

Penultimate draft

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The Problem of Evil and the Grammar of Goodness

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1. Here I consider the two most venerated arguments about the existence of God: the Ontological Argument and the Argument from Evil. The Ontological Argument purports to show that God's nature guarantees that God exists. The Argument from Evil purports to show that God's nature, combined with some plausible facts about the way the world is, guarantees (or is very compelling grounds for thinking) that God does not exist.

Obviously, both arguments cannot be sound. But I argue here that they are both unsound for the very same reason.

2. Consider first the Argument from Evil. There are very many ways the Argument from Evil can be formulated. For the most part, these differences will not affect the issue at hand in this article. So here is one rough but standard way of putting the Argument:

E1. If God exists, then a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and **perfectly good** exists.

E2. A being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and **perfectly good** would not create a world in which there is (avoidable) evil.

E3. But there is (avoidable) evil in the world.

E4. Therefore, God does not exist.

We are led to conclude that God does not exist, because if God did exist, then He would prevent the sorts of evils that we in fact see. We can be confident that He would prevent these evils, because that is what a perfectly good being who knew about these evils would do, if He could.

Consider next the Ontological Argument. There are many ways this argument can be formulated, but most of the differences between them will not affect the issue at hand in this article. (One variation *is* important. I will have something to say about this later.) Here is one rough but standard way the Ontological Argument is put:

O1. God is that than which no **greater** can be conceived.

O2. If God does not exist, then there is something greater than God that can be conceived.

O3. Therefore, God exists.

We are led to conclude that God exists, because it is part of the very concept of God that he is as great as one can possibly be, and that existence is part of greatness. We can be

confident that God exists, because we know that a being that can be conceived and actually exists is greater than a being that merely can be conceived but does not exist.

Notice that both arguments rely on premises involving the nature of God, and that both attribute evaluative properties to God. In the case of the Argument from Evil, we are to think that God is good. In the case of the Ontological Argument, we are to think that God is great. Here I will question whether it is correct to think about God this way.

3. Why think that there is anything amiss in saying that God is good or great? It will be instructive as a point of comparison to briefly review the history of one of the most influential arguments in moral philosophy, G. E. Moore's Open Question argument, an argument whose cogency depends entirely upon the logical grammar of goodness. Moore held that it always makes sense to ask, of any natural property, whether something that has that property is good.ⁱ From this fact, Moore concluded that goodness is not identical with any natural property; for if the two were indeed identical, then it would *not* always make sense to ask whether something that has that natural property is good.

The lesson that Moore took away from this observation is that since goodness is not a natural property, it must be a nonnatural property. Noncognitivists, by contrast, typically conclude that goodness is, strictly speaking, not a property at all, and so moral language is to be understood as doing something other than describing how the world is.ⁱⁱ And Cornell realists point out yet another option: they argue that the Open Question argument does not rule out the possibility of *a posteriori* necessary moral truths, and so goodness might still be a natural property after all.ⁱⁱⁱ

But one typically overlooked response to the problem Moore poses originates in the work of Peter Geach.^{iv} Geach draws our attention to two different ways adjectives can logically function. They can function either as predicative adjectives or as attributive adjectives. Most adjectives seem to function as predicative adjectives. Most color concepts work this way. Because ‘white’ is predicative, the fact that the Washington Monument is a white building strictly implies that the Washington Monument is white. The noun that the adjective is modifying in the original claim can be dropped, and the adjective still can be truly predicated of the subject. (More formally, if F functions as a predicative adjective, then “x is a F K” implies that “x is F”.)

But this sort of implication is not available in the case of the use of every adjective. For attributive adjectives, the adjective cannot be meaningfully and correctly detached from the specific generic noun it modifies. The adjective ‘large’ works this way. The fact that Y is a large microprocessor does not strictly imply that Y is large. The fact that Z is a heavy atom does not imply that Z is heavy. And, most importantly, the fact that N.N. is a good robber does not imply that N.N. is good.

For attributive adjectives always, at least implicitly, need an associated generic noun to modify in order even to make sense. To say that Houdini is good probably is to mean that he is a good magician or a good entertainer. It probably does not mean that he is a good son or a good business associate.

