24.00: Problems of Philosophy
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Evidential Arguments from Evil

I. Reasons: Inductive and Deductive

We've been considering whether it is rational to believe that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God exists. The Ontological Argument attempts to give a *deductive* argument for theism. A deductive argument is one in which it is *impossible* for the premises to be true and the conclusion false, i.e., it is *logically valid*. However we should note that an argument may provide good reasons for believing something without being a deductive argument. For example, if I tell you that there will be an in-class exam on Wednesday, you have good reason to believe there will be, even if it is possible for me to tell you this and not set the exam. Sometimes reasons give us evidence that the conclusion is probable, but don't go so far as to establish it conclusively.

Non-deductive arguments come in a variety of forms. One form used regularly in daily life draws general conclusions from a series of instances. For example, I'm guessing that you believe that when you turn on the tap, grape juice will not come out; that swans are white; and that the earth will continue rotating on its axis for the next 50 minutes. Your experience has taught you these things (though note that there are black swans in Australia!). Arguments of this kind are called *inductive* arguments. Sometimes the term 'inductive' is used for any non-deductive argument, sometimes for this specific kind. To avoid confusion, we'll call the broad class of non-deductive arguments, *evidential* arguments, and will reserve the term 'inductive' for the narrower class. (Note also that we'll discuss induction more specifically in a couple of weeks.)

II. The Problem(s) of Evil

Last time we considered a deductive argument posing the Problem of Evil for theism (here slightly modified):

(1) If God existed, she'd be omniscient, omnipotent, good (OOG). (Assumption)
(2) If God existed, there would be no evil. (from 1)
(3) There *is* evil in the world. (Assumption)
(4) Therefore God does not exist. (1,2,3)

Note that (2) seems to be too strong to be deduced from (1). If we count pain and suffering as evil, then there are many cases in which pain and suffering is justified by a long-term good. Moreover, freewill seems to justify God's allowing our free acts, both good and evil. So the inference from the assumptions (1) and (3) to the conclusion (4) is not deductively valid.

To repair the argument it appears we should modify (2):
2*) If God existed, the only evil would be evil that served some sufficiently good point (otherwise, God would have prevented it).
And make a corresponding adjustment in (3):
3*) Some evils serve no sufficiently good point, i.e., they are gratuitous or unredeemed evils.
BUT: On what basis can we assert (3*)? It may be that (3) is obvious, but (3*) requires not just that there is evil, but that there is *unredeemed* evil. What is our evidence for this?

Atheist: If after careful reflection and inquiry we can find no good that redeems an apparent evil E, we are justified in concluding that there is no good that redeems E. After careful reflection and inquiry we can find no good that redeems the death of Ariana Swinson [or fill in your favorite horrendous evil], so we are justified in concluding that there is no good that redeems it. Hence we are justified in asserting (3*).

Theist: God works in mysterious ways and has far greater knowledge than we do. The fact that *we* cannot determine what redeems a particular evil E, such as Ariana's death[1], is compatible with its being redeemed in the greater scheme of things. So we are not justified in asserting (3*).

Note that now the debate has shifted from deciding what can be deduced from the agreed upon existence of evil, to considering evidence for or against unredeemed evils. The atheist's position seems better articulated along these lines[2]:

(5)   After careful observation and reflection we've found that no good we know of justifies God in permitting evil E_1 (and E_2…).

(6)   Therefore, no good justifies God in permitting evil E_1 (and E_2…).

(7)   Therefore, There is no God.

Let's call this argument (and others the rely on non-deductive reasoning) *Evidential Arguments from Evil.*

Consider Ariana's death [or again, a horrifying actual event]. Is it an irredeemable evil? What would we have to show?

a) We can find no good that redeems it (it is not intrinsically good, and it is not a means or precondition for some good that outweighs its evil).

b) We have no special reason to doubt our own judgment about what's good or bad.

And the epistemic principle:

c) If (after careful reflection, inquiry, etc.) we can find no good that redeems it, then we are entitled to conclude that there is no such good.

III. Redeeming Reasons (re (a))
We've already considered one theist explanation of how evil is redeemed: freewill. It is much better that we are free to do evil than that God controls what we do and what consequences our actions have.
Doubts:

➢   Is it really better for God not to control the consequences of our choices? If I intend to cause excruciating pain and God intervenes to lessen the pain I cause, or if I intend to kill and God intervenes to vaporize the bullet, wouldn't this be a better world? It is plausible that this would not compromise my *freewill*, even if it might compromise my *freedom*. [Roughly, freewill concerns one's choices and intentions; freedom concerns

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[1] See the reading assigned for today: Bruce Russell, "The Problem of Evil: Too Much Suffering." http://www.uta.edu/philosophy/faculty/burgess-jackson/russell.html.

[2] This form of argument has been defended by, among others, William Rowe, in "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 262-85.

what one brings about. On the scenario sketched, my choices are free, even if, when my choices are evil, I fail to implement them.].

