

Truth, consequences, and the Evil-god challenge: a response to Anastasia Scrutton

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Abstract: In her 2016 article in *Religious Studies*, Anastasia Scrutton attempts to undermine Stephen Law's Evil-god challenge by arguing that belief in a good god is more justified than belief in an evil god, despite the alethic similarity of the two hypotheses. Drawing on the epistemological theory of pragmatic encroachment, Scrutton claims that it is more reasonable to believe in a benevolent deity than a malevolent one because belief in the latter (i) is detrimental to one's well-being and (ii) has worse moral consequences, whereas belief in the former (i) is good for one's well-being and (ii) has better moral consequences. In this article, I critically respond to Scrutton's argument by proposing that even if belief in a good god results in better consequences than belief in an evil god does, pragmatic encroachment does not undermine the Evil-god challenge. I further argue that pragmatic encroachment potentially undermines itself in this instance.

Introduction

Let's call the belief in the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing god the Good-god hypothesis (GGH) and the belief in the existence of an all-evil, all-powerful, and all-knowing god the Evil-god hypothesis (EGH). In brief, the Evil-god challenge postulates the EGH as a way to rival the GGH in alethic plausibility. If, as Stephen Law (2010) and others (see Cahn (1977); Haight & Haight (1970); Madden & Hare (1968); Millican (1989); and New (1993)) state, the EGH is broadly similar in reasonableness to the GGH, then those who accept the latter over the former are challenged to justify their position.

Anastasia Scrutton (2016) offers a unique response to Law's challenge. She argues that although the two hypotheses may be alethically equal, belief in the GGH is more justified than belief in the EGH because (i) it is better for one's well-being and (ii) it produces better moral consequences. Scrutton's contention

relies on the epistemological thesis of pragmatic encroachment. Simply put, she claims that the positive practical consequences of believing in Good-god hoist it up the reasonableness scale and make belief in Good-god more justifiable – and consequently rational – than belief in Evil-god. If this is the case, then – contrary to Law’s claim – it is more rational to believe in Good-god over Evil-god.

After briefly explaining Scrutton’s argument, I will present two objections that can be posed in response. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate that the epistemological approach Scrutton relies on – pragmatic encroachment – undermines itself in this instance. I also employ a classification system by which we can distinguish between different types of Evil-god challenge (Lancaster-Thomas (2018)). By differentiating *weak* Evil-god challenges from *strong* Evil-god challenges, we can determine that Scrutton’s argument only undermines one type of Evil-god challenge: a type that makes no claims about the absurdity or incoherence of the EGH.

Scrutton’s argument

Scrutton offers a distinctive reason why we would be more justified (and therefore rational) to believe in Good-god over Evil-god. She proposes that there are pragmatic motives for accepting the GGH over the EGH, claiming that:

[D]espite not being alethic, the practical reasons for preferring one option over the other are in fact epistemic grounds for preferring one over the other, such that we would be less rational or justified if we chose to believe evil-God hypothesis than if we chose to believe classical theism. (Scrutton (2016), 346)

Her overall argument can be schematized as follows:

- (1) The EGH and the GGH are similarly likely (the symmetry thesis).¹
- (2) If two hypotheses are similarly likely, it is more rational to believe in the one that has better consequences (pragmatic encroachment).
- (3) Belief in the GGH has better practical consequences than belief in the EGH.
- (4) It is more rational to believe in the GGH than the EGH.

As previously mentioned, Scrutton takes Law’s symmetry thesis for granted for the purposes of her article. Her second premise relies on the relatively new epistemological theory, pragmatic encroachment.² Scrutton argues that one of two alethically similar hypotheses can gain justifiability simply by being more practically attractive than the other. She states that ‘practical considerations such as what is at stake are epistemically significant: they can raise or lessen the extent to which your belief is justified or the amount of knowledge you have, even if the alethic considerations remain the same’ (*ibid.*, 347). Scrutton’s reasoning for the third premise is twofold. First, she claims that belief in Good-god is better for our individual well-being. Second, she asserts that belief in Good-god is better for societal

well-being. She concludes that '[i]t is more reasonable to live as though classical theism is true because classical theism is just as likely to be true as evil-God hypothesis but is more conducive to human well-being' (*ibid.*, 353). Overall, Scrutton proposes that, when given the choice, we might choose to believe the GGH over the (similarly likely) EGH because it is better for us.³

