Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil
Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This source presents **Dr. James Spiegel's lecture on the philosophical problem of evil**, a significant objection to theistic belief. He begins by outlining **Epicurus's classical formulation** of this problem: the apparent contradiction between an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God and the existence of evil. The lecture then explores different **definitions and categories of evil**, distinguishing between natural and moral evil. It further examines **William Rowe's argument for atheism** based on gratuitous suffering and **William Alston's critique** of this argument, emphasizing the limits of human understanding in discerning God's purposes and reviewing several theodicies as potential explanations for evil.

2. 24 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).

Spiegel_PhilRel_Session09.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil

Briefing Document: The Problem of Evil in Philosophy of Religion

Executive Summary:

This briefing document summarizes Dr. Jim Spiegel's lecture (Session 9) on the problem of evil, a significant objection to theistic belief. The lecture outlines the classical formulation of the problem, different categories of evil, William Rowe's influential argument for atheism based on evil, and William Alston's critique of Rowe's argument through the lens of human epistemic limitations and the potential of theodicies. The session concludes by suggesting that while the problem of evil is a serious challenge, prominent theodicies and the possibility of future insights offer reasons for theists to maintain their belief rationally.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. **Definition of the Problem of Evil:**

- The problem, first articulated by Epicurus, questions how the existence of a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God can be reconciled with the reality of evil in the world.

- The lecture emphasizes the classical framing of this tension as a central challenge to theism.

1. **Definition and Categories of Evil:**

- Following Augustine, evil is defined as a "privation of goodness or privation of being," a "lack of goodness."

- Doug Geivett's definition of evil as "a departure from the way things ought to be" is presented as a variation on the Augustinian theme.

- Two major categories of evil are distinguished:

- **Natural Evil:** Evil resulting from natural events (e.g., hurricanes, famines, diseases, birth defects).

- **Moral Evil:** Evil resulting from the choices of free beings (e.g., rape, murder, lying, theft).

- Both categories are understood as "departures from the way things ought to be" and "privations of goodness."

1. **William Rowe's Argument for Atheism:**

- Rowe argues that atheism is rationally justified due to the problem of evil, particularly focusing on natural evil.

- His formal argument is presented:

1. "That there exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."

2. "An omniscient, holy, good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."

3. "Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient, holy, good being does not exist."

- Rowe suggests the first premise is supported by the existence of "gratuitous evil" - suffering that seems completely unnecessary and doesn't contribute to a greater good. He uses the example of a young fawn dying in a forest fire. "What good could that possibly serve for such an animal to suffer so horribly? Couldn't God have prevented that? So that seems like a gratuitous evil."

1. **Critiques of Rowe's Argument:**

- **Direct Attack:** Rejecting the first premise by showing potential greater goods resulting from horrific events. Spiegel notes Rowe's counter-argument that theistic tradition allows for mystery regarding God's purposes.

- **Indirect Attack:** Affirming the second premise and the existence of God, thus concluding the first premise must be false. Spiegel observes that many theists would take this approach: "...I can't explain why that fawn would be burned to death...but I know God is real. And I know that he doesn't allow just gratuitous evils...without some sort of good reason, even if I can't identify what that is. But that first premise just can't be true."

- Rowe argues that this indirect attack requires independent grounds for believing in God.

1. **Atheistic Responses to Theism:**

- **Unfriendly Atheism:** No one is rationally justified in believing in God (e.g., Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens).

- **Indifferent Atheism:** Taking no position on whether theism is rationally justifiable.

- **Friendly Atheism:** Theists could be rationally justified in their belief in God, even though atheists believe God does not exist. Rowe identifies with this view, using the analogy of people rationally believing a plane crash survivor is dead based on available evidence. "The idea here is that a person can justifiably believe something that's false."

1. **William Alston's Response to Rowe:**

- Alston critiques Rowe's first premise, arguing that it is "questionable and, in fact, indefensible because of the limits of human understanding."

- He asserts that "our powers, access to data, and so on, are radically insufficient to provide sufficient warrant for accepting this premise." We lack the comprehensive understanding (physical, metaphysical, moral) to confidently claim that instances of suffering could have been prevented without greater loss.

- Alston identifies the inference supporting Rowe's premise ("So far as I can tell, P is the case. Therefore, P is the case") as often tenuous, especially when dealing with significant issues like God's existence. "To be justified in such a claim, one must be justified in excluding all the live possibilities for what the claim denies to exist."

1. **Theodicies as Attempts to Explain God's Permission of Evil:**

- A theodicy is defined as "an attempt to identify God's reasons for permitting evil."

