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# NON-ORGANIC THEORIES OF VALUE AND POINTLESS EVIL

John O'Leary-Hawthorne

In this paper, I shall argue that if a certain theory of value is correct, then there is pointless evil in the world. I shall not try to defend the theory. Nor shall I assume that a justified belief in pointless evil is sufficient epistemic warrant for atheism. Thus I am not arguing for atheism here. This paper is intended rather to help elucidate what it would take to demonstrate that no one is justified in believing in pointless evil. If my thesis is correct, then any successful attempt to show that no belief in pointless evil is justified will, *inter alia*, have to demonstrate that belief in what I shall call "a non-organic theory of value" is irrational.

## 1. *Preliminary Considerations*

According to a non-organic theory of value, the quantity of non-derivative value that obtains at one temporal stage of the universe depends solely upon the intrinsic facts that obtain at that temporal stage.<sup>1</sup> (Something is of non-derivative value just in case it is valuable in itself. By contrast, something has instrumental value just in case it brings about something of non-derivative value.) Hence on this view the non-derivative value attaching to some stage is not, even in part, determined by its place in the temporal order of things. Such a theory will be subscribed to by anyone who thinks that the fundamental bearers of value are momentary mental states. Thus it is held, notably, by the utilitarian who holds that the value that obtains during some period of the universe's history depends solely upon the balance of pleasure over pain that obtains at that period.<sup>2</sup> The proponent of such a theory need not, of course, claim that we speak falsely when we ascribe value to items whose temporal structure seems important—a piece of music, for example. Rather she would insist that the value of such things is merely instrumental. We may formulate the non-organic thesis as follows:

1. The balance of non-derivative value over disvalue of any temporal stage in the universe's history supervenes on the intrinsic details of that temporal stage.

That is, if some stage of the actual world is intrinsically the same as some stage of another possible world, then according to the non-organic theory,



those two stages must have equivalent amounts of non-derivative value attaching to them.

The existence of pointless evil can be inferred from the non-organic theory, coupled with the following principle: there is no metaphysically necessary connection between the intrinsic structure of events at one temporal stage of the world and the intrinsic structure of events at another, non-overlapping temporal stage. This principle does not merely deny that the intrinsic detail at one temporal stage is a sufficient condition for every intrinsic detail at every other non-overlapping stage. Rather, it claims that the intrinsic detail at any given temporal stage is not a sufficient condition for *any* intrinsic detail at *any* other non-overlapping stage.

Why might one hold this stronger thesis? Here is one good reason. Take the intrinsic state of a possible world *W1* at some time *t*. It seems that there is another world *W2* which, at the *first* moment of its existence, is exactly like *W1* at *t*. It also seems that there is a third world *W3* which, at the *last* moment of its existence, is exactly like *W1* at *t*. I cannot prove that these worlds are possible. But I offer it as a reasonable metaphysical conjecture that they are possible. Those worlds would doubtless have different laws of nature. But that requirement only makes problems for my conjecture if the laws of nature that operate at this world are reasonably thought to be metaphysically necessary. But I know of no good reason to think that they are.

One virtue of my metaphysical conjecture is that something like it looms large in Christian thinking, and so the atheist who employs it cannot be accused of question-begging. For it is commonly thought that God has the power to create *ex nihilo* a world which at the moment of creation was just like the state of the actual world at some particular moment in time. Moreover, the doctrine that God can perform miracles requires the God not be constrained by causal laws, which in turn requires that those laws be contingent.

If possible worlds of the sort that I have entertained really are possible, then it would indeed seem to follow that the intrinsic detail at one temporal stage is not a sufficient condition for any intrinsic fact at any other non-overlapping stage. Take some such intrinsic fact *F*. If *F* obtains at a temporal stage *T2* which is later than another stage *T1*, then the intrinsic detail at *T1* is not sufficient for *F* at *T2* since it is possible that *T1* be the last stage in the world's history, in which case *F* would not have obtained. If *F* obtains at *T1*, the detail at *T2* is not sufficient for *F* since it is possible for *T2* to be the first stage in the world's history. So, neither the intrinsic detail of earlier nor later stages is sufficient for *F*. Since the considerations presented here do not depend on any peculiarities had by *F*, they generalize to any intrinsic fact at any stage.

There is one objection that is worth discussing, brought to my attention by William Alston. The principle, as I have stated it, ranges not just over the world created by God, but over God Himself. (So long as God is in time, that

is.) Now the theist may well be willing to concede that the temporal stages of the cosmos are metaphysically independent. But she will be unlikely to concede that the temporal stages of God are so independent. For one thing, that would have the consequence that God can commit suicide, a controversial doctrine indeed. To take care of this, we can formulate the principle as follows:

2. The intrinsic structure of non-overlapping temporal stages of the cosmos is not linked by metaphysical necessity, where 'cosmos' is intended to include the whole domain of contingent beings.

