Religious Disagreement, Religious Experience, and the Evil-God Hypothesis

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Abstract:

Conciliationism is the view that says when an agent who believes *P* becomes aware of an epistemic peer who believes *not-P*, that she encounters a (partial) defeater for her belief that *P*. Strong versions of conciliationism pose a sceptical threat to many, if not most, religious beliefs since religion is rife with peer disagreement. Elsewhere (Lougheed 2018) I argue that one way for a religious believer to avoid sceptical challenges posed by strong conciliationism is by appealing to the evidential import of religious experience. Not only can religious experience be used to establish a relevant evidential asymmetry between disagreeing parties, but reliable reports of such experiences also start to put pressure on the religious sceptic to conciliate toward her religious opponent. Recently, however, Asha Lancaster-Thomas poses a highly innovative challenge to the evidential import of religious experience. Namely, she argues that an evil-God is just as likely to explain negative religious experiences as a good God is able to explain positive religious experiences. In light of this, religious believers need to explain why a good God exists instead of an evil-God. I respond to Lancaster-Thomas by suggesting, at least within the context of religious experience, (i) that the evil-God hypothesis is only a challenge to certain versions of theism; and (ii) that the existence of an evil-God and good God are compossible.

I.   Introduction

The epistemology of disagreement literature focuses on the question of whether awareness of epistemic peer disagreement constitutes a (partial) defeater for rational belief (or knowledge). There are two main schools of thought regarding this question. First, conciliationism is the view that says when an agent who believes *P* becomes aware of an epistemic peer who believes *not-P* she encounters a (partial) defeater for her belief that *P*. Second, non-conciliationism states that when an agent who believes *P* becomes aware of an epistemic peer who believes not-P she doesn't necessarily encounter a defeater for *P* and can rationally remain steadfast in her initial belief that *P*. Strong versions of conciliationism pose a sceptical threat to many, if not most, religious beliefs since religion is rife with peer disagreement.

Elsewhere I argue that one way for a religious believer to avoid the sceptical challenge posed by strong conciliationism is by appealing to the evidential import of religious experience (Lougheed 2018). This is because religious experience can be used to establish a relevant evidential asymmetry between disagreeing parties. When evidential symmetry is broken the two opponents are no longer epistemic peers and the sceptical threat posed by strong conciliationism evaporates. Likewise, such experiences can actually start to put pressure on the religious sceptic to conciliate toward her religious opponent. In a recent article, however, Asha Lancaster-Thomas poses a highly innovative challenge to the evidential import of religious experience. Namely, she argues that an evil-God is just as likely to explain negative religious experiences as a good God is to explain positive religious experiences. In light of this, religious believers need to explain why a good God exists instead of an evil-God.

In Section II I outline my original argument explaining how a religious believer can appeal to religious experience as a way of rationally rejecting conciliationism about religious disagreement. In Section III I outline Lancaster-Thomas's evil-God challenge to the evidential import of religious experience and show how it can be used as an objection to my argument about religious disagreement. Section IV examines a number of different objections to Lancaster-Thomas. I concede that if her target is classical monotheism, then her objection is successful. However, I argue that there are resources within certain theistic traditions to avoid this challenge. For instance, her rejection of Satan as an explanatory hypothesis fails. Though admittedly complicated questions about theory selection arise. Likewise, it's not obvious that a good God and evil-God can't co-exist. Manichaeism is an ancient religion which posited something similar to this idea. In conclusion, it's worth noting that her argument does indeed succeed with respect to classical monotheism. It's less clear, however, that it could be used to reject supernaturalism and leveraged in support of ontological naturalism though she never claims as much for it.

II.   Lougheed's Solution to Religious Disagreement from Religious Experience

Elsewhere, I argue that religious experience can, at least sometimes, provide a solution to the challenge of religious disagreement (Lougheed 2018). In this section I briefly explain my understanding of the problem and then my proposed solution. Let's start with the problem:

The Problem

1. Agent A and agent B are epistemic peers with respect to whether proposition P if they share the same evidence E (with respect to P) and are equally reliable with respect to accurately evaluating relevantly similar propositions to P (on the basis of relevantly similar evidence to E). [Approximate statement of epistemic peerhood]

2. If agent A believes proposition P and agent B believes not-P and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether P, then both A and B must revise their beliefs that P and not-P, respectively. [Approximate statement of conciliationism]

3. Agent A believes religious proposition R and agent B believes not-R (and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether R).

