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Why Law's Evil God Challenge Fails

Omar Alsayad

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University of Birmingham

SET QUESTION

Outline and critically assess Law's Evil God challenge.

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Awarded a merit.

In "The evil-god challenge," Law argues that there is no reason why it should be dismissed that there can be an evil-God. He separates the moral character of God from his existence and says: "even if most of the popular arguments for the existence of God do provide grounds for supposing that there is some sort of supernatural intelligence behind the universe, they fail to provide much clue as to its moral character."

Then, Law proceeds to use the fine-tuning argument to affirm, or rather, grant an existence of an omnipotent and omniscient creator but the question whether or not said creator is good is exactly what Law aims to discuss. Law's intention is to showcase, by his "symmetry thesis", that most conceivable theodicies for the good-god narrative could be mirrored by what he names: "reverse theodicies" to fit an evil-god narrative.

An example of a good-god narrative theodicy mentioned in his paper is the "Simple free-will solution" where Law represents the theistic position for the existence of evil by appealing to free-will and the structure of the argument is:

- P1 God gave humans free will
- P2 Free-will entails the human capacity to either commit evil acts or good acts (P3) Evil acts cause suffering
- P4 Free will allows for important goods like moral virtue
- C Therefore, evil is compatible with a good God

To which Law responds by a "reverse theodicy" through his "symmetry thesis" with the same argument but mirrored to show that the same reasoning could be applied to fit an evil-god description and the structure of the argument is:

- P1 God gave humans free will
- P2 Free-will entails the human capacity to either commit evil acts or good acts (P3) Good acts cause happiness (which "evil-god" hates)
- P4 Free will allows morally responsible evil (evil committed "of our own volition")
- C Therefore, the existence of good is compatible with an evil God

Law introduces the "symmetry thesis" after showcasing multiple "theodicies" and their opposite equal "reverse theodicies" (showcased in the aforementioned example). The symmetry thesis, simply put, is Law's attempt

to portray that there exists a pattern between the evil-god and the good-god narrative and that pattern is congruency.

Much like the relationship between addition and subtraction in math: (+) 5 and (-) 5 are equal in magnitude and content but opposite in their signs (polarity). Same is true with temperature too, (+) 40 degrees Celsius and (-) 40 degrees Celsius are equal magnitude but unequal in their polarity, the former is hot, and the latter is cold.

Law brings the idea closer by introducing the “scales analogy” to illustrate that arguments for God’s existence does not change in magnitude of reasonability when applied to either evil/good-god hypothesis of God’s moral character. Law maintains that there is nonpolarity to God’s moral character when referencing arguments for existence and asks an important question: Why then is one more reasonable than the other?

However, Law does caveat his “symmetry thesis” position with the openness to accept that not every theodicy has an exact parallel “reverse theodicy”. So, he sets his camp away from the likes of Madden and Hare, Cahn, Stein and New and openly proclaims: “I reject Hare, Madden, Cahn, and Stein’s central claim: that the problems of good and evil and their respective solutions are ‘exactly parallel’(Madden and Hare)”. Instead, he introduces “asymmetries” which are anomalies that run counter to his symmetry thesis as a whole and deals with the “asymmetries” he could conceive of.

In short, Law brings to our attention that arguments of God’s existence are non-polar and tell us nothing about his moral character. Then, he draws a link between theodicies given to justify a good-god and “reverse-theodicies” given to justify an evil-god, ultimately, portraying that they are reverse parallels (an idea made famous by Madden and Hare, Cahn, Stein and New). This understanding gives birth to the “symmetry thesis”. Law then caveats his challenge by detaching himself from Madden and Hare, Cahn, Stein and New and notes that there exist “asymmetries” which are anomalies that justify a good-god narrative but cannot be mirrored; to which Law provides his own theodicies to. The argument structure for Law’s evil-god challenge is:

- P1 Arguments for God’s existence are non-polar – they tell us nothing about God’s moral character.
- P2 Theodicies used to justify a good-god hypothesis could be mirrored (“reversetheodicies”) and used to justify an evil-god hypothesis.

P3 This congruency forms a framework of the “symmetry thesis”.

C Therefore, magnitude of reasonability must not change for either evil/good-god hypothesis.

So far so good, the argument is valid – it obeys the laws of logic, but this is not the problem with Law’s challenge. The problem with Law’s evil-god challenge is a flawed foundation. His entire argument rests on at least propositional, if not false, assumptions. Before stating the assumptions, interrogating the foundation of Law’s challenge and executing the aim of this paper, it is important to make clear how (i) many other arguments could be valid and sound in form but lead to absurd conclusions, (ii) discuss assumptions in depth:

i Arguments valid and sound, but absurd conclusions:

I.

II.

III.

IV.

