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PETER VAN INWAGEN ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

William L. Rowe

In his book *The Problem of Evil*, Van Inwagen aims to establish that the problem of evil is a failure. My article considers his response to the evidential problem of evil. His response relies on a fundamental assumption: "Every possible world God could have actualized contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those of the actual world, or else is massively irregular." While it may not be unreasonable to suggest that it is *logically possible* that an omnipotent, omniscient being is unable to actualize a better world, a world with somewhat less, prolonged animal suffering, this hardly amounts to an adequate response to the evidential problem of evil, an argument that endeavors to establish that it is more likely than not that an omniscient, omnipotent being could have created such a world.

In his Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of St Andrews in 2003, van Inwagen presents a comprehensive examination of the problem of evil, both the so-called logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil.¹ His aim is to show that "the argument from evil is a failure." Putting aside the logical problem of evil, in this essay I will examine van Inwagen's discussion of the evidential problem of evil in Lecture 6: "The Local Argument from Evil," and Lecture 7: "The Suffering of Beasts." By 'a beast,' van Inwagen presumably means any animal other than a human being. I am assuming here that a human being is correctly characterized as a rational animal. With that assumption in mind, in this essay I will take any non-human animal—a fawn or a dog (even a faithful, seeing-eye dog)—to be one of van Inwagen's beasts. My aim is to critically evaluate van Inwagen's argument in support of his claim that the horrendous evils in our world provide no good reason to doubt that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who created the world. The evils occurring on our planet—the part of the world we are acquainted with—include not only the sufferings that human beings undergo but also the sufferings that non-human animals (beasts) undergo.

One further back-ground point should be mentioned before discussing van Inwagen's response to the evidential problem of evil. Christian theists tell us that God is a god of love. From my early days as a Christian, I recall hearing ministers and evangelists placing great emphasis on the love of God for his creatures. And this love, we were told, remains in force even when humans turn away from God and choose the path of sin—for "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner." Moreover, he cares for those who suffer. Indeed, he cares for all his creatures, not just human beings. I also recall that when I was a young lad I saw a movie in which a Christian family had



a dog they dearly loved. Toward the end of the film, the members of the family, as well as their dog, died. The final scene pictured the family reuniting upon entering heaven, and being overjoyed on hearing the familiar sound of their beloved dog, barking and wagging his tail as he rushed to meet them. Such stories, of course, have little, if anything, to do with the issue at hand, except to remind us that human beings are capable of forming attachments to non-human animals that are both profound and deep. I am one of those human beings. Over the years I have loved five different dogs, and mourned the death of four of them—the fifth is still alive and my constant companion. Undoubtedly, the God of traditional theism, if he exists, is aware that his human creatures form strong, lasting attachments not only to other humans, but to some of van Inwagen's beasts as well, attachments that for dogs, as well as humans, are often both deep and lasting.

In his discussion of the evidential argument from evil, van Inwagen says that the amount of evil in the world is not the central difficulty. I think he is right about this point. If each particular evil were in itself bad, but not too bad, then even should the total amount of evil in the world be enormous, we would not be faced by the central issue raised by the evidential argument from evil. For it is horrendous evils that are the focus of the evidential argument from evil. Many such evils appear to be unnecessary for any outweighing good and would be easily preventable by an omnipotent, omniscient being, provided such a being both exists and cares about the welfare of the sentient beings he has brought into existence. As van Inwagen notes:

There are many horrors, vastly many, 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.²

He provides an example of such a horror—a young woman whose arms were chopped off at the elbows by a man with an ax, is raped, and left to die. Although she undergoes enormous suffering, she survives and must live the rest of her life “without arms and with the memory of what she had been forced to endure.”³ How does van Inwagen respond to such examples of evil, examples that leave one wondering why an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would permit them to occur in such abundance? He first sets forth an argument for the non-existence of God based on this particular horrendous evil, an argument he describes as “modeled” on the central argument of my essay, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.” Referring to events in the example as ‘the Mutilation,’ van Inwagen's argument proceeds as follows:

- (1) If the Mutilation had not occurred, if it had been, so to speak, simply left out of the world, the world would be no worse than it is. (It would seem, in fact, that the world would be significantly better if the Mutilation had been left out of it, but my argument does not require that premise.)
- (2) The Mutilation in fact occurred (and was a horror).

- (3) If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and the world would have been no worse had that horror 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.
- (4) If an omnipotent being created the world, he was able to leave the Mutilation out of the world (and was able to do so in a way that would have left the world otherwise much as it is).

