

The No-Minimum argument, satisficing, and no-best-world: a reply to Jeff Jordan

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Abstract: Peter van Inwagen's 'No-Minimum' argument boldly rejects a proposition widely accepted by theists and atheists alike: God and gratuitous evil are incompatible. Jeff Jordan (2003) criticizes van Inwagen's argument and (Jordan 2011) defends his position against Michael Schrynmakers (2007). I present two criticisms of Jordan. Concerning his first paper, I argue that if it is plausible to suppose that there exist undetectable evils, Jordan's argument is incomplete. Concerning his second paper, I show how Jordan fails to engage adequately with Schrynmakers's reply and, more seriously, with the notion of satisficing implicit in van Inwagen's No-Minimum argument. To draw out this second criticism, I make use of another debate in the philosophy of religion: the problem of no-best-world.

According to William Rowe's well-known version of the evidential argument from evil, an instance of evil is gratuitous if and only if it could have been prevented by God without the loss of a greater good or the permission of an evil equally bad or worse. Call this the Theological Premise of Rowe's argument. Further, it seems that such instances of evil do occur, namely, certain instances of pain and suffering. Call this the Evidential Premise. Therefore, Rowe concludes, there probably is no God (Rowe (1979), 336).¹ Most critics of Rowe's argument accept the Theological Premise and so challenge the Evidential Premise, denying that critics of theism have shown that any inscrutable evil is probably gratuitous. Peter van Inwagen, however, challenges the Theological Premise (van Inwagen (1988); (2001); (2006)).

Van Inwagen claims that the argument from gratuitous evil is committed to a faulty assumption: there is a precise minimum amount of evil necessary for God's purposes, and so there is a precise amount of evil God would permit and no more (van Inwagen (1988), 167; (2001), 71; (2006), 100). Call this the Minimum Claim.

Van Inwagen rejects it, arguing by way of several analogies that there is no minimum amount of evil necessary for God's purposes. For example, it is clear that the fertility of eighteenth-century England would not have been affected in the least by the subtraction or addition of a single raindrop. There is no precise minimum number of raindrops required to satisfy the conditions of fertility in eighteenth-century England (van Inwagen (2001), 76). By the same reasoning, van Inwagen proposes his No-Minimum Claim,

(N) For any amount of evil V_1 that God permits, there is another amount of evil V_2 God could have permitted that is less than V_1 and would serve His purposes just as well.²

Van Inwagen thinks that, since there is no minimum amount of evil God can permit in order to achieve His purposes, He must *satisfice*; that is, God must choose from a range of possibilities, none of which is best, and all of which are good enough.³ Further, van Inwagen argues that (N) implies the following claim.

(J) God is in no way culpable in permitting V_1 in spite of the fact that there is another amount of evil V_2 that is less than V_1 and would serve His purposes just as well.⁴

God cannot help but to *satisfice*; He must draw an arbitrary line and van Inwagen argues that, given the circumstances (N), He is morally permitted to do so (J). If van Inwagen's No-Minimum argument succeeds, the Theological Premise is false: God and gratuitous evil are compossible.

In the first of two recent papers, Jeff Jordan rejects van Inwagen's argument. His target is (N), the No-Minimum Claim, and his argument is formulated, following Rowe, with respect to pain and suffering. Jordan interprets van Inwagen's No-Minimum Claim as itself relying upon a faulty assumption: pain and suffering are infinitely diminishable. Only in this way, says Jordan, does van Inwagen establish that, for any amount of pain and suffering God could permit, there is a lesser amount that would serve His purposes just as well. Jordan argues, on the contrary, that pain and suffering are not infinitely diminishable, that 'there is a difference in diminishing something and diminishing something in a morally significant way' (Jordan (2003), 237). More precisely, he argues that 'to diminish pain and suffering in a morally significant way requires a detectable diminishing, but pain and suffering, even if diminishable *ad infinitum*, cannot be diminished in a detectable way *ad infinitum*' (*ibid.*, 236–237).⁵ Since there is a lower bound on the human ability to detect pain and suffering, van Inwagen has failed to show there is no minimum amount of pain and suffering required for God's purposes.⁶ Thus, van Inwagen has failed to establish (N) and so has provided no support for (J). In this way, Jordan thinks he has reinstated the Theological Premise.⁷

