

God, Gaps, and Evil

Michael DeVito
The University of Maine

ABSTRACT: Jc Beall has recently advanced a glut-theoretic solution to the problem of evil. In this paper, I explore a dual, gap-theoretic approach to the problem, which also finds its roots in Beall's work. Specifically, working with the same background commitments as Beall, I argue that a natural (and novel) gap-theoretic solution to the problem of evil emerges. Not only does this proposal show promise, but it also highlights some interesting virtues that accompany gap-theoretic approaches to theological issues.

Jc Beall's recent work within analytic theology has unveiled novel (and refreshing) solutions to many of the field's longstanding problems. By utilizing a subclassical framework, Beall has put forth solutions to the paradoxes that arise when considering the suite of God's omni-attributes (Beall and Cotnoir (2017); Beall and DeVito (2023)), as well as the distinctively Christian doctrines of the incarnation (Beall, 2021) and the trinity (Beall, 2023a). Most recently, Beall (2023b) has taken on one of the most notorious issues plaguing analytic theology by exploring a novel, glut-theoretic solution to the problem of evil. My aim in this paper is to continue the exploration. Specifically, in this paper, I will explore a dual, gap-theoretic approach to the problem of evil, which finds its roots in Beall and Cotnoir (2017). I will first look at Beall's glut-theoretic solution to the problem of evil. Next, I will lay out Beall and Cotnoir's gap-theoretic approach to the paradox of the stone, as well as recent extensions of said approach, and then move to further extend Beall's and Cotnoir's model to the problem of evil. I will conclude by looking at some possible objections to my proposal.

1. Terminology

The terminology used in this paper is standard. A *glut* is a sentence (proposition, etc.) that is both true and false. Dually, a *gap* is a sentence (proposition, etc.) that is neither true nor false. $K3$ is a paraconsistent logic that allows for gaps. First-degree entailment (*FDE*) is both a paraconsistent and paracomplete logic, allowing for gluts and gaps. That is all the logical terminology necessary for the arguments presented in this paper. For more on these logics see, Beall (2021; 2023a), Beall and Van Fraassen (2003), Beall and Logan (2010), and Beall and Cotnoir (2017).

2. God, Gluts, and Evil

The literature devoted to the problem of evil (PoE) is almost as vast as the god it tries to disprove. Thus, instead of walking the well-worn path, I will get straight to the point, focusing solely on the derivation provided by Beall (2023b, 645).

- (1) God is omniscient (and thereby knows how to rid the world of evil).
- (2) God is omnipotent (and thereby has the power to rid the world of evil).
- (3) God is omnibenevolent (and thereby wants the world to be rid of evil).

These three premises entail either:

- (4) It is false that there is evil in the world.

Or

- (5) It is false that God exists.

The reasoning behind the PoE is straightforward.¹ If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, then he knows how to stop evil, has the power to stop evil, and wants to stop evil. Therefore, it is either the case that there is no evil in the world, or the traditional omni-god does not exist. Of course, there is evil in the world, so the traditional omni-god must not exist (or so the argument goes).

Beall's solution to the PoE (as laid out above) is to reject (4) and (5), take (3) to be just true, and argue that (1) and (2) are glutty (both true and false).² Thus, while it is true that God is both omniscient and omnipotent, it is also false that he is omniscient and omnipotent and the falsity of these two attributes provides room for the existence of evil.

An obvious objection, however, is to point out that, on the truth of (1) and (2), it is false that evil exists (assuming, as Beall does, that (3) is also true). In turn, while the falsity of these attributes allows for it to be true that evil exists, the truth of these attributes entails that evil does not exist. Alas, we seem to have an entanglement of truth and falsity as it relates to evil in the world. As Beall and DeVito have pointed out elsewhere (2023), this is a common problem facing glut-theoretic approaches to Type C paradoxes: The gluts bleed over into the human realm.³ It is one thing to say that gluts (or gaps) are present in the ever-mysterious divine realm; it is quite another to posit such phenomena in human reality. Though this particular glut-theoretic approach (viz., that it's true and false that evil exists) is an option, it is one that at least Beall rejects in favor of one that takes the existence of evil to be just true.

