Van Inwagen on the Problem of Evil: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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The purpose of this essay is to probe the most important points of Peter van Inwagen's 2003 Gifford lectures on the problem of evil (van Inwagen 2006) in an effort to initiate a thoughtful workshop discussion for the 2007 Baylor philosophy of religion conference. In true Texas style, the paper is entitled "Van Inwagen on the Problem of Evil: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly." In the section on the good, we present several of professor van Inwagen's important contributions to the problem of evil and explain how these contributions advance the current debate. In the section on the bad, we present several nit-picky complaints about professor van Inwagen's methodology and conclusions. In the section on the ugly, we lay out two serious objections to his position.

I. The Good

In a debate as old as the problem of evil, it is remarkable that anyone is able to contribute substantially to our understanding of the relevant arguments and responses. However, we think that professor van Inwagen's approach to the problem of evil makes several such contributions, and instead of authoring a wholly critical response (a trend these days in analytic philosophy), we shall take a moment to present these contributions and explain why we think that they are so important.

First, professor van Inwagen decries the standard taxonomy of the problem of evil, and he offers a substitute. Each of these is important. On the negative side, he rightly points out that analytic philosophers are quick to categorize the argument from evil into two species: the logical argument from evil and the evidential argument from

evil.[1] The logical problem of evil purports to show that the co-existence of God and evil is logically impossible. The defender of the evidential argument from evil, on the other hand, grants that it is possible that God and evil co-exist, but he insists that it is very unlikely that God exists given the extent and degree of evil actually observed.

Professor van Inwagen rightly notes that the logical/evidential distinction is a relic of history. The early contemporary literature on the problem of evil focused first on logical arguments from evil (e.g. Mackie 1955) and theistic responses to these arguments (e.g. Plantinga 1974). The logical argument has since fallen out of favor, and philosophers have focused their attention on the evidential problem of evil (e.g. Howard-Snyder 1996). As professor van Inwagen has pointed out, this historical distinction often motivates theists to think of an adequate response to the argument from evil as occurring in two distinct stages. First, as the standard approach would have it, the theist sees it as her burden to present an argument intended to show that the existence of God is logically consistent with the existence of evil. Second, the theist sees it as her task to undermine the evidential argument from evil in some way (pp. 66-68). We agree with professor van Inwagen that this historically motivated approach to the argument from evil isn't particularly useful.

Professor van Inwagen himself likens the situation to that of a courtroom. It is a poor strategy for a defense attorney to first attempt to show that the proposition that his client is innocent is logically consistent with the evidence (since it is possible, for example, that his client may not be guilty on account of the fact that a *doppelganger* committed the crime) and only then attempt to find a plausible way of undermining the

[1] For example, see Howard-Snyder (1996) pp. xi-xx, Peterson (1997) pp. 393-401, and Rowe's (2001) divisions of his edited anthology.

evidence against his client (p. 66). Likewise, this is not the best way for the theist to proceed either. It is better that the theist should aim for a plausible defense from the get-go.

Instead of the traditional logical/evidential classifications, professor van Inwagen offers us an alternative taxonomy that divides all arguments from evil into global or local genera. On this alternative scheme, arguments from evil are classified by the *scope* of the evil that is offered as evidence against the existence of God:

Global Argument from Evil

1) If God exists, then the world would not contain evil (or a vast amount of evil).

2) But the world does contain evil (or a vast amount of evil).

3) So, God does not exist.

Local Argument from Evil

4) If God exists, then the world would not contain this *particular* evil (e.g. the Holocaust, Rowe's fawn, Sue, etc.).

5) But the world does contain this *particular* evil (e.g. the Holocaust, Rowe's fawn, Sue, etc.).

6) So, God does not exist.

This taxonomy is more useful than the logical/evidential distinction because global arguments from evil and local arguments from evil require different responses on behalf of the theist. Professor van Inwagen claims that "even if one had an effective reply to the global argument, one would not necessarily—one would not thereby—have an effective reply to just any local argument from evil" (p. 8).