- Alston reviews several major theodicies (not exhaustively) to illustrate potential explanations for seemingly gratuitous evil.

- **Punishment Theodicy:** Suffering as punishment or discipline for sin, potentially for reform. "In this world, when people suffer, the idea is that at least sometimes they're being punished or disciplined for their moral crimes." Alston notes our limited ability to assess individual sinfulness and the reformative effects of suffering.

- **Soul-Making Theodicy:** God permits suffering to develop good character traits and foster a loving relationship with humanity. "God permits suffering in order to develop good character traits in us and ultimately to build a loving relationship

with us for eternity." The "no pain, no gain" analogy is used. We cannot definitively know if a seemingly gratuitous evil yields no benefits.

- **Free Will Defense:** Evil is a consequence of God granting free will, necessary for genuine relationships and moral significance. "The occurrence of evil in this world is a consequence of God's arranging for the existence of human free will, which is necessary for genuine relationships." We cannot reliably ascertain the extent to which divine interference would defeat human freedom.

- **Natural Law Theodicy:** Natural evil is a consequence of God creating a law-like world necessary for predictable life circumstances. "God had to make the world in a law-like fashion in order to make life circumstances reasonably predictable. Natural evil is a consequence of this." Altering natural laws or human biology to prevent certain evils might have unforeseen negative consequences. "For all we know, there are many desirable features of this world that would be lost if God made the world very different in terms of law-like regularities."

1. **Epistemic Humility and Future Theodicies:**

- Alston's critique emphasizes the need for "epistemic humility" when judging God's reasons for permitting evil due to our limited understanding.

- Spiegel highlights the possibility of "stronger undreamt of theodicies" being developed in the future. "Who knows what theodicy might be devised in the coming years that is far more effective in dealing with the problem of evil than any of these theodicies that we've discussed."

- The progress in philosophy and theology, despite lacking uniform agreement, suggests that new and innovative solutions to the problem of evil may emerge.

1. **The Strength of Existing Theodicies:**

- Spiegel concludes that while not entirely solving the problem, the free will defense and the soul-making theodicy "go a long way in defusing the problem of evil."

- He suggests these theodicies provide "a lot of good reason to believe that this is not a devastating problem for the theist."

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel's lecture provides a comprehensive overview of the problem of evil as a philosophical challenge to theism. By presenting Rowe's influential argument for atheism and Alston's critical response grounded in human epistemic limitations and the potential of theodicies, the lecture highlights the complexity and ongoing debate surrounding this issue. The discussion suggests that while the existence of evil poses a significant question for believers, theistic responses, particularly through well-developed theodicies and an acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding, offer plausible grounds for maintaining rational belief in God. The possibility of future insights and the inherent strengths of certain theodicies further support this perspective.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil

Study Guide: The Problem of Evil

I. Key Concepts and Definitions:

- **Theism:** The belief in the existence of one God, especially one creator of the universe who is all-powerful and all-knowing.

- **Problem of Evil:** The philosophical difficulty in reconciling the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God with the reality of evil and suffering in the world.

- **Classical Problem of Evil:** As articulated by Epicurus, the question of how a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God can coexist with evil.

- **Evil (Augustinian Definition):** A privation or lack of goodness or being.

- **Natural Evil:** Evil that results from natural events such as hurricanes, famines, diseases, and birth defects.

- **Moral Evil:** Evil that results from the free choices of human beings, such as murder, rape, lying, and theft.

- **Gratuitous Evil:** Instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without losing a greater good or permitting an equally bad or worse evil; seemingly unnecessary suffering.

- **Theodicy:** An attempt to provide a rational justification for God's permission of evil in the world.

- **Direct Attack (on Rowe's argument):** Rejecting the premise that there exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without a greater loss.

- **Indirect Attack (on Rowe's argument):** Affirming the second premise of Rowe's argument (that a good God would prevent preventable suffering) and the existence of God, thus concluding that the first premise must be false.

- **Unfriendly Atheism:** The view that no one is rationally justified in believing that the theistic God exists.

- **Indifferent Atheism:** The view that it is uncertain whether or not it is rationally justifiable to be a theist, without taking a firm position.

- **Friendly Atheism:** The view that a theist could be rationally justified in their belief in God, even though the friendly atheist believes there is no God.

- **Epistemic Limits:** The inherent limitations of human knowledge, understanding, and access to information.

- **Punishment Theodicy:** The explanation that God allows suffering as a punishment for sin, sometimes for reformative purposes.