Objections

I will now detail two objections to Scrutton's contention that practical considerations elevate the GGH on the reasonableness scale against the corresponding EGH. The first objection contests Scrutton's second premise – that if two theories are similarly likely, it is more rational to accept the one that has better consequences – and suggests that pragmatic encroachment undermines itself in this instance. The second objection alleges that Scrutton has missed the point of the Evil-god challenge; Evil-god hypothesizers are not arguing in earnest that the EGH should be adopted as a belief system.

Pragmatic encroachment is incompatible with the existence of Good-god

To recap, pragmatic encroachment is the thesis that epistemic value is added to propositions that have better practical consequences. Conversely, if propositions have worse practical consequences, epistemic value is detracted. Let us imagine a world in which pragmatic encroachment is universally accepted.

The police discover a brutally murdered man and find persuasive DNA evidence that points the finger of culpability at Sid. It comes to light that Sid has an identical twin, Sam, who is the true perpetrator. It is beyond reasonable doubt that one of them committed the crime, but there is equally compelling evidence against each twin. Sid, who is suicidal, doesn't mind being handed the death penalty, whereas Sam (who has vowed to be a model citizen hereafter) desperately desires to live. Bereaved friends and family of the victim simply want someone, be it Sid or Sam, to be convicted of the crime (and punished accordingly). The practical consequences of the jury adopting the belief that Sid committed the crime are better than the practical consequences of the jury adopting the belief that Sam did the deed; the propositions have the same epistemic value for the jury based on the evidence they have. According to pragmatic encroachment, the jury should send Sid to his death if they have an understanding of the consequences of their actions. Despite this, it seems intuitively wrong that Sid should be punished for his brother's crime: it is a miscarriage of justice and an unfair distribution of retribution.⁴

To take a broader example, imagine that in 1,000 years' time all physical evidence for the Holocaust has been eradicated. Humans debate whether the Holocaust took place, with evidence being equal on both sides. If the propositions (i) the Holocaust did take place and (ii) the Holocaust did not take place are equally likely, then let's say society decides to accept proposition (ii), because it

is better for individual and/or societal well-being. Perhaps the pragmatic encroachers conclude that it would be distasteful to believe that mankind committed such atrocities or that conflict would be reduced by agreeing that the event did not occur. It is, of course, arguable whether accepting proposition (ii) would really have better practical consequences, but the point is this: if, hypothetically, it would be better for individual and societal well-being to believe that the Holocaust did not occur, pragmatic encroachment suggests that we are more justified in believing that proposition (ii) is true. Again, this seems intuitively wrong.⁵ Ultimately, it seems that pragmatic encroachment can lead to injustice.

Of course, the consequentialist might argue that sacrificing justice for better positive practical outcomes is not a good enough reason to disqualify pragmatic encroachment altogether. In this case, however, Scrutton is employing pragmatic encroachment to justify belief in the GGH, which means that it should at least be compatible with that which it is justifying. So, let's consider the implications that potential injustice might have on the compatibility between pragmatic encroachment and the existence of Good-god. I will argue that some serious tension is apparent between the GGH and a utilitarian system like pragmatic encroachment, and the case can be made that pragmatic encroachment is self-refuting as a result. To see how, we can reflect on what the specific consequences might be for individuals who adopt a potentially unjust epistemological system in a world where the GGH is true and Good-god really exists. The following passage from the Bible gives an insight into how Good-god views instances of injustices (like the aforementioned case of Sid and Sam): 'Whoever says to the guilty, "You are innocent," will be cursed by peoples and denounced by nations. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come on them' (Proverbs 24:24-25, NIV). Good-god seems to value justice, rewards those who behave in a just manner, and punishes those who do not, as can be seen in these extracts from the Old Testament: 'Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right' (Psalm 106:3, NIV) and 'Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken' (Proverbs 22:8, NIV). Similarly, the following excerpt, also from the Old Testament, explains the consequences of behaving justly or unjustly in detail:

