

How Much Horrific Suffering is Enough?

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Abstract

Isn't there something like an amount and density of horrific suffering whose discovery would make it irrational to think God exists? Use your imagination to think of worlds that are much, much, *much* worse than you think Earth is when it comes to horrific suffering. Isn't there some conceivable scenario which, if you were in it, would make you say "Ok, ok. God doesn't exist, at least in the way we thought God was. We were wrong about that"? Pursuing this question leads to what I call the *Problem of Absurd Evil*.

Let Moral Theism, MT, be the conjunction of the following:

MT1: If God exists, then for any instance of suffering, it's not the case that God is morally unjustified with respect to it.

MT2: God exists.

MT1 is accepted by most theists because they think that God is always so incredibly morally good that the only suffering that happens will be God-justified. That is, he is justified in permitting all the suffering that exists.

Opinions differ in how to best fill out the details of MT, but we won't pause to go over them. In order to have the subsequent argument applicable, the reader is asked to insert into MT ideas (e.g., regarding "God") so that MT comes out true according to *many* people (although of course it won't be accepted by *all* theists). MT entails that there isn't even one instance of suffering that wasn't God-justified. For short: there is no G-unjustified suffering.¹

1. The Horrifying Travel Plan

Pretend that you travel to another planet that has many billions of creatures that can feel both pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow, etc. Suppose it's definitely *much worse* than Earth, overall, when it comes to suffering, pleasure, pain, well-being, and so on, no matter how you want to fill out that comparison (e.g., total amount of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering, amount per creature, amount per

¹ If an instance of suffering is G-unjustified, it could of course still be justified with respect to me, since I didn't know anything about it and couldn't have done anything about it (e.g., I promise I had nothing to do with the Black Death). Since God is supposed to be supremely knowledgeable and supremely powerful, those two excuses don't seem to apply to him. It's agreed upon by all non-delusional people that there are many instances of suffering that *appear* G-unjustified, since they are horrific and yet there doesn't seem, to those of us who have looked into it thoroughly, to be any adequate reason for God to allow them to happen.

creature per year of their life, and so on). The presence of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering on this planet dwarfs that on Earth. Regardless of the details, it's obvious that some situations and lives are much worse overall than others, and that's the only premise we need here for our stipulation that this hypothetical planet is much worse than ours when it comes to apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering, no matter how you work out the comparison.

Upon discovering this fact about that planet, you retain belief in MT. You are still convinced that God exists and there has never been any G-unjustified horrific suffering anywhere, ever, in the universe. Again, his goodness and other qualities wouldn't allow it.

You then travel to yet another planet, one that for hundreds of millions of years has had, at any given time, many trillions of cognitively advanced creatures who are currently enduring many kinds of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering. It's much worse than the previous planet: it really is like having Hitlers and Stalins in most countries most of the time, for millennia. It's the rough equivalent of a Nazi concentration camp for 90% of humanity and most other consciously advanced creatures--except that it's worldwide and goes on for literally many thousands of years. Concentration camps and factory farming are everywhere. And the factory farms aren't restricted to creatures like chickens; the farms produce creatures as advanced, in various kinds of consciousness, as humans, dolphins, elephants, chimpanzees, and octopuses. In addition, we can envision that the *natural* order on this planet is significantly worse than ours when it comes to pain and other kinds of suffering (the physical pain systems register more pain than ours do). So it's not just the Hitlers, Stalins, and factory farmers that are producing the extra horrific suffering.

Now you're on the third planet with an incredible number of conscious beings. Yes, it's much worse again: more creatures than in the previous places, suffering even more, for literally hundreds of millions of years. And the next planet is comparable, as are about a thousand after that.

In this appalling travel plan, when, if ever, must you give up on MT? How much apparently G-unjustified suffering, especially of various extreme kinds, do you have to know about, through various kinds of testimony, before it's epistemically irrational for you to stick with MT?

There are only two options, stipulating that you reevaluate MT after your decades of travels have ended (we also stipulate the nontrivial claim that you don't lose your mind after what you have witnessed and heard about).

Option Rational: it is rational to continue believing MT after your travels.

Option Irrational: it is irrational to continue believing MT after your travels.

