

MEGILL'S MULTIVERSE META-ARGUMENT

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper in THIS JOURNAL, Jason Megill (2011) offers an innovative meta-argument which deploys considerations about multiple universes in an effort to block all arguments from evil. In what follows, I contend that Megill has failed to establish a key premise in his meta-argument. I also offer a rival account of the effect of multiverse models on the debate about evil. (Megill's article is available online at: www.springerlink.com/content/h245n640g526717t/fulltext.pdf.)

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several philosophers have offered reasons for thinking that if theism is true, the actual world (likely) includes multiple universes.¹ Some have further argued that a multiverse model can help theists respond to arguments from evil.² The latter move has been criticized in various ways.³ In a recent paper in THIS JOURNAL, Jason Megill (2011) offers a novel and ambitious meta-argument: he claims that the bare epistemic possibility of multiple universes defeats *all* arguments from evil. Here it is:

- (1) If we know that any atheistic argument from evil is successful, then we know that God would be (or at least probably would be) either unjustified in creating, or unjustified in sustaining, our universe.⁴
- (2) There might be multiple universes.
- (3) If there might be multiple universes, then we do not know that God would be (or at least probably would be) either unjustified in creating, or unjustified in sustaining, our universe.
- (4) We do not know that God would be (or at least probably would be) either unjustified in creating, or unjustified in sustaining, our universe.
- (5) We do not know that any atheistic argument from evil is successful.

If Megill's argument were sound, this would be an enormously important result in the philosophy of religion. The problem of evil, after all, is widely thought to be one of the most serious objections to theism. It has been discussed throughout the history of philosophy, and has generated an enormous and very technical contemporary literature. But can the bare epistemic possibility of multiple universes really defeat *all* arguments from evil, both past and present, as Megill maintains?⁵ In what follows, I grant premises (1) and (2), but I contend that Megill fails to establish premise (3). I conclude with a rival account of the effect of multiverse models of theism on the debate about evil.

PREMISE THREE

Megill defends premise (3) by urging that its consequent follows from premise (2), together with two claims, each of which I will examine in turn:

CLAIM ONE: God is obligated to create good.

CLAIM TWO: There might be more good than evil in the actual universe.

Interestingly, Megill does not defend CLAIM ONE directly.⁶ Instead, he assumes that it is plausible, and considers what consequences it has, given (2). He concludes that God either *would be* or *might be* obliged to create *every* universe that contains more good than evil, since creating each one adds to the total of good in concrete existence (pp.131-2). And, although Megill doesn't explicitly say so, the idea seems to be that if God is *obliged* to create every such universe, then God is *justified* in so doing. (In standard deontic logic, of course, what is obligatory for *S* is permissible for *S*.) I begin with a few brief comments on Megill's argument so far:

- (i) Megill does not say whether he takes the obligation expressed in CLAIM ONE to be defeasible or not. If it is a defeasible obligation, then further argument is needed to show that it is not defeated in the case of universe creation. For the sake of argument, however, let's grant that either this obligation is indefeasible, or else nothing defeats it in the present case.⁷
- (ii) Megill offers the following reason for thinking that CLAIM ONE shows that God would (or might) be obliged to create every universe featuring more good than evil: each one adds to the total amount of good in concrete existence (p.132). But this reason is too weak for Megill's purposes. After all, creating very *bad* universes also adds to the total amount of good in concrete existence, as long as they contain some good. What Megill presumably intends to claim, however, is that adding a universe which features more good than evil makes the resulting world (*ceteris paribus*) better than it would otherwise be.
- (iii) That said, it is controversial whether, in all cases, adding such a universe will make the resulting world (*ceteris paribus*) better than it would otherwise be.⁸ For the sake of argument, however, let's suppose that Megill is right about this too.
- (iv) Megill suggests that God has (or may have) an obligation to create *every* universe featuring more good than evil, but he does not explicitly add the highly plausible restriction that an essentially perfect being will create *only* these.⁹
- (v) In several places, Megill says that either God *would* or *might* be obliged to create every good universe, given (2) and CLAIM ONE (p.132). I take it that Megill intends to assert that it is at least epistemically possible that a multiverse is expectable on theism.¹⁰

Given these points, I hereafter replace CLAIM ONE with:

REVISED CLAIM ONE: It is epistemically possible that: if theism is true, the actual world is a multiverse comprised of *all* and *only* those universes which feature more good than evil.

For the most part, Megill seems committed to this claim.¹¹

Megill's CLAIM TWO refers to *the actual universe*. The definite article here is surprising, given that Megill generally seems to have in mind a model according to which the actual *world* includes multiple *universes*. On this view, of course, there are multiple actual universes within the unique actual world. Moreover, Megill's defence of CLAIM TWO appeals to considerations

about *our* universe – the one *we* inhabit (pp.133-5). So, in what follows, I replace CLAIM TWO with:

REVISED CLAIM TWO: It is epistemically possible that (*P*) there is more good than evil in *our* universe.

