

## PETER VAN INWAGEN ON GRATUITOUS EVIL

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**ABSTRACT:** Defenders and critics of the evidential argument from evil typically agree that if theism is true, no gratuitous evil occurs. But Peter van Inwagen has challenged this orthodoxy by urging that for all we know, given God's goals, it is impossible for God to prevent all gratuitous evil, in which case God is not required to do so. If van Inwagen is right, the evidential argument from evil fails. After setting out this striking and innovative move, I examine three responses found in the literature, and show that none of them defeats van Inwagen's argument. I then offer a novel criticism: I show that van Inwagen implicitly relies on the claim that God can sensibly be thought to *satisfice*, and I argue that this is seriously under-motivated. Accordingly, van Inwagen's objection to the evidential argument from evil is, at best, incomplete.

### 1. VAN INWAGEN'S 'NO MINIMUM' REPLY TO THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

Following Hasker (2010, 305), let's say that a token or type of evil is *gratuitous* if and only if God, if he exists, antecedently knows he could prevent it in a way that would make the world overall better.<sup>1</sup> The probable occurrence of gratuitous evil has been thought to disconfirm theism in the following way:

- (1) If God exists, no gratuitous evil occurs.
- (2) Probably, gratuitous evil occurs.
- ∴ (3) Probably, God does not exist.

The most common response to this evidential argument from evil is to defend a model of our epistemic circumstances and capacities according to which it is not reasonable to assert (2). This position has become known as *skeptical theism*, and it has generated a large and very technical literature.<sup>2</sup> Defenders and critics of this argument typically agree, however, that premise (1) is secure.<sup>3</sup>

But in a series of important publications, Peter van Inwagen has challenged this orthodoxy by resisting premise (1). Van Inwagen's intricate argument has the following overall structure. He proposes two *defences*: stories which, he claims, are true for all anyone knows.<sup>4</sup> Each identifies one purpose that God has with respect to creation. Van Inwagen then claims that God needs evil to occur in order to achieve his purposes, and that there is no minimum amount of evil which will suffice. Accordingly, van Inwagen thinks it is reasonable to suspend judgment about (1),<sup>5</sup> in which case the evidential argument for atheism must be deemed a philosophical failure.<sup>6</sup> I now set out van Inwagen's argument in more detail.

The first story is called the *expanded free will defence*, and it purports to explain why human beings experience both moral and natural evil. It can be summarized as follows:

*Over millions of years, God guided evolution so as to produce very clever primates. At a certain point in history, God took a small group of these and miraculously raised them to humanity, by giving them the power to reason, to communicate using language, to think abstractly, to love disinterestedly, and to act freely. This first generation of humans lived in mystical union with God, and never acted wrongly. They also possessed preternatural powers which enabled them to avoid being harmed by animals and the forces of nature. They thus initially experienced neither moral nor natural evil. But, tragically, these humans misused their freedom by committing moral evil, and thereby separated themselves from God. As a result, they lost their preternatural powers and began to suffer natural evil as well. All subsequent humans have a genetic tendency towards evil, and the result is our broken world. But God has inaugurated a rescue plan – a plan of atonement – which will restore humanity to union with God. Human beings must cooperate with God for the plan to work, and this requires that they learn what it means to be separated from God. This, in turn, requires that humans experience vast amounts of evil.<sup>7</sup>*

The second story is called the *anti-irregularity defence*, and it purports to explain why animals experience natural evil. It can be summarized as follows:

*In order for evolution to produce the very clever primates that God miraculously raised to humanity, it was necessary for there to be an enormous amount of suffering experienced by higher-level sentient creatures. Every world that God could have actualized that contains such creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those found in the actual world, or else is massively irregular. Being massively irregular is at least as great a defect in a world as is the defect of containing patterns of animal suffering morally equivalent to those found in the actual world.<sup>8</sup>*

In what follows, I grant, for the sake of argument, that van Inwagen's stories are indeed true for all anyone knows.<sup>9</sup> Two divine purposes emerge from these stories. In the first, God's purpose is to rescue humanity from its fallen condition. In the second, God's purpose is to use evolution to produce very clever primates. Crucially, both purposes require the occurrence of significant amounts of evil.<sup>10</sup>

Suppose that there is a minimum amount of evil that suffices for God to achieve either (or both) of these two purposes. One would naturally expect an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good deity to permit just this minimum amount and no more. If so, of course, no evil would be excessive or gratuitous. Van Inwagen's original and striking contribution to the problem of evil literature is to deny that there is any such minimum amount. Van Inwagen offers two analogies in support of this surprising claim.<sup>11</sup> In one place, he imagines that God's purposes require an "impressively tall prophet" to appear at a certain place and time (1988b, 167), and elsewhere, he supposes that God's purposes require a certain country to be fertile during a certain century (2001, 77; 2006, 106). Van Inwagen thinks it obvious that there is no minimum height that the prophet must attain in order to be impressively tall, and equally evident that there is no minimum number of raindrops that must fall on a country during a given century in order for it to be fertile. Likewise, van Inwagen asserts that:

