




An Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy

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Abstract

I develop a new theodicy in defense of Anselmian theism, one that has several advantages over traditional and recent replies to the Problem of Evil. To make my case, I first explain the value of a *positive trajectory*: a forward-in-time decrease in ‘first-order-gratuitous’ evil: evil that is not necessary for any equal-or-greater *first-order* good, but may be necessary for a higher-order good, such as the good of strongly positive axiological trajectory. Positive trajectory arguably contributes goodness to a world in proportion to the magnitude of this trajectory, and worlds that contain first-order-gratuitous evil thereby have the potential to contain a strongly positive trajectory. This would arguably explain why God would permit first-order-gratuitous evils: he may be indifferent between a world with no first-order-gratuitous evil (and thus a flat trajectory) and a world with some first-order-gratuitous evil but a strongly positive trajectory. Next, I answer the most salient objections to this theodicy. Finally, I explain how this theodicy is superior to some common theodicies.

Keywords Theodicy · Problem of evil · Gratuitous evil · Axiology · Anselmian theism

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Introduction

The standard Problem of Evil is intended to provide evidence against Anselmian theism, according to which God is the maximally great, omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect creator of the universe.¹ The currently most-prominent version of the Problem of Evil (Rowe 1979) argues that God would not permit *gratuitous evil*: evil that he could have prevented without thereby sacrificing an equal or greater good. Yet arguably, gratuitous evil exists. No single reply to the Problem has emerged as a consensus solution.² Therefore, defenders of Anselmian theism have reason to look for a new approach.

One may roughly summarize the four extant types of reply to the Problem of Evil as follows, although there is some overlap between these tactics. First, *theodacists* defend explanations for why a morally perfect God might nevertheless allow the evils we observe. This would normally occur because the evil necessary for some equal-or-greater first-order good,³ such as significant free-will (Plantinga 1977: 33–34), soul-making (Hick 1977: 375), regular laws of nature (Reichenbach 1976; van Inwagen 2006: 114 ff.), or incarnation and atonement (Plantinga 2004), but God could also be morally obligated to permit some evil that was not, *in itself*, necessary for some equal or greater good (cf. Leftow 2013).⁴ Second, *skeptical theists* (Wykstra 1984) argue that for all we know, God has a morally sufficient reason to allow the evils in the world. Third, *radicals* argue that gratuitous evil is compatible with God's existence after all, or that a morally perfect God might not necessarily eliminate gratuitous evils (Kraay 2010; van Inwagen 1988: 167 ff.; Murphy 2017). Last, *Mooreans* bite the bullet of admitting that evil is *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God, but argue that our total evidence does not render theism *ultima facie* irrational (cf. Rowe 1979: 339 and Plantinga 2008: 170–71).

I will present a theodicy that purports to explain why God would permit some evils that are gratuitous in a certain sense to be explained momentarily. In brief, my theodicy holds that there is value in a *positive axiological-trajectory*. This occurs when over time, the amount and magnitude of first-order-gratuitous evils (evils unnecessary for any first-order good) decreases. God might have a morally sufficient reason to permit many first-order-gratuitous evils, as long as the amount and magnitude of these evils decrease over time, because this decrease is, itself, a good—indeed, a good that cannot exist unless there are such first-order-gratuitous evils.

My theodicy is not a form of Mooreanism, because it holds that evil is little evidence, at best, against the existence of God. It's not exactly radicalism, because it admits that God's existence is incompatible with gratuitous evil of a certain sort. It's not skeptical theism, because it affirms that we do indeed know the good for which some

¹ Mackie (1955: 200) and Rowe (1979: 335), on the first pages of their landmark articles, indicate that they are targeting Anselmian theism.

² Most philosophers are at-least-sympathetic to the core of the Problem of Evil; cf. Bourget and Chalmers 2014: 476. I assume that if most philosophers are atheists, then at-least-most philosophers are at-least-sympathetic to the Problem of Evil.

³ A first-order good is a good that is not in itself about distributions or magnitudes of goodness or evil; see below.

⁴ Strictly speaking, Leftow (2013) could count as what I'm calling a 'radical,' not a 'theodacist,' but I view him as at theodacist because he is explaining why it would be morally imperfect for God to prevent some evils. In any case, not much turns on this distinction in the rest of my paper.

evil is necessary. But it's not a traditional theodicy, either, because it does not argue that the evils we observe are necessary for any of the familiar, first-order goods.

