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Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion: The Virtues of Phenomenological Realism and Values

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Abstract: We present a criterion for the use of thought experiments as a guide to possibilities that bear on important arguments in philosophy of religion. We propose that the more successful thought experiments are closer to the world in terms of phenomenological realism and the values they are intended to track. This proposal is filled out by comparing thought experiments of life after death by Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman with an idealist thought experiment. In terms of realism and values we contrast an exemplary thought experiment by Iris Murdoch with one we find problematic by William Irwin.

Keywords: Thought experiments; Peter van Inwagen; Dean Zimmerman; William Irwin; Iris Murdoch; Berkeley

1 Introduction

Thought experiments are frequently employed in philosophy in general, philosophy of religion in particular. Thought experiments involve conceivable states of affairs that are at some remove from ordinary experience, designed to enhance, clarify or critique some philosophical position. So, the Ring of Gyges, in which a shepherd discovers a ring that will make him invisible is engaged in Plato's *Republic* to test our view about what human beings are really like, viz. what would you do if you could do anything you wished and get away with it?¹ In philosophy of religion since World War Two, we have had famous thought experiments in which God is compared to an invisible gardener and someone in the underground resistance during wartime who seems loyal but the evidence is not clear.² We also have thought experiments in which two persons traveling along a road, one of whom believes they will come to a great kingdom, and more recently, God's hiddenness is likened to a parent who hides from her child who is lost in the woods.³

In "Sensibility and Possibilities: A defense of Thought Experiments," Taliaferro defended the evidential role of thought experiments against modal skepticism.⁴ In this paper we extend that project and then propose two points: thought experiments are better served when they are in accord with our phenomenological experience and when they track the values that are in play. We critically assess what we believe to be incidents of when this is not the case in thought experiments by Peter Van Inwagen and William Irwin,

1 Plato, *The Republic*, Book II.

2 Flew, "Theology and Falsification".

3 Tooley, "John Hick and the Concept of Eschatological Verification"; Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*.

4 Taliaferro, "Sensibility and Possibilities".

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and then assess a thought experiment which we think succeeds admirably in light of our proposal about phenomenology and value.

2 Modal Realism

Taliaferro has earlier defended the claim that if one can conceive of (imagine, consistently describe) a state of affairs obtaining and know of no independent reasons for thinking its obtaining to be impossible, then one has *prima facie* justified in believing the state of affairs to be possible. We now wish to amend this to take into account conditions of when such conceivability takes place with the careful scrutinizing of possible defeaters that would show the state of affairs to be impossible. We are impressed by David Lund's notion of what he calls *secunda facie justification*. Lund articulates his ideas in the context of addressing thought experiments involving persons existing in a disembodied state.

Though ideal conceivability would yield conclusive knowledge of metaphysical possibility, the ideal form is apparently beyond our reach, at least in the case of any matter as complex as one's possible disembodiment. On the other hand, we should strive to attain more than *prima facie* conceivability, for it may be quite vulnerable to defeaters revealed by a more detailed conception and better reasoning. *Secunda facie* conceivability, by contrast, survives an informed and painstaking search for possible defeaters. Though the likelihood of defeaters is not eliminated, it is greatly reduced. Thus we must acknowledge *secunda facie* conceivability to be an extremely reliable guide to nonfactual possibility unless we are willing to deny that any form or level of conceivability provides any epistemic access to such possibility. But the implications of such a denial would be intolerable if, as seems clear, conceivability is our only basic access to nonfactual possibility.⁵

We will use this enriched condition of *secunda facie* conceivability in what follows.

3 Phenomenological experience

The philosophical literature on the conceivability of life after life, in which there is personal continuity after the dissolution of the body, consists of a multitude of thought experiments. We have imagined states of affairs in which philosophers have sought to distinguish between the re-creation of a person after physical death with the re-creation of a replica of that individual. The most creative thought experiments have involved the replacement of physical bodily parts with immaterial objects to the replacement of a person's body at the point of death with a simulacrum while God has taken the bodily person to some remote realm to God siphoning off bodily elements of a person's body to another spatial dimension where a closest continuer, successor of the (soon to be) dead person has been created and can become the continuant of the deceased.⁶ We propose that each of these thought experiments involves a remoteness from ordinary experience and, in the van Inwagen case, not just a remoteness from ordinary experience but also a remoteness from our values and what, for theists, is our understanding of God's goodness. Let us first propose some thought experiments that do not have these impairments and then offer some critical observations about the thought experiments that, in our view, fail in terms of connecting with phenomenological experience.