Nemo is a fish, Nemo can speak English, therefore, all fish can speak English.
All that is natural is morally good, violence is natural, therefore, violence is morally good.

Morality is a phenomenon in the universe, science explains phenomena,
therefore, science explains morality.

Citizens must follow the law, stealing food to save your family from starvation is against the law, therefore, stealing to save your family from starvation is wrong OR; citizens must follow the law; being oppressive, condescending and violent to Jews in Nazi Germany is following the law, therefore, you must be oppressive, condescending and violent to Jews.

The aforementioned examples are built on true premises, they are even sound in form, but the conclusions are absurd. But, what do they all have in common? They are all loaded, they all have unstated assumption – almost smuggled, let us unpack the assumptions of each:

I.

II.

III.

IV.

This argument assumes that Nemo, a fictional character, has a bearing on reality This argument assumes that there is a relationship between nature and morality which is, if not false, at least is, unjustified

This argument assumes that every phenomenon that occurs could be

scientifically explained which collapses if morality is shown to be metaphysical This argument assumes that everything that is legal or illegal is morally good or morally evil respectively.

ii About assumptions:

It is important to note that from a procedural and methodological perspective, arguments are supposed to begin with axiomatic assumptions or at least agreed upon; simply because nothing can be further proved or discussed if there is no consensus on the assumptions.

Robert Stalnaker (2002, p.701) says:

To presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information as common ground among the participants in the conversation. What is most distinctive about this propositional attitude is that it is a social or public attitude: one presupposes that ϕ only if one presupposes that others presuppose it as well. But while the social dimension plays a prominent part in the informal explanation of speaker presupposition, it is not usually made explicit in formal models of context. If Law's evil god challenge is posited as an academic question, then the setting must be considered formal. If the setting is formal, then assumptions must be made explicit. Also, Parsons explains in What is an Argument that one of many prerequisites for an argument to be successful is to use premises that were clearly and explicitly assumed preliminary to positing the argument (Parsons, 1996, p.171). Failing to do so would render the argument an enthymeme or an ur-argument by virtue of said argument containing premises or steps that were skipped through; and both are incomplete arguments (Parsons, 1996, p.166). By those standards, Law's challenge is already compromised. In this

paper, I will argue that his challenge fails because of a major unstated assumption that is either false or needs justification for his challenge to even materialize. I will also argue that Law's challenge fails by his own standards. This will be demonstrated by 2 lines of attack each in sections I and II respectively.

(I)

1. Line of attack 1: How does Law reconcile the relationship of good and evil?

1. 1.

Theories of Evil:

The reconciliation of good and evil has featured myriad of back and forth. Law, in his challenge, does not even engage with good and evil to clarify how he reconciles the relationship between the two. If an inference is being made on God's moral character, then it would only be natural and necessary to address the elephant in the room; the question of evil becomes relevant, nay integral. I have anticipated three theories of evil that together, in my view, exhaust the metaphysical, moral and political dimensions of evil, that Law may apply to build on; and they are:

a Privation and Dualist theories of evil

Dualism, simply put, submits that evil is an ontologically independent force that is coequal, coeternal with good; and is in an active battle against good.

For instance: Darkness and light as separate forces that are constantly fighting for dominion

Privation, again, simply put, submits that evil is not a thing at all; it is only what occurs when there is no goodness.

For instance: Darkness and light are not actually separate forces that are in constant strife, but darkness is simply what occurs when light is not there (Calder, 2022, §2.1).

b Kant's theory of evil

Kant aims to reconcile three claims: (1) humans are free (2) they are naturally inclined to do good (3) they are also naturally inclined to do evil. Based on these 3 claims, he defines evil as a freedom to choose the morally wrong action; evil occurs when a person chooses to not do the morally right thing. He proceeds to explain that there are 3 stages of evil:

- Stage 1 – Frailty: Intends to do right but cannot, or rather, fails due to weakness • Stage 2 – Impurity: Does partly right for good reasons, does partly evil for other incentives
- Stage 3 - Wickedness (Perversity) – Prioritization of self-love over moral law Kant coins the term “radical evil” and what he means by that is: all humans have an innate propensity to place their self-interest in the upper levels of their value system relative to “moral law”. In short, it is a defect in the orientation of the will and presupposes a “moral law” (Calder, 2022, §2.2).

c Arendt's theory of evil

Arendt, in an attempt to understand the horrors of the death camps in Nazi Germany, she borrows the term “radical evil” from Kant and revises it to say that it is a wrongdoing that makes humans “superfluous”. Sequentially and essentially turning them into living corpses, it is an evil that attempts to erase the essence of what makes humans human (dehumanization), and it is not driven by self-interest like Kant hypothesized, but by totalitarianism. Here, Arendt majorly focuses on systemic evil, almost political or sociological, but surely exempts individual culpability up to this point.

