

Podcast Companion

The Problem of Evil & Suffering

In today's session of the podcast we looked at continuing our study on the problem of suffering and evil. It became, for the first time in my opinion, quite technical and potentially confusing.

I appreciate that some of the information may have been legitimate brand-new information for you, so encountering and digesting it quickly is unlikely.

That is the reason for these podcast companions though, to assist in that understanding and digestion, so well done for making it here!

First of all, for this companion, let's look at the intellectual argument as it gets presented, which is this:

P1. It is logically impossible that an all-loving & all-powerful God and evil can co-exist

P2. Suffering & evil exist

C1. Therefore, God does not exist

And we discussed the implicit assumptions of these explicit premises – namely, that in order for it to work you have to assume two things:

- A. If God is all powerful, then He can create any world that He wants
- B. If God is all loving, He prefers a world in which there is no suffering

Now, we're finally going to engage with breaking this down!

Let's begin with A, if God is all powerful, then He can create any world that He wants.

As discussed in the episode, this isn't true.

This is due to the fact that there are logical limits to basically everything!

For example, as I repeatedly said in the episode, God cannot make a married bachelor, because those two things are antithetical and can't possibly exist together. You also can't have a square circle, because those are two different shapes, something is either one or the other, but not both.

So, God cannot create something that is not possible.

Again, to reiterate, rather than this being a limit to God's powers, this is actually just a good example of how logic is a reflection of God's own nature. God can do *anything* that is possible, even stuff that seems impossible, but He cannot do that which is not possible, because things like a married bachelor are just a meaningless assortment of words, they can't actually exist – someone is either married or single, they can't be both.

Further to this, as we discussed, God will not violate His own character. God makes choices that befit His character and will not go back on these decisions... because that would violate His nature.

Giving us free will, by way of example, was a decision God made because to do otherwise would be less loving, thus violating His character as the maximally great being, in which being all-loving is necessary. God made that decision, and for Him to repeal that decision would be to do something that is unloving, unjust and capricious – three things God is not: God is omni-benevolent, perfectly

just, and the same yesterday, today and tomorrow (unchanging). Anyone who was in our session on God's attributes in October(ish) will remember all of this.

So, now we know this, let's consider God's options at creation!

Here is where we began our philosophy 101 lesson.

Let's discuss the difference between three things – actual worlds, possible worlds and feasible worlds.

The actual world is literally the one we are in, the one God chose to actualise at the Big Bang.

Possible worlds, however, are an exploration of what *could* have been, but not what actually is.

These are generally heuristic devices that philosophers use to simply explore what is logically possible.

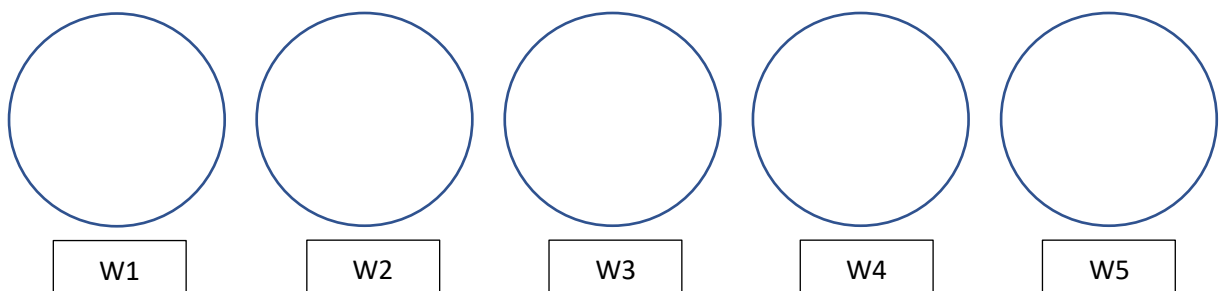
Let's consider some examples of possible worlds:

- There is a possible world in which every pet I own is a dog
 - There is a possible world in which all of my pets are mammals
 - There is not, however, a possible world in which all of my dogs are lizards – this is logically impossible
- OR
- There is a possible world in which I am a bachelor
 - There is a possible world in which I am married
 - There is not, however, a possible world in which I am a married bachelor – this is logically impossible

Does that all make sense?

