

Three Consequences of van Inwagen's Account of Philosophical Success
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I will argue that van Inwagen's account of philosophical failure has three unpalatable consequences. The first unpalatable consequence is that every agnostic with respect to some philosophical thesis p should forever remain agnostic with respect to p . The second unpalatable consequence is that every ideal proponent of some philosophical thesis p must have some non-philosophical reason for maintaining p . That is, it is impossible for there to be an ideal proponent of p that maintains p on the basis of some philosophical argument for p . The third unpalatable consequence is that it is far too easy to show that the argument from evil is a failure.

Once an agnostic, always an agnostic

According to van Inwagen "[a]n argument for p is a success just in the case that it can be used, under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics (agnostics with respect to p) to belief in p —in the presence of an ideal opponent of belief in p " (47).

According to van Inwagen, most, if not all, philosophical arguments for p are failures. That is, given the idealizations, most, if not all, arguments for p would fail to convert an audience of ideal agnostics to p . The reason for the startling claim that most, if not all, philosophical arguments are failures is simply that nearly every philosophically substantive thesis is controversial. That is, for every philosophically substantive thesis, there is an approximately ideal proponent of the thesis and an approximately ideal opponent of the thesis. Thus, if the proponent and opponent were to present their cases for accepting and rejecting some philosophically substantive thesis, they would each fail to convert an audience of ideal agnostics to their side of the debate, and thereby be guilty of presenting philosophical arguments that are failures.

Now consider what most of us were with respect to many philosophically substantive theses before we settled down on one side of some thesis. Most of us were agnostic with respect to most philosophically substantive theses before hearing arguments in favor or against it. If that is correct, then I maintain that we should have remained agnostic with respect to every philosophically substantive thesis that we were agnostic about. In other words, once an agnostic, always an agnostic. Or put a bit more explicitly, if for some philosophically substantive thesis p , S is agnostic with respect to p , S desires to be ideally rational, and S believes that p is controversial, then S should remain agnostic with respect to p . Here's a quick sketch of the argument (I realize that some work remains to make it valid but the idea should be clear and turning it into a valid argument would not involve the addition of controversial steps).

1. For every philosophically substantive thesis p , there are ideal proponents of p and ideal opponents of p .
2. If for every p there are ideal proponents of p and ideal opponents of p , then if S is an ideal agnostic with respect to p , S should remain an agnostic with respect to p .
3. Thus, if S is an ideal agnostic with respect to p then S should remain an agnostic with respect to p .
4. For every philosophically substantive thesis p and for every philosophical inquirer I , there is a time t , such that I at t was agnostic with respect to p .
5. If I were ideally rational at t and I were to hear from Pro- p and Op- p at t , then I would remain agnostic with respect to p .
6. I should strive to be ideally rational.
7. Thus, I should remain agnostic with respect to p .

Van Inwagen accepts the first and second premise.¹ The third premise is entailed by the first and second. Thus, van Inwagen should accept the third premise. The fourth premise is too strong. Putting it as strong as I did makes the argument simpler and weakening it still has the same overall effect.²

Van Inwagen should have no beef with the fifth premise since it merely restates (counterfactually) the consequent of premise two substituting I for S. In fact the fifth premise could be weakened without loss. Ideally rational I need not hear from Pro-p and Op-p in order to remain agnostic with respect to p. All that ideally rational I need be aware of is that p is controversial. Knowing that p is controversial, ideally rational I would know that there is an ideal pro-p and an ideal op-p (or that there could be an ideal pro-p and an ideal op-p) and that is enough for I to remain agnostic with respect to p. The sixth premise seems unassailable. Thus, given van Inwagen's own commitments plus the claim that we should strive to be ideally rational we are forced to conclude that agnostics should forever remain agnostics.³

¹ It is perhaps better to say that van Inwagen appears to accept the second premise. He mean his ideal participants in the debate (the proponents, opponents, and audience) to be ideal observers in the sense proposed by ideal observer theories in ethics (42). I take it as a consequence of this notion of ideal that that what ideal participants do is what they should do. Hence, if ideal agnostics remain agnostic after the ideal debate, then they should remain agnostic.

² In order to make it less controversial, it could be amended in one of two ways:

4*. For every philosophically substantive thesis p such that the only reasons for accepting or rejecting p are philosophical arguments and for every philosophical inquirer I, there is a time t, such that I at t was agnostic with respect to p.

4* rules out philosophically substantive theses that can be rationally accepted or rejected on the basis of something other than an argument.

4'. For many philosophically substantive theses p and for many philosophical inquirer's I, there is a time t, such that I at t was agnostic with respect to p.

4' essentially has the same effect as 4* though without stipulating (as 4* does) the nature of the substantive theses that a philosophical inquirer can accept.

On either 4* or 4' the upshot is still essentially the same.