However, she introduces the term “banality of evil” and here is where she shifts to individual responsibility and discusses Adolf Eichmann, the person who personally organized trains to death camps in Nazi Germany. She found out that he was an ordinary person who was following orders and did not think deeply about his actions (Calder, 2022, §2.3).

1 2.

Law's options:

So, (a) does Law agree with the “evil is privation” thesis, (b) or does he adopt the dualist view? or (c) does Law reconcile good and evil according to Kant? or (d) is Law's reconciliation of good and evil according to Arendt?

Since there is no way to know, I will show how all four of those options are either flat out false to a magnitude that completely invalidates everything that comes after or need justification to how they apply to the evil-god challenge:

a Law adopts the "evil is privation" theory of evil:

If Law were to agree that evil is privation, then it would immediately nullify the entire challenge. His "symmetry thesis" is completely dependent on treating good and evil as two sides of a coin. So, if he accepts the privation theory, then he affirms and accepts that:

- Evil is not an independent force
- Evil is a lack of good
- (Which would lead to accepting that) good is the metaphysical prior

This completely shatters Law's "symmetry thesis" since one side (evil) becomes ontologically parasitic on the other (good). It is exactly like staring in the mirror, if there is no object, there is no reflection of it.

If "evil is privation" is accepted then simply, a good-god would be independent and necessary, and an evil-god would be dependent. One hypothesis of God fits the classical definition, the other doesn't.

b Law adopting the "dualist" theory of evil

Here is where I see a plausible route for Law's challenge to materialize. If good and evil are ontological equals, the challenge would still not materialize since the evil god challenge has layers of problems, namely moral relativism. However, I shall focus on assessing the reasonableness of the "dualist" theory of evil for now. Let's look at one example through the lens of "privation" theory and again through the lens of "dualist" theory; also, let's assume life to be preferable (good) and death to be unpreferable (bad):

Privation in life and death:

- P1 Life and death are not two positive biological states
- P2 Death is the absence of life
- P3 Therefore, societies must favor the living over the dead in terms of resources (P4) Living is certainly preferable for all healthy human beings

- C We should therefore aim towards a world that saves human beings from the possibility of death, and introduce concepts such as “healthy lifestyle” to make sure they have a longer life in attempts to delay death as much as possible Dualism in life and death:
- P1 Life and death are two equal, ontological, positive biological states (P2) A corpse, therefore, is not a “lack of life”, it is a different life form (a beautifully quiet, still and peacefully free of metabolism)
- P3 Societies who favor the living over the dead are unfairly privileging a form of existence over another and are guilty of biological chauvinism
- P4 Actually, death is superior too since said form of existence does not commit moral evils, does not suffer diseases (mental or otherwise).
- C We should not bury the dead and preserve them like ancient Egypt did and if we don’t, then we are committing a humanitarian crime. We should also reassess murders and soften their sentencing since they merely transitioned a person from one form of existence to another. Also, hospitals should stop “saving lives,” revise the Hippocratic oath to accommodate for this perspective, and proudly facilitate and allow the transition into this higher form of existence. Lastly, we must allow all suicides to take place too, the suicidal person is not mentally ill; said person merely prefers one form of existence over the other.

By this, I aim to have demonstrated that the logic of the theory is a failure. And if there is disagreement on its failure, then my aim shifts to a call for consistency and intellectual honesty. If “dualism” claims good and evil to be ontological equals, then surely, any contrast structure such as life and death, health and disease, justice and injustice must also consider both sides to be positive states too. It is clear, though, when the same logic is applied elsewhere, the results are absurd. Think of dualism applied in blindness and sight, or music and silence (silence could be a music genre), or knowledge and ignorance – the implausibility and the absurdity of the consequences undermine the dualist account, if not completely fails the theory.

c Law adopting the Kantian theory of evil:

Firstly, Kantian theory of evil is not a metaphysical one; it is an ethical, anthropological and a moral one. It would not follow to apply a non-metaphysical theory of evil unto a challenge that features a metaphysical account. Secondly, even if we were to grant its applicability, Kant developed his theory according to human observation, Law would need

to justify how that knowledge can be applied unto God without falling into anthropomorphizing God. Also, Kantian evil theory is a corruption of will and since Law grants in his paper that God is omnipotent; I do not see how he would use this theory given corruption of the will is based on a phenomenon observed in a finite agent.

d Law adopting Arendt's theory of evil:

