Peter van Inwagen — *The Problems of Evil, Air, and Silence*

**Summary**

- Mackie’s argument fails as a *deductive* argument; the theist can *consistently* maintain God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence in the face of evil.

- However, many still accept it as a very convincing *inductive* argument against the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God. That argument concerns the following two hypotheses:
  
  **Chance** The condition of humans is not the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhumans.

  **Theism** The condition of humans is the result of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being.

The ‘evidential argument from evil’ then goes like this:

| **P1** | The evidence of mass suffering is not at all surprising, given *Chance*. |
| **P2** | The evidence of mass suffering is *very* surprising, given *Theism*. |
| **C1** | The evidence of mass suffering gives good reason to prefer *Chance* to *Theism*. |
| **P3** | There is no evidence which gives us reason to prefer *Theism* to *Chance*. |
| **C2** | It is irrational to accept *Theism*, given our current evidence. |

- van Inwagen hopes to show that this is not so — that the evidence of mass suffering does not give us conclusive reason to abandon our belief in God. He aims to show that it can be entirely rational to continue to believe in the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God in spite of the evidence of mass suffering.

- Consider a debate between an ancient Greek atomist and an Aristotelian. The atomist says that every element — air, earth, water, and fire — is composed of *atoms*, very tiny and indivisible bodies. The Aristotelian objects to this view with the following argument:

  | **P1** | The natural resting place of bodies is the ground. That is why all bodies fall. |
  | **P2** | If the air was made up of atoms, then it would, like a cloud of dust, eventually settle to the ground. |
  | **P3** | Air does not settle to the ground like a cloud of dust. |
  | **C**  | Air is not made up of atoms. |
• The Aristotelian might go on to argue that the atomist ought to see air’s failure to settle to the ground as providing a good evidence against atomism. They might say, consider the following hypotheses:

Aristotelianism  Air has a different nature than bodies.

Atomism  Air has the same nature as bodies.

Now, the ‘evidential argument from non-settling’ goes like this:

P1  The evidence of air not settling is not at all surprising, given Aristotelianism.

P2  The evidence of air not settling is very surprising, given Atomism.

C1  The evidence of air not settling gives good reason to prefer Aristotelianism to Atomism.

P3  There is no evidence which gives us reason to prefer Atomism to Aristotelianism.

C2  It is irrational to accept Atomism, given our current evidence.

• We know why air does not settle. However, the Greek atomist was in no position to know why air does not settle. Does that mean that they would be irrational for them to hold on to their belief that air is made up of atoms?

• van Inwagen says ‘no.’ They might just say: Air atoms could have ‘fur’ consisting of long, thin spikes which keep them from getting too close to one another, and therefore keep them from settling to the ground. I don’t know that they do have fur like this, but they could have it for all we know; and it wouldn’t be too surprising that they had it, if Atomism were true.

• A problem like the problem of evil or the problem of air is called (by van Inwagen) a difficulty.

• A Defense is just a way that things could be, consistent with, and not surprising given, all that we know, which deals with the difficulty.

• Here is van Inwagen’s defense against the problem of evil:

1. Every possible world that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those that occur here, or else is massively irregular.

2. Some important good depends on the existence of higher-level sentient creatures; this good is of sufficient magnitude that it outweighs the pattern of suffering that occurs in the actual world.

3. Being massively irregular is a defect in a world, a defect at least as great as the defect of containing the patterns of suffering occurring at the actual world.

• van Inwagen contends that, for all we know, 1–3 are true. Moreover, 1–3 are not surprising given Theism. And, if 1–3 are true, then the existence of suffering is not incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect god. So, they constitute a successful defense.

• Theists should acknowledge that suffering does present a difficulty; and that they don’t know quite what to say about them. However, this doesn’t mean that it is irrational to continue believing in Theism. Every half-way interesting theory faces difficulties.