Surplus Evil
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Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Scots Philosophical Association and the University of St. Andrews
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2219969
Accessed: 06-03-2015 23:36 UTC

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More needs to be said on these topics, but I hope that the foregoing gist is sufficient to show that the very comparison of states leading to a decision for or against theism (or anti-theism), which is assumed as the modus operandi of the whole empirical debate, cannot be made in any way that yields anything that could count as deciding evidence either way.

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SURPLUS EVIL

BY DANIEL T. SNYDER

Nowadays, most people who think about the problem of evil are convinced that it is possible for God to co-exist with evil. The reason is that, in short, it is possible for a perfectly good and omniscient being to permit evil so long as it is required for a greater good, and this even though he could have prevented it. However, another argument for atheism based on the incompatibility of God and evil that does not serve an outweighing good has gained popularity. The most widely discussed version is William Rowe's 1979 formulation which runs as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore,

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

In support of (1), Rowe cites what he thinks is an instance of preventable pointless suffering: a fawn, trapped in a forest fire caused by lightning, is horribly burned and lies in excruciating pain for several days before dying. Regarding the fawn, Rowe observes:

So far as we can see, the fawn's suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an

8 For fuller arguments along the lines briefly sketched in section III, see my 'On Failing To Resolve Theism-Versus-Atheism Empirically', Religious Studies (forthcoming).
9 I am grateful to Neil Cooper for valuable suggestions and to the Research Council at Seton Hall University for its generous support.
evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn’s suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn’s suffering been prevented. Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented the fawn’s apparently pointless suffering? The answer is obvious, as even the theist will insist . . . Since the fawn’s intense suffering was preventable and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn’t it appear that premise (1) of the argument is true.²

Theists typically object to Rowe’s ‘appearing-claims’. In one way or another, they argue that the fact that the fawn’s suffering seems pointless does not adequately justify the belief that it is pointless. These critics are too generous. For there is good reason to believe that, even if the fawn’s suffering is pointless (and preventable), it does not follow that it is an instance ‘of intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good’. Preventable pointless evil is compatible with the existence of God. Having shown why this is so, I will circumscribe a class of evil — surplus evil — which, if there is any, entails premise (1). Finally, after considering an objection, I will present an argument that, although distinguishable from Rowe’s in letter, is no different in spirit.

I. ROWE’S FAWN

Rowe claims that the fawn’s suffering is pointless and could have been prevented by an omnipotent and omniscient being. But what does he mean by ‘pointless’? On a plausible reading of his description above, he means this:

Evil $E$ is pointless iff there is no good $G$ such that

(i) $G$ outweights $E$ and

(ii) if $E$ weren’t the case, $G$ wouldn’t be the case

(or, (ii) necessarily, $G$ requires $E$);

and there is no evil $E^*$ such that

(i) $E^*$ is equally bad or worse than $E$ and

(ii) if $E$ weren’t the case, $E^*$ would occur

(or, (ii) necessarily, not-$E$ requires $E^*$).

Now suppose that the fawn’s suffering at $t$ must have been a real possibility³ at time $t - 1$ in order for the following good to obtain at $t - 1$: there is a range $R$ of real possibilities such that $R$ includes a good state of affairs $A$ and the fawn’s suffering. Furthermore, suppose that the value of $R$ obtaining at $t - 1$ outweighs the disvalue of the fawn’s suffering at $t$, and if the fawn had not suffered at $t$, then $A$ would have obtained at $t$. Under these conditions, the fawn’s suffering is pointless. For, on the one hand, since the outweighing good in question, $R$, does not require the fawn’s suffering at $t$ but merely that it is a real possibility at $t - 1$, it follows that there is no good $G$

³ Something is a real possibility at a time $t$ iff given the way things have gone up to $t$, it is causally possible that it occur at $t$ and it is causally possible that it fail to occur at $t$. 

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such that \( G \) outweighs \( E \) and \( G \) requires \( E \); and, on the other, since \( A \) would have obtained at \( t \), if the fawn had not suffered at that time, it follows that there is no evil \( E^* \) such that \( E^* \) is equally bad or worse than \( E \) and \( E^* \)'s failing to obtain requires \( E^* \). Moreover, we rightly suppose that an omnipotent and omniscient being could have easily prevented the fawn's suffering at \( t \): he could have eliminated \( R \) at \( t - 1 \). But, obviously, even though the fawn's suffering were a preventable pointless evil in this way, it is false that it would be an instance of 'intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse'. For there is some outweighing good, namely, \( R \), for which the real possibility of the fawn's suffering is necessary.

