

ETHICAL NATURALISM AND EVIL

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Recently in this journal Mark T. Nelson argued that theists do not have to concern themselves with defending theism against the argument from evil. He based this on a claim that, in virtually all cases, no non-relativized formulation of the argument from evil is possible. Against this, I argue for his being wrong on both points and for a formulation of the argument from evil that is more adequate than that used in his paper—this being a formulation that is neither relativized nor one against which theism is justifiably excused from the need to defend itself.

In a recent article in this journal¹ Mark T. Nelson argues that an essential feature of a large class of atheistic arguments from evil to the non-existence of God, namely, their ethical naturalism, justifies theists in not taking those arguments seriously. But, as I will show, Nelson's argument fails and the philosophical problem of evil is one that theists² do indeed have to reckon with.

The atheistic arguments that Nelson is interested in are tied to philosophical naturalism and, more specifically, to ethical naturalism. This does not restrict the scope of his claim, however, for, as a practical matter, such arguments represent virtually the whole class of atheistic arguments from evil. As he describes it, ethical naturalism is typically inclined either to relativism, subjectivism, or nihilism.³ Because it does not matter for my argument whether atheists who argue from evil to the non-existence of God are ethical relativists, subjectivists, or nihilists, I shall speak from now on only of such philosophers' relativistic readings of ethical propositions, with the understanding that either or both of the alternatives may be substituted without affecting my argument.

In essence Nelson's position is the following: the crucial propositions in the atheist's case are

- (1) if there were an all-good, all-powerful God, then there would be little or no evil in the world,

because

- (4) if there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world,

and an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good God would be able to bring about a



world in which there was little or no evil.⁴ But propositions (1) and (4) are moral propositions.⁵ So, as they are believed true by atheists whose conception of morality is relativistic, they are relativistic propositions. Arguably it is code-relativism that, as formulated by Gilbert Harman, is the strongest version of moral relativism, so, consistent with that and wishing to take the argument from evil on its strongest terms, (4) should be read to mean

- (4*) if there were a God who was all-good according to code C, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world.⁶

But this

...simply reflects (presumably) the speaker's code. Yet, code C is not necessarily the same as the theist's code (let alone God's); moreover, if this is so, there need be no code-independent reason for the theist (or God) to hold code C. So, if code C is not the theist's code, then the conclusion of the argument from evil is of little concern to the theist.⁷

Thus, Nelson believes, it is not incumbent upon theists to defend their theory against the argument from evil.

Let us look closely at Nelson's argument and in particular at proposition (4). In agreement with Nelson,⁸ I do not think that anything significant in the present context turns upon the difference between (1) and (4), so I shall ignore (1). Nelson treats (4) as basic to atheism's case, and in fact his own argument requires its being basic, but it is not basic at all, thus his interpretation of (4) as (4*) does not compromise atheism's argument from evil or immunize theism against it. I will show these things by showing that the problem of evil lies deeper both than Nelson seems to think and than his analysis reaches, and also that it possesses greater subtlety and power than he recognizes.

Instead of being itself basic, (4) is one particular interpretation and application of another proposition that *is* basic. That proposition is

- (*4) if God, as defined in traditional theism, exists, he would not want there to be unjustified evil in the world, i.e. any evil which, from God's point of view, had no morally sufficient reason for existing.⁹

Proposition (*4) does not commit atheism to the view that there can be "little or no (justified) evil" in a God-made world, and so allows atheistic thinking on God and evil to be seen as more subtle and nuanced than does (4). This is because (*4) countenances atheists' accepting the possibility that some types and tokens of evil are indeed compatible with the existence of God while, at the same time, pressing the point that not all the evil that actually exists is justified in a supposedly God-made world. Richard Swinburne acknowledges this point as the focus of the especially "awkward" (for theists, that is) formulation of the problem of evil.¹⁰ To be sure, some atheists do believe that the net amount of justified evil in any God-made world is none or virtually none, but so strict an interpretation of (*4) is optional. Thus, this

interpretation does not serve to provide an adequate characterization of atheistic thinking on the problem of evil, or its strongest formulation.

In the literature such reasons as the following are frequently cited as morally sufficient for the existence of either any or all evil in a God-made world: the freedom of choice and action possessed by human beings and deemed necessary by God for the success of his plan for human moral development; the need for there to be natural evil in the world so that, from experience of it, human beings can learn about the harmful consequences of some of their actions. The former is standardly offered as justification for moral evil in a God-made world while the latter is offered as justifying natural evil.

