WHY GOD IS MOST ASSUREDLY EVIL: CHALLENGING THE EVIL GOD CHALLENGE

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The evil God challenge argues that for every theodicy that justifies the existence of an omnibenevolent God in the face of evil, there is a mirror theodicy that can defend the existence of an omnimalevolent God in the face of good. People who invoke the evil God challenge further argue that because we find evil God theodicies to be implausible, we should find good God theodicies to be equally implausible. This article argues that in fact evil God theodicies are more reasonable than good God theodicies by expanding upon arguments offered by David Benatar regarding the nature of existence, and David Hume regarding the asymmetry in our sensations of pain and pleasure.

> It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone.
>
> John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent*

The non-existence of God is often argued for by invoking the problem of evil. The problem of evil claims that the following four propositions cannot all be true:

(1) God is omnibenevolent.
(2) God is omniscient.
(3) God is omnipotent.
(4) Evil exists.

After all, how could an all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing deity allow for evil to torment humankind? Many respectable and keen arguments defending God's existence in the face of evil have been proposed. Some of these

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arguments are known as theodicies. Theodicies attempt to give a positive justification regarding the existence of evil. For instance, some of these theodicies involve appeals to free will, virtuous character development, or to original sin. However, a recently resurrected rebuttal of these theodicies has gained traction. The 'evil god challenge', most articulately put forward and eloquently defended by Stephen Law ('The Evil-God Challenge', *Religious Studies*, vol. 46, (2010), 353–73), argues that for nearly all (if not all) theodicies in favour of an all-good deity, a mirror theodicy can be offered for an omnimalevolent (evil) deity.

For example, why does good God allow for so much evil in the world, like hatred and war? Perhaps it is because humans have free will and they occasionally (or all too often) use it to commit vile acts. But notice a mirror argument can be given for a very similar sort of problem:

(1) God is omnimalevolent.
(2) God is omniscient.
(3) God is omnipotent.
(4) Good exists.

Why does evil God allow for good in the world, like friendship and peacetime? Perhaps evil God gave us free will, and sometimes we use it for good, but we often use it to commit vile acts as well, like loathing and going to war. Vile acts committed out of free will are so much worse than vile acts committed out of coercion or pre-programming.

Law runs through numerous theodicies and provides numerous mirror theodicies showing how each good God theodicy has a mirror evil god theodicy: free will can be used for good and evil, or evil allows for the development of good and bad character traits. These corresponding theodicies lead to the conclusion that there is a rational symmetry between both philosophical positions, and, because we all take it for granted that evil God's existence is unreasonable, we should be equally sceptical regarding the existence of good God.

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I want to raise an amicable problem with the evil God challenge. I argue below that there is actually an asymmetry relating to the existence of good and evil God. If a deity does exist, it is more probable that the deity is evil than good. Those proposing the evil God challenge are too generous regarding the probability of good God's existence when claiming an evil God's existence is equally reasonable. In order to justify my claim I will extend an argument from the anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar (*Better Never to have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)), but utilize it for purposes other than warning people against the evils of procreation. I will then borrow an argument from David Hume (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Penguin Classics, 1990)). Conspicuously absent from current debates, Hume's argument deserves consideration in the evil God challenge, because it reveals that all theodicies actually favour the existence of evil God over good God. As a result, believing in evil God is more reasonable than believing in good God. First, I will summarize Benatar's anti-natalism, then I will modify his argument in order to justify the rational basis for an evil God being more likely than a good God, then I will reiterate some of Hume's observations regarding the nature of pain and pleasure so as to apply them to the evil God challenge.

Synopsis of Benatar

David Benatar's chillingly titled book *Better Never to Have Been* defends the claim that existence is categorically worse than non-existence because coming into existence necessarily entails harm, but never existing is perfectly fine. In order to justify this claim he puts forward four premises, and reveals an asymmetry between our considerations of good and bad.

(1) Pain is bad.
(2) Pleasure is good.

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However,

(3) 'The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone'.

Whereas

(4) 'The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation'. (Benatar, p. 30)

Premises (1) and (2) seem correct and for the purposes of this article will be accepted as true (the existence of other goods will be discussed below). However, premises (3) and (4) constitute an asymmetry. This asymmetry regards the absence of pleasure and pain. This is not a contrived asymmetry; it is an asymmetry we take for granted regarding issues of procreation, and also incorporate in our general ethical reflections.

For instance, to take premise (3), we quite literally think it is good when children, teenagers, college students, and those unprepared to have children, avoid having children. Secular communities laud birth control for the unprepared. And we consider these things good because if the unprepared were to have children, those children would suffer. But when they have not had children, and no one is suffering, that is good, because 'the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone'; the 'anyone' in this case being the non-existent children.

Or, let us consider this asymmetry another way. It would quite literally be impossible for me to impregnate my wife out of concern for the well-being of my future child. Entities that do not exist do not have interests; therefore I cannot impregnate my wife for the interest of our future child. However, my wife and I can avoid pregnancy out of concern for future children; again, most people consider this a good, since 'the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone'.

