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On Evil's Vague Necessity

Michael J. Almeida

I. INTRODUCTION

It is the standard position on the existence of evil that a perfect being could not permit even one instance of evil that serves no purpose. Among those who have defended the standard position on evil is William Rowe.

An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of *any intense evil it could*, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.¹

[FN1]

According to Peter van Inwagen the standard position on the existence of evil is false. A perfect being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could only if there exists some minimum amount of evil that is necessary to the purposes of a perfect being. The minimum evil necessary for divine purposes is the least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.² But van Inwagen urges that it is implausible to suppose that there is some amount of evil that is the minimum necessary.

[FN2]

My thanks to Jon Kvanvig and Peter van Inwagen for lively discussion and helpful comments on the paper. Thanks also to participants at the 2007 Baylor Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference. The paper, 'On Evil's Vague Necessity', is a shortened version of, *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings* (London: Routledge, 2008), ch. 3.

¹ See William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', collected in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1-11. My emphasis.

² The unfortunate locution 'the minimum amount of evil necessary for divine purposes D' refers to the least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for D. If k is the least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes, then of course $k - i$ is necessary for D and $k - 2i$ is necessary for D and so on for any amount of evil less than k and greater than 0. But k is the total quantity of evil necessary for D. Van Inwagen calls that the minimum evil necessary for D.

It is not very plausible to suppose that there is a way in which evil could be distributed such that (i) that distribution of evil would serve God's purposes as well as any distribution of evil could and (ii) God's purposes would be less well served by any distribution involving less evil.³

FN:3

It is plausible to suppose instead that for any amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for God's purposes there is some lesser amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for God's purposes. Call that the *No Minimum Thesis*. There is therefore no least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. According to van Inwagen the *No Minimum Thesis* together with some uncontroversial assumptions entails that the standard position on evil is false. And we arrive at the incredible conclusion that a perfect being might exist along with pointless and preventable evil.

I present next van Inwagen's *No Minimum* argument against the standard position on evil. I show in Section II.1 that the premises in the argument cannot all be true together and that therefore the argument offers no reason to believe that the standard position on evil is false. Contrary to the *No Minimum* argument the standard position on evil does not entail that there is a discrete transition between evil that is unnecessary for divine purposes and evil that is necessary for divine purposes. In Section II.2 I provide a reformulation of the *No Minimum* argument that assumes a greatest lower bound on evil that is unnecessary for divine purposes. The reformulated argument unfortunately entails that there exists a discrete transition between an amount of evil that is necessary for divine purposes and amount that is unnecessary for divine purposes. In Section II.3 I offer the *Vague Minimum Thesis*. The thesis guarantees that there is no discrete transition between amounts of evil that are necessary and amounts of evil that are unnecessary for divine purposes. The *Vague Minimum Thesis* poses no threat to the standard position on evil. In Section III I consider some alternative formulations of the *No Minimum Thesis*. I argue that the alternative formulations are consistent with the *Vague Minimum Thesis* and do not advance van Inwagen's argument. I offer some closing comments in Section IV.

II. VAN INWAGEN'S NO MINIMUM ARGUMENT

Suppose there is a divine purpose to bringing about a world containing higher-level sentient beings. Perhaps the existence of higher-level sentient

³ See Peter van Inwagen, 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy', in his *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 103.

beings is necessary to some very important moral good—a moral good that outweighs all sentient suffering. It might be true that a series of miraculous interruptions in natural law could prevent every instance of sentient suffering. But suppose that preventing every instance of sentient suffering would produce a moral defect—the bad effects of a massive irregularity in natural law—that is at least as great as any pattern of suffering among sentient beings. It might then be true that a perfect being could permit an amount of evil that is not the minimum evil necessary for divine purposes. Here is the *No Minimum* argument.

But what of the hundreds of millions (at least) of instances [of intense suffering similar to Rowe's fawn] that have occurred during the long history of life? Well, I concede, God could have prevented any one of them, or any two of them, or any three of them . . . without thwarting any significant good or permitting any significant evil. But could He have prevented all of them? No—not without causing the world to be massively irregular. And of course there is no sharp cutoff point between a world that is massively irregular and a world that is not . . . There is, therefore, no minimum number of cases of intense suffering that God could allow without forfeiting the good of a world that is not massively irregular.⁴

FN:4

But if there is no minimum amount of evil necessary for divine purposes, van Inwagen urges, we cannot conclude that God is unjust or cruel for permitting more than the least amount of evil necessary for those purposes.