³ This of course assumes that if there is an ideal proponent of p at t and an ideal opponent of p at t then there will be an ideal proponent of p at t + n and an ideal opponent of p at t + n. I left this out because it

Ideal Perceivers

The second unpalatable consequence is that every ideal proponent of some philosophical thesis p must have some non-philosophical reason for maintaining p . Consider van Inwagen's fictional characters Norma the nominalist and Ronald the realist. Norma and Ronald are ideal proponents of their positions. Norma and Ronald have a debate before an audience of ideal agnostics. Norma presents and argues for her position. Ronald responds by either casting doubt on some of Norma's arguments directly – showing that the truth of the claim 'all the premises in Norma's argument are true' can be reasonable doubted – or indirectly – providing arguments for realism. Once Norma has completed her presentation and argument for nominalism, it is Ronald's turn to do the same for realism. What, van Inwagen asks, is the outcome of this debate for the audience of agnostics? Will they become nominalists or realists? According to van Inwagen, the audience of agnostics will remain agnostic. But then why, we should ask, is Norma a nominalist and Ronald a realist? Does Norma have some other argument up her sleeve that she refuses to present, that would, if she no longer refused, convert the audience of agnostics? If so, then presumably Norma's hidden argument would also convert Ronald, in which case there would no longer be an ideal proponent of realism (the same applies *mutatis mutandis* to Norma).

If Norma presents all of her reasons for accepting nominalism and rejecting realism and Ronald presents all of his reasons for accepting realism and rejecting nominalism, and neither Norma nor Ronald is able to convert the audience of agnostics, then how can it be that Norma is an ideal proponent of nominalism and Ronald an ideal

over-complicated a likely over-complicated argument and because once again van Inwagen seems committed to it.

proponent of realism? If the audience of agnostics should not be converted, then shouldn't Norma and Ronald cease being proponents of nominalism and realism respectively. The point of all these questions is to motivate the following argument. Either N and R have decisive arguments for their positions or they do not. If they do, then given the idealizing assumptions there is no ideal N or ideal R depending upon which possesses the decisive argument. Obviously both could not have a decisive argument in favor of their respective positions. If neither N nor R has a decisive argument for their position, then neither N nor R can be ideal.⁴ Thus, either there is a decisive argument for N or R, in which case there cannot be both an ideal N and an ideal R, or there is no decisive argument for N or R, in which case neither N nor R can be ideal. Either way there cannot be an ideal N and an ideal R.

The above argument assumes that ideal proponents and opponents maintain their positions solely on the basis of some philosophical argument(s). If we deny this assumption then it could be that while an ideal N cannot convert an audience of agnostics because there is no argument for N that is uncontroversial, the ideal N maintains N on the basis of something other than a philosophical argument. That is, if ideal N maintains N solely on the basis of some philosophical argument, then ideal N should become an agnostic when presented with ideal R's defense. However, if ideal N does not maintain N on the basis of some philosophical argument, then ideal N can remain committed to N even when presented with ideal R's defense. But given that for every philosophically substantive thesis p there is an ideal proponent of p and an ideal opponent of p it follows that neither pro-p nor op-p can maintain their position on the basis of a philosophical

⁴ In other words, neither N nor R would endorse their position without decisive argument. If they did, then this would count against their being ideal.

argument. Rather pro-p and op-p must maintain their position on the basis of some non-philosophical argument. In fact, I think things are even more dramatic. If pro-p maintains p on the basis of some non-philosophical argument, then surely pro-p could use this to convince the audience of agnostics that p is true. Furthermore, such reasoning should convince op-p to maintain p as well. We are back to where we started. Thus, it is impossible for there to be an ideal proponent of p that maintains p on the basis of some argument philosophical or otherwise. In order to be an ideal pro-p or an ideal op-p one must maintain p or $\sim p$ on the basis of something other than an argument. In other words, every ideal proponent of some philosophical thesis p must have some non-philosophical reason for maintaining p that doesn't amount to an argument for p. This reasoning seems to imply that an ideal proponent of p must have some non-inferential reason for maintaining p.

How to End a Debate in 10 Seconds

The third unpalatable consequence is that it is far too easy to show that the argument from evil is a failure. The argument from evil is an attempt to show that God does not exist. According to van Inwagen one way to show that the argument from evil is failure is by telling a story that casts doubt on either one specific premise or on the claim that all of the premises in the argument from evil are true (49). The story told to cast doubt on one or more of the premises in the argument from evil need not be true but simply epistemically possible. That is, at the end of the story if an audience of ideal agnostics were to respond by saying "for all we know that's how things are", then this is enough to show that the argument from evil is a failure. Furthermore, it is perfectly permissible to tell a story that includes philosophical arguments which are by the story

teller's lights failures (38). Since all one needs to do in order to show that the argument from evil is a failure is to tell a story that casts doubt on a premise or the truth of all of the premises, including philosophical arguments that are failures is permissible as long as they too are epistemically possible. Indeed van Inwagen's own defense is full of philosophical arguments that by his own lights are failures.

Consider the ontological argument for the existence of God. Unlike the other classical arguments for theism the ontological argument concludes with a being that is incompatible with belief in atheism. Furthermore, it is precisely the God implicated in the ontological argument that is supposed to be shown not to exist by the argument from evil. So, why not simply wield the ontological argument in one's defense against the argument from evil and leave all else alone?

For all we know the ontological argument is sound. We may not know that the premises are true, but we certainly don't know that any of the premises are false. Granted, the argument would not convince a room full of agnostics and is thus a philosophical failure but that is no matter. We are permitted to use philosophical failures in our defense. What premise does the ontological argument cast in doubt? Doesn't it simply deny the conclusion and thus beg the question? Perhaps, but remember we are not, according to van Inwagen, required to specify which premise we deny or wish to cast doubt on. All that we must do is cast doubt on the claim that all of the premises of the argument from evil are true. The epistemic possibility of the soundness of the ontological argument surely does that.