Now what about premise (4)? This premise is defended by observing a consistency of our common ethical reflections. While I write this article I am occupying a small space in a

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larger room. I occupy perhaps 1/15th of the total space in this room. No one would come into this room and mourn the absence of occupied space, demanding the rest of the room be filled, nor am I indignant that my kitchen and guest room are empty at the moment. We do not think remaining space ought to be occupied by beings ravished in pleasure, nor do we look up into the heavens and wish the moon was stuffed, shoulder to shoulder, with entities experiencing orgasmic pleasure. In other words, the absence of entities on the moon and in my room is not bad, because 'the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation'. That the moon is empty, and my room is spacious, is perfectly fine because 'the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone'. Notice that if anyone disagrees with this claim, then they must accept that the universe is a lamentable creation, since it is predominantly unoccupied space, in which case God is most assuredly not good (or at least a very poor creator).

If we accept what has so far been argued, then it follows that non-existence is preferable to existence, because sentient existence always involves some harm (e.g. hunger, thirst, skinned knees, cancer, common colds, fisticuffs, etc.), which is bad, but non-existence is good by premise (3). A common rebuttal is that some people live their lives with a net surplus of pleasure, and a very minimal amount of pain, and so existence is fine in this case. But this rebuttal misses the point of the argument. Asking yourself whether or not your life is worth continuing is not the same as asking whether or not life is worth starting, i.e. bringing entities into existence. Let us pretend just such a blessed being, Jane Doe, exists. She has the occasional harm, but overall her life is quite pleasurable. It is certainly good that Jane is enjoying life now that she is here, but had she never existed, that would not be bad for her, since things that do not exist cannot be deprived and 'the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation'. Moreover, Jane Doe's non-existence is fine since 'the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by

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anyone'. Notice that if someone disagrees with the claim that things that do not exist cannot be deprived and are not somehow worse off, then they must again accept that God is either wicked or a poor creator, since out of the zillions upon zillions of possible beings that could potentially exist – just given the diversity of sperm and eggs alone – deprivation is ubiquitous. There are ever more beings that have not existed than have, and if not existing is wrong, then there is perpetually more wrong than good in the universe.

Another common rebuttal of the theory outlined above is that although the absence of pain is good, and the absence of pleasure is not bad so long as it is not a deprivation, it is still better to have more happy people than no people, because it leads to an overall net surplus in good. In this case, as long as God's creation has a net surplus of charmed lives over harrowed ones, it follows that existence may be good. However, this rebuttal overlooks the fact that it tacitly views sentient beings as means to an end, i.e. people ought to be created to net more pleasure. Given that no life is guaranteed to be charmed this is a very risky gamble to make, independent of its instrumental nature. Furthermore, although it is good for sentient beings to be happy, it does not follow that it is good to (try to) make happy sentient beings (Benatar, pp. 36–7). The latter view sees people as instruments towards an end, and that is a rather dubious ethical stance to take. Finally, this criticism would not be a devastating objection since it too could suffer from a reverse evil God theodicy, whereby God uses people to net more evil than good. Because existence is preferable to non-existence, evil God capitalizes on this fact to use people for wicked ends, e.g. such as bringing them into existence to lead a life inevitably consisting of some harms.

Anti-Natalism and Evil God

The reader may see where this argument is headed. If it is immoral for humans to have children, then our father,

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who art in heaven, really made a mistake when he decided to have several billion children (and we are presently bracketing out animals, which also should not exist according to the argument above). The fact that God could make a mistake, and repeated it billions of times, contradicts God's omniscience and omnibenevolence. What is bad for the individual parent is exacerbated greatly for the heavenly father. This being is no longer good, but at best egregiously reckless. Moreover, matters are much worse than God's being reckless, especially if we augment Benatar's theory with some contemporary cosmology:

(1) Pain is bad.
(2) Pleasure is good.
(3) 'The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone'.
(4) 'The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation'.
(5) The universe is infinite in size.

If the universe is indeed infinite in size, as many cosmologists and astrophysicists suggest, then a disturbing conclusion follows: an infinitely good universe would be one totally devoid of sentience, since the absence of pain on an infinite scale would be infinitely good. As soon as a single being comes into existence, however, God forfeits his infinite goodness. Since sentient beings do exist, in large numbers, it follows that at a minimum God cannot be infinitely good, since he created a universe that had the potential to be infinitely good, passed on the opportunity, and made one that is conspicuously bad.

Now one could respond to this by trying to reject premise (5) and say that the universe is not actually infinite in size. I lack the cosmological credentials to refute such an objection with authority and conviction, and will assume for the purposes of argument that it is true that the universe is not infinite. But it is expanding, with no signs of slowing down (in fact it is speeding up), and so a maximally good

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burgeoning universe would still be one completely devoid of entities. Seeing how the universe has entities, it is not maximally good, nor is this maximal goodness burgeoning, as it could be if no sentient beings existed. This fact suggests the universe is not the work of a good God.