II. THE COMPATIBILITY OF PREVENTABLE POINTLESS EVIL AND GOD

Theists are not of one mind regarding the thesis that: *there are preventable pointless evils and God exists* are compatible. Some believe that any evil which failed to be outweighed by a greater good which required it would constitute decisive evidence for atheistic belief.\(^4\) Others claim that, for one reason or another, the real possibility of pointless evil is necessary for greater goods of various sorts.\(^5\) It is to this suggestion – shared by most 'free will' theodicies – that I shall restrict my attention.

The idea might be developed this way. It is a good thing for a person to be free with respect to actions that have a bearing on the development of his character, his relationships with others and the world, and his relationship with God. Call this 'significant freedom'. Being significantly free requires that one have a range of possible futures open to him, most importantly, the possibility of becoming both good and bad, the possibility of both treating others and the world well and harming them, and the possibility of both loving and alienating himself from God. But it is not a necessary condition of a person's having a range of possibilities open to him that any particular one of them be realized. For suppose that I actually harm you. My harming you is not necessary for it to be within the range of possible actions open to me both that I harm you and that I treat you well. Now, given that the value of my possessing that range is at least comparable to the disvalue of my bringing about any possibility within it, my having that range justifies God in permitting me to harm you. None the less, my harming you does not result in a good that requires my harming you (since my having that range does not require that I harm you). Nor is my harming you necessary to prevent some equally bad or worse evil (since, were I to refrain from


harming you or were I to treat you well, these would be good things). But, surely, God could have prevented me from having that range, hence my harming you. My harming you, therefore, is preventable and pointless.

To show that \( p \) is consistent with \( q \), it suffices to show that there is some proposition \( r \) such that \( r \) is possible, the conjunction of \( p \) and \( r \) is consistent and the conjunction of \( p \) and \( r \) entails \( q \). Now

4. God exists

is consistent with

5. God creates a world with someone significantly free with respect to a range of possibilities \( R \); his being significantly free with respect to \( R \) is at least as valuable as his bringing about any of the possibilities in \( R \); he actualizes a possibility in \( R \) bringing harm upon himself and others; this harm is pointless and preventable.

(4) is possible and in conjunction with (5) entails

6. There is a preventable pointless evil.

So (4) and (6) are consistent. There is no incompatibility in there being both a God and preventable pointless evils.

Perhaps my reader will insist that I have failed to address Rowe's argument. The fawn's suffering is a case of preventable pointless natural evil, not preventable pointless moral evil, as my argument suggests. Thus, my grandiose talk about the real possibility of preventable pointless moral evil being necessary for significant freedom is irrelevant to Rowe's argument.

I have two replies. First, in addressing the fawn case, I purposefully failed to specify what the relevant range was and whether or not it had anything to do with free will. My reason was that theists differ in their accounts of natural evil and, since my purpose is quite general, it does not matter which account is right. Second, and more importantly, supposing it is true that the fawn's suffering is not a moral evil, that fact is beside the point. Rowe seems to think it sufficient for the fawn's suffering being an instance of 'intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good' that it merely be a preventable pointless evil. I have argued that this is false. The fawn's suffering could be preventable and pointless yet fail to be such that 'an omnipotent being could have prevented [it] without thereby losing some greater good'. This objection to Rowe's use of the fawn case cannot be wished away by insisting that the fawn's suffering is not a moral evil. Instead, what the atheist needs to emphasize is that there is no range of real possibilities as specified related to the fawn's suffering, regardless of whether that range is required for mere creaturely freedom in the situation or any other good. If that's so, then the fawn case is an instance of the sort of suffering referred to in premise (1) and is of service in making it reasonable to believe (1). But once again, it is not enough that it is an instance of preventable pointless suffering.
III. SURPLUS EVIL

It is an infelicity in Rowe’s presentation that he fastens on an instance of natural evil rather than an instance of moral evil. This might lead one to think that no evil wrought by a free will is relevant to his argument. Indeed, Rowe fosters this misconception when he considers the possibility that some suffering is freely chosen.

The theist may say that some suffering results from free choices of human beings and might be preventable only by preventing some measure of human freedom. But, again, it’s clear that much intense suffering occurs not as a result of human free choices.⁶

The implication seems to be that only suffering which ‘occurs not as a result of human free choices’ stands a chance of satisfying the description in (1). But to think this would be to err. In what follows, I shall show why.

