



# Divine ambiguity: A philosophical inquiry into God's uncertain decisions



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The debate surrounding the nature and attributes of God as presented in the Bible has garnered significant attention and critique from various philosophical perspectives like Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell and David Hume. This philosophical critique emphasises the inconsistency in the nature of God and challenges traditional theological beliefs. The expression of regret by the God of the Bible in Genesis 6:6 raises philosophical dilemmas regarding divine attributes and the problem of evil. The contradiction between God's regret and the affirmation of his creation as good underscores fundamental questions about divine omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence. The presence of evil and suffering in the world poses a significant challenge to the notion of a loving and all-powerful God. Examples of human suffering, such as slavery, colonisation, apartheid and natural disasters, further highlight the complexity of reconciling divine attributes with the existence of evil. Philosophically analysing biblical narratives, such as the story of Job, Noah's flood and the plagues of Egypt, raises ethical concerns regarding divine justice and the moral agency of humanity. Additionally, the indiscriminate punishment of innocent individuals in these narratives challenges the credibility of a benevolent and compassionate God. The philosophical inquiry into the problem of evil and natural disasters underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of divine attributes and their implications for human existence.

**Contribution:** The study encourages reflection on key questions about the nature of divinity, the morality of divine actions, and the compatibility of traditional theology with rational thought. It highlights how inconsistencies in certain biblical accounts challenge those trying to balance faith with reason and scientific understanding. While some may view these narratives as metaphors or allegories, others find it difficult to align them with their intellectual beliefs, resulting in tensions between religious faith and scientific rationality.

**Keywords:** God's regret; metaphysics; omniscience; theology; biblical interpretation; divine sovereignty.

## Introduction

There are gazillions of opinions and criticisms about the nature and characteristics of God as presented in the Bible. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work titled 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra', embarked on a philosophical inquiry in which he declared God to be a dead entity. The author further confronts traditional religious beliefs and questions the relevance of the so-called God to modern life (Nietzsche & Hollingdale 2020). In his reasoning, philosopher Bertrand Russell expressed skepticism about the certainty of God's existence and questioned why people should be Christians, citing insufficient evidence to support the belief. According to him, the concept of God is incoherent and self-contradictory, and he casts suspicion on the theological doctrines as presented in the Bible (Mordarski 2022). Another philosopher who criticises the nature of God and points out the ambiguity is David Hume. In his writing, he expressed reservations about the problem of evil, suggesting that the existence of evil is sufficient evidence to uphold the fable about the possibility of God, who is supposed to be essentially all-powerful and benevolent in the midst of human suffering (Penelhum 2010). According to David Hume, a belief in God was non-sensical because God was only an idea that could not be experienced through human senses because fundamentally there is no empirical justification to hold such a belief (Norton 2017). In the opinion of Mugo (2017), David Hume presented logical points to emphasise the inconsistencies about the nature of God:

- If God is willing to prevent evil but unable to do so, then he is impotent or lacking in power.
- If God is able to prevent evil but unwilling to do so, then he is malevolent or morally deficient.

**Note:** Special Collection: SASRF – Empathy and Religion, sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa, South Africa).

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- If God is both able and willing to prevent evil, then the existence of evil seems contradictory to the existence of such a God.

This rational argument advanced a fundamental query about the nature of God and the compatibility of divine attributes with the presence of evil in the world. This sequence of reasoning has been persuasive in philosophical discussions about the problem of evil and the apparent instability in the nature of God.

The God of the Bible in Genesis 6:6 (NIV) would base this present intellectual intervention on the expression of regret, which reads:

The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled, So the LORD said, 'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground – for I regret that I have made them'.

This expression is not reflective of a God who has everything under his control, nor does he have foreknowledge of the consequences of his actions.

## Between God's regret and moral evil

The contradiction concerning the pang of guilt expressed by God in creating man can also be evaluated, citing the Bible in Genesis 1:31 (NIV):

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

And in Genesis 1:27 (NIV), the identity of man was affirmed:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The implication of God creating man in his image and after his likeness shows that whatever God can do is also potential in man. At the same time, he later expressed regret over the man. He created it in his image and declared it good; therefore, it would be logical to conclude that there was defectiveness in the way man was created or that the creator is also defective. In addition, the impression that God expressed regret over creating humans who are created in his image and declared them good presents a philosophical dilemma. If God is indeed omnipotent and omniscient, as commonly attributed to him, then the notion of God experiencing regret suggests a limitation in his nature or instability in divine attributes and decisions. This concept is pre-logical and problematic and therefore lacks support from rational argumentation.