In this essay I evaluate both options in detail, articulating their pros and cons. Such evaluation will lead to the *Problem of Absurd Evil*. I won't share any of my own views, despite occasionally using pronouns that suggest the opposite.

2. Would Some Conceivable Suffering Make Moral Theism Irrational?

After a few decades of planetary travel, you have witnessed a thousand planets, each with a long history of many billions of billions of creatures living lives of agony both physical and psychological. Each planet is clearly much worse than ours when it comes to apparently G-unjustified *horrific* suffering in three respects.

- Each planet has vastly more creatures enduring horrific pain.
- Each of those creatures endure much more horrific suffering per moment of being alive.
- These two circumstances have been going on much longer than on our planet (so our planet's history of pain-feeling creatures is considerably shorter than each of theirs).

Hence, those planets aren't anything like suffering-duplicates of Earth. Pretend that the typical animal on Earth experiences one urg of horrific suffering per year, on average, where horrific suffering is measured in urgs. (A silly assumption, but the fictional numbers convey the point well.) On these planets, the creatures experience dozens of urgs per year on average. So the "density" of horrific suffering is much worse than it is on Earth.

If it's rational for you to continue believing MT despite what you have learned in those travels (which is what option Rational says), then after your travels are finished it's rational for you to, metaphorically, stand on top of an outrageously large pile of trillions of trillions of corpses, each of whom suffered horribly, and scream to no one other than your own tortured soul "No! Absolutely all the suffering of each of these creatures was morally okay for God to permit! *All of it!*".

A pile of trillions of trillions of corpses would be very roughly the size of *hundreds of Earths*. It is beyond our psychological grasp.

The thought experiment, with its heap-of-corpses scene, vividly imagined, is emotion-provoking but not an argument. It is meant to help us consider seriously the question "Even if no actual suffering that I know of is definitely enough to rule out MT, couldn't suffering get so incredibly bad that it would rule it out?" For some philosophers, a single well-chosen case of horrific suffering on the part of an innocent child is enough. For many others, however, it's just a psychological fact that there remain doubts. They are disposed to say, with regard to the innocent child case, "Yes, that was a truly awful thing to happen, and no, I don't know how God would allow it. But maybe there's something about it we don't know about. I still have doubts. I'm just not 100% sure we're not missing something, okay?". What the planetary traveling scenario does is blow up that case to absurd levels: roughly put, that child victim is one of trillions of trillions, *and*, if that's not enough, the suffering of those others was much worse than that of the innocent child. The idea is that eventually just about everyone will be very tempted to say "Yes, yes, I agree now. If things got *that* outrageously bad, then it would be foolish and irrational to stick with MT".

Those are comments on our *psychological reactions* to suffering, both actual and conceivable. There is no argument, not yet. Before we get to the argument, it's worth asking *why* the numbers seem to make a difference to our reactions. That is, why is it that when the numbers reach absurd levels, as they do in the planetary travel scenario, it seems to most of us that it would be irrational to stick with MT?

I think it's due to our planetary traveler's awareness of two facts combined with her knowledge, obtained through her travels, of the vast number of instances of horrific suffering throughout the universe (cf. Frances 2013, 2020):

Fact F1: There has been, spread out over the centuries, a large group of people (which includes our planetary traveler) who collectively are *highly intelligent*, who collectively know an *enormous amount* about horrific suffering and its potential moral justification, who have collectively spent a *great deal* of time (centuries) thinking *very hard* about the potential moral justification of horrific suffering, and who collectively have undertaken a *very long* (again, centuries), *intelligent, heartfelt, and otherwise serious* search for justifications.

Fact F2: These people (including our traveler) have collectively failed to find justification for an enormous number of instances of horrific suffering. That is, there is an enormous number of instances of horrific suffering S such that these people have collectively failed to come to know any highly informative truth of the form 'The moral justification for S is such-and-such'.

F1 is a historical fact that is obvious to any philosopher: many of our best and brightest have tried extremely hard to find out the things, reasons, facts, or whatever that make horrific suffering G-justified. It's a fact about our *efforts*, that's all.

