

GOD AND GRATUITOUS EVIL (PART I)

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This paper appears in *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 905-912, and the published version can be found here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/phc3.12389/full>.

ABSTRACT

In contemporary analytic philosophy, *the problem of evil* refers to a family of arguments that attempt to show, by appeal to evil, that God does not (or probably does not) exist. Some very important arguments in this family focus on gratuitous evil. Most participants in the relevant discussions, including theists and atheists, agree that God is able to prevent all gratuitous evil and that God would do so. On this view, of course, the occurrence of even a single instance of gratuitous evil falsifies theism. The most common response to such arguments attempts to cast doubt on the claim that gratuitous evil really occurs. The focus of these two survey papers will be a different response – one that has received less attention in the literature. This response attempts to show that God and gratuitous evil are compatible. If it succeeds, then the occurrence of gratuitous evil does not, after all, count against theism. After introducing some key terms, I survey the literature surrounding the attempts by Michael Peterson and John Hick to execute this strategy. In a follow-up paper, I discuss the attempts of William Hasker, Peter van Inwagen, and Michael Almeida, respectively.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of philosophy, there have been many attempts to defend atheism by appeal to some claim(s) about evil. Here is one such argument pattern:

- (1) If God exists, no gratuitous evil occurs.
- (2) Gratuitous evil occurs.
- ∴ (3) God does not exist.

In order to evaluate this argument, of course, one must be clear on what the terms ‘God’ and ‘gratuitous’ mean. Let’s follow an influential tradition and take God to be a necessarily existing person who is essentially unsurpassable in power, knowledge, and goodness, and who is the creator and sustainer of all that exists. If a gratuitous evil is one such that if God were to permit it, God would be *surpassable* in power or knowledge or goodness, then (1) expresses a conceptually necessary truth.¹ Generally, however, ‘gratuitousness’ has not been understood in this strong fashion.

Given how the recent discussion has unfolded, it is important to distinguish between the (putative) pointlessness of some evil’s *occurrence*, and the (putative) pointlessness of the *divine permission* of some evil. This distinction prompts two different definitions of gratuitous evil:

GE1: Any instance of evil the occurrence of which is not necessary for the occurrence of some sufficiently greater good.²

GE2: Any instance of evil which God, if God exists, antecedently knows it to be certain or probable that he could prevent in a way that would make the world overall better than it would otherwise be.³

It's easy to see that an evil could count as both GE1 and GE2. But these definitions are not equivalent. To bring out the difference between them, consider the following. Suppose that a libertarian-free creature performs an evil action that is not necessary for any greater good whatsoever. This action, then, counts as GE1. But it might not count as GE2. Suppose, for example, that the only way for God to prevent it would be to override that creature's free will in a way that would make the world overall *worse* than it would otherwise be.⁴ In such a scenario, the evil would not be GE2.⁵ Moreover, an evil might qualify as GE2 while not counting as GE1. Suppose, as some theists have held, that God does not have certain knowledge of exactly how creatures would act in every possible scenario in which they might find themselves. Suppose instead that God has *probabilistic* knowledge about such matters. If so, then there could be an evil action such that God knows it to be probable that his prevention of it would make the world overall better than it would otherwise be. This suffices for the action counting as GE2. But suppose it also turns out that this action is necessary for the occurrence of some sufficiently greater good. If so, then this action does not count as GE1.

In analytic philosophy of religion, enormous attention has been paid to arguments for atheism that follow the above pattern.⁶ The most common response to such arguments is to defend a model of our epistemic circumstances and capacities according to which it is not reasonable to assert (2). This position has become known as *skeptical theism*, and it has generated a large and very technical literature.⁷ Defenders and critics of such arguments typically agree, however, that premise (1) is secure.⁸ That said, there have been several important attempts to resist (1). In this paper, I discuss attempts to establish the compossibility of God and GE1 due to Michael Peterson and John Hick.⁹ In a sequel to this paper, I discuss attempts to establish the compossibility of God and GE2 due to William Hasker, Peter van Inwagen, and Michael Almeida, respectively. One preliminary terminological point is worth noting. In the literature on the problem of evil, an important distinction is drawn between 'moral' and 'natural' evil: the former denotes evil caused by the actions or omissions of moral agents, while the latter refers to evil not caused by such agents. In what follows, I will add "M" or "N" to the above acronyms to distinguish these two forms of evil.