Therefore,

4. A and B both must revise their belief that R and not-R, respectively. [The Problem] (Lougheed 2018, 174-175).

If A and B disagree over some religious proposition, and are epistemic peers in the relevant domain, then a serious challenge has been raised to the rationality of religious belief. For religious belief is rife with peer disagreement. Without a dispute-independent reason that either A or B could appeal to in order to justify their belief, rationality requires that each conciliate toward the other. Here's my proposed solution to the problem which appeals to the evidential import of religious experience:

The Solution

5. Religious experiences of intuitive knowing are perceptually or phenomenologically unique.

6. Agent A experiences intuitive knowing K and it constitutes additional evidence for R.

Therefore,

7. A and B are no longer epistemic peers with respect to whether R.

Therefore,

8. (4) is false. A need not revise her belief that R. [The Solution] (Lougheed 2018, 188)

In my solution I focus on cases of religious experience known as *intuitive knowing* or *intellectual visions* since they appear to be phenomenologically unique. This uniqueness allows the agent who has such an experience to add something to her evidence which her opponent does not possess in her evidence. Hence, the one who has the intellectual vision is in a better evidential position with respect to religious questions than her opponent. Thus, they are no longer epistemic peers, and the problem from religious disagreement evaporates. Here's one example of intuitive knowing I appeal to in my proposed solution:

> Amelia: "It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said 'God.' I knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of 'that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst.' Of course, I didn't put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the

Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God." Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that "God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him." (Lougheed 2018, 185-186).[1]

I conclude my solution by suggesting that religious experience can sometimes put pressure on the religious sceptic. For if two religious sceptics are epistemic peers up until the point at which one of them has a religious experience (and stops being a sceptic on the evidential basis of that experience), then the other faces pressure to conciliate toward the religious believer. This is because she knows that if she had had such an experience she would have evaluated the evidential import of it in the same way. Why? Because they were peers up until the moment of the experience. Of course, this proposal needs to assume that testimony of such experiences is reliable (and hence constitutes reliable evidence).[2] Likewise, this proposal is consistent with there being defeaters for the testimony of such experiences (Lougheed 2018, 188-192).[3] In the next section I show how Lancaster-Thomas's evil-God challenge to religious experience can be used to undermine my proposed solution to religious experience.

III.   Lancaster-Thomas's Evil-God Challenge to Religious Experience

In a recent article, Asha Lancaster-Thomas appeals to the possibility of an evil-God to pose an innovative challenge to arguments from religious experience. She assumes, as my solution to religious disagreement does, that religious experience does indeed constitute evidence for religious belief, and that testimony of such experiences is prima facie reliable. In other words, she agrees that the religious sceptic cannot dismiss the evidential import of such experiences out of hand without appearing to beg-the-question against her religious opponent. Still, despite making these apparent concessions to the proponent of religious experience, Lancaster-Thomas levels a serious objection to seemingly any appeal to the evidential import of such experiences. She argues that (i) negative religious experiences provide direct evidence for an evil-God, and also that (ii) positive religious experiences provide indirect evidence for an evil-God. In light of this, religious experiences aren't just equally compatible with an evil-God, they support the existence of an evil-God *more* than that of a good God.[4] Of course, Lancaster-Thomas doesn't believe there is good evidence for an evil-God; her point is that this shows the absurdity of a good God. Her dialectical strategy is to categorize different religious experiences and then show that there are reports of negative experiences in every category. However, the classification of religious experience isn't important for my purposes here. Lancaster-Thomas also notes that while there are fewer reports of negative experiences, it may well be that there is likely a strong bias against the reporting of such experiences.[5] Here are three examples Lancaster-Thomas uses as examples of negative experiences:

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[1] This example is from Phillip H. Wiebe 2015 which he takes from the Alister Hardy Centre for Religious Experience.
[2] The assumption here is that if agent S testifies about P to agent Q then Q has a reason to believe P, all-else-being equal. This is perhaps closely related to Swinburne's Principle of Credulity.
[3] I borrow this idea from Reining 2016.
[4] This is even stronger than the evil-God challenge for the problem of evil which suggests that an evil-God is as equally likely as a good God (Lancaster-Thomas Compass I, Law 2010).
[5] For instance, such experiences are associated with stigma. Likewise, in earlier times reporting such experiences could have had even worse consequences than stigma.