F2 is endorsed by any informed MT theist with a decent sense of the difficulty of philosophy: we have utterly failed to find justifications for an incredible number of instances of horrific suffering. For much but not all horrific suffering, all we have done is offer speculations regarding justifications--*intelligent* speculations, for sure, but still mere speculations. If you think F2 is false, perhaps because you think you or one of your favorite philosophers have revealed the *actual* moral G-justifications for the vast majority of instances of horrific suffering, then this essay probably won't interest you.

The pair of facts F1 and F2 is relevant to our issue in this manner: since we know that despite our *prodigious and intelligent* efforts, we have collectively failed to find the justifications for *so many* instances and varieties of horrific suffering, if we become aware that those numbers have reached absurd levels--like they do in the planetary traveling scenario--then it appears irrational for us to think that *absolutely none of those trillions of trillions* of instances of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering is truly G-unjustified. The idea is that it would be irrational to think that absolutely all of those negatives (viz. "They haven't found justifications") are false negatives ("The justifications are there anyway, every time"). That's why option Rational seems false. I'll next consider four objections to this claim that in S it would be irrational to stick with believing MT.

First Objection. What if in the planetary travels one learned of absurd numbers of *pleasurable or otherwise positively fulfilling* experiences--and they even outnumbered the instances of horrific suffering?

I don't see how that matters to our specific question for the planetary traveler, "Were absolutely all of the trillions of trillions of cases of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering morally okay for God to permit?" Like I pointed out earlier, since we know that despite our extraordinary efforts we have collectively failed to find the G-justifications for a truly enormous number of instances of horrific suffering, it's irrational for us to think that absolutely *none* of those instances of horrific suffering are G-unjustified.

Of course, given the difficulty of the task there will be many false negatives: cases of horrific suffering that *mistakenly* seem to be G-unjustified. But given the ridiculous number of negatives--cases of horrific suffering that we haven't found to be G-justified--it beggars belief that 100% of them are false negatives. The presence of good things doesn't matter to that claim.

Perhaps a comparison can help convey the gist of this response to the first objection. If a person adopts a dozen children and gives six of them wonderful lives, but knowingly permits the lifelong torture of the other six despite having the power to easily prevent it, we aren't going to be okay with the torture just because the other children are living wonderful lives. Nothing changes if the person knowingly allows the easily preventable torture of just one or two children. Given her knowledge and power, it's not as though she is distracted by the other children.

Second objection. If God exists, then he knows (a) *infinitely more* about than we do about the (b) *difficult* topic of the justification of suffering. So why take our collective failure to find justifications as a reliable sign that any one of those trillions of trillions of instances of horrific suffering are G-unjustified?

This is a familiar complaint (e.g., varieties of skeptical theism; cf. Dougherty 2022). I can't treat it adequately here, since it's a complex issue with many intelligent points to be made on both sides. But I will offer one comment that suggests the objection isn't strong *when applied to the fictional traveling scenario*--which is not to say anything about its power when applied to the actual world.

Suppose someone--human, alien, artificial, or supernatural--knows infinitely more than we do on some difficult topic. That fact would hardly suggest that our judgment on that topic is *wildly* unreliable, which it would have been if all those trillions of trillions of negatives were false negatives. In fact, it doesn't give us *any reason at all* to think our judgment on that topic is unreliable. Compare:

- Suppose you learned that some being knew infinitely more than you do *about baseball*. Would that make you think you are unreliable in your difficult baseball judgments (e.g., Jones was a better hitter than Smith)? No, of course not. Just because you admit there are millions of baseball facts, even interesting ones, you know nothing about doesn't mean you should admit that you are unreliable in your baseball judgments.
- Suppose you learned that some being knew infinitely more than you do *about suffering and justification*. Would that make you think you are unreliable in your difficult judgments about suffering and justification? No, of course not. Just because you admit there are millions of suffering/justification facts, even interesting ones, you know nothing about doesn't mean you should admit that you are unreliable in your judgments about suffering and justification.

Needless to say, this point has nothing to do with baseball or even God. If some being (human, alien, artificial, or supernatural) knows infinitely more than we do about difficult topics regarding mathematics, rap music, French poetry, cognitive development in children, PTSD, sailing, or modal logic, those two facts--that being's immense epistemic superiority (point (a) above), and the epistemic difficulty of the topics (point (b) above)--hardly mean that our judgment about those topics is unreliable in any serious way. To think that all the trillions of trillions of instances of horrific suffering that we have failed to find G-justifications for really do have such justifications--despite our incredible efforts over centuries to find

them--really is tantamount to saying that we are not merely unreliable but *wildly* unreliable. But is there decent independent evidence that we are *that* unreliable?