- **Soul-Making Theodicy:** The explanation that God permits suffering in order to develop virtuous character traits and facilitate a deeper relationship with humanity.

- **Free Will Defense:** The argument that evil is a consequence of God granting humans free will, which is necessary for genuine relationships and moral responsibility.

- **Natural Law Theodicy:** The argument that natural evil is a necessary consequence of God creating a world governed by consistent, law-like principles, which are essential for predictability and other benefits.

II. Short-Answer Quiz:

1. How did the ancient philosopher Epicurus articulate the classical problem of evil?

2. Explain Augustine's definition of evil and provide another philosopher's variation on this definition discussed in the text.

3. What is the key distinction between natural evil and moral evil, and can you provide an example of each?

4. Summarize William Rowe's argument for atheism based on the problem of evil, highlighting the concept of gratuitous evil.

5. What are the two main ways, according to Rowe, that one might critique his argument against theism?

6. Explain William Alston's primary objection to the first premise of Rowe's argument.

7. What is a theodicy, and what is its purpose in the context of the problem of evil?

8. Briefly describe the soul-making theodicy and how it attempts to address the issue of suffering.

9. How does the free will defense explain the existence of moral evil in the world?

10. Explain the natural law theodicy and how it attempts to account for the existence of natural evil.

III. Answer Key to Quiz:

1. Epicurus posed the problem of evil as a question: how can the existence of a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God be reconciled with the reality of evil in the world? This highlights the apparent contradiction between God's attributes and the presence of suffering.

2. Augustine defined evil as a privation or lack of goodness or being. Doug Geivett, a Christian philosopher, defined evil as a departure from the way things ought to be, which Spiegel notes is a variation on Augustine's theme, defining evil in terms of a lack of conformity to goodness.

3. Natural evil results from natural events and processes, such as hurricanes or diseases, while moral evil stems from the free choices of moral agents, like acts of murder or theft.

4. Rowe argued that atheism is rationally justified because there exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent and omniscient being could have prevented without losing a greater good or permitting an equal or worse evil. He calls these instances gratuitous evil, using the example of a fawn dying in a forest fire as seemingly pointless suffering.

5. Rowe identifies a direct attack, which involves rejecting the premise that gratuitous evil exists by showing potential goods that could result from suffering. He also outlines an indirect attack, which affirms God's existence and goodness, thus implying the first premise (the existence of gratuitous evil) must be false.

6. Alston argues that we are not justified in accepting Rowe's first premise due to the radical insufficiency of our human powers, access to data, and understanding to confidently determine whether instances of suffering are truly gratuitous. Our epistemic limits prevent us from knowing all possible reasons why God might permit such suffering.

7. A theodicy is an attempt to identify God's reasons for permitting evil. Its purpose is to provide a rational explanation that reconciles the existence of evil with the attributes of God, thereby addressing the problem of evil.

8. The soul-making theodicy posits that God permits suffering to develop good character traits in individuals and to foster a loving relationship with them for eternity. Difficult experiences can lead to moral growth, increased faith, and deeper empathy.

9. The free will defense argues that moral evil is a consequence of God granting humans the freedom to make choices. This freedom is considered necessary for genuine relationships and for individuals to be morally responsible for their actions, and God does not typically interfere with these choices.

10. The natural law theodicy suggests that natural evil is an unavoidable byproduct of God creating a world governed by consistent natural laws, which are essential for a predictable and orderly existence. While these laws can lead to suffering, they also enable many beneficial aspects of the universe.

IV. Essay Format Questions:

1. Critically evaluate William Rowe's argument for atheism based on the problem of evil. What are its strengths and weaknesses, and how do theists typically respond to it?

2. Compare and contrast two of the theodicies discussed in the text (punishment, soul-making, free will defense, natural law). In what ways do they attempt to explain evil, and what are some potential criticisms of each?

3. Discuss William Alston's concept of epistemic limits in the context of the problem of evil. How does he use this idea to challenge arguments against the existence of God based on suffering?

4. Explain the distinctions between unfriendly, indifferent, and friendly atheism as presented in the text. What implications do these different stances have for the rationality of theistic belief?

5. Consider the effectiveness of the theodicies presented in the text in fully resolving the problem of evil. Do you find any of them to be particularly persuasive, and are there aspects of evil and suffering that remain difficult to reconcile with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God?

V. Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Theism:** Belief in one God, the creator and ruler of the universe.

- **Problem of Evil:** The philosophical challenge of reconciling God's attributes with the existence of evil.