So, now let's turn our attention to feasible worlds, and back to our look at God's creation. Mainly, how not all *possible* worlds are *feasible* worlds.

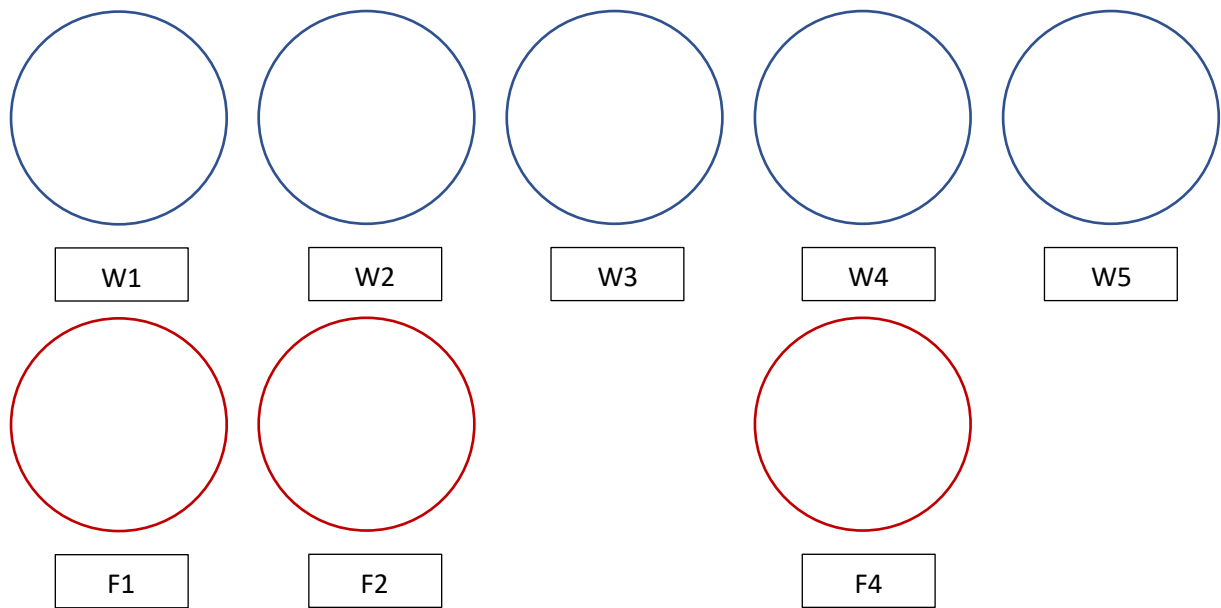
Let's consider 5 possible worlds, we'll call them W1, W2, W3, W4 and W5.



Let's say all of these worlds (W1-W5) are virtually identical to our own with you lot all still in them. In world 2, it's perfectly possible that Jennie is presented with circumstances in which she could commit an evil act, and freely does so.

It is logically possible that, in W5, Jennie is presented with the exact same circumstances to do the evil act, but freely chooses not to! The same could be true in W3, let's say.

Now, it could be the case, however, that there is no actualisable, feasible world (F1-F5) in which Jennie freely chooses not to commit the evil act.



It might be *possible* that she could resist, but that in those circumstances she *never* freely would. You can see above, then, that because Jennie wouldn't freely choose not to do evil in worlds 3 and 5, that they are not able to go from possible worlds (W3, W5) to feasible worlds (F3, F5). Therefore, in order for God to actualise a world in which Jennie doesn't commit the evil act, He would have to remove Jennie's free will to stop her. Then it would be God, not Jennie, that's choosing.

It's logically impossible to make someone do something freely. God's omnipotence, as we discussed, does not mean He can do things that are logically no possible, therefore, there are some worlds that, whilst *possible*, simply are not *feasible* because of our free will.

The interesting question then becomes – how does God know what we will freely do?

This comes down to something we discussed a while ago in a Thursday session, for those who remember – God's *middle* knowledge.

All theologians and philosophers will agree that God has 2 types of knowledge – His natural knowledge and His free knowledge.