But if there is no minimum of evil that would serve God's purposes, then one cannot argue that God is unjust or cruel for not "getting by with less"—any more than one can argue that a law that fines motorists \$25.00 for illegal parking is unjust or cruel owing to the fact that a fine of \$24.99 would have an identical deterrent effect.⁵

FN:5

According to the standard position on evil a perfect being cannot permit more than the minimum evil necessary for divine purposes. Every instance of evil that exceeds the minimum necessary is, of course, unnecessary or pointless. But according to the *No Minimum* argument it is true both that some evil is necessary for divine purposes and that no evil is the minimum necessary for divine purposes. A perfect being can actualize divine purposes only if he permits more than the minimum evil necessary. But van Inwagen urges that certainly a perfect being is permitted to actualize the great goods in his divine purposes. Therefore the standard position on evil is mistaken.

According to the *No Minimum* argument an omnipotent being might allow pointless and preventable evil and display no moral imperfection at

⁴ Peter van Inwagen, 'The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence', in *God, Knowledge and Mystery*, 77 n. 11.

⁵ 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy', 103.

all. And that is a good reason to suspect that the *No Minimum* argument has gone wrong. Suppose we reconsider the premises in the argument. Let k be the total amount of evil in the actual world including every instance of intense suffering among sentient beings. The *No Minimum* argument assumes that the amount of evil in k is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. Indeed van Inwagen proposes the stronger assumption that the amount of evil in k exceeds the amount necessary for divine purposes. He simply concedes that many actual instances of intense sentient suffering do not serve any divine purpose. The initial premise of the *No Minimum* argument states the following.

1. The actual amount of evil k is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

But according to the *No Minimum* argument the amount of evil k_n is not the least amount of evil necessary for divine purposes only if, for some positive increment in evil i , the amount of evil k_{n-i} is not the least amount of evil necessary for divine purposes. In fact van Inwagen finds it a very plausible assumption that for any amount of evil that would have served God's purposes, slightly less evil would have served His purposes just as well.⁶ However bad the actual world it seems unlikely that there is an infinite amount of actual evil. But let's suppose that the amount of evil between 0 and k is at least infinitely divisible.⁷ Let i be some increment in evil between 0 and k . There is then a sequence S in total amounts of evil that begins at the actual amount k and ends at 0 and is such that $k > k - i > k - 2i > k - 3i > \dots > 0$.⁸ The second premise in the argument expresses the *No Minimum Thesis*.

2. There is some $i(i > 0)$ such that for any amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for

⁶ A Theodicy, 103–14.

⁷ Two points are worth mentioning here. First the infinite divisibility of the evil between 0 and k might entail that some evils that are imperceptibly small. That conclusion is controversial. Jeff Jordan argues against imperceptible harms or evils. See his 'Evil and van Inwagen', *Faith and Philosophy*, 20 (2003), 236–9. Frank Arntzenius and David McCarthy offer a strong argument in favor of imperceptible harms or evils. See their 'Self-Torture and Group Beneficence', *Erkenntnis*, 47 (1997), 129–44. Here I remain neutral on the point. Second it does not affect the *No Minimum* argument whether the infinite series is countable or uncountable.

⁸ S is a sequence in total amounts of evil where k is the actual amount of evil and i is some increment in evil. So, in the sequence S we begin at k and subtract i to reach the lesser amount of total evil $k - i$. We move from $k - i$ to $k - 2i$ to a still lesser total amount of evil. We finally arrive at 0 evil by subtracting the increment i .

divine purposes then k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.⁹

FN:9

The *No Minimum Thesis* expresses the proposition that, for each amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in the sequence S , if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then, for some positive increment in evil i , the same is true of the lesser amount of evil k_{n-i} .

But from premise (1) together with the *No Minimum Thesis* we can derive premise (3).

3. There is no amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) that is the *least* amount of evil such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. From (1) and (2).

Let's show that (3) follows from premise (1) and the *No Minimum Thesis*. Suppose premise (3) is false. It follows that there is some *least* amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) such any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. But it follows from the *No Minimum Thesis* and premise (1) that for every amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) there is a *lesser* amount of evil k_{n-i} such that any greater amount is unnecessary for divine purposes. So our supposition is false. It follows that premise (3) is true.