Negative Experience 1: I was out one night in Sussex, near _____, and when I came to a ruined building, I felt the presence of something evil, which made me feel extremely uncomfortable and frightened.... On no other occasion in my life have I had such an overpowering feeling of the presence of evil which invoked such fear in myself (Hay 1979, 172 quoted in Lancaster-Thomas forthcoming).

Negative Experience 2: My body was like a black pit, as big as a bucket, wide open for anything to enter! Appalled, I held my arms tightly across myself to close up this awful hole. What did I shut out? From that moment, and for the next two years, I had no interest in my church going. I seemed to be completely cast out from a feeling of nearness to God – and what was worse I did not want to be near (Jakobsen 1999, 18 quoted in Lancaster-Thomas forthcoming).

Negative Experience 3: In the October of the autumn '51 I went through the most terrible darkness. Of all the darkness and desolation I had suffered this was the ultimate. There are many, many dark nights of the soul in mystical experience, but this was the blackest of them all. I thought I was in the hands of great evil and, being by nature innately religious, I went to my bedroom to pray. There was no God to pray to, so I said 'If I am in the hands of great evil, please take me out of this' (Jakobsen 1999, 12 quoted in Lancaster-Thomas forthcoming).

These experiences purport to support the existence of an evil-God in the same way that positive experiences support the existence of a good God. Given this, the theist is under pressure to explain why we should think a good God exists instead of an evil-God. Without such an explanation this challenge offers a reason to deny the evidential value of positive religious experiences. Likewise, Lancaster-Thomas suggests that even positive negative experiences can be explained by the existence of an evil-God. For an evil-God would be a deceiver and so might create a number of different (competing) religious experiences in order to create confusion and conflict. This makes the evil-God challenge about religious experience even more challenging then its counterparts in say, the problem of evil, or the ontological argument (Lancaster-Thomas 2018a).

With respect to my proposed solution to religious disagreement recall premise (6): Agent A experiences intuitive knowing K and it constitutes additional evidence for R. Lancaster-Thomas's challenge is a defeater for premise (6) because it provides a reason to deny that religious experiences (including experiences of intuitive knowing) offers additional evidence for R. Thus, Lancaster-Thomas offers a reason for rejecting my proposed solution to the problem of religious disagreement. In the next section I explore a number of different possible replies in the hopes of saving my solution to religious disagreement.

IV.   Possible Replies to Lancaster-Thomas

Elsewhere, Lancaster-Thomas explains that there are at least three different strategies the proponent of the evil-God challenge can employ(2018a). The weak challenge claims that both the

evil-God hypothesis and good God hypothesis share the same evidential support and hence there is no reason to choose between them. Since there is no reason to choose between them it is unreasonable to believe in a good God instead of an evil-God (and vice versa). The first type of strong challenge says that the good God hypothesis is absurd because the parallel evil-God hypothesis is absurd. The second type of strong challenge says the evil-God hypothesis entails that both an evil-God and a good God exist which is an impossible state-of-affairs. (Lancaster-Thomas 2018a). Lancaster-Thomas says the intended strength of her objection to religious experience is in the strong category. Negative experiences not only show that an evil-God is just as likely as a good God, but according to Lancaster-Thomas they show that an evil-God is *more likely* to exist than a good God.

In the literature, standard objections to the evil-God challenge deny that there is symmetry between the two hypotheses.[6] Others accept symmetry but claim that the good God hypothesis is more likely than the evil-God hypothesis. However, in what follows I'll focus on (i) the target of the objection and; (i) whether the two hypothesis really can't co-exist.

VI.1. Lancaster-Thomas's target God is unclear

This objection says that the target God Lancaster-Thomas has in view is unclear. On certain conceptions of God her challenge is more difficult to sustain. I'll demonstrate this by examining how to apply her objection to a more specific conception of God found in the Christian tradition.

