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Introduction and Overview

The Scope of the Problem of Evil and of Arguments from Evil: Relevant Conceptions of God

The term 'God' is used in many ways. Sometimes it is given a purely metaphysical interpretation, involving no moral properties: God is a prime mover, or the first cause, or a necessary being having its necessity of itself, or the ground of being, or a being whose essence is identical with its existence. Or God is not one being among other beings – even a supremely great being – but instead God is being itself. Or God is an ultimate reality to which no concepts truly apply.

Thus interpreted, no problem of evil arises: since such purely metaphysical definitions involve no moral concepts, the existence of such a being would not pose any puzzle concerning the existence of evil.

In sharp contrast are interpretations of the term 'God' that render appropriate certain religious attitudes, such as that of worship, or that connect up with important human hopes and desires – such as the desire that biological death not be the end of a person's existence, or the desire that, ultimately, justice will prevail, that good will triumph over evil. For what kind of being would make it reasonable to believe that such important desires are not in vain? Or what type of being would be worthy of worship?

A natural and very common answer is, first, that it must be disposed to care about the well-being of persons, and so, presumably, itself be a person. Secondly, it must be very powerful, to enable human persons to survive biological death, and to ensure that justice will ultimately exist. Thirdly, it must be very knowledgeable, to be aware of evils that should be eliminated or prevented. Finally, it must be at least basically moral rather than either evil or morally indifferent to the existence of evil.

Ideally, it would possess those properties in the highest degree. Thus one has classical theism's concept of God, according to which God is an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect good person. It is then puzzling, however, why the world contains such an enormous number of horrendous evils. It is thus this classical conception of God that is most threatened by the problem of evil.

Consequently, some philosophers, theologians, and religious thinkers have proposed shifting to belief in a more limited deity – one that is not omnipotent or not omniscient. This, however, is not sufficient, as becomes clear when one asks *how limited* such a deity must be for evil not to pose a problem, since it would seem that such a being must be unable either to prevent or to eliminate the enormous ills that human flesh is heir to, including the suffering inflicted by other persons, or else it must lack all knowledge of such evils. Either way, a deity thus limited would provide no grounds for thinking, for example, that

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humans survive biological death, or for hoping that, in the end, justice will prevail.

What if, instead, one uses the term 'God' to refer to a being that is less than morally perfect? The answer is that this seems even less satisfactory. For, first, many of the great evils the world contains could be eliminated, or prevented, by a being only moderately more powerful than humans; secondly, a being no more knowledgeable than humans would know of their existence; and, thirdly, even a moderately good human being, given the power to do so, would presumably eliminate those evils. Conceiving of God as less than morally perfect provides no escape, then, from the problem of evil.

What if, instead, one uses the term 'God' to mean simply an intelligent creator of the universe, to whom no moral nature at all is ascribed? That certainly enables one to escape the problem of evil, but such a creator is hardly worthy of worship, nor would it provide any grounds for thinking human hopes and desires concerning justice or survival of death will be met. One can attempt to offer reasons for thinking that such an intelligent creator would also be morally good, but then one is back on a collision course with the problem of evil.

Finally, some religious thinkers have suggested that the idea of a *personal* deity should be jettisoned: the term 'God' should be used instead for a completely impersonal force moving events toward what is good rather than what is bad.

This is a perfectly coherent concept, but now questions arise as to how strongly this force pushes events toward the good rather than the bad, how accurate the 'information' is that determines how the force is directed, and how powerful that force is. The stronger the force is in these respects, the more the problem of evil will bear upon the existence of such an impersonal entity. An impersonal God, in short, is as much exposed to the problem of evil as is the personal God of classical theism.

Incompatibility Arguments versus Evidential Arguments

Any argument from evil starts with the claim either that the world contains states of affairs that are intrinsically bad, in the sense of being intrinsically undesirable, or, alternatively, that there are states of affairs that one should prevent or eliminate if one knows of their existence and has the power to prevent or eliminate them. A crucial question then arises, however, concerning what one is attempting to prove, and here there are two alternatives. First, there are *incompatibility* versions of the argument from evil, which attempt to demonstrate that there are facts that *logically entail* that a deity of a certain sort does

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not exist. Such arguments attempt to show, in other words, that a conjunction consisting of certain justified beliefs about the world and the proposition that, for example, the God of classical theism exists is a *contradiction* and thus cannot possibly be true.

