EVIL AS EVIDENCE AGAINST
THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A RESPONSE

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February 17, 1978
Robert Pargetter has recently argued that, even if the theist cannot produce plausible explanations for the evil we experience, the atheologian has no justifiable basis for claiming that evil can in any sense count as strong evidence against God's existence. His strategy is to challenge as question-begging (1) the atheologian's assumption that a prima facie conflict between God and evil exists and (2) the atheologian's claim that God's nonexistence is a more plausible explanation for unresolved (unexplained) evil than a number of theistic options. I argue that Pargetter is unsuccessful, mainly because he (1) fails to understand clearly the conditions under which a prima facie moral conflict exists and (2) fails to distinguish clearly between 'plausibility' and 'possibility' as these terms are applicable to explanatory hypotheses.
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Many atheologians who acknowledge that the existence of evil does not pose a strict consistency problem for the theist still wish to contend that, unless the theist can offer plausible explanations for the types and amounts of evil we experience in a world supposedly created by a wholly good God, such evil, if not a sufficient reason not to believe in theism, at least strongly counts as evidence against the justifiability (rationality) of theistic belief. Since the presence of evil is seen by such critics as a relevant factor in a serious evaluation of theism by any rational person, the type of theistic explanation desired is one which is plausible from an inter-world-view perspective. That is, the requisite explanation is to appear plausible not only to the theist, but also to the non-theist who has assumed, for the sake of argument that the traditional God exists.

A number of theists simply refuse to play this type of inter-world-view plausibility game. Some claim that logical consistency is the only necessary criterion for the rationality of theistic belief. Others grant that the plausibility of explanations for evil is, in principle, relevant to an evaluation of theistic belief, but argue that attempts to establish plausibility criteria which will be acceptable to both the theist and nontheist are fruitless (i.e., are ultimately question-begging). Still others claim that the very idea of a theist seriously seeking an explanation for evil is self-stultifying, as it demonstrates an absence of that basic trust in the moral integrity of God which is necessary to be a true theist.2


2 This, for example, was the view of the influential philosophical theologian, E. J. Carnell. See, for example, his Christian Commitment (New York: McMillan, 1957).
But there are also a number of theists who accept the evidential challenge, proposing what they consider to be plausible inter-world-view explanations for all, or some, seemingly unnecessary evil - e.g., the free will defence, the ultimate harmony defence, the 'soul-making' defence. Most recent evidential discussions debate whether such explanations adequately justify all the evil which exists. At present, many philosophers would argue that they do not.

Recently, however, Robert Pargetter has outlined a novel theistic response to the evidential challenge. He argues that, even if the theist cannot produce plausible explanations for the evil we experience, the atheologian has no justifiable basis for claiming that evil can in any sense count as strong evidence against God's existence. This contention is significant. If Pargetter is correct, the theist possesses a general argument which, in principle, allows him to successfully counter the evidential challenge. He need no longer depend on specific explanatory claims which may or may not be perceived as plausible by the non-theist.

My primary purpose is to demonstrate that Pargetter's argumentation is unsuccessful. But, in the process, I will also be identifying and clarifying the basic issues which I believe are relevant to any meaningful evidential discussion of evil.

II

The essence of Pargetter's argument is not hard to elucidate:

1. When the nontheist claims that evil counts strongly against the existence of God, he seems to mean one of three things:

   a. "Evil is something which requires an explanation, and the best available explanations include (or entail) that God does not exist."

3See, for example, David Griffin, God, Power, and Evil: A process Theodicy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), P. 256.

b. "We can directly (immediately, intuitively) see a support relationship between the existence of evil and the nonexistence of God."

c. "Our inability to resolve the prima facie conflict between the existence of evil and the existence of God is best explained by rejecting that God exists." 5

2. Both (1a) and (1b) make sense only if it is implicitly assumed that there is a prima facie conflict between God and evil which must be explained and are, therefore, only disguised forms of (1c).

3. (1c) can be criticized on two counts:

a. The assumption in (1c) that there exists a prima facie conflict between God and evil is question-begging as this is what needs to be proved.

b. Even assuming that such a prima facie conflict does exist and that this conflict has not yet been resolved, the nontheist is not justified in claiming that our inability to resolve this conflict is best explained by rejecting that God exists. It is just as plausible to affirm one of the following hypotheses:

1) A solution exists and will yet be discovered.

2) The best world is a world in which evil exists and we do not know the reason for its existence.