This is an important point that seems to have gone unnoticed in the literature. Nevertheless, it is a point that can be readily made accessible in terms of simple

categorical logic. From the premise some F's are G's, and that premise alone, we are not entitled to infer that since some particular thing is an F, then it is also a G. And, likewise, even if the theist has shown that the existence of *some* evil is compatible with the existence of God, it does not thereby follow that *any* given instance we find in the world is compatible with the existence of God. A successful defense against a global argument from evil will not thereby automatically provide the theist with a successful defense against just any old local argument from evil.

Another important contribution that professor van Inwagen makes in his response to the argument from evil is his ingenious employment of vagueness as a way of arguing that the existence of God is compatible with the existence of gratuitous evil.[2] An evil is gratuitous when its occurrence is neither necessary for any compensating good nor necessary to prevent something equally bad or worse. Employing the notion of a gratuitous evil, contemporary local arguments from evil proceed as follows:

> 7) If God exists, then there are no gratuitous evils.
>
> 8) But there are at least some gratuitous evils (e.g. the Holocaust, Rowe's fawn, Sue, etc.).
>
> 9) Therefore, God does not exist.

The atheist defends premise (7) by appeal to the following moral principle:

> 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 (p. 100).

By definition, the allowance of a gratuitous evil would not result in a compensating good and preventing it would not result in some other evil at least as bad, and so—granting the

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[2] The vagueness response was initially developed in van Inwagen 1988 and in van Inwagen 1996, footnote 11.

truth of the moral principle—it follows that no perfect moral agent would allow the existence of gratuitous evils. In order to defend premise (8), the atheist need only point to intuitive cases: it seems remarkably implausible that *exactly* 6 million people had to die in the Holocaust. It seems as if the theist is stuck saying that had that final person not been tortured and killed by the Nazis, the world would have been deprived of some great good (or subject to some evil equally bad or worse).

Contemporary theistic responses to this argument from evil usually grant premise (7) but then challenge premise (8). These responses purport to show either that none of the evils in the actual world are gratuitous (a theodicy) or that we have no adequate reason for thinking that the evils in the actual world are gratuitous (a defense). Professor van Inwagen's response, however, focuses on premise (7). He argues that the fact that there is vagueness in the world ensures that the moral principle in question is false. In many cases, an arbitrary line must be drawn by perfect moral agents.

To take one of professor van Inwagen's own examples, a sentence of 10 years is no more effective at deterring future crime than is a sentence of 9 years and 364 days. So according to the moral principle, a just punisher would not sentence the criminal to 10 years. But then this line of reasoning can be reiterated (just as in a *sorites* argument) until we reach the conclusion that no jail term is just. But surely some jail term or other is just. The solution is to recognize that "effective deterrence" is vague. A perfect moral judge must simply draw the line somewhere, and for any place he draws it, it will be true that his drawing it at a slightly different place would have been just as effective.

With regard to the problem of evil, professor van Inwagen argues that there is no precise number or quality of evil things that must occur to secure certain compensating goods (or to prevent equally bad or worse consequences):

> He [God] cannot remove *all* the horrors from the world, for that would frustrate his plan for reuniting human beings with himself. And if he prevents only some horrors, how shall he decide which ones to prevent? Where shall he draw the line?—the line between threatened horrors that are prevented and threatened horrors that are allowed to occur? I suggest that wherever he draws the line, it will be an arbitrary line. (p. 105)

And so even a perfect moral judge like God must draw an arbitrary line when deciding what number and quality of evil things to allow. This vague line ensures that some of the evils in our world are gratuitous. In short, if there is no non-vague demarcation between the evils that are necessary to secure compensating goods and those that are not, then any moral agent attempting to secure those compensating goods will have to make an arbitrary choice.

This response is valuable for the following reasons. First, it opens a new line of attack on a previously uncontested premise. Now both premises of the local argument from evil can be contested. Second, theists now have a clear response to the argument from evil that does not rely on denying or undermining premise (8). The theist can agree with the atheist that there are evils in the world that are not necessary to secure some greater good. The fact that 6 million people died in the Holocaust instead of 6 million minus one is arbitrary. The death of that last person was, indeed, gratuitous.

II. The Bad

Despite the important contributions made by professor van Inwagen's work, we don't find it wholly without problems. In this section we present several nit-picky criticisms of both his methodology and his conclusions.

