

ON NECESSARY GRATUITOUS EVILS¹

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Abstract. The standard position on moral perfection and gratuitous evil makes the prevention of gratuitous evil a necessary condition on moral perfection. I argue that, on any analysis of gratuitous evil we choose, the standard position on moral perfection and gratuitous evil is false. It is metaphysically impossible to prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world. No matter what God does — no matter how many gratuitously evil states of affairs God prevents — it is necessarily true that God coexists with gratuitous evil in some world or other. Since gratuitous evil cannot be eliminated from metaphysical space, the existence of gratuitous evil presents no objection to essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially morally perfect, and necessarily existing beings.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of principles expressing a conceptual or metaphysical relationship between moral perfection and gratuitous evil. The standard position on moral perfection and gratuitous evil makes the prevention of gratuitous evil a necessary condition on moral perfection.

SP: Necessarily, a morally perfect being prevents every gratuitously evil state of affairs it can prevent.

Since God is an essentially morally perfect, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and necessarily existing being, the principle entails that God prevents every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world.

There are of course limits to what an omnipotent being can do. No omnipotent being can bring about a state of affairs that is metaphysically im-

1 Many thanks to two referees for *EJPR* for insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

possible, for instance.² But there are no gratuitously evil states of affairs that an omnipotent being cannot prevent. An intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous just in case, roughly, the state of affairs can be prevented without overall moral cost. If God exists and the standard position is true, then gratuitously evil states of affairs are impossible.

Keith Yandell argues that the standard position is a conceptual truth. According to Yandell, it follows from the concept of God that metaphysical space includes no gratuitous evil.

... God does nothing evil; He is perfectly good. Thus theists standardly hold a view expressible as N: Necessarily, if God exists then whatever God allows is something He is morally justified in allowing or Necessarily, if God allows an evil to exist, then He has a morally sufficient reason for allowing it to exist ...³

Yandell argues that every state of affairs in every possible world is such that God is morally justified in allowing it. So, there are no gratuitously evil states of affairs obtaining in any possible world.

Alvin Plantinga, too, argues in defense of the standard position that God necessarily eliminates every evil he can properly eliminate. God properly eliminates evil just in case God eliminates evil without either bringing about a greater evil or eliminating a good state of affairs that outweighs it.

Necessarily, an omnipotent, omniscient, good being eliminates every evil that it can properly eliminate.⁴

The principle Plantinga defends is a qualified version of John Mackie's well-known 'quasi-logical rule' that a good being eliminates every evil that it can eliminate.

[Necessarily] a good [and] omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, ... the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.⁵

2 Of course, not everyone accepts the view that metaphysical possibility sets a limit to what God can do. Metaphysical voluntarists such as Ockham and Descartes maintain, on the contrary, that God's will determines what is possible. Brian Leftow seems to hold a similar view. See his *God and Necessity* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014).

3 Keith Yandell, 'Gratuitous evil and Divine Existence', *Religious Studies*, no. 1 (1989), 17.

4 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 21ff.

5 John Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind* LXIV, no. 254 (1955), 201.

For Mackie, every possible intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous. Since omnipotent beings exemplify logically unlimited power, according to Mackie, God exists only if no intrinsically evil states of affairs obtain anywhere in metaphysical space.⁶

The standard position is among the most intuitive and widely endorsed positions on the relationship between moral perfection and gratuitous evil. Stephen Wykstra sums up the general attitude toward the standard position.

[Denying it] is tantamount to saying that God could allow some intense suffering either because he enjoys the sight of occasional suffering for its own sake, or because he is indifferent to it ...⁷

Nevertheless, I aim to show that the standard position is false. There is in fact no conceptual or metaphysical relationship at all between moral perfection and gratuitous evil. It is not a metaphysical or conceptual truth that morally perfect beings prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs they can prevent. The standard position is false even if we restrict the principle to all and only those gratuitous evils that are determinately unnecessary to any greater good.⁸ There are possible worlds in which God exists and there exists gratuitous evil that is determinately unnecessary to any greater good.

In section II I consider some well-known analyses of gratuitous evil. I argue that the received analyses of gratuitous evil in William Rowe and Michael Peterson surprisingly entail that gratuitous evil is impossible. Every intrinsically evil state of affairs is non-gratuitous on these analyses, even those

6 Ibid., 200ff. Mackie advances a notion of omnipotence according to which an omnipotent being has unlimited power: "These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely ...", (201). But in his discussion of 'fallacious solutions' to the problem of evil Mackie he seems to accept the restriction that omnipotent beings are limited by logical possibility. See 203ff.

