

The Argument from Evil

Handout
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1. Failing to prevent suffering

2. The Argument from Evil

'Unnecessary suffering' =_{df} suffering that is not justified as an inevitable consequence of pursuing some greater good.

P1: If God exists, God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.

P2: Any perfectly being would prevent unnecessary suffering if she knew about it, and was able to prevent it.

P3: Any omnipotent and omniscient being would know about, and be able to prevent, any unnecessary suffering there might be.

C1: Therefore, if God exists, there is no unnecessary suffering.

P4: But there is unnecessary suffering.

C2: Therefore, God does not exist.

3. Defence of P2

It is plausible that *we* are not *morally obliged* to prevent unnecessary suffering in every way we can. But:

- (i) That seems to have something to do with the fact that it would often be very *hard* for us to prevent suffering. But if God is omnipotent, it would be as easy for him to prevent suffering as for us to raise our arms.
- (ii) In any case, a *perfectly good* being would do all sorts of good actions beyond those she was *morally obliged* to do.

4. Defence of P3

It seems obvious that if an omnipotent being *anything*, an omnipotent being can prevent suffering. But consider: can an omnipotent being create a round square? Or can an omnipotent being create a square that was not created by any omnipotent being?

Presumably not: to count as omnipotent, a being needs only to be able to produce any *possible* effect. So one could deny P3 if one were willing to claim that it is *impossible* for the suffering in question not to occur.

But this is completely implausible.

5. Defence of P4

For a human being, it could happen that the only way to pursue some greater good involved causing or failing to prevent suffering—e.g. civilian casualties in a just war. But an *omnipotent* being wouldn't be limited by the "laws of cause and effect" in the same way as human beings! God could achieve the greater good *directly*, without having to use suffering as a means or creating suffering as a side-effect.

Reply: not if the suffering was a *necessary part* of the greater good. How could this be?

1. Maybe it's good when people get what they deserve, and some people deserve to suffer.
 - but isn't it obvious that lots of suffering is undeserved?
2. Maybe it's good for physical objects to obey exceptionless "laws of nature".
 - but is this really so good? Wouldn't a God who accepted suffering for the sake of exceptionless laws of nature be more like a maniacal artist than a perfectly good being?
3. Maybe it's good for people's free choices to have their natural consequences.
 - But why couldn't God ensure that people only made the *right* free choices?
 - A: because a choice whose outcome was planned in this way by God would not be free.
 - Does the value of Pol Pot's free choice having its natural consequences really outweigh the badness of all the suffering?
 - In any case, lots of suffering is not the natural consequence of anyone's free choices.
 - A: some theists deny this. Some trace all suffering to the Devil. Van Inwagen traces it to the Fall of the first generation of human beings.
4. Maybe it's good for people to make certain free choices which might be prompted by suffering: for example, the free choice to display sympathy or charity, or to turn towards God.
 - but couldn't these choices be elicited by the mere *appearance* of suffering?
 - A1: this would have introduced another evil, namely false beliefs.
 - A2: sympathetic action based on *true* beliefs is much more valuable than sympathetic action based on false ones.
 - Some suffering seems to lead to callousness, maliciousness, etc. rather than the good choices.
 - A: To make the good choices possible, God has to run the risk of bad choices. God as an unlucky gambler.
 - Wouldn't it have sufficed if there had been *much less* suffering? EG God might have chosen to eliminate all the *natural* suffering, leaving us with the suffering due to wars, purges, etc. Wouldn't that have taught the lesson of our need for God even more effectively?
 - What about suffering that no-one ever hears about; the suffering of animals before human beings evolved; etc.?
5. Maybe suffering is necessary for some other good of which we have absolutely no conception.