Secondly, one has *evidential* arguments from evil, where the claim is instead that while the justified beliefs in question are logically compatible with the existence of the type of deity being considered, those justified beliefs provide *evidence against* the existence of such a deity. This evidence, moreover, is sufficiently strong to make it *more likely than not* that such a deity does not exist, thereby rendering belief in the existence of such a deity *irrational* in the absence of sufficiently strong countervailing considerations supporting the existence of such a deity.

The Structure of the Element

Section 1 addresses some preliminary issues that it is crucial to think about in formulating arguments from evil.

Section 2 is concerned with the question of how incompatibility arguments from evil are best formulated, with possible responses to incompatibility arguments. The specific argument offered there has two parts; the first aims at showing that no theodicy, or defense, or any combination, provides an answer to the argument, while the second part introduces additional premises needed to derive the conclusion that God does not exist.

Next, Section 3 focuses on skeptical theism – a theistic view that attempts to refute incompatibility arguments from evil by appealing to possible goods of *types* of which humans have no knowledge. A central conclusion will be that, given the argument developed in Section 2, skeptical theists have *much* more work to do to defend their claim of having defeated incompatibility versions of the argument from evil.

In Section 4, the discussion turns to evidential arguments from evil. There I set out the main alternatives, argue that some are unpromising, formulate an improved version of inference to the best explanation approaches, and conclude by slightly fine-tuning and defending what is arguably the most fundamental type of evidential argument from evil – namely, one based upon equiprobability principles.

1 Formulations of Arguments from Evil: Important Preliminary Issues

In the next section, I shall turn to the task of formulating a strong incompatibility argument from evil. Before doing that, however, some fundamental distinctions

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need to be considered: first, within normative or evaluative terms there is the distinction between axiological terms and deontological terms, which leads to the question of which should be used in formulating arguments from evil; secondly, there is the distinction between arguments from evil that involve only highly general claims about the evil found in the world, and those that involve much more specific claims; thirdly, there is the distinction between arguments that appeal only to readily observable facts about the world, and arguments involving premises that, though not matters of everyday observation, are claims for which very strong support can be offered.

1.1 Axiological Terms versus Deontological Terms: Which Should Be Used?

Evaluative or normative judgments are of various types. Some concern the moral status of actions, wherein one judges some actions to be morally wrong, others to be morally obligatory, and still others to be neither wrong nor obligatory, but simply morally permissible. Concepts involved in such judgments about what one ought or ought not do, one's duties, and the rights of individuals I shall refer to as *deontological* concepts.

We also make evaluative judgments, however, that, rather than involving claims about the moral status of actions, are judgments about the goodness or badness, the desirability or undesirability, of states of affairs. Most people, for example, think that pain is *intrinsically bad* – that is, that considered simply in itself, and ignoring consequences, being in pain is an undesirable state of affairs. Similarly, most people think that pleasurable experiences are *intrinsically good* – that is, that such experiences, taken simply in themselves, and without considering any consequences to which they may lead, are desirable. I shall refer to these concepts of goodness and badness, understood as desirability and undesirability, as *axiological* concepts.

Which concepts should be used in formulating arguments from evil, axiological or deontological? If the former, one might argue that since the world contains many intrinsically undesirable states of affairs, an omnipotent being could improve the world by eliminating such states of affairs. Thus one might argue – having in mind Leibniz's (1714) attempt in his *Monadology* (Paragraphs 53–55) to prove that this is the best of all possible worlds – that given the evil that exists, this is not the best of all possible worlds.