2. PETERSON

Michael Peterson's most extensive case for the compossibility of God and GE1 is found in his 1982 monograph, *Evil and the Christian God*, Chapter 5.¹⁰ Peterson offers three independent lines of argument for this conclusion (102-122), which may be summarized as follows:

- (i) Significant moral freedom includes having the power to perform moral GME1, and so it is logically impossible for God to completely prevent or eliminate GME1 without severely diminishing moral freedom. It is permissible, then, for God to allow GME1 for the sake of the outweighing good of significant moral freedom.¹¹
- (ii) The existence of a regular natural order is required for the existence of creaturely free will, and such an order cannot exist without the possibility of GNE1. It is permissible, then, for God to permit GNE1 for the sake of the outweighing good of creaturely free will.
- (iii) "God's primary purpose in creation is to bring forth mature moral and rational creatures," and achieving this goal requires both the actuality and possibility of GME1 and GNE1.

Accordingly, it is permissible for God to allow GME1 and GNE1 for the sake of the outweighing good of achieving his primary purpose in creation (118).

These arguments may seem to court paradox in alleging that God can justifiably permit *gratuitous* evil for the sake of an *outweighing* good. But the appearance of paradox dissolves when the distinction between tokens and types is borne in mind. Individual tokens of the evils that Peterson has in mind are indeed instances of GME1 or GNE1. The occurrence of these specific tokens is not necessary for bringing about the relevant greater goods: other tokens of these types might have done the trick instead.¹² However, on Peterson's account, God must be willing to permit some instances of these *types* of evil (GME1 and GNE1) to occur in order to bring about the relevant outweighing goods.¹³

Peterson imagines a critic replying to (i) by saying that even if God cannot *completely* prevent or eliminate GME1 without severely compromising moral freedom, God should nevertheless prevent *rather more* than he does. Peterson offers two responses. The first asserts that “[t]o remove or restrict the possibility of great [GME1] is to remove or restrict proportionately the possibility of great good” (107). Peterson's second response asserts that “...*how much* [GME1] God can allow depends upon personal judgment, not demonstration. This is a matter on which rational and moral persons may legitimately differ” (107).

Neither response is persuasive as it stands. Peterson offers no argument for the former claim, but he surely bears the burden of showing that this direct proportionality actually exists. Moreover, even if it does, what Peterson needs to show – but fails to – is that the proportional reduction in moral freedom that would result from God's reduction or elimination of GME1 would outweigh the benefits of his adopting this policy.

Peterson offers no argument for the latter claim either. Moreover, even if it were true, this would *still* be insufficient as a response, since Peterson needs to show more than that, in general, there can be reasonable disagreement about how much GME1 God must permit. Peterson needs to show, in particular, that it is reasonable for him to insist that the amount of GME1 actually found in the world is not excessive, against his imagined critic's claims to the contrary.

All that said, the complaint that God permits *too much* GME1 should be set aside as irrelevant to assessing the merit of Peterson's arguments for the *compossibility* of God and GME1. Ultimately, to support (i), Peterson needs to show that significant moral freedom really requires that agents have the power to perform GME1, and that the benefits of this freedom outweigh the costs of its misuse. Many theists will find these claims congenial, but they are controversial, and Peterson provides little argument for them.

Peterson imagines two replies to (ii). The first holds that God should intervene miraculously to prevent GNE1. Peterson responds in two ways. First, he argues that on the assumption “that God is in the business of avoiding or removing pointless evils” (112), miraculous intervention would be unnecessary, since God's omniscience would have foreseen the occurrence of these evils, and so God could have “arranged for them to be avoided or removed from the beginning” (112). His second response asserts that God's preventing all GNE1, miraculously or otherwise, would have a deleterious effect on the “human drama”: there would be fewer occasions for sympathy, moral effort, and other virtues to be exhibited by creatures (112). Neither response is sufficient. With respect to the first, Peterson needs to show that it's reasonable to suppose that God indeed possesses the knowledge and power needed to avoid all GNE1 *ab initio*. This claim is far from obvious, particularly for natural orders – like our own – that involve indeterministic processes. As for Peterson's second response, even if he is right that God's prevention of all GNE1 would have a deleterious effect on the “human drama”, what he still needs to show – but fails to – is that this would outweigh the benefits of God's prevention of all GNE1.