7 Stephen Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984), 75-77.

8 Peter van Inwagen has argued that there are gratuitous evils that are indeterminately necessary to greater goods. Among van Inwagen's examples, he suggests that there is no determinate amount of suffering necessary for the greater good of a law governed world. See his, 'The Problem of Air, the Problem of Evil, the Problem of Silence' and his 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy' both in his, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

that could be prevented without overall moral cost. The revised analyses in Frances and Daniel Howard-Snyder and Alan Rhoda entail that almost every intrinsically evil state of affairs in almost every world is gratuitous. I argue that these analyses are not implausible, since God can prevent almost every intrinsically evil state of affairs, in almost every world, without overall moral cost. In section III I argue that, on any analysis of gratuitous evil we choose, the standard position on moral perfection and gratuitous evil is false. It is metaphysically impossible to prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world. No matter what God does — no matter how many gratuitously evil states of affairs God prevents — it is necessarily true that God coexists with gratuitous evil in some world or other. Since gratuitous evil cannot be eliminated from metaphysical space, the existence of gratuitous evil presents no objection to essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially morally perfect, and necessarily existing beings.

The cogency of every argument from evil depends on the standard position on God and gratuitous evil. But since the standard position is false, there are no cogent arguments from evil. That's the most important consequence of the argument. I offer further concluding remarks in section IV.

II. WHAT IS GRATUITOUS EVIL?

Gratuitous evils are, roughly, intrinsically evil states of affairs that God could prevent without overall moral cost. These are intrinsic evils that a morally perfect being could prevent without an overall moral diminishment of the world. Moral costs are understood broadly to include axiological costs in the value of the world and deontological costs in the justice of the world. If the standard position on evil is correct, then there cannot coexist an essentially omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect, and necessarily existing being and a gratuitously evil state of affairs.

William Rowe is credited with defending the view that an intrinsically evil state of affairs *S* is gratuitous, if an omniscient and wholly good being could prevent *S* without losing a greater good or permitting a worse evil. The principle Rowe advances provides the conditions under which an omniscient and wholly good being would prevent intrinsically evil states of affairs. Those are the same conditions under which an intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous.

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.⁹

What makes an intrinsically evil state of affairs gratuitous, on this view, is that a wholly good and omniscient being could prevent it without losing some greater good or permitting some worse evil. The more general principle of gratuitous evil that Rowe might have had in mind is P1.

P1: An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case God could prevent S without losing a greater good S'.¹⁰

The concept of God in P1 is a being exemplifying the divine attributes of essential omnipotence, essential omniscience, essential moral perfection, and necessary existence.

According to P1, an intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous just if God *could prevent* it without losing a greater good. In general 'could' is understood tenselessly. God could prevent an intrinsically evil state of affairs S just in case God *can* prevent S or God *could have* prevented S. There are in general many ways that God could prevent an intrinsically evil state of affairs. God could prevent a city from flooding, for instance, by commanding the water to stop flowing. But God could also prevent a city from flooding by actualizing a better world in which rivers never flood. But then it is also true that God could prevent a city from flooding by actualizing a world in which that city does not exist at all. According to P1, an intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case there is *some way* for God to prevent S without losing a greater good S' or, equivalently, just in case it is metaphysically possible for God to prevent S without losing a greater good.

Michael Peterson and John Hick offer another principle of gratuitous evil according to which an intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous if and

9 William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979), 336 ff.

10 For simplicity, I leave implicit the additional condition 'or permit a worse evil'. P1 is somewhat stronger than Rowe's stated principle since (i) P1 makes the fact that God could prevent an evil state of affairs S without overall loss both necessary and sufficient for the gratuity of S, (ii) P1 talks about evil in general and not merely suffering, and (iii) P1 assumes that God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and necessarily existing. Rowe's stated principle concerns an omniscient and wholly good being.

only if there is no greater good S' such that S' entails S . Peterson's version of the principle is the following.

An evil is justified if and only if it is necessary to the existence of some actual or possible greater good, or to the prevention or elimination of some greater evil; an evil is gratuitous if it bears no such relations.¹¹

The proposition in P2 is the more general version of the principle in Peterson and Hick.