Megill supports this claim by defending another one: we do not know that there is more *evil* than *good* in our universe (pp.133-5). But establishing this latter claim, by itself, is not sufficient to establish REVISED CLAIM TWO. In order to show that (*P*) is epistemically possible, Megill needs to show that (*P*) is not known to be false. So, in addition to showing that we do not know that there is more *evil* than *good* in our universe, Megill also needs to show that we do not know that there is *equal* good and evil in our universe.

Fortunately for Megill, he offers very plausible reasons for thinking that we do not know that there is more evil than good in our universe, and these reasons also support the claim that we do not know that there is *equal* good and evil in our universe. Megill identifies three tasks that must be completed before even beginning to investigate whether our universe contains more evil than good (or, we might add, equal amounts of both): first, a method for quantifying good and evil must be found; second, certain key disagreements between ethical theories must be resolved; and third, it must be determined just which instances of suffering count as evil (p.133). Megill rightly doubts that these tasks will be completed any time soon. He next points out that, *even if they were* completed, it is unlikely that we would then be capable of judging whether our universe contains more evil than good (or, we might add, whether our universe contains equal evil and good). This is because we would need to evaluate *all* regions of our universe at the *present* time – a daunting enough prospect! – and we would have to evaluate the entire *past* and *future* of our universe as well (pp.133-4). In short, Megill offers good reasons for thinking that we do not know that (*P*) is false, and so he offers strong support for REVISED CLAIM TWO.

Unfortunately for Megill, however, the bare epistemic possibility of multiple universes, together with REVISED CLAIM ONE and REVISED CLAIM TWO, do not entail the consequent of premise (3). This is because God might be *unjustified* in creating a universe that has *more good than evil*. In other words: a universe with more good than evil might nevertheless contain some feature that makes it unworthy of inclusion in a divinely furnished multiverse. Perhaps sensing this, some contributors to the literature on theistic multiverses have proposed additional requirements:

- (a) Derek Parfit says that each individual's life must be worth living (1992, p.423).
- (b) Peter Forrest holds that every individual must have a life in which good outweighs evil (1981, p.53), and, in a later book, defends two further restrictions: each creature who suffers must at least virtually consent to it, and must receive ample recompense afterwards (1996, pp.225-7).
- (c) Paul Draper urges that no individual's life may be bad overall, and that God must be a benefactor to all creatures (2004, pp.319-20).

In discussing arguments from evil, but not specifically theistic multiverse scenarios, other authors have proposed similar constraints:

- (d) Michael Tooley maintains that "... it is morally permissible for an omnipotent and omniscient being to allow a morally innocent individual to suffer only if that suffering will benefit the individual in question, or, at least, if it is sufficiently-likely that it will do so" (1991, p.113), and William Rowe quotes this passage approvingly (1996, p.92).

- (e) Richard Swinburne claims that God has the right to allow humans and animals to suffer only if each individual's life is good overall (1998, p.235).
- (f) Marilyn Adams suggests that "at a minimum, God's *goodness* to human individuals would require that God guarantee each a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole by balancing off serious evils" (1999, p.31).

These are six versions of a *patient-centred requirement* on the permission of evil by God. Theists, atheists and agnostics tend to agree that some such requirement is extremely plausible.¹²

But notice that a universe which contains more good than evil could nevertheless fail to satisfy such a requirement. Accordingly, if any such requirement is plausible, having a favourable balance of good over evil is not a *sufficient* condition on a universe's being worthy of inclusion in a divinely-furnished multiverse. It may well be a *necessary* condition, but perhaps other conditions are also necessary. But this, of course, is just to say that that premise (3) has not been shown to follow from REVISED CLAIM ONE and REVISED CLAIM TWO. Accordingly, Megill's argument fails to establish premise (3), which means that he has not shown his argument to be sound.¹³

THE THEISTIC MULTIVERSE AND ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

Although Megill's meta-argument fails, it is worth considering what effect this multiverse model of theism has on the debate about evil. All proponents of theistic multiverses claim that there is an objective axiological threshold above which *all* universes are worthy of inclusion in a divinely-furnished multiverse, and at or below which *no* universe is worthy. The trick, of course, is to say enough about where this threshold lies.

Some conditions will be easy to specify. For example, a universe's being *axiologically unsurpassable* is surely a plausible *sufficient condition* for being worthy of being created and sustained by God.¹⁴ As for putative *necessary conditions*, we have already seen several. Megill suggested that each universe must have a *favourable balance of good over evil*. The philosophers listed above in (a)-(f) proposed various *patient-centred requirements*. Yet another candidate for a necessary condition might be *the absence of gratuitous evil*: someone might say that no universe that includes *any* instance of gratuitous evil whatsoever should be included in a multiverse furnished by God.¹⁵

So how should the debate about evil proceed in the context of 'multiverse theism'? Critics of this model can devise and defend, *a priori*, putative necessary conditions on a universe's being worthy of creation and sustenance by God. They can then attempt to show, *a posteriori*, that some such condition is (probably) not satisfied in *our* universe.¹⁶ No doubt it will be very difficult for such critics to show that our universe fails to contain more good than evil, for the very reasons Megill gives. But critics can turn their attention to other putative necessary conditions instead. For example, they might urge that we have good reason to believe that the requirements expressed in some or all of (a)-(e) are not (or are probably not) met in our universe. Or they might urge that we have good reason for thinking that our universe does (or probably does) feature gratuitous evil. Either move would provide reason for thinking that our universe is not worthy of being created and sustained by God, and would therefore count against the multiverse model of theism.