NMA: For any amount of evil which suffices for God's purposes, there is some lesser amount which would serve God's purposes equally well.<sup>12</sup>

As some commentators have noted, NMA might be thought to entail something most theists take to be implausible: that God's purposes would be served equally well with *no* evil whatsoever (Jordan 2003, 237; Schrynemakers 2007, 247). But this is evidently not what van Inwagen intends, since, as we have seen, the relevant divine purposes require the occurrence of considerable evil.<sup>13</sup> It is better to treat van Inwagen as asserting either that there is no minimum positive *cardinality* of evil that suffices for God's purposes, or else that there is no minimum

positive *ordinality* of evil that suffices for God's purposes (or perhaps both).<sup>14</sup> In either case, God just has to draw the line somewhere. So long as God prevents an adequate amount of gratuitous evil, the exact position of this line is an arbitrary matter.<sup>15</sup> And, no matter where God draws this line, some evil will be gratuitous. In short: van Inwagen thinks that NMA is true for all we know, and that, accordingly, we should suspend judgment about (1). If this is right, the occurrence of gratuitous evil simply cannot disconfirm theism, and this evidential argument from evil fails.

## 2. THREE RESPONSES TO VAN INWAGEN

In this section, I discuss three responses to van Inwagen's argument found in the literature.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1. THERE IS TOO MUCH GRATUITOUS EVIL

Interestingly, most commentators on van Inwagen's argument tacitly concede that, in principle, there is nothing amiss with God's permitting some gratuitous evil – as long as God does not permit too much. They continue by arguing, *a posteriori*, that the amount of gratuitous evil found in the actual world is excessive.<sup>17</sup> The result is a modified evidential argument for atheism which appeals, not to the bare presence of gratuitous evil, but to the *quantity* of gratuitous evil:

- (4) If God exists, excessive gratuitous evil does not occur.
- (5) Probably, excessive gratuitous evil does occur.
- ∴ (6) Probably, God does not exist.

Evidently, while this is a response to van Inwagen's argument, it is not actually a criticism of it: it simply concedes that van Inwagen's argument succeeds in defeating (1). Accordingly, I set it aside in what follows.

### 2.2. NMA IS FALSE

Stone (2003), Schrynemakers (2007), and Jordan (2003, 2011) all criticize NMA by maintaining that pain and suffering are not infinitely diminishable, since there is a practical lower bound below which differences in the duration or intensity of the relevant stimuli can no longer be detected. Accordingly, they say, it is not true that for *any* amount of evil that suffices for God's purposes, there is some lesser amount that would also suffice, and so NMA is false.

A few clarifications are needed here. First, while Jordan focusses only on the *human* ability to detect stimuli, Stone and Schrynemakers make no such restriction. Since both human and animal suffering are widely invoked in discussions of the evidential argument from evil, and since van Inwagen addresses both in his defences, it will be best to keep both in mind. Second, none of these authors say whether they mean to assert that there is a lower bound for the relevant species in general, or for individuals in particular. Presumably the latter is more plausible, since individuals from the same species can surely vary in their sensitivity to the relevant stimuli. Third, it seems reasonable to suppose that any given individual's ability to detect small differences in the intensity or duration of stimuli can also vary across time. If so, then the objection should presumably be indexed not only to an individual but also to a (rough) time period: for any human or animal individual *i*, during any (rough) time period *t*, there is a lower bound below which differences in the intensity or duration of the relevant stimuli cannot be detected.

Dragos (forthcoming) offers an innovative reply to this criticism of NMA. He says that van Inwagen could concede to his critics that pain and suffering are not infinitely diminishable, while nevertheless denying that this defeats NMA. After all, van Inwagen might say, NMA concerns *evil*, not pain and suffering, and perhaps *evil* is infinitely diminishable, even if pain and suffering are not. This view may seem strange at first, but bear in mind that the presence of pain or suffering is neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of evil. It is not sufficient, since minor instances of pain or suffering (certain slight toe-stubbings, for example) need not be evil. Nor – and this is the key point – is it necessary. Three examples will make this clear. First, someone can be the victim of an evil action (by being morally wronged in certain ways, for example) without experiencing any pain or suffering at all. Second, as Alan Rhoda has pointed out, some evil actions are completely victimless, in which case there is evil without pain and suffering (2010, 287).<sup>18</sup> Third, it is very plausible to suppose that there can be evil thoughts without evil actions, and such thoughts can surely occur without causing pain and suffering. So, in short, if not all evil is *felt*, van Inwagen could concede that creaturely pain and suffering is finitely diminishable, while denying that this shows that *evil* is only finitely diminishable.

In response to Dragos, however, critics of van Inwagen might concede that not all evil is felt evil, but insist that the finite diminishability of pain and suffering provides strong inductive grounds for thinking that *all* evil is only finitely diminishable.<sup>19</sup> If this is right, then the finite diminishability of pain and suffering does, after all, count against NMA. To block this move, however, van Inwagen could appeal to the following principle, which Michael Bergmann has recently defended (2001, 2009):<sup>20</sup>

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the evils we know of are representative of the evils there are.

