

Gratuitous Evil Unmotivated: A Reply to MacGregor^{*}

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Abstract

In his article “The Existence and Irrelevance of Gratuitous Evil,” Kirk R. MacGregor has argued that the Christian theist need not demur at the existence of gratuitous evil. In fact, we are told that Christian theists have ample philosophical, theological, and biblical evidence in favor of the existence of gratuitous evil. In this brief note I examine both the general structure of his argument as well as several of his more central arguments in favor of gratuitous evil and the compatibility of such evil with Christian theism.

1 On an Evil’s Being ‘Gratuitous’

Before turning to a few of MacGregor’s central arguments in favor of the existence of gratuitous evil and the compatibility of such evil with Christian theism, I want to make some general remarks about his particular understanding of ‘gratuitous evil’ and its implications for the overall structure of his argument.

MacGregor, following Rowe (1979), sets his sights on the following form of the evidential argument from evil (EA henceforth):

1. Probably, if God exists, then gratuitous evil does not exist.¹

^{*}Published in *Philosophia Christi* (2013) 15: 2

¹Although it should be pointed out that the first premise of EA is not normally formulated in probabilistic terms, just a standard material conditional.

2. Probably, gratuitous evil exists.
3. Therefore, probably, God does not exist.

Contrary to standard theistic replies to the above version of EA, MacGregor's primary aim in the article is to argue in favor of premise 2 and thereby single-out premise 1 as being the culprit worthy of denial on behalf of the theist. In doing so, MacGregor is eager to distance himself from the standard theistic denial of the existence of gratuitous evil by means of the so-called "greater-good defense" which, according to MacGregor, argues that "God uses all these evils to bring about greater goods than would otherwise have transpired...goods [which] furnish God with morally sufficient reasons for permitting each evil..." (165).

Unfortunately, MacGregor's initial characterization of the conceptual terrain at this point suffers from a grave ambiguity that threatens to undercut his entire project before it begins. The variety of evil that is thought to pose a problem for theists concerning EA in particular is that for which God has no *all-things-considered* morally sufficient reason to permit, i.e. evils that are pointless or gratuitous *tout court*. Yet the only definition of 'gratuitous evil' that MacGregor offers is "pointless or morally unnecessary evil" (165). Apart from the above passing remarks, the reader is left in the dark as to what exactly MacGregor means by an evil's being gratuitous, a grave oversight given the literature on the subject.²

As stated, MacGregor's rough gloss on an evil's being 'gratuitous' is ambiguous between the following two readings:

e is a *token-gratuitous evil* if and only if the permission of *e* itself is not necessary for the existence of a greater good (or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse).

e is a *type-gratuitous evil* if and only if the permission of *either e or some other evil equally bad or worse than e* is not necessary for the existence of a greater good (or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse).

In the course of his essay, MacGregor often vacillates in his use of 'gratuitous evil' between the token and type variety. On the one hand, at times he appears to take 'gratuitous evil' to be synonymous with token-gratuitous evil

²See Chrzan (1988), Howard-Snyder (1999: 118-119), Peterson (1982), Trakakis (2007).

and the greater-good defense as being committed to the thesis that each and every particular instance of evil is itself necessary and must have a ‘hidden benefit’ which results from the particular evil’s being permitted by God.³ As far as I can tell, for MacGregor, the rejection of such a view is tantamount to affirming the existence of gratuitous evil in the world.

