

# The incompatibility of God and gratuitous evil: implications for the termination of civilizations

KIRK DURSTON

*Creative Communications: Research, 65 Massey Rd., Guelph, ON, N1H 1G3, Canada*  
e-mail: [kdurston@uoguelph.ca](mailto:kdurston@uoguelph.ca)

**Abstract:** Setting aside the discussion of whether the biblical destruction of the Canaanites actually occurred or was ordered by God, there still remains the philosophical question of whether any good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting or orchestrating the destruction of an entire society. If we grant that the existence of God is incompatible with gratuitous evil, then God must terminate a society when it reaches a point in its history where the net moral value of permitting it to continue becomes negative. This raises at least four concerns which are discussed here.

*You shall utterly destroy them,  
You shall make no covenant with them,  
And show no favour to them.*

Deuteronomy 7:2

## Introduction

Could an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good God be justified in ordering, orchestrating, or even permitting the large-scale death or termination of an entire society? The catalyst for this question arises from various biblical accounts of God commanding and bringing about the destruction of the ancient Canaanite society by Israel, followed centuries later by the destruction of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians and, at some time in the future, the rather apocalyptic end to human civilization after an event popularly known as Armageddon. Regardless of one's own view of the truth or falsity of these three accounts, the philosophical question still remains: if God exists, could He be justified in orchestrating the destruction of a society?

An essential premise that is either stated or implied in most, if not all, evidential arguments from evil for the non-existence of God can be described as follows:

P: the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God is incompatible with gratuitous evil.

It follows from (P) that if God exists, He must prevent any gratuitous evil from occurring. For a series of events, when the net moral value of that series reaches a point where it would result in gratuitous evil if the series were to continue, God must terminate that series of events. By the non-theist's own premise in evidential arguments from evil against the existence of God, one must conclude that if a society reaches the point where their net moral value is about to become gratuitous, then God must terminate that society at that point. This raises at least four worries, which are discussed in the closing sections.

### Definitions

Given (P), the concept of gratuitous evil is central to arguments from evil for the non-existence of God. *Gratuitous evil* is most simply understood as unjustified evil, an instance of suffering which God could have prevented without forfeiting some greater good or permitting some evil as bad or worse. Alan R. Rhoda has attempted an uncontroversial definition of gratuitous evil (Rhoda (2010), 281), which William Hasker has challenged (Hasker (2010), 303). The controversy, argues Hasker, centres on two difficulties. First, uncertainty as to what an omniscient being actually knows and, second, the problem of arriving at a definition that is not demotivating with regard to assisting one's fellow human being. Both problems are relevant to one of the concerns discussed below and will be addressed at that time.

There is a common factor in the various definitions and concepts of gratuitous evil discussed by Rhoda and Hasker. Essential to determining if an instance of suffering is gratuitous or not are the intrinsic moral values of the *consequences* of the event, as well as the consequences of the best possible alternative that could have been actualized by God at the time. The argument presented here does not depend upon any particular definition discussed by Rhoda and Hasker, only upon the acceptance that the net moral value of all the relevant consequences are an essential component in what determines an event to be gratuitous or not. To clarify, one cannot discuss whether an event is gratuitous or not, without knowing something about its consequences.

In determining if an event is gratuitous, a few concepts and definitions are used here that arise from a method proposed by Kirk Durston (Durston (2000), 65).

*Primary event*: a single event that cannot be broken down any further into constituent events.

A car accident in which two people were injured, for example, is composed of at least two primary events, the immediate suffering of one of the victims and the

immediate suffering of the other victim. There will be two interacting chains of consequences that unfold from these two primary events.

*Intrinsic moral value:* the moral value of a discrete event considered only by itself (in isolation from all its consequences and other events).

A discrete event may be a primary event initiating an exponentially increasing, interacting chain of consequences, or it may be a particular, discrete consequence of the primary event. Each consequence has its own intrinsic moral value that we could quantify as ranging from  $-10$  to  $+10$  (or any other range of values a person deems fit just so long as all events are evaluated on the same scale).

*Overall moral value:* the sum of the intrinsic moral value of the primary event and the intrinsic moral values of each consequence to the end of history or so far as is logically possible for an omniscient mind to know.