4. Since (1c) contains question-begging and/or false assumptions, "the claim that the existence of evil is strong evidence against the existence of God has not been justified." 6

In his introduction, Pargetter tells us:

Many atheists claim that the argument from evil can be reconstructed as a good non-deductive argument. For it is claimed by many that the existence of evil, pain and suffering counts, prima facie, as strong evidence against

5 Pargetter, p. 243

6 Pargetter, p. 242-243
the existence of God. Of course, they point out, a believer may be able to escape such an argument from evil if he has other reasons or arguments for believing in God. But the hypothetical rational agnostic, searching for rational evidence on which to base his beliefs and unimpressed by the arguments for the existence of God, must take the presence of evil as good evidence against the existence of God. I am interested in assessing this claim.7

Pargetter, then, is not simply assessing (1c). He actually wishes to discuss the validity of (1c'): Assuming that no argument for God's existence is credible, our inability to resolve the prima facie conflict between the existence of evil and the existence of God is best explained by rejecting that God exists.

This fact is significant. Since (1c) cannot be affirmed without denying the existence of God, strictly speaking, it can only be affirmed by the true atheist. But both the agnostic and the theist can also affirm (1c') as to do so does not necessitate denying that God could or does exist. The theist or agnostic need only add that, when all other relevant evidential data is considered, the 'negative' evidence — of which our inability to resolve the prima facie conflict between God and evil is a part — does not conclusively out-weigh the 'positive' evidence with which it must compete. In short (1c') is quite consistent with both theistic and agnostic world-views. Of course, in and of itself, this fact in no way reflects upon the cogency of Pargetter's argument. But it does point out the controversial nature of his undertaking. Let us see how well he fares.

Pargetter claims (as noted in 3a) that the nontheist begs the question when he presupposes the existence of a prima facie conflict between God and evil. This presupposition, we are told, "is what has to be justified." 8 The issue here is not whether evil is a reality or God is opposed to evil. The crucial issue is: Even granting that evil exists and God is opposed to it, is there a prima facie conflict between God and evil?

7Pargetter, p. 242-243
8Pargetter, p. 244
To respond, we obviously need to define 'prima facie moral conflict'. Normative definitions are notoriously problematic. But, with respect to the actions of individuals, it seems to me that our ordinary use of the terms in question allows us at least to maintain the following: A prima facie moral conflict arises when the actions of a person do not coincide with what we would normally expect of such an individual in a given context (i.e., do not coincide with our normal moral expectations for a person with his/her capacities and character in this or that situation). For example, let us suppose that a father, who we have been told is a loving individual, sits idly by while his daughter is mauled by a large dog. It would, I believe, be justifiable (and noncontroversial) to contend under such circumstances that the wide discrepancy between our normal moral expectations with respect to the actions of a loving person and what has actually occurred has generated a prima facie moral conflict between the two. Of course, we may discover that the father was 'frozen with fear' or in a drug-induced stupor. If such were found to be the case, we would readily acknowledge that the prima facie conflict was not an actual (genuine) conflict, as such pieces of information would rightfully be seen as sufficient reasons why a loving father might not perform the type of action we expected of him. But, to generalize the point, when there exists a divergence between our normal moral expectations and the actual actions of a person, the possibility that the prima facie conflict is actual remains until we are able to explain why the person acted in such an unexpected manner.

Two clarifications are necessary. First, the distinction between establishing that a prima facie moral conflict may be actual and establishing that an actual moral conflict does in fact exist cannot be overemphasized. To establish that a prima facie moral conflict may be actual, we need only demonstrate that no plausible explanation for a given expectation/action discrepancy has yet been proposed. To establish that an actual moral conflict does in fact exist, we must know (be able to demonstrate conclusively) that no plausible explanation of the requisite type could be proposed. The latter is obviously a much more difficult enterprise. Second, it should now be clear that the more we know about the character of the moral agent in question and the specific details of the actual situation under consideration, the less likely we will be to claim mistakenly that an actual moral conflict may (or does) exist. If, for example, we know that a certain individual 'freezes with fear' at the sight of dogs, we will rightfully not claim that an actual moral conflict is (or may be) generated by his failure to come to the aid of his daughter when a dog is involved. Our prior knowledge of his phobia would instantly furnish us with the necessary 'explanation'.

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What then of God and evil? Does a prima facie conflict between the two exist? When we consider the fact that God is supposedly a wholly good, omnipotent, omniscient being, there do appear to be many obvious discrepancies between what we would expect in a world created by such a being and what we do, in fact, find. Why would a wholly good God who foreknew exactly how much pain and suffering his created world would generate actually instantiate such a state-of-affairs? Why would a wholly good God create persons who he foreknew would choose not be become rightly related to him and thus be eternally damned? Why does so much pain and suffering occur in a world over which God supposedly has complete control? But the important issue is not whether a prima facie conflict can be generated when only certain aspects of God's character are compared to the created state-of-affairs we experience. This much is obvious. The important issue is whether the consideration of all relevant data concerning God and his creative actions furnishes us with plausible reasons why such a wholly good, omnipotent, omniscient being would have acted as he did (acts as he does). If such reasons can be articulated, what some have considered to be (or possibly be) an actual moral conflict between God and evil disappears. But, if the expectation/action discrepancy remains unexplained (or not adequately explained), the possibility that there exists an actual moral conflict between God and evil remains also.