Some of us are tempted to respond to that question in this way.

But we are making suffering-justification judgments *from a human perspective*. There is no reason to think we can peer into the mind of God! Given his extreme knowledge, maybe he knows a great many relevant things we don't.

For two reasons, I think this response is weak.

First, we know what the instances of horrific suffering are like, and in many cases we know very well what it's like to be aware of them and have power over them. We also know that there certainly aren't any obvious outweighing goods for many of them, even if we allow somewhat intangible goods with only indirect connections to the suffering. We are actually pretty smart about suffering and justification. Second, and more to the point, it would be silly to reply, in the baseball and other cases, "But we are making baseball judgments from a human perspective; and there is no reason to think we can peer into the mind of God; maybe he knows a great many relevant things we don't".

To be clear, this response to the second objection does *not* say that all or even any particular variety of skeptical theism is false. It doesn't even say that skeptical theism is irrational to believe in the actual world. It only says that it isn't rational *in scenario S, after the travels*, to retain belief in MT. It's logically consistent with this thesis to say that it's fully epistemically rational *in the actual world* to believe MT. A person could think that only in S is the evidence against MT good enough to make MT irrational. We will look at that position, distinguishing what's rational to believe in S versus the actual world, in great detail in the next section (via premise (b) there).

Third objection. If one *knows* that P, then it is rational to stick with P even when encountering misleading evidence against P; but many theistic philosophers know that MT is true, even in scenario S; hence, they are rational to stick with MT even after the planetary travels. Reply: the first premise is false, as one can easily see through realistic counterexamples. For instance, you start out knowing your name is X, but then a well-crafted and impressive conspiracy produces fake documents and other testimony that your name is not X; it isn't rational to then stick with your belief even though you started with knowledge.

Fourth objection, which is similar to but superior to the previous one. A good number of theists (who accept F1 and F2) have such *incredibly good* evidence for MT that it is rational for them to conclude, from F1, F2, and what they discover in the horrifying planetary travels, that we humans are *incredibly* awful at finding moral justifications for horrific suffering. There isn't anything irrational in their retaining belief in MT in S.

In order to understand the power of this objection, consider a fictional but realistic scenario. We discover that some bird species does some amazing migration feat every year, and despite a great many scientists trying, over many years, to figure out how the birds do it, they fail. In such a situation we would not conclude that the bird doesn't really do the amazing migration; we could conclude that it's very hard for humans to discover how the bird pulls it off. Similarly, upon learning F1, F2, and the extent of horrific

suffering in scenario S, many theists (in S) should, given their extremely strong evidence for MT, conclude that we human are almost shockingly bad at finding justifications in this restricted sense: all our negatives are false negatives. We can continue to think that we are quite often or even usually right when thinking 'The justification for this bit of suffering is such-and-such'. The problem is that we are always wrong when we say 'There is no G-justification for this other bit of suffering'.

In response to this fourth objection, I am willing to grant that *if* a person has incredibly strong evidence for MT--comparable to scientists' evidence that the bird species really has that migration pattern, each part of which has been witnessed firsthand by many scientists for many years--*then* option Rational is true for that person even after the horrible planetary travels. Fair enough.

Even so, how many of us really have evidence for MT that is that powerful? For the sake of argument, let us grant that some people often have overwhelmingly powerful experiential evidence that some kind of publically invisible and extremely impressive "presence" is communicating with them in various meaningful ways. But do they have very strong evidence that this presence is supremely knowledgeable, supremely powerful, supremely morally good, and would not permit G-unjustified suffering anywhere in the universe? That takes additional evidence, and even if it exists, how strong is it really?

I can't answer that question. But let's be clear on what it means to think option Rational is true. It means you are saying that *no matter what horrific suffering you discover in the universe*, it's always still rational to stick with your old belief that absolutely all that suffering is G-justified. You're saying that it's virtually unimaginable that you could actually discover *any* terrible collective suffering that would make it irrational to stick with your belief that there is no G-unjustified suffering. It doesn't take much imagination to realize how implausible this position is. Indeed, we all know of people who would judge the position to be morally insensitive if not impermissible.