This argument alone should tip the scales regarding Law's symmetry theory. There is now more evidence in favour of evil God than good God, and no mirror theodicy defending good God can be offered in the case of the argument above. The unoccupied universe is infinite or at least maximally good, the occupied one is not. Between the competing God hypotheses, evil God (or no God) is therefore more reasonable.

Hume on Pain

In Hume's *Dialogues*, the sceptical character Philo challenges the theistic character, Cleanthes, with the problem of evil. The usual issues are raised, such as free will, natural evil, and suffering. However, the character Philo makes a keen observation. He points out that the worst pains are not mirrors of the best pleasures (Hume, pp. 103–13). That is, the worst pains life has to offer are remarkably worse than the best pleasures life has to offer.

For several semesters I have had my students close their eyes, lower their heads (in order to avoid social pressure), and asked them to raise their hands if they would take the following offer: one hour of the most euphoric, orgiastic, phantasmagoric pleasure possible, coupled with an hour of the most wicked and excruciating pain. Out of several hundred students, perhaps two have raised their hands. I then change the ratios from an hour of pleasure to forty-five minutes of pain, then an hour compared to thirty, then an hour compared to fifteen. At the final point maybe a fifth of the class raises their hands.

This in-class thought experiment is rather telling. Not only are the worst pains worse than the best pleasures, but

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they are considerably worse! Why would a good God allow such a remarkable discrepancy in pain and pleasure? All the standard theodicies regarding free will, character building, etc., do not address this issue. Often students, having recently read Plato's theory of opposites, will suggest that just as one cannot have light without dark, one cannot have pain without pleasure, and one cannot have evil without good. This is a standard theodicy (which Hume even discusses in his dialogues). However it misses the crux of the problem. Unlike light and dark, pain and pleasure are not equidistant opposites on a shared spectrum, as one of these is qualitatively different from the other, in terms of overall effects and impacts. There is no counter or opposite pleasurable scenario for the pain and torture humanity can, and often has, both inflicted and been afflicted by. Imagine the worst possible thing a human can endure. Can you imagine any form of pleasure which would compensate? Now imagine the best pleasure you could endure. How easy is it to imagine an overriding pain that would forever crush your spirits, demonize your soul, and leave you in perpetual agony?

One could reply that there are certainly other goods in the world (e.g. virtue, dignity, and respect) which are good regardless of pain and pleasure. Although that is certainly true, it is also true that these goods are obtainable without the worst pains being worse than the best pleasures. The fact that pain is more potent than pleasure remains egregious. Furthermore, because the worst pains really are so visceral, it makes the shattering of these other goods all too easy. Building up dignity for instance can be quite difficult; shattering it through torture or rape is all too easy (J. M. Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury*).

Given that there is a real discernible discrepancy between the potency of pain and pleasure, there very well seems to be a real discrepancy between the likelihood of God being good or evil. If we bracket out the anti-natalist argument from above, it remains true that many of the

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theodicies for good God's existence in the face of evil make sense and are even compelling (to some). But all of the good God theodicies function better when pleasure and pain are mirror opposites, and they subsequently function worse when pain is more potent than pleasure. Free will, engendering of virtue, needing bad to have good, etc., can work just as well as theodicies defending God's goodness in the face of evil, in a world where pleasure and pain are mirror opposites (i.e. equidistant on a shared spectrum).

It makes more sense in traditional good God theodicies that pain and pleasure would be mirror opposites on a spectrum. Moreover, if the best pleasures overrode the worst pains, this would give more credence to a good God. However, in a world where they are not – our world – something gratuitous has taken place. The existence of gratuitous pain as a property of pain itself (and not as a particular evidential problem of evil) is better explained by the existence of an evil God, and all theodicies defending his evil existence can make sense of the discrepancy regarding pain and pleasure in the world. For instance, one can certainly use one's free will for good, but one can also use it to do even greater evil. Moreover, one can develop a virtuous character, but one can also suffer in extreme agony and torment in ways remarkably worse than any possible flourishing could compensate for.

No theodicy defending good God addresses this remarkable problem, and all of the good God theodicies are weakened by this problem's existence. However, all the evil God theodicies are strengthened by the existence of gratuitous pain. Between competing Gods, evil God makes more sense of the pain–pleasure discrepancy than good God does.

Concluding Remarks

I hope to have shown that the evil God challenge does not entail that both Gods are equally likely and reasonable. If non-existence really is better than existence, then it is

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more reasonable for an evil God to bring us into existence than it is for a good God to do so. If pains really are remarkably worse than pleasures, then again, it makes more sense for evil God to order the universe this way than it does for good God to do so. Thus, the scales between these competing hypotheses are not equal, but tip in favour of evil God. Yet, since almost no one actually believes in evil God, and evil God is more reasonable than good God, those who cling to good God theodicies are comparatively unreasonable.

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