The Value of Axiological Trajectory

Ironically, the seeds of my theodicy are in J. L. Mackie's landmark *defense* of the Problem of Evil. In his discussion of objections and replies, Mackie distinguishes 'first-order' and 'second-order' goods and evils. First-order goods are familiar goods such as happiness, moral virtue, and freedom: goods that are not inherently about the distribution or magnitude of other goods. First-order evils are the evils commonly mentioned in presentations of the Problem of Evil: nonhuman animals' suffering, moral evil, natural disasters, and the rest: again, evils that are not inherently about the distribution or magnitude of other evils. In turn, first-order-*gratuitous* evils will be evils that are not necessary for any first-order goods. Mackie makes the following interesting claims:

[Second-order good] includes ... the gradual decrease of first-order evil and increase of first order good [Second-order evil] ... would include ... states in which [first-order good] is decreasing and [first-order evil] is increasing. (Mackie 1955: 206–7).

Clearly, Mackie regarded *periods of increase in goodness* as, themselves, further *goods*. These would be 'second-order' goods, because they are goods *about* the distribution of goodness and evil themselves. Thus, for Mackie, decreases over time in the amount of gratuitous evil produce, or constitute, *axiological* goodness.⁵ This is the sort of goodness that one has *moral* reasons, in particular, to produce. It's not merely esthetic goodness, i.e., the goodness of beautiful art. It's not merely prudential or pragmatic value, i.e., what makes lives better or worse, or benefits or harms someone. Instead, it is the sort of ethical goodness that can allegedly morally outweigh the evils of suffering in the world, thereby morally justifying someone in creating a world that contains some evils.

As far as I can tell, Mackie's view about the value of *progress in eliminating* first-order evil has received very little attention in the literature on the Problem of Evil. Yet, it may be the basis of a new and powerful theodicy. Consider the following hypothesis:

(H) A world is better, *ceteris paribus*, proportionally to the magnitude at which the total quantity of first-order-gratuitous evil decreases, forward in time, in that world.

According to (H), a 'rags-to-riches' world is *eo ipso* better than a rags-to-rags world, and even better than some *riches-to-riches* worlds are. A world that began in a fallen state but progressed eventually into a state of goodness would be superior to a world that began in a state of goodness but just got worse, ending with widespread pointless suffering and moral evil. It's worth noting, of course, that the story in question—a

⁵ In Mackie's (1955), he argues that God would have prevented any evil at all. Therefore, he regards all evils as gratuitous.

world's being filled with evil, despair, and suffering, but progressing eventually into an eternal kingdom of virtue and happiness—is broadly consonant with the Christian theist's eschatology. And a creator such as God might well aim for a work that begins in a fallen state but is redeemed, rather than a world with no such progress; the latter world may be relatively boring and lacking a certain sort of unique value. This *progress* in elimination of first-order-gratuitous evil is *itself* a good, and so presumably, the world overall is better insofar as this progress occurs.

Of course, we cannot uncritically assume that the whole is better merely because one of the parts is better.⁶ But it's natural to take proper-part improvement to be *prima facie* evidence of improvement in the whole. When this evidence is defeated, it's normally because there is something special about the proper part in its place in the whole that makes its value ultimately contribute to disvalue. For example, suppose that an extremely evil person somehow wanted this progress to occur, and evil people's getting what they want is bad. Or suppose that a person promised (for some reason) that such progress would not occur, and broken promises are bad.⁷ Then such progress would also contribute badness to a world. Yet in reply, it seems obvious that just as many (or more) *good* people would prefer progress in eliminating gratuitous evil than evil people would. Another way that the presence of progress in eliminating gratuitous evil could render the world overall worse would be some other higher-order good that progress (i.e., a second-order good) precludes. One candidate would be the good of the creaturely *moral action* of encountering gratuitous evil and choosing to eliminate it, but of course this would make progress in elimination of gratuitous evil render the whole *better*, not worse. The same can be said for the *aesthetic* value of a world; again, take the example of rags-to-riches stories, and stories of overcoming evil or of redemption. Therefore, I feel safe in assuming that the *prima facie* contribution of progress in the elimination of gratuitous evil to a world's value is normally undefeated. More generally, I will argue that I can make a strong case for my theodicy if we are justified in assigning at least 0.5-credence in (H), so we need not be *certain* that progress *always* renders the whole better.

If (H) is true, then progress in the *elimination* of first-order-gratuitous evil might justify the *existence* of some first-order-gratuitous evil. After all, we cannot eliminate something that does not exist in the first place. Let us say, then, that a world has 'positive trajectory' (with respect to first-order-gratuitous evils) when over time, the total quantity of first-order-gratuitous evils decreases. Then hypothesis (H) would say that positive trajectory, all else equal, has axiological value: it makes a world better. Of course, whether a world has this trajectory is a difficult empirical question. I'll offer a variety of evidence, in the section "[Outline of an Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy](#)," that our world indeed has this positive trajectory.