VI.1.1. Monotheism

Lancaster-Thomas's target is classical monotheism. Monotheism is the idea that there is only one God who is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. If this is the version of God in view, then Lancaster-Thomas's argument hits its target. It's difficult to see how the parallel case for the evil-God could be denied. And the existence of an evil-God is incompatible, by definition (i.e. of 'mono'), with the existence of a good God. This is because on monotheism there is only one God. Likewise, giving up the argument for a good God from religious experience clearly doesn't help. For doing so eliminates the evil-God parallel, but at the cost of eliminating the parallel good God argument. And this is just the conclusion that Lancaster-Thomas is hoping to support.

VI.1.2. Christian Theism

While Christianity is a type of monotheism, it is not monotheism simpliciter. And there are resources unique to Christianity that may help one respond to the evil-God challenge.[7] For example, many versions of Christianity posit the literal existence of Satan, something a monotheist unconnected to a religious tradition cannot posit (at least not without it appearing to her opponent to be an ad hoc suggestion). Satan is a very powerful fallen angel who is capable of causing the negative religious experiences reported by Lancaster-Thomas. On this view, negative religious

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[6] For more discussion of symmetry see Forrest 2012; Hendricks 2018; Lancaster-Thomas 2018b; Peoples 2011; Ritchie 2012.

[7] I am discussing the Christian tradition because that's what I'm familiar with, but presumably there are strategies unique to the many other theistic religions too.

experiences serve as confirmation of the existence of Satan, and hence serve as confirmation of the Christian metaphysical picture of the world.

Lancaster-Thomas anticipates the appeal to Satan when she writes that in order to "respond to this challenge, we need only include theistic dualism in the Evil-god hypothesis by speculating the existence of a lesser, benevolent god (or perhaps a fallen demon that co-exists with Evil-god but has proclivities toward good rather than evil" (Lancaster-Thomas, forthcoming). Here Lancaster-Thomas is too quick. For while it's true that there are a large number of hypotheses (perhaps an infinite number) which could explain a certain phenomenon (in this case positive or negative religious experiences), we need some *independent reason* to think the explanatory hypothesis in question is plausible in the first place. In the case of the Christian theist, they have not only scripture, but also a long tradition which posits the existence of Satan. This appears to make the Satan hypothesis more likely than the lesser benevolent demon hypothesis. Such speculation about a Satan parallel is ad hoc on the part of Lancaster-Thomas.

Consider that on a standard Bayesian approach to probability a theory becomes *less likely* to be true the more that is added to it (i.e. the more complex it becomes). If this is right, then simple monotheism is more probable than Christian theism since it's a much simpler theory. But things are complicated. For instance, some say the problem of evil is easier to respond to on Christian theism than on bare theism. The Christian has at her disposal a number of theological resources that the bare theist cannot access. But this means that Christian theism is more likely to be true than bare theism, at least with respect to the problem of evil, even though it's a *way more* complicated theory. I wonder if the same thing might be true of the evil-God challenge. At the very least, this is a line of response that deserves attention from Lancaster-Thomas.

In her final attempt to reject an appeal to Satan, Lancaster-Thomas questions why God would allow such an evil being to exist in the first place. She asks:

> [W]hy Evil-god would allow a benevolent deity to exist in the first place. A similar problem is apparent in traditional theistic dualism... Two common theistic explanations for why Good-god allows the devil to persist are i) because it can bring about greater good, 'deeming it to be more befitting His power and goodness to bring good out of evil than to prevent the evil from coming into existence' (Augustine 2009: 732), and ii) Good-god's goodness will ultimately defeat evil. Similarly, the Evil-god hypothesiser can maintain that the supreme Evil-god allows a lesser good deity to exist i) to bring about greater bad (creating false hope that Good-god exists, for example, is one greater bad that Evil-god realises through distributing GREs) and ii) goodness will eventually be defeated by Evil-god's evil. The theistic dualist seems to be stuck in a quandary whereby they must either allow the consistency of dualism in both the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis, or deny both. Again the objection is nullified, because it is applicable to both hypotheses (Lancaster-Thomas, Forthcoming)