Mistakenly detaching attributive adjectives from the generic nouns to which they attach often results in contradictions. For it might both be true that a particular painting is both a genuine van Meegeren and a fake Vermeer (to use a standard example). Yet it

is nothing but confusion to say that some particular painting is both genuine and fake. Terms like ‘genuine’ and ‘fake’ mean something only when they modify some noun.

Now Geach proposed that the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *always* function attributively. Nothing is simply good or bad, but instead is a good or bad instance of some kind or other. If right, then Moore was incorrect to hold that it always makes sense to ask, in response to the claim that some object has some natural property, whether it is also good. For if Geach is correct, then it *never* makes sense to ask of some object simply whether it is good. That would be like asking whether it is large or heavy or genuine. Nothing is simply good. We can sensibly ask only whether something is a good K (where K denotes some generic kind), and then the answer to that question essentially depends upon *what* kind of thing is under discussion.

This is obviously true in the case of artifacts. It makes no sense just to say baldly that some particular object is good; rather, it makes sense to say that it is a good (or bad) music player, or a good (or bad) doorstop, or a good (or bad) theft deterrent, or a good (or bad) anniversary present, and so on. Something can be a good or bad instance of its kind (which themselves can be multiple), but nothing is good or bad *tout court*.

What does Geach’s account of the grammar of goodness imply about morality? There are many possibilities, but his account fits very nicely with a view of morality developed by Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Michael Thompson.^v On this view, whether some *operation* or *state* of yours is good or bad depends upon the kind of creature you are. It would be a defect in *me* were I not to care for my offspring. Ignoring one’s offspring is a bad human action. This has to do with natural facts about human

beings. But it is not a defect in each and every fish were *they* not to care for their offspring. In their case, ignoring one's offspring is not a bad operation (at least for some species of fish). What counts as a good or bad operation depends crucially upon the kind of creature operating.

There are facts about how human beings live and operate, facts that set the standard of goodness for particular human beings. For instance, it is a natural fact that human beings have ten fingers. But Uncle Joe here has only six fingers. He is, for all that, a human being; but to that extent he is defective or disabled. It might not be a defect in some particular creature of some other kind to have six fingers, but it is for humans.

These natural facts are neither merely statistical nor purely normative. As Anscombe noted, human beings have thirty-two teeth, even if most of them do not. And to say that humans beings have thirty-two teeth is not merely to say that they *should* have thirty-two teeth. For I might say of a rotary saw blade that I am now forging that *it* should have thirty-two teeth, and I would mean something very different by that utterance than I mean when I say that human beings have thirty-two teeth.

Now there are natural facts not only about the number of fingers or teeth humans have, but also natural facts about their wills. And to the extent that my will differs from this standard, my will is thereby defective or bad. When we say that So-and-so is a (morally) bad person, we usually mean that So-and-so's will is bad, bad by comparison to the way that human beings are motivated. Whether some feature or operation of me is good or bad never floats free of the kind (or kinds) of creature I am, but makes sense only

in reference to this more general thing: my species. An immoral human being thus has a will that is bad for a human being to have.

I propose to take this account of goodness in general, and moral goodness in particular, very seriously. I admit that there are objections to this view, objections that merit careful consideration. Some of these objections seem *prima facie* powerful. This is not the place to weigh all of them, but I will head off a few misconceptions.

First, Geach's point is not about surface grammar. Very often, one says things like "That new Sopranos episode was good!", and everyone knows what one means. The listener typically has no trouble grasping that one means that it was a good *episode*, rather than a good soporific, or a good depiction of the typical American family.

Second, only some generic nouns imply standards of goodness. To say of some particular entity that it is a good molecule leaves one's listener scratching her head. For there is no such thing as a good molecule or a bad molecule, not without some special story about what one needs a particular kind of molecule for—in which case the relevant generic noun is not simply a molecule, but something more specific than that.

