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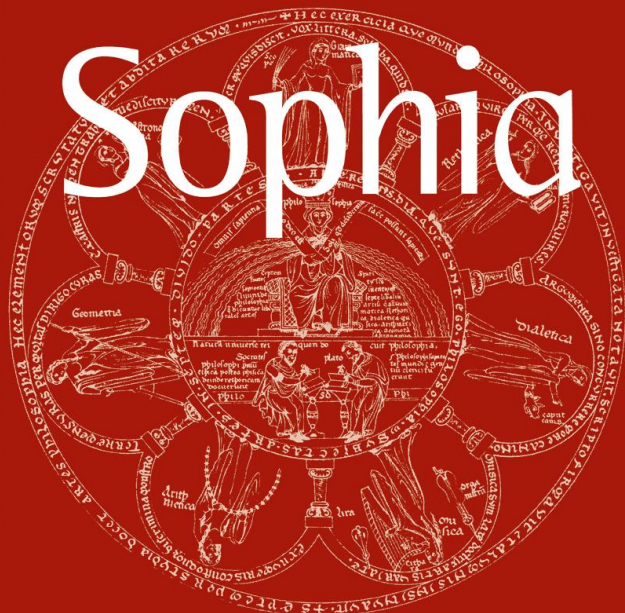
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Reply to Oppy on God, the Best and Evil

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Abstract My reply corrects one misstatement in Oppy's summary of my book, abandons a footnote in the light of one of Oppy's criticisms, and argues that Oppy's other criticisms do not succeed in showing either that my claims are mistaken or that the arguments by which I supported them are defective.

Keywords God · Theodicy · Omniscience · Infinite value · Compatibilism · Rational choice · Infinite hierarchies of options · Moral evil · Oppy

I thank Graham Oppy for his careful attention to my book and for his stimulating criticisms, which I will deal with in the order he presented them. Before doing so, however, I should draw attention to one misstatement in his account of my partial theodicies.

God's Policies and Human Responsibility

Oppy says:

Langtry argues that if God ensures that there is no suffering and dysfunction, then rational creatures are not free and morally responsible in refraining from causing individual instances of suffering or dysfunction, and whether or not rational creatures undergo any suffering or dysfunction does not depend on individual rational creatures' personalities, values, beliefs, tastes, reasoning, or intentions—and the value that has thereby been lost is very great, and greater than the disvalue of there being some suffering and dysfunction. In connection

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with the amount of suffering and dysfunction, Langtry argues that if God ensures that there is not much suffering and dysfunction, then rational creatures have a low degree of freedom and moral responsibility...

When I wrote my chapter on theodicy, I remained neutral among theological compatibilism, Molinism, and open theism, and I was well aware that theological compatibilists and Molinists hold that in general God can ensure that such-and-such does not occur—i.e., strongly or weakly actualize its non-occurrence—while nevertheless humans remain free and morally responsible in refraining from causing it to occur, and whether or not it occurs depends on individual humans' distinctive personal traits. Accordingly, I did not assert and support the propositions that Oppy ascribes to me. What I argued instead was that if God were to have *a moral duty, independent of any contingent truths about the universe*, to ensure that there is no suffering or dysfunction (or not much suffering and dysfunction), then the stated consequences would follow. The difference is vital. My core argument concerning suffering and dysfunction was formulated as a *reductio* of the assumption that God has such a moral duty.

Defining 'Omniscience'

Oppy addresses the following account of divine omniscience:

God is omniscient in world W if and only if God exists in W and for any proposition p that is true in W, in W it is the case that either God knows that p, or else he does not, but his knowing that p is not precluded by any defect or limitation in his intrinsic cognitive capacities.¹

Oppy objects:

Suppose that there are things that God does not know, not because of defects or limitations in his intrinsic cognitive capacities, but simply through inattention or performance error. Surely that would count against his omniscience.²

I reply that if there are things of which God is ignorant because of inattention or performance error, then it follows that God's intrinsic cognitive capacities are defective or limited. Obviously, if they are unlimited then God *can* pay attention simultaneously to everything that is currently happening. Might he choose not to do so? Perhaps. Nevertheless, one good, survival-conducive feature of human cognitive capacities is that we can, and often do, acquire information about matters to which we are not paying attention – for example, your perceptual system sometimes detects events on the periphery of your visual field and induces appropriate motor responses even while you are focused on events in front of you. Other things being equal, it would be advantageous to us if we typically acquired more information we than do, without paying attention – for example, it would reduce the time we spent searching for things. (Similar points can be made about distraction.) So if God's causal

¹ *God, the Best, and Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2008, p. 39.