Again, while the theory of Satan can be successfully paralleled (i.e. the opposite idea in that of a benevolent demon is, minimally, an epistemic possibility), the *appeal* itself to Satan isn't successfully paralleled. The Christian is appealing to a longstanding understanding and

interpretation of Christian doctrine. The same appeal to tradition can't be made by the evil-God challenger.[8] Likewise, questions about why God would permit the existence of Satan, merely reduce to questions about why God would permit evil. Hence, the final problem Lancaster-Thomas proposes about Satan reduces to the problem of evil. But again, there are many resources (both contemporary and historical) that the Christian theist can draw on to respond to the problem of evil. In any case, it's certainly not a new challenge to the rationality of Christian belief.[9]

Likewise, while it's true that we can posit many (perhaps infinitely many) alternative explanations of the hypotheses on offer purporting to explain any given phenomenon. But from this it doesn't follow that each competing hypothesis is equally likely to be the correct explanation. It doesn't follow that each enjoys the same independent reasons (i.e. independent of the phenomenon in question) in support of its plausibility. The Christian has independent reasons that aren't ad-hoc for thinking that Satan exists. Lancaster-Thomas hasn't provided independent reasons that aren't ad-hoc for the alternative good-Satan hypothesis. Within the context of examining the phenomenon only (i.e. the experiences), the two hypothesis might be equally plausible. However, the larger picture which includes independent reasons for the hypothesis in question shows why this is a mistake.

In reply, Lancaster-Thomas might say it's nothing more than a historical accident that so many people believe Satan exists. If the two hypotheses were inversed historically, then the objection would be that positing an evil Satan is ad hoc instead of positing a good-Satan. Grounding a theory in history and/or tradition doesn't make it any more or less ad hoc than its competitors because such grounding rests on highly contingent processes. Thus, we still need other reasons for preferring the evil Satan hypothesis to the good-Satan hypothesis.

This rejoinder pushes us toward more complicated issues about theory selection. For instance, apart from the context of a challenge to mono-theism, is it more rational to think that there is an evil-God, a good God, an indifferent God, or no God at all? Which one of these best explains the phenomena in our universe? How does the scientific criteria for theory selection apply, if at all, to the selection about Gods? When is adding something to a theory not ad hoc? Answers to these and related questions aren't easily forthcoming, and thus I won't attempt to address them here. To conclude, it's important to keep in mind that more work needs to be done (on both sides of the argument) in order to see how and if the evil-God challenge applies to more specific versions of monotheism such as Christianity.

To conclude, it's worth observing that this discussion provides some reason to reject the symmetry thesis which is essential to evil-God challenges. Consider that there are independent arguments for Christian theism. Such arguments include resurrection arguments, prophecy arguments, and historicity arguments more generally. These arguments are distinct from the traditional arguments for God's existence that don't purport to establish the truth of any particular religion. Whatever the evidential value of historical arguments for Christianity may be, there is much more historical evidence for Christianity than the existence of an evil God. For there is little, if any, historical

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[8] Appealing to tradition is only an informal fallacy, and thus this response is suggesting that this is a legitimate scenario in which to make such an appeal.

[9] Some have claimed (e.g. Stephen Law and John Collins) that reverse theodices can respond to the problem of the good just as well as traditional theodices answer the problem of evil.

evidence supporting the existence of an evil God. This is significant because it means that there are arguments in favour of Christianity that cannot be successfully paralleled by an evil-God challenge. But the same is true about religious experience and Christianity. If it's true that religious experience makes Christianity more probable than an evil God, then the symmetry thesis is false. If the symmetry thesis is false then the evil-God challenge fails, at least when it is applied to Christian theism.[10]

VI.2. Are the two hypotheses really incompatible?