First is a methodological point. The way in which professor van Inwagen sets up the debate ensures that his thesis is boring. The thesis of the book is that "the argument from evil is a failure" (p. 2). This sounds really exciting. But, professor van Inwagen then subsequently admits that "…no philosophical argument for any substantive conclusion is successful in the sense that I have proposed…" (p. 53). He is quite frank about the implications of this failure: "…are there any successful philosophical arguments? I know of none" (p. 52). So, by professor van Inwagen's own admission, his thesis is that the argument from evil has a property that is shared by every other philosophical argument for a substantive conclusion.

But, if that is so, one wonders how substantive professor van Inwagen's own thesis really is, and one wonders why proponents of the argument from evil should feel threatened by it. Would professor van Inwagen feel threatened if a compatibilist (about free will) were to write a book arguing that, say, the modal consequence argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism is a failure by van Inwagen's own standard? It seems doubtful that he would, given that he concedes that the arguments typically associated with his name are also failures by his standard (p. 52). And yet, we would venture to guess that professor van Inwagen still believes that the modal consequence argument for incompatibilism is, in some sense, a *good* argument. And, this seems like an entirely consistent position for him to take. Likewise, it seems consistent for the advocate of the argument from evil to maintain that the argument from evil is a good one even if it is a failure by professor van Inwagen's standard. This suggests to us that his standard of philosophical failure is too strict, and that his thesis would be more interesting given a more liberal standard. Professor van Inwagen claims that "alas, there

is no more liberal criterion" (p 160 n.5), but we find this claim implausible to the extent that we find it implausible to think that there have never been any successful philosophical arguments for substantive philosophical theses.

The above criticisms bring us to our second point; this point concerns professor van Inwagen's criterion of success itself. He proposes that a philosophical argument is successful if and only if an ideal audience would eventually be convinced of the truth of its conclusion by an ideal proponent of that argument within the context of an ideal debate between that proponent and an ideal protagonist. The ideal debaters that he envisions would be persons:

> of the highest degree of philosophical and logical acumen, and they are intellectually honest in this sense; when they are considering an argument for some conclusion, they do their best to evaluate it dispassionately …[they] have unlimited time at their disposal and are patient to preternatural degree; they will continue to engage in the debate, weighing carefully every argument raised by their opponents, until one or both of them has nothing left to say (p. 42-43).

Furthermore, the ideal audience consists of individuals who are agnostics with respect to the conclusion of the argument being presented (that is they neither affirm nor deny the conclusion, nor do they lend significantly more credence to the affirmation of the conclusion that they do to its negation or vice-versa). Nevertheless, they "would very much like to come to some sort of reasoned opinion" on the truth or falsity of the proposition in question. Finally, they have "the same unlimited leisure and superhuman patience" as well as "the same high intelligence and high degree of logical and philosophical acumen and intellectual honesty" as the ideal debaters possess (p. 44).

Our concern is that the nature of the background knowledge and beliefs possessed by the ideal audience (as well as the background knowledge and beliefs possessed by the

debaters) is underspecified. What, for example, is the extent of the audience's background knowledge? Obviously they cannot be logically omniscient, for example, since then (for many philosophical theses at least, including the thesis that the existence of evil is inconsistent with the existence of God) they would know the truth of the matter before the debate even began. Also, what credences do the members of the audience assign to various propositions? We believe that these matters are in need of further elaboration, since which premises the ideal audience will be inclined to accept and the plausibility rankings they assign to various supporting or undermining premises are highly sensitive to what background beliefs and credences they have.[3]

It may even turn out that different ways of specifying the background beliefs and credence assignments afforded to various propositions by the ideal audience results in their coming to radically different conclusions at the end of the ideal debate that professor van Inwagen envisions. If so, then this might also afford us with a more liberal criterion of what it is for a philosophical argument to be a success. Perhaps to be a success, for example, an argument need not be capable of persuading just any ideal audience. Instead, perhaps it need only be capable of persuading an ideal audience that holds *some* specified combination of background beliefs and credence assignments within some suitably restricted domain of such combinations, allowing that there may be other combinations of background beliefs and credence assignments within that domain such that an audience member who held one of those combinations would not be so persuaded. Such a criterion may turn out to be pluralistic in that it allows for two philosophical

