Abstract: Responding to Stephen Law's Evil-God Challenge

In his paper "The Evil-God Challenge", Law proposes that believing in an evil god is, roughly, as reasonable as believing in a good god. That is, there are comparable amounts of evidence for both beliefs. He calls this the symmetry thesis. He arrives at his thesis through reversing traditional theistic arguments. Confronted with the problem of evil, some theists dismiss it by pointing to the overwhelming amount of goodness. Surely, a good god is behind all this, they say. However, Law reverses their response, proposing, since there is such an overwhelming amount of evil, an evil god is behind it all. Conversely, he also faces a problem - the problem of good. Accordingly, theists might apt for other responses to the problem of evil. We call their responses theodicies - explanations to how a good god and evil can coexist. Again, Law reverses, by proposing reverse theodicies - explanations to how an evil god and goodness can coexist. From his reversals, Law offers the evil-god challenge: *How can believing in a good god be more reasonable than believing in an evil god?*

How can we solve the challenge? One way is to add some good that cannot be reversed by adding a roughly equivalent amount of evil. Thus, we create an unbalance between the amount of good and evil, in favour of goodness. If this unbalance is large, we can reject the symmetry thesis. For if there is more goodness, there is more evidence for a good god than an evil. Surely then, believing in a good god is more reasonable. And in rejecting the symmetry thesis, we solve the evil-god challenge.

If free-will is intrinsically good, whether a good god or an evil god has bestowed it on us, we have a good, to which there is no parallel intrinsic evil. Thus, we have more good than evil. This is the free-will theodicy. However, we cannot reject the symmetry thesis yet. The difference in amount of good and evil must be *large*. That is, the intrinsic goodness of free-will must be very good. I claim that the intrinsic goodness of free-will is, indeed, very good. Any intrinsic good must be very good by definition, being the good to which all rational pursuit is instrumental. Therefore, if free-will is intrinsically good, it must be very good. Thus, the free-will theodicy creates a large asymmetry in reasonableness, contradicting the symmetry thesis.

Law anticipates this conclusion in his paper and provides three objections. I try to refute all three.

In his first objection, he argues that, the asymmetry between the two theodicies might be neutralised. However, I think he begs the question. He appeals to some symmetries between theodicies, and assumes, therefore, that there also should be a parallel to free-will in another intrinsic evil. In other words, he assumes his symmetry thesis. Theists may discard his assumption.

In his second objection, he argues that, even if the goodness of free-will is large, it might not make a good god more reasonable than an evil. There still remains much evil, which is comparable to the amount of good; although there is more good than evil, both beliefs are still highly unreasonable. Thus, his symmetry thesis survives. However, trying to judge the difference between evil and goodness, after having accounted for the free-will theodicy, is a dubious and subjective activity. Such judgements carry little weight. Theists may discard these.

In his third objection, he argues that, even if the asymmetry due to free-will is large, it might be counterbalanced by some other asymmetry in favour of the evil-god hypothesis. This reason is forceful, because he provides evidence. In searching for an irreversible theodicy, theists might appeal to the goodness of religious experiences and miracles. Law reverses this theodicy, proposing that, an evil god might inflict different religious experiences and miracles on different people, to create conflicts about who has the true god.

I disagree with his conclusion. Different miracles and religious experiences are not reasons for conflict, rather they are cover-ups for the actual reasons for fighting. At best, I can grant him that it might fuel a conflict, but never actually be the reason itself. I think he overstates both the amount and intensity of conflict, resulted from such differing experiences. Furthermore, if, indeed, such differing experiences give rise to conflicts, they must be sufficiently evil to outweigh the good that, miracles have in creating hope and happiness, and religious experiences have in meeting man's need for spirituality.

He gives no further evidence. Thus, we are back in the same position as in his first objection. He assumes his conclusion, that there should be counterweights to asymmetries favouring the good-god hypothesis, *if* his symmetry thesis is true. Theists may discard his assumption.

In this paper, I try to solve the evil-god challenge assuming that free-will is intrinsically good, by creating a large asymmetry between good and evil, in favour of goodness - thereby, making the belief in a good god more reasonable than in an evil. Law anticipates this conclusion and provides opposing reasons. I believe I refute these, and if Law doesn't provide more substantial evidence for his reasons, theists, assuming free-will's intrinsic goodness, may consider the evil-god challenge solved.