None of this is to say that MT is false! None of it says that skeptical theism is false either. Not only that: like I said earlier, none of it even faintly suggests that MT is irrational to believe in the actual world. My focus includes only a restricted subset of people who believe MT--ones in a *counterfactual* situation! In this section I am merely articulating and partially evaluating arguments for the partly counterfactual claim that *if* one accepts F1 and F2, and *if* one kept that acceptance and were subject to this eye-opening tour of the universe in which one learned of the absurd number of instances of horrific suffering that don't appear to be G-justified, *then* option Rational is false, in virtually all cases: after one's travels one is irrational to continue believing MT (the exceptions being those who have literally fantastic evidence for *both* MT1 and MT2).

3. Underestimating the Suffering in the Actual World

On option Irrational, you should, rationally, stop believing MT after your shocking travels. That seems reasonable. I think most theistic philosophers would go with option Irrational. But if that's right, so it's irrational to continue believing MT after your travels, why not before as well?

Sure, after your travels through the universe you have witnessed and have testimony regarding something like a trillion trillion times more horrific suffering than you knew about on Earth. But wasn't there enough *actual* apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering on Earth to make it unreasonable to believe MT? It would

seem that all the extra suffering on conceivable planets shouldn't have mattered in your evaluation of MT. It's certainly not the case that there is only a small amount of that kind of apparently G-unjustified suffering here in the actual world!

Think of a simple if inexact comparison. You learn that each of a billion (10^9) fair coins have been tossed a million (10^6) times, for a grand total of one quadrillion (10^{15}) flips.² So, based solely on the odds, you should think that on at least one occasion a coin landed on its edge instead of flat, even though you haven't witnessed such an occurrence. If you had learned that there had been only a million total coin flips, you *still* should think at least one coin landed on its edge at least once. (According to Murray and Teare 1993, the odds are 1 in 6000 for a USA nickel.) The difference in numbers, a quadrillion vs. a million, is extreme of course. But it is epistemically irrelevant to the rationality of your beliefs in this exact sense: if it's irrational to believe "No coin landed on its edge even once" in the quadrillion-flip scenario, it's also irrational to believe it in the million-flip scenario, given your knowledge of the probability facts. A second analogy: if it's irrational to believe "There has been a one-year period, in the last thousand years, during which not even one drop of water rained on the entire area of North America", it's also irrational to believe "There has been a one-year period, in the last thousand years, during which not more than a million drops of water rained on the entire area of North America", given your knowledge of the probability facts.

A similar conditional plausibly holds for our topic: if there was enough apparently G-unjustified suffering on all those conceivable planets to make it irrational to believe MT, then surely there was enough apparently G-unjustified suffering in the actual world alone to make it irrational to believe MT. Again, the amount of apparently G-unjustified suffering in the actual world alone is truly staggering. To think otherwise is to be an adult with his or her head in the sand, guilty of wishful thinking, or akin to a sheltered child.

Or so the argument says! I will look at arguments for this key premise below. Here is the argument thus far:

- a. In the fictional/counterfactual planetary traveling scenario S, facts F1 and F2 are true, you accept them, and it is irrational for you to continue believing MT after your travels. That is, option Rational is false and option Irrational is true for that scenario.
- b. If in S F1 and F2 are true, you accept them, and it is irrational for you to continue believing MT after your fictional travels (i.e., if (a) is true), then in the *actual* world it is irrational for you--who correctly accepts F1 and F2 and is aware of the absurd number of actual instances of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering--to believe MT.
- c. Hence, in the actual world it is irrational for you--who correctly accepts F1 and F2 and is aware of the absurd number of actual instances of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering--to believe MT.

² It's more realistic than you probably thought. If we have a billion coins to work with and each flip takes three seconds, then it will take a little over a month of continuous flipping (by machines) to get to a quadrillion flips. There are many billions of coins in worldwide circulation at any moment.

This argument is meant to serve as a relatively concrete way of filling out the following intuitive train of thought, one that I think a lot of reflective people have had (it can't just be me).