The minimum evil necessary for divine purposes is just the least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. But from premise (3) we know that there is no least amount of evil such that any greater is unnecessary for divine purposes. And so we arrive at premise (4).

4. There is no minimum amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) necessary for divine purposes. From premise (3).

Now according to the theodicy that van Inwagen offers—a story offered as a plausible elaboration on the data of Christian revelation—a certain amount of suffering and evil is *necessary* for divine purposes. It is impossible, for instance, for God to prevent every instance of intense suffering among sentient beings without thereby causing a moral defect that is at least as bad.

⁹ It is not clear what version of the *No Minimum Thesis* van Inwagen had in mind. This is a stronger version that gives wide scope to the quantification over increments. I consider a weaker version in the next section.

There is some i ($i > 0$) such that for any amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) and if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

As a point of clarification, note that n throughout equals the total amount of evil in k_n . It follow that there is no difference in value between k_{n-i} and k_n-i .

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The *No Minimum* argument therefore assumes that at least some instances of evil are necessary for divine purposes.

5. There is some amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) that is necessary for divine purposes. Assumption.

We know from premise (4) that there is *no minimum* amount of evil necessary for divine purposes. And we know from (5) that some amount of evil is necessary for divine purposes. Now certainly a perfect being would permit enough evil and suffering to realize divine purposes. So we arrive at premise (6).

6. A perfect being would permit an amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) that is sufficient to realize divine purposes. Assumption.

An amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) is sufficient for divine purposes just in case there is no greater amount of evil necessary for divine purposes. But for every amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$), k_n is either *less than* the minimum necessary for divine purposes or k_n *more than* the minimum necessary for divine purposes. Any amount of evil that is less than the minimum necessary for divine purposes is an amount that is insufficient to realize those purposes. The *No Minimum* argument therefore concludes that a perfect being would permit an amount of evil that is greater than the minimum necessary for his purposes. From premises (4), (5), and (6) we arrive at premise (7).

7. A perfect being would permit some amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) greater than the minimum amount of evil necessary for divine purposes. From (4), (5), and (6).

Of course, in defense of the standard position on evil it might be urged that a perfect being simply could not permit more than the minimum evil necessary for divine purposes. Premise (7) would then constitute an absurd consequence of the assumption that there are divine purposes for which there is no least amount of evil necessary. But suppose we set this objection aside. It follows directly from premise (7) that the standard position on evil is mistaken.

8. Therefore the standard position on evil is false. From (7).

The standard position on evil states that a perfect being would prevent the occurrence of any pointless evil it could. But according to (7) a perfect being would permit an amount of evil that is greater than the minimum necessary for divine purposes. But then a perfect being would not prevent the occurrence of all the pointless evil it could. The standard position on evil is therefore false.

II.1 Why the No Minimum Argument Fails

The *No Minimum* argument is designed to show that the standard position on evil is false. Premise (1) assumes that any amount of evil exceeding the actual amount is unnecessary for divine purposes.

1. The actual amount of evil k is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

And premise (2) expresses the *No Minimum Thesis*.

2. For any amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then for some increment i ($i > 0$), k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

And since our theodicy assumes that some amount of evil is necessary for divine purposes, the *No Minimum* argument also includes premise (5).

5. There is some amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) that is necessary for divine purposes.

But these premises cannot all be true together. Premises (1) and (2) entail that premise (5) is false. We know from premises (1) and (2) that every amount of evil in S is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. Suppose for *reductio ad absurdum* that (5) is true and k_n is necessary for divine purposes. We know that there is some amount of evil $k > k_n$ in S , such that k is unnecessary for divine purposes. But, for any positive increment in evil i and repeated applications of premise (2), it follows that k_n is also unnecessary for divine purposes. That's impossible. Therefore our supposition is false. It follows from premises (1) and (2) that no amount of evil—not so much as the scratching of a finger—is necessary for divine purposes. So contrary to (5) no amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in S is such that k_n is necessary for divine purposes.

We know that premises (1), (2), and (5), in the *No Minimum* argument cannot all be true. The *No Minimum* argument must contain at least one false premise. The argument is therefore unsound. I consider in Section II.2 an illuminating reformulation of the *No Minimum* argument.