Some theists might protest at this point that, while in the case of human beings (e.g. a father) we have a good idea what sort of things would count against an individual's being good, the same cannot be said with respect to God. Presumably, such a claim would be based either upon the premise that (1) God's nature is so far beyond our comprehension that we simply cannot say what would or would not count as a moral conflict between God's actions and his goodness or the premise that (2) God is his own standard of morality and, therefore, that what he does is good by definition.

In the present context, such a ploy is unhelpful. While all theists admit that terms predicated of God and man are not univocal, most theists realize that, if their utterances are to have any rational basis, such terms must have at least an analogical relationship. Moreover, all major forms of theism spell out quite clearly a number of aspects of 'goodness' which are common to both divine and secular usage. One of the most significant of these common semantical aspects is that upon which the above analogy is based: to care for the physical and mental (spiritual) well being of other persons (e.g., to protect those who are being threatened).
What then of Pargetter's claim that the nontheist begs the question when he assumes the existence of a prima facie conflict between God and evil which is in need of explanation? First, given the reading of 'prima facie moral conflict' just set forth, there seems no way he could deny that a prima facie conflict between God and evil exists. What he would still claim (or always desired to claim) it appears, is that the nontheist begs the question when he assumes that the prima facie conflict between God and evil may be actual (genuine). But we have seen that, if no plausible explanation for God's creative behavior can be articulated, it must be granted that the prima facie conflict between God and evil may be genuine. Since Pargetter grants in (lc') that the discrepancy between our normal moral expectations and God's creative behavior is unresolved, (and even grants that the nontheists in question do not possess compelling, independent reasons for believing in God's goodness) his claim that no prima facie conflict necessarily exists remains unjustified even under this more generous reading.

This problem, alone, is not fatal to Pargetter's position. In his more significant criticism of (lc'), he does not deny that there exists a prima facie conflict between God and evil which must be explained. He argues rather (as noted in 3b) that, even assuming the existence of such a moral conflict, the nontheist is not justified in claiming that our inability to resolve this prima facie conflict is best explained by rejecting that God exists. Two supporting arguments are set forth. We are first told (as noted in 3b1) that "perhaps the suggestion that there is a solution which has not yet been found has been dismissed too quickly as a good explanation for the failure to resolve the apparent conflict. At least it is difficult to see why one can say that this is clearly a less plausible explanation than God's nonexistence."10

Some clarifications are again required. First, we are no longer discussing explanations for God's seemingly unusual creative behavior. We are now discussing explanations for our inability to generate plausible explanations for such behavior. Second, as we have already seen, Pargetter assumes that the hypothetical nontheist with whom he is debating acknowledges no good reason for believing in God's existence.

10 Pargetter, p. 244.
(i.e., acknowledges no positive evidence against which that data counting against God's existence must be weighed). Accordingly, Pargetter's real contention seems to be the following: (3b1') The nontheist who acknowledges no good reason for believing in God's existence is not justified in claiming that our inability to generate plausible explanations for the prima facie conflict between God and evil is best explained by rejecting the existence of God because it is no less plausible to assume that explanations for God's creative behavior exist but have simply not yet been discovered.

To properly evaluate this contention, we must draw a distinction between 'plausibility' and 'possibility' in the present context. Exact definitions for these terms are infamously elusive, but 'possibility' is basically a logical term. The existence of a state-of-affairs is normally said to be logically possible unless it can be conclusively demonstrated that such could not be the case. 'Plausibility' tends to be more of an evidential term. The existence of a state-of-affairs is normally said to be plausible iff there exist good reasons to believe that such is the case.

Given this distinction, Pargetter's 'plausibility comparison' can now be analyzed. As we have repeatedly seen, Pargetter grants for the sake of argument that no adequate (plausible) explanation for God's creative behavior has yet been articulated and assumes that the nontheists with whom he is debating acknowledge no compelling, independent data supporting God's goodness. But, if these conditions are imposed, the nontheist could have no justifiable basis for granting that the existence of adequate, but presently unknown explanations for God's creative behavior is a plausible explanation for the unresolved prima facie conflict between God and evil. For the conditions which Pargetter himself imposes rule out the possibility that the nontheist could have any good reasons for affirming his explanatory option. The most the nontheist can be justifiably forced to admit under such conditions is that the existence of adequate, but unknown, explanations for God's creative behavior is a real possibility.