Perhaps (H) is already plausible. Apparently, one of the foremost defenders of the Problem of Evil would have found it plausible. However, for those who aren't yet convinced, I have two arguments for it.⁸

⁶ Perhaps the world itself is a Moorean organic unity. Moore (1993 [1903]: 78 ff.). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for noting this.

⁷ Compare Ross's (1939: 138) two worlds.

⁸ If positive trajectory in well-being across a life is important (cf. Kaez 2007: 74 ff.), then this may provide a third reason to suspect that positive trajectory of a world is axiologically valuable. I lack the space to explore this possibility here.

(1) The Esthetic Argument: the esthetic good of positive trajectory is difficult to deny, given the prevalence in fiction of rags-to-riches stories, stories of overcoming evil, and stories of moral redemption.⁹ (Why not read *riches-to-riches* stories, which contain more *total* happiness?) This is presumably why so many popular novels and films join the story when the world is most threatened, and end when the protagonists save the world. Of course, I assume that the Anselmian God would actualize the overall-best combination of values (of all types, including esthetic) in the world.¹⁰ Here, someone might question whether it's permissible to produce *esthetic* goods by allowing first-order-gratuitous evils. But most philosophers would say that it's at-least-sometimes permissible to sacrifice ethical value for esthetic value; it might be permissible, for example, to spend some nonzero-amount of time composing good music instead of working to accumulate money in order to donate that money to famine relief.¹¹ Perhaps, this is only because of the *axiological* good of the *pleasure* of uptaking the artwork, but of course if positive trajectory is esthetically valuable, then humans can enjoy that value as well, as we observe the trajectory of the world. Thus, positive trajectory produces an esthetic good, and this esthetic good is either valuable intrinsically, valuable instrumentally because of the axiological good it produces, or both.

(2) The Intrinsic-Goodness Argument: positive trajectory might be simply an axiological good in itself. Suppose you had the opportunity to create one of three worlds. All you knew about the worlds was that one of them had a negative trajectory (i.e., the total quantity of first-order-gratuitous evil *increased* over time); one had a flat trajectory; and one had a positive trajectory. You now must choose between the three. Which should you choose? For my part, I have the intuition that the third option is the best. Those who share this intuition have reason to affirm that positive trajectory itself can decide between three otherwise-unknown worlds, i.e., that positive trajectory is a *pro tanto* good: a phenomenon that always contributes *some* axiological goodness. Similarly, suppose that you had the opportunity to decide, of a certain moment in the future, whether the trajectory in that moment was negative, flat, or positive, but you could not decide anything else about that moment, and your choice would not affect your own well-being in any way. For my part, again, I have the intuition that it's best to choose a positive trajectory, even though strictly speaking, this choice has no effect on the net, total gratuitous evil in that world.

⁹ To be sure, there are well-known riches-to-rags stories, such as in Greek tragedies. However, philosophers usually view the value of these not in esthetic terms per se, but in didactic terms (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b). The lives themselves aren't good, and do not clearly contribute to the goodness of the world, but our inspecting such lives makes the rest of us more virtuous. Still, this would presumably be a value of a rags-to-riches world as well.

¹⁰ An Anselmian God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, among other properties. See, e.g., Anselm 2001 [1077–78]: ch. V. His moral perfection would lead him to want to actualize the overall-best set of values. I do not need to take a position here on whether these values are ultimately commensurable or reducible to each other; all I need is that esthetic goodness is genuinely valuable.

¹¹ If it's ever permissible to spend money on art instead of on famine-relief, then, I think, we can say that the values are commensurable. Cf. Singer 1972, and Kagan 1989: 3 ff. on moral options: points at which it is at-least-permissible to do what is non-optimific. I say 'most' philosophers because presumably, nearly all deontologists, plus some consequentialists (e.g., scalar consequentialists (Norcross 1997)), will believe in options.

Despite these arguments, some philosophers will not yet agree that (H) is plausible. I have two further points to make.

First, even if the theodicist cannot convince all atheists of the truth of (H), she may have nevertheless gained ground in the debate over the Problem of Evil. For she can now cheerfully concede the point that there are evils that are, in a certain sense, *gratuitous*. Mackie writes:

Let us call pain and misery ‘first order evil’ [P]leasure and happiness will be called ‘first order good’ ... which somehow emerges in a complex situation in which [first-order evil] is a necessary component [S]ome second order goods (e.g. benevolence) try to maximize first order good and minimize first order evil; but God’s goodness ... is the will to maximize *second* order good. We might, therefore, call God’s goodness an example of a third order goodness. (Mackie 1955: 206–7, emphasis original).