The 'intrinsic' qualification is of course crucial here. Take the stage at which I was born. Take the stage at which my mother was born. If Kripke's necessity of origins thesis is correct, then the birth of John Hawthorne is linked by metaphysical necessity to the birth of Mary Hawthorne. That doesn't violate the principle above, however. All it entails is that there are possible worlds which have spatio-temporal zones which are intrinsically exactly like the one occupied by my birth at this world, but where I am not born. In what follows I shall indicate how one can reasonably infer the existence of pointless evil on the basis of (1) and (2) above.

## 2. *The Argument*

An event *E* is an instance of pointless evil just in case (a) it has non-derivative disvalue, (b) there is no event or class of events which *E* is necessary for and whose non-derivative value equals or outweighs *E* and (c) there is no event or class of events whose non-derivative disvalue is greater than *E* and which *E* is necessary to prevent.<sup>3</sup>

Why the restriction to *non-derivative* value/disvalue? Well, suppose an evil was metaphysically necessary for some event of great instrumental value. One couldn't infer that the evil wasn't pointless unless that instrumental value was in turn necessary for some event of non-derivative value (whose value was greater than the disvalue of the evil.) The following example should illustrate this. Suppose I kill Joe and thereby save ten lives. The death of Joe might reasonably be taken to be of great instrumental value. Suppose further that I could have saved those ten lives without harming anybody. In that case, we would be in no position to infer that the death of Joe wasn't pointless on the basis of its instrumental value.

We can now proceed with the argument. Take some occurrence which your favorite non-organic theory holds to be of non-derivative disvalue. Let us suppose it is a pain which occurs at *t* in the actual world. Take the temporal stage of the actual world which includes all future times after *t*. If (2) is correct, there is no metaphysically necessary connection between the intrinsic structure of the latter stage and the pain. So there is a possible world where the pain doesn't occur, but where the intrinsic facts that obtain after *t* at the actual world still obtain. So by (1), if some non-organic theory is true, there

is a possible world where the same quantity of goodness obtains *after t* but where the pain doesn't occur. Similar considerations show that if some non-organic theory is true, there is a possible world where the same quantity of goodness obtains *before t* but where the pain doesn't occur. Consider next any past or future evils which would have obtained if the pain hadn't obtained. The presence of pain can't be absolutely necessary for the prevention of such evils, for that would violate (2).

Therefore, if (1) and (2) are correct, it seems that the only ways to defend the claim that the pain is not an instance of pointless evil is to assert either (a) that there are goods that obtain at the time of the pain that the pain was necessary for or else (b) that there are evils that would have obtained at the time of the pain that the pain was necessary to prevent.

We can quickly dismiss (b). There is a world whose whole history is the same as the history of the actual world after *t*. So there is no evil which does not obtain at our world which the pain at *t* is necessary to prevent. How about (a)? This move has very little *prima facie* plausibility. Even those who hold that the pains of, say, Holocaust victims had a point would hardly be inclined to suggest that their point is to be found at the time that the suffering was endured.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the theist will grant that there are no goods that obtain in the world of spatio-temporal beings that the pain is necessary for. However, he might argue that there are goods that obtain in the life of God for which the pain is necessary. Again, though, this line looks very implausible. Most theists would not take seriously the possibility that the pains of Holocaust victims are justified by, say, the pleasure they give directly to God. They would concede that such pains, if they are justified at all, are justified at least in part by virtue of benefits that accrue to the victims themselves or to other creatures of God.

Thus there is good reason to think that given a non-organic theory of value, there is pointless evil in the world. We can use this result to show that a common objection against justified belief in pointless evil is wanting. It runs like this. To judge whether an evil is pointless, one needs epistemic access to its consequences. Human beings lack the power to compute the state of the world at times far into the future. Hence we are not in a position to believe reasonably that there is pointless evil. I have shown that it is by no means clear that in order to believe justifiably that there is pointless evil, one needs to have epistemic access to distant spatio-temporal zones. All one needs is a justified belief in the metaphysical independence of non-overlapping temporal stages of the world together with a justified belief that some non-organic theory of value is true. (Well, to be accurate, one also needs the justified belief that there is at least one instance of evil.) None of this requires clairvoyant powers.

To conclude, then, an adequate attack on the epistemic status of belief in pointless evil will have to give good reason to doubt the rationality of belief in (1) or (2) above. Since those attacks that I know of have not undertaken this task, they are inadequate.<sup>5,6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. I shall be assuming a 4-d view of concrete objects. It should be clear, however, that my remarks do not depend on this.

2. I am assuming of course that the quantity of pleasure and pain that obtains at a time is determined by the intrinsic state of the universe at that time. This seems to be obviously true.

3. A few refinements may be appropriate here. However, to incorporate them and then to address them in what follows would make the text unnecessarily cluttered. I leave it as an exercise for the reader to add his favorite refinements and discover how it leaves the central thrust of the argument untouched.

4. A theist can reasonably argue that there is some point to evil that is found at the time suffering is endured. Marilyn Adams suggests that when we suffer we obtain some "identification with and vision into the inner life of the creator." ("Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Audi and Wainwright, [Cornell University Press, 1986], p. 267). But it is hard to take seriously the claim that a sufficient reason for the permission of all actual evils can be found along these lines.

5. See for example, Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1984); Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

6. I would like to thank William Alston, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Frances Howard-Snyder for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.