P2: An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case there is no positively valued state of affairs S' such that S' entails S and $|S'| > |S|$.¹²

In P2 the symbols $|S'|$ and $|S|$ represent the absolute values of S' and S respectively. According to P2, an intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous if and only if it is possible that $\sim S$ does not involve the loss of some greater good S' . Since S' entails S , P2 explains why an omnipotent being could not prevent S without preventing S' . It is impossible to do so.¹³

11 See Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God*. (Baker Book House, 1982), 96 ff. But see his 'The Inductive Problem of Evil'. *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 33 (1981) 82–87 and his 'C.S. Lewis on the Necessity of Gratuitous Evil' in D. Baggett, G. Habermas, & J. Walls (eds.), *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* (InterVarsity Press, 2008) 175–194. For a similar principle, see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* 2nd ed. (MacMillan Press, 1978) and his 'Reply' in H. Hewitt (ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick*, (MacMillan Press, 1991) 134–137.

12 To simplify discussion, P2 is deliberately truncated. The full version of P2 states the following. Using P2 rather than the more complicated P2.1 does not affect the argument to follow: "P2.1 An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case there is no positively valued state of affairs S' such that S' entails S and $|S'| > |S|$ and there is no negatively valued state of affairs E such that S entails E and $|E| < |S|$."

13 Libertarian reasons are sometimes advanced to show that some actions are gratuitous on P1 and not gratuitous on P2. It is sometimes argued, for instance, that the fact that there is an institution of significant morality does not entail that Smith exercises his freedom to act immorally. But God could not prevent Smith from acting immorally without damaging the institution of significant morality. The suggestion is that preventing the *option* to act immorally damages the institution, but the agent's failure to act immorally does not. But the argument is not cogent. Consider the ways in which God might prevent Smith from acting immorally. God might fail to create Smith altogether or God might fail to create Smith and create a morally perfect (or more nearly perfect) Jones instead, and so on. The failure to create Smith in either case does not damage the institution of significant morality at all, though it does prevent the option for Smith to act immorally. So, contrary to the central claim, God's preventing the option to act immorally does not in general affect the institution of significant

If there is a uniquely best possible world w that includes an intrinsically evil state of affairs S and that has a finite overall value, then we should expect P1 and P2 to entail that S is non-gratuitous in w .¹⁴ If S is gratuitous in w , then if the overall value of w is finite, then w is not the uniquely best world. If S is gratuitous, then the prevention of S would involve no moral cost at all and would yield another (better) world w' . Of course, it is improbable that there is a uniquely best world whose overall value is finite, since it is always metaphysically possible to increase the finite value of worlds. It is always possible, for instance, to consistently add valuable states of affairs to worlds. But whether or not there is a finitely valued best possible world and whether or not there are infinitely valuable worlds, P1 and P2 entail that every intrinsically evil state of affairs in every world is non-gratuitous.

Suppose S is any intrinsically evil state of affairs in any world w . Let w' be any extremely valuable world, diverse from w , that includes S . It might be true in w' , for instance, that God actualizes infinitely many valuable states of affairs in addition to S or that God actualizes uncountably many valuable states of affairs in addition to S .¹⁵ For any sufficiently valuable w' that includes S , w' entails S and $|w'| > |S|$. So, if God prevents S , then God prevents the greater good w' , since w' could not obtain without S . But then S is non-gratuitous on both P1 and P2.

morality. God's preventive activity — as we should expect — occurs prior to the actualization of the world. William Rowe was the first to distinguish the principles P1 and P2 and to argue that the principles are not equivalent in 'Response to Hasker's 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil' (unpublished). For an argument along similar lines see Klaas Kraay, 'God and Gratuitous Evil (Part I)' *Philosophy Compass* Volume 11, Issue 12 (2016), 773. See also Daniel Howard-Snyder and Frances Howard-Snyder, 'Is God Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 36, no. 2 (1999), 116. The argument also occurs in William Hasker, 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, no. 9 (1992), 23–44, and in Alan R. Rhoda, 'Gratuitous Evil and Divine Providence'.

14 How could the best possible world include an evil state of affairs? There is more than one way this could happen. It is epistemically possible (at least) that we inhabit a Spinozistic world. If so, then there is exactly one possible world and it includes lots of evil. Of course under the supposition all of the evil is justified, since all of the evil is necessary to the greatest possible good (viz. our world). But less speculatively, it might be that there are some very great goods that are impossible without some evils. I thank a referee for *EJPR* for questions on this point.