The true genius of Beall's solution is a built-in mechanism to handle this entanglement: falsity's filter effect on entailments. As Beall points out, many of the standard entailment patterns of classical logic fail to deliver when dealing with gluts. For example, disjunctive syllogism: Not-*A*, *A* or *B*, therefore *B*, is fine when *A* has a classical semantic interpretation. However, if *A* is glutty, disjunctive syllogism is no longer valid. Beall writes, "[W]hen premises can be false on top of being true, this has a filtering effect on the would-be entailment: the entailment is arrested, filtered out by falsity. And this is common: if we focus only on the possibilities on which the premises are just true, we get more entailments—a lot more" (Beall 2023b, 646). Beall stretches this idea further, arguing that when falsity is present

¹ As is the case with Beall (and as is evident from the derivation), my focus is on the logical PoE, as opposed to evidential or probabilistic versions of the problem. For more on the PoE see Plantinga (1977).

² Note that, while Beall (2023b) doesn't mention it explicitly, in much of his other work (for example, Beall (2021; 2023a)), Beall utilizes FDE as the assumed account of logical consequence, which, importantly, allows for gluts (and which would permit his glut-theoretic solution to the PoE).

³ This terminology comes from Nagasawa (2008). A Type C paradox is one that arises when considering God's attributes in relation to human (contingent) reality. A Type B paradox is one that arises when considering two or more of God's attributes, and a Type A paradox arises when considering a single divine attribute.

in addition to truth, it may be the case that said falsity actually restricts or “pinches off” the relevant entailments delivered by truth. As it relates to resolving the PoE, Beall argues that the falsity of God’s gluttony omnipotence and gluttony omniscience “[filter] out expected entailments that otherwise obtain when no such falsity is involved” (Beall 2023b, 648). In other words, the truths that would normally follow from the truth of God’s omnipotence and omniscience (i.e., God has the power to stop evil and God knows how to stop evil) fail to obtain because they are filtered out (restricted) by the falsity of said attributes.

Beall’s solution to the PoE opens the door not only for a novel approach to a longstanding theological and philosophical problem, but perhaps more importantly, also opens the door for a novel glut-theoretic framework that will be of great interest to those working in the fields of logic and the philosophy of logic. More will need to be said regarding the semantics of Beall’s novel “falsity filter,” but an initial evaluation is promising. In what follows, my aim is not to object to Beall’s solution to the PoE, nor is it to advance it further, but rather to explore a dual, gappy approach to the PoE that also finds its roots in Beall’s work. Thus, while I am arguing for a glut-free solution to the PoE, in which gaps replace gluts, the motivation for this commitment is a spirit of exploration and not due to a problem with gluts or, more specifically, Beall’s solution to the PoE. With this in mind, I now turn to discuss Beall’s and Cotnoir’s gappy approach to omni-problems.

3. God of the Gaps

Beall and Cotnoir (2017) provide a gap-theoretic framework for resolving omni-problems. The authors focus specifically on the infamous stone paradox, which they formulate as follows:

- (1*) Either God can create a stone which God cannot lift or God cannot create such a stone.
- (2*) If God can create a stone which God cannot lift, then God cannot do everything.
- (3*) If God cannot create a stone which God cannot lift, then God cannot do everything.
- (4*) Therefore God is not omnipotent. (Beall and Cotnoir 2017, 681)

The problem is evident: If God can create a stone he cannot lift, then there is something he cannot do (lift the stone). If he cannot create the stone, then again, there is something he cannot do (create the stone). Either way, God fails to be omnipotent. The stone paradox is an example of a Type A omni-problem, where again, a paradox arises when considering only one of God’s attributes.