Perhaps it is safe to presume that (at least some forms of) pain and suffering bulk large among known evils. If so, and if ST2 is true, then the finite diminishability of such pain and suffering provides no compelling reason for thinking that *all* evils are finitely diminishable. If this use of ST2 is successful, the arguments of Jordan, Schrynemakers, and Stone fail to defeat NMA. There is, however, an important drawback to such a response to Dragos. As the debate about premise (2) amply reveals, ST2 is a very controversial claim, and so if van Inwagen were to employ it to ward off the challenge pressed by Jordan, Schrynemakers, and Stone to NMA, this would not – to say the least – meet with universal acclaim.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, a better reply to Dragos is available.<sup>22</sup> Jordan, Schrynemakers, and Stone could reply that the possible infinite diminishability of *evil simpliciter* is just a red herring. After all, they might say, while the evidential argument expressed in (1)-(3) is a general argument from evil to atheism, critics of theism often fashion their arguments to concentrate on (certain specific forms of) pain and suffering in particular, as follows:

- (7) If God exists, no gratuitous pain and suffering (of a certain sort) occurs.
- (8) Probably, gratuitous pain and suffering (of this sort) occurs.
- ∴ (9) Probably, God does not exist.

Rowe's famous 1979 argument, to which van Inwagen takes himself to be responding (2001, 71; 2006, 98, 125), is an instance of just this type of reasoning.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, then, Dragos' appeal to evils which (a) do not count as pain nor suffering; and (b) are infinitely diminishable is quite irrelevant to the argument expressed in (7)-(9).

Here, then, is the state of play. To sidestep Dragos' appeal to the infinite diminishability of evil that does *not* fall under the heading of pain or suffering, Jordan, Schrynemakers, and Stone should argue that this entire discussion should be focused on the argument for atheism expressed in (7)-(9), which *does* concentrate on pain and suffering. Accordingly, in the

remainder of this paper, I will address argument (7)-(9), rather than (1)-(3). It is clear that van Inwagen believes that (7) can be rejected, since he thinks that the following specification of NMA is plausible:<sup>24</sup>

NMA\*: For any amount of (the relevant sort of) pain and suffering which suffices for God's purposes, there is some lesser amount which would serve God's purposes equally well.

But, against NMA\*, Jordan, Schrynemakers, and Stone can argue that the finite diminishability (of the relevant forms) of human and animal pain and suffering shows that NMA\* is false.

Cullison (2010) offers an interesting reply to this finite diminishability objection. He says that the human capacity for discriminating differing cardinalities or ordinalities of pain and suffering is contingent, and asserts that "there is no minimum limit to how fine-grained God could have made our apparatus" (2010, 123). Except for a bare appeal to divine omnipotence, Cullison does not offer any argument to support this assertion. But, given the dialectical context, Cullison does not need to show that this assertion is true; he merely needs to claim that it is true *for all we know*, and perhaps the appeal to omnipotence suffices for this.

Jordan responds as follows: "While Cullison is correct that the human capacity for feeling pain could have been enlarged, it is hard to see the relevance of this ... 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" (2011, 126).<sup>25</sup> (While both Cullison and Jordan focus on human pain, their claims could surely be extended to animals as well.) But Jordan's reply to Cullison either misinterprets Cullison or begs the question against him. In the quotation just displayed, Jordan seems to take Cullison merely to claim that the relevant threshold could have varied, but of course Cullison does not just assert this: he *also* claims that there is no limit at all to how sensitive God could have made the human sensory apparatus. If, on the other hand, Jordan realizes this, then his response – which just asserts that there is such a limit – begs the question, by insisting without argument on the very thing that Cullison denies. Either way, Jordan's response to Cullison fails.

It is tempting to concede to Cullison that, for all we know, there is an infinite series of possible worlds such that in each one, God guides evolution to bring about humans and animals with ever-more sensitive apparatus – but to insist that this is irrelevant. After all, one might say, the evidential argument from evil seeks to show that the probable existence of gratuitous evil *in the actual world* renders theism improbable: these other worlds are beside the point.

The central move in Cullison's argument, however, can be expressed in a way that avoids this worry. Instead of being construed as an appeal to possible worlds in which evolution results in differently-abled creatures, the argument can be construed as focussing on whether God should miraculously intervene to heighten the sensitivities of creatures in the actual world. According to van Inwagen's defences, God's purposes require the occurrence of significant amounts of pain and suffering. God, *qua* perfect being, wants to permit no more to occur than is necessary to achieve his purposes. God sees that, given how creation has actually unfolded, there is for each human or animal individual *i*, during any (rough) time period *t*, a practical lower bound below which differences in the intensity or duration of the relevant stimuli cannot be appreciated. God also knows that he could miraculously intervene to increase creaturely sensitivities, and understands that if he were to do this, he could achieve his purposes with less pain and suffering. But, very quickly – he is God, after all! – he realizes the following problem: for any degree to which he miraculously hones the relevant apparatus, he could always do more. Given this predicament, Cullison might say, God is justified in leaving creaturely apparatus alone. Van Inwagen can claim that this interpretation of Cullison's story is true for all we know, and he can add it to his two defences. If all this is plausible, then NMA\* emerges unscathed by

the arguments of Stone, Schrynemakers, and Jordan, and van Inwagen can wield it against premise (7).