The second reply to argument (ii) that Peterson imagines holds that God could have, and should have, made a different natural order altogether. In response, Peterson complains that this is not obviously possible: “it is far from clear that a different set of natural laws could produce

essentially the same good and approvable effects as the present ones do and yet not produce the ostensibly gratuitous evil consequences” (114). But Peterson may be too hasty in attempting to shift the burden of proof to his imagined opponent. After all, his (ii) asserts a modal claim to the effect that every possible natural order that includes free creatures also includes, at least, the possibility of GNE1. Surely such a claim requires robust philosophical defence – and Peterson offers none.

Peterson’s (iii) is inspired by, and is similar to, arguments due to John Hick which will be discussed below, and so I will not discuss it separately here.¹⁴ Before turning to Hick, however, one final point is worth noting. The most common complaint about Peterson’s project is that he aims at the wrong target.¹⁵ Those lodging this complaint believe that arguments like (1)-(3) that invoke GE2 are far more powerful than those which invoke GE1. If this is true, then those who wish to resist the first premise of such arguments should try to establish the compossibility of God and GE2.¹⁶

3. HICK

John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* (1966/1978) is an extremely important and influential presentation of the Irenean ‘soul-making’ theodicy. Briefly, this theodicy holds that God permits evil to occur in order for the world to be a ‘vale of soul-making’ – an environment conducive to the spiritual development of its denizens. In a brief section of the book entitled “Excessive or Dysteleological Suffering”, Hick acknowledges that the world contains more moral and natural evil than is required for soul-making. Hick says: “These [evils] reach far beyond any constructive function of character training. Their effect seems to be sheerly dysteleological and destructive. They can break the victim’s spirit and cause him to curse whatever gods there are” (1978, 330).¹⁷ Here it is clear that Hick has GE1 in mind.¹⁸ Hick offers two defences of God’s permission of such evil. The first can be deemed ‘conceptual’, and runs as follows:

[E]vils are exceptional only in relation to other evils which are routine. And therefore unless God eliminated all evils whatsoever there would always be relatively outstanding ones of which it would be said that He should have secretly prevented them ... There would be nowhere to stop, short of a divinely arranged paradise in which human freedom would be narrowly circumscribed, moral responsibility largely eliminated” (337).

Madden and Hare complain that Hick’s first defence is an instance of the slippery slope fallacy:

This argument fails because the erroneous assumption is made that in the process of removing [gratuitous] evils God would not be able precisely to calculate the effect of each removal and stop at exactly the point at which soul-making was most effectively achieved. Presumably at that point men would still suffer and complain about their suffering, but it would be possible to offer them an explanation of the necessity of the amount of suffering as a means to the end of soul-making (290).

If there is a precise minimum amount of evil that God must permit in order to achieve his purposes, then Madden and Hare are right that Hick’s first defence fails. But it is controversial whether such a minimum exists.¹⁹

Hick’s second defence of the compossibility of God and GE1 is expressed very tentatively.²⁰ He asks his readers to imagine a counterfactual scenario in which gratuitous evil is *known* (or, we might add, reasonably believed) *not* to occur. In such a world, Hick suggests, “... men’s sufferings would always be seen either to be justly deserved punishments or else to serve a constructive

purpose of moral training” (334). Hick offers two reasons for thinking that such a world simply could not be a suitable environment for soul-making. First, human misery would not “evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is *bad* for the sufferer” (334). Second, moral motivation would be compromised: “...there would be no doing of the right *simply because* it is right and without any expectation of reward [because] under such a régime virtuous action would be immediately rewarded with happiness, and wicked action with misery” (335, emphasis added).

As with Peterson’s argument, Hick’s argument here might seem to assert – paradoxically – that *gratuitous* evil serves an *outweighing* good (soul-making, in this case). Again, however, it is important to see that Hick can sensibly maintain that individual tokens of the relevant suffering are, indeed, GE1: it is not necessary for these specific instances to occur in order for the greater good to be achieved. However, according to Hick, God is justified in permitting evils of this *type* to occur, in order for the world to be a ‘vale’ in which soul-making can occur.

Madden and Hare also complain about Hick’s second defence. They reject Hick’s claim that if God were known (or, let’s again add, reasonably believed) to prevent all GE1, human misery would not evoke sympathy or compassion. They rightly point out that it is entirely possible to feel sympathy and compassion for the sufferer even when the suffering is known (or reasonably believed) to be necessary for an outweighing good. They offer the pain of childbirth as a plausible example. Second, they assert that even if *some* GE1 is needed to make sympathy or compassion possible, surely far less than what actually occurs would suffice.²¹ Third, they claim that GE1 also creates “massive resentment”, and they assert that “[t]he benefits of compassion are probably more than offset by the damage done by resentment” (291).