In the same vein, in discussing God’s allowing particular moral and natural evils to run their course, MacGregor allows for evils that are themselves ‘pointless’ and yet, at the same time, the permission of which are logically necessary to secure particular goods of great (outweighing?) value. He states, “there is absolutely no meaning to the evil, as it is simply a logically unavoidable necessity of contingent living in a freedom-permitting world” (180) and that “...gratuitous evil in the actual world, both natural and moral, can only be eliminated at the expense of libertarian human freedom” (177).⁴

These are puzzling statements indeed. Here we have instances of evil that are both ‘pointless’ and yet, at the same time, are logically necessary to secure the goods of creaturely existence and morally significant freedom. But if it is logically impossible for God to secure the presumably greater goods of creaturely existence and morally significant freedom without permitting such evils, then they are certainly not *all-things-considered* pointless or gratuitous, i.e. type-gratuitous. This further supports MacGregor’s narrow reading of ‘gratuitous evil’ in terms of token-gratuitous evil. On the other hand, MacGregor’s central argument against the greater-good defense takes aim at an understanding of ‘gratuitous evil’ in terms of type-gratuitous evil in particular. In his argument formulated in the section titled “The Incoherence of the Greater-Good Defense” in favor of gratuitous evil, MacGregor’s reasoning (if successful) warrants the very strong conclusion that *all* instances of evil in our world are all-things-considered (type) gratuitous.

The worry this ambiguity poses to the general structure of MacGregor’s

³See the quote on page 168 that starts with “The absurdity of the Greater-Good Defense...”

⁴Similar statements abound: “Given God’s overriding desire to create libertarian creatures requires that the universe currently stands at a metaphysical and epistemic distance from his definitive presence, both gratuitous natural and gratuitous moral evil follow as logically inescapable consequences” (179) and “Notice that all such evils are, in and of themselves, gratuitous or pointless; their only *raison d’être* is the logically unavoidable privation of ontological necessity exhibited by created entities...[S]uch immediately explains the existence of gratuitous natural evil; it is logically necessary to the universe, and God simply has to put up with it if he chooses to create a universe at all” (174).

overall argument in favor of the existence and irrelevance of gratuitous evil is as follows. It is vitally important to note that an instance of evil may be token-gratuitous without being type-gratuitous.⁵ Theists often argue that while God's permission of a particular evil may not *itself* be necessary to secure an outweighing good, it may very well be the case that some evil equally bad or worse as that particular instance of evil may be necessary for such a purpose.⁶ As Michael Murray (2008: 15) notes, "it is likely that many outweighing goods can be secured by allowing a range of evils, none of which is singularly necessary for this purpose." One might think that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a token-gratuitous evil in that God's permission of *that* evil in particular was in no way necessary to secure an outweighing good, without thereby thinking that it was type-gratuitous in so far as *some evil equally bad or worse* may have been necessary to secure such a good (say, the possibility of a stable, law-governed medium that allows for the exercising of morally significant freedom).

Given that an evil can be token-gratuitous without being type-gratuitous, MacGregor's pointing to alleged instances of evil none of which appear to be *singularly* necessary to secure a greater good (e.g. each traumatic thought of one suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder, being bitten by a mosquito, cutting oneself while shaving, stubbing one's toe, Pilate's slaughter of Galileans and the collapse of the tower of Siloam in Luke chapter 13, etc.) in no way establishes that such evils are *all-things-considered* gratuitous and, by extension, the truth of premise 2 of EA. Even *if* we grant that MacGregor's individual arguments that appeal to the gratuity of particular instances of evil are sound, they are innocuous for the purpose of securing the existence of the kind of evil that is relevant to the argument at hand.⁷ While there are

⁵Recall van Inwagen's (1988: 65) moral for students of the problem of evil: "Do not attempt any solution to this problem that entails that every particular evil has a purpose, or that, with respect to every individual misfortune, or every devastating earthquake, or every disease, God has some special reason for allowing it. Concentrate rather on the problem of what sort of reasons a loving and providential God might have for allowing His creatures to live in a world where many of the evils that happen to them happen to them for no reason at all."

⁶This possibility is hinted at by Plantinga (2000: 493-494): "There is another distinction that must be made. Perhaps God's reason for permitting me to suffer is not that by undergoing this suffering I can thus achieve a greater good...but because he can thus achieve a better world overall."