### 2.3. VAGUENESS

Michael Schrynemakers (2007) claims that van Inwagen misformulates his own argument. According to Schrynemakers, van Inwagen should not have taken himself to be defending NMA or NMA\*, but instead:

NSC: There is no sharp cut-off between amounts of pain and suffering definitely sufficient for God's purposes and amounts definitely not sufficient.<sup>26</sup>

Certainly there are passages in van Inwagen's writing which support this interpretation.<sup>27</sup> NSC holds (or at least entails) that "sufficient for God's purposes" is a vague predicate. And if this is so, one might think that it casts doubt on premise (7) of the evidential argument, which appears to presume that God can find such a sharp cut-off and ensure that no pain or suffering occurs in excess of it. Schrynemakers neither defends nor criticizes NSC; he simply offers it as better interpretation of van Inwagen's argument, and chides Jordan (2003) for failing to engage it.

Of course, the most direct response to NSC is simply to reject it, by endorsing *epistemicism* about vagueness. Stone (2003, 268) briefly flirts with this response. Van Inwagen, however, rejects this move out of hand, vividly calling it a departure from the "bright world of good sense" (2006, 107). Epistemicism has had its prominent defenders, but since an overall assessment of this controversial view lies outside the scope of this paper, I am here content to simply note this response to NSC and to set it aside.

Jeff Jordan (2011) offers a different response to NSC, arguing that it cannot be used to undermine (7):

Suppose one believes that God's purposes require a vague and not specific amount of [pain and suffering]. 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 ... 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 [pain and suffering] looms even in the gloom of vagueness (126).

Unfortunately, this passage contains two infelicities. First, it is implausible for Jordan to assert that there is no sharp cut-off between amounts of pain and suffering permitted and those not permitted. In this context, divinely-permitted pain and suffering actually occurs. *Contra* Jordan, there certainly is a sharp cut-off between pain and suffering which occurs and that which does not: this is the boundary between the actual and the merely possible. Second, Jordan here locates vagueness in the *amount* permitted, rather than in the predicate "sufficient for God's purposes". Clearly NSC neither states nor entails that the *amount* of pain and suffering permitted is vague: it is entirely compatible with the claim that God always permits a precise cardinality or ordinality.<sup>28</sup> Instead, what NSC holds, or at least entails, is just that "sufficient for God's purposes" is a vague predicate.

A predicate is vague when there are cases to which it definitely applies, cases to which it definitely does not apply, and these are separated by a range of "borderline" cases to which the predicate neither definitely applies nor definitely does not apply. In one place, Jordan focusses on borderline cases. He imagines that there are two amounts of suffering, V1, and V2, that God is considering permitting in order to achieve divine purpose E, such that V1 is less than V2. Jordan says:

Even if it is vague whether V1 or V2 are sufficient for obtaining E, the fog of vagueness does not obscure that one has reason to choose V1 over V2. Borderline cases ... 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 rank (2011, 126).

It is doubtful, however, that borderline amounts like V1 and V2 are germane. This is because it is surely reasonable to expect God to choose an amount (whether cardinal or ordinal) of pain and suffering to which the predicate “sufficient for God’s purposes” *definitely* applies. Suppose, for analogy, that God’s purposes require a hirsute prophet. The predicate “is hirsute” is paradigmatically vague, even though one can sensibly speak of precise cardinalities or ordinalities of hair follicles. But one would not expect God to endow his chosen prophet with a number of hairs from within the borderline range, such that the predicate “is hirsute” would fail *definitely* to apply to the prophet. There would be no reason for God to do such a thing, and every reason for God to do otherwise: a vast range of follicular quantities is available such that in each case, the resulting prophet would be *definitely* hirsute. Equally, God should choose an amount of pain and suffering that is *definitely* sufficient for his purposes.<sup>29</sup>

If the argument of the preceding paragraph is sound, then we must focus on amounts which *are* sufficient for achieving God’s purposes. In one place, it should be stressed, Jordan does just this: he says that, all else equal, if God’s purposes can equally be achieved with two different amounts of evil, God should choose the lesser amount (2011, 126). This is surely plausible, given God’s goodness. And it seems equally plausible to suppose that if there is a least such amount, God should choose it. But of course all this leaves the central question unanswered: is there or isn’t there a least such amount?

One might think that NSC itself precludes there being a least such amount, but it does not. After all, NSC merely denies that there is a sharp boundary between those amounts of pain and suffering which are *definitely* sufficient for God’s purposes and those which are *definitely* insufficient: instead of a sharp boundary, there is a borderline range, within which all amounts are neither *definitely* sufficient nor *definitely* insufficient. For all NSC says, there is a sharp cut-off between the amounts *definitely* sufficient and this borderline range. But perhaps this is implausible. If so, we should consider:

NSC\*: There is no sharp cut-off between amounts of pain and suffering *definitely* sufficient for God’s purposes and amounts which are neither *definitely* sufficient nor *definitely* not sufficient.