One common way of responding to the evil-God challenge is to deny that an evil-God is logically possible. The logical impossibility of an evil-God is shown by demonstrating that such a being is internally inconsistent.[11] If this is right, then the evil-God challenge cannot get off the ground in the first place, since it couldn't be posited as an alternative explanation to the good God hypothesis. Briefly, this objection can be levelled in a number of different ways. For instance, one might argue that an all-knowing and all-powerful being would not do evil because evil is always the result of ignorance (Lancaster-Thomas 2018b; Daniels 1997). This assumes, with Aquinas, that it's a conceptual truth that agents tend toward the good. Lancaster-Thomas notes, however, that it's far from obvious that all agents tend toward the good. Likewise, this idea appears to equate the good with what is desirable. She explains that "[i]f the Evil-god hypothesis were true, Evil-God would desire what was bad, and what is bad would be right because of this" (Lancaster-Thomas 2018b, 6). Additionally, a Kantian-style objection to the logical possibility of an evil-God says that it's always only ever rational to tend towards good. But one can simply deny moral rationalism to avoid this objection (Lancaster-Thomas 2018b, 6). And it's not clear that denying moral rationalism is any cost to the proponent of the evil-God challenge. Finally, Stephen Law observes:

> The point is this: even supposing an evil-God is, for some reasons X, an impossibility, we can still ask the hypothetical question: setting aside the fact that so-and-so establishes that an evil-God is an impossibility, how reasonable would it otherwise be to suppose that such an evil being exists? If the answer is 'highly unreasonable', i.e. because of the problem of the good, then the evil-god challenge can still be run. We can still ask theists to explain why, if they would otherwise reject the evil-god hypothesis as highly unreasonable, do they not take the same view regarding the good-god hypothesis? (Law 2010, 372 quoted in Lancaster-Thomas 2018b, 7).

Let's suppose that, minimally, the logical impossibility challenge can be met by proponents of the evil-God challenge.

One response which may serve to save my solution to religious disagreement, but which isn't available to the classical monotheist, is the idea that both the evil-God and good God hypothesis aren't mutually exclusive. Consider that while there might not be precedent for precisely the claim that there are two maximal, unsurpassable, or omni Gods, there is historical precedent in similar claims. Manichaeism (originally known as *Mani*) is a religion arising partly out of Gnosticism in the 3rd century Greco-Roman world. It appears to have borrowed "elements from Persian dualistic

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[10] Thanks to anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.
[11] For more on this see Daniels 1997; Lancaster-Thomas 2018b; Ward 2015; Weaver 2015.

religion (Zoroastrianism), Jewish Christianity, Buddhism, and even Mithraism" (Moore 2018). For my purposes, the important feature of this religion is its claim that there is a Ruler of Light and Ruler of Darkness. In the Manichaeism story, the Ruler of Darkness had defeated the Primal Man (the represented of the light). The universe is considered part of the scattered light which will eventually be brought together to overcome the darkness (Moore 2018). This religion thrived into the seventh century, with some historians saying it had the most adherents of any religion at its peak.[12] Here I am not claiming that because something was believed in the past that it's necessarily logically possible. Rather, I am explaining that a sophisticated religion with an elaborate cosmology (and indeed elaborate customs) and many adherents was a dualistic religion. The idea that there is a great evil power pitted against a great good power, then, should be taken as at least prima facie logically possible (even though it may turn out not to be possible).

Recall the weak evil-God challenge says that both the evil-God and good God are equally supported. This response goes a step further in suggesting that it's possible that both the evil-God and good God can co-exist. If this is right, then the evil-God challenge doesn't undermine the good God hypothesis at all. It simply posits the existence of another being, which is compatible with the existence of a good-God. We've seen that there is some precedent for this idea in Manichaeism, but we want to know about something more specific. Namely, we want to know if something like two Gods similar to the classical conception of God (i.e. a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent), one evil and the other good, are compossible. In order to discover whether this is the case let's consider what each conception, minimally, claims:

Evil-God Hypothesis	Good God Hypothesis
Omniscience	Omniscience
Omnipotence	Omnipotence
Omnimalevolence	Omnibenevolence

These two hypothesis, at least on their face, aren't mutually exclusive or logically incompatible. For instance, it's intelligible to think that two beings could be omniscient. There's no contradiction in supposing two beings to know infallibly the truth-value of every proposition (or possess all possible knowledge, etc). Nothing in any plausible definition of omniscience appears to rule out the possibility that there could be multiple beings who are omniscient. Likewise, no problem of identity of indiscernibles applies in our case about the Gods since one of the Gods is good and the other is evil. It's also possible to imagine an all-evil being co-existing with an all-good being. We see lesser beings who tend toward evil co-existing with lesser beings who tend toward the good constantly. Maximizing evil or goodness doesn't, at least on its face, provide any reason to think that two beings with such traits, even if they are maximized, cannot co-exist with one another.