If you let your imagination really go wild, it's not hard to think of ways the universe could have been that would make you think there is no chance that God exists, since the imaginary universe is really, absurdly evil. If I found myself in such a reality, there is no way I'd be a theist; it would be stupid to be one.

But come to think of it, isn't the evil we actually know about, in the real world, bad enough? We have gotten so used to it that we don't appreciate how truly awful a fantastically large number of lives are. If we're honest, we should realize that there already is enough evil to make it vanishingly unlikely that God exists. To think otherwise is to be clueless about evil, or be the victim of fairly pathetic wishful thinking.

Let (a)-(c) be the *Problem of Absurd Evil*. Unlike other problems of evil, it isn't an argument for atheism. As we will see below, a theist could consistently accept its soundness. Instead, the Problem of Absurd Evil is an argument for the epistemic claim (c) only. In the remainder of this essay, I explore only the various ways of responding to this problem, indicating their strengths, weaknesses, and consequences.

Suppose for a moment that you think (b) is false. So, you hold that although *in scenario S* it's irrational to stick with MT after the travels, it isn't irrational to do so *in the actual world* despite the fact that you are aware of F1 and F2 and the absurd number of actual instances of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering. This rejection of (b) is hardly foolish: S is wildly worse than the actual world, right? (Hint: no it's not.)

I'll start with three arguments in favor of (b). They are meant to show the high price of rejecting (b).

First argument. Given that animals who can feel both physical and emotional pain have been around on Earth for hundreds of millions of years--and will continue to be here in some form or other for hundreds of millions more years, no matter what happens to humans--I estimate we are talking about at least a *quintillion*, a billion billion or 10^{18} , of the *hard* cases of actual instances of horrific suffering, the ones we have real difficulty finding justifications for. No doubt, I'm off by orders of magnitude, but that hardly matters. Think of the suffering typically involved near death, or the kind that breaks one's mind permanently, leading to many years of fear, terror, and other forms of emotional agony (in advanced creatures only of course). The point is supposed to be that we *already* are in the land of absurd numbers of cases of horrific suffering when limited to puny Earth.

This means that the differences in numbers between the world of S and the actual world don't matter to our assessment of MT. If it was irrational to continue to believe it in S, then it's also irrational for you, today, in the actual world. That's (b). So, (b) is true.

Second argument. You might object to (b) by arguing that the reason the planetary travels would make it irrational to stick with MT is that you would be learning things about suffering that are significantly worse than what we know about it on Earth. You insist that the suffering there is much worse than the suffering on Earth--and not merely more numerous--and that's why one is irrational to stick with MT in scenario S.

If that's true, then the coin-flip analogy is poor. Hence, you say that just because after the travels MT is irrational doesn't mean it's irrational before the travels; (b) is false.

But do you really want to say that? The suffering on Earth isn't bad enough for you? Is your life really that sheltered? Or are you not sheltered but in denial? Or perhaps grossly morally insensitive? In accepting the falsehood of option Rational you are saying that sure, there is some conceivable suffering that is so horrendous that if there was enough of it, and you learned about it, then you would be irrational to stick with MT. But in rejecting (b) you're also saying that the suffering on Earth isn't enough to make sticking with MT irrational. Multiple cases of repeatedly raping and torturing children in front of their parents isn't bad enough? What about the agonizing slow death of starvation--actually happening literally trillions of times on Earth to creatures who can and do feel acute physical pain? What about the emotional pain that breaks one's mind permanently and leaves one with decades of fear, shame, and terror? You're saying that the incredibly horrendous naturally-caused suffering, of untold billions of billions of pain-feeling creatures on Earth, doesn't measure up?

Further, what if you discover, a year from now, that that super-horrific suffering you were considering has actually happened on Earth--either at our own hands or on the part of nature (imagine learning this through more sophisticated understanding of the nervous systems of non-human animals)? Will you give up on MT then?

