

Comments on Problem Set 2

General Comments

Many of these problem sets were too long. You should be able to complete each problem set in about two double-spaced pages (12 pt font). Many of the problem sets were much longer than this (some were over four double-spaced pages, others were two full single-spaced pages in 10 pt font). One skill that these problem sets are testing is your ability to answer succinctly and directly the questions being asked. If you find that your problem set is exceeding two double-spaced pages in 12 pt font, you should try to cut it down to this size. Doing this will sharpen and focus your answers to the questions.

Philosophy is hard. English is not. Please check your problem sets for spelling and grammar. Also, avoid colloquialisms in your written work. They are out of place both in these assignments and in most other written academic work.

Peter van Inwagen's last name is 'van Inwagen', not 'Inwagen'.

1. 'Before the invention of the theory of evolution by natural selection, the hypothesis that life on Earth came into existence as a result of intelligent design was the only reasonable thing for an educated person to believe.' Discuss. As part of your discussion of this claim, consider at least TWO competing hypotheses about the origins of life on Earth, other than the theory of evolution by natural selection. (You may want to consider some of the hypotheses suggested by Hume in the Dialogues.) Say whether these competing hypotheses provide better or worse explanations of life on Earth than the hypothesis of intelligent design, and why.

Many people spent a fair amount of space summarizing and discussing Hume's *Dialogues* in answer to this question. This was unnecessary and a waste of words. Though you may have wanted to discuss some of the hypotheses therein discussed in order to compare them to the intelligent design hypothesis (as suggested in the question), their place in the *Dialogues* is irrelevant to answering the question.

Though most people did discuss at least two competing hypotheses for the existence of life on Earth to that of intelligent design, many simply stated that the competing hypotheses were more plausible than or less plausible than the intelligent design hypothesis. To answer this question you need to give your reasons why they are more/less plausible than the intelligent design hypothesis. Also, arguing that a competitor hypothesis is implausible is not enough. You must argue that it is less plausible than the intelligent design hypothesis. Some people said that competitor hypotheses were implausible on the basis of considerations that if decisive would be decisive against the intelligent design hypothesis as well. Clearly, such considerations cannot be reasons for thinking the competitor hypotheses are less plausible than the intelligent design hypothesis.

2. According to van Inwagen (in ‘The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy’), God has a good reason for allowing people to endure terrible suffering as a result of natural disasters, rather than intervening to prevent this suffering.

(i) Briefly explain the essential idea behind van Inwagen’s account of God’s motivations. (If you like, this part of your answer could take the form of an answer by God to a prayer for relief made by someone experiencing great suffering as a result of some horrible accident.)

Many people, in giving an account of van Inwagen’s theodicy, though indicating that human beings separated themselves from God in the Fall, neglected to explain what the Fall was. According to van Inwagen, the Fall was an event in the past, when an early generation of human beings *freely* turned away from God. These people exercised their free will by choosing to turn away from, rather than to embrace, God.

Some also neglected to indicate why, according to van Inwagen, God gave human beings free will. He did so because God wanted human beings to love Him and they could love Him only if they could freely choose (i.e., exercise their free will) to be united with Him.

According to van Inwagen, and as many of you indicated, God does not prevent suffering because He wants human beings to realize that a life separated from Him is a miserable one in order that they will *freely* turn back to Him. This is different from suffering’s being a punishment for turning away from God. Many people indicated that on van Inwagen’s theodicy, suffering is a punishment for the Fall, but van Inwagen does not talk of punishment. On his theodicy, suffering is a consequence of the Fall, but it does not follow from this that suffering is a punishment for the Fall.

Many said that, according to van Inwagen’s story, when people turned away from God, God took away their powers to avoid natural disaster. Van Inwagen only claims that in turning away from God people lost this ability.

(ii) Does van Inwagen’s proposal succeed as a response to the argument from evil against the existence of God? Defend your answer.

Many of those who claimed that van Inwagen’s proposal failed as a response to the argument from evil questioned the compatibility of God’s omnipotence and His inability to affect people’s free choices. Many claimed that van Inwagen’s proposal failed as a response to the argument from evil because it conceded that God was in fact not omnipotent for He could not make it the case that people freely choose to love him (or do the right thing). Though this is a legitimate concern, as van Inwagen assumes, rather than tries to defend, that they are compatible, it would have been better to try to criticize his theodicy on other grounds. Of those who did criticize van Inwagen in the above way, no one did anything much more than simply assert that if God is omnipotent He could make people freely choose what He wants them to. Almost no one seriously considered and tried to rebut the arguments that theists have given for this position. Roughly the view is as follows: omnipotence means being able to do whatever is possible, and as determining a person’s free choice is impossible, that God cannot determine a person’s free choice does not threaten His omnipotence. Given that van Inwagen was assuming for the

purposes of his theodicy that this is right, criticizing him on this score at least requires engaging with this line of thought.

If you think that van Inwagen's proposal does succeed as a response to the argument from evil, you must do more than simply say so. Defending your answer requires anticipating what a critic would say in response to van Inwagen's theodicy and explaining why those criticisms fail.