Any such approach seems unsatisfactory, however, since for any possible world, no matter how good, it would seem that a better world is possible. For let U be absolutely any world. Could there not be another world, W, consisting of U plus U*, where U* is an exact, qualitative duplicate of U? Then, however, if U

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were a good world, would not W be an even better world? If so, there cannot be a *best* of all possible worlds, since there would exist a never-ending sequence of better and better possible worlds. Consequently, the mere fact that an *omnipotent* being had failed to create the best of all possible worlds would not entail that such a being was less than perfectly good.

What, then, would be grounds for judging that an omnipotent being was less than morally perfect? The answer, it would seem, would be the existence of some evil that the omnipotent being could and *should* have prevented, but failed to do so. But then, should not incompatibility arguments from evil – and indeed, any arguments from evil – be formulated using *deontological* rather than axiological terms?

1.2 Highly General Propositions about Evils versus Much More Specific Propositions

Traditional formulations of incompatibility arguments from evil often involved only extremely general claims about evils found in the world. Sometimes, for example, they were based on the most general claim of all, namely, that the world contains at least one evil, at least one state of affairs whose existence should have been prevented if at all possible. At other times, reference was made to the existence of multiple, unspecified evils, or to the total amount of evil of which we are aware, or to the existence of individual but unspecified evils that are horrendous in nature.

Such formulations are silent on the *intrinsic nature* of the evils in question, thereby in effect assuming that such information is irrelevant to the incompatibility claim. Given certain responses to incompatibility arguments from evil, however, that view seems problematic. Consider, for example, free will responses, which claim that libertarian free will, where this involves the ability to perform actions not causally determined by states of affairs lying outside the agent's control, is very valuable, and that this value is such that it is better for persons to possess free will, even given that actions may be performed that will harm others and that are morally wrong. An omnipotent being could prevent such morally wrong actions, but the contention is that this would deprive people of the power to choose freely how to act and thus of something very valuable indeed.

There is much to be said about this 'free will defense' response to arguments from evil. My point here, however, is that rather than grappling with the difficult idea of libertarian free will, a defender of an incompatibility argument can try to render this type of defense *irrelevant*. They could do this, for example, by drawing a distinction between moral evils and natural evils – between evils

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resulting from immoral choices by free agents, and evils not so caused – and then by formulating an argument from evil in terms of natural evils.

Or consider another important response, namely, the 'soul-making' theodicy championed especially by John Hick, and which he traced back to a second century AD theologian, Irenaeus. This 'soul-making' theodicy involves the contention that the evils found in the world can be seen to be justified given the idea that God so designed the world to maximize the opportunity for people, through the exercise of free will in response to challenges that confront them, to grow spiritually in a way that would ultimately make them fit for communion with God:

> The value-judgement that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue. In the former case, which is that of the actual moral achievements of mankind, the individual's goodness has within it the strength of temptations overcome, a stability based upon an accumulation of right choices, and a positive and responsible character that comes from the investment of costly personal effort. I suggest, then, that it is an ethically reasonable judgement, even though in the nature of the case not one that is capable of demonstrative proof, that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process. (1978, 255–6)

Hick's basic contentions, accordingly, are as follows. First, soul-making is a great good. Secondly, and as a result, God is justified in designing a world with that purpose in mind. Thirdly, our world is well designed in that regard. Consequently, if one views evil in the world as a problem, it is because, overlooking the great value of soul-making, one mistakenly thinks that the world ought, instead, to be a hedonistic paradise.

As with the free will defense, there are many strong objections to Hick's soul-making theodicy, but my point is once again that defenders of incompatibility arguments from evil can attempt to short-circuit all of that discussion by formulating things in terms of evils that are completely unnecessary for a soul-making world, by focusing, for example, upon the suffering of nonhuman animals over the eons before *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene – suffering that makes no contribution to the development of anyone's moral character.

The moral, in short, is that there are reasons for thinking that, at least in the case of incompatibility arguments, stronger arguments can be formulated by focusing on *specific types* of evils, and it is striking how long it took philosophers to realize that this is so.

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The breakthrough in this respect was due to William Rowe, who focused, first of all, in his 1979 article, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," upon the case of a fawn suffering a prolonged and agonizing death in a forest fire, and then, in his 1988 article, "Evil and Theodicy," upon the case of a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who was brutally beaten, raped, and then strangled by her mother's boyfriend. This shift, I believe, was important indeed.