NSC\*, of course, is a claim about *higher-order-vagueness*. Now, perhaps it is true, but the existence of higher-order borderline cases is simply not relevant. After all, just as there would be no reason for God to select an amount from within the borderline range, so too there would be no reason for God to select an amount from within this higher-order borderline range: God must select an amount that is *definitely sufficient* for his purposes. And the same reasoning, of course, will apply to any further higher-level iteration of NSC.<sup>30</sup>

If the foregoing is correct, then Schrynemakers’ attempt to shift the discussion to NSC is ultimately unhelpful. While “sufficient for God’s purposes” may indeed be a vague predicate, God surely cannot select an amount of pain and suffering to which this predicate *definitely fails* to apply, and, moreover, as we have just seen, God also cannot select an amount to which this *predicate fails definitely* to apply. Accordingly, the key question remains: is there, or is there not, a minimum amount of pain and suffering that is (*definitely*) sufficient for God’s purposes? If the argument of section 2.2 is correct, van Inwagen should accept a Cullison-inspired addition to his defences, and if he does, he will be entitled to assert that, for all we know, there is no such minimum amount.

### 3. A NEW CRITICISM OF VAN INWAGEN'S ARGUMENT

So far, I have argued that none of the published responses to van Inwagen's argument succeed in defeating it. In the remainder of this paper, I develop a new criticism: I show that van Inwagen's argument involves a tacit appeal to the propriety of *divine satisficing*, and I argue that this appeal is seriously undermotivated. If this is correct, then van Inwagen's argument is – at best – incomplete.

van Inwagen offers three stories, all involving more-or-less ordinary cases of human deliberation, in support of his claim that it can be morally and rationally acceptable to choose an arbitrary amount of something when no minimum amount is available. The first is legal:

- a judge is deliberating about whether to sentence a criminal for ten years, or for slightly fewer days, minutes, or seconds (1988b, 167; 1991, 144, 164; 2001, 72; 2006, 101, 124).<sup>31</sup>

van Inwagen claims that there is no minimum amount sufficient for producing the relevant effect – deterrence – and, accordingly, holds that it is perfectly acceptable to set the amount *arbitrarily*, at least within certain general parameters. The next analogy is political:

- politicians are deliberating about whether to impose a higher tax burden to fund the prevention or alleviation of social ills (2001, 77-8; 2006, 108-9).

van Inwagen claims that the welfare state could always raise taxes (without reaching the maximal rate of 100%) and thereby reduce social ills. But as there is no minimum amount of social ill that must be permitted, and no practical maximum level of taxation, van Inwagen thinks that it is acceptable for the state to select the overall tax rate *arbitrarily*, at least within certain general parameters. Finally, van Inwagen imagines the following medical scenario:

- one thousand children have a disease that is fatal unless treated with a sufficient dose of medicine. But the store of medicine is limited. If the store is divided equally into one thousand units, all the children will die, since no individual dose will be sufficient. So if the medicine is given to either all or none of the children, all will die (2001, 78-9; 2006, 109-111.)<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, in this scenario, the medicine must be given to some (neither all nor none) of the children. Van Inwagen thinks that there is no minimum number of children who must be permitted to die, in which case it is perfectly acceptable to choose an *arbitrary* number of children to save, at least within certain general parameters.

Suppose that, in these three cases, the judges, politicians, and doctors select the relevant amounts arbitrarily. Van Inwagen seems willing to concede that, no matter what, they could have selected a different amount (a shorter sentence, a higher tax burden, and a smaller dose) which would have resulted in a *better overall outcome*. But van Inwagen denies that to bring about such a better outcome is to perform a *better action*. In each case, he says, arbitrary selection does not count against the relevant agents' moral or rational status. In short, van Inwagen here implicitly appeals to the propriety of *satisficing* in these scenarios: he claims that the relevant outcomes are *good enough*.<sup>33</sup>

Evidently, these stories are meant to be analogues for God's choice. Since van Inwagen defends NMA\*, he is committed to the view that God could have achieved a *better overall outcome*, by preventing more gratuitous pain and suffering (2001, 69; 2006, 97). But he emphatically denies that God's *action* could always have been better (1988b, 167; 2001, 73-4; 2006, 102-3). So when van Inwagen says that God must and can select an arbitrary amount of gratuitous pain and suffering to prevent, he is in fact suggesting that God must and can *satisfice*.



Van Inwagen thinks that God cannot be faulted for preventing (and hence permitting) an arbitrary amount of gratuitous pain and suffering: the outcome of his action is, simply put, *good enough*.