The obvious incidence of evil and suffering in the world presents a substantial challenge and contradiction to the notion of a benevolent and omnipotent God. The problem of evil runs contrary to how a supposedly loving and all-powerful deity could tolerate the existence of pain, injustice

and cruelty in the world (Agada 2015; Dean 2023). It can be inferred that either God is loving or powerless, or he is powerful but wicked.

The existence of evil and human suffering creates strong evidence against the existence of an all-powerful and loving God. From this perspective, the problem of evil remains a significant challenge to traditional theological beliefs. Humans, supposedly created in the image and likeness of God, share identical attributes that cause some of these evils. For instance, Herre et al. (2024) reveal that 37 million people have died from various warfare since 1800, acknowledging that the number would be higher if civilians who were caught in the crossfire or died as a result of hunger and diseases were included. The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development confirms that armed conflict and large- and small-scale criminality worldwide cause at least 526 000 deaths annually. Recovery and reconstruction of communities affected by this conflict can take years, with numerous challenges ranging from infrastructure to be reconstructed, a persistently high crime rate, pervasive health complications, education systems in poor shape and unexploded armaments to be cleared. Most of the countries emerging from conflict suffer years of deficiency in how to rebuild the economy (World Bank 2024). According to the statistics by World Meters (2024), the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that 704 607 102 were infected with the dreaded disease and 7 009 335 died.

Another suffering that is significant in relation to human travail is the injustices of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, which continue to have profound and enduring effects on the descendants of the victims, affecting their social, economic and cultural realities in substantial ways. The trans-Atlantic slave trade displaced millions of Africans under duress from their natural native land, subjecting them to ruthless conditions and mistreatment in the Americas and other regions. Till today, the descendants of incarcerated Africans continue to experience intergenerational trauma resulting from the systemic violence, dehumanisation and exploitation endured by their ancestors (Micheletti et al. 2020). The legacy of slavery has endured to date, contributing to persistent socio-economic inequalities, including wealth disparity, loss of manpower, educational imbalance and inadequate access to opportunities, propagating cycles of poverty and marginalisation (Bertocchi 2016).

Furthermore, colonisation upset native cultures, languages and social organisations, imposing European norms and value systems on the colonised peoples, and obliterating indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Colonial powers exploited and took advantage of the natural resources and labour of colonised territories for their own economic advancement at the expense of local communities, leading to long-term underdevelopment and dependency (Kicza & Horn 2016). Colonial rule subjugated and subdued the indigenous inhabitants politically and socially, rebuffing their right to self-determination and propagating systems of oppression and marginalisation (Nettelbeck 2017).

Another typical example of the evil suppression of fellow human beings is the Apartheid system in South Africa, in which racial segregation and discrimination were institutionalised by dividing the people along racial lines and depriving non-white populations of basic human rights and freedoms. The Apartheid era wreaked intense trauma and suffering on the non-white population, which included involuntary removals from ancestral land, violent suppression and systemic discrimination, leaving enduring psychological injury and scars on individuals and communities (Abel 2019). Notwithstanding the termination of apartheid as a strangulating socio-economic and political policy, its legacy lingers on in the form of tenacious racial inequalities in South Africa, which also include disparities in income, education, healthcare and access to resources that could alleviate poverty (Tshishonga 2019).

The establishment of a slave breeding farm occurred even after the outlawing of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is a deliberate and systematic reproduction of enslaved individuals for the purpose of growing the slave population on plantations and farms because the slaveholders sought to increase their workforce without incurring the costs associated with purchasing enslaved Africans from external sources (Sublette & Sublette 2015). Slave breeding was specifically motivated by economic inducements, as slaveholders wielded strong control over the reproductive capacities of enslaved women and men, often through coercive measures such as forced mating, rape or the separation of families to facilitate breeding, including enforcing breeder males to sleep with their mothers. Slave breeding treated black slaves as ordinary commodities for labour, ignoring their humanity, independence and rights to self-determination. The legacy of slave breeding continues to hunt their descendants to this day as they continue to endure stigma, humiliation and challenges related to tracing one's ancestry and identity (Bacow 2022).

## Philosophical analysis

The philosophical analysis of how a God who is loving, omniscient and all-powerful permits the existence of evil and human suffering, as described earlier in this article, involves contending with the typical theological conundrum and puzzle known as the 'problem of evil'. This problem arises from the obvious contradiction between the existence of evil and human suffering in the world and the traditional attributes ascribed to God, such as omnipotence (all-powerful), omniscience (all-knowing) and omnibenevolence (all-loving).