However, Jordan's argument is vulnerable in two ways. First, he may be too quick to narrow his attention to instances of pain and suffering. Perhaps his intention is

to remain faithful to Rowe, who also focuses on instances of pain and suffering. Rowe can do this since, in order to show that gratuitous evil-in-general (probably) exists, it is sufficient for Rowe to show that gratuitous pain and suffering (probably) exists. In contrast, showing that pain and suffering are not infinitely diminishable is insufficient for Jordan's purposes; Jordan must show that evil-in-general is not infinitely diminishable, since, crucially, van Inwagen is interested in evil-in-general. Though he explicitly addresses Rowe in the 2001 and 2003 formulations of his No-Minimum argument, van Inwagen distinguishes between arguing from 'the fact of evil' or the 'global argument' from evil, and arguing from 'particular evils' or the 'local argument' from evil.⁸ The former is about arguments from evil-in-general while the latter is about arguments from particular evils, such as certain instances of pain and suffering, and van Inwagen thinks his work is relevant for both sorts of arguments. Furthermore, van Inwagen's 1988 formulation of the No-Minimum argument is framed as a general theodicy and does not even mention Rowe. Thus, van Inwagen's No-Minimum argument is not meant to address only an argument from pain and suffering, but arguments from evil-in-general.⁹

This is important if we admit the possibility of undetectable evils that are not instances of pain and suffering. If there are such evils, then Jordan's argument is unsuccessful, since, in this case, Jordan has not shown that *no* evil is infinitely diminishable, only that *some* evil (pain and suffering) is *not* infinitely diminishable. That there exist undetectable evils, I think, is plausible. Much debate in the philosophy of religion turns on the claim that there exist undetected and undetectable great goods. For example, so-called sceptical theists argue for the existence of undetectable great goods in order to resist the Evidential Premise of Rowe's argument.¹⁰ If it is plausible to suppose that there exist undetectable goods, then parity suggests that it is plausible to suppose that there exist undetectable evils. If there are, in fact, divine plans for the sake of which God must permit undetectable evils, then Jordan has not provided a complete argument showing that these evils are not infinitely diminishable.¹¹ He has only shown that *some* evil (pain and suffering) is not infinitely diminishable. Thus, the set of all evils relevant for God's purposes, which plausibly contains both detectable and undetectable evils, may very well be infinitely diminishable. If so, then Jordan's argument against van Inwagen's (N) is incomplete.¹²

Even if Jordan provides a plausible rejoinder to the above criticism, his position is still vulnerable to Michael Schrynemakers's argument. Schrynemakers argues that it is ultimately not infinite diminishability in van Inwagen's No-Minimum Claim (N) that is counterpoised against the idea of a minimum amount of evil required for God's purposes; rather it is vagueness. Schrynemakers extracts what he takes to be the heart of van Inwagen's No-Minimum Claim:

[I]f there is no *specific* amount of permitted evil necessary and sufficient for [God's purposes], then (because every instance of some amount of evil is a

specific amount of evil) there are specific amounts of evil it is permissible to allow for [God's purposes] that are not necessary for [God's purposes]. (Schrynemakers (2007), 47)¹³

Unfortunately, argues Schrynemakers, van Inwagen often writes in terms of infinite diminishability, but the notion van Inwagen should employ is that of a *vague concept*. Consider an oft-used analogy. The concept of tallness ranges over an indeterminate series of height measurements such that there is no precise height measurement in this series that is necessary and sufficient for the correct minimum application of the term 'tall'. In the same way, the amount of evil required for God's purposes is vague: it ranges over an indeterminate series of precise amounts of evil, none of which are the minimum required to achieve God's purposes. Thus, any precise height measurement sufficient for the correct application of the term 'tall' will exceed the height necessary for tallness, and any amount of evil satisfying God's purposes will exceed the amount of evil necessary for God's purposes. If this is correct, van Inwagen need not argue that evils are infinitely diminishable in order to establish (N). He need only argue from vagueness. Given God's options, van Inwagen holds that God is morally permitted to draw an arbitrary line, and so (J) holds. In this way, Schrynemakers shows that Jordan has failed to engage with van Inwagen's argument, properly construed, and so Jordan has failed to reinstate the Theological Premise.