A thought experiment that would, in our view, more successfully make a case for the coherence of believing that there could be life after life would be one in which one imagines that Berkeleyan idealism is true here and now of our world. Consider, for example, the extensive work of John Foster in which our world of sensations and perceptions, ostensible material objects et al, turns out to be the world according to Bishop Berkeley.⁷ From such a standpoint, the customary assumption that the mind-independent physical world is epistemically and metaphysically primary is overturned. In a Berkeleyan framework, the coherence of mind surviving the perishing of what we take to be physical is apparent insofar as we have a radical non-identity between mind and material body. A subjective idealist can accept mortalism, the idea that mind

⁵ Lund, *The Conscious Self*, 264-265.

⁶ See van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection".

⁷ Foster, *The Case for Idealism*.

perishes with the body, but she is not committed to that and has the resources to articulate how it is that there may be continuity of person after death.

What if we have good reason to believe that a Berkeleyan universe is, in fact, not our universe? We are, say, in a universe in which there is a mixture of mind and non-mind and the physical domain is mind-independent (at least of finite minds). Then the thought experiment can be shifted to become a description of the next life.⁸ If Berkeleyan idealism involves some known impossibility such as a violation of the law of non-contradiction or in violation of some metaphysical truth that is evident for all possible worlds (e.g. backwards causation), then the thought experiment is useless, but short of this, its apparent conceivability is *prima facie* evidence of it being a genuine possibility and, insofar as we examine possible defeaters and establish that they do not undermine the coherence of a Berkeleyan realm, we have *secunda facie* justification.

Note that the above thought experiments (in which we imagine either this life or the next in idealist terms) do not involve God's engagement in the deception required for van Inwagen's thought experiment. In van Inwagen's case we have to imagine a situation in which the (ostensible) body of the deceased is not numerically identical with the body of the living person and thus it only resembles the body of the deceased.

Perhaps at the moment of each man's death, God removes his corpse and replaces it with a simulacrum which is what is burned or rots. Or perhaps God is not quite so wholesale as this: perhaps He removes for "safekeeping" only the "core person"—the brain and the central nervous system—or even some special part of it.⁹

Van Inwagen's thought experiment has been criticized by others on matters of value. Here, however, we go further, making note of van Inwagen's reply to these objections. So, as one reviewer of an earlier version of this article observed, "van Inwagen has argued that the model should not offend our values since the simulacrum is a counter-factual demonstration of all that God has achieved in Christ and the fact that we mistake the simulacrum for the corpse is just an example of mistaken identity in epistemically favorable conditions, which is something that can easily occur and does not entail that one has been deliberately deceived."¹⁰ Van Inwagen makes the following claim in "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead and the Life of the World to Come":

If God does replace each fresh corpse with a simulacrum, he does thereby show us an important truth: what death mean, or what it would mean if he had not gone beyond justice, beyond mercy, and drawn death's sting in Christ. He shows us this, so to speak, counterfactually, but it is a counterfactual situation he's showing us. He's showing us what would have been if he were no more than a God of justice and had left us to the situation we had earned for ourselves by our rebellion against our creator."¹¹

We offer a threefold reply. First, *contra* van Inwagen, it is far from clear how this body-switching amounts to "showing" God's powerful love. The switch is not observable. Presumably any switch would have to be instantaneous. Imagine if it were otherwise. This would be close to a horrifying gradual substitution of one body with another, the parasitic simulacrum slowly expanding until it has fully replaced the person's actual body. Secondly, the substitution would, in our view, undermine the reverence Christians show to the corpse, a reverence van Inwagen acknowledges.¹² This, however, would seem at odds with the longstanding tradition within Christianity of venerating relics. If van Inwagen's thought experiment holds, then the relics of the bodies of saints are not actually the bodies of saints. Rather, relics collected after death are merely bits taken from divinely-constructed sculptures of saints' bodies. Even if, like ourselves, one does not practice the veneration of relics, this would be a practice that would be outrageously misplaced if one follows van Inwagen's thought experiment. Third, we propose that van Inwagen's thought experiment is

⁸ As suggested in Taliaferro's *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, this was done, in part, by H.H. Price in "Survival and the Idea of 'Another World'".