Third argument, the most fascinating one. The planetary traveling story is of course fictional. The surprise is that it is highly probable that *the horrific suffering described in the thought experiment actually exists*. The part of the story with you traveling was fictional, but the rest probably was not. Here are the relevant calculations:

We know that there are hundreds of billions--and probably trillions--of galaxies in our universe, and current estimates say there are billions or at least hundreds of millions of roughly Earth-like planets in our galaxy alone. If there are *only* a trillion galaxies total in the universe, and they average *only* 500 million Earth-like planets each (so, significantly fewer than estimated by scientists), that is 5×10^{20} Earth-like planets total. If only one in a million of those *Earth-like* planets have advanced conscious life ("advanced" for our purposes means being fully capable of horrific suffering), that's a conservative estimate of 500 trillion planets total with *advanced* conscious life. That's a lot of planets. The odds that a mere thousand of them are truly awful as described in thought experiment is high: it would mean that just one in every *500 billion* planets that *already* have advanced conscious life is as awful as the ones in the thought experiment.³

³ As to the question, "If there are so many of these planets with advanced consciousness, then why don't we detect their planetary communications with our best telescopes?" I think the start of an illuminating answer is to note that the universe is unfathomably large and advanced consciousness might come in radically different forms (even if it *starts* out roughly like that of creatures on Earth). Even with 500 trillion planets with advanced consciousness, there may be only a few hundred or even dozen in our galaxy, they might not exist yet, they might not even be trying to communicate, communication over tens of thousands

Are these *sober* estimates of the prevalence of horrific planets far too high? Maybe the above speculation “One in a million Earth-like planets has advanced consciousness” is wildly wrong: it’s only one in a *hundred* million. Okay, then the odds that a thousand of them are truly awful like in scenario S is still high: it would mean that just one in every *five billion* planets that *already* have advanced conscious life is as awful as the ones in the thought experiment.

Indeed, for two reasons the support for “The suffering in S is actual” is stronger than I have let on thus far.

Reason 1. Suppose there are “only” five trillion planets with advanced consciousness, instead of 500 trillion. The third argument says that at least a thousand of them are as bad as described in the thought experiment. It would be bizarre to think that the number is significantly less than a thousand. If there were significantly less than a thousand, that would mean that more than 99.99999998% of them aren’t significantly worse than Earth. Virtually all of the realistic ways that could be true would require Earth to be horrific compared to most other planets with advanced consciousness. I don’t know of even the slightest reason to believe that.

Reason 2. We should be worried that the number of actual horrific planets is far higher, not lower. Induction on the history of astronomy suggests, if anything, that the universe is significantly larger than we currently think it is. Every few centuries and, more recently, decades, astronomers announce to the world that previous astronomy-informed estimates about the extent of the universe were much, much too low. This fact makes it even more probable that there actually is all that suffering described in S.

This means *we have excellent reason to think that the actual world is relevantly similar to S when it comes to apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering*, minus the bit about you being a planetary traveler. If one admits that *in S* it’s irrational for the planetary travelers to stick with MT, then since one (who reads this essay) has excellent reason to think that there *actually* is all that apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering in the actual universe, one has to admit that it’s irrational for us to stick with MT in the actual world. That’s the third argument for (b).

The question “Would any conceivable suffering make theism irrational?” can be answered affirmatively but in a way that doesn’t generate the Problem of Absurd Evil. Imagine that you get to talk to God, you know you are talking to God, and you know God is being honest when he says to you “There is a lot of G-unjustified suffering. I admit it. Just look at what happened to Lisa.” The planetary traveling scenario is different for two reasons. First, it helps us vividly think about the absurd amount of horrific suffering on Earth. Second, we have good reason to think all the suffering in the thought experiment actually exists.

The considerations in favor of (b) could be used in the opposite direction: if it is irrational for the traveler to continue believing MT, then it is irrational for us in the actual world to believe MT (that’s (b) again); but it’s not irrational for us in the actual world to believe it; hence, it’s not irrational for the traveler to continue to believe it; hence, (a) is false. However, like I pointed out earlier, denying (a) means holding

of light years might be pretty unreliable, or they are so incredibly different from us that we are blind to each other’s communications.

that *no matter what horrific suffering you might discover in the universe*, it's always still rational to stick with your old belief that absolutely all that suffering is morally justified for God. That seems like a wildly overconfident, even delusional, thing to believe. That's the price of rejecting (a).