⁷This point is underscored nicely by Howard-Synder (1999: 118-119) and Trakakis (2007: ch. 12).

no doubt a variety of evidential arguments from evil on offer in the literature that vary with respect to the variety and the scope of evils in question, it is widely acknowledged by both atheist and theist alike that it is the alleged existence of type-gratuitous evil that undergirds the force of the evidential argument taking the form of EA.⁸

2 Is Belief in Gratuitous Evil Properly Basic?

Let us turn now to a few of MacGregor's central arguments in favor of gratuitous evil (premise 2 of EA). MacGregor begins by arguing that one's belief in the existence of gratuitous evil is properly basic and thereby rational in the absence of overriding defeaters. Let us assume here for the sake of argument that MacGregor takes the belief in type-gratuitous evil in particular to be properly basic. The question as to whether or not belief in the existence of (type) gratuitous evil can be properly basic is a fascinating one that, I think, deserves much more attention than it has received in the literature on the evidential problem of evil.

Let's say that for any particular instance of evil, *e*, person *S* immediately and non-inferentially forms the following belief *B* when confronted with *e*:

B: It's true or likely that *e* is an instance of (type) gratuitous evil.

As with any properly basic belief, the idea here is that *S* forms *B* non-inferentially, that is, not on the basis of any other beliefs *S* might hold. In the absence of any propositional or non-propositional defeaters that would undermine *B*, *B* is properly basic for *S*.

As stated, affirming the proper basicity of *B* for *S* is equivalent to affirming the proper basicity of the belief that God's permission of *e* or some evil equally bad or worse is not necessary for the obtaining of an outweighing good (or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse). Alternatively, it is the claim that the following belief *B** is properly basic for *S*:

⁸In particular, see Rowe's (1979) comparison of condition (i) and (ii) on page 336. See also Chrzan (1988), Feinberg (1994: 270), Howard-Synder (1999: 118-119), Rhoda (2010: 289-291), and Trakakis (2007: 322-324). Granted, if MacGregor's target was the evidential argument in the form of what van Inwagen calls 'local argument from evil' then he would be correct in thinking that the existence of token-gratuitous evil—particular instances of evil that are themselves in no way necessary to secure a greater good—would in no way call into question the existence of a wholly good and omnipotent God.

B^* : It's true or likely that there is no outweighing good that could be secured by God (or some worse evil that could be avoided by God) only if e or some evil equally bad or worse were permitted.

When one unpacks B in terms of B^* I think the plausibility of B^* being the sort of belief that can be properly basic to S becomes more remote. Anyone with even an ounce of sympathy for skeptical theism might retort here that we have little reason to think that our cognitive faculties are fine-grained enough to track the full scope of existing goods available to an omniscient and wholly good God. For all we know, there may be a variety of yet unknown goods that, were they to exist, would suffice to outweigh e and God would therein be justified in permitting e or evils similar in kind in so far as their permission is necessary to secure such goods. This, of course, is no argument in favor of such goods; rather, it is simply to point out that to assert that humans are able to form beliefs regarding the *non-existence* of such goods in the properly basic way assumes that they would be attune to such goods if they were there, the very thing at stake in the debate over the skeptical theist rejoinder to EA.

Along the same lines, while we might grant MacGregor that humans have a "faculty for moral discrimination" it is a further step to say that when confronted with e , one immediately forms beliefs of the sort picked out by B^* by means of that faculty. There appears to be a salient difference between forming the moral belief, on the basis of one's faculty for moral discrimination, that "the deliberate taking of innocent human life is morally wrong" and the moral belief encapsulated in B^* when confronted with an instance of evil, say a murder. For one, the former is a belief about a particular good (or, more specifically, the contravening of that good) pertaining to human well-being. The latter, however, presents itself as a belief about the scope and size of the domain of existing goods *per se*. Without some independent reason to think that our faculty for moral discrimination is currently capable of tracking all existing goods *per se* (and not merely all existing goods that are amenable to human discovery), we have little reason to think that such a moral faculty is capable of producing beliefs with content resembling B^* in an immediate and non-inferential fashion.