As noted, a first-order-gratuitous evil would be an evil that the Anselmian God could have prevented without thereby sacrificing any equal or greater first-order good. (And a ‘good’ can include the prevention of an equally bad or worse evil.) We can describe second-order-gratuitous evils as well: evils that are unnecessary for first-order goods, but necessary for second-order goods. We can also describe an evil as *gratuitous-tout-court*: this evil is unnecessary for any good at all, no matter what the order of the good. Therefore, some evils may be first-order gratuitous but *not* gratuitous-*tout-court*. Now distinguish a set of claims that a theodicist might be making:

(T1) There are no first-order-gratuitous evils.

(T2) There are no second-order-gratuitous evils

(T*) There are no gratuitous-*tout-court* evils.

The theodicist, in the end, is really committed to (T*), not to (T1) or (T2). Theodicies standardly explain how some evil is necessary for some other good, but as long as that good is good *enough*, it does not matter morally on which *order* the good is located.

Now why does this constitute the theodicist’s having gained ground? Because like many philosophers, I find it plausible that there are first-order-gratuitous evils. I have the strong intuition that Rowe’s (1979) fawn’s suffering is first-order-gratuitous, and a very strong intuition that some evil *somewhere* is first-order-gratuitous. Indeed, given sophisticated, probabilistic versions of the Problem of Evil (e.g., Tooley 2018: § 3.5), it might be rational to regard ‘all evils are justified’ to have only (say) a 0.001 epistemic probability. Yet even setting aside the arguments for (H), I do not know why anyone should be anything less than *indifferent* when it comes to (H). For example, I do not know what strong argument anyone would have *against* it, and (H) does not seem the kind of hypothesis one would normally have a strong a priori intuition against. And so, it might be (say) at least 0.5 epistemically probable that (H) is true. If I’m correct, ultimately, that the truth of (H) is sufficient (along with other plausible assumptions) to produce a successful theodicy, then the theist might be at least justified with something near 0.5 confidence in believing that there is a successful theodicy, *while* being only 0.001 justified in believing that there are no first-order-gratuitous evils. In turn, the theodicist does not have to rest her case on a hypothesis with 0.001 probability; she can rest it on a hypothesis with 0.5 probability. That’s an advantage.

Beyond all this, even if some philosophers lack the intuition that (H) is true, some philosophers will share the intuition. Given the lack of arguments against (H) in the literature, some theists may be all-things-considered justified in affirming (H), at least until arguments against (H) appear. The Problem of Evil might then be simply a version of the problem of peer disagreement in philosophy. When difficult topics come down to clashes of baseline-level intuitions, it may be rational to affirm one's own intuition, despite other experts' views to the contrary.¹² Therefore, I will proceed with the rest of this paper by assuming that (H) is true. My conclusions, I trust, will at least be convincing to those who share the intuition, or have some other dialectical reason to affirm (H). And even those who reject (H) may have, as noted, far less reason to reject (H) than they have to reject (T1). While it may be extremely implausible that Rowe's fawn had to suffer to achieve some equal-or-greater first-order good, I think many philosophers will be rational in being at-least-agnostic about (H).

Outline of an Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy

I assume for our purposes that a morally perfect God will create a world that is as good as he can possibly create, setting aside no-best-world concerns.¹³ One way for worlds to be as good as possible, perhaps, is if they contain no first-order-gratuitous evils. But another way for them to be as good as possible is if they do contain first-order-gratuitous evils, but have positive trajectories. This is a *prima facie* explanation for why God would permit a world to contain large amounts of *inscrutable* evil, i.e., evil such that we do not know why God would permit it; God might be permissibly indifferent between two worlds, one of which contains some first-order-gratuitous evil, and the other of which contains positive trajectory. God recognizes the value of positive axiological-trajectory, so he permits the right amount of first-order-gratuitous evil (and permits or ensures the requisite trajectory) to generate enough value as to outweigh the disvalue contributed by the first-order-gratuitous evil. In turn, according to my theodicy, first-order-gratuitous evil is compatible with God's existence.

If that's correct, then even if God exists, the world may contain first-order-gratuitous evils. These first-order-gratuitous evils need not contribute to the first-order good of soul-making, and may not be the results of creatures' significant free-will. However, they will not be *second-order-gratuitous*, since they are necessary for the second-order good of a positive trajectory. And given the hypothesis (H), these worlds can be just as good *tout court* as worlds containing no first-order gratuitous evils but a lesser trajectory. Let us say that a hypothesis 'predicts' some phenomenon when the hypothesis raises the probability that the phenomenon will occur. If (H) is true, then Anselmian theism does *not* necessarily predict the existence of a world containing *no* first-order-gratuitous evils. Instead, it predicts that *either* there will be no such evils, *or*:

¹² See e.g. Henderson et al. for a defense of nonconciliation or steadfastness.