Madden and Hare’s first response seems adequate, although a defender of Hick could easily revise the argument to sidestep it. Specifically, one might argue, more subtly, that if we knew (or reasonably believed) that God prevents all GE1, then our capacities for sympathy, our moral motivation, and the like, would be *reduced* or *compromised*, rather than eliminated entirely.²² As for Madden and Hare’s second response, it should be set aside as irrelevant to the question of whether Hick succeeds in showing the compossibility of God and GE1. And their third response, to say the least, is underdeveloped. They do not say against whom this resentment is directed, nor do they offer any support for their claim that the costs of this resentment outweigh the benefits of compassion.

Unlike Madden and Hare, William Rowe accepts Hick’s second defence of the compossibility of God and gratuitous evil (‘Paradox and Promise’ 119-120). Specifically, he endorses the claim that soul-making requires that it *not* be rational to believe that there is *no* excess evil (124, n. 17). On Rowe’s interpretation, this means that “the amount, intensity, and distribution of evil in our world must be such as to create and sustain our belief that evils occur in excess of what an omnipotent being would need to permit for our moral and spiritual growth” (120).²³ But Rowe believes that this argument, while successful, fails to blunt the force of arguments from evil that appeal to the amount or intensity of evil in the world. According to Rowe, “it not only seems obvious to us that evil occurs far in excess of what an omnipotent being would have to permit for soul-making; it also seems obvious to us that evil occurs far in excess of what an omnipotent being would have to permit for us to be rational in believing that excess evil occurs” (120).

Linda Zagzebski rejects Rowe’s claim that it seems obvious that evil occurs far in excess of what God would have to permit for us to be rational in believing that excess evil occurs. Zagzebski claims that:

For the evil needed for soul-making includes whatever evil is necessary to make it rational to believe that there is excess evil. Thus, if the soul-making hypothesis is true, it is rational to believe that there is excess evil, *and that means that* it is

rational to believe that there is evil in excess of what must exist in order to make it rational to believe that there is excess evil” (‘Critical Response’ 126, emphasis added).

Rowe rightly deems the final inference in this reasoning to be a non-sequitur. Even if soul-making requires the belief that some evil which occurs is excessive, this alone provides no reason whatsoever to think that there must be evil which is excessive for this very task (‘Response to Linda Zagzebski’ 131-2). In any case, again, Rowe’s complaint concerning *excessive* gratuitous evil is irrelevant to assessing the merits of Hick’s attempt to establish the compossibility of God and gratuitous evil.²⁴

Four final points concerning Hick’s second defence are worth noting. First, Hick offers no reason to suppose that if God were to prevent all GE1, creatures would come to know (or reasonably believe) this. But he requires such a reason, since the drawbacks that he believes will occur in his counterfactual scenario arise, not exactly from God’s prevention of GE, but rather from our knowledge (or reasonable belief) that God prevents GE1.²⁵ Second, Hick needn’t be read as suggesting that, in such a scenario, it would always be clear to some or all observers exactly how and why each instance of suffering constitutes either just punishment or serves the good of moral training. Hick could argue that soul-making would be undermined in such a world even if the specific connections between suffering and various outweighing goods are not always, or even generally, known. Third, however, if Hick’s position is to be more than a tentative suggestion, he requires a robust argument for thinking that the benefits derived from God’s permitting GE1 would indeed outweigh the drawbacks – and he offers none. Finally, even if Hick succeeds in establishing the compossibility of God and GE1, it is clear that his argument is silent concerning GE2. Since many arguments for atheism appeal to GE2, it is important to canvass attempts to resist such arguments by establishing the compossibility of God and GE2. I turn to these in a sequel paper, entitled ‘God and Gratuitous Evil (Part II)’.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Chris Dragos for many detailed discussions of these issues, and for helpful comments on this paper. I am also grateful to Kirk Loughheed for helpful feedback on this paper. I am also grateful to an anonymous referee for additional valuable comments. Finally, I am very grateful for the generous research support provided by the John Templeton Foundation.

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Notes

¹ Yandell (18) makes a similar point.

² The greater good in question might be the prevention or elimination of a worse evil.

³ This definition is adapted from Hasker ('Defining Gratuitous Evil' 308).