Be that as it may, many Christian theists of a particular stripe may well have a defeater for B^* from other beliefs embedded within their noetic structure. As Plantinga (2000: 485) points out with respect to theistic belief in general, "Coming to see the full horror of the evil the world displays might

be a defeater for theistic belief with respect to some noetic structure and not with respect to *others*.”

So what specific beliefs might a theist hold that would defeat the proper basicity of B^* ? I think the conjunction of the following are as good as any:

B_1 : God is essentially morally perfect.

and,

B_2 : God exercises meticulous providence in the world.

In order to see how the conjunction of B_1 and B_2 may suffice to provide an overriding defeater for B^* , consider the following intuitive moral principle affirmed by many atheists and theists alike which plausibly undergirds the truth of premise 1 of EA:⁹

MP: If one is in a position to prevent some evil e , it would be morally wrong to allow e to occur, unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh e or preventing e would result in some other evil at least as bad.¹⁰

Consider an oft-cited example illustrating MP: the pain and suffering that results from the radiation and chemotherapy of aggressive cancer-treatment.¹¹ Suppose the parents of a young child diagnosed with stage-four cancer are, in fact, in a position to prevent the child’s experiencing such pain and suffering. Would it be morally wrong for them to allow it to occur? I think the natural and intuitive answer here would be that it depends on whether or not it’s possible for the good in question to be secured by less horrendous means other than the radiation and chemotherapy. If it were indeed possible that the eradication of the stage-four cancer could be secured by a less heinous means (say by oral medication), then it seems right to say that the child’s parents ought not allow the pain and suffering to occur. If the parents proceeded to subject their child to all-things-considered *needless* pain and suffering, then we would rightly question their moral standing.

⁹On the principle (or something very similar) Rowe (1979, 336) states, “This premise (or something not too distant from it) is ...held in common by many atheists and nontheists...[It] seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists.”

¹⁰This is adapted from van Inwagen (2006: 100).

¹¹See Bergmann (2012).

Now consider MP as it pertains to the case at hand. The theistic belief that God is essentially morally perfect, stated in B_1 , amounts (in part) to the claim that it is impossible for God to do what is morally wrong. In addition, a great many theists are fond of the belief that God exercises a rather strong, meticulous variety of providence in the world, B_2 , which I assume here entails (at the very least) a commitment to God's comprehensive knowledge of the future.

How might a theist of this particular stripe—one who affirms both B_1 and B_2 —think about MP in the case of God? For those theists who adopt some form of meticulous providence—say theological determinism or Molinism—God will certainly be in a position to prevent e given His strong providential hand and exhaustive foreknowledge of the future. Coupled with the belief that God is essentially morally perfect as per B_1 , our theist might infer that it would be *impossible* for a wholly good God to allow e to occur, unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh e or preventing e would result in some other evil at least as bad; that is, unless God had a morally sufficient reason for doing so.¹² But note that the conjunction of B_1 and B_2 , together with the truth of MP and the assumption that God has in fact allowed for e to occur, entails the falsity of B^* . Consequently, for theists who have B_1 and B_2 within their overall noetic structure, and in so far as the conjunction of these two beliefs and the truth of MP entail the falsity of B^* , then such a theist has a defeater for B^* .¹³

3 Is the Greater-Good Defense Incoherent?

We now come to what is perhaps the most ambitious argument against the greater-good defense and in favor of the existence of gratuitous evil. MacGregor poses the following dilemma: “either evil is necessary for God to

¹²See Judisch (2012) for a defense of the claim that Molinists in particular are no worse off than Open Theists regarding the existence of gratuitous evil.