¹³ Penner 2006; Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994; Rowe 2004: 112. If no-best-world or other a priori atheological arguments are sound, then my theodicy is otiose anyway. And if the Problem of Evil can be rebutted by adverting to a non-traditional Anselmianism (Almeida 2012), then my theodicy is also otiose. Therefore, I set aside such concerns. There are of course interesting reasons to dispute this assumption, or at least its alleged implications (Murphy 2017), but I lack the space to discuss them here, especially given that they would likely obviate my theodicy anyway.

the long-term trajectory of the world will be positive. And in this respect, my explanation for evil differs from most previous attempts. Generally speaking, previous theodicies either held that first-order evils were *necessary* for equal-or-greater *first-order* goods (e.g., significant free will and soul-making), or else held that evils were gratuitous *tout court*, but that that fact was still compatible with theism (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1999; Kraay 2015; Murphy 2017). I take a middle-ground position: the inscrutable evils we observe can be *first-order*-gratuitous, but not gratuitous *tout court*, because they are necessary for the equal-or-greater second-order good of a strongly positive trajectory.

Hence, worlds are axiologically better as their first-order-gratuitous evil decreases over time. In turn, God may have morally sufficient reason to create these worlds that have the valuable good of positive trajectory. One might summarize this new theodicy in the following claim:

(AT) For any world w that a morally perfect God might create or allow and contains *no* first-order-gratuitous evil, there is a world w' that a morally perfect God might create or allow that contains (1) *some* first-order-gratuitous evil and (2) an overall positive trajectory.

Here, the ‘trajectory’ in a world refers to the absolute change from the greatest amount of first-order-gratuitous evil to the last moment at which any change occurs in whether there is first-order-gratuitous evil. If the quantity of first-order-gratuitous evil never permanently stops changing, then if there is an average in the infinite future starting at time t , then we count that as the level at t as the level at the ‘last moment’ at which any change occurs. If there is no average after t , then we count the minimum after t . And if there is no minimum, then there is no fact of the matter about the trajectory of that world.

Whether this last possibility could be a problem for (AT) depends on whether the actual world contains a time t such that there is a determinate average-amount of first-order-gratuitous evil after t . If first-order-gratuitous evils existed at various points *infinitely* into the past or the future, then the total quantity of first-order-gratuitous evil in the world (considered across time and space) might be positive-infinity, for there would be infinitely many nonzero moments in which first-order-gratuitous evil exists.¹⁴ But arguably, a morally perfect God would not allow such a world. (If the atheist thinks God *could* be morally perfect and yet allow such a world, then it’s not clear why that atheist is propounding the Problem of Evil in the first place. It would be odd for the atheist to argue that some *finite* amount of first-order-gratuitous evil is incompatible with theism, but an *infinite* amount is compatible!). Therefore, we can safely assume that given Anselmian theism, the total amount of gratuitous evil in the world (across time and space) is not positive-infinity, and so there is a time t_x before which gratuitous evil never existed, and there will be a time t_y after which gratuitous evil never exists (and therefore the quantity never changes). Finally, then, Anselmian theism predicts that worlds will have overall trajectories of determinate magnitudes. According to proponents of the standard Problem of Evil, Anselmian theism predicts that that

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, if the amount of first-order-gratuitous evil in these moments decreases in the right way, the total may be finite, in the way that $1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \dots = 2$. But this is a priori very improbable.

magnitude will always be zero (i.e., there will be no trajectory), because God would never allow any first-order-gratuitous evil (Rowe 1979: 336). But according to my argument, that magnitude need not be zero. Worlds that at some point have enormous amounts of first-order-gratuitous evil, and later have zero, will have trajectories of greater magnitudes than worlds that only ever have small amounts of first-order-gratuitous evil, and later have none.

Notably, I have assumed that trajectory from some point of a high quantity of first-order-gratuitous evil to an endpoint of no first-order-gratuitous evil is a valuable, positive trajectory. But what if a world begins at a certain amount of first-order-gratuitous evil, and then the first-order-gratuitous evil *increases* over time to that maximal point, before decreasing? Would God really allow that, or would that really be valuable? In reply, I think the two arguments made above for the value of trajectory are also cogent when that trajectory is parabolic in this way. Respectively: (1) *riches-to-rags-to-riches* stories intuitively acquire esthetic value from that trajectory; and (2) I would expect many philosophers to choose to create the world in which first-order-gratuitous evil increases but then decreases forever rather than the one with an unknown amount and trajectory of first-order-gratuitous evil.