Addressing the problem in subclassical fashion, Beall and Cotnoir argue that the problem lies not with the concept of omnipotence, but instead with the assumption that the law of excluded middle (LEM) is logically valid, and so all of its instances are true. Specifically, the authors reject (1*)—an instance of LEM—arguing that it is neither true nor false that God can(not) create a stone which he (can)not lift, and equipped with a suitable subclassical logic (Beall and Cotnoir utilize K3), such a move is permissible.

However, just because logic allows for gaps (and a rejection of the universal applicability of LEM) does not entail that one can simply posit them whenever it is convenient. In order to motivate their approach, Beall and Cotnoir propose the following gap-locating principle:

(G): If a claim L implies that God has limits, and the negation of L implies that God has limits, then L is gappy. Otherwise L is false.

In other words, if a claim limits God in any way and if the negation of said claim also limits God in any way, then that claim is gappy. As it relates to the stone problem, if God can create a stone he cannot lift, his power is limited, and if it is false that God can create a stone he cannot lift, his power is also limited. Thus, the claim “God can create a stone which he cannot lift” is a limit claim and, on the Beall-Cotnoir approach, is gappy. In turn, the traditional monotheist can reject (1) and circumvent the stone problem.

DeVito (2023) and Joaquin and DeVito (2023) extend the Beall-Cotnoir solution to other omni-paradoxes. Setting the details aside, what is important for our purposes is the machinery DeVito adds to the Beall-Cotnoir solution that allows for such extensions. Specifically, while the Beall-Cotnoir solution focuses solely on limits to God’s omnipotence, DeVito employs a more generalized “no-limit” principle that encompasses all of God’s attributes:

(No-limit principle): Any limit claim about God’s divine attributes is either just false or gappy. It is never the case that a limit claim about any of God’s divine attributes is true. (DeVito 2023, 10)

Here, a “limit claim” is simply any claim that limits *any* of God’s attributes (whereas, for Beall and Cotnoir, limit claims are specifically about limits on God’s omnipotence (see, Beall and Cotnoir 2017, 684)). Equipped with this generalized principle, the Beall-Cotnoir solution can be extended to paradoxes generated when considering more than one divine attribute. DeVito (2023) explores an extension of the Beall-Cotnoir solution to the foreknowledge and free will problem (a Type C paradox) and Joaquin and DeVito (2023) extend the solution to a puzzle about God’s impeccability (a Type B paradox). I now turn to explore an extension of the Beall-Cotnoir model to the PoE as discussed above.

4. God, Gaps, and Evil

Returning to the PoE above, to lay the groundwork for a Beall-Cotnoir extension, I will assume the same commitments that Beall takes on in his glut-theoretic approach. That is to say, I will assume that it is just true that: (i) God is omnibenevolent, (ii) there is evil in the world, and (iii) God exists. With these commitments in mind, take the following limit claims:

(L) God knows how to stop evil and has the power to stop evil.

\neg (L) It is false that God knows how to stop evil and has the power to stop evil.

To begin, let’s look at (L). Is (L) a limit claim on God’s attributes? Yes, due to the fact that if (L) is true and evil exists, then it is false that God is omnibenevolent. Thus, given that

(L) entails the falsity of God's omnibenevolence (which, again, I am taking to be just true), it violates the no-limit principle, and represents a genuine limit on God. In contrast, if $\neg(L)$ is true, then either it is false that God is omnipotent or false that God is omniscient (or both). In turn, via the same reasoning, $\neg(L)$ also represents a genuine limit on God. Now, in light of (G), we can reasonably take the following disjunction to be gappy:

(Gappy evil): It is neither true nor false that God knows how to stop evil and has the power to stop evil.

With our “gappy evil” claim in place, the traditional monotheist can reject (1) and (2) and avoid the fangs of the PoE. Moreover, temperaments tend to vary when it comes to subclassical approaches to philosophical problems. Thus, for those who may be hesitant to embrace Beall's novel “falsity filter,” such a gappy solution to the PoE avoids any need to filter entailments since a feature of gappy solutions to Type C omni-problems is that gaps are constrained to the divine realm (in other words, there is no “gappy entanglement” between the divine and the contingent).