¹³I think it interesting that many theists who affirm the existence of gratuitous evil are apt to deny meticulous providence. For instance, see Hasker (2004), Little (2013), and Peterson (1982). Ironically, MacGregor himself gives the impression that he holds to the conjunction of B_1 and B_2 and therefore has a defeater for B^* . In addition to advancing arguments aimed to preserve the moral perfection of God, in the latter part of his article he explicitly “draws upon insights from the *scientia media* tradition” (176). Hence, I see no reason why—apart from an outright rejection of MP—MacGregor wouldn't himself have a defeater for B^* given his apparent acceptance of both B_1 and B_2 .

bring about greater good than would have otherwise transpired, or evil is morally unnecessary” (169). He then goes on to argue that the first horn of the dilemma—representing the greater-good defense—undermines Orthodox Christian theism by compromising both the omnibenevolence and the omnipotence of God.

With respect to the first lemma of the first horn of the dilemma, MacGregor argues that “if God permits evils to bring about greater good, then God operates according to the principle that the ends justify the means, despite that he explicitly denounces this principle as unethical in Scripture and punishes humans who act in precisely the same way as he purportedly does” (169). If the “ends” here refer to the obtaining of the outweighing good secured by the permission of the evil, and the “means” correspond to God’s permission of an instance of evil (the means to securing the greater good), then it is no part of the greater-good defense that the obtaining of the outweighing good “justifies” God’s act of permitting the instances of evil, if by “justifies” here MacGregor means that the obtaining good state of affairs fixes or determines the moral rightness of God’s act.

It is widely acknowledged by friend and foe of theism alike that God’s being justified in permitting an instance of evil that is necessary to secure a greater, outweighing good harbors no particular commitment to how the moral rightness of actions (whether human or divine) are fixed or determined, whether by the overall goodness of the consequences or by certain intrinsic features of the act itself.¹⁴ The core of the greater-good defense can be easily recast in language that is more conducive to deontological principles as follows: God has a moral duty to not permit instances of evil and suffering that he could have easily prevented without thereby diminishing the overall moral goodness in the world.

Let us turn to the second lemma of the first horn, that the greater-good defense undermines God’s omnipotence. MacGregor states, “Contra divine omnipotence, by suggesting that evil is necessary to good, the Greater-Good Defense leads to the unwanted implication that if there are goods than can

¹⁴See Howard-Snyder (1999: 116-117), Rowe (1979: n. 3), and Trakakis (2007: 319-320) for a sampling. Trakakis (2007: 319-320) states, “The theological premise, however, need not be read in this consequentialist way. Indeed, it seems more faithful to Rowe’s intentions to read the theological premise as stating, roughly, that God is justified in permitting an evil E only if E is necessary for some greater good G, where G is not restricted to goods that result from the occurrence of E but may also include some deontological moral requirement.”

only occur through divine permission of evils, then there exist logically possible tasks that God cannot perform—namely, bringing about various goods in the absence of evils” (169).

The objection fundamentally misunderstands the very heart of the greater-good defense. As far as I can tell, MacGregor’s worry here is that in so far as the greater-good defense is committed to the notion that God allows occurrences of evil that are logically necessary to secure outweighing goods, then this implies that God cannot do all that is logically possible, in particular, bring about the particular outweighing goods without allowing such evils. The argument begs the question that it is in fact possible to secure the relevant outweighing goods without permitting the evils in question. The only way MacGregor can affirm that God’s “bringing about various goods in absence of evils” is logically possible is if he presupposes that God’s allowing the evil is not, in fact, *necessary* for the outweighing goods, precisely what the proponent of the greater-good defense denies.

4 Is There Evidence of Gratuitous Evil from Scripture?

As for Scriptural considerations regarding the existence of gratuitous evil, MacGregor is unequivocal: “[f]ar from guaranteeing that no evil is truly pointless, I propose that Scripture actually teaches the existence of gratuitous evil in the world” (172). MacGregor offers two Scriptural arguments on behalf of gratuitous evil, only one of which I have space to consider. The argument centers on two tragic events recorded in Luke 13 and Jesus’ response to them: Pilate’s slaughter of the Galileans and the falling of a tower in Siloam that killed eighteen people. Contrary to greater-good style reasoning, MacGregor argues that Jesus “discloses no overarching divine purpose, such as punishment for sin, for these atrocities, but insinuates their pointless character...” (172).