There is, therefore, no omnipotent and morally perfect creator.⁴

As van Inwagen notes, some theists (skeptical theists) respond to my argument concerning the fawn's five days of terrible suffering, due to being severely burned while trapped in a forest fire caused by lightning, by claiming that, for all we know, had an omnipotent being prevented the fawn's being trapped and severely burned, or prevented one day of its five days of terrible suffering, he would have had to forfeit some greater good or permit the occurrence of some other evil just as bad or worse. Van Inwagen does not respond to the Mutilation in this way, indicating that he regards premise 1 of the mutilation argument as "fairly plausible." In opposition to the skeptical theist's response, van Inwagen tells us that in his view it is even more plausible, "very plausible indeed, to suppose the following existential generalization of (1) is true":

There has been, in the history of the world, at least one horror such that, if it had not existed, if it had been, so to speak, simply left out of the world, the world would be no worse than it is.⁵

One might take van Inwagen's existential generalization as suggesting that had God prevented this terrible evil from occurring, the world may well have been no worse than it is. But, after reflection,⁶ I have concluded that he means to say that the world would have been better had the mutilation been prevented. Indeed, when he first presents premise (1) of his argument he adds the following to that premise:

(It would seem, in fact, that the world would be significantly *better* if the Mutilation had been left out of it, but my argument doesn't require that premise.)⁷

Given that God is perfectly good, as well as omnipotent and omniscient, one might infer that van Inwagen would accept, or at least not object to, this slightly altered version of the premise I use in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism":

An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering he foresees as about to occur unless he could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.⁸

But since the weaker premise he employs is sufficient for his argument, he has no need to use a premise stronger than it. So, it seems right to infer that he also holds that there has been, in the history of the world, at least one horror such that, if it had not existed, if it had been, so to speak, simply left out of the world, it is likely that the world would be less bad (i.e., better) than it is.⁹ For if it should be true that were God to have prevented one horrendous evil, or many horrendous evils, he knew that all such efforts on his part would be in vain, that the world would be just as bad (i.e., no better) were he to have prevented those evils as it would be were he to permit them, it may well make no sense for God to make the effort.

Before proceeding further, it must be noted that in van Inwagen's view God is like us, a temporal being. As opposed to the traditional (standard) view that God is eternal, outside of time, and thus not limited in knowledge of the distant future by existing only in the always changing present, van Inwagen holds that God's knowledge of the future free acts of creatures is limited by the fact that the future has not yet occurred, a point that necessitates a different understanding of the traditional conception of the doctrine of divine omniscience. He also holds that "the existence of a being who knows the future is incompatible with free will."¹⁰ This doesn't mean, of course, that when observing the man raising the ax while chasing the woman God doesn't know that unless he intervenes the woman will very likely be severely injured if not killed. For God will be able to anticipate what that supposedly free creature with the ax is intent on doing. And in the case of the fawn's five days of terrible suffering, God would surely know that after all that suffering only death will come, and so he would know that it would be a merciful act on his part to help the fawn die on the first day, rather than leaving it to suffer terribly for four more days.¹¹ So, there is good reason for van Inwagen to see the need of responding to the argument from evil. What then is his response? It comes, if it comes at all, in Lecture 4 (The Global Argument from Evil) and Lecture 5 (The Global Argument from Evil Continued).

It is important to note a view that emerges in van Inwagen's book, a view that suggests a somewhat different understanding of the problem of evil. I will call it, the "playthings of chance" explanation for the much of the evil that occurs in the world. On this explanation, God becomes impatient with humans for their failure to come to know, love, and serve him; and sees the need to enlighten them. As van Inwagen puts it:

They must know what it means to be separated from him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply "canceled" all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. If he did that we would be content with our lot and should see no reason to cooperate with him.¹²

Perhaps realizing that this makes God sound a bit like Al Capone, van Inwagen adds:

But God does shield us from *much* evil, from a great proportion of the sufferings that would be a natural consequence of our rebellion.

If he did not, all human history would be at least this bad: every human society would be on the moral level of Nazi Germany.¹³

(To make a claim like this presupposes that if the world were to exist without God there would be no such thing as morality, or at least that humans would be incapable of discovering or developing a system of morality. What we do know is that as humans have evolved they have developed (or discovered) a system of morality. And we also know that humans are able to act morally, even though they all too often fail to do so. What, in my judgment, we don't know is whether there is such a being as God.)