II.2 No Minimum Reformulated

According to the *No Minimum* argument there is some amount of evil that is necessary for divine purposes. We can stipulate without loss of generality that some amount or other *greater than* 50 turps of evil is necessary for

divine purposes. Let's suppose further that for any amount of evil k_n greater than 50 turps there is some increment $i = \frac{1}{2}(k_n - 50)$ such that k_{n-i} serves divine purposes just as well. We arrive at the conclusion that *some amount (or other)* of evil greater than 50 turps is necessary for divine purposes and each particular amount of evil greater than 50 turps exceeds the least amount necessary for divine purposes.

In the reformulated *No Minimum* argument premise (1) is true just in FN:10 case the actual amount of evil k_n exceeds 50 turps.¹⁰

1. The actual amount of evil k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

If we put k at 50 turps of evil then the *No Minimum Thesis* states that for any amount of evil k_n greater than k there is some increment i ($i > 0$) such that k_{n-i} is unnecessary for divine purposes. This reformulated *No Minimum Thesis* is weaker than the formulation in (2). The *No Minimum Thesis* in (2') gives narrow scope to our quantification over increments of evil and so permits those increments to decrease in size as we move down the sequence S .

- 2'. For any amount of evil k_n , ($k < k_n$) if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then for some i ($i > 0$) k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.

Since we have stipulated that $i = \frac{1}{2}(k_n - 50)$, it is evident that premise (2') is true. Premise (5) states that there is some amount of evil greater than k that is necessary for divine purposes.

5. There is some amount of evil k_n ($k < k_n$) that is necessary for divine purposes.

But premise (5) is false under the current assumption that each particular amount of evil greater than k is unnecessary for divine purposes.¹¹ Since FN:11

¹⁰ Here I consider the possibility that there is some specific amount of evil, 50 turps, such that some amount or other greater than 50 turps is necessary for divine purposes. In the context of this discussion I let $k = 50$ and I let actual evil be some amount k_n greater than k . This departs from our earlier assumption that let k equal the actual amount of evil.

¹¹ Suppose instead it is urged that 50 turps is necessary for divine purposes and any amount of evil greater than 50 turps is unnecessary for divine purposes. In that case there is a minimum amount of evil such that *any* greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes (viz., 50 turps). A perfect being may therefore allow the total amount of evil necessary for divine purposes (viz., 50 turps). And that is perfectly consistent with the standard position on evil.

the scope of the quantifier in premise (5) is wide it asserts that there is some *particular* amount of evil greater than k that is necessary for divine purposes. The intuition is that at least some evil is necessary: at least the scratching of a finger is necessary or the death of a single fawn. Indeed if van Inwagen is right, then quite a large amount of evil is necessary for divine purposes. The theodicy he offers is designed to show the *essential* contribution to God's plan of a good portion of actual evil.

What the theodist must do, given the facts of history, is to say what contribution—what essential contribution—to God's plan of Atonement is made by the facts about the types, magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil that are made known to us by historians and journalists, not to mention our own experience.¹²

[FN:12]

But in this reformulation of the argument we cannot preserve the intuition that any particular amount of evil, however small, is necessary for divine purposes. Premise (5) is true only if we give the quantifier narrow scope and replace (5) with (5').¹³

[FN:13]

5'. It is necessary to divine purposes that there is some amount (or other) of evil k_n , ($k < k_n$).

Premise (5') states that it is necessary to divine purposes that there is *some amount of evil or other* greater than k . Consider whether premises (1), (2'), and (5') are consistent.

Suppose the actual amount of evil k_n equals 60 turps. Since, by hypothesis, any amount of evil greater than k is unnecessary for divine purposes, it follows that k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. According to premise (2'), for any amount of evil k_n , if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then for some i ($i > 0$), k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. Since we have defined $i = \frac{1}{2}(k_n - 50)$, it follows that $k_{n-i} = (k_n/2 + 25)$ or $k_{n-i} = (60/2 + 25) = 55$. It is evident that any amount of evil greater than 50 turps satisfies premise (2').

The reformulated *No Minimum* argument includes premises (1), (2'), and (5'). But these premises entail that there is some least amount of evil such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.¹⁴

[FN:14]

¹² 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy', 104.

¹³ We are here suggesting that it is necessary to divine purposes that there is some amount of evil (or other) greater than k and there is no amount of evil greater than k such that it is necessary to divine purposes. The suggestion is analogous to the consistent assertion that it is obligatory that some moral agent (or other) saves Smith and there is no moral agent such that it is obligatory that he saves Smith.