Same is true with Arendt's theory of evil, it is more of a political theory; it would not follow to apply it unto a challenge that features a metaphysical account. However, even if granted, applying banality to God does not follow according to traditional understanding of God and the omni-God thesis that is featured in Law's challenge. Simply put, (a) is self-defeating to the challenge Law submits. (b) Appeals to a theory that is too blunt, flattens clear contrasts, and features a logic that leads to absurdities. (c) and (d) are possibly applicable to use as a theory of evil in Law's challenge, however they would require a lot of justification on Law's part, since they are not clear-cut metaphysical explanations of evil when compared to the privation theory of evil. Take a watch for instance, to a commuter, a watch is simply a tool that tells when the bus will come. To a horologist fixing or manufacturing a watch, on the other hand, it is a highly sophisticated and calibrated system that regulates oscillations. Both have different explanations for the same thing, and each individual explanation is useless for the quest of the other. I assert that the same is true with theories of evil; each attempt at giving a theory of evil is not always metaphysical. Some offer a theodicy of why agents perform acts of evil; others explain what evil is from a human account; these explanations are usually psychological or political and often given as a preliminary step before presenting an ethical system. These specific theories of evil are not applicable to a paper such as Law's. This is why; the most reasonable theory of evil that could be resorted to, as far as this paper is concerned, is the privation-dualist theory.

(II)

2. Line of Attack 2: Methodological Critique of Law's challenge

This line of attack could be considered an ad hominem. Arguably, there is a case to be made for such reasoning. This is not, however, my intention at all; the aim is to simply point out how assumptions, definitions and first principles are left out in the challenge and by extension, this exclusion renders Law's challenge immaterial by his own judgment as we will later see.

And by that, it is pertinently relevant to mention and briefly discuss the modern understanding of an ad hominem; they are classified into two types: circumstantial and abusive (Johnson, 2009, p.252). The circumstantial ad hominem is when: "an inconsistency exists between a statement and the circumstances of its utterance". In short, it is a "practice what you preach" objection. The abusive ad hominem is when an attack is directly aimed at the arguer's character. According to Christopher and Hinman, particular contexts justify an ad hominem move. In such cases, the ad hominem argument is not fallacious and instead functions as a legitimate rational critique.

To be clear, I do not believe what I am about to demonstrate is an ad hominem at all, I am simply acknowledging that an argument may be made from there and I attempt to block the counter move that may come from that direction.

2 1.

Justifying the Alleged Claims of an ad hominem Attack:

According to Christopher Johnson quoting Hinman, there are situations where an ad hominem attack is a rational move and non-fallacious, and these situations are (Johnson, 2009, p.254):

- a The absence of sufficient evidence
- b When a value judgment is featured and the arguer adheres to unusual evidential standards; it is when the arguer is for instance a radical skeptic or credulous (c) When the arguer has a preconceived belief in an idea as an absolute truth, the starting point becomes incongruent because of the arguer's ideological commitments.

As far as Law's challenge is concerned, (a) is certainly relevant here and that could be basis for an ad hominem attack that would not be considered fallacious, at least according to Hinman.

In his paper, "Reconsidering the Ad Hominem" (Johnson, 2009), Christopher mentions that the circumstantial ad hominem usually does not have any bearing on the truthfulness of the person's claim. Using his example, an obese doctor giving advice to lose weight is not undermined because of said doctor's obesity. However, consider this: what if the advice given was methodological? It is reasonable to assert that obesity is categorically unhealthy irrespective of the doctor's weight. But if (using the same example) the doctor is performing a surgery, outlines the exact method that must be followed, condemns a student for deviating from that method, and is then seen ignoring that very method in his own practice, the issue shifts. At that point, the attack is not an ad hominem at all, it is an assessment and evaluation of technical practice.

2 2.

Methodological Critique and Law's non-adherence to his own standards

If person X establishes that the method by which Y must be conducted is P. Then, person X conducts P using method Z. It would be reasonable to deduce that person X showcases unreliability for technical ability, if not a complete technical blunder. In his book, "Believing Bullshit", Law attacks McGrath for jumping into the argument without preparing assumptions or presenting any evidence. Not only that, but Law deems that (because of that), it is sufficient grounds to dismiss the entire argument McGrath puts forth and (Law, 2011, p.55) says:

McGrath here just asserts that the god question cannot be fairly conclusively settled on the basis of observational evidence. Again, he has no argument at all.

But Law in his challenge asserts and argues without giving a theory of evil or good, does not show if they are subjective, objective, natural, non-natural. Law skips first principles and asserts these moral categories without any definitions or justifications. It is precisely what he is accusing McGrath of.

From this, there are two conclusions that follow. Firstly, Law holds McGrath to standard X that he himself does not meet. Secondly, according to Law, if that standard is not met, then it is sufficient to dismiss McGrath's position; and by that, it ought to be equally sufficient to dismiss the evil-god challenge.

Conclusion:

The focus of this paper has been to show that the evil-god challenge features unstated assumptions that are integral for the challenge to be reasonably engaged with. We have done that by anticipating what Law's evil theory may be and found that the challenge collapses if we employ said "evil theories". Also, we have seen that Law's challenge fails by the very yardstick he insists upon in his critiques of other argumentations.

NOTES

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