If (AT) is true, then the actual-world existence of first-order-gratuitous evils does not seriously threaten the justifiability of theism. The existence of some first-order-gratuitous evil is logically necessary for any positive trajectory. (If there is never any first-order-gratuitous evil, then there is never any non-zero trajectory.) Still, as noted, if God exists, there will be *no gratuitous-tout-court* evils, for only that sort of evil would be truly incompatible with the existence of the Anselmian God. So God might be indifferent between the two worlds mentioned in (AT), in which case first-order-gratuitous evil is not strong evidence against his existence. He might also be justified in positively *preferring* world w' , in which case first-order-gratuitous evil is no evidence against his existence. Thus, my theodicy would explain why some first-order-gratuitous evil exists. But it stops short of radicalism, because it does not hold that gratuitous-*tout-court* evil is compatible with God's existence.

Do we live in a world with a positive trajectory? Despite how it sometimes seems, the world has been getting better for at least the past few millennia. Life expectancy at birth has steadily increased.¹⁵ In general, populations have liberalized over time.¹⁶ Marginalized groups certainly tend to have more legal-rights, at least in Western countries, than they did even a few decades ago.¹⁷ People can expect to receive more education now than any earlier time in history (Barro and Lee 2013). War is comparatively rare today,¹⁸ and even in war, it's frowned upon to target civilians, whereas very recently it was considered acceptable (Walzer 1977: 138 ff.; Schabas 2011: 99). Democratic republics are now common, but a few centuries ago, they were very rare.¹⁹ The environmental and animal-rights movements, at least in their modern forms, began relatively recently as well (Singer 1975; Pritt 2015). And more generally, population

¹⁵ Galor and Moav 2007; Galor and Moav 2005; World Bank Group 2017; World Bank Group 2016: 12.

¹⁶ Cf. the examples in Huemer 2015: § 3.

¹⁷ E.g. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U. S. 483 (1954); Davis 1984; Langley 1999; *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U. S. 558 (2003).

¹⁸ See e.g. Pinker 2011.

¹⁹ Democracy in which a high proportion of the citizenry is eligible to vote is rare historically. See e.g. Dahl et al. 2003; Huntington 1996.

has been increasing steadily over time, a population of lives that are generally worth living, so this obviously contributes to the total first-order goodness of the world. In recent years, the world poverty-rate has dropped sharply (World Bank Group 2016: 3; Sala-i-Martin and Pinkovskiy 2009; Human Progress 2016). Beyond all this, notably, people tend to *underestimate* exactly how much better the world is getting (Norberg 2016: 206). Those people to whom it seems that the world *has not* been getting better should impose some skepticism on their judgment.

Still, many readers will now recall the world wars and the tens of millions who died because of them. Could the amount of first-order-gratuitous evil really be decreasing, in the large scale? In reply, while the Twentieth Century saw the two deadliest wars the world has ever known, a smaller *percentage* of the world's population was killed in these wars than in several wars from previous centuries (Pinker 2011: xxi). Indeed, by death toll, no conflict after the year 1945 is even within the top twenty deadliest conflicts in history (ibid., ch. 5). And again, it is very easy to be pessimistic about the trajectory of the world. We should not make that judgment from the armchair. Therefore, the world appears to be getting better, at least in the long term.²⁰ And if we can rely on the continued advancement of technology, then we can expect the world to continue to improve.

Granted, we can imagine the world's acquiring much more first-order-gratuitous evil, perhaps due to global climate change or a thermonuclear war. If that were to occur, then we would have to think carefully about our assessment of whether the world's trajectory is positive. We will return, when we consider objections, to this point. But when we examine the past few millennia, we see a generally positive trajectory. Once again, I have argued that some worlds with this positive trajectory, but also *some* first-order-gratuitous evil, might be *no worse* than some worlds containing a flat trajectory and *no* first-order-gratuitous evil. They might even be positively better. This would explain God's permission of some first-order-gratuitous evil.

Objections to the Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy

In this section, I answer objections to the Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy.

First, consider the 'Middle-Class-to-Riches' objection:

[Objection] God might achieve an equally valuable trajectory by creating a world with *no* first-order-gratuitous evil but *moderate* amounts of goodness, and ensuring a trajectory toward *very high* amounts of goodness.