¹⁴ Actually we need the additional stipulations that some amount or other *greater than* 50 turps of evil is necessary for divine purposes and that for any amount of evil k_n

At *precisely* k ($= 50$) turps we arrive at an amount of evil that is less than the total amount of evil necessary for divine purposes and *any* amount of evil greater than 50 turps is greater than the total amount necessary for divine purposes. Here is van Inwagen again.

But could He have prevented all [instances of evil similar to Rowe's fawn]? No—not without causing the world to be massively irregular. *And of course there is no sharp cutoff point between a world that is massively irregular and a world that is not . . .*¹⁵

FN:15

But according to the reformulated *No Minimum* argument there is a sharp cutoff point between a world that is massively irregular and a world that is not. At precisely 50 turps of evil the world is massively irregular and at any amount of evil—ever so small—greater than 50 turps the world is perfectly regular. So the reformulated *No Minimum* argument entails that there is a precise border between an amount of evil that is less than the total necessary for divine purposes and an amount of evil that is greater than the total amount necessary for divine purposes. Van Inwagen notes elsewhere,

One might as well suppose that if God's purposes require an impressively tall prophet to appear at a certain time and place, there is a minimum height that such a prophet could have.¹⁶

FN:16

But, given the reconstructed *No Minimum* argument, there is a precise height, say $6'$, such that any prophet that is exactly $6'$ or less will fail to serve God's purposes and any prophet that exceeds $6'$ by any amount—say a prophet that is $6.000000000001'$ —would serve God's purposes perfectly well.

Suppose that a $6'$ prophet would not serve God's purposes and that a world containing 50 turps of evil is massively irregular. It is evident that the world would not suddenly become regular at 50.000000000001 turps of evil and a prophet would not suddenly serve God's purposes perfectly well at 6.000000000001 feet.

The reformulated *No Minimum* argument contains premises that are simply incredible. The argument entails that there is a precise border between an amount of evil that is less than the total necessary for divine purposes and an amount of evil that is more than the total amount necessary for divine purposes. So the reformulated *No Minimum* argument fares no better than the initial *No Minimum* argument.

greater than 50 turps there is some increment $i = \frac{1}{2}(k_n - 50)$ such that k_{n-i} serves divine purposes just as well. But these are not controversial for those who take the line that there is some lower bound on the amount of evil that is not in the sequence of amounts of evil that serve divine purposes.

¹⁵ 'The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence', 77 n. 11.

¹⁶ 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy', 103

II.3 Vague Minimums: A Supervaluation Solution

Suppose it's agreed that the predicate 'is necessary for divine purposes' does not sharply divide its positive and negative extensions. There is an amount of evil k_{n-j} that is necessary for divine purposes and an amount of evil k_n that is unnecessary for divine purposes. But there are amounts of evil in the sequence S that are neither necessary for divine purposes nor unnecessary for divine purposes. Now suppose that the actual amount of evil k falls just outside the range of evil that is clearly unnecessary for divine purposes. Figure 1.1 displays the situation that we are considering. The amounts of evil in the shaded area in Figure (1.1) are those amounts that are not definitely necessary for divine purposes and not definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. So k falls outside the range of evil that is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. Supervaluation semantics urges that the truth-value of the proposition "the amount of evil in k is necessary for divine purposes" can be determined *only if* we sharpen or precisify the vague predicate 'is necessary for divine purposes'.

But of course there is no unique and non-arbitrary way to make the predicate 'is necessary for divine purposes' precise. Any semantic decision to sharpen the predicate will make some arbitrary distinction. Supervaluationism therefore makes it *true* that the amount of evil in k is necessary for divine purposes if and only if that proposition is true on every admissible precisification of 'is necessary for divine purposes'. And supervaluationism makes it *false* that the amount of evil in k is necessary for divine purposes if and only if that proposition is false on every admissible precisification of that predicate. Otherwise the proposition is neither true nor false.

Supervaluation semantics places some important restrictions on admissible precisifications. Propositions that are clearly true (false) prior to precisification must remain true (false) after precisification. The proposition expressed in premise (5) of the *No Minimum* argument, for instance, is assumed to be clearly true and so it must remain true on every precisification. But it is no doubt false that the amount of evil in k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) is necessary for divine purposes only if the lesser amount of evil in k_{n-j} ($k_n > k_{n-j} > 0$) is unnecessary for divine purposes. The proposition must therefore remain false on every precisification.