Let it be granted that in order to be significantly free, there must be occasions on which a person has a range of possible actions open to him such that pointless suffering is contained in that range. And let it be granted that no particular evil within that range is required for the possession of that range. None the less, there seem to be numerous instances of evil which are such that their disvalue outweighs the value of their being really possible. Let us consider a concrete case.

Omni reported that between 1977 and 1984, ‘17 men [were] identified as having killed at least ten people each; nine of these men killed 20 or more’ (e.g. Henry Lee Lucas, Ted Bundy, John Gacy).⁷ A more recent and less drastic case of serial murder is Harrison ‘Marty’ Graham’s slaying of seven women in Philadelphia. Jet reported that Graham lured them to his apartment with the promise of drugs then strangled them during sex.⁸

Now, if I understand the free-will theodicist aright, the manifold evils stretching over the weeks that Graham was active were themselves unnecessary for, let us say, his having a significant hand in the shaping of his character.⁹ However, its being within Graham’s power to bring them about (or something like them) was necessary. Suppose this is correct. Now consider what God knew after, say, Graham enticed his sixth victim into his apartment. Graham has tortured and strangled five women over the past few days; he is planning to and will do so again today; if he does, more pointless suffering will result. Presumably, the free-will theodicist would have us believe that if God restricts the range of possible actions open to Graham so as to prevent him from killing his sixth and seventh victims, God would prevent him from having as significant a role as is good for him to have in becoming the man he wills to be. Furthermore, it is of at least as great a value that Graham have this particular range of possibilities open to him than that he be prevented from having that range;

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⁹ The reader who thinks that this is not the relevant good in this case is encouraged to specify and substitute his preference here and throughout.
indeed, the value of his having that range is at least comparable to the disvalue of his raping and strangling his sixth and seventh victims.¹⁰

There seems to be something deeply right about our sense that Graham's freedom with respect to shaping his character in this way has lost its significance. As it stands, the harm accompanying the raping and strangling of Graham's first five victims is sufficient to show that his freedom in this regard is not worth the risk of any further similar harm. Despite the value attending Graham's having it within his power to slay his sixth and seventh victims, that goodness is outweighed by the disvalue of his raping and strangling his sixth and seventh victims. None the less, Graham's sixth and seventh victims suffer for the divine extension of this nearly worthless freedom.

The sort of evil evident above I shall call 'surplus evil'. \(E\) is a surplus evil just in case the disvalue of \(E\) outweighs the value of the range of real possibilities to which \(E\) belongs.¹¹ In the context of free will, \(E\) is a surplus evil just in case the disvalue of \(E\) outweighs the value of \(E\) being within the range of possible actions performable by someone.

Surplus evil is to be distinguished from pointless evil. Not every pointless evil is surplus. If someone \(S\) has range \(R\) and \(R\) contains \(E\), and \(G\), but \(S\)'s having \(R\) is not

¹⁰ Should my reader think that the moral difference between permitting 4 or 5 rather than 6 or 7 killings is rather slight, I suggest he reflect on Ted Bundy's 33 murders, or Henry Lee Lucas's nearly 200, or on the recent report of 4 Vienna nurses jointly killing 49 patients. Of course, these do not exhaust the options for reflection.

¹¹ Another notion of surplus evil was alluded to earlier: \(E\)'s obtaining at time \(t\) is an instance of surplus evil just in case there is some range \(R\) at \(t - 1\) such that the real possibility of \(E\) belongs to \(R\) and the disvalue of \(R\)'s obtaining at \(t - 1\) outweighs the value of \(R\)'s obtaining at \(t - 1\).

The definition in the text may appear suspect. 'According to your definition,' one might object, 'the mere range of possibilities is the subject of value against which the disvalue of one of its members is weighed. That entails that merely having a range of possible courses of action is valuable, that an agent's simply being free with respect to an action is a good thing. But only a very committed free-will theodist would hold that God's only reason for permitting an agent to do a particular evil \(E\) is the value of the agent's being free with respect to \(E\). It is that for which freedom is necessary that is of great value. Libertarian freedom, if we can make any sense of it having any intrinsic value at all, surely has little. You've created a straw man.' (I thank William Rowe for suggesting this unclarity to me.)