² Graham Oppy, 'Langtry on God, the Best, and Evil,' *Sophia* (p. 2).

capacities are non-defective and unlimited, and if he does not pay attention to everything that is currently happening, then he would not lack knowledge as a result of his inattention. (Similar points can be made about distraction.)

We can rule out cases in which theoretical or practical irrationality contributes to God's ignorance of some truth. The former (and, many philosophers would add, the latter) involves a defect in God's cognitive capacities. The latter is incompatible with God's perfect goodness, which I take to involve a lot more than being perfectly morally good. (Remember that my working definition defines 'omniscience' only in the context '*God* is omniscient.')

Thus, relevant performance error does not involve irrationality, but presumably involves some unsuccessful action by God aimed at acquiring knowledge or some action by God which prevents what otherwise would have been God's acquiring knowledge without his acting in order to acquire it.

God's unlimited, non-defective cognitive capacities yield *direct* knowledge of past and present states of affairs, so cognitive performance is involved only with respect to the future. If the doctrine I call Comprehensive Providence is true, then God's unlimited, non-defective cognitive capacities give him exhaustive knowledge of the future via deductive inference from current and past states of affairs (including his own intentions).³

Let us, then, consider scenarios involving future states of affairs that God does not strongly or weakly actualize. God attaches degrees of belief to propositions about these states of affairs. The only 'performance' involved in yielding these degrees of belief is surely non-deductive inference from God's exhaustive knowledge of the present and the past. Could God infer badly, and so make a mistake with respect to degrees of belief? Not through inattention, or through irrationality, for reasons explained before. For example, one good, survival-conducive feature of human cognitive capacities is that we can, and often do, make valid inferences, and avoid invalid ones, even when our attention is claimed by other matters, and (other things being equal) we would be better off if we could make even more complex inferences in this way than we currently can. So if God's causal capacities are non-defective and unlimited, then performance error seems ruled out.

I conclude that there cannot be things that God does not know, not because of defects or limitations in his intrinsic cognitive capacities, but simply through inattention or performance error. Thus, my account of omniscience is vindicated against the objection.

Modus Ponens for Counterfactuals

Footnote 18 on page 28 of my book was there to explain why I formulated my definition of 'counterfactual of creaturely freedom' the way that I did, rather than in some equivalent but more convoluted way. Oppy is objecting not to the definition, but to the claim that constituted my explanation, viz., that *God strongly actualizes A*

³ Comprehensive Providence is the following doctrine: Everything that occurs is either intended by God or is an unintended consequence of what he intends. God plays an active causal role that *guarantees* that both his intentions are fulfilled and their unintended consequences occur. God is in complete control of all that occurs. All of God's decisions are reached before he implements any of them.

and *If God were to strongly actualize A then he would thereby weakly actualize B* do not together entail *B obtains*. He rightly says that my argument was invalid.

Although most philosophers working on conditionals favor modus ponens for counterfactuals, their opinion is sometimes disputed.⁴ I now intend to avoid the controversy by abandoning footnote 18. Doing so will not adversely affect the status of the text to which it is a footnote, or anything else in the book.

Measures of Quantitative Value

Section 2.1.2 of *God, the Best, and Evil* concludes that we lack good reasons for holding that a plausible aggregative theory of value, if there is one, will assign infinite (quantitative) values to some worlds. Section 2.1.3 considers whether there are good arguments *against* there being infinitely valuable worlds. I could not find any direct arguments to this effect and so instead considered Greg Restall's challenge to proponents of infinite value: what are they to say against proposed 'measures' of value that exclude infinite value? He gave an example of such a measure. I argued that Restall's measure yielded absurd results.