To begin assessing this move, it is worth briefly revisiting the pair of seminal papers in which Herbert Simon introduced the concept of satisficing into the contemporary literature.<sup>34</sup> Simon first argued that the ideal rational agent postulated by economists is a dangerous fiction (1955). Given our physiological and psychological limitations, no human being has enough information or computational capacity to do what traditional *optimizing* or *maximizing* accounts of rationality require: namely, to (1) identify every possible outcome of an action; to (2) determine the value of each one; and (3) to assess the probability of each one's occurring. These requirements can be avoided on the alternative, *satisficing* conception of rationality, on which the agent merely roughly divides outcomes into 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory', and is permitted to select any one of the former. While this paper concentrated on features of the agent, his subsequent paper explored features of an agent's choice environment which also motivate satisficing (Simon 1956). Simon's emphasis was generally descriptive (1955, 104; 1956, 137), but he also suggested that there may be normative implications (1955, 101).

Clearly, this notion of satisficing was devised specifically for human agents who are limited in knowledge and power, and precisely *because of* those limitations. As Weirich (2004, 386) notes, many decision theorists have followed Simon in this approach, in order better to model "bounded" human rationality.<sup>35</sup> But of course it would be inappropriate to apply Simon's account of satisficing to the divine case, since God does not suffer from the relevant limitations of knowledge and power.

Other philosophers have discussed a different kind of satisficing, sometimes called *genuine satisficing* (Weber 2004; Henden 2007) or *blatant satisficing* (Mulgan 2001). On this model, "a good enough option may be preferred to a better [and] it is assumed that a better option is included in a set of options that have been enumerated and evaluated" (Swanton 1993, 33). This kind of satisficing has been defended by prominent philosophers (e.g. Slote 1989), and has been employed in many areas of philosophy, and indeed in other disciplines. This is surely the kind of satisficing at work in the analogies offered by van Inwagen. This kind of satisficing can (at least potentially) be applied to the case at hand.

Unfortunately, however, this kind of satisficing is enormously controversial. It has been criticized in various ways by, for example, Byron (1998), Richardson (1994), Mulgan (2001), Sorensen (1994, 2006), and Bradley (2006). Even idealized cases – which are closest to the divine case – are contested. For example, John Pollock (1983) famously imagines an oenophile's deliberating about when to consume a bottle of EverBetter wine, which improves with each passing day. Pollock thinks that the oenophile is rationally permitted to satisfice, by drinking the wine on any day when it is good enough. But Sorensen, for example, demurs, stating unambiguously that in this case, "reason declares there is no permissible alternative" (2006, 214, and see also his 1994).<sup>36</sup> There is no space here to examine all the moves in the complex debate about genuine satisficing. But it is worth pointing out that there is something troubling about responding to the evidential argument from evil by uncritically invoking divine satisficing, when it is highly controversial whether human agents are (rationally or morally) permitted to satisfice.

Moreover, even if they were utterly uncontroversial in ordinary human cases, certain important arguments for genuine satisficing employ ideas that are inapplicable to the divine case. For example, Slote (1989) motivates satisficing by appeal to the virtue of *moderation*: one may turn down an afternoon snack or a second serving or dessert either because one feels no need for some additional good thing, or because one is perfectly satisfied as one is (10-20, 37-40). But surely van Inwagen would not likewise hold that God exhibits moderation by choosing an outcome far worse than some other he could choose at no extra cost.

Here is another consideration deployed in favour of genuine human satisficing that is inapplicable to the divine case. Slote (1989) and Weber (2004) both appeal to the existence of multiple legitimate perspectives on a particular choice or option. In different ways, both philosophers argue that an agent can be rational in choosing an option that is worse from one legitimate perspective, since it is better from another legitimate perspective. They assume that there is no over-arching objective perspective from which to assess choices. Henden (2007) offers compelling arguments against this line of thinking in ordinary human cases.<sup>37</sup> But even if Henden is wrong about this, it is perfectly clear that this appeal to multiple perspectives cannot be used to ground divine satisficing. After all, in his reply to the evidential argument from evil, van Inwagen is committed to the view that God may select an outcome that is *objectively* and *non-perspectivally* worse than others that might have been chosen.

Finally, then, let's suppose that arguments for genuine human satisficing are found (or constructed) that are not only deemed successful, but that do not depend upon considerations that are irrelevant or inapplicable to the divine case. Even *this* would not be enough to defeat these three arguments for atheism, since there is an important difference between human cases and the divine case that has not yet been brought out. Defences of genuine satisficing in human cases seek to establish the rational or moral *permissibility* of choosing a worse option when a better one is known to be available. Suppose that they succeed, and that they are deemed to show, by analogy, that it is morally or rationally permissible for God to do likewise. The problem remains that God is not like any other agent. God is not merely supposed to be excellent, or superior, in goodness and rationality: God is taken to be *essentially unsurpassable* in these and other respects. So, even if it is shown that it is rationally or morally permissible for God to satisfice, this does not entail that God's doing so is *logically possible*, given his nature.<sup>38</sup>