### The nature of God

**Omnipotence:** God is usually assumed to possess unlimited power and control over all things.

**Omniscience:** God is believed to have complete knowledge of all events, past, present and future.

**Omnibenevolence:** God is perceived as perfectly good, loving and compassionate, desiring the well-being and happiness of all creation.

### The problem of evil

The existence of evil and suffering in the world seems irreconcilable with the attributes of an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God.

If God is all-powerful, why does he allow evil to occur? Could not he prevent it?

If God is all-knowing, why does he allow suffering that he knows will happen?

If God is all-loving, why does he permit his creation to experience pain and anguish?

### Logical contradiction

The logical problem of evil presupposes the existence of a deity characterised by omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. This proposition, however, engenders a logical inconsistency when juxtaposed with the existence of evil (Adams 1999). According to this line of reasoning, an omnipotent deity possesses the ability to eradicate evil entirely, an omniscient deity possesses the knowledge of evil's existence and an omnibenevolent deity harbours the desire to eliminate evil, given its inherent goodness (Rowe 1979). Nevertheless, the existence of evil and such a God creates a logical contradiction, pointing to either the nonexistence of God, a lack of power to stop evil, ignorance about the existence of evil or a choice not to act against it (Swinburne 1964).

Through the presented logical arguments, it may be contended that the existence of multiple deities is feasible, as acknowledged by the God depicted in the biblical tradition, particularly as evidenced in the Decalogue's injunction: 'You must not worship any other gods except me'. This proposition raises philosophical inquiries regarding the exclusivity of the biblical God's jurisdiction, suggesting a potential limitation to the deity's relevance solely to the Israelite community, excluding other ethnic groups. Consequently, a pertinent question arises concerning the existence of distinct divine entities governing diverse nations: do alternative deities preside over non-Israelite populations?

### Natural evil and divine blunder

The biblical narrative comprises several accounts of catastrophic events, often prompted by God to punish those who deviate from his instructions. Instances of such calamities include Noah's flood (Gn 6:19), the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19:24-25), Job's suffering (Job 1-16) and the pestilences visited upon Egypt during the time of Moses (Ex 11:1-12:36). In narrating this account, it was unambiguously asserted that these events were coordinated

by God as acts of judgement in response to human transgressions and iniquity (O'Mathúna 2018). In the case of Job, God permitted his suffering to serve as a test of his faith and integrity. Satan dares God, proposing that Job's righteousness is simply a consequence of his comfortable circumstances and that he would curse God if those circumstances were taken away. In this divine experiment, Job was made to endure severe tribulation; in the process, he lost all of his possessions, his children died, and he suffered great physical and economic loss. We can view this as an abuse of divine sovereignty. From a philosophical perspective, the Joban dilemma prompts an examination of theodicy, which seeks to resolve the reality of evil and suffering with the belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God. Despite his righteousness, Job's anguish raises questions about the justice of divine judgement and the nature of God's sovereignty over human endeavours. Philosophers throughout history have grappled with the problem of evil and the apparent injustice inherent in innocent individuals experiencing profound suffering (Plantinga 1974).

The story of Noah during the flooding of the world by God also deserves to be logically evaluated. The Lord instructed Noah to construct an ark, within which his family and 'every living thing of all flesh' (Gn 6:19) found refuge from the flood. The deluge decimated the wicked and all land-dwelling creatures outside the ark. Once the floodwaters subsided, Noah and his family emerged from the vessel. Critics of the biblical narration may have a difference of opinion about the indiscriminate destruction caused by the flood, which seems incompatible with the idea of a loving and merciful God. It is logical to question why a God who supposedly cares for humanity would resort to such extreme measures to address human sin and disobedience.

From a logical and ethical viewpoint, the flood narrative raises questions about divine justice and the moral agency of humanity. Critics may question the fairness of holding all humankind accountable for its sins through a catastrophic event, particularly considering the potential presence of innocent individuals, such as children and animals, who are not eligible moral agents and would have perished in the flood. Moreover, sceptics may challenge the notion of divine punishment on a global scale, arguing that it reflects an overly punitive and disproportionate response to human wrongdoing by a God who created them in his image and early declared them perfect and good (Kugel 2017).

In the narrative of Exodus 12:29–38, Pharaoh sustains a tyrannical dominion over Moses and his people, who migrated from the land of Israel, subjecting them to inhuman treatment. In reaction, God demands that Pharaoh free the Israelites, but Pharaoh stubbornly refuses. To assert his authority and force Pharaoh's compliance, God inflicts pestilence, causing the deaths of all the firstborn children. Though the emphasis now is on the children who are not accountable moral agents, some may also be of tender age and bear no direct responsibility for the enslavement or

injustices committed by the Egyptian authority. This scenario raises ethical concerns akin to the imposition of punishment for the transgressions of others. Such an illustration stimulates the philosophical inquiry as to the desirability of worshipping a God regarded as revengeful and unforgiven retribution against innocent children.