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[3] Van Inwagen does specify that the members of the audience are to be drawn from our time and our culture (p. 47). And, no doubt, this restricts, to a certain degree, the range of background beliefs and credence assignments we would expect them to have. But, even so, this restriction still seems to allow for a large amount of variation.

arguments to count as successes, even though they argue for opposite conclusions. But, given that it is plausible to think that there are, in fact, good philosophical arguments for mutually exclusive conclusions, we do not consider such pluralism a defect.[4]

The two criticisms offered above focused on professor van Inwagen's methodology and his way of framing the debate. We close this section with a minor criticism regarding a claim that professor van Inwagen makes within the context of the debate itself. This third criticism deals with his analysis of omniscience. Since the proposed defense is a free will defense, and professor van Inwagen believes that the proposition that God infallibly knows all truths (including truths about the future actions that his creatures will undertake) is inconsistent with the proposition that any creature has free will, he proposes to qualify the traditional conception of omniscience (pp. 81-82). The proposition is that instead of conceiving of a being to be omniscient if and only if it believes every true proposition and believes no false one, we may conceive of a being as being omniscient if and only if it jointly satisfies the following two conditions: (i) "it is impossible for [that being's] beliefs to be mistaken," and (ii.) that being "has beliefs on every matter on which it is able to have beliefs" (p. 82). As Jonathan Kvanvig has pointed out, however, qualifications to the doctrine of omniscience that run along these lines are inadequate, since they entail, for example, that objects that are incapable of knowledge are omniscient.[5] Rocks, for example, trivially meet both of professor van Inwagen's proposed conditions. It is impossible for any of a rock's beliefs to be mistaken (because it is impossible for a rock to have any beliefs whatsoever), and rocks have beliefs on every matter on which they are capable of having beliefs (since they aren't

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[4] Van Inwagen, by contrast, does seem to think that a proposed standard for philosophical success would be defective if it allowed for such pluralism (see p. 48).
[5] See Kvanvig 1986.

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capable of having any beliefs). But, clearly, no definition of omniscience is adequate if classifies objects like rocks as being omniscient.

The above criticisms, as we said at the outset, are nit-picky. We believe, however, that professor van Inwagen's argument is also subject to at least two criticisms that are far more serious.

III. The Ugly

In this final section, we present two substantive criticisms of professor van Inwagen's treatment of the problem of evil. First, it appears that his own proposed defense against the argument from evil violates a criterion of adequacy by which he faults other defenses against the argument from evil. Professor van Inwagen maintains that an adequate free will defense must not only "take the form of a story about how God brings some great good out of the evils of this world, a good that outweighs these evils," but it must also "include the proposition that God was *unable* to bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse)" (p. 68). And he faults other defenses against the argument from evil for failing to meet this standard.

Professor van Inwagen notes, for example, that a popular defense among undergraduates at Notre Dame fails for this reason. Many undergraduates at Notre Dame maintain that the reason God allows evil in the world is because "if there were no evil, no one would appreciate—perhaps no one would even be aware of—the goodness of the things that *are* good" (pp. 68-69). Even aside from the fact that this "appreciation defense" fails to plausibly account for the magnitude and extent of evil in the world, professor van Inwagen argues that the defense is faulty in a different way:

> It is not at all evident that an omnipotent creator would need to allow
> people really to experience *any* pain or grief or sorrow or adversity or

illness to enable them to appreciate the good things in life….An omnipotent being could, for example, so arrange matters that at a certain point in each person's life…that person has very vivid and absolutely convincing *nightmares* in which he is a prisoner in a concentration camp or dies of some horrible disease or watches his loved ones being raped and murdered by soldiers bent on ethnic cleansing. (p. 69 emphasis his).

And regardless of whether having a world in which there are such nightmares would actually be "worth it" in the sense that they would render people in that world better off than they would be without them, professor van Inwagen notes that "it seems clear that a world in which horrible things occurred *only* in nightmares would be better than a world in which the same horrible things occurred in reality" (p. 69).

When presenting his own defense, however, professor van Inwagen proposes that for all we know, the reason God allows various evils in the world is to furnish us with a certain kind of knowledge, knowledge that it is necessary for us to obtain in order to gain a great spiritual good. He suggests that the reason that God allows pervasive evil in the world is because human beings, by their own free choice, have become estranged from God, and it is God's desire to restore humanity to a union with himself (p. 87). And furthermore in order to restore humanity to himself, God requires the free cooperation of human beings. And in order for human beings to cooperate with God in his plan to rescue us from our estrangement with him, "they must know they need to be rescued." But to know that, he claims, "they must know what it means to be separated from him," and according to professor van Inwagen, "what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors" (p. 88).