To see why, recall that Slote (1989) urged that part of the appeal of satisficing is to open up conceptual space for *supererogation*. Slote imagines a fountain of youth that emits life-and-happiness-giving rays: the closer one stands to the fountain, the more life and happiness one gains (111-123). But, of course, there is no closest possible position to the fountain, and so there is no best choice. Slote claims that there are distances from the fountain that would be rationally permissible – i.e. not irrational – to choose, even though closer distances could have been selected instead. Slote thinks that we should reject the assumption that it is irrational to knowingly forego a better alternative, since to take it for granted amounts denying the very possibility of rational supererogation (115-16). On this view, however, two rational – i.e. not irrational – agents can differ in overall status. As Slote says, this move opens a “... gap between rationality and ideal rationality,” (121) such that “...it may be possible for an act (choice) not to count as irrational or bad ... though it is less than ideally rational, less than the best available” (115). A similar point can be made concerning morality: even if it is morally permissible for an agent to satisfice, that agent could be surpassed by another who instead performs a morally supererogatory act.<sup>39</sup> The upshot is obvious: establishing the rational or moral *permissibility* of divine satisficing is insufficient for showing that God – an essentially unsurpassable agent – can coherently be thought to satisfice.

We have seen that three published lines of response to van Inwagen fail to defeat his objection to the evidential argument from evil. First, the most common response to van Inwagen merely concedes that his argument succeeds, and then proposes an entirely different argument for atheism. Second, while several authors contest van Inwagen's ‘no minimum’ claim, van Inwagen can plausibly resist this move by appending a variant of a story proposed by Cullison (2010) to his defences. Third, some authors have urged that van Inwagen's argument is really about vagueness. But even if there are amounts of evil to which the predicate “sufficient for God's purposes” neither definitely applies nor definitely fails to apply, this has no bearing on van Inwagen's argument, since God can only choose amounts of evil to which this predicate definitely applies. Finally, we have seen that the core of van Inwagen's argument is a tacit appeal

to *divine satisficing*. But this is under-motivated, since satisficing is enormously controversial in ordinary human contexts, and since it is far from clear that intuitions concerning choices faced by limited agents transfer unproblematically to putatively unsurpassable agents. If the foregoing is correct, van Inwagen either needs an independent argument for the coherence and propriety of divine satisficing, or else a robust defence of human satisficing together with a defence of its use as an analogue for God. But absent such support, his objection to the evidential argument from evil must be judged incomplete at best.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I have replaced the phrase “could antecedently know”, in Hasker’s formulation, with “antecedently knows”, since if God could know *p*, God knows *p*. Hasker here aims to refine a definition of gratuitous evil offered by Rhoda (2010, 287-289), which Rhoda, in turn, takes to be an improvement over William Rowe’s (1979) conception. Other critics of Rowe’s account of gratuitousness include Alston (1991, 33-34) and van Inwagen (1991, 164, note 11). Rhoda’s definition appears to be inspired by van Inwagen (2001, 69; 2006, 97).

<sup>2</sup> For recent surveys of this terrain, see McBrayer (2010) and Dougherty (2011).

<sup>3</sup> David O’Connor calls (1) the “Establishment Position” (1998, 72, 74), and Jeff Jordan dubs it the “Standard Claim” (2003, 236). William Rowe, for his part, has said that (1) “accords with basic moral principles ... shared by both theists and nontheists” (1979, 337). Stephen Wykstra, putting the point more strongly, has said that (1) is “a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists alike (1984, 76). In more recent papers, Rowe has even deemed it a necessary truth (1996, 284), and has said that to deny it is “radical, if not revolutionary” (1991, 79).

<sup>4</sup> See van Inwagen 2001, 66; 2006, 70, 90-3, 113-117, and 119. In an earlier presentation of his argument, van Inwagen refers to these stories jointly as a *theodicy*, but he also says that this is a “partial and speculative explanation” of God’s ways, and notes that someone who does not share his allegiance to the data of Christian revelation may treat his account as a *defence* (1988b, 161-2). All subsequent citations will be to van Inwagen’s work, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> See 2001, 71; 2006, 99, 125.

<sup>6</sup> For van Inwagen’s account of philosophical success and failure, see 2006, 37-55.

<sup>7</sup> For van Inwagen’s full presentation of this defence, see 2001, 163-5 and 2006, 85-88.

<sup>8</sup> For van Inwagen’s full presentation of this defence, see 1991, 143-152 and 2006, 113-134.

<sup>9</sup> That said, it is worth sketching some ways in which one might resist conceding this. With respect to the former story, one might question van Inwagen’s claim that, for all we know, the only way for humans to realize the wretchedness of our fallen condition is for us to experience vast amounts of moral and natural evil. One might try to insist that God should instead use vivid dreams or stories to educate us concerning the consequences of separation from himself. After all, van Inwagen himself employs this very idea in criticizing the “appreciation defence”, which holds that the experience of actual evil is required for us to appreciate the good. Van Inwagen retorts that God could instead arrange things so that we all suffer vivid and absolutely convincing nightmares involving suffering, rather than experiencing actual suffering. Van Inwagen says that such experiences would be just as effective in bringing about appreciation of the good things in life, and says that “a morally perfect being would, all other things being equal, prefer a world in which horrible things were confined to dreams to a world in which they existed in reality” (2006, 70).

