

## Vagueness and the Problem of Evil

In his intriguing Gifford Lectures, *The Problem of Evil*, van Inwagen considers the local argument of evil as it is offered by his ideal Atheist. The local argument relies upon the apparent fact that there are many terrible evils “from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn’t have achieved without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all” (97). The argument is formed in reference to a particular horror, which he calls The Mutilation, a true story about a woman who is raped and has her arms cut off at the elbows but survives her horrible suffering. The first premise states that the world would have been no worse off if this particular horror had been left out of it, and the second states that this horror was not left out of it. The fourth premise posits that an omnipotent being could have, in fact, left the horror out of the world, and the conclusion is that a morally perfect and omnipotent creator does not exist. It is the third premise which carries the most weight and which van Inwagen objects to:

(3) If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally perfect creator would have left the horror out of the world he created—or at any rate he would have left it out if he had been able to.

This premise, he argues, only makes sense given a general moral principle:

(MP) If one is in a position to prevent some evil, one should not allow that evil to occur—not unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh it or preventing it would result in some other evil at least as bad.

And this moral principle, he argues, is one that we should reject because there are counterexamples to it. Van Inwagen’s counterexample involves a prison official with the ability to release a prisoner, Blodgett, who cleverly argues that, since one day less would not affect the

amount of good served by his time in prison and each day in prison is an evil, he should (given the cumulative effect of this argument) not serve anytime in prison. This is a reductio of the moral principle, however, because it is clear from 'practical wisdom' that a line has to be drawn somewhere. Where that line has to be drawn is vague, and this is van Inwagen's point: there may be no good result from any given horror, but God is still morally perfect as long as he does not allow more evil than necessary and there is a reason to allow some horrors. How much he actually allows may simply be arbitrarily chosen from the vague area.

Van Inwagen's point, I take it, is not actually that Blodgett would be released, for surely MP forbids this as well since allowing Blodgett to spend some time in prison is necessary to accomplish the good of deterrence. Rather, the point is that the precise amount of time needed is vague so an arbitrary line must be drawn, and this is precisely what MP forbids. The MP-legalistic prison official would not release Blodgett, but he would be paralyzed into complete inactivity, because MP would forbid him from taking off another day when that would not clearly prevent a greater evil, and would also forbid him leaving the sentence where it is at, for it is not clear that he wouldn't be preventing a greater evil by taking off another day from the sentence.

Of course, MP is only problematic in God's case if the vagueness is in reality itself. To see this, imagine that the prison official is omniscient. Assuming, as seems likely, that omniscience includes knowledge of how long of a prison sentence is required to deter Blodgett (and perhaps others) from further crime, God is not paralyzed by MP but could reduce the sentence (and in the parallel case evil) precisely as far as it can be reduced. In this case, the amount of evil certainly is not arbitrary even if the particular evils chosen are. MP, then, would obviously still fail, but a weaker version applicable only to omniscient beings would hold. If the vagueness is in reality, however, as van Inwagen seems to assume in this work (and argue for in

his earlier work, *Material Bodies*), then even an omniscient God cannot know how long of a prison sentence is required and even the weaker version of MP fails. If we allow that vagueness is in the world, then van Inwagen's desired conclusion still goes through.<sup>1</sup>

Let us grant, then, that vagueness is in the world. The quantity of evil required for God's purposes is, we are granting, vague, though clearly some amounts of evil would be too little (a toothache a year for everyone) and some would be too much (cf. Dante's *Inferno*). Anywhere within that vague area, however, we can allow that it is arbitrary just how *much* evil God chooses to allow. But what about the particular evils that he chooses? Is there not a line that Atheist could argue for between some run-of-the-mill evils and others such that it should not just be arbitrary which evils God chooses? Surely it is the case that many of these horrors will lead to a good which outweighs the horror. Surely even more of these horrors will lead to a great good, even if it cannot outweigh the horror. The Mutilation, for example, perhaps led to the good of greater sympathy for others, increased awareness of the dangers of being alone, and perhaps greater security for many people who would have been injured by others without the graphic warning that it is not safe to be alone in wooded areas. If nothing else, *ex hypothesi* it was some small part of the great good of people coming to realize that life is horrible without God and so coming to be saved. Finally, it is surely the case, I think, that there are horrors that do not lead to any great good at all, and perhaps not even to a small good. This would include things like Rowe's fawn, but it might also include a rape and mutilation where the woman does not live, and so does not become a national news story that can act as a broad warning and bring many people to awareness of their own wickedness. Other examples abound. As van Inwagen has it in the parallel case, consider the broad existential claim that there is *some* evil that occurs that leads to no good, and this seems difficult to deny. But if there is even one evil that leads to no good, we