Very recently, Jordan has responded to Schrynemakers. In his earlier argument, Jordan denies (N). But in his new paper, for the sake of argument, Jordan concedes Schrynemakers's point that vagueness and not infinite diminishability is the key to (N). Instead, he denies the inference from (N) to (J), the latter of which is the claim that God is morally permitted to satisfice. This is because, 'for any two amounts of suffering V_1 and V_2 , such that V_2 involves more suffering than does V_1 , while both may be sufficient for [God's purposes], morality requires that one opt for V_1 and not V_2 ' (Jordan (2011), 126). In other words, for any amount of evil V_1 , since there is a lesser amount of evil V_2 that would serve God's purposes just as well, God would be morally culpable in permitting V_1 , and so God cannot satisfice in permitting V_1 . That is, contrary to van Inwagen, (N) does not imply (J) and so the Theological Premise, in case of (N), implies atheism. Jordan's mistake here is that he does not adequately engage with Schrynemakers and, more importantly, with van Inwagen. He simply denies (J) instead of engaging with van Inwagen's argument for it. Consider another of van Inwagen's analogies (van Inwagen (2001), 73–73). A ten-year sentence is sufficient for the purposes of rehabilitating the criminal, Blodgett, but equally sufficient is a sentence of nine years, three hundred and sixty-four days. Nevertheless, we should surely agree that the judge presiding over Blodgett's case is morally permitted to assign Blodgett a ten-year sentence. Similarly, since God's decision about precisely how much evil to permit is made within necessarily vague parameters, van Inwagen thinks God is justified

in permitting some precise amount. Jordan does not engage with this argument but simply asserts that even if God cannot but permit some gratuitous evil, He is morally culpable in permitting any gratuitous evil. Jordan must do more than deny van Inwagen's conclusion; He must engage with van Inwagen's argument.¹⁴

Perhaps the best way for Jordan to engage with van Inwagen and Schrynemakers is to investigate the merits of divine satisficing. The importance of doing so is made vivid by looking at another debate in the philosophy of religion: the problem of no-best-world.¹⁵ Leibniz famously argues that there is a best of all possible worlds. Further, God must actualize the best world and so, if He actualized this world, it must be the best possible. Today, very few maintain that (a) there is a best possible world. The consensus position is that (b) there is an infinite series of possible worlds, each surpassable in goodness.¹⁶ Given (b), some have proposed an a priori argument for atheism, also called the argument from no-best-world.¹⁷ According to this argument, God's traditional attributes imply that God could not do better than He actually does. From (b), we know that if God were to actualize any world, there would be (infinitely many) better possible worlds He could have actualized instead. Thus, there are no possible worlds that God could actualize, which means that God does not exist in any possible world.

Several philosophers have rejected this argument by defending a notion of divine satisficing according to which, given (b), God is still able to actualize a world, even though His creation is less than best.¹⁸ This reasoning can be reformulated into conditions for satisficing parallel to (N) and (J):

(N*) For any possible world W_1 that God actualizes, there is another possible world W_2 such that W_2 surpasses W_1 in goodness.

(J*) God is in no way culpable in actualizing W_1 in spite of the fact that there is some possible world W_2 such that W_2 surpasses W_1 in goodness.

On scenario (b), Jordan's position in the previous debate suggests he should accept (N*) but deny that it implies (J*). This means Jordan's reasoning, translated into this debate, suggests he should deny that God possesses grounds for actualizing any world.¹⁹ However, such a rejection would be seriously underdeveloped. After all, (b) is the consensus position involved in the no-best-world debate, and, as Jordan himself notes, a substantial portion of the no-best-world literature is about the merits of divine satisficing.²⁰ This means that, in order to defeat arguments in the no-best-world debate employing divine satisficing, Jordan must do more than merely stipulate that satisficing is unacceptable. Since such a response is unacceptable in this context, it seems an analogous response in the problem of evil context is equally unacceptable. Yet, in reply to van Inwagen and Schrynemakers, this is precisely what Jordan does. Given that divine satisficing is directly relevant to van Inwagen's rejection of the Theological Premise, Jordan must do more than dismiss this issue without due diligence; he must directly engage van Inwagen's proposal that God is permitted to satisfice.²¹

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Notes

1. Rowe's argument is about instances of pain and suffering in particular, not evil in general. However, instances of pain and suffering are important for Rowe because they are supposed instances of gratuitous evil and, thus, provide support for the Evidential Premise. I will return to the distinction

between pain and suffering on the one hand, and evil-in-general on the other, as it is important for my first criticism of Jordan.