Third and finally, it is possible to agree with Geach in the main, but understand remaining stubborn predicative uses of the word 'good' expressivistically. While most surface predicative uses of the word 'good' can be understood by implicitly inserting some appropriate generic noun to which it is attached, we may interpret other predicative uses of 'good' as noncognitivists do. If Ellen says "That is good!", and she rejects all of our attempts to insert some generic noun into her thought ("A good party?" "A good meeting?"), then we should probably take her merely to be expressing her emotions about

the subject of her sentence. While we can reject noncognitivism about most uses of evaluative predicates, such an account may be appropriate for other uses of them.

4. Now suppose Geach's view here is correct: goodness is a two-place relation between a particular and a kind, a kind of which the particular is a member. What follows from this account?

I will initially argue that 1) God is not a member of any kind; then, more modestly, 2) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it; then, finally and sincerely, 3) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it such that He would be defective with respect to said standards by failing to prevent suffering. (Similar claims about greatness hold as well.)

First, consider the claim that God is not a member of any kind. There is no kind K of which God is a particular member. God is completely *sui generis*. On one conception of the divine, a particular god might be a member of the kind of gods. This may be the proper way to understand certain mythological polytheisms. We might think that Mars, for instance, is a particularly good or bad god, because he has or lacks most of the characteristics gods have. But many Theists can reply that God is instead *utterly unique*, without committing any severe heterodoxy. And if there is *no* kind K of which God is a particular member, then God cannot be a good (or bad) K.

It may be objected that there are indeed some true things that can be said about God. For instance, God has existed for more than four minutes. So God is a member of

the kind of things that have existed for more than four minutes, just as you and I are.

Thus it appears false to say that God is not a member of any kind whatsoever.

Nonetheless, this is not enough to establish what is needed for the Argument from Evil to work. This kind (more-than-four-minute-existents) does not give rise to *any* standards according to which a particular entity could be a good or bad instance of its kind. There is no such thing as a bad or good more-than-four-minute-existent. Any particular entity that has *not* existed for more than four minutes is not a bad more-than-four-minute existent. So while God may be a member of some kinds, He is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it.

But it may now be objected that God is *indeed* a member of a kind that has standards of goodness internal to it. By any orthodox account, God is an intelligent being. An intelligent being is good qua intelligent being, in so far as it is knowledgeable, logical, and has all the other intellectual virtues. So it is indeed possible for God to be a good or bad intelligent being. Thus, the objector concludes, there are indeed standards of goodness that apply to God.^{vi}

Still, this is not enough to rescue the Argument from Evil. It is true that God would be a bad intelligent being if He should fail to be clever or rational or critical. God is indeed a member of some kinds that have standards of goodness internal to them. But He is not a member of any kind that characteristically alleviates avoidable suffering or other evils. That is, there is no kind of entity that typically prevents pain of which God is a member. So the kinds to which God *does* belong do not require Him to eliminate our

woes in order to be a good instance of those kinds. The fact that God can be good in some ways does not mean He would wipe the world of evils, should He exist.

Some will want to insist that God, like all humans, is a member of the class of Rational Beings, and as a result God is governed by exactly the same rules of rationality as are humans, and that these rules imply, among other things, that God should prevent suffering, and so on. But the tradition of morality I have been referencing understands rationality too as something kind-dependent. What counts as practically rational for members of one kind can differ, at least within limits, from what counts as practically rational for members of some other kind.^{vii} There could be creatures for which practical rationality is simply instrumental rationality, while for other kinds of creatures practical rationality is more complex. What it is for a particular creature to be rational again depends upon more general truths about the species to which it belongs. So we cannot infer from the fact (if it *is* a fact) that it would be irrational for *us* not to prevent needless suffering the conclusion it would be irrational for any rational being not to prevent needless suffering.

The most important implication of this line of argument is that we have no grounds for saying that if God is good, God will not create a world in which there is evil. For the antecedent, strictly speaking, makes no sense. God cannot be good or bad, in just the same way that the number 3 cannot be good or bad, or that the set of molecules constituting this journal volume cannot be good or bad. Premises E1 and E2 are not true, because they are ill-formed. And thus the Argument from Evil is not sound.