1.3 Justified Beliefs versus What Is Known in Some Strong Sense of 'Knowledge'

Arguments from evil claim that there are propositions expressing facts about evils found in the world that are either incompatible with the existence of various deities – including the omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfectly good deity of classical theism – or render the existence of the deity in question at least unlikely – and, arguably, extremely so. But what sorts of propositions can be employed in such arguments?

Suppose, for example, that a philosopher or theologian were to advance one of the following claims: (a) The suffering of nonhuman animals poses no problem, since nonhuman animals do not experience pain: all that one has is so-called 'pain behavior'; (b) there are no natural evils, only moral evils, since natural disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the 1931 China floods, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and so on are all caused by fallen angels, while the sufferings of animals due to predators such as tigers occur because predators are animals possessed by demons; (c) while humans and other animals suffer pain, that suffering is not undeserved, because the doctrines of reincarnation and karma are true. If the person then claims that the proposition in question is "true for all we *know*," what is one to say?

One may be tempted to reply that one *does* know that the proposition in question is false. Given, however, that there is no generally accepted analysis of the concept of knowledge nor even any close approximation thereto, replying in that way is surely to choose a path that is unlikely to be profitable. What one should say instead is, first, that the fundamental question here is what it is *reasonable* to believe, and secondly, that what it is reasonable to believe is not confined to propositions that are *known* in any sense of the latter term.

The moral is this. First, in formulating an incompatibility argument from evil, *any* propositions can be used that one is *justified in believing*. Secondly, if one is also justified in believing *the conjunction* of those propositions, and if that conjunction logically entails the nonexistence of the relevant deity, the result is a successful incompatibility argument from evil.

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2 Incompatibility Arguments from Evil

In this section, I shall formulate a number of propositions that, taken together, are logically incompatible with the existence of God. Before doing that, however, I think it will be helpful to provide some background to readers new to this area by describing important responses to incompatibility arguments from evil.

First, one can offer a *theodicy*. This claims that while the world contains intrinsically evil states of affairs that may initially appear to be unjustified in the sense of not being logically necessary either for some good that outweighs the evil in question, or to avoid some greater evil, this initial impression is mistaken, since upon reflecting more deeply on the situation, it can be seen that there are known types of goods that justify the evils in question.

What are the alternatives to a theodicy? One involves arguing that for any evil that exists, it is *logically possible* that the evil is necessary either to avoid some still greater evil, or else to achieve some good outweighing the evil in question. Traditionally, such an alternative response was described as a *defense,* and it took the form of appealing to some *specific type* of good and saying that, for any evil that might appear unjustified, a good of that type could be present for all one knows, and that if it were, a deity would be justified in allowing the evil in question.

As an illustration, consider what is probably the most famous type of defense – namely, the free will defense – whose best-known defender is Alvin Plantinga (1974a, 7–64, and 1974b, 164–95). Here the basic ideas are that evils can be divided into moral evils and natural evils, and that allowing moral evils is justifiable because of the great good of there being agents who possess libertarian free will. As regards what are *described* as natural evils, such as the Lisbon earthquake, it is possible, for all we know, that those evils are in fact moral evils caused by the actions of nonhuman persons, including supernatural ones (1974a, 57–9, and 1974b, 191–3).

The crucial point about this way of arguing that certain evils in the world are logically compatible with the existence of God is that it does not appeal to the mere possibility of there being some *unknown* type of good that outweighs a given type of evil, and for which the evil is logically necessary, or to the mere possibility of there being some *unknown* type of evil that is weightier than the known evil, and that can only be avoided by allowing the known evil in question. Rather, a response such as Plantinga's specifies, first of all, a *type* of good – such as the existence and actions of genuinely free agents – possible instances of which might be prevented by God if God were to prevent what are generally described as 'natural evils.' It also specifies *how* the possible good in

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question is *connected* with the evil that it outweighs – namely, the free action in question is the cause of the evil.