Oppy responds that it does so sometimes, but not always:

There is no doubt that what Langtry says about length and mass is correct: additive properties cannot be properly handled by Restall's proposal. However, what Langtry says about temperature is plainly wrong. If I take two bodies that are at 30° and join them together, the temperature of the conjoined body is ... 30° (not 60°). It is well known that there are no in-principle objections to adopting a temperature scale that conforms to Restall's g-function. (For a nice discussion of these—and other—matters, see P. Ehrlich (1982) 'Negative, Infinite and Hotter than Infinite Temperatures,' *Synthese* 50, 57–76.) Moreover, as Langtry himself notes, there are reasons for supposing that value is not an additive property (in the way that length and mass are). So, at the very least, it seems to me that Restall's question remains alive: if value is more like temperature than it is like length, then it seems that it will just be a matter of convention—i.e., a matter of arbitrary choice of scale—whether or not we say that there are infinite values.⁵

I have several points to make about what Oppy says here. Firstly, if Restall's g-function gives absurd results when applied to length and mass, then it gives absurd results when applied to temperature. When discussing temperature, we normally use some linear scale, rather than, say, a logarithmic one. Yes, temperature, unlike length and mass, is non-additive: the temperature of an object having three parts is not the sum of the temperatures of the respective parts. Nevertheless, to calculate the current average temperature of an object whose three equally sized parts have different temperatures x , y , and z , respectively, we use the function $f(x, y, z) = (x + y + z)/3$. The g-function gives different results depending on whether we use the Celsius or the Fahrenheit numbers. If we put $x=30^{\circ}\text{C}$, $y=40^{\circ}\text{C}$, and $z=50^{\circ}\text{C}$, then the g-function yields the following

⁴ For example, by William G. Lycan, 'MPP, Rip' *Philosophical Perspectives* 7 (1993), 411–428.

⁵ Oppy, op. cit. pp. 6–7. Philip Ehrlich's article is in fact on pp. 233–277 of the *Synthese* volume.

reasoning about the average temperature: $g(x,y,z)=f_x(40)=40 \text{ N}/41^\circ\text{C}=0.976 \text{ N}^\circ\text{C}$, which is $33.756 \text{ N}^\circ\text{F}$. If for 30, 40, and 50 we substitute the Fahrenheit equivalents, we get $g(x,y,z) = f_x[(86 + 104 + 122)/3] = f_x(104) = 104\text{N}/105\text{N}^\circ\text{F} = 0.990^\circ\text{F}$, which is $-17.23 \text{ N}^\circ\text{C}$. The discrepancy surely gives us decisive reasons for not using the g -function to measure temperature. A similar issue would arise if we were calculating the rise in temperature of a litre of water in an electric kettle that would have taken place one minute after turning on the electricity switch in our kitchen.

Secondly, I do not see how anything in Ehrlich's paper overthrows the foregoing argument. Instead, Ehrlich makes a different point having at least some bearing on our current concerns: that in terms of Kelvin's absolute temperature function T we can define at least one temperature function, T' , that provides infinite temperatures, and in terms of T' one can assign at least one other, T'' , that provides only finite temperatures. He does not claim that it is just a matter of convention—i.e., a matter of arbitrary choice of scale—whether or not we say that the actual world contains objects having infinite temperatures. His view is that the matter must be settled by theoretical considerations grounded in empirical evidence:

From what we have said it should be clear that the existence of an actual infinity is not a necessary consequence of assigning the values ∞ and/or $-\infty$ to systems on an absolute scale. The only conclusions that can be drawn from the assignment of such values are that there are the hottest and/or coldest thermal states and, moreover, that these states are occupied. *To determine whether or not the occupation of such states implies the existence of an actual infinity, we must appeal to experience and our physical theories.*⁶

Thirdly, suppose that, contrary to the conclusion I drew at the end of Sect. 2.1.2, we had good reasons (falling short of proof) for holding that there is at least one infinitely valuable world. Would reflection on the existence of the temperature function T'' give us non-decisive but significant grounds for holding both that (1) we could define a value function Val , which assigns only finite numbers to valuable states of affairs, and that (2) the availability of Val should lead us to abandon the view there is at least one infinitely valuable world? The foregoing quotation from Ehrlich's paper suggests that the answer is *No*. If we should agree with Ehrlich about whether the actual world contains objects having infinite temperatures is to be decided not by mathematics alone but instead on empirical grounds, then surely we should hold that whether there is at least one infinitely valuable world is to be decided by metaphysical argument. Now at the beginning of this paragraph I introduced the supposition that we had good reasons (falling short of proof) for holding that there is at least one infinitely valuable world. I cannot see that there is any countervailing mathematical argument that overthrows the foregoing reasons (whatever they are). Hence I reaffirm the main conclusion of 2.1.3 that given the assumption that some aggregative theory of the goodness of worlds is true, currently there are no good arguments against there being at least one infinitely valuable world.⁷

⁶ Ehrlich, *op. cit.*, pp.267-268. The italics are mine.