My proposal here differs from other responses to The Problem of Evil. Some see a way out by radically altering what is meant by 'God'. Others, for instance, have thought that God has no interests or desires or aims, and that this is one reason why it does not make sense to say that God is good, for goodness is always relative to these things. But nothing I have said commits me to the thought that God is without interests or desires or aims. All I have held is that God is not a member of any kind that characteristically minimizes suffering.

Likewise, some have proposed what is called negative theology, the view that we can say only what God *is not*, not anything about what God *is*. Others have argued that God is hidden, and we just do not know why God would permit suffering unnecessarily. This may be true, but it too differs from what I have been arguing. We may know *exactly* what God is like, yet this would give us no grounds for judging that God is good or bad. My proposal really requires no major revision in the traditional conception of God, only a revision in the common (but mistaken) conception of the grammar of goodness.

But even if I am correct that there are no standards of goodness or badness that apply to God, the Problem of Evil may return in some other form. Instead of predicating goodness of God, one might predicate omnibenevolence of Him. The existence of evil seems to imply that there is no omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being. Does this show that God does not exist?

I do not think so. There is no reason for insisting that if God exists, He is omnibenevolent. Most religious traditions *do* hold that God sometimes acts benevolently. But these traditions do not supply sufficient grounds for insisting that God

always does the *most* benevolent thing. God may be selectively benevolent, but not omnibenevolent. So shifting the focus from God's goodness to God's omnibenevolence will not enable to us to infer that God does not exist.

I also have no solution to the question why we should *worship* a being who does not alleviate avoidable suffering. One might sensibly wonder why we should submit to the will of a being who could easily improve our lives, and yet does not. There may be a good answer to this problem, but I have nothing on offer here.

Still, I have suggested a way Theists can defang The Problem of Evil, a way to block the argument that God does not exist. The solution is heterodox in so far as I do not maintain that God is good. But we are still entitled to say that God is free of defect. God is without flaw. God is in no respect bad. Maybe that is all the orthodoxy we need.

5. The Ontological Argument suffers from similar problems. It begins by understanding God as great; in fact, God is the greatest thing that can be conceived. This presumes that it make sense to say (baldly) that God is great. But is this correct?

I venture to say that all of the reasons for thinking that 'good' always functions attributively apply with equal force in favor of thinking that 'great' always functions attributively. We often do *say* that something is (just plain) great, but this is because we expect the listener to use contextual cues to understand some generic noun as relevant. If Nicolas says "Beethoven was great", we presume that he means that Beethoven was a great composer, not a great joke-teller. When Muhammad Ali said "I am the greatest", we should not expect his confidence to waver if someone were to point out that there is

an awfully large wall in China. Asking whether the Great Awakening was greater than the Great Depression misses the point. Greatness, like goodness, always logically functions attributively.

We *do* sometimes compare the greatness of one kind of thing with the greatness of a different kind of thing. People sensibly argue over whether Tiger Woods is greater than Michael Jordan, despite the fact that one is a golfer and the other is a basketball player (we should ignore Jordan's mediocre golfing and baseball careers). But this is only because 1) they are both athletes, and 2) it makes sense to talk of a great athlete. Such comparisons are possible only when the items that are being compared all fall under some category that implies criteria for being great. Not all categories *do* imply criteria of greatness: it makes no sense to speak of a great way of exerting a gravitational force. Thus it makes no sense to say that something is great unless some generic noun is thereby implied, or we are to understand the locution in an expressivist fashion.

And so it is not true that God is great, much less greater than anything else conceivable. Premises O1 and O2 are not true, not because they are false, but because they are ill-formed. The Ontological Argument seemed to work only because it had appeared to make sense to say that God was great. Once we see that this does not make sense, the appeal of the Ontological Argument evaporates.

Can the Ontological Argument be revised so that it is sound? The most immediate way to repair the argument may be to find some kind of which God is a great instance. The Theist will likely first try:

O1* God is that than which no **greater being** can be conceived.

O2* If God does not exist, then there is some **greater being** than God that can be conceived.

O3* Therefore, God exists.

At least this argument uses ‘great’ attributively. Or it pretends to. For to say that one item is a greater *being* than another item merely amounts to saying that the first item is greater than the second item, which is to say nothing at all: being *a being* brings no specific criteria of greatness in tow. In order to repair the Ontological Argument, one needs to find some *specific* generic noun of which God is the greatest possible instance.