But why can't the criticism of the "appreciation defense" be raised against this defense? Couldn't God have given us this sort of knowledge without making us suffer? Couldn't God have so arranged things, as professor van Inwagen suggests in his critique

of the "appreciation defense," so that we acquired knowledge of what it was like to live in a world without God by our having vivid nightmares, etc.? Would not a world in which we come to have such knowledge only through nightmares or visions be better than a world that is actually filled with the sorts of horrors that our world contains? At the very least, professor van Inwagen owes us an explanation here.

Our second and final criticism focuses on professor van Inwagen's reliance on moral skepticism. Professor van Inwagen's response to the argument from evil is to offer a defense: a story that is true for all anyone knows and that shows how the evils of our world are plausible given the existence of God. His own defense has two stages. Post-lapse evil—that is, any evil that has occurred since moral agents have initiated a separation from God—is accounted for by a free will defense. Pre-lapse evil—that is, any evil that occurred *before* moral agents initiated a separation from God—is accounted for by a "massive irregularity defense." We find professor van Inwagen's call to moral skepticism with regard to the pre-lapse defense unconvincing.

The pre-lapse defense is a story comprising 4 claims, and professor van Inwagen argues that each claim is true "as far as anyone knows." In other words, we should either endorse or be agnostics with regard to each of the following claims:

1) Every world God could have made that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those of the actual world, or else is massively irregular.

2) Some important intrinsic or extrinsic good depends on the existence of higher-level sentient creatures; this good is of sufficient magnitude that it outweighs the patterns of suffering found in the actual world.

3) Being massively irregular is a defect in the world, a defect at least as great as the defect of containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those found in the actual world.

4) The world—the cosmos, the physical universe—has been created by God. (p. 114).

If each claim in this story were true, this would show that the kinds and varieties of evils in the actual world are consistent with the existence of God.

Is it the case that each of 1-4 are true for all anyone knows? Claim (1) states that it is not possible for God to create a world with higher-level sentient creatures that is not either filled with evil or massively irregular. Professor van Inwagen does not argue that this claim is true, so there are no arguments for us to undermine. However, he does suggest that we should be modal skeptics about certain states of affairs, and this skepticism gives us a reason to be agnostics about (1). However, there is at least some reason to think that (1) is false: namely, an appeal to conceivability. For example, it is conceivable that the actual world was created much as Genesis suggests: 6 literal days of creation with full-blown moral agents arriving on day 6. While conceivability may not be an infallible guide to possibility, the burden of proof should be on the skeptic here.

Things get worse. Even if we grant that for all anyone knows claims (1), (2) and (4) are true, is it the case that for all anyone knows a massively irregular world without suffering is on a moral par with a law-like world with massive amounts of evil? No. We find it plausible that this claim is false. Let's be clear at the outset about what we must do to undermine professor van Inwagen's defense. What, exactly, is our burden of proof? He notes that "the third component of our defense is objectionable only if we have some prima facie reason for believing that the actual sufferings of beasts are a graver defect in a world than massive irregularity would be" (p. 120). This looks pretty easy.

First we'll undermine professor van Inwagen's call to skepticism, and then we'll present some considerations for thinking that (3) is false. Parallel to his defense of the

modal claim (1), professor van Inwagen provides no reasons for thinking that the moral claim (3) is true.[6] Instead, he argues that we should be agnostic about (3) because he is a moral skeptic about certain value comparisons:

> …why should anyone suppose that anyone's inclinations to make judgments about the relative value of various states of affairs are reliable guides to the true relative values of states of affairs of cosmic magnitude that have no connection with the business of human life? ….My position is that we cannot be sure, and that, for all we know, the value-judgments that people are inclined to make about cosmic matters unrelated to the concerns of everyday life are untrustworthy. (pp. 121-2)

Rhetorical questions are no substitution for argument, and it is not at all clear how the argument for moral skepticism is supposed to go. Surely professor van Inwagen is not requiring that we have a *positive* reason to think that a source of beliefs is reliable before trusting that source. For believers with a finite number of faculties, this requirement leads only to global skepticism or epistemic circularity. The most charitable reconstruction of the argument seems to go as follows:

10) A source of beliefs is trustworthy only if the source has some appropriate connection with the business of everyday life.