For brevity, let us agree to read "evil" in propositions (1), (4) and (*4) as meaning only natural evil, thereby restricting ourselves to the problem of natural evil. That being so means we should take (4) to be a particular interpretation and application of

- (**4) if God, as defined in traditional theism, exists, he would not want there to be unjustified natural evil in the world, i.e. any natural evil which, from God's point of view, had no morally sufficient reason for existing,

and interpretations and applications other than (4) are possible and plausible.

Thus it is not incumbent upon atheists to endorse (4). Nelson's claim about proposition (4) is that it is optional for theists. I agree. In short, then, the acceptance of proposition (4) is optional all around. But the same does not apply to either (*4) or (**4), for they, being implicates of the traditional theistic definition of "God," are true if that definition is true. The gist of the definition is that by "God" is meant an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who made the world, conserves it in existence, and wants all human beings freely to choose and achieve their own destiny. Specifically, propositions (*4) and (**4) are entailed by the goodness clause in that definition. For it is simply inconsistent with something's being perfectly good either that he would want there to be in the world natural evils for which there is no morally sufficient reason or that the existence of such natural evils would ever be a matter of indifference to him. Thus, both theists and atheists will accept that (**4) is true. In other words, (**4) is a code-independent proposition insofar as theism and atheism are concerned.

Furthermore, theists, believing that God does in fact exist, will also believe that there exists no natural evil for which there is no morally sufficient reason, while their atheistic opponents will argue that certain classes or instances of natural evil are gratuitous. Clearly, we cannot here get into the question of whether or not there *are* any such cases of gratuitous natural evil, nor need we. Given the status of (**4), to warrant a response from theists an atheist (or anybody else, for that matter) must only show that, *prima facie*, there are such cases. And ordinary everyday experience does seem to give us an abun-

dance of them; to cite just one class of examples, the many instances of what seems to be biologically useless pain among both animals and humans. Thus, it is the combination of

- (a) (**4)'s being true,
- (b) (**4)'s being basic in both theism and all formulations of the argument from (natural) evil,¹¹

and

- (c) the existence in the world of either types or tokens of *prima facie* gratuitous natural evil

that constitutes the core of the problem of (natural) evil, that shows it to lie deeper than Nelson digs, and that makes it a problem that theists cannot duck for such reasons as those he offers.

A separate, although related, issue: Nelson maintains that, as standardly deployed, the argument from evil is an *ad hominem* argument against theists.¹² There is a weak sense in which this is true, but on balance it is a misleading way of describing the argument. For, to describe it as *ad hominem* suggests that, because the argument from evil is directed specifically against theists, attention is thereby being deflected from a matter of substance to some merely local features of a given theist's, or class of theists', formulation of theism. But that is misleading, for the problem of evil—understood essentially as the seeming discordance between either (*4) or (**4) and the existence of *prima facie* gratuitous evil—only arises in the first place on the supposition that God, as traditionally defined in standard theism, exists and made the world. Hence there is no way of formulating the problem that does not call either the truth of theism or the reasonableness of believing it true into question.

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NOTES

1. Mark T. Nelson, "Naturalistic Ethics and The Argument from Evil," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 1991), pp. 368-79.

2. Two points of clarification: first, a distinction must be made between theists and religious believers (even believers in the God of traditional theism). The former are holders of a certain philosophical theory, whose central theses I will state later on in this paper, while the latter need make no overt theoretical commitments whatever; second, a distinction must be made between the philosophical problem(s) of evil—the logical and the evidential problems basically—and various personal and pastoral problems of evil. The former are problems that arise on and for a certain philosophical theory and thereby that call for solution in reasoning and argument, while the latter do neither.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 369-70. For convenience, I have retained Nelson's numbering of the

propositions that are under discussion in both his paper and mine, namely, (1), (4), and (4*).

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 370-71 and fn. 4, p. 377.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

9. See my "On the Problem of Evil's not Being what it Seems," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 149 (October 1987), p. 442.

10. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 219.

11. On page 376 Nelson maintains,

In sum, it's not as if the naturalist can point to a definite set of moral propositions which all theists must share and say, "See! These commit you to (4)."

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that (*4) and (**4) constitute such a definite set. Even if that were so, nobody who accepted those propositions would be committed to (4), for it is not entailed by them. Rather, as I remarked earlier, it is a particular interpretation of one or both of them. But, as I have been arguing, there is no significantly good news for theism in its not being committed to (4), for atheists are not committed to it as part of the ground floor of the argument from evil either.

12. Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 376.