Even in the contemporary human legal system, the indiscriminate killing of innocent children as a form of punishment for the actions of their rulers raises serious moral and legal concerns. Even if one accepts the concept of divine justice, the idea of punishing innocent individuals for the sins of others is morally unjustifiable (Feldman 2002). The story of slaughtering the firstborn of the Egyptians exposes God as deficient in empathy for the innocent victims of the plague, and even from a humanistic perspective, the suffering of innocent children should evoke compassion and a desire to protect them rather than inflict harm upon them. The actions attributed to God in this biblical narration contradict and controvert generally accepted moral principles, such as the value of human life and the importance of protecting the innocent. This inconsistency and discrepancy undermine the credibility of the credential of God, who was proclaimed to be inherently good and compassionate (Rubenstein 2022).

Another biblical account that revealed the contradiction in the superlative attribute of God as an omniscient and omnipotent God is the story of Lucifer's fall, described in the Old Testament chapters Ezekiel 28, Isaiah 14 and Revelation 12:7–10. In summary, Lucifer was initially an influential and attractive archangel created by God who occupied a vantage position within the heavenly realm. Lucifer became arrogant and wanted to promote himself above God, seeking to supplant his authority and position. This mutiny against God led to a heavenly conflict between Lucifer and God, resulting in the expulsion of Lucifer from Heaven along with a third of the angels who were loyal to him. His insurrection led to the casting of Lucifer, also known as Satan or the devil, and his followers down to Earth. Therefore, the Earth became their territory of influence, from where they continue to wield their wickedness on humanity, tempting individuals away from God and perpetuating evil in the world.

Evaluating the contradiction surrounding the way the devil was sent to the Earth, especially against the background of a presumably loving and all-powerful God, advances concerns about why he would knowingly allow the devil, a being associated with evil, to exist and influence humanity negatively (Adams 1999). If God is omnipotent, why does not he suppress or eliminate the devil's influence altogether? This leads to questions about God's responsibility for the presence of evil in the world. Is it rational to hold humans responsible for their actions when they are subjected to the influence of an inherently malevolent being? (Plantinga 1974). The idea of God judging and condemning humans to hell for yielding to the devil's temptations raises questions about divine justice. Is it fair for God to punish humans for actions that were influenced by external forces beyond

their control? Should not a loving and just God offer redemption and forgiveness rather than eternal damnation? (Feldman 2002). Finally, the question arises of how God expects humans to overcome the influence of the devil if he himself does not intervene directly to suppress evil. Does God provide humans with the necessary tools, such as moral guidance or spiritual strength, to resist temptation? Or does he simply expect them to navigate the complexities of good and evil on their own? (Kraft 2016).

Humanity also grapples with the divine entity's allowance of natural disasters, which plunges individuals into severe adversity. This phenomenon persists as an enigma surpassing human understanding, prompting philosophers and theologians to grapple with the pursuit of logical elucidation. Natural evil denotes the travail and destruction caused by natural phenomena such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, diseases and other disasters that man has no control over. This also poses a substantial philosophical challenge to the notion of a benevolent, all-powerful God. The effort to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of a loving and omnipotent God is thought-provoking.

Between 1998 and 2017, earthquakes affected approximately 750 000 deaths globally, representing more than half of all deaths connected to natural disasters. During this time period, well over 125 million people were affected by this natural disaster. The implication is that many more people who did not lose their lives directly became homeless, displaced, injured and evacuated (World Health Organization 2024). Annually, approximately 60 000 people die globally as a result of natural disasters (Kenny 2013). The rational explanation to justify natural disasters in relation to a loving and all-powerful God involves contending with profound questions about the nature of divinity, human existence and the problem of evil. While absolute answers may remain mysterious, philosophical inquiry can deepen human understanding of the complexities and mysteries inherent in the human experience.