The method originally presented by Durston sums the intrinsic moral values of all consequences to the end of actual and possible histories, which assumes that omniscience includes *middle knowledge*, that is, knowledge of the truth-value of all possible counterfactuals of freedom. The role of middle knowledge in omniscience is controversial (Hasker (1986), 545), a fact that Rhoda and Hasker have taken into account as mentioned earlier. If omniscience is defined as knowing all that is logically possible to know (Mann (1975), 151), then the definition of overall moral value supplied above takes into account the controversy surrounding what God actually knows and the possibility that middle knowledge is not included in the attribute of omniscience. With this in mind, let

A = the overall moral value of the actual event and,

B = the overall moral value of the best alternative that could have been actualized by God

*Net moral value:* the difference between the overall moral values of the actual primary event

(A) and the best alternative that God could have actualized (B).

Given all of the above, we can define gratuitous evil as follows:

*Gratuitous evil:* An event is a gratuitous evil, or results in gratuitous evil if, and only if, the net moral value of that event is negative.

Since the argument to be presented concerns entire societies, the overall moral value of a society (actual or possible) at time  $t$  is defined as:

$A_{\text{soc}}$  = the sum of the overall moral values of all the primary events occurring at time  $t$  in a society,

and the overall moral value of the best alternative to that society that God could have actualized is:

$B_{\text{soc}}$  = the sum of the overall moral values of all the primary events of the best alternative that God could actualize at time  $t$ .

The net moral value of an entire society at time  $t$  would simply be the difference between  $A_{\text{soc}}$  and  $B_{\text{soc}}$  at  $t$ . A society results in gratuitous evil, therefore, when its net moral value is negative.

### The argument

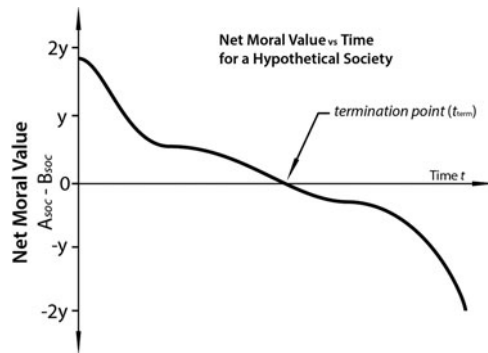
Recall (P): the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God is incompatible with gratuitous evil. It follows from (P) that if the net moral value of a society at some time  $t$  in its history is positive ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}} \geq 0$ ), then God must permit that society to continue. To use an example from the destruction of the Canaanite society, in Genesis 15 God tells Abraham some 400 years prior to the conquest of Canaan that he and his descendants cannot possess that land for another 400 years because ‘the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure’, or ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}} \geq 0$ ) for Amorite society at that point in history.

(P) also entails that if, at some time  $t$  in the history of a society, the net moral value of that society becomes negative ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}} < 0$ ), then God must bring about an end to the society at that point. The argument can be summarized as follows:

1. P.
2. A society results in gratuitous evil if its net moral value is negative.
3. If P and (2), then God must terminate a society at the point in its history when its net moral value becomes negative.
4. Therefore, God must terminate a society at the point in its history when its net moral value becomes negative.

This concept can be illustrated as shown in [Figure 1](#). In contemplating the curve in [Figure 1](#), it is important to understand the distinction between the net moral value ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}}$ ) of a hypothetical society, the overall moral value  $A_{\text{soc}}$  of a society, and the intrinsic moral value of a society at some time  $t$ . For example, at  $t_{\text{term}}$  in [Figure 1](#), the intrinsic moral value of the society at that point might actually be positive and  $A_{\text{soc}}$  might also be positive at that point in time, which entails that there is a  $B_{\text{soc}}$  that is higher in overall moral value than  $A_{\text{soc}}$  (i.e. there is another option God could actualize at  $t_{\text{term}}$  that is better than permitting the actual society to continue). Of course, it may also be the case that the intrinsic value of the hypothetical society at  $t_{\text{term}}$  is already quite negative, but ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}} = 0$ ). In other words, one cannot infer the intrinsic moral value of a society at any time  $t$ , or the overall moral value  $A_{\text{soc}}$  at time  $t$  by simply looking at the curve in [Figure 1](#).

The argument presented here raises various worries and problems, four of which are addressed below.



**Fig. 1 Net moral value vs time** Each point on the descending curve represents the net moral value ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}}$ ) of a hypothetical society versus time  $t$ . This is not to be confused with either the intrinsic moral value or the overall moral value ( $A_{\text{soc}}$ ) of the society at any point in time. If those points were plotted, the resulting curves would be quite different from the ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}}$ ) curve shown.