Perhaps we can do that. God is a great creator. God is a great provider. These are specific aspects of the orthodox notion of God. So consider:

O1** God is that than which no **greater provider** can be conceived.

O2** If God does not exist, then there is some greater provider than God that can be conceived.

O3** Therefore, God exists.

Is this argument sound? A problem emerges. First, it is not obvious that a provider who exists is ipso facto a greater provider than a provider who does not. Who is the greater provider: Santa Claus or my Uncle Daniel, who once gave me \$10 for my birthday? It’s true that Uncle Daniel exists, whereas Santa Claus does not. But Santa Claus gives presents to millions of children, while my Uncle Daniel is exceedingly flinty. The second consideration seems to outweigh the first. One provider is not always a greater provider than another provider simply because only the first one exists.

Still, perhaps a provider who exists is *ceteris paribus* a greater provider than one does not. And God is not simply a great provider; He is purportedly the greatest provider whom can be conceived. So maybe the argument is sound.

But is it true that God is the greatest provider that we can conceive? Is O1** true? I can conceive of a being who is exactly like God (call Him Schmod), except that 1) Schmod just provided me with a proof of the Goldbach Conjecture, and 2) Schmod does not in fact exist. Still, Schmod would seem to be an even greater provider than the greatest provider who actually exists. Or, if providing me with a proof of the Goldbach Conjecture is alone not enough to make Schmod a greater provider than the greatest provider who actually exists, then we can imagine Schmod also providing me and others with all sorts of things that no one actually provides them with. This should be enough to make Schmod a greater provider than the greatest provider who actually exists, much like Santa Claus is a greater provider than my Uncle Daniel. So O1** is false. And it appears that analogous moves could be made with any other generic noun that is inserted (in place of “provider”) in the argument.^{viii}

Here’s a second problem with the revised argument. Even if my argument of the previous paragraph fails, the revised argument shows only that greatest conceivable *provider* exists. It permits us to conclude nothing else about the nature of the being in question; in particular, we are not permitted to conclude that such a being has all the other characteristics typically attributed to God, such as omniscience—at least not unless it can *also* be shown that the greatest possible knower exists. So it is highly unlikely that the Ontological Argument can give the Theist *everything* she wants. Still, I must confess

that the Ontological Argument is less damaged by the logic of evaluative adjectives than is the Argument from Evil.

Furthermore, early on I hinted that there was a variation of the Ontological Argument that was importantly different from the version of it I consider here. This version is formulated not at all in terms of God's greatness, but instead in terms of God's necessity.^{ix} The thought behind these modal arguments is roughly that God, by definition, is not a contingent being. So if it is possible that God exists, it is necessary that God exists. But it is possible that God exists. So God exists. Whether *this* argument is sound is a controversial matter; I raise it only to acknowledge that the logic of evaluative adjectives has no bearing upon it.

6. Evaluative adjectives such as 'good' or 'great' logically function as attributive adjectives, a fact that proponents of two standard arguments concerning the existence of God have overlooked to their own detriment. Many have been too quick to assume that we can determine whether God exists by exploring what good particulars of other sorts are like. But a good or great instance of one kind and a good or great instance of another kind need have nothing else in common. So reasoning analogically about God in these ways is likely to falter.

ⁱ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

ⁱⁱ C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist” in G. Sayre-McCord (Ed.), *Essays on moral realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 181-228).
- ^{iv} Peter Geach, “Good and Evil”, *Analysis*, Vol. 17 (1956), 33-42.
- ^v G. E. M. Anscombe, “Good and Bad Human Action” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006), 195-206. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Michael Thompson, “The Representation of Life” in *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 247-296.
- ^{vi} I thank __ for raising this objection.
- ^{vii} Michael Thompson, “Three Degrees of Natural Goodness” *Iride*, April 2003.
- ^{viii} This argument obviously bears affinities with Gaunilo’s objections to one of Anselm’s versions of the ontological argument.
- ^{ix} Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments" *Philosophical Review* **69** (1960): 41-62; Alvin Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument from St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).