- **Evil:** A privation of goodness or a departure from how things ought to be.

- **Natural Evil:** Suffering caused by natural events.

- **Moral Evil:** Suffering caused by the free choices of moral agents.

- **Gratuitous Evil:** Seemingly pointless suffering that God could have prevented.

- **Theodicy:** A justification for God's permission of evil.

- **Epistemic Limits:** The boundaries of human knowledge and understanding.

- **Free Will:** The capacity of agents to make uncoerced choices.

- **Natural Law:** Consistent and predictable principles governing the natural world.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: The Problem of Evil

1. What is the "problem of evil" in the context of theistic belief?

The problem of evil is a fundamental objection to the existence of a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God. It questions how such a God can be reconciled with the reality and extent of evil in the world. The classical formulation of this problem is attributed to the ancient philosopher Epicurus.

2. How is "evil" typically defined within theistic traditions? What are the different categories of evil?

Drawing from Augustine, evil is often defined as a "privation of goodness" or a "lack of being." Another related definition describes evil as a "departure from the way things ought to be." Evil is generally categorized into two main types:

- **Natural evil:** Evil that results from natural events such as hurricanes, famines, diseases, and birth defects.

- **Moral evil:** Evil that results from the choices and actions of free beings, such as rape, murder, lying, and theft.

3. What is William Rowe's argument for atheism based on the problem of evil, and what is the concept of "gratuitous evil" within his argument?

William Rowe argued that atheism is rationally justified due to the existence of evil. His formal argument posits that there are instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without losing a greater good or permitting an equally bad or worse evil. He suggests that a perfectly good being would prevent such suffering. Rowe introduces the idea of "gratuitous evil," which refers to suffering that appears to be completely unnecessary and does not contribute to any greater good, using the example of a fawn suffering in a forest fire.

4. What are the two main ways to critique Rowe's argument, according to Rowe himself?

Rowe identifies two main approaches to critiquing his argument:

- **Direct attack:** Rejecting the premise that there exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without losing a

greater good. This involves trying to show potential goods that could result from seemingly horrific events.

- **Indirect attack:** Affirming that a good God would prevent gratuitous suffering, and since evil exists, concluding that the premise claiming instances of gratuitous evil must be false, thereby upholding belief in God. This approach relies on independent reasons for believing in God's existence.

5. How does William Alston respond to Rowe's argument regarding gratuitous evil?

William Alston argues that Rowe's premise concerning gratuitous evil is questionable and indefensible due to the limitations of human understanding. He contends that the complexity and magnitude of the issue are such that our knowledge and capabilities are insufficient to confidently assert that there are instances of suffering an all-powerful, all-knowing God could have prevented without consequence. Alston highlights the weakness of inferring that because we cannot see a good purpose for suffering, no such purpose exists.

6. What is a "theodicy," and what are some of the major theodicies discussed as potential explanations for the existence of evil in a world governed by a good God?

A theodicy is an attempt to provide a rational justification for God's permission of evil in the world. Several major theodicies (or defenses) are discussed:

- **Punishment Theodicy:** God allows suffering as punishment for sin, potentially for reformative purposes.

- **Soul-Making Theodicy:** God permits suffering to develop good character traits in individuals and foster a loving relationship with them.

- **Free Will Defense:** Evil, particularly moral evil, is a consequence of God granting humans free will, which is necessary for genuine relationships and moral significance.

- **Natural Law Theodicy:** Natural evil is a byproduct of God creating a world governed by consistent natural laws, which are necessary for a reasonably predictable life.

7. How do the limitations of human knowledge ("epistemic humility") play a role in Alston's response to the problem of evil?

Alston emphasizes the importance of "epistemic humility" when grappling with the problem of evil. He argues that our limited knowledge and understanding of the universe, God's purposes, and the potential long-term consequences of events should make us cautious about asserting the existence of truly gratuitous evils. We are often in a poor position to judge the full scope of a situation, including potential moral or spiritual benefits that might arise from suffering, or the intricate web of consequences that might result from altering natural laws.

8. What is the significance of considering new or undreamt-of theodicies in the ongoing discussion of the problem of evil?

The possibility of new or yet-to-be-developed theodicies suggests that our current understanding of God's reasons for permitting evil may be incomplete. Just as human knowledge and technology continue to advance in unexpected ways, so too might philosophical and theological understanding evolve, potentially offering more compelling explanations or perspectives on the problem of evil in the future. This possibility cautions against prematurely concluding that the problem of evil is an insurmountable obstacle to theistic belief.