### **Problem one: what about good people in an evil society?**

Let us define a completely depraved society as a society where all individuals freely choose to do wrongly all the time, and a completely perfect society as a society where all individuals freely choose to do rightly all the time. It is reasonable to grant that the vast majority of societies fall somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes. In other words, the vast majority of societies are composed of a set of individuals who form that society, a subset of which contains people whose goodness exceeds their badness and another subset of which contains people whose badness exceeds their goodness. Along with this, recall that the intrinsic moral value of an event or person may be negative but their net moral value may still be positive when all the consequences to the end of actual and possible histories are considered. Similarly, there may be individuals with a positive intrinsic moral value but who have a negative net moral value when all future consequences are considered. With this in mind, a society that reaches the crossover point into gratuitous evil may still contain a subset of good people, or people who have a positive net moral value. If a society must be destroyed to prevent gratuitous evil but, in doing so, people who have a positive net moral value are destroyed, is not one gratuitous evil replaced with another?

The above worry arises out of the assumption that if God must terminate a society, then all people in that society must be terminated. It does not logically follow, however, that the termination of a society entails the termination or death of every individual within that society. One option is simply to disperse the individuals of that society broadly enough such that the net moral value of the larger dispersion becomes positive. A danger with this, however, is that if the subset of evil people within the society is large and evil enough, complete dispersion may end up fanning the flames of evil over a larger area. Another option is

for a filtering process to occur whereby the good are dispersed with only the evil remaining behind for destruction. To use an example of dispersal from the account of the conquest of Canaan mentioned earlier, God is quoted as saying, 'I will drive them out little by little until you . . . take possession of the land' (Exodus 23:30–31).

If a filtering process is used, however, whereby the good are dispersed leaving behind only the evil, then the concentration of people with a negative net moral value will be much higher, resulting in a post-filtered society with an even more negative ( $A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}}$ ). For the remaining members for whom  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}}) < 0$ , given (P), God must terminate those individuals unless there is a way to bring their net moral value into a positive position.

To summarize, the termination of a society does not entail the termination or death of all its constituent members.

### **Problem two: can we know if a society is gratuitous?**

Can we justify the conclusion that a particular society has declined to the point where it has become a gratuitous evil? The underlying worry here is whether we can destroy a society on the grounds that, in our view, it has become a gratuitous evil.

Durston has argued that the consequential complexity of history is such that we are in no position at all to know if an event or, in this case, a society is gratuitous. The amount of relevant information we have is minuscule in comparison to what we would need to know, to infer inductively if an event is gratuitous or not (Durston (2000), 65). I will only very briefly summarize his argument here as follows.

Each event in history unleashes an exponentially increasing number of interacting consequences to the end of history. To evaluate whether a primary event is gratuitous or not, we must have a reasonable idea of the net moral value ( $A - B$ ) of that event. Recall that ( $A$ ) is the overall moral value of the event with all its consequences to the end of history (or as far as omniscience permits). If we let ( $E$ ) represent the intrinsic moral value of the primary event and  $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots, C_{\text{end}}$  represent the intrinsic moral values of each of the consequences of that event to the end of history, then we can represent ( $A$ ) as follows.

$$A = E + C_1 + C_2 + C_3 + \text{billions of unknown intrinsic values} + C_{\text{end}}.$$

Similarly, the net moral value of the best alternative that God could actualize can be represented as follows,

$$B = E' + C'_1 + C'_2 + C'_3 + \text{billions of unknown intrinsic values} + C'_{\text{end}}.$$

The intrinsic moral value for each one of the billions of consequences has some unknown value of unknown sign, positive or negative. Given that our knowledge of the consequences to the end of history is minuscule in comparison to the

billions of unknowns, the most rational position appears to be agnosticism with regard to the net moral value of any event. A hypothetical society is composed of many primary events at any time  $t$ . If the net moral value of each of the constituent events is unknown, then the summation of those unknown values in order to calculate  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}})$  at time  $t$  is also an unknown. We are thus in no position at all to know if a society has become a gratuitous evil.

A possible complication arises if we grant that there is controversy with regard to what an omniscient being knows, as discussed earlier. In response, it is reasonable to assume that even if we do not know how much an omniscient mind knows, it is very likely that a mind that knows all that is logically possible to know, knows vastly more than we do about the future consequences of any event. Furthermore, even if there is controversy over how much an omniscient mind knows, the consequential complexity of history keeps us just as much in the dark as ever, independent of the question of what omniscience includes. The most defensible position to take, therefore, is agnosticism with regard to the net moral value of any society, owing to the consequential complexity of history. It follows from this that humanity cannot justify the conclusion that any particular society has a negative net moral value.