I reply that some trajectories from bad-to-good are better than some trajectories from medium-to-good. Again, this explains the prevalence of rags-to-riches stories, instead of middle-class-to-riches stories. And many philosophers are sympathetic to prioritarianism or sufficientarianism (cf. Parfit 2002), according to which helping the least-well-off or those with very bad lives is more *valuable* than simply benefiting

²⁰ Again, see also Norberg 2016 for a useful survey of all the ways in which the world is on a positive axiological-trajectory.

everyone. Presumably, some egalitarians would also enjoin us to improve the lives of the least-well-off, because the distribution of wellbeing would thereby become more equal, without our needing to ‘level down’ (Holtug 1998). And presumably there’s a reason we applaud ‘triumphing over evil’ instead of triumphing over mediocrity. Therefore, it’s not obvious that God should have created a middle-class-to-riches world instead of our world.

This should be especially plausible if we assume that the total and average net-first-order-goodness of the worlds are equal, as they arguably will be if God is indeed a maximally good being (Anselm 2001 [1077–78]: ch. V; Lembke 2013), and there are no infinitely bad evils, i.e., evils that would render worlds containing an infinitely-good good less than maximally good. After all, if God did not contribute *infinite* first-order goodness to a world, then we could imagine a greater being. In turn, any two worlds that contain God will (as long as there are no infinitely bad evils) be equal in *total* quantity of first-order goodness: positive-infinity. Given that God exists *eternally*, they will also be equal in *average-over-time* quantity of first-order goodness: positive infinity. We may also want to assume, with some theists, that those who suffer particularly bad evils will be compensated or improved somehow in the afterlife, and that everyone’s life will eventually be infinitely good, since universalism about salvation is true. Arguably, these theses cohere well with Anselmian theism anyway (Kronen and Reitan 2013; Stump 1985: 433; Adams 1988: 235), so taking them on does not greatly lower the prior probability of theism.

Second, consider the ‘Initially-Hellish World’ objection:

[Objection] But if a world acquires goodness from its positive trajectory, then why did God not create a world of trillions of constantly tormented creatures, so that the potential for improvement was much greater?

I have two replies. First: I have not claimed that the moral importance of trajectory always trumps the moral importance of first-order goods. There are some worlds that are bad enough that God would not create them. However, there are presumably a number of worthy worlds, depending on the relative levels of first-order goods and evils versus their trajectories. We may not always be in an epistemic position to reliably weigh different orders of goods and evils against each other, since it’s far more important for our moral choices that we be able to weigh *first-order* goods and evils against each other. Second: Some hellish worlds will not permit sufficiently good trajectories anyway. Presumably a world in which all creatures were imprisoned and constantly tortured would not be a one in which human beings could improve their world or their moral characters very much, at least not by free-will choices.

Third, consider the ‘Pain-Pleasure-Asymmetry’ objection:

[Objection] It may not be permissible for God to *allow* such rags-to-riches worlds. It is morally worse to allow first-order-gratuitous evil than it is good to allow first-order goods.

Of course, God would simply be creating a world knowing that would eventually *contain* first-order-gratuitous evil and various goods; he would not be causing the evils

directly. Yet perhaps, for example, preventing pain is morally more important than promoting pleasure.

Replies: My first reply is that by creating a world that will have a positive axiological-trajectory, God would be creating a world in which pain-prevention over time increases, perhaps more than pleasure-creation increases. Thus, the allegedly morally superior phenomenon (pain-prevention) would be greater in magnitude than the allegedly morally inferior phenomenon (pleasure-creation). If prevention of first-order-gratuitous pain is indeed very morally valuable, as the objector suggests, then only worlds with first-order-gratuitous pain *in* them are sites of this valuable good anyway. My second reply is that while pain-prevention in general may be more important than pleasure-promotion in general, we do not normally think that pain-prevention always trumps pleasure-promotion. We think it's normally permissible to leave the house to go to a movie, even though one might be thereby risking infecting some other person with the flu. In turn, a world with a strongly positive trajectory can begin with lots of first-order-gratuitous pain and end with no first-order-gratuitous evil at all.

Consider, fourth, the 'Objection from Local Negative Trajectories.' Suppose that trajectory is indeed valuable. If so, the objector asks, then:

[Objection] Why does God *ever* allow increases in overall evil? Those events would, after all, be points of inflection in the world's positive trajectory; thus, they would have no first-order nor second-order value.