Reconsider the *No Minimum Thesis*. Supervaluation semantics makes the thesis true only if it is true on every admissible precisification of 'is necessary

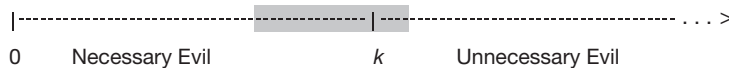


Fig. 1.1.

for divine purposes'. But on every admissible precisification of that predicate there will be some *least* amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. If k_n is the least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes, then of course k_{n-i} is *not* such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. We know there is one increment of evil greater than k_{n-i} (namely, k_n) that is necessary for divine purposes. Therefore no matter how we make the predicate precise there will be an exception to the generalization expressed in the *No Minimum Thesis*. It follows that the thesis is false.

But it does not follow that the transition from the amount of evil unnecessary for divine purposes to the amount necessary for divine purposes is discrete. We should replace the *No Minimum Thesis* in (2) with the thesis in (2a).

- 2a. There is no amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in S such that for every increment i ($i > 0$) and every admissible precisification, k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes.

It follows from (2a) that for every amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) there is *some* admissible way of sharpening the predicate 'is necessary for divine purposes' such that k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes only if k_{n-i} is unnecessary for divine purposes. The thesis in (2a) therefore asserts that there is no discrete transition from the evil unnecessary for divine purposes to the evil necessary for divine purposes. Call (2a) the *Vague Minimum Thesis*.

FN:17 The *Vague Minimum Thesis* is true.¹⁷ But does it present a problem for the standard position on evil? Suppose that the actual amount of evil k is

¹⁷ The *No Minimum Thesis* entails the *Vague Minimum Thesis* but the converse does not hold.

NMT. There is no amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in S such that for *some* admissible precisification, any amount of evil greater than k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and some amount of evil greater than k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes.

VMT. There is no amount of evil k_n , ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in S such that for *every* admissible precisification, k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes.

Prove NMT entails VMT: Suppose VMT is false. Then there is some k_n and k_{n-i} such that on every admissible precisification k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes. It is true of k_{n-i} that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. But then it follows from NMT that no amount of evil greater than k_{n-2i} is necessary for divine purposes. But that is false since the amount of evil in k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes. Therefore NMT entails VMT.

Prove VMT does not entail NMT: Assume VMT and that, for some admissible precisification, k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes and k_{n-i} is necessary for divine purposes.

accurately represented in Figure 1.1 above. According to (2a) there is *some* admissible precisification on which the amount of evil in k is unnecessary for divine purposes and the lesser amount of evil in k_{-i} is also unnecessary for divine purposes. But it does not follow that the standard position on evil prohibits a perfect being from permitting the evil in k . This is because it is *not true* that the amount of evil in k is unnecessary for divine purposes. Certainly on some admissible ways of sharpening the predicate 'is necessary for divine purposes' k is unnecessary for divine purposes. But on other admissible ways of sharpening the predicate k is necessary for divine purposes. Supervaluationism makes it true that k is unnecessary for divine purposes only if k is unnecessary for divine purposes on *every* admissible precisification. The standard position therefore does not prohibit a perfect being from allowing k .

But suppose that the amount of evil in k is clearly unnecessary for divine purposes. Here is van Inwagen.

If there is a purpose that is served by allowing the "age of evil" to have a certain duration, doubtless the same purpose would be served if the age of evil were cut short by a day, a year or even a century.¹⁸

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Let's suppose that the actual amount of unnecessary evil is the amount contained in an additional day in the "age of evil". Suppose the amount of evil in k is close to the amount depicted in Figure 1.2. The amount of evil k is clearly unnecessary for divine purposes. But it is also obvious in Figure 1.2 that k does not include a great deal of unnecessary evil. Still it is true on every admissible precisification that the amount of evil in k is unnecessary for divine purposes. So even under the assumption that k does not contain a great deal of unnecessary evil the standard position does not allow a perfect being to permit k .

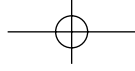
Consider the interpretation of the standard position that is most favorable to theism. As it happens, it is also the most plausible version of that principle. The standard position on evil holds that a perfect being would not permit



Fig. 1.2.

Contrary to NMT it follows that, for some admissible precisification, any amount of evil greater than k_{n-i} is unnecessary for divine purposes and some amount of evil greater than k_{n-2i} is necessary for divine purposes. So VMT does not entail NMT. The weaker thesis in VMT is true but (as we've seen) the stronger thesis in NMT is false.