I take it that one of the virtues of my definition of surplus evil is that it allows for the possibility that there merely being a range of possible futures is a good thing, whether that range consists of possible actions or not. Perhaps there is intrinsic value in a world governed by chance, or in our being free as such. I do not know. But if so, both can be viewed either as a limiting case or as a constant in the surplus evil equation. However, the typical case is much more complicated. My view is that a range of possible futures derives its value from those specific things for which it (or something very like it) is necessary. Consider Graham again. Let us say, for the sake of simplicity, that the range of possible futures that were open to Graham after he killed his sixth victim and prior to his meeting his seventh consisted of a variety of options ranging from refraining from enticing anyone at all to raping and strangling yet another woman. Perhaps Graham's possessing such a range had intrinsic value; perhaps not. But surely, the free-will theodist will say that his having it was instrumentally valuable. For example, suppose that, to some degree or another, possessing this range permitted Graham another way to affect some aspect of his character, say, his temperance. Being temperate is a good thing. In that case, the value of Graham's having this range consists in his becoming temperate, specifically, temperate as regards his treatment of women. Understood in this way, the notion of surplus evil avoids the difficulty raised.
outweighed by $E_i$, then were $S$ to do $E_i$, $E_i$ might very well be pointless yet it would not be surplus. Your son’s having it within his range of possible actions to viciously yank on his sister’s pigtail might be a good that is not outweighed by the disvalue of your daughter’s suffering; none the less, her suffering might very well be pointless, since his having that range is not a good that requires her suffering; yet, it would not be surplus. However, every surplus evil is pointless.

The difference between non-surplus, pointless evils and surplus evils can also be seen in how they are perceived. What strikes us about an instance of non-surplus, pointless suffering is either that it is not required for any good end or, if some good end is discerned, that the suffering is not so closely connected to that good as to be required by it. On the other hand, what strikes us about an instance of surplus evil is that it is too much, that ‘it isn’t worth it’. We see that its disvalue exceeds whatever value there is in the relevant range of possibilities to which it belongs.

The free-will theodist cannot admit the existence of surplus evil. For one of his tenets is that no range $R$ had by someone $S$ is such that $S$’s having $R$ is outweighed by the suffering $S$ brings about. Otherwise, significant freedom does not constitute a morally justifying reason for God’s permitting person-produced evil, just as the enjoyment I receive upon hearing Bob Dylan sing ‘I and I’ does not constitute a morally justifying reason for permitting children to starve to death.

This consequence is important. Although the real possibility of an evil may be necessary for someone to have a significant range of actions open to him, if it is surplus, then it is a contradiction to say that the value of his having that range outweighs the disvalue of the evil. For an instance of surplus evil has this essential feature: its badness outweighs any virtue there is in its being within one’s power to perform. Such seems to be the case with Graham. It might very well have been that the real possibility that another woman should suffer at Graham’s hand after the fifth victim was necessary for his possessing a range of possible actions that allowed him a truly significant role in the kind of man he became as regards his attitudes toward women; but, if his having his way with his sixth and seventh victims was surplus evil, then necessarily, the goodness of this range was outweighed by his slaying his sixth and seventh victims.

IV. AN OBJECTION

My colleague, John Hawthorne, has objected to my claim that God could not be morally justified in permitting surplus evil. Suppose that the disvalue of evil $E$ is $-5$ and that $E$ belongs to a range $R$ of possible actions open to $S$ (including, say, refraining from $E$) and that the value of $R$ is $+4$. By my definition, were $S$ to perform $E$, $E$ would be an instance of surplus evil. Now suppose that God does not have middle knowledge. (It is arguable that not even an omniscient being can know what $S$ would freely do — in the relevant sense — were he permitted to have $R$, perhaps in the way that not even an omnipotent being can create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it.) Further, assume that God knows that there is a probability of 0.5 that $E$ will obtain if God permits $S$ to have $R$. Now, since the product of the probability that $E$ will obtain times the disvalue of $E$ (times $-1$) is less than the value of $R$, God would be perfectly morally justified in permitting $S$ to have $R$ even though, as we may suppose it turns
out, \( S \) does \( E \). The risk is worth it. Therefore, surplus evil is compatible with the existence of God.

What this argument shows is that the definition of surplus evil is in need of refinement. But before proceeding to that task, it is only proper that I underscore the controversial nature of the assumed limit on omniscience. It is far from clear that an omniscient being could not know what \( S \) would do, were he given \( R \). And if he did, Hawthorne’s objection wouldn’t get off the ground. For if an omnipotent and omniscient being knew that \( S \) would do \( E \), the fact that there was only a 0.5 probability of \( S \)'s performing \( E \) given \( R \) would be irrelevant to his being morally justified in permitting \( S \) to have \( R \). Now to the solution.