⁷ On p. 50 of the book I expressed my view that aggregative theories of the goodness of worlds are hopeless.

Compatibilism

Oppy next addresses an extended line of argument that appears on pp. 61–63 of *God, the Best, and Evil*, and is echoed in several later places:

As Langtry points out, there are different specific versions of compatibilism; however, they typically say something like this: S acts freely in doing A in circumstances C at time t in world w if in doing A, S acts on S's normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions, etc., and is not subject to certain kinds of external constraints. ... I can't see that, on a compatibilist analysis of freedom, there is a relevant difference between no person's ever performing a morally wrong act and no person's ever reading aloud the second 1,000 digits in the decimal expansion of pi (even if it is in some sense an accident that God has chosen to make a world in which no person ever reads aloud the second 1,000 digits in the decimal expansion of pi, and not in that same sense an accident that no person ever performs a morally wrong act).⁸

If your legs have been amputated, and no prostheses are available today, then you are not free to walk today. This truth should surely be accommodated by one of the external constraints to which Oppy alludes. For similar reasons, you are not free to construct a machine that, when started, will be in principle capable of remaining in operation forever, and doing work over and above merely keeping itself going.⁹ You might try many different designs and notice that each prototype you test contains a different proximate cause of its failure. But underlying all the detailed, distinctive causal stories of the prototypes is a more general, insurmountable fact: the first and second laws of thermodynamics together rule out the existence of a machine of the kind you are trying to build. Furthermore, if your doing some action A is logically inconsistent with the conjunction of the laws of nature and *There is carbon* or *There are planets* or *Our universe began with a Big Bang*, then you are not free to do A.

Compatibilism, the generic position of which there are many more specific versions, should be formulated as the view that an action's being free is compatible with its being determined, and that an action is free if and only if it is caused in some way that the correct compatibilist theory will identify as the *right* kind of way. This wording reflects the fact that, while some compatibilists hold that *free action* entails *determined action*, others do not. In leaving 'right kind of way' to be filled out by some specific theory, it is similar to Oppy's account, which leaves 'normally acquired' and 'certain external constraints' to be filled out. The generic position leaves it open whether if some specific compatibilist theory turns out to be the correct one, then that theory is consistent with the claims made in the preceding paragraph.

On pp. 61–63 I was considering what follows from three assumptions: *God exists*, and *God's omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness jointly entail that if God can create a maximal world then he does*, and *necessarily, every maximal world contains many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures*, and *no*

⁸ Oppy, op. cit., p. 7.

⁹ The phrase 'in principle capable of' is inserted because the device does not need to possess immunity from destruction by earthquakes, disassembly by engineers, and so on.

morally wrong ones. I argued that if these three propositions were all true then the non-occurrence of morally wrong choices and actions would be very deeply entrenched in the universe, so that people would be no more free to perform a morally wrong action than they would be to do A (where doing A is logically inconsistent with the conjunction of the laws of nature and *There is carbon*, etc). I pointed out that compatibilists who agree with me can continue to maintain that God has made many upstream providential decisions that determine what we will do or not do, which do not undermine our freedom in action or refraining from action. It is hard to see that Oppy has offered a successful objection to the foregoing line of thought.

Infinite Hierarchies of Options

Oppy now turns his attention to Sect. 3.3 of my book. I have several comments to make. Firstly, he is right in saying that the issue is not whether the life of any inhabitant of our universe could be prolonged by as many as, say, 10^{130} days. As I said on p. 77, ‘... what did the work in the story employing the word ‘you’ is the underlying thesis that it is logically possible that there be *some* good and *some* agent such that the marginal value of the good for the agent is always positive.’