2. This claim (N) is formulated on the basis of remarks made in van Inwagen (1988) 167; (2001) 72–73; (2006) 102–103.
3. The total absence of evil might not be best if God must permit some amount of evil in order to fulfil some good purpose, e.g. creating creatures with free will (van Inwagen (1988) 161, 163; (2001), 66).
4. This claim (J) is formulated on the basis of remarks made in van Inwagen (1988), 168; (2001) 72–73; (2006), 102–103.
5. Jim Stone (2003) puts forward the same argument against van Inwagen. Thus, my first criticism of Jordan, if successful, also counts against Stone's argument.
6. One might object to Jordan's argument as follows. There is no common human ability to detect pain and suffering; different people, for example, experience the same pain stimulus differently, and even the same person may experience the same pain stimulus differently at different times. Thus, my inability to discriminate between two amounts of pain does not preclude the ability of another to discriminate between the two. This objection is misguided, since the key point in Jordan's argument is not that there is a common lower bound on the human ability to detect pain and suffering, but that there is, in principle, a lower bound on each person's ability to detect pain and suffering.
A similar mistake is made by Cullison (2011). Cullison concedes Jordan's claim that there is a lower bound on our ability to detect pain and suffering but points out that our current capacities for detecting pain and suffering are contingent: there are possible worlds in which human pain-detection is far more sensitive so as to allow for the detection of minuscule amounts of pain that are not detectable by humans in the actual world. This, Cullison thinks, blocks Jordan's argument against the No-Minimum Claim. Jordan correctly dismisses Cullison's criticism as irrelevant, since it is very plausible to suppose that any contingent capacity (less than omniscience) for detecting pain and suffering has a lower bound (Jordan (2011), 126–127).
7. At one point, Jordan argues against his 'Benthamite' interpretation of van Inwagen's No-Minimum Claim, according to which pain and suffering are measurable only by the whole numbers (Jordan (2003), 237). If God permits some amount of pain n , and $n = 5$, then some amount of pain equalling 4 serves God's purposes just as well. This also means that some amount of pain equalling 3 also serves His purposes just as well, as does some amount equalling 2, and 1, and 0. But surely if zero pain is sufficient for God's purposes, He would permit zero pain and no more. Michael Schrynemakers also argues against this interpretation, though he does not refer to it as the Benthamite interpretation (Schrynemakers (2007), 247–248). However, this interpretation is clearly not what van Inwagen has in mind. In fact, he dismisses it in his 2006 argument. Van Inwagen first presents the claim for which Jordan and Schrynemakers provide multiple interpretations, including the Benthamite interpretation: 'For any n , if the existence of at most n horrors is consistent with God's plan, the existence of at most $n - 1$ horrors will be equally consistent with God's plan' (van Inwagen (2006), 106). In the endnote following this claim, van Inwagen continues,

Does it not then follow that, for any n , if the existence of at most n horrors is consistent with God's plan, then the existence of at most m horrors (where m is any number smaller than n , including 0) is consistent with his plan? No: mathematical induction is valid only for precise predicates.
(*ibid.*, 112)

As will be shown, van Inwagen is pressing the point that Schrynemakers draws out of his work: we cannot reason in this way with vague predicates, such as evil, but only with precise predicates, which, paradigmatically, are those predicates that are quantifiable by the natural numbers.

8. The 'fact of evil'/'particular evils' distinction is drawn in van Inwagen (2001, 65) and the global/local distinction is drawn in van Inwagen (2006, 95).
9. While Jordan's argument about the finite diminishability of pain and suffering does not undermine van Inwagen's response to arguments from gratuitous evil-in-general, it would undermine a van Inwagen-style response to Rowe's arguments about gratuitous pain and suffering in particular.
10. For example, Wykstra (1984, 1996) argues in this fashion against Rowe. See also arguments from Alston (1991) and Bergmann (2008). Note that both Alston and Bergmann distinguish between undetectable goods and undetectable justifications. Regarding the latter, their point is that God might permit certain evils for the sake of detectable goods, but it might be the case that God's *justification* for so doing is

undetectable. Since Jordan's argument is not about infinitely diminishing *justification*, undetectable justifications do not pose a problem for him.