### **Problem three: were destroyed societies evil?**

There are societies that no longer exist and others that have been decimated in history. If the argument presented earlier is granted, does it follow that these societies were evil?

The first point to make by way of response is that even if  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}})$  is negative, it does not follow that the intrinsic moral value of that society at the time it was destroyed was negative. From the previous section, we can see that  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}})$  is the difference between two values, each of which has billions of variables of unknown value and sign, positive or negative. If all we know is that  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}})$  is negative, we are in no position at all to infer the intrinsic moral value ( $E_{\text{soc}}$ ) of the society at the time it was destroyed or decimated; it may actually have been positive. Nick Trakakis has pointed out that the consequential complexity of history also prevents us from knowing if a primary event that has a *positive* intrinsic value leads to a gratuitous evil (Trakakis (2003), 451). To clarify, for a single event, its intrinsic moral value ( $E$ ) may actually be positive but the consequences that unfold from that event, when compared to the best alternative, may result in a negative ( $A - B$ ). Similarly, it is possible that  $(E_{\text{soc}})$  is positive but  $(A_{\text{soc}} - B_{\text{soc}})$  is negative. In other words, it is possible that a society with a positive intrinsic moral value may actually result in gratuitous evil when the consequences of allowing that society to continue are considered. Conversely, a society that has a negative intrinsic moral value, at a particular time in history, may actually result in a positive net moral value when all its consequences are considered to the end of history (or the limits of what is logically possible to know). We are not,

therefore, in a position to conclude that a society that was destroyed or decimated must have been an evil society. If God exists, and if we grant (P), then all we can conclude was that the *consequences* of letting that society continue would have either led to a greater evil, or prevented a greater good when compared to terminating that society at that time in history.

#### **Problem four: moral indecision**

Nick Trakakis also raises the problem of moral indecision. If the consequential complexity of history puts us in a position of having no idea if any event, good or evil, will result in gratuitous evil, then on what basis can we act? If we have no idea if a society will result in gratuitous evil, then could we be paralyzed into moral indecision when that society appears to need help?

In his reply to Trakakis, Durston has proposed a premise that seems to arise out of our moral intuitions and which is embraced by many judicial systems. He states it as follows :

J: An agent is morally obliged to act on the basis of what that agent could reasonably be expected to know.

(Durston (2006), 87)

The above premise (J) is applicable both to the problem of moral indecision presented here, as well as to the problem addressed by Rhoda, mentioned earlier. Recall that Rhoda's concern was that any definition of gratuitous evil should not produce moral inaction because of the assumption that if God exists, all actual events either prevent a greater evil or bring about a greater good, so we can sit back and let things happen.

The motivation for (J) arises not just from our moral intuitions, but out of Alvin Plantinga's free-will defence as well, specifically, the idea that the state of any possible world at time *t* that contains free agents, is not solely determined by God, but also by how well the free agents in that world freely cooperate with God. Plantinga writes (Plantinga (1979), 164-193):

[T]he creation of a world containing moral good is a cooperative venture; it requires the uncoerced concurrence of significantly free creatures. But then the actualization of a world W containing moral good is not up to God alone; it also depends upon what the significantly free creatures of W would do if God created them and placed them in the situations W contains evil.

It follows from Plantinga's idea that the more the free agents of a possible world will cooperate, the better the world God is able to actualize. Cooperation entails that we make the best moral decisions we can, given the knowledge we can reasonably be expected to acquire, resulting in Durston's premise (J).

If premise (J) is granted, then the problem of moral indecision and moral inaction has a possible solution despite our minuscule knowledge due to the consequential complexity of history.



## Conclusions

If we grant the non-theist's premise (P), which plays a key part in arguments from evil against the existence of God, then it logically follows that if God exists, He must not permit a society to exist past the point in time where it results in gratuitous evil. It does not logically follow, however, that every individual in that society must be destroyed; the good subset of people can be selected out or the society dispersed. The consequential complexity of history makes it impossible for us to know if a society has reached the point of becoming a gratuitous evil. The same factors also prevent us from validly inferring that a society in the past that was decimated, was intrinsically evil at that time. All of this might leave us in a position of moral indecision or even moral inaction were it not for our own moral intuition (J) that an agent is morally obligated to act on the basis of what that agent could reasonably be expected to know. Thus, premise (P) may entail that God must terminate a society when it becomes a gratuitous evil, but premise (J) entails that we must strive to make this world a better place on the basis of what we can reasonably be expected to know.

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