Secondly, let us consider Oppy’s claim that finite agents can represent only finitely many alternatives and so cannot be faced with decisions between infinite hierarchies of any kind. To get us started, suppose that a wealthy aunt offers to give you any amount of money in dollars you choose, between one dollar and a billion dollars. You can represent the first option by a token of ‘1,’ the second option by a token of ‘2’ and so on. But do you have enough time, energy, and neural storage capacity to generate one billion tokens? If not, this limitation does not prevent your having one billion options (plus the option of declining to choose a dollar amount). You need not represent every one of them separately by a token numeral in order to understand the alternatives open to you and to make a choice. In choosing, you employ a representation of the number of days chosen, as well as various ranges of numbers of days, but doing so is well within your capacity, since each number of days is such that you can produce a corresponding token numeral, and for each range you might consider you can produce an appropriate description, such as ‘at least 200 million days,’ ‘between 500 and 800 million days.’ The case of the example involving the superior being is similar. You need not represent all of your infinitely many options in order to understand the alternatives open to you and to choose between them. After all, our current system of numerals can be supplemented indefinitely by conventions enabling you to produce token numerals and descriptions representing vastly many numbers of days and ranges of numbers of days that could not be represented before.

Thirdly, what about Oppy’s view that there cannot be infinite hierarchies of states of affairs ordered according to how good they are *for* a given finite agent? Elsewhere in the book, I argued in a way that can be adapted to support the proposition there are no worlds containing people whose lives are infinitely better than our own.¹⁰ But the truth of this proposition does not cast doubt on the key thesis that it is logically

¹⁰ Cf. *God, the Best, and Evil*, p. 58.

possible that there be some good and some agent such that the marginal value of the good for the agent is always positive and that accordingly it is logically possible that some agent face an infinite hierarchy of options that are better and better.

Fourthly, I am very puzzled by Oppy's argument

- (1) All possible worlds share an initial segment with the actual world and diverge from it only as a result of the outworkings of objective chance.
- (2) All possible agents are creatures much like ourselves.
- (3) Therefore, it is impossible for there to be agents who are faced with infinite hierarchies to choose between.

Re (1): Russell thought that there is a possible world that began in a state qualitatively very similar to the state the actual world was in five minutes ago. What considerations show that he was wrong? Given that the initial segment of our world involved a Big Bang, what considerations show that there is no possible world lacking a Big Bang? Re (2): this entails that it is logically impossible that God exists—an odd *premise* to use in a discussion of *God, the Best, and Evil!* I can see, more or less, how Oppy might think that (2) entails (3), though as indicated above, I disagree with him; but I cannot see why he thinks that the argument from (2) to (3) is strengthened by the addition of (1).

Oppy's Probabilistic Argument from Moral Evil

In my footnote 22 on page 186 of the book, I criticized a probabilistic argument from moral evil that Oppy offers as a natural development from what he calls the standard moral argument from moral evil; the argument has a conclusion contrary to the one sketched in my Section 7.12. Oppy replies that I misunderstood premise 2 of his argument and that 2 correctly understood is very plausible. He formulates his preferred version of 2 as follows: (2*) *Necessarily, for any universe in which someone freely chooses the bad, there is a non-arbitrarily better universe in which everyone always freely chooses the good.*¹¹

But Oppy is not in a position to maintain that 1, 2*, and 3 jointly entail 4. To see this, consider the supposition, which I take to be both compatible with 2* and epistemically possible, that there is an infinite hierarchy of better and better universes such that both 2* is true and also, for any universe in which everyone always freely chooses the good, there is a non-arbitrarily better universe in which someone freely chooses the bad.

Incidentally, consider the result of adding to the premises the negation of the supposition stated in the preceding paragraph. Then 1, 2*, 3, and this new proposition would still not entail 4. We would need yet another additional premise, which Oppy is, quite reasonably, taking for granted in the present context: *Necessarily, for any universe in which either there are no free choices or the free choices are all neither good nor bad, there is a non-arbitrarily better universe in which everyone always freely chooses the good.*

¹¹ Oppy, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Conclusion

Although my footnote 18 on page 28 involved a fallacious argument, with respect to the other points on which Oppy expresses disagreement with my views, I do not think he has succeeded in showing either that my claims are mistaken or that the arguments by which I supported them are defective.