15 Possible worlds, on the view under consideration, are maximally consistent collections of states of affairs. Worlds already include uncountably many states of affairs describing the uncountably many numbers existing in each world and the uncountably many space-time points in (at least some) worlds. It would not affect the maximal consistency of worlds for there to be uncountably many positively valued states of affairs as well.

It is true that typical examples of non-gratuitous states of affairs S are such that there is some less than maximal state of affairs S' such that S' entails S and $|S'| > |S|$. Jones' holding up magnificently to suffering entails that Jones suffers.¹⁶ The state of affairs S' perhaps also justifies Jones' suffering. But there is nothing about the analysis of gratuitous evil that requires that only non-maximal states of affairs might justify an intrinsically evil state of affairs. The maximal state of affairs w' might also serve to justify an intrinsically evil state of affairs S .¹⁷

It is a serious problem for P1 and P2 that they make every intrinsically evil state of affairs S , in every world, non-gratuitous, even in cases where God could prevent S without leaving things overall worse. Let S be some intrinsically evil state of affairs in world w and let w' be some better actualizable world that does not include S . God could easily have prevented S by actualizing the much better world w' which does not include S . Still, according to P1 and P2, S is a non-gratuitous evil, since there is surely some valuable world w'' such that $|w''| > |S|$ and w'' includes S .

P1 and P2 entail that every intrinsically evil state of affairs S is non-gratuitous even in cases where *we* finite creatures can prevent S without leaving things overall worse. It is generally agreed that we should not ignore the suffering of innocent sentient beings. But, according to P1 and P2, if we prevent that suffering S , we thereby prevent a greater good, since there is always some very valuable world w that includes S . If we prevent S then we prevent the overall greater good, w . The world w cannot obtain without S obtaining. So, according to P1 and P2, the fact that God or some finite beings can prevent S in a way that would leave the world overall better — or, even, much better — is not a reason to conclude that S is a gratuitous evil. The consequences

16 The example is from Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 23 ff.

17 Thanks to an *EJPR* referee for flagging a concern here. I do not assume that a world w is a conjunctive state of affairs or a conjunctive proposition or any sort of set theoretical entity. I do not assume, for all the complexity they represent, that possible worlds are complex objects at all. On Plantinga's account of worlds, for instance, possible worlds are abstract simples, as are all states of affairs, and so have no members or parts. So if there is an objection to worlds as justifiers of intrinsically evil states of affairs based on the fact that possible worlds are conjunctive states of affairs — I actually see absolutely no objection here, but still — the reply is that worlds are not conjunctive states of affairs or any other sort of complex object. See John Divers, 'The Modal Metaphysics of Alvin Plantinga' in Deane-Peter Baker (ed.) *Alvin Plantinga* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

of P1 and P2 are implausible. We have good reasons to revise the analyses of gratuitous evil offered in Rowe and Peterson.

Frances and Daniel Howard-Snyder suggest the following revision to Rowe's analysis of gratuitous evil.

God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be.¹⁸

The suggestion is that if God could prevent S without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be — even if God could not prevent S without preventing some greater good — then S is a gratuitous evil. The more general version of the Howard-Snyders' principle is in P3. P3 does avoid the problems with P1 and P2.

P3: An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case God could prevent S without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be.

An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is non-gratuitous in a world w, according to P3, just in case every actualizable world w' that includes ~S is worse than w. That is, S is non-gratuitous in w just in case God could not bring about a ~S-world that is at least as good as w.

But it seems unlikely that, for any intrinsically evil state of affairs S, God could not actualize some world or other at least as good as w that includes ~S. Suppose, for instance, that S is the intrinsic evil of Smith freely acting immorally in w. There are surely lots of better ~S-worlds w' in which God never creates Smith at all and there are still other ~S-worlds w'' in which God creates Smith and he never does wrong at all.¹⁹ S is a non-gratuitous evil in w just in case there are no ~S-worlds God could actualize that are at least as

18 See Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, 'Is God Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 36, no. 2 (1999), 117. A referee from *EJPR* worries that on this interpretation of the Howard-Snyders' principle, 'things' is read broadly as, roughly, the world. 'Without leaving things worse off' seems to mean without leaving the world worse off or without leaving us on balance worse off. I'm not sure how otherwise to read it.