Reply: Suppose, as is plausible, that a higher frequency of drops in trajectory is a bad-making feature of a world. If so, then a world improves to the extent that such drops become *less frequent*. That is, when the rate at which first-order-gratuitous evil is eliminated gets higher, itself, then a world is better, still; a world is better when the *second* derivative of first-order-gratuitous evil with respect to time is negative. If we had reason to think that increases in first-order-gratuitous evil were getting more frequent, then, we would have reason to reject the present theodicy. But I am not yet aware of such reason. Of course, even if we did have such a reason, we would have to ask whether the rate at which these increases was getting more frequent was, *itself*, decreasing, i.e., whether the second-order trajectory (a third-order axiological good, and the third derivative $\frac{d^3e}{dt^3}$ of first-order-gratuitous evil with respect to time) was changing. These are all empirical questions, so I will not say much more about them here. We can leave it to future observers to assess these quantities as best they can. I would simply maintain that so far, the second-order trajectory (i.e., the second derivative of overall first-order-gratuitous evil over time) does not yet appear to be positive.

I have argued that positive trajectory can contribute goodness to a world. In turn, this can outweigh the badness of a world contributed by the presence of first-order-gratuitous evils. We proceed now to a comparative project: to investigate how well the Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy improves upon other, traditional theodicies.

Objections to Traditional Theodicies

In this section, I argue that the Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy avoids two objections to the very project of theodicy.

First, traditional theodicies face the ‘Total-Quantity Objection.’ One might ask (cf. Weinstock 1974):

[Objection] How likely is it that God would permit *this much* evil? Surely God’s purposes could be accomplished if one fewer fawn died painfully in a forest fire.

Reply: According to (AT), every local drop in the amount of first-order-gratuitous evil contributes to a positive trajectory, given a long-term decrease in the frequency of such drops. Recall: A particular fawn’s death is apparently not narrowly logically necessary for any traditional theodical good (e.g., free will or soul-making), but it (or something equally bad) is narrowly logically necessary for a sufficiently great positive trajectory. If one fewer fawn suffered in a forest fire, then the overall trajectory of the world would be a tiny bit less strongly positive, and some genuine axiological value would be lost.

Second, there is a set of objections one might list under the heading, ‘The Problem of Metatheodicy’ (e.g., Trakakis 2007: 175). For example:

[Objection] If God is using the widespread suffering of creatures as a means to the end of a positive axiological trajectory, then is he not using them as mere means to ends?

Reply: Standard theodicies might regard God as using some creatures’ suffering to produce other first-order benefits, such as a person’s developing a virtuous soul, or being able to use her significant free will. In contrast, (AT) is about the goodness of *worlds in general*, not of particular creatures’ lives. And it is not yet obvious that the proper object of God’s moral action is *individuals* rather than *worlds*. If consequentialism is true, then God’s obligations will straightforwardly apply to worlds (or, strictly speaking, to aggregates of goodness-bearers), and so this objection fails. Still, it’s rare to find theist consequentialists,²¹ so suppose instead that deontology is true. Then of course the theist can simply appeal to the Doctrine of Double Effect, a deontological doctrine with a respectable Christian pedigree (Aquinas 1948, I-II, q. 64 a. 7; DeYoung et al. 2009). God does not *intend*, of any particular creature, that this creature suffer for the benefit of the world in general. Instead, God creates a world subject to natural laws, a world that he foresees will contain lots of first-order-gratuitous evil. But he foresees that this suffering will ultimately make the world better, as he (perhaps with the help of creatures) creates more goodness in the world, while time goes forward. Similarly, the theist can appeal to the deontologically respectable Doctrine of Doing and Allowing (Woollard 2012): God creates a world in which many creatures are allowed to suffer first-order-gratuitously, but he does not directly cause them to suffer, and so *a fortiori* he does not cause them to suffer in a way that treats them as mere means to ends.

²¹ Data from Bourget and Chalmers (2014: 479) note a strong positive-correlation between consequentialism and naturalism, and data on the survey site they link confirm the negative correlation between theism and consequentialism.

Again, the Anselmian can also argue that if God exists, then God will ensure that all creatures that suffer are compensated by eternal happiness or otherwise improved or benefited (cf. Kronen and Reitan 2013; Stump 1985: 433; Adams 1988: 235), which blunts this objection further.

Conclusion

I have argued that theism predicts a positive trajectory in the elimination of first-order-gratuitous evils. In contrast, atheism does not seem to make any particular prediction about the world's trajectory. Most theodicies are engaged in 'damage control'; they intend to explain why (despite widespread intuitions) evil is not ultimately as bad as it appears to be, or to show that God would not really be obligated to reduce evil from its current amount, because he would thereby be sacrificing an equal or greater good. But a theodicy is better to the extent that it specifically *predicts* the facts of good and evil better than atheism does. The Axiological-Trajectory Theodicy, then, may not merely be a plausible explanation for God's permission of first-order-gratuitous evils; it may also provide independent evidence for theism.

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