On K3, a conjunction is gappy so long as (i) at least one conjunct is gappy and (ii) neither conjunct is false. This is the case as it relates to our gappy-evil claim above. However, at this point, it is natural to wonder which conjunct is gappy: Is it the claim that God knows how to stop evil, or the claim that God has the power to stop evil, or both? I have no idea. As mentioned, literature can be found arguing for gappy omnipotence and gappy omniscience (see, Beall and Cotnoir (2017) and DeVito (2023), respectively). When it comes to the proposal at hand, either the exact location of the gappiness will require further investigation, or it is possible that such information is beyond human inquiry. Nevertheless, the exact location isn't necessary for the success of the Beall-Cotnoir extension to the PoE. Rather, given what we do know (as discussed above), the conjunction (L) and its negation both represent limits on God's omni-attributes. In turn, on the Beall-Cotnoir extension, said conjunction is gappy, and the details as to where the gaps truly lie, while interesting, needn't be settled for the success of the solution.⁴

5. Objections

Objection #1: Are there no limits to limit claims? On the given proposal, any number of claims can represent limits on God. For example, the claim “God cannot do evil” seems to represent a limit on God's omnipotence, and yet, most theologians and philosophers would take such a claim to be just true. The same goes for claims like “God cannot create a square circle” or “God doesn't know what it is like to sin.” In other words, on the given proposal, many (many) claims about God that are naturally taken to be just true turn out instead to be gappy.

Reply: Good! Perhaps I am in the minority, but taking these claims to be gappy as opposed to just true seems to mark a step closer to a truly perfect being. On the given proposal, gaps replace limits (however natural it may seem to attribute a given limit to God), and therefore, God is truly *limitless*. It is untrue that God cannot sin. Importantly, it is also not false that God cannot sin. It is gappy. Thus, the analytic theologian can have their proverbial cake and eat it too. One needn't attribute limits to any of God's attributes while at

⁴ Beall also hints at this point as it relates to his gluttony approach to the PoE (see, Beall (2023b, 644, n.5)).

the same time one needn't embrace claims about God that one would normally reject, such as "God can do evil" or "God knows what it is like to sin." Of course, each claim warrants a standalone paper, since the details in each case vary (and matter). Nevertheless, at first glance, the objector's *reductio* seems to highlight a virtue of the given proposal as opposed to a vice.

Objection #2: (L)—God knows how to stop evil and has the power to stop evil—represents a limit to God's omnibenevolence, not his omniscience nor his omnipotence. However, the omni-attributes relevant to (L) are God's omniscience (knowing how to stop evil) and God's omnipotence (having the power to stop evil). While (L) may limit God's omnibenevolence, it isn't a traditional limit claim (*à la* Beall and Cotnoir) since the relevant omni-attributes included in (L) aren't limiting to themselves, but to a different attribute altogether. Thus, (L) isn't a limit claim (at least not in original sense of the term).

Reply: The objection highlights a novel feature of the Beall-Cotnoir extension. Specifically, on the given proposal, what makes (L) a limit claim is not simply the attributes assumed within the claim itself, but the relationship of said attributes to a third attribute. Specifically, the conjunction *God knows how to stop evil and has the power to stop evil*, if true, entails that it is false that God is omnibenevolent (assuming an all-loving God who knew how to stop evil and had the power to stop evil would, in fact, stop evil). However, that (L) marks a limit on a divine attribute not explicitly featured in (L) doesn't make it any less of a limit claim. As is explicit in the gap-locating principle (G) above, if a claim *L* implies that God has limits, and the negation of *L* implies that God has limits, then *L* is gappy. Here, (L) implies that God has limits; if true, it is false that God is omnibenevolent. Thus, (L) is a limit claim. What the proposal at hand has revealed is a further generalized understanding of limit claims: Specifically, a given claim can be limiting to God whether it marks limits to the divine attribute(s) involved in the claim or whether the divine attribute(s) involved in the claim limit some other divine attribute not explicitly involved in the given claim.