This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin. (Jeremiah 22:3-5, NIV)

If we presume that an omniscient god knows the motivations one has for deciding to choose proposition *a* over proposition *b*, Good-god would know if one chose to believe *a* over *b* simply because it had better practical consequences. The seeming value that Good-god places on truth and the punishments Good-god inflicts on

those who reject truth in favour of good consequences for themselves is shown in the following passage from the New Testament, as explained by the Apostle Paul to the Romans: 'But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger' (Romans 2:8, NIV). These are just some of the many scripture selections that strongly imply that Good-god might disfavour and punish individuals who adopt pragmatic encroachment.

Perhaps, then, Good-god hypothesizers have convincing pragmatic reasons for embracing just decision-making: they will be disciplined by Good-god if they do not. If the jury chooses to punish the innocent Sid, rather than the real guilty party, this may have severe ramifications for their well-being: Good-god will punish them.⁶ Similarly, if, in the hypothetical case postulated earlier, a society decided to adopt the belief that the Holocaust did not happen only to improve their well-being, it seems that Good-god would punish such behaviour. If we adopt pragmatic encroachment, then in certain situations unjust consequences might result: injustices that are prohibited by Good-god in religious texts. Accepting pragmatic encroachment, therefore, could be seen to be incompatible with the existence of Good-god. On the other hand, Evil-god, who would desire to maximize injustice among other evils, would have fewer qualms about individuals adopting pragmatic encroachment. In fact, Evil-god would probably enjoy an epistemological system that is not based on truth and which potentially results in injustice. To sum up, there seems to be a fundamental conflict between the GGH and pragmatic encroachment. If this is the case, then the alethically challenged theory could undermine itself when being utilized to weigh the reasonableness of the GGH against the reasonableness of the EGH.

The Evil-god challenge does not advocate belief in Evil god

For now, let us put aside the previous objection and grant all Scrutton's original premises: the symmetry thesis, pragmatic encroachment, and the notion that Good-god is better for us than Evil-god. Even then, the Evil-god challenge can remain untarnished by Scrutton's contention. Really, the only counterargument that needs to be posed against it is that the Evil-god challenge is not intended to advocate a belief in Evil-god; it is (generally) intended to be a strategy to highlight the absurdity or incoherence of the GGH. Scrutton puts forward the following argument:

[W]e are not rational to act as if evil-God hypothesis is true given that evil-God hypothesis is likely to result in a diminishment of our well-being, and given that good-God hypothesis is equally likely to be true and more likely to be good for us. We are therefore not rational to believe in an evil God rather than a good one. (Scrutton (2016), 354)

However, Law is not attempting to argue that believing in an evil god is rational. Rather, he is claiming that belief in an evil god *and* belief in a good god are similarly preposterous. Since Law is not aiming to convert individuals to belief in Evil-god, Scrutton's argument is redundant against his Evil-god challenge.

Consider the following example. Susan is attempting to prove to her friend, Steve, that some markings through a woodland area are the tracks of a unicorn by pointing out particular characteristics of the markings. Steve believes that the markings are naturally occurring and not created by any creature. In an attempt to enlighten Susan, Steve constructs a parallel argument to postulate that the tracks were made by a werewolf (something that Susan desperately disagrees with – she is afraid of werewolves after all!). Steve establishes that all the available evidence points to the werewolf hypothesis as much as it does the unicorn hypothesis. Susan says to Steve, ‘well, even though the hypotheses are equally likely based on the evidence, it would be better for my well-being to believe that the markings were created by a unicorn rather than a werewolf, so that is the more justified hypothesis’. Clearly, Susan is missing the point of Steve’s argument. Steve constructed a hypothesis that he himself does not believe to show Susan how absurd hers is; he is not offering it as a viable alternative. Steve is attempting to show Susan that neither hypothesis should be accepted. Similarly, Law’s Evil-god challenge is not intended to offer a feasible hypothesis or prove that Evil-god actually exists.