11. One might object to my appeal to parity as follows. Sceptical theists often argue that God is like a wise and loving parent. Parents sometimes permit their children to suffer for the sake of goods that are beyond their ken. This analogy, if apt, provides reason to think there are undetectable goods for the sake of which God allows us to suffer. There is not, however, an equivalent reason to posit undetectable evils. Here are four potential responses. (1) I might argue that the parent analogy *does* license my appeal to parity by providing an equivalent reason for positing undetectable evils. If our awareness of a particular evil is not required for the obtaining of some greater good (but the evil itself is required for some greater good), then perhaps it is good that we are not burdened by awareness of that evil. For example, a parent might avoid familiarizing her child with the obituaries if that child is unable say, to subsequently appreciate and act in accordance with the fragility and finitude of mundane life. (2) I might construct an additional analogy identifying greater goods that serve as reasons to posit the existence of undetectable evils but not undetectable goods. (3) I might construct an analogy that, perhaps unlike the parent analogy, identifies greater goods that serve as reasons to posit both undetectable goods and undetectable evils. (4) I might provide an explanation for why we might think there are undetectable evils that does not require positing a greater good. This last option seems promising. Our limited epistemic capabilities disqualify us from knowing infinitely many (perhaps complex) truths about the world, and I do not see why we should be very confident that some of these are not truths about the existence of undetectable evils. I thank Klaas Kraay for bringing this objection to my attention.
12. This criticism has been reformulated in light of an anonymous reviewer's astute observations, including the observation that the detectability of an evil does not imply the detectability of its gratuitousness. Recently, Jordan (2006) has also criticized sceptical theism. He argues that sceptical theism implies moral scepticism. Alternatively, one might argue that the possibility of undetectable goods alone does not warrant a rejection of the Evidential Premise. Neither of these arguments, however, denies the existence of undetectable goods. Jordan's 2006 argument does not turn on the distinction between undetectable goods and undetectable justification. In fact, Jordan, like Wykstra, is content to discuss justifying goods (Jordan (2006), 404–407). My argument is that the possibility of undetectable goods suggests the possibility of undetectable evils, which in turn may provide some warrant for the claim that the total amount of evil is infinitely diminishable. In this case, the Minimum Claim is brought back into question.
13. Emphasis in the original.
14. Schrynemakers similarly charges Jordan with a failure to engage with van Inwagen's argument (Schrynemakers (2007), 252). However, that charge is aimed at Jordan's 2003 argument while my charge is aimed at Jordan's 2011 argument.
15. For a clear and concise overview of the problem, see Kraay (2010). This article was very helpful for the construction of this section.
16. This position is not a new one, however. It is maintained by St Thomas Aquinas. The most notable contemporary philosophers of religion espousing this view are Plantinga (1974), 61; and Swinburne (2004), 114–155.
17. See Grover (1988), (2003, (2004); Rowe (1993), (1994), (2002), (2004); Sobel (2004), 468–479; and Wielenberg (2004).
18. That is, God exists in possible worlds that are less than best. See Langtry (1996); (2006), 467. Langtry argues as follows:

It is logically necessary that if a being is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good then it cannot act in a morally better way, or more rationally, than it in fact acts. What [NBW] implies is that, given that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being is logically possible, there are worlds V and W such that V is better than W, and God can actualise V without violating any moral duty, but God's actualising V is not a morally better action, or more rational, than his actualising W. (Langtry (1996), 320)

Daniel & Francis Howard-Snyder (1994) & (1996) also defend divine satisficing at length.

19. Technically, Jordan is able consistently to deny that arguments from satisficing are successful in either debate, since, in a very brief review of Rowe, Jordan criticizes Rowe's argument from no-best-world on

independent grounds (Jordan 2009). I will not address the merits of this brief argument, since it does not affect my criticism of Jordan posed below.

20. Regarding Rowe's argument for atheism from no-best-world, Jordan writes, 'Rowe's argument has generated a host of criticism most of which has focused on premise (4)', which is Jordan's rendition of Rowe's claim that

If this world is not among the best that God could bring about, then God does not exist, since either for any possible world God could bring about there is an even better world that God could bring about, or there is a best world that God could bring about but did not, in either case God would not be absolutely perfect. (Jordan (2009), 496)

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