19 It's not unreasonable to suggest that there might be worlds in which Smith is transworld depraved and will go wrong no matter which world God creates him in. But there is very good reason to doubt that there is any world in which any agent is transworld depraved. See Michael J. Almeida, *Freedom, God, and Worlds* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

good as w .²⁰ In either case — whether God fails to create Smith or God creates a morally perfect Smith — God prevents S from obtaining. And God could do so without leaving things any worse off.²¹

P3 makes most intrinsically evil state of affairs, in most worlds, gratuitous. God could prevent almost any intrinsically evil state of affairs S , in almost any world, without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be.²² According to P3, the fact that some intrinsically evil state of affairs S is necessary to some greater good does not entail that S is non-gratuitous. To reconsider the example from Plantinga, it might be true that Smith's bearing up magnificently to suffering entails that Smith suffers, but it might also be true that Smith's suffering is not included in every world that is at least as good as ours. It might be true instead — indeed it is very likely to be true — that God could prevent Smith's suffering without leaving things worse than they otherwise would be.²³

Alan Rhoda has argued that the proper analysis of gratuitous evil must incorporate the epistemological condition that God antecedently knows about the intrinsically evil state of affairs.

20 It might be a problem for P3 that some intrinsically evil state of affairs S in w is not included in *every* world better than w , but is included in every better world above some level of value. It is not obvious that this is possible, but if there are such intrinsic evils, then P3 might be revised to P3.1: "P3.1 An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous just in case (i) God could prevent S without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be and (ii) there are no actualizable S -worlds w' such that, for all w " at least as good as w' , w " is an S -world and w " is at least as good as w ."

21 A referee for *EJPR* notes that it might be the case that there isn't a better world for every possible world. Maybe there is some best possible world, or some world for which there is no better. The arguments for the existence of a best possible world would be an argument for a Cantorian absolutely infinitely valuable world: a world whose value exceeds the value of every infinitely valuable world, no matter the cardinality. If there is a world whose value is absolutely infinite, then on P3 (but not P4 below) the evils in that world would all be gratuitous. Eliminating every intrinsically evil state of affairs from an infinitely valuable world does not diminish the overall value of the world at all.

22 I do say that God could prevent *almost* any intrinsically evil state of affairs S , in *almost* any world, without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be. I'm uncertain whether, for instance, there are some evil states of affairs that obtain in every world or whether there are best worlds that include evil. In general I'm uncertain that the worlds I'm envisaging include more or less the sorts of worlds there are.

23 See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 23 ff.

A gratuitous evil = def. A token or type of evil which God antecedently knew He could have prevented in a way that would have made the world overall better.²⁴

The general version of Rhoda's principle is in P4, which aims to offer an epistemological advantage over P3.

P4. An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous iff. S describes a type or token of evil that God antecedently knew He could have prevented in a way that would have left the world overall better.²⁵

God of course knows every intrinsically evil state of affairs S that *could* obtain.²⁶ And for every S that could obtain, God knows whether he could prevent S in a way that would leave the world overall better. The only intrinsically evil states of affairs that God could not prevent in a way that would leave the world overall better are those that are included in every better world that God could actualize. So it is unlikely that there are any intrinsically evil states of affairs in any worlds that are non-gratuitous on P4. For any intrinsically evil state of affairs S, God could prevent S in a way that includes actualizing an extremely valuable world that does not include S. God could prevent S, in short, in a way that includes bringing about a much more valuable world that excludes S.

24 Alan R. Rhoda, 'Gratuitous Evil and Divine Providence', *Religious Studies*, 46, no. 3 (2010), 281-302 and William Hasker, 'Defining 'Gratuitous Evil': A Response to Alan R. Rhoda' *Religious Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010), 289.

25 William Hasker has argued that this form of the principle entails that there are no gratuitously evil states of affairs if God does not exist. Hasker proposes the following revision: "A gratuitous evil = def. A token or type of evil which God, if God exists, could antecedently know He could prevent in a way that would make the world overall better.," see William Hasker, 'Defining 'Gratuitous Evil': A Response to Alan R. Rhoda' *Religious Studies* 46 no. 3 (2010) 303-309. Hasker's revised principle is equivalent to P4.1: "P4.1 An intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous iff. if God exists, God antecedently knew He could have prevented S in a way that would have left the world overall better." But, according to P4.1, if God does not exist, then, necessarily, every intrinsically evil state of affairs S is gratuitous.