We've noted the skeptical theist's appeal to human ignorance of the goods that God will know as a justification for God's permission of the fawn's five days of terrible suffering: the suggestion that perhaps there is some greater good that God (even though omnipotent) is unable to realize should he prevent even one day of the fawn's five days of terrible suffering. And, undoubtedly, skeptical theists will respond in a similar way to the van Inwagen's argument from evil based on the molestation. They will reject the first premise of his argument:

If the Mutilation had not occurred, if it had been, so to speak, simply left out of the world, the world would be no worse than it is. (It would seem, in fact, that the world would be significantly better if the Mutilation had been left out of it, but my argument does not require that premise.)¹⁴

For they will say that for all we know, had God prevented the man from chopping off her arm and raping her, God, even though omnipotent, would have had to forfeit some greater good or permit some other evil just as bad or worse. As implausible as this claim may seem to an agnostic, one must allow that it is a logical possibility. But since many false claims are logically possible, I suspect that van Inwagen's aim is to provide a somewhat stronger response, a response that will be something more than a logical possibility, a response that will not only provide a way for the committed believer to retain her belief, but will seem reasonable, if not persuasive, to an agnostic.

When I wrote about the fawn's suffering,¹⁵ I did so on the assumption that theists do not confine the problem of evil just to what befalls human beings who are thought to possess free will, but see the problem as extending to the sufferings of animals as well. If so, it does seem reasonable to think that had the fawn's five days of suffering been prevented, or if not prevented then mercifully shortened to four or less days, the world would in some very small degree be better than it is. In chapter 7, "The Suffering of Beasts," van Inwagen apparently denies what seems to me, and to many others, to be "a reasonable belief."

I will now tell a story, a story that, I maintain, is true for all anyone knows, a story according to which God allows beasts to suffer (and in which the extent of their suffering and the ways in which they suffer are the actual extent and the actual ways). The story comprises the following four propositions:

- (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 a 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.¹⁶

When van Inwagen moved from his discussion of the global problem of evil to the local argument from evil, I thought, on first reading, that in taking up the case of the fawn's suffering he was shifting his attention from so-called logical arguments from evil to what are often described as evidential arguments from evil: arguments that aim at establishing not that God's existence is impossible, but only that God's existence is unlikely. But the more one reflects on the argument just stated, the more it appears to be a response to a logical argument against the existence of God. Consider the first premise of his argument. Rephrasing it slightly we have:

Every possible world God could have actualized that contains higher-level sentient contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those of the actual world, or else is massively irregular.

As we've noted, this pessimistic view of possible worlds an omnipotent being is able to actualize assumes, without any argument, that miraculous interventions by God either are impossible or useless. Moreover, it suggests that a common religious practice may be senseless. (When Christians pray to God to heal them, or to lead some poor soul to Christ, they do so in the belief that should God do so, the world may well be better than it otherwise would be.) So, if God exists, among the possible worlds will be worlds that are otherwise the same except for miraculous interventions by God. And, as we've noted, along with the actual world in which the fawn suffers for five days, there is a world in which God intervenes to help the fawn die swiftly. And should he have done so, it simply isn't true that the world would then and there be massively irregular.¹⁷ If that is the best that van Inwagen can do, the problem of evil will continue to be a serious obstacle to the credibility of theism.

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NOTES

1. His lectures are published as: Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 97. While I agree with van Inwagen on this point, in making it he departs from what I take to be the traditional theist's response to the evidential problem of evil. That response is that God permits such horrendous evils to occur only to secure some outweighing good or to prevent some evil just as bad or worse. In the case of human beings, the good in question is often taken to be the ability to exercise libertarian freedom of will.

3. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 97.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 99. This remark is somewhat puzzling. One would think that if an evil e is subtracted from a whole consisting of e & g , where g is something good, that the result would be either less bad or better than the whole consisting of e & g . And a similar point holds if the whole consists of two independent goods, g_1 and g_2 . If we subtract g_1 from this whole and are left with only g_2 , one would expect the whole is less good than it was—at least this appears to be so if the goodness of g_1 and the goodness of g_2 are respectively independent.

6. With the help of my colleague, Michael Bergmann.

7. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 97.

8. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979).

9. I'm ignoring here the remote possibility that the world contains an infinite number of van Inwagen horrors.

10. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 80.

11. It is standard Christian doctrine that God is able to bring about miracles such as turning water into wine, and bringing back to life someone who is dead. But not knowing van Inwagen's view on such matters, I won't suggest that he thinks God could have performed a miracle and simply restored the fawn to the form of life it enjoyed before being stuck by the falling tree.

12. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 88.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

15. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979).

16. *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 113–14

17. Of course, were God to intervene constantly, or even very frequently, the world would be massively irregular. But, if anything, the evidence available to us seems to show that he doesn't intervene at all. (It is possible, of course, that God does intervene but in ways that are hidden from human understanding.)