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Dr. Kvanvig for pointing out that this case was more complicated than I originally took it to be.

might rephrase Atheist, then a morally perfect God cannot exist. Let's call these Worthless Evils (meaning by Evils what van Inwagen means by Horrors).

Now we simply restate the argument for particular evils using these considerations and one additional premise, and let us posit a particular Worthless Evil since this is the local argument from evil, call it WE:

- (1) If WE had not occurred, the world would be no worse than it is.
- (2) WE did, in fact, occur.
- (3) If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain WE out of the world he created while still accomplishing his larger purposes, then he would have left WE out of the world he created—or at any rate he would have left it out if he had been able to.
- (4) There are enough non-Worthless Evils for God to demonstrate to human beings that the world is horrible apart from him; indeed, Worthless Evils are particularly ill-suited for this task.
- (5) If an omnipotent being created the world, he was able to leave WE out of the world while still accomplishing his overall goals in creation.

Premise (4), of course, simply argues that the issue of quantity is not significant; there are enough non-Worthless Evils that it is no longer vague for God whether he needs these particular evils to accomplish his goal, so premise (3) need not rely upon the controversial MP.<sup>2</sup>

The burden lies on Atheist to prove that (4) is the case, but I do not find it unreasonable as a premise. It certainly seems as if there are many ways that great goods can come from evil, even many ways that we cannot possibly imagine or ever claim to know about. If nothing else, God could, it seems, make sure that any evil that occurs is known about by a sufficient number

---

<sup>2</sup> I take it that premise three combined with four would now rely upon the less interesting but more plausible MP': If one is in a position to prevent some evil and it isn't vague whether preventing this evil will lead to a greater good, then one should not allow that evil to occur—not unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh it or preventing it would result in some other evil at least as bad. While obviously uninteresting in most human cases, most true absolute moral principles are, and it is sufficient to get God 'on the hook.'

of people. So wouldn't a morally perfect creator make sure that any evil he has to have in the world will indeed have a point, even if no more point than to show us how horrible the world is without him? If the justification for these horrors is that they allow us to know something, then the very existence of unknown evils remains *prima facie* unjustified.

There may still be an area of vagueness, then, but God's choice is not entirely arbitrary. Being omniscient, he would be able to project quite accurately what evil is likely to have good consequences, even if he does not have foreknowledge, and a morally perfect creator would only allow evils that lead to some good. But clearly, Atheist will claim, Worthless Evils exist, so there is no morally perfect, omnipotent God.

Theist could respond, perhaps, by arguing that (2) is in fact wrong: there are no Worthless Evils. God has, instead, made us such that our grotesque fascination with horror and love of gossip make it so that all horrors are indeed broadcast far around (who knew God was behind network news?). This may, for all I know, be true, but it seems highly counterintuitive that there are not evils never learned about because of how many evils we do learn about almost coincidentally. And the force of the broad existential claim that we considered earlier is quite strong: it seems quite likely to me that there was some horrible evil at some time that led to no significant good whatsoever.

Given the terms of the debate set up by van Inwagen, however, I have already had Atheist concede too much, for all that van Inwagen needs is a plausible story that is true for all we know, and it is true, for all we know, that God does not allow a single evil to go by unpublished to at least a minimal number of witnesses,<sup>3</sup> and so does not allow a single Worthless Evil.

---

<sup>3</sup> Part of van Inwagen's response could actually be that an evil being known to only a handful of people may itself be part of the horror for those who do know about it, so that the universal broadcasting of an evil is not necessary for it to be worthwhile. Somehow having a national headline made out of our pain can often mitigate that pain, or at least help turn it into a different purpose, the Cindy Sheehan effect we might call it.