More recently, however, many philosophers have championed a different way of arguing that the existence of all the evils found in the world is logically compatible with the existence of God. This approach is known as 'skeptical theism.' According to this view, there may be goods of which we have no knowledge – 'goods beyond our ken' – which, if they exist, justify God in allowing the evils present in the world. In contrast to traditional defenses, however, *nothing* is said here even about the *types* of goods in question, let alone about *how they are connected* to relevant, known evils.

The upshot is that the description typically offered of the idea of a defense – namely, as any attempt to show that the evils found in the world are logically compatible with the existence of God – is no longer satisfactory since it fails to distinguish between defenses and skeptical theism. Accordingly, I shall use the term 'defense' to refer to views that not only attempt to show that the evils found in the world are logically compatible with the existence of God, but also specify both *the type of goods* that are relevant and *how those goods are connected to the evils in question*.

Let me now describe the goal of this section in more detail. First of all, it is not to survey alternative incompatibility arguments from evil that have been advanced, nor is it to consider all of the various responses to such arguments and everything that can be said for and against such responses. As regards the former, many incompatibility arguments are weak, and my goal is to formulate what I hope is a stronger type of incompatibility argument. As regards the latter, while I shall sometimes comment, generally very briefly, on important responses, my object is to show that familiar theodicies and defenses are often rendered irrelevant by the incompatibility argument I shall set out.

Secondly, I shall not consider theodicies or defenses that appeal to supposedly *revealed* religious truths. A discussion of such approaches would require, in the end, arguing that there are good reasons to believe that the religions in question are false – a task that would require another and much longer book in itself.

Finally, as regards possible skeptical theist responses to the incompatibility argument I shall set out, that topic will be considered in Section 3.

2.1 The Existence of Suffering by Nonhuman Animals That Are Not Persons

Let me now develop the incompatibility argument in question and respond to objections.

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(1) The world contains sentient nonpersons that undergo suffering, often intense, when they are killed by predators, by natural disasters such as forest fires, or by disease.

Objection to Proposition (1): Nonhuman animals do not experience pain.

Michael Murray, in the chapter entitled "Neo-Cartesianism" in his book *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*, appeals to a theory of consciousness typically advanced by philosophers who hold that all mental states are reducible to states involving nothing beyond the entities, properties, and relations postulated in theories in physics, and who maintain that for something to be a state of consciousness, it must be the object of a higher-order mental state – specifically, it must be the object of a higher-order *thought*. Such higher-order thought theories of consciousness – HOT theories for short – can, Murray points out, also be embraced by philosophers who are not physicalists with regard to the nature of mind and who hold that experiences involve phenomenal, 'raw feel' qualities – such as colors, sounds, tastes, and smells – that are not reducible to the stuff of physics. Given a HOT theory of consciousness, one can, accordingly, formulate a neo-Cartesian view of nonhuman animals, according to which they can be in states with phenomenal, nonphysical properties, but, since they lack the capacity for thought, they cannot have any higher-order thoughts and therefore are not conscious (2008, 55). The result, if one embraces this neo-Cartesian view, is that one can, according to Murray, plausibly hold that "so long as the animal lacks the higher-order access, so long as it cannot represent itself as being in a state of pain, there is nothing about its situation that has intrinsic moral disvalue" (2008, 56).

Murray's view is open to both philosophical and scientific objections. As regards the former, higher-order thought analyses of the concept of consciousness are open to decisive objections. It can be shown, for example, that if thoughts are themselves conscious states, the result is a vicious infinite regress, whereas if thoughts are not conscious states, then there can be purely mechanical devices that possess consciousness. Other serious philosophical objections have also been advanced against such analyses. Peter Carruthers, for example, arrived at the conclusion that it "may be that only humans, or perhaps humans and other species of great ape, are phenomenally conscious, if either of these forms of higher-order thought approach are correct" (2018, 192).

Then, as regards scientific objections, careful studies have found strong evidence that vertebrates can be in the same state as humans experiencing pain. First of all, the types of neural circuits present in the brains of humans when they experience pain are present in other mammals and in vertebrates as

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