¹⁸ 'The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy', 103



any amount of evil k_n that is *definitely* unnecessary. The amount of evil k_n is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes just in case it is unnecessary on every admissible precisification.

SP1. A perfect being would not permit an amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) in S if and only if, on every admissible precisification, k_n is unnecessary for divine purposes.

We can therefore conclude that a perfect being would not permit the amount of evil we find in the actual world if—as van Inwagen proposes in the *No Minimum* argument—the actual amount of evil is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes.

The *Vague Minimum Thesis* in (2a) guarantees that there is no discrete transition between the amount of evil that is unnecessary for divine purposes and the amount of evil that is necessary for divine purposes. But this presents no problem for the standard position on evil. The standard position in SP1 entails that a perfect being would not permit any amount of evil that is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. And SP1 and (2a) are perfectly consistent.

II.4 Alternative No Minimum Theses

Supervaluation semantics provides a simple countermodel to the *No Minimum Thesis*. No matter how we make the predicate ‘is necessary for divine purposes’ precise there will be an exception to the generalization expressed in that thesis. So it is reasonable to replace that thesis with the *Vague Minimum Thesis*.

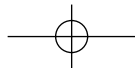
FN:19 Jeff Jordan has proposed yet another version of the no minimum thesis.¹⁹

For any amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) that is sufficient for divine purposes, there is some increment i such that k_{n-i} is also sufficient for divine purposes.

Consider whether the proposed thesis advances van Inwagen’s *No Minimum* argument. Suppose that the new thesis asserts (2c).

2c. For any amount of evil k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is *definitely* unnecessary for divine purposes then, for some increment i ($i > 0$) k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes.

¹⁹ Jordan, ‘Evil and van Inwagen’. Jordan proposes this version of the *No Minimum Thesis* and finally rejects it.



(2c) entails that every amount of evil greater than some k_n ($k_n \geq 0$) is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes and the amount k_n not definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. This of course assumes a discrete transition between evil that is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes and evil that is not definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. But there is no discrete transition in the sequence. So (2c) does not advance the *No Minimum* argument. But suppose instead the thesis asserts (2d).

- 2d. For any k_n ($k \geq k_n > 0$) if k_n is such that any greater amount of evil is (at least) indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes then for some increment i ($i > 0$), k_{n-i} is such that any greater amount of evil is (at least) indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes.

(2d) entails that every amount of evil greater than some k_n ($k_n \geq 0$) is indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes and the amount k_n not indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes. This of course assumes a discrete transition between evil that is indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes and evil that is not indefinitely unnecessary for divine purposes. But again there is no discrete transition in the sequence.²⁰ So (2d) does not advance the *No Minimum* argument.

FN:20

• Q1

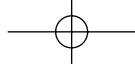
III. CONCLUSIONS •

According to van Inwagen the standard position on evil is true only if there is a least amount of evil such that any greater evil is unnecessary for divine purposes. But that position is mistaken. The *No Minimum* argument includes inconsistent premises and the reformulated argument in Section 2.2 includes premises that are incredible. Neither version presents any problem for the standard position on evil.

It was shown in Section II.3 that a supervaluation solution to the problem of evil's vague necessity replaces the (false) *No Minimum Thesis* with the (true) *Vague Minimum Thesis*. The *Vague Minimum Thesis* guarantees that there is no discrete transition between the amount of evil that is unnecessary for divine purposes and the amount of evil that is necessary for divine purposes. And the thesis in (2a) is perfectly compatible with the standard

²⁰ Just as there is an amount of evil that is definitely necessary for divine purposes there is also an amount that is definitely unnecessary for divine purposes. What is definitely unnecessary clearly exceeds what needs to achieve his purposes. An amount of evil that is not definitely unnecessary is an amount that is on the borderline of an amount that exceeds what God needs for divine purposes.

position on evil in (SP1). There are other versions of the *No Minimum Thesis* in the literature, but none of these is especially helpful to van Inwagen's *No Minimum* argument. It is reasonable to conclude that there is no formulation of van Inwagen's argument that presents a problem for the standard position on evil.



Queries in Chapter 1

- Q1. WE HAVE TYPESETTED THE HEADING LEVEL NUMBERS
IN ORDER. PLEASE CONFIRM.