⁹ van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection", 121.

¹⁰ Reviewer 2, *Open Theology*, January 17, 2017.

¹¹ van Inwagen, "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead and the Life of the World to Come", 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

more a description of an act of magic than a miracle. We are not skeptics about the possibility or even the reasonability of believing in some miracles. But note that such miracles, including Biblical resurrections, do not involve substitutions. When Christ resurrects Lazarus, he returns life to the corpse of the deceased Lazarus. This is impossible, per van Inwagen's view. For van Inwagen, Christ's resurrection of Lazarus must involve a substitution of Lazarus' simulacrum with his already-transported body. This, however, seems inconsistent with the recollection of the miracle presented in the Gospel. A fourth point may be added, but we will not develop it here. Van Inwagen is driven to his extreme thought experiment by a rejection of dualism and acceptance of materialism. If dualism is indeed thoroughly, demonstrably false, then it may be reasonable to consider replacement accounts like van Inwagen's, but we do not find this to be the case. Instead, we hope that the implausibility of materialist accounts of resurrection will lead those inclined to believe in resurrection to reconsider dualism.

There is also something at least peculiar about imagining God collecting parts of human bodies and then re-assembling them in some other realm, as we find with Zimmerman's thought experiment.

The escape is by a hair's breadth, effected by a miraculous last minute "jump" that takes me out of harm's way. So I am tempted to call this story "the falling elevator model of survival" — for you'll recall that, according to the "physics" of cartoons, it is possible to avoid death in a plummeting elevator simply by jumping out in the split second before the elevator hits the basement floor. I argue that it is consistent with the rest of van Inwagen's materialistic metaphysics that our bodies do something like that when we die.¹³

Perhaps Zimmerman is merely offering a logically or metaphysically possible way in which materialism could be true, and a person's human body persists in an afterlife, rather than identifying a way in which we may recognize such a transition as either probable or elegant. Nonetheless, his thought experiment raises the same concerns as van Inwagen's. Zimmerman's account of budding caused by the worldly body is not at all observable and seems closer to science fiction than everyday experience. Other things being equal, the Berkeleyan thought experiment seems more elegant and proximate. In thinking of this life or an afterlife one does not need to posit a phenomenology other than what we experience and, when we imagine a transformed afterlife, we need not think about the transfer of physical particles or the causal processes going on among them.

4 Tracking values in thought experiments

There are numerous thought experiments involving values in the philosophy of religion; often these involve the problem of evil and different accounts of redemption or the atonement.¹⁴ Here we identify only one case, but which we think is quite instructive by the atheist, existentialist philosopher William Irwin. He rejects moral realism, and advances an error theory in terms of moral judgments. On his view, there is no objective fact of the matter that the torture of children is morally wrong. He advances some thought experiments designed to wear away the intuitions of moral realists who assume that there are objective facts of the matter. Let us first review his position succinctly and then indicate why we think his use of thought experiments loses track of the values in question.

Irwin writes:

Advocates of objective morality often fall back on a piece of subjective evidence: morality feels true. That may be, but we need to ask why. Does morality feel true because we were raised with morality? Probably both. The fact that a thing feels true may provide subjective reason to look for an objective reason that validates the subjective feeling, but if no such reason is forthcoming, the feeling must be rejected as insufficient evidence.¹⁵

Irwin notes the pervasiveness of our ethical feelings:

¹³ Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival", 196.

¹⁴ See Taliaferro and Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, for a review of cases.

¹⁵ Irwin, *The Free Market Existentialist*, 105-106.

