

Is the no-minimum claim true? Reply to Cullison

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Abstract: Is the no-minimum claim true? I have argued that it is not. Andrew Cullison contends that my argument fails, since human sentience is variable; while Michael Schrynemakers has contended that the failure is my neglect of vagueness. Both, I argue, are wrong.

Peter van Inwagen has argued that ‘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.’¹ So, one cannot argue that God is unjust or cruel for not ‘getting by with less evil’. Put another way, van Inwagen has argued for the no-minimum claim:

- (1) For any amount of pain and suffering which serves God’s purposes, there is some lesser amount which also serves God’s purposes.

Van Inwagen’s argument is noteworthy as it is an innovative and clever response to the problem of evil. Despite these assets I have argued that van Inwagen’s argument fails as the no-minimum claim is implausible.² Integral to my argument is the distinction between diminishing something, and diminishing something in a morally significant way. Also important is the recognition between the stimuli which cause pain, and the subjectivity of felt pain. While it may be that the stimuli which cause pain admit of infinite diminishment; it is very implausible that felt pain is infinitely diminishable, as the human capability to feel pain is not so finely tuned. And if felt pain is not infinitely diminishable, then it is implausible that for any amount of felt pain which serves divine purposes, there is a lesser amount which does also.³

Cullison⁴ argues (123) that my objection to the no-minimum claim fails since God could have varied our capability for feeling pain, rendering humans ever more sensitive to pain. While Cullison is correct that the human capacity for feeling pain could have been enlarged, it is hard to see the relevance of this.

Perhaps it is relevant to blunt Philo's charge in part XI of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that the goodness of the deity may be questioned for employing pain, as well as pleasure, as an incitement to action.⁵ But Cullison's contention is not relevant to the fact that there is a practical lower limit on the human capability to feel pain, even if that limit could have varied, and so felt pain is not infinitely diminishable. And if felt pain is not infinitely diminishable, the no-minimum claim is in trouble.

A second challenge to my argument *contra* the no-minimum claim comes from Michael Schrynemakers.⁶ Schrynemakers argues that my objection is persuasive against van Inwagen's argument, but van Inwagen misformulated his own argument! When framed correctly, the argument can be revived. Schrynemakers contends that van Inwagen misidentifies the no-minimum claim as (1) when in fact the no-minimum claim is best understood as:

- (2) There is no sharp cut-off between amounts of evils sufficient for divine purposes and amounts not sufficient.

In short, according to Schrynemakers, the issue is not the diminishment of evil, but vagueness, as there are amounts of evil that are not clearly too little, or too much, for divine purposes. Schrynemakers, however, is wrong that the argument is strongest with vagueness alone, without involving infinite diminishment.

Schrynemakers's mistake is ignoring a relevant dissimilarity between vague predicates like tallness or baldness, and the alleged vagueness of whether an amount of evil is sufficient for divine purposes: unlike many other vague concepts, the latter involves moral evaluation. Suffering is a moral concern, so for any two amounts of suffering S_1 and S_2 , such that S_2 involves more suffering than does S_1 , yet both are sufficient for gaining a certain morally permitted end E , one has a strong reason to opt for S_1 over S_2 .⁷ A consequence of this principle is that 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 gaining E , morality requires that one opt for V_1 and not V_2 . Even if it is vague whether V_1 or V_2 are sufficient for E , the fog of vagueness does not obscure that one has reason to choose V_1 over V_2 .

Borderline cases of evil, then, will be ranked not just by their respective quantities of pain and suffering, but also according to their moral desirability, with the greater the quantity, the lower the moral rank. And with this result, a Rowe-style argument is evident despite the mist of vagueness: suppose one believes that God's purposes require a vague and not a specific amount of evil. Still, since there is no sharp cut-off between those amounts permitted and those not, it seems that God could have gotten by with slightly less evil, with no obvious loss of any greater good. So, the charge that God would be cruel or unjust since He could have gotten by with less evil looms even in the gloom of vagueness.

Notes

1. Peter van Inwagen *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 106.
2. Jeff Jordan 'Evil and van Inwagen', *Faith and Philosophy*, **20** (2003), 236–239.
3. Perhaps one might claim that it is best to take van Inwagen's argument as involving cases or instances of evil (pain and suffering), rather than the intensity of pain and suffering within a case. This distinction is irrelevant, since even if the argument was intended as involving the former, the latter would still be of philosophical interest.
4. Andrew Cullison 'A defence of the no-minimum response to the problem of evil', *Religious Studies*, **47** (2011), 121–123.
5. Assuming that pleasure alone would not suffice as an incitement for action.
6. Michael Schrynemakers 'Vagueness and pointless evil', *American Catholic Philosophical Association, Proceedings of the ACPA*, **80** (2007), 245–254.
7. With everything else (distribution of the suffering for instance) equal.