First, it needs to be pointed out that from the fact that Jesus discloses no overarching reason why God would allow these tragic episodes, it simply does not follow that no such reason exists. There is an important difference between one’s asserting ‘not-p’ and one’s failing to assert ‘p.’ Here MacGregor unjustifiably infers from Jesus’ failing to assert an overarching divine reason for allowing these atrocities (p), that therefore Jesus asserts that there

is no overarching divine reason (not-p).

But even *if* we were to grant that Luke 13 leaves interpretive room for Jesus' asserting the non-existence of an overarching reason as opposed to his failing to assert the existence of such a reason, the immediate context warrants only the exclusion of the claim that God's overarching reason for allowing such events to occur was for the purpose of divine punishment of sin in particular; to infer from this particular passage that Jesus teaches that there is no morally sufficient reason *whatsoever* for God's allowing the evils to take place would be an unjustified extrapolation from the text.

5 A Leibnizian Denial of Premise 1 of EA

Seeing positive reasons for the Christian theist to affirm premise 2 of EA, MacGregor argues that the most "fruitful path for Christian theists to take in terms of apologetic tactics" (173) is to reject premise 1 of EA. MacGregor then argues for the compatibility of God and gratuitous evil by advancing the Leibnizian line that evil is a logical consequence of creation per se in so far as the nature of evil consists in "a lack, limitation, or incompleteness in something that is good, namely, an absence of the complete limitless fulfillment that equals perfection" (173). By his lights, it is logically impossible for God to create a world without evil in that "if God chose to create anything at all, evil would necessarily come into existence, not because God created or caused it, but because whatever God created would not be God" (174).

Most importantly, the argument appropriates Leibniz's mischaracterization of the traditional scholastic understanding of the metaphysics of evil. As Samuel Newlands (forthcoming) has recently pointed out, Leibniz misconstrues the traditional scholastic position on the metaphysics of evil in so far as he collapses the distinction between a *negation*, *limitation*, or *lack* of being or goodness per se with a *privation* of being or goodness, that is, *one that is that is due to a thing in virtue of its nature*. This distinction is clearly noted by Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* I, q. 48, a. 3.:

But not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a privative and in a negative sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for

instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil.¹⁵

Contrary to Leibniz and MacGregor, it is the absence of being or goodness that is due a thing by nature that constitutes the nature of evil for the scholastics, not the lack or negation of being or goodness *per se*.

One worrisome consequence noted by the scholastics concerning the sort of metaphysic of evil endorsed by MacGregor (and Leibniz), one whose force MacGregor doesn't seem moved by in the least, is that *everything* that is not identical to God is intrinsically evil. And if creation is a distinctively causal notion, it is difficult to see how God would not be directly causally involved in bringing evil into existence in virtue of His being the immediate causal source of every entity that is not identical to Himself.

Even stronger, however, is the fact that the view entails that it metaphysically impossible for God to create anything intrinsically good in so far as it is impossible for God to create Himself (assuming of course that God alone is intrinsically perfect and without limitation *per se*); consequently, everything that God creates *or could possibly create* is intrinsically evil. As noted by Newlands, this view is more at home in a neo-Platonic metaphysic than a Christian theistic one in that "the bulk of the Western Christian tradition rejected the evil as negation view as inadequate" (5).

For the foregoing reasons, then, neither the existence of all-things-considered pointless or gratuitous evil (the truth of premise 2 of EA) nor the compatibility of Christian theism with such evil (the rejection of premise 1 of EA) is adequately motivated by the above arguments advanced by MacGregor.

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¹⁵Newlands (forthcoming, p. 44, n. xvi) points out that Suarez also makes this point against the evil as negation view: "a thing is not evil for not having a more excellent perfection if it ought not to have it; otherwise, every creature would be evil for not having the perfection of the Creator."

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