➢ Even if God needed to allow our evil choices to be implemented sometimes in order to give us a "sense of freedom", wouldn't it be better to intervene in the most horrific cases? Note that humans are capable of learning a lot as witnesses of others' evil acts, or by reading accounts of them, even by reading fiction. I don't need to kill someone in order to learn that murder is wrong…

➢ Even if allowing freely chosen evil is sometimes outweighed by the good of freedom, there need not be as much freely chosen evil as there seems to be. And which, if any, of our actions are truly free anyway? (More on this later in the course.)

➢ What about pain and suffering caused by natural events, not human agency?

IV. Judgments about consequences (re (b))
Note that the evidential argument against theism rests on the claim that the kind or quantity of evil in the world is not justified by the greater good it makes possible: the evil outweighs the good that results. But our judgment concerning this may be called into question: (a) do we know *what* good the evil makes possible? (b) is it clear exactly *how much* evil is needed?

Although we must be cautious in making such value judgments, the defender of the problem of evil might reply that there is *no known good*, or perhaps even, *no conceivable good* that could outweigh the excessive suffering we find around us. Although it is plausible that there are grey areas where it is hard to balance present suffering for long-term gain, the world's evil does not fall within a grey area.

V. Evidence (re (c))
Supposing that we cannot find any good that redeems an apparent evil [Ariana's death, or other horror], what should we conclude? Should we conclude that it is unredeemed?

Theist: Our knowledge and understanding is limited. From the fact that we cannot find what redeems a particular evil does not entitle us to draw the general conclusion that there is no good that outweighs it.

Atheist: According to ordinary principles of evidence and confirmation, it is reasonable to conclude from the fact that our search to find a redeeming good fails, that there is no such good.

Let's consider the pattern of inference with more concrete examples. Consider:

(8) There are no observed elephants in this room.
(9) There are no elephants in this room.

Inferences such as this suggest that we can reasonably draw the conclusion that something does not exist, given careful observation and reflection. Someone who, after close investigation, refused to conclude that there are no elephants in this room would be considered unreasonable, even irrational. However, what about a similar inference:

(10) There are no observed bacteria in this carpet (I've looked carefully!).
(11) There are no bacteria in this carpet.

The inference is weak. Why? Because we wouldn't expect to be able to see the bacteria without instruments, etc. So the legitimate principle seems to be:

Detectability Condition (DC) "…Failure to see something (an elephant, a person, a reason) gives us reason to believe it is not there *only if* we are justified in believing that if it were there, we would see it." (Russell, section 2, para. 8)

A theist could plausibly claim that even our careful observation and reflection will not reveal God's reasons to us, so the fact that we have not found the goods that redeem the world's evil does not establish that the evil will remain unredeemed.

However, is (DC) true? Russell claims not. He suggests that even if we cannot have direct evidence for one hypothesis over another, we can judge between the hypotheses using a criterion of simplicity. Consider the hypothesis that we are in a world that is pretty much as we think of it and an alternative hypothesis that we are in a Matrix world. (In a Matrix world we are led to have our beliefs in real-worldly things by the manipulations of computers.) We ask: is there a coffee cup on the table. I don't see one. Why not?

Answer 1 (simple): There isn't a coffee cup there.

Answer 2 (needlessly complex): The Matrix computers haven't set up things for me to see a coffee cup.

Which is the *reasonable* answer (allowing that we cannot be sure)? Plausibly answer 1. Now ask: Is the evil in the world redeemed by greater good? I don't see it. Why not?

Answer 1 (simple): It is genuinely pointless suffering.

Answer 2 (needlessly complex): There is a God who has a great plan that we can't understand and the suffering is part of that plan.

Isn't the *reasonable* answer also Answer 1? It surely seems to be the simpler answer. And when we construct our best theory of the world, isn't it more reasonable to opt for the simpler explanation than the needlessly complicated? If so, then we have reason to accept the atheist's conclusion than the theist's. (Question to consider: This simplicity argument is non-deductive. Is it (narrowly) inductive?)

Moreover, if we are not justified in believing the simplest hypothesis when we lack direct evidence, then we would have to be skeptical about many things that the theist seems to maintain as strongly as anyone. On what basis do we believe that the world has existed for more than 100 years? On what basis do we believe in the existence of other minds? On what basis do we believe that there is a world beyond the mind at all? As Russell presents it, the theist who does not, in general, take the simpler explanation of a phenomenon to be the more reasonable must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Questions to consider:

1. Under what conditions can one reasonably conclude, based on the fact that one has never observed X, that X does not exist? What if X =
      --Other minds?
      --Goods that redeem apparent evils?
      --Ghosts? Aliens?
      --God?

2. What degree or kind of evidence is required in order to *reasonably* hold the belief that p (where p is an assertion about the world). What is required in order for me to believe that I have two hands, that there is coffee in my cup, that I was born on the earth a few decades ago, that the sun will rise tomorrow, that murder for fun is wrong? How does belief in God (or belief that there are redeeming goods for all apparent evils) fit in with these?

3. By whose criteria do we judge whether something is good or evil? Is it adequate for a theist to claim that God has a different morality than we do, so (some of) what we count as evil, He counts as good, and (some of) what we count as good He counts as evil? It seems to many that even though omnipotent, God cannot violate the laws of logic or create new laws of logic. What about moral principles such as: torture and murder for fun is wrong. There seem to be principles common to all human societies. Could God violate them and still be good?