4. The Epistemic Consequences of the Problem of Absurd Evil

One result we can definitely agree on is this: $\{(a), (b), \text{ and } \sim(c)\}$ is logically inconsistent, so at least one of those three claims is not true. You know, since you've read this far, that at least one of them is false. Which one is it, in your opinion?

- Suppose you think that (a) is false. I have repeatedly laid out how extreme a position this is.
- Suppose you think that (b) is false. As indicated in the previous section, this means you have to diminish in significance the suffering on Earth. It also means you have to claim that the conservative astrophysical calculations are wildly wrong in seeming to support (b).
- Suppose you think that $\sim(c)$ is false. That is, you accept (c), which is the claim "It's irrational for we (who accept F1 and F2 and know of the absurd number of actual instances of apparently G-unjustified horrific suffering) to believe MT". Hence, *you* accept that it's irrational *for you* to believe MT. Presumably, that means you won't believe MT, despite thinking hard about it. It would be pretty odd for you to believe MT and believe that you are irrational in believing MT.

I suppose that different people who have read this far may have significantly different bodies of evidence regarding the three pivotal claims, (a), (b), and $\sim(c)$. Even so, I suspect that for the majority of people who read this far, it's $\sim(c)$ that has the least overall evidence going for it. Suppose for a moment that that's right.

Often, when you know of three jointly inconsistent claims, and one of them has the least supporting evidence, you should reject the claim that is the evidence loser. That's a plausible rule. If that rule were true, and I was right in the previous paragraph about $\sim(c)$ being the evidence loser, that would mean we who have read this far should reject $\sim(c)$, thereby giving up on MT, Moral Theism.

But there are three possible exceptions to that plausible rule. First, perhaps the three supporting bodies of evidence for (a), (b), and $\sim(c)$ are very close in strength, so the fact that one claim is the evidence loser should produce the caution of belief suspension, not the confidence of belief. Second, we might rationally think that our evidence regarding each of the claims is so weak that the evidence contest doesn't tell us much. Third, even if one of the three claims loses the evidence contest by a *large* margin, perhaps the bodies of evidence are so complicated that it is very difficult for us to know which one lost the contest. Sometimes it is very hard to evaluate a body of evidence. For my money, this "It is too complicated" option applies to the Problem of Absurd Evil. But I won't argue the point here.

In any case, regarding the last group, who think $\sim(c)$ is false and thereby won't believe MT, they have to take exactly one of three possible positions on MT.

Lesser Theism: Reject MT1 (that if God exists, there is no G-unjustified suffering), retain MT2 (that God exists), and conclude that there is G-unjustified suffering because, presumably, it's not true that

God is *all* of the following three: supremely knowledgeable, supremely powerful, and supremely morally good. God can still be supremely good, even perfect, but then he will have to fail on at least one of the other two measures. God is less than typically thought.

Mysterious Theism: Reject MT1, retain MT2, and conclude that there is G-unjustified suffering even though God *is* supremely knowledgeable, supremely powerful, and supremely morally good.

Atheism: Reject MT2, theism. (These people accept MT1, since MT1 is a material conditional with what they take to be a false antecedent.)

Mysterious Theism deserves its name: if you think that God is supremely morally good, then how can there be G-unjustified suffering? One would think that the more G-unjustified suffering there is, the less morally good he is. If God is supposed to be not merely morally “supreme” (a vague notion, to be sure) but morally *perfect*, then it is difficult to see how this view is even coherent, since it’s saying that God is morally perfect but at least sometimes morally unjustified. Perhaps there is way to make this result coherent, but it will take some work.

We should be careful here. Mysterious Theism is not to be confused with the view that God is morally perfect but there are cases of suffering that *have no outweighing goods*. In the arguments of this essay I haven’t assumed (or denied) the principle that instance of suffering X is G-unjustified = X fails to be paired with outweighing goods. Peter van Inwagen 2000 rejects that principle; others such as Trakakis 2003 criticize van Inwagen. This is not my fight.

What the three above positions on MT have in common is this: there is no god who successfully makes sure all suffering is G-justified. No matter what, we reach the conclusion that it’s not the case that God has prevented all G-unjustified suffering. Such a conclusion may give the theist (either Lesser or Mysterious) pause regarding the basis for worshipping him.

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