26 It is difficult to interpret the epistemic condition in P4. It is true in every world that God knows every intrinsically evil state of affairs S which is such that, if S obtains, then God could have prevented S in a way that would leave any world overall better. Virtually all intrinsically evil states of affairs meet that condition and God can prevent them all.

There are problems for P3 and P4 arising from the possibility of infinitely valuable worlds.²⁷ It does seem true that, necessarily, God could prevent any intrinsically evil state of affairs *S* in an infinitely valuable world *w* without leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be. And it seems to follow that, according to P3, every intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous in infinitely valuable worlds.

Still, there might be non-gratuitous evils even in infinitely valuable worlds. Suppose it is true that, for any world *w* whose overall value has reached some infinite cardinality, there is some world *w'* whose overall value is some larger infinite cardinality. If some intrinsically evil state of affairs *S* in *w* holds in every world whose cardinality in overall value is larger than *w*, then P3 entails that *S* is non-gratuitous. It is not possible for God to prevent *S* without leaving things overall worse than they would otherwise be. We come to the same conclusion for P4. If there are intrinsically evil states of affairs *S* that God could prevent in an infinitely valuable world that would leave the world overall better, then *S* is gratuitous. Otherwise *S* is non-gratuitous.²⁸

27 For discussion of infinitely valuable worlds see Quentin Smith, 'Moral Realism and Infinite Space-Time Imply Moral Nihilism', in Heather Dyke, (ed.) *Time and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003) and Scott Davison, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* (Continuum Publishing, 2012).

28 The problem is particularly acute on the traditional theistic assumption that God is both absolutely infinitely valuable and necessarily existing. Every world includes an absolutely infinitely valuable being, so every possible world is absolutely infinitely valuable. It follows from P3 that, necessarily, every intrinsically evil state of affairs is gratuitous. And it follows from P4 that, necessarily, every intrinsically evil state of affairs is non-gratuitous. If the traditional theistic assumption is correct, then P3 and P4 might be relativized to the created universes of possible worlds. I owe this suggestion to Josh Thurow.

P3.2 An intrinsically evil state of affairs *S* is gratuitous just in case God could prevent *S* without leaving the *created universe* worse off than it otherwise would be.

P4.2 An intrinsically evil state of affairs *S* is gratuitous iff. *S* describes a type or token of evil that God antecedently knew He could have prevented in a way that would have left the *created universe* overall better

Georg Cantor was the first to notice the theological implications of the absolutely infinite. According to Cantor, the absolutely infinite or the 'true infinite' surpasses all infinite cardinalities. See Georg Cantor, *Contributions to the Founding of the Theory of Transfinite Numbers* (Dover Publications, 1955). For discussion of the theological implications of the true infinite see Georg Cantor, Letter to G. C. Young, June 20, 1908 in Joseph Warren Dauben, *Georg Cantor: His Mathematics and Philosophy of the Infinite*. (Harvard Univ. Press, 1979). More recently Mark Johnston has argued that on the traditional conception, God is absolutely infinite in goodness,

It is surprising that, on the plausible analyses of gratuitous evil in P3 and P4, almost every intrinsically evil state of affairs, in almost every world, is gratuitous. But this is a consequence of the fact that God could prevent almost any intrinsically evil state of affairs, in almost any world, without overall moral cost. If the standard view on the relation between God and gratuitous evil is true — if necessarily a morally perfect being prevents every gratuitously evil state of affairs it can prevent — then necessarily God does not exist. On P3 and P4, there is so much gratuitous evil, in so many possible worlds, that it cannot be true both that God exists and that the standard position is true.

In section III I argue that the standard view on the relation between God and gratuitous evil is false. It cannot be a moral requirement that God prevents every instance of gratuitous evil in every possible world, since it is impossible to prevent every instance of gratuitous evil in every possible world. It is a necessary truth that God coexists with gratuitous evil in some world or other.

III. THE INELIMINABILITY OF GRATUITOUS EVIL

It is a consequence of the standard position that an essentially morally perfect, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and necessarily existing being prevents every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world. According to the standard position, anything that is properly morally perfect must prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs that it can prevent, and there are no gratuitously evil states of affairs that an omnipotent and necessarily existing being cannot prevent.