11) The source of moral judgments concerning the relative values of cosmic states of affairs has no appropriate connection with the business of everyday life.

12) So, we should not trust our moral judgments concerning the relative values of cosmic states of affairs.

This is a radical proposal indeed. If (12) is true, then professor van Inwagen should have saved himself the time of writing a whole book on the problem of evil. If none of our moral judgments about "cosmic states of affairs" are justified—if moral skepticism with regard to value comparisons of possible worlds is the only reasonable position—then the

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[6] Van Inwagen does cite a few considerations that show that irregularity is a defect in a world (e.g. the Deists thought so, it would involve deception on the part of God, etc.), but he does nothing to establish the crucial comparative claim that irregularity is on par or worse than suffering.

theist can simply wave off any argument from evil. After all, the argument from evil depends on our ability to see that some "cosmic states of affairs" are morally better or worse than others. If it is never reasonable to do so, then it is never reasonable to employ the argument from evil.

One can raise two questions concerning this argument. First, why think that (10) is true? We can think of no plausible reason. Worse, there is some reason for thinking that (10) is false. The source of a scientist's beliefs about quantum mechanics have little to do with everyday life, but intuitively we think that these beliefs are trustworthy. Professor van Inwagen might demur and insist that the source in this case *is* connected to everyday life. In that case, we'd like to know a little more about what it takes for a source of belief to be connected to everyday life. Second, what is the scope of "cosmic states of affairs" in premise (11)? When we compare two possible worlds that are identical with one exception, are we comparing two "cosmic states of affairs"? If not, why not?

Worse, professor van Inwagen himself ignores the implications of his argument. Recall that in dismissing the "appreciation defense" he asserts that "it seems clear that a world in which horrible things occurred *only* in nightmares would be better than a world in which the same horrible things occurred in reality" (p. 69). What is the source of his belief that the "massive irregularity" involved in God constantly intervening to give people nightmares is morally preferable a world in which they actually suffer? This seems like a value judgment concerning the relative values of cosmic state of affairs— precisely the kind of moral judgment ruled out by his moral skepticism. This is not an

isolated example. Several pages after defending his limited moral skepticism, professor van Inwagen makes the following claim:

> …although I am confident that I do not know whether a pattern of suffering like the actual suffering of beasts constitutes a graver moral defect in a world than massive irregularity, I am not willing to say that I have no idea whether the pattern of suffering actually exhibited by human beings constitutes a graver moral defect in a world than massive irregularity. In fact, I am inclined to deny this thesis; I am inclined to say that the mere avoidance of massive irregularity cannot be a sufficient justification for the actual sufferings of human beings. (p. 127)

Here again professor van Inwagen makes a value judgment concerning the relative values of cosmic state of affairs. He might respond that in these cases the source of his belief is appropriately connected to everyday life because the beliefs concern human suffering. However non-human animal suffering seems just as related to our everyday lives as human suffering, and perhaps more so (e.g. factory farming, hunting, owning pets, etc.). This line of response is *ad hoc* at best. Either we can make moral judgments at this cosmic scale or we cannot. If we can, then we are free to deny (3) and the "massive irregularity" defense fails. If we cannot, then professor van Inwagen has to give up his criticism of the "appreciation defense" and his value comparison about human suffering.

So much for undermining professor van Inwagen's reasons for moral skepticism. Recall that our burden of proof was to show that it was at least *prima facie* plausible that the evil in the actual world is morally worse than massive irregularity. We think that this is easily done. Value comparisons are typically defended in one of the following ways: (a) holding the two states of affairs in abstract and making a considered judgment concerning them, (b) inferring a conclusion from a plausible moral principle, or (c) arguing for a conclusion by analogy. We will employ all three. First, compare the two states of affairs at stake. On the one hand is a regular world with massive suffering.