## Reconciling divine love with human suffering

In Thomas Jay Oord's book, titled *God Can't*, the author made an intellectual contribution in support of open theology, which presented a context for reconciling the Christian God with actual-world experiences. Oord confronted traditional theodicy by disagreeing with the notion that God does not control everything and is incapable of preventing evil due to the nature of divine love and the autonomy of creation. Instead of domineering manipulation, God's power is seen as persuasive love, operating within a world based on free will and natural processes. This approach portrays God as relational and dynamic, suffering with creation and continually working to bring about good despite evil and suffering. It contrasts with classical theism, where God is omnipotent and fully in control, making the existence of evil harder to explain (Oord 2019). In other words, Thomas Jay Oord argues that God's all-loving and non-controlling nature

limits His ability to prevent evil, as divine intervention would contradict His very essence and infringe upon human freedom and free will.

## Interpretive approaches on theodicy

The subject of theodicy, which deals with the challenge of reconciling God's inherent goodness with the existence of evil, hinges on the evidence used to assess God's nature (Wiley 2013). According to the author, if one adopts a naturalistic viewpoint and regards the Bible as merely a human document, the issue of theodicy becomes irrelevant, as God is not believed to have revealed himself through any extraordinary means from this perspective. On the other hand, if the natural world is the main source for understanding God's goodness and the Bible is secondary, then the exploration of theodicy will be permanently inconclusive and unconvincing. This method can lead to theological views such as process theology and open theism, which suggest that God is not the sovereign ruler of the universe. Only by prioritising the Bible as the primary interpretive lens can the goodness of God and the problem of evil be reconciled reasonably.

The debate on theodicy struggles with how the existence of evil and human suffering seems to contradict the popular notion of a good God. This intricate subject is stressed by Clendenin (1988) who notes that some are distressed by any presence of evil, while others are worried by the extent of evil. Regardless of the doubts, the existence of evil is a well-acknowledged aspect of the Christian faith. The author argues that even if evil were an illusion, its effects in terms of misery, pain, suffering and eventual death are obvious enough to constitute a significant problem. This predicament can be traced back to Epicurus, who questioned why an omnipotent and benevolent God could coexist with evil (Waters 1997). The Bible, however, does not view this as a problem and instead reconciles God's goodness with the existence of evil.

Pain and suffering are distressing realities on Earth. Nevertheless, if theodicy is as significant an issue as sceptics would claim, why does the Bible also discuss the reality of evil extensively? Rather than being a concealed aspect of Christianity, the Bible was unapologetically truthful about the existence of evil and God's purposes for allowing it. To elucidate this point, examples abound in the Bible, prominent are the stories of Job, Joseph and Jesus Christ (Wiley 2013).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding the nature and characteristics of God, as presented in the Bible, evokes numerous opinions and criticisms from various philosophical perspectives. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell and David Hume have challenged traditional religious beliefs and questioned the relevance of the biblical God to modern life. Their scepticism revolves around the coherence of the concept of God and the logical inconsistencies inherent in traditional theological doctrines.

The biblical narrative itself presents philosophical quandaries, particularly regarding divine justice and the problem of evil. The story of Noah, as well as other biblical accounts such as the Exodus and Lucifer's fall, raise profound questions about the nature of God, human suffering and moral agency. The contradiction between the purported attributes of God as omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence and the existence of evil and suffering in the world challenges traditional theological interpretations.

The inconsistencies and illogicalities present in certain biblical accounts pose significant challenges for individuals navigating the complexities of faith, reason and scientific understanding in the modern world. While some may choose to interpret these narratives metaphorically or allegorically, others may struggle to reconcile them with their intellectual and philosophical convictions, leading to tensions between religious belief and scientific rationality.

The philosophical analysis of these biblical narratives prompts reflection on fundamental questions about the nature of divinity, the moral implications of divine actions and the compatibility of traditional theological beliefs with rational inquiry. The problem of evil, in particular, remains a significant challenge to traditional theological doctrines, as it calls into question the coherence of a benevolent and omnipotent God in the face of human suffering and injustice.

While philosophical inquiry may not provide definitive answers to these profound theological questions, it can deepen our understanding of the complexities inherent in the human experience and stimulate further reflection on the nature of divinity, morality and the human condition. Ultimately, the discourse surrounding the nature and characteristics of God remains a fertile ground for philosophical exploration and intellectual inquiry, inviting scholars and thinkers to engage in rigorous debate and contemplation.

## Originality and value

The article is novel because of the comprehensive and interdisciplinary style in examining the problem of evil and the nature of God. It efficiently incorporates classical philosophical arguments, historical context and modern issues to challenge traditional religious beliefs. As a result of this, it provides a different perspective and multidimensional analysis that allows readers to re-evaluate the rationality and significance of traditional theistic attributes in light of the existence of evil and suffering.

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O.O.D. conceptualised and conducted the study, including the investigation, writing and analysis. M.N. contributed to the conceptualisation, review and editing of the study.

## Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

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