Natural knowledge is His knowledge of all necessary truths and propositions. That is to say that God knows everything that is propositionally true, and does not believe any propositions (p) that are not true (where p is true, God knows p , whereas when p is not true, God does not know p). Basically, God doesn't believe anything that is not true, and He believes and knows *everything* that is true. In addition, God does not know all non-propositional truths, which can be called experiential truths, only appropriate ones (such as what it feels like to be God). For example, I know what it feels like to be a sinner, but God doesn't, because that would be an imperfection on His part.

God's free knowledge is His knowledge of all contingent truths, so things that could have been different if he had chosen to actualise a different world. They're dependent on God's will.

As I say, these two types of knowledge are all fairly standard for theologians and philosophers to affirm.

It's a third type of knowledge that is the subject of God's ability to parse possible worlds into feasible worlds – God's *middle* knowledge.

I won't spend ages on this, but let me give a quick explanation and example of middle knowledge:

So, middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what every possible person that he could create would freely do in any circumstances God might place him. So, God would know, for example, that if He

were to create Peter in a certain set of circumstances, he would deny Christ three times. More personally, God knows every decision we would make and action we would take in every single set of circumstances, regardless of whether they ever get actualised. Let me give you an example of this – consider the classic film/book the Christmas Carol. In the Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by three ghosts – the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future.

It's the ghost of Christmas future that is the one we're focusing on. When this ghost appears he shows Scrooge what the future will look like if he doesn't change his ways. Importantly, he doesn't show Scrooge a future which *could* be, but that *would* be, if Scrooge doesn't change.

Well, spoiler alert (for a book written in 1843): Scrooge does change his ways, and that future never comes true! This doesn't change the fact that he was shown a very real future – the future that *would* have happened.

This is the knowledge which allows God to understand feasible worlds – knowing the choices we would freely make in any given circumstances. His natural knowledge gives Him the knowledge of all possible worlds, middle knowledge gives Him knowledge of all feasible worlds, and His free knowledge gives Him knowledge of the actual world. Phew! Complicated, eh?

For further reading, I would strongly suggest [this very in-depth, but eminently readable article](#) by William Lane Craig on Reasonable Faith, in which he discusses the philosophical underpinnings of how God can differentiate between possible and feasible worlds (interestingly, if you recall last week we used some quotes from John Mackie – Craig actually interacts with Mackie's ideas in this article). You could also [watch this interview](#), or read the transcript below, for a better understanding of God's different types of knowledge.

You'll notice, that all of this is a long way round of saying implicit assumption A (if God is all powerful He can create any world He wants) is not true. Not because of any deficiency in power on God's part, but rather because of the logical, loving and just nature of God.

Congratulations! You have had your first philosophy lesson. Good isn't it?

Now, that's obviously way more in-depth than I was able to go in the podcast, but I'm hoping if you've taken the time to come here you've also been willing to take the time to understand the concepts and maybe even check out the links!

Right, I think that's officially a good place to stop!

I really hope you have enjoyed this, that you enjoyed the podcast, and that it was thoroughly educational. I also hope it really shows you the magnificence of God!

Here's a recap of our question of the week and scripture from the podcast:

1Peter 3:15 – *“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect”*

This is one of my top three favourite verses in the Bible – it's the apologists top verse of choice, but why is this relevant to what we're talking about?

Well, firstly, the call of Peter here is to be able to discuss and defend our faith! We're all called to this, and to simply live your life without questioning, encountering and developing a response to these tough topics is to ignore this call on our lives.

Secondly, this is a great example of living both on the balcony and on the road! You need to be prepared to give a defence for the hope that is within you, which is spending time on the balcony and learning, but then you must be able to share it gently and respectfully, which is being on the

road!

If there's only a handful of verses you can commit to memory, I would suggest this be one of them.

Anyway, with that said, let's look at our question of the week! This time it's less of a question and more of something to think on.

I want you to try and come up with some different possible worlds and then consider whether or not they're feasible. I also want you to consider whether or not God exists in each of them. Hopefully, if you've understood this session correctly, this will be a good way to apply your new understanding!

As always guys don't be afraid to get in the youth group chat on WhatsApp and let us know how you're doing and what you're thinking. Make sure you have your prayer requests ready for our Bible studies on Thursdays so we can make sure we're all in this together. You can also interact with some stuff on Instagram @chawnyouth.

See you next week!