Even if there were no precise way of confidently deciding on cases in which the probability of \( E \)'s obtaining is low and/or the difference in value between \( E \) and \( R \) is minimal, it seems that there are instances of evil that lie beyond that domain. Take Graham. After having been in similar situations and having done what he did to his first five victims, I would wager that a \( +4/−5 \) ratio is a serious error and that the probability of recurrence is relatively high. I suspect that the following comparative judgement is near the truth: the value of Graham’s being free with respect to raping and strangling his sixth victim is \(+1\) and the disvalue of his sixth victim’s being slain in this way is \(−5\). The probability of his killing another woman is at least 0.5, but certainly less than 1. In that case, the product of the probability of Graham’s killing his sixth victim times the disvalue of his sixth victim’s being slain (times \(-1\)) is much more than the value of his freedom in this regard. Thus, an omnipotent and omniscient being would not be morally justified in permitting Graham his freedom. So while the existence of some surplus evils (as initially defined) and a God who lacks middle knowledge might be compatible, the existence of surplus evils which are such that their disvalue times the probability that they will obtain (times \(-1\)) is greater than the value of the range to which they belong are not. Indeed, this observation leads to the following refinement on the definition of surplus evil. Where probability is expressed as an \( n \) such that \( 0 \leq n \leq 1 \), \( E \) is an instance of surplus evil just in case there is no range \( R \) such that \( E \) is a member of \( R \), and the value of \( R \geq \) the product of the disvalue of \( E \times n \times (−1) \). In that case, Hawthorne-style objections would be inapplicable.\(^{12}\)

V. ROWE’S ARGUMENT REDEEMED

I have argued that the existence of preventable pointless evil is compatible with the existence of God. What Rowe needs to undergird his argument is the existence of preventable surplus evil. That is, he needs

4. There are instances of surplus evil that an omnipotent and omniscient being could have prevented.

\(^{12}\) Hawthorne-like objections are also inapplicable to the notion of surplus evil defined in the first paragraph of note 11.
Is (4) true? Well, is Graham's slaying of his sixth and seventh victims surplus evil? It seems so. Even the goodness of a person's having a significant choice can be outweighed by the badness of the possibilities he realizes in virtue of having that choice. (That's one good reason to put criminals behind bars.) Could God have prevented Graham from having the range of power he had? That seems true too. Given what an omniscient and omnipotent being would know after Graham killed his fifth victim, he could have paralysed him or restricted the range of actions open to him in some other way. And similarly for untold other cases. But since, obviously,

5. An omniscient and wholly good being would prevent any surplus evil he could, it follows that

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good being.

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COHERENCE, TRUTH AND THE 'OMNISCIENT INTERPRETER'¹

BY VRINDA DALMIYA

The nemesis of coherence theories of justification has been their apparent detachment from truth and supporters have been hard pressed to distinguish fairy tales from beliefs about the world. One of the most ingenious responses to the challenge of providing a route from the coherence of our beliefs to their truth-conduciveness is found in what has been called Davidson's 'argument from an omniscient interpreter'. My purpose here is first to make explicit what I think the logical steps in this argument are and then to show why, in spite of its initial plausibility, this method of giving truth to the coherentist does not work. In order to do this I suggest a counter-argument that is parallel to the Davidsonian argument but has as its conclusion the falsity of our beliefs.

¹ The reader will notice that this 'seeming-claim' is open to the same line of objection that I referred to when discussing Rowe; one may challenge the justificatory status of the atheist's belief in surplus evil on the basis of its seeming so. I remain unconvinced by such sceptical arguments, since they usually involve epistemic principles that are either implausible in their own right or else preclude any adequate moral epistemology; and when plausibly modified, it is very difficult to see how those principles can be used successfully against the atheist. But that is the topic of another paper, 'Surplus Evil and the Justification of Atheism' (unpublished).

¹ I have benefited from suggestions and comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am particularly grateful to William Alston, William Hasker, William Rowe, Richard Swinburne, and Mark Webb, but especially to John Hawthorne.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Northwest Conference on Philosophy held at Moscow, Idaho in November 1988. I benefited from the remarks of the commentator Jack Carloye. I am also thankful to James Allard, Ernest Sosa and James Van Cleve for helpful discussion on earlier drafts.