It certainly is true that, aside from psychopaths, virtually all human being will find the torture of children for fun to be abhorrent. But that feeling does not make it true that the action is morally wrong.¹⁶

But does it provide evidence that it is morally wrong? No.

The feeling is not proof of an objective moral fact; it is simply evidence for an evolved reaction of strong disapproval. As strange and awful as it sounds, if our evolutionary history had been different we could have developed the tendency to approve of the torture of children. The near universal reaction of moral disapproval establishes nothing about objective morality.¹⁷

Irwin likens our response to events in ethical terms to the biological reaction to dog faeces.

The fact that nearly every human being with normal olfactory operation finds the smell of dog droppings to be disgusting does not mean that dog droppings objectively smell disgusting. Rather, what the evidence tells us is that, given the senses human have evolved, dog dropping's smell bad to nearly all humans. Does that mean they smell bad objectively? Not in any objectively real or supernatural sense. Consider the fact that dogs seem to love the smell of dog droppings. With just some small difference in our evolutionary history, we might have come to really enjoy the smell of dog droppings too.¹⁸

Irwin goes on to propose that we might have evolved so that we find eating the corpses of human beings desirable.

What should we make of these claims and appeals to thought experiments of how we might have evolved differently? We suggest that they miss the point. Most moral realists (such as ourselves) would take it to be an objective fact of the matter that torturing children is morally wrong. Why? Because it is bad for them. It violates their very being. Describe a case of what we would normally call "torture" but without using the word (so as to avoid a tautology according to which that which is "torture" is ipso facto wrong): the skinning and salting of live children. Can there be any doubt that this is a clear, evident case of *harming children*, and thus doing something that not only *violates their health* but *brings about their deterioration and the collapse of their faculties*? What Irwin asks us to imagine is that bystanders or those inflicting this damage might think it morally good or permissible, but that is different from asking us to imagine that the skin laceration and salt is good for the child or contributes to her health. We submit that while we can engage in thought experiments in which we imagine ourselves to be psychopaths, that does nothing to de-stabilize the realization of objective facts of health and disease, good and bad, for human persons. Consider the following thought experiment:

Imagine a world in which white persons love removing the eyeballs, tongues, and ears of black people, and then use their labor to cultivate their fields of cotton. In this world, such action is perfectly good and healthy for all concerned.

We suggest that this thought experiment is utterly incoherent. So long as we are imagining human persons, there is no possible world in which the dismembering of black persons can be good and healthy for all concerned. Only if we engage in the most outrageous science fiction in which human anatomy is utterly different (people don't use eyes to see, etc.), could we begin to begin entertaining something remotely like this. But then it should be apparent that the thought experiment serves no purpose other than being an exercise in imaginative sadism.

5 Virtuous thought experiments

We summarize our proposal in this short paper by pointing to a thought experiment that we think succeeds in terms of proximity and the tracking of values. Consider Iris Murdoch's thought experiment designed to show that the prevailing, largely behavioristic philosophy of mind of her day was truncated as developed

¹⁶ Ibid., 101-102.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸ Ibid.

in her classic *The Sovereignty of Good*. In chapter one, she develops in detail the picture of the ideal person in light of the work of Stuart Hampshire. In this picture, persons lack interior mental thoughts that are not directly related to actual or hypothetical behavior. Murdoch artfully develops the portrait of the inner life of a mother-in-law who overcomes her contempt and disdain for her daughter-in-law and yet this involves no actual change in her real or hypothetical behavior.

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pet and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind.¹⁹

What makes this a great thought experiment is its proximity to ordinary experience (we are led in to think about the inner mental life of the mother-in-law) and to appreciate the values at stake (we can appreciate the cruelty of the mother-in-laws contempt and how she comes to love the daughter-in-law). We are thereby led to see Hampshire's ideal as truncated, as missing out on what we can see as something valuable and yet Hampshire's schema prevents us from appreciating. "This is one of those exasperating moments in philosophy when one seems to be being relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say."²⁰ Thought experiments in philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular, can give us a forum in which we might find ways to express insights into matters from which we are otherwise cut off. In constructing these thought experiments, the focus on proximity and values is paramount.

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¹⁹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

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