Conclusion

Given the force and resilience of the PoE, philosophers and theologians should welcome novel approaches to the problem. Given the paradigm shift that has arisen within analytic theology thanks to Beall's subclassical approaches, an exploration of how the latter may resolve the former is natural and interesting.⁵ Beall (2023b) opens the door for such an exploration. In this paper, I hope to have taken a few more steps on the journey. Obviously, the above proposal is simply a sketch of a solution. More work is necessary in order to arrive

⁵ As a reviewer for this journal points out, an interesting avenue for further exploration focuses on how the given (gappy) proposal fits within the larger discussion concerning apophatic (or "negative theology") approaches to theological issues. Both kinds of solutions (gappy and apophatic) propose, roughly, that there are some otherwise problematic theological claims (i.e., omni-problems) that are neither true nor false. However, on apophatic approaches (generally speaking), the relevant theological claims are not gappy, but rather, for various reasons, are not truth evaluable. As such, the apophatic theologian or philosopher can seemingly circumvent theological problems (like the PoE) while at the same time ensuring that theology is closed under the standard account of logical consequence. For advocates of this approach see Lebens (2014; 2017; 2020), Mulhall (2016), and Moore (2019). One possible upshot of gappy, as opposed to apophatic, approaches is simply that the relevant theological claims *are truth evaluable*. Thus, the former can be modelled semantically, whereas it is unclear if this is the case for the latter (this objection mirrors that of Beall (2023a, 95–98)). However, the relationship between gappy and apophatic approaches is interesting and, while outside the scope of this paper, does merit further exploration.

at an ultimate judgment regarding whether such a solution is definitive. Nevertheless, the gap-theoretic approach to the PoE discussed above is promising and will hopefully motivate further investigation into the view.⁶

References

- Beall, Jc. 2021. *The Contradictory Christ*. Oxford University Press.
- Beall, Jc. 2023a. *Divine Contradiction*. Oxford University Press.
- Beall, Jc. 2023b. “God, Gluts, and Evil.” *Analysis* 83 (4): 643–52.
- Beall, Jc, and A. J. Cotnoir. 2017. “God of the Gaps: A Neglected Reply to God’s Stone Problem.” *Analysis* 77: 681–89.
- Beall, Jc, and S. A. Logan. 2010. *Logic: The Basics*. Routledge.
- Beall, Jc, Van Fraassen, B. A. 2003. *Possibilities and Paradox: An Introduction to Modal and Many-valued Logic*. Oxford University Press.
- Beall, Jc, and M. DeVito. 2023. *Entailment, Contradiction, and Christian Theism*. Cambridge University Press.
- DeVito, M. 2023. “Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: Exploring a Gap-theoretic Account.” *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (10): 1–18.
- Joaquin, J. J., and M. DeVito. 2023. “Gaps and God’s Impeccability.” *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 2 (66): 1–7.
- Lebens, S. 2014. “Why so Negative about Negative Theology? The Search for a Plantinga-Proof Apophaticism.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76: 259–75.
- Lebens, S. 2017. “Negative Theology as Illuminating and/or Therapeutic Falsehoods.” In *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity*, edited by Michael Fagenblat. Indiana University Press.
- Lebens, S. 2020. *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford University Press.
- Moore, A. W. (2019). “Ineffability and God.” In *Language, World and Limits: Essays in Philosophy of Language and Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.
- Mulhall, S. 2016. *The Great Riddle. Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Nagasawa, Y. 2008. “A New Defence of Anselmian Theism.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (233): 577–96.
- Plantinga, A. 1977. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Eerdmans.

⁶ I am grateful for Jc Beall, whose feedback on earlier drafts significantly improved this manuscript. Thank you also to a blind reviewer for helpful feedback.