Homo sapiens arrived on the scene a mere 400,000 years ago. Let's be extremely generous and assume that these pre-modern humans were full moral agents and that the "lapse" occurred immediately. This means that the pre-lapse defense needs to cover evils occurring from the creation of the cosmos up to about 400,000 years ago. The most significant evil during this period of time is the suffering of sentient animals. Let's also be generous and say that only animals classified as reptiles and higher can suffer. This leaves us with almost 300 million years of animal suffering and almost 2 million years of very advanced hominid suffering. Billions and billions of non-human animals have suffered terribly during this time. However, this suffering is combined with regularity. The world works like Deistic clockwork.

On the other hand is a massively irregular world without suffering. Perhaps God allows evolution to occur with animals that are zombies that feel no pain. Or perhaps God intervenes whenever the suffering is extreme so that the animal doesn't feel the pain. At any rate, there is no (or very little) suffering but massive irregularity in the everyday workings of the world.

Which is preferable? Well, the constant intervention costs God nothing (he's omnipotent!) so that shouldn't enter into the comparison. Whether or not lawlike regularity is valuable will depend on one's theory of value. Some views countenance aesthetic value only if there is a valuer present to appreciate the object (e.g. museums without patrons aren't very valuable). If this is correct, then for the vast majority of the time that the cosmos has been in existence the property of clocklike regularity was valuable only insofar as it pleased God. This suggests that God's creation of a lawlike world at the expense of horrible animal suffering would be pretty egocentric. But even if

we grant that states of affairs can be aesthetically valuable even without sentient observers, we're still left with the following comparison: which is morally preferable, 300 million years of animal suffering with a "regular" world or 300 million years of an irregular world without the suffering of billions of sentient creatures? The comparison is a slam dunk.

So much for the first method. If your considered judgment of the case doesn't align with ours, consider the following simple moral argument. Moral agents have a *prima facie* moral obligation to alleviate suffering when it costs them relatively little (or nothing). Intervening in such a way to alleviate the suffering would cost God relatively little (or nothing). So, God has a *prima facie* moral obligation to actualize a massively irregular world without suffering over a regular world with extreme suffering. True, this obligation is only *prima facie*, but it is difficult to see how an aesthetic concern like the beauty inherent in regularity could trump the disvalue of extreme suffering of billions of sentient creatures.

Finally, we suggest an argument from analogy. I have to take my dog to a computerized kennel for a week (suppose that this secures some great good or prevents an evil equally bad or worse). I have two options. In option A, the kennel runs with complete regularity although my dog will experience severe pain several times a day. In option B, the kennel's operations are massively irregular in such a way that I have to call once a day to ensure proper operation. However, in option B my dog does not suffer at all. Which, as a moral agent, ought I to choose? It is obvious that option B is morally better. By analogy, a massively irregular world without suffering is morally better. Professor van Inwagen should be happy with the moral judgment in this case: it seems

perfectly connected with everyday life. And the analogical premise also seems without fault. The most significant difference between the cases is one of scale, and that seems morally irrelevant.

In closing, we find professor van Inwagen's moral skepticism on the comparison of massive suffering and massive irregularity ill defended. Indeed, it seems at least *prima facie* plausible that it is morally better to eliminate suffering at the expense of an aesthetic element like regularity. When combined with his failure to defend the modal claim crucial for his free will defense, this deficiency constitutes a serious flaw in van Inwagen's overall response to the argument from evil.[7]

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[7] We humbly suggest the following rejoinder. Van Inwagen should agree with us about the moral claim (3) but then re-tool his pre-lapse defense to include a different modal claim than (1). We propose the following:

> (1*) Every world God could have made that contains higher-level sentient creatures contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those of the actual world.

(1*) is identical to (1) with the exception that it does not contain the disjunction "or else is massively irregular." If van Inwagen is going to be a modal skeptic, then he should be agnostic about both (1) AND (1*). Furthermore, (1*) eliminates the need to defend the moral claim that we find implausible. The new pre-lapse defense will consist only of (1*), (2) and (4).

We must confess that we find (1*) implausible. But, hey, we've argued that (1) is implausible too! However, at least the re-tooled defense includes only one implausible claim instead of two, thereby giving van Inwagen less to defend. Instead of having to defend modal *and* moral skepticism, he need focus only on presenting a case for modal skepticism to get his defense off the ground.

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