That two beings who are both omnipotent could co-exist is probably the most difficult of the divine attributes to explain on this proposal. This is because if an evil-God existed then a good God would not be able to overpower an evil-God, and vice-versa. This appears to entail that both Gods are not all-powerful. Hence, the objector could claim that it's impossible to have two all-powerful beings co-exist. By definition, 'omnipotent' could only apply to one being.

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[12] Augustine followed Manichaeism before converting to Christianity.

It's difficult, however, to see exactly why this is a problem. For even on the classical monotheistic conception of God there are many things God can't do. God can't do what's logically impossible (make a square circle, or modus ponens invalid, etc). Likewise, God can't sin or be guilty. Typically, these examples aren't taken to be evidence for the fact that God isn't omnipotent (and hence doesn't exist). Similarly, if an evil-God exists, then a good God would be unable to overpower an evil-God, and vice versa. But this is simply a logical consequence of having two beings identical in power. Observing that this is a problem is akin to pointing out that God can't square a circle.

Finally, there are ongoing debates about how to understand the divine attributes. It turns out that these debates very much effect the strength of this objection. For instance, in his book *Maximal God: A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism* Yujin Nagasawa (2017) argues that divine perfection with respect to the divine attributes should be understood as the best possible combination of properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. These individual properties need not each be maximal, but only their combination when taken together. Nagasawa's maximal God, then, might not have maximal omnipotence. If something like Nagasawa's conception of the divine attributes is correct, then another way to avoid the objection associated with omnipotence is available. A good God could be overpowered because even though God, by definition, is a maximal being, it doesn't follow that God has maximal omnipotence. Nagasawa has independent reasons for his position which I will not outline here (though his novel approach certainly warrants attention in its own right). My point in drawing attention to this account is that, as should be clear by now, it very much matters what conception of God Lancaster-Thomas has in view when assessing the strength of her evil-God challenge.

Providing more details about what exactly the evil-God hypothesis entails is the best way of discovering whether this objection succeeds or fails. I suspect that the definition of God has in view will very much effect the strength of this objection. As it stands, however, there is nothing incoherent in claiming that the evil-God and good God can co-exist, though this response admittedly does nothing to protect monotheism simplicter against Lancaster-Thomas's objection.

V. Conclusion: Revisiting Lancaster-Thomas's Target

The strength of Lancaster-Thomas's objection to arguments appealing to the evidential value of religious experience depends on the conception of God one has in view. If her target is monotheism unconnected to any particular religion (and I think it is), then her argument hits its target. The evil-God hypothesis gives us reason to reject premise (6) of my argument from religious experience. However, I argue that Lancaster-Thomas too quickly dismisses the legitimacy of appeals to Satan for the Christian wanting to use arguments from religious experience. This is because appealing to Satan is no ad hoc addition to Christianity invented only to avoid the evil-God challenge. Finally, Lancaster-Thomas says that the weak version of the evil-God challenge simply states that the challenge adds legitimacy to the evil-God hypothesis, while detracting from the plausibility of the good God challenge. However, Lancaster-Thomas never considers the possibility that the existence of a good God is compatible with the existence of an evil-God. That this is a possibility has its roots in ancient Manichaeism. Finally, that an evil-God can't overpower a good God (and

vice versa) may simply be a logical consequence of the position (i.e. similar to the idea that God can't square a circle), instead of a serious problem for the view.

In conclusion, if we merely take the existence of religious experience (both negative and positive) as evidence for supernaturalism (and hence against naturalism), it's not clear the evil-God challenge can be raised in this context. And in fairness, supernaturalism clearly isn't Lancaster-Thomas's target. Thus, while her evil-God objection to classical monotheism is correct, more work remains to be done in exploring whether the evil-God challenge supports something like ontological naturalism, or if the evil-God challenge applies only to classical monotheism and not any other conceptions of the divine or supernaturalism more broadly. The success of my solution to religious disagreement in the face of the evil-God challenge, then, rests on the extent to which the challenge applies to different conceptions of God. It also rests on whether religious experience is dependent on certain conceptions of theism, and whether such conceptions are more or less susceptible to the evil-God challenge.[13]

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