The argument that gratuitous evil is ineliminable aims to show that it is impossible that God prevents every instance of gratuitous evil in every possible world. It is true in every world that God can prevent every instance of gratuitous evil — every instance of gratuitous evil, in every world, is contingent and preventable — but it is impossible that God prevents every instance of gratuitous evil in every world. It is impossible that God brings it about that there is no gratuitous evil in any world. It is a consequence of the argument that necessarily God coexists with preventable evil in some world or other.

knowledge, power and, in all positive respects, an unsurpassable and undiminishable being. See Mark Johnston, 'Why Did the One Not Remain Within Itself?' in Lara Buchak and Dean Zimmerman (eds.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 9 (Oxford Univ. Press, 2019).

There is nothing God can do about that, no matter how much gratuitous evil he prevents. So, God cannot be morally required to prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs that God can prevent.

The argument that gratuitous evil is ineliminable does not aim to show that, necessarily, God must allow gratuitous evil in order to ensure significant morality or that, necessarily, God must allow gratuitous evil in order to ensure the exercise of significant freedom or in order to ensure any other great good. These theses might be true, but the argument does not depend on them.²⁹ The argument aims to show instead that it cannot be a moral requirement on God to prevent every gratuitously evil state of affairs in every possible world, since it is impossible to do so. It cannot make any being less than perfect to permit what it is impossible to prevent.

The initial premise in the argument expresses the standard position on God and gratuitous evil. It states that there is a necessary connection between God's moral perfection and gratuitously evil states of affairs. In premise (1), the box \Box symbolizes metaphysical necessity and the arrow \rightarrow symbolizes the material conditional.

- (1) $\Box(\text{God is morally perfect} \rightarrow \text{God prevents every gratuitously evil state of affairs})$

Premise (1) is intended to express the proposition that God is not essentially morally perfect if he fails to prevent some gratuitously evil state of affairs in some world. We are assuming throughout that the gratuitously evil states of affairs in each world are contingent and preventable.

Let S be some gratuitously evil state of affairs. And let \Diamond represent metaphysical possibility. Premise (2) states that it is metaphysically possible that a gratuitously evil state of affairs obtains.³⁰

29 For a discussion of necessary gratuitous evil in this sense see Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Baker Books, 1982), William Hasker, 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, no. 9 (1992), 23–44, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Frances Howard-Snyder, 'Is God Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1999) 115–130, and Keith Chrzan, 'Necessary Gratuitous Evil: An Oxymoron Revisited', *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (1994), 134–137. In this regard it is also worth looking at John Hick, 'Evil and Soul-Making' in Michael Rea and Louis Pojman (eds.) *Philosophy of Religion* (Cengage, 2015), 319–24 and Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

30 To simplify presentation of the argument I do not distinguish between states of affairs and propositions. On this view we can speak indifferently of states of affairs obtaining or being true.

(2) $\Diamond S$

According to (2) there is a gratuitously evil state of affairs obtaining in some possible world somewhere in metaphysical space. (2) is true — or very likely true — on the analyses of gratuitous evil in both (3) and (4). The open question is whether God could exist, given that (2) is true.³¹

Since S is a gratuitously evil state of affairs we know that, necessarily, God is morally perfect only if God prevents S. (3) follows directly from (1) and (2).

(3) $\Box(\text{God is morally perfect} \rightarrow \text{God prevents } S)$

Since God is essentially omniscient, essentially omnipotent, essentially morally perfect and necessarily existing, we know that, necessarily, God is morally perfect.

(4) $\Box(\text{God is morally perfect})$

From (3) and (4) it follows that, necessarily, God prevents S. The inference to (5) requires the principle K that holds in all normal modal logics, $\vdash \Box(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\Box p \rightarrow \Box q)$. K ensures that necessity is closed under implication.

(5) $\Box(\text{God prevents } S)$

But it is necessary that God prevents the gratuitously evil state of affairs S only if it is necessary that God prevents the *possibility* of S.

(6) $\Box(\text{God prevents } \Diamond S)$

What is the argument from (5) to (6)? The argument depends on the S5 theorem $\Box \sim p \rightarrow \Box \sim \Diamond p$. If p is impossible, then there is no world in which p is possible. If necessarily God prevents S, then S obtains in no possible worlds. So, S is impossible. But the S5 theorem entails that if S is impossible, then $\Diamond S$ is also impossible. If S is not true in any possible world, then $\Diamond S$ is also not true any possible world. In order for $\Diamond S$ to be true in some world, S must be true in some possible world. So if (5) is true then (6) is true.