Although Scrutton’s argument fails to undermine the type of Evil-god challenge Law develops, other types of Evil-god challenge could be susceptible to it. Really, the term ‘Evil-god challenge’ (singular) is misleading. In fact, there are distinct forms of Evil-god challenge, only one of which is undermined by Scrutton’s argument. I will now employ a classification system that distinguishes between distinct types of Evil-god challenge (Lancaster-Thomas (2018)). What I call the *weak Evil-god challenge* claims that belief in the EGH and belief in the GGH are both similarly likely or reasonable positions to hold, so there seems to be no motivating reason to choose one over the other. On the other hand, what I call the *strong Evil-god challenge* maintains that the GGH should be rejected because it is absurd or incoherent (the *strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence*), or because if the EGH is true then so is the GGH, which is a contradictory state of affairs, so both must be rejected (the *strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency*).

Bearing in mind these distinctions, it is clear that Scrutton’s argument is defunct when applied to strong Evil-god challenges because they hold that both hypotheses are unreasonable. Her argument does, however, apply to one version of the Evil-god challenge: the weak Evil-god challenge. This is because the weak Evil-god challenge considers the EGH to be a reasonable position to hold. It seems, then, that only the weak Evil-god challenge might be susceptible to Scrutton’s argument, whereas strong Evil-god challenges are not undermined. I am not aware of any scholars who have seriously advocated the weak Evil-god challenge. Ultimately, the Evil-god hypothesis is a challenge to classical monotheism, not a serious alternative to it, just as Steve’s werewolf hypothesis was meant to challenge Susan’s unicorn hypothesis, not offer a feasible alternative. Even if believing in Good-god is better for our well-being than believing in Evil-god, the EGH is used only as a tool to deny the rationality of belief in Good-god. Besides this,

the Evil-god challenge makes no claims about how people should live their lives. It is not a normative or motivational argument that advocates living as if an evil deity actually exists. Clearly, a substantial number of people already believe in Good-god. Evil-god hypothesizers might agree that holding a belief in Good-god is better than sincerely believing in Evil-god. Ultimately, even if pragmatic encroachment is a sound epistemological approach, it does not weaken the strong Evil-god challenge.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that pragmatic encroachment is self-refuting when applied to the debate concerning the reasonableness of the EGH and the GGH, because there is a tension between the consequences of pragmatic encroachment and the established moral standards that come from Good-god. I have also tried to demonstrate that even if we accept all Scrutton's premises, the strong Evil-god challenge still stands, because it is not intended to provide a serious alternative to the GGH; rather it exists to show that both hypotheses are incoherent, absurd, or inconsistent. Perhaps the Evil-god challenge can be undermined; but if it can, it is not because of pragmatic encroachment.

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Notes

1. Of course, if it is discovered that the EGH is *more likely* than the GGH (Lancaster-Thomas (2018)), then the first premise is false, and the argument is unsound.
2. In brief, pragmatic encroachment adopts 'the slogan that the practical encroaches on the epistemic' (Kim (2017), 7). It embraces the idea that practical considerations can alter the epistemic status of beliefs – they can make the belief more or less justified.
3. Note that Scrutton recognizes that her assertion only holds true for binary choices such as choosing between the EGH and the GGH, admitting that her argument 'does not preclude options other than belief in evil-God or good-God' (Scrutton (2016), 355).
4. The pragmatic encroacher might reply that although we are slightly more justified in believing that Sid committed the crime this pragmatic consideration should not tip the balance when making a legal decision.

In response, I would argue that the onus would be on them to explain why the practical consequences should not be considered on such occasions.

5. Perhaps this example only seems intuitively wrong because we know that the Holocaust did occur, but I would argue that even in the case of an event that, based on available evidence, has equal likelihood of occurring as not occurring, it is still absurd to claim that it is less justified to believe that it occurred simply because of its detrimental effect on our well-being.
6. Of course, it is arguable whether a truly good god would punish people in this way, but I am employing selections of scripture from classical monotheism as one example of the GGH. As far as I am aware, all main branches of classical monotheism agree that Good-god advocates justice and disapproves of injustice.