⁴ Obviously, this supposition involves value judgments that are bound to be highly controversial. But my aim here is not to defend them; it is simply to illustrate the conceptual difference between GE1 and GE2.

⁵ Given the assumptions in play, it might be tempting to think that this instance of evil is not in fact GE1: after all, one might think, if God's preventing it would make the world *worse* than it would otherwise be, then surely this evil's occurrence is necessary for the sufficiently greater good of making the world *better* than it would otherwise be (*ceteris paribus*). But this would be a mistake. To see why, notice that *God's* preventing it is not the only way for this evil to be prevented. Perhaps this evil could be prevented by some *creaturely* action (either by the agent herself or by some other agent), and perhaps this would result in a better world. So, given the assumptions in play, we have a case of an evil that counts as GE1 but not GE2.

⁶ One very influential such argument is due to Rowe ('The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism'). Rowe's argument appeals to "instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" (336). For criticisms of this formulation, see Alston (33-34) and van Inwagen ('The Problem of Air, the Problem of Evil, the Problem of Silence', note 11).

⁷ For recent surveys of this terrain, see McBrayer, and Dougherty ('Recent Work' and 'Skeptical Theism').

⁸ David O'Connor calls (1) the "Establishment Position" (*God and Inscrutable Evil*, 72, 74), and Jeff Jordan dubs it the "Standard Claim" ('Evil and van Inwagen' 236). William Rowe, for his part, has said that (1) "accords with basic moral principles ... shared by both theists and nontheists" ('The Problem of Evil' 337). Stephen Wykstra, putting the point more strongly, has said that (1) is "a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists alike (76). In more recent papers, Rowe has even deemed it a necessary truth ('The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look' 284), and has said that to deny it is "radical, if not revolutionary" ('Ruminations' 79). (Note, however, that there are some differences in how these authors understand the term 'gratuitous evil'.)

⁹ Space prevents me from considering Keith Yandell's argument for the compossibility of God and gratuitous evil, so I merely mention it here, along with Chrzan's reply ('God and Gratuitous Evil: A Reply to Yandell').

¹⁰ Briefer presentations of this argument may be found in Peterson ('The Inductive Problem of Evil' and 'C.S. Lewis on the Necessity of Gratuitous Evil').

¹¹ A similar argument can be found in MacGregor.

¹² In fact, strictly speaking, it's only the *possible* occurrence of tokens of this type that is necessary for the outweighing goods mentioned in Peterson's (i) and (ii).

¹³ For a similar move, see Section 1.1 of the sequel to this paper.

¹⁴ See Peterson (*Evil and the Christian God* 118-120).

¹⁵ This objection is pressed in various ways by Chrzan ('When is Gratuitous Evil Really Gratuitous?'); Stewart (*The Greater Good Defence* 77-82); Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder ('Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?' 118-119); Feinberg (345-350); Trakakis (320-324); and Rhoda (290-1).

¹⁶ Peterson also briefly sketches an argument *for* Christian theism that invokes the existence of GE1 (*Evil and the Christian Gods* 130-132). For criticisms, see Feinberg (352-55) and Martin ('A Theistic Inductive Argument from Evil?').

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, Hick seems to consider only natural evil in this passage, but it is clear from the remainder of this section that Hick also grants that the world contains more *moral* evil than is needed for soul-making.

¹⁸ In the sequel to this paper (entitled 'God and Gratuitous Evil (Part II)'), I discuss William Hasker, who employs Hick-style reasoning in an attempt to establish the compossibility of God and GE2.

¹⁹ In the sequel to this paper (entitled 'God and Gratuitous Evil (Part II)'), I discuss Peter van Inwagen's denial that there is a precise minimum.

²⁰ Hick denies that his view is a "theory" that would "explain in any rational or ethical way why men suffer as they do" (*Evil and the God of Love* 333) and he introduces it with tentative expressions such as "may be" and "perhaps".

²¹ Michael Martin (*Atheism* 424-5) levels the same two criticisms against Hick.

²² William Hasker offers such an argument (with respect to GE2), and I discuss it in Part II of this paper.

²³ Rowe here assumes without argument that the only way for it to *not* be rational for us to believe that the world *lacks* GE1 is for it to be rational to believe that the world *contains* GE1.

²⁴ Hick ('Reply') responds to both Rowe ('Paradox and Promise') and Zagzebski.

²⁵ In contrast, Hasker does provide such an argument in his attempt to establish the compossibility of God and GE2. For details, see 'God and Gratuitous Evil (Part II)'.