For their part, defenders of multiverse theism can either attempt to show that the proffered necessary condition is illegitimate, or they can attempt to defeat the relevant *a posteriori* claim which holds that it is (probably) not satisfied in our universe. This might involve showing that the necessary condition (probably) *is* satisfied in our universe, or, more

weakly, this might involve denying that it is reasonable to think that it is (probably) *not* satisfied. In short, defenders and critics of multiverse theism can argue about evil in the same way as philosophers of religion do in other contexts. No reason has yet been given for thinking that this model is less vulnerable to arguments from evil (or more vulnerable, for that matter) than other models of God's creation.

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NOTES

¹ McHarry (1978); Leslie (1989); Parfit (1991, 1992); Stewart (1993); Forrest (1981, 1996); Turner (2003); Draper (2004); Hudson (2006); O'Connor (2008); and Kraay (2010, 2011, and forthcoming).

² McHarry (1978); Parfit (1991, 1992); Turner (2003); Hudson (2006); and O'Connor (2008).

³ Perkins (1980) criticizes McHarry (1978); Almeida (2008) criticizes Parfit (1991 and 1992), Turner (2003), and Hudson (2006); Almeida (2010) criticizes O'Connor (2008); and Monton (forthcoming) criticizes Hudson (2006), while also offering a general argument against all multiverse-based responses to arguments from evil. Draper (2004) also offers general considerations against multiverse-based responses.

⁴ I have replaced "sound", in Megill's formulation, with "successful", to avoid giving the misleading impression that Megill is concerned merely with deductive arguments from evil. I have also replaced "unjustified in actualizing", in his formulation, with the following phrase: "either unjustified in creating, or unjustified in sustaining". This is to avoid giving the misleading impression that Megill's universes are possible worlds. (For more on this, see note 11, below.)

⁵ Megill even expresses considerable confidence that his meta-argument will defeat *future* arguments from evil (p.137).

⁶ Megill does offer something of an indirect defence of CLAIM ONE, given the dialectical context: he says that if this claim is denied, it will be difficult for the critic of theism to mount arguments from evil (p.132).

⁷ One consequence is worth noting: if God, qua perfect being, is not free to refrain from meeting his obligations, then, on Megill's model, God is not free to refrain from creating universes. This, of course, contradicts the traditional idea that God is free to refrain from creating.

⁸ Some philosophers have argued that a multiverse containing infinitely-many good universes cannot be improved by the addition of one more such universe: Perkins (1980, p.170); Walker (2009, p.371); and Almeida (2010, p.306). But others have criticized this view: Almeida (2008, pp.156–8); Monton (forthcoming); and Kraay (forthcoming).

⁹ Megill expresses uncertainty about whether universes featuring *equal* amounts of good and evil would be worthy of inclusion in a divinely-furnished multiverse (p.132, note 10). I here assume that such universes would *not* be worthy of inclusion, but my argument below does not depend upon this claim.

¹⁰ Megill's use of "might" is explicitly identified as epistemic on pp.129–130.

¹¹ In one place, Megill briefly entertains the idea that universes *just are* possible worlds (p.136). If so, however, it's not clear what it would mean for God to *create* – or, for that matter, *actualize* – multiple universes in the way Megill's argument suggests. In what follows, then, I set this notion aside.

¹² For general doubts about such restrictions, see van Inwagen (2006, pp.95-113). For particular doubts about strong versions – according to which patients must themselves benefit from the suffering they undergo – see Jordan (2004).

¹³ One might wonder whether Megill could simply omit (2) and (3) from his argument, since (1) and (4) together entail (5). Perhaps, but nothing in Megill's paper suggests a way to defend (4) without appeal to multiple universes.

¹⁴ Of course, some might hold, on *a priori* grounds, that *no* universe is axiologically unsurpassable.

¹⁵ The *absence of gratuitous evil* requirement is weaker than the *patient-centred requirement*: every justification for the divine permission of evil that satisfies the latter will also satisfy the former, but not vice-versa. (Subject S may suffer non-gratuitously in that her suffering is, for example, necessary to bring about some greater good, but it may still be the case that none of conditions (a)-(f) is met for S.) Theists who have denied the *absence of gratuitous evil* requirement include Hick (1973, pp.333-6); Peterson (1982, pp.79-120); Yandell (1989, pp.15-30); Hasker (1992, pp.23-44); and van Inwagen (2006, pp. 95-113).

¹⁶ Since theistic multiverse hypotheses typically take universes to be spatio-temporally distinct entities that do not causally interact with each other, it is difficult to imagine how an argument from evil could be based on claims about any universe *other than* our own.

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