On the other hand, the absence of a plausible explanation for God's behavior does raise legitimate doubts concerning God's character. Does this fact establish the plausibility of the nontheistic claim that the unresolved conflict between God and evil is best explained by rejecting the existence of God?
If the nontheist means that the unresolved conflict between God and evil is best explained by concluding that God could not, in fact, exist, the answer is no. The existence of a prima facie expectation/action discrepancy concerning God's character is not, in and of itself, a sufficiently good reason to conclude that God could not, in fact, exist.

But it is doubtful that the nontheist intends this strong of a reading when he claims that the unresolved conflict in question is best explained by rejecting God's existence. He more likely means that, in the absence of any plausible explanation for God's creative behavior and any compelling, independent reason for believing that any such explanation exists, the doubts generated by this moral conflict force him presently to refrain from affirming the existence of God (i.e., force him to assume anagnostic stance). This is clearly a plausible position. As long as there exists a prima facie conflict between our normal moral expectations and the actual behavior of God, there exists the real possibility that the conflict is actual (i.e., that there is no plausible explanation for God's behavior). And as long as there exists the real possibility that the conflict may be actual (and we have no compelling, independent reasons for believing that the necessary explanations exist), the existence of the resultant prima facie conflict does furnish a sufficiently good reason not to affirm at present the existence of the type of all powerful, wholly good God the orthodox theist postulates.

Accordingly, (3b1') is clearly false. Since the nontheistic hypothesis is plausible and Pargetter's theistic option only possible, the nontheist is justified in contending that his stance is the most adequate.

Pargetter's other supporting argument for (3b) reads as follows: (3b2) "...there is a least one alternative explanation often overlooked: the best possible world is a world where evil exists and where we do not (cannot) know the reason for evil (at least at this stage). It seems impossible to argue that this is a less plausible explanation than God's nonexistence without having either begged-the-question, or carried out some sort of direct assessment."\(^1\)

\(^1\) Pargetter, p. 244.
This contention (3b2) suffers from the same basic problems as (3b1'). In the absence of any plausible explanation for God's creative behavior or any compelling, independent supporting evidence for God's goodness, the theistic explanation for the unresolved conflict in question could not be affirmed as plausible by the nontheist. The nontheist could only admit that Pargetter's theistic explanation describes a logically possible state-of-affairs.

But the nontheistic claim implicit in (3b2) can be rendered plausible. If the nontheist means that since legitimate doubts concerning God's goodness are raised by the unresolved prima facie conflict between God and evil, there exists a good reason for him to presently refrain from affirming the existence of God, his argument is sound.

This reading, accordingly, falsifies Pargetter's claim that his theistic option - which is only logically possible - is equally adequate.

What then are we to say concerning Pargetter's concluding assertion: "To sum up, the claim that the existence of evil is strong evidence against the existence of God has not been justified." On the basis of our discussion of (3a) and (3b), two comments are necessary. Pargetter has shown that even the presence of unexplained evil, in and of itself, cannot justify the contention that God could not, in fact, exist. What Pargetter has failed to establish is that, in the face of no counter-evidence, the presence of unresolved evil in a world created by a wholly good God would not count strongly against the affirmation of God's existence (i.e., that unexplained evil should not strongly support an agnostic stance).

III

A few concluding remarks are necessary. In the course of our discussion, we have touched on the three basic 'evidential' questions:

(1) Does the existence of evil generate a prima facie conflict for the theist?

(2) If so, do there exist any plausible explanations for God's creative behavior?

(3) If not, how is this inability to resolve the prima facie conflict best explained?

Pargetter, p. 244-45
The uniqueness of Pargetter's approach was his attempt to counter the 'evidential' problem of evil without making reference to any specific explanations for God's creative behavior. Unfortunately, since (1) must be answered affirmatively, and the most plausible response to (3) under the conditions Pargetter has imposed is an agnostic stance, his discussion offers little help to the theist who desires an effective counter to the evidential challenge which the presence of evil in a world supposedly created by a wholly good God generates.

The significance of this fact, however, must not be overestimated. The theist can still concern himself with (2), arguing that plausible explanations for God's creative behavior do, in fact, exist. This issue has certainly not yet been settled. Furthermore, our criticism of Pargetter has only demonstrated that, if it is assumed that no other evidential factors are relevant, the most plausible response to (3) is an agnostic stance. But the theist need not (indeed, should not) discuss evil in isolation. It is part of our total experience which must be explained. Accordingly, even if discussing (3), the theist can argue that, when all evidential factors are considered, a tentative commitment to theism is the most plausible option. This issue is also far from settled and nothing said in this paper should be construed as an argument against such a theistic response to it.

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