31 An *EJPR* referee asks how a theist could grant premise (2), given theistic intuitions about modal possibility. Note that I'm not privileging non-theistic modal intuitions in this argument. The point of premise (2) is the following: suppose a theist is faced with the objection that gratuitous evil is at least possible. The most common theistic response is to reject the hypothesis that gratuitous evil is possible. Setting aside the plausibility of that sort of response, the point of the argument is to show that such a response is unnecessary. The argument shows that theists can simply grant (2), since it does not constitute any evidence against theism.

(6) entails that S has been eliminated from metaphysical space entirely or that S is an impossible state of affairs. From (5) and (6) it follows that, necessarily, God prevents S if and only if God prevents the possibility of S. From (5) we know that it is true in every world that God prevents S and from (6) we know that it is true in every world that God prevents $\diamond S$. Both propositions are true in every world and so (7) is true as well.

(7) $\Box(\text{God prevents } S \leftrightarrow \text{God prevents } \diamond S)$

But from (3) and (7), and the substitution of logically equivalent propositions, we arrive at the principle in (8).³²

(8) $\Box(\text{God is morally perfect} \rightarrow \text{God prevents } \diamond S)$

According to (8) God would be less than morally perfect if God failed to prevent $\diamond S$. But God prevents $\diamond S$ only if God brings it about that $\sim \diamond S$, or equivalently, God prevents $\diamond S$ only if God brings it about that S is impossible.

Here we arrive at the central problem. No one could bring it about that S is impossible since S is *necessarily possible*. It is necessarily true that S obtains somewhere in metaphysical space, no matter what God does. (9) states that S is necessarily possible and (9) follows directly from (2) and the S5 axiom $\diamond p \rightarrow \Box \diamond p$.

(9) $\Box \diamond S$

(9) states that it is necessarily true that $\diamond S$. But if it is necessarily true that $\diamond S$, then it is necessarily true that S obtains in some world or other. Since S must obtain in some world or other, it cannot be a moral requirement on God that, necessarily, he prevents S. It cannot be a moral requirement that a morally perfect being must do the impossible. It is not a moral requirement on God or any other being that it must do the impossible.

The argument that God is not required to prevent S generalizes to any gratuitously evil state of affairs obtaining in any possible world. For any gratuitously evil state of affairs S^* , if S^* is possible, then, *necessarily*, S^* obtains somewhere in metaphysical space. It cannot be a moral requirement that, necessarily, God prevents S^* , since it is impossible to prevent S^* from obtain-

32 We could also arrive at (8) by the transitivity of \rightarrow . From (5) and (6) we get (7') $\Box(\text{God prevents } S \rightarrow \text{God prevents } \diamond S)$. And from (3) and (7') we derive, via transitivity of \rightarrow , or hypothetical syllogism, proposition (8) $\Box(\text{God is morally perfect} \rightarrow \text{God prevents } \diamond S)$.

ing somewhere in metaphysical space. So there is no possible gratuitously evil state of affairs S^* which is such that God is required to eliminate S^* from metaphysical space.

Since we've granted that gratuitously evil states of affairs are at least possible — indeed it seems to follow from the plausible analyses of gratuitous evil in P3 and P4 — the only assumptions in the argument are the standard position in (1) and the logic S5. And from the standard position in (1) we derived (8). Since (8) is necessarily false, we should conclude that the standard position on the relation between God and gratuitous evil is necessarily false. It is false that a morally perfect being must prevent every instance of gratuitous evil that he can prevent in every world in which he exists.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

For any possible gratuitous evil S , we know it's impossible that God prevent S from obtaining in every possible world. God simply cannot do that. So, the fact that S is preventable and God does not prevent S is no objection to the moral perfection of God. No matter how many gratuitously evil states of affairs God prevents, God must coexist with S in some world or other.

Since every argument from evil depends on some version of the standard position, it is important that the standard position is false. The discovery that there obtain gratuitously evil states of affairs or the discovery that, possibly, there obtain gratuitously evil states of affairs does not constitute evidence against the existence of God. God cannot make gratuitously evil states of affairs impossible. For every gratuitously evil state of affairs S in every possible world, it is a matter of metaphysical necessity that God coexists with S in some world or other. There is nothing God can do to prevent that.

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