As for the latter story, while it is true that the evolutionary process requires enormous amounts of animal suffering, one might argue that God should have used a different, less violent mechanism to bring about human beings. Van Inwagen does seem to think that using evolution was the only or best way for God to proceed (2006, 119), but he does not explicitly argue for this claim. For other ways to resist van Inwagen’s claim that these stories are epistemically possible, see Schellenberg (2006, 263-7).

<sup>10</sup> It is important to see that, in these stories, God’s purposes are conditional, not absolute. In the former, the Fall of humanity was a contingent event, as indeed was God’s gracious decision to set in motion a plan of atonement (2006, 86-7). But *given that* the Fall occurred, and *given that* God plans to rescue humanity from its fallen condition, the occurrence of evil is required: it is the only way for us to realize the wretchedness of our fallen condition (2006, 88). In the latter story, *given that* God wanted to produce higher-level sentient beings, massive amounts of animal suffering were required.



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<sup>11</sup> Van Inwagen also offers three stories, each of which purports to show that human beings can be rational in choosing an arbitrary amount of something or other when there is no minimum amount sufficient for achieving some goal. (One is legal, one is political, and one is medical.) It is clear that van Inwagen intends these to be analogues for God's choice, and that he takes them to support the normative claim that God may choose an arbitrary amount of evil to permit. It is less clear whether van Inwagen also intends these stories to support, by analogy, the factual claim that there is no minimum amount of evil that suffices for God's purposes. These stories will be discussed in section 3, below.

<sup>12</sup> See van Inwagen (1988b, 167). In later expressions of his argument, van Inwagen sometimes replaces "evil" with "cases of intense suffering" (1991, 164, note 11; 2006, 125), and sometimes with "horrors" (2001, 76; 2006, 106). But not all evils are cases of intense suffering, and, of course, not all cases of intense suffering are evil. (Consider the voluntary intense suffering involved in certain forms of physical exercise.) As for "horrors", van Inwagen defines this term rather loosely as "certain particular very bad events" (2006, 95). On this definition, it seems that not all evils are horrors, although van Inwagen may mean all horrors to count as evils. I will say more about this, below, in section 2.2.

<sup>13</sup> See van Inwagen (1988b, 167-8; 2001, 73; and 2006, 106, note 4).

<sup>14</sup> Jordan (2003) calls the former the Eleatic Assumption, and the latter the Ordinal Assumption. Van Inwagen does appear to think that evil can, at least in some rough sense, be quantified (2006, 96).

<sup>15</sup> Van Inwagen discusses God's drawing arbitrary lines in his 2001, 73, and his 2006, 102, 124. For his more detailed treatment of the relationship between God and chance, see 1988a.

<sup>16</sup> Space does not permit discussing Almeida's (2008) intricate responses to van Inwagen.

<sup>17</sup> See Drange (1998, 36-8); Russell (1996, 2004); Trakakis (2007, Chapter 12); and Fischer and Tognazzini (2007). Van Inwagen anticipated this response (1988b, 168), but has not yet replied to it.

<sup>18</sup> Rhoda's example concerns a delusional psychopath who believes that pumpkins are persons, and carves them up while delighting in their imagined screams. One might wonder whether the psychopath's actions count as *moral* evil, if indeed he is psychopathic. Perhaps it is more plausible to think of them as instances of *natural* evil, presuming that his psychopathy has natural causes. Either way, however, Rhoda's point stands.

<sup>19</sup> Schrynemakers appears to do this tacitly, since he moves from the finite diminishability of *evil* from the finite diminishability of pain and suffering (2007, 247-8).

<sup>20</sup> While I here use a proposition from Bergmann's defence of skeptical theism, for explanatory clarity, it is important to note that van Inwagen has himself defended skeptical theism in his 1991 and his 1996. But see also his 2001, 70, and 2006, 98-9.

<sup>21</sup> See the literature surveyed in McBrayer (2010) and Dougherty (2011).

<sup>22</sup> Dragos himself mentions this reply in his forthcoming, note 9.

<sup>23</sup> Rowe appeals to ostensibly gratuitous "instances of intense suffering" and concentrates on a particular example: the immolation of a fawn in a naturally-caused forest fire (1979, 336-7).

<sup>24</sup> See note 12 above.

<sup>25</sup> Dragos (forthcoming, note 6) cites Jordan's criticism of Cullison approvingly.

<sup>26</sup> Schrynemakers (2007, 249). Jordan criticizes the reformulated argument (2011, 126). Both authors refer to *evil*, rather than to pain and suffering, in their formulations of NSC, but I have changed this for

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reasons given in section 2.2. I have also added the modifier ‘definitely’ in two places, for reasons which will soon be evident.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example: 1988b, 168; 1991, 164; 2001, 71, 76; and 2006, 124, 168, note 4.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, it could be the case that God’s purposes require a vague amount of evil. Schrynemakers offers two suggestions: (a) God’s purpose itself may be vague, as in the case of nature’s being ‘highly regular’, and (b) God’s purpose may depend upon a vague circumstance, as in van Inwagen’s example of God needing an ‘impressively tall prophet’ (2007, 249).

<sup>29</sup> Stone (2003, 271) and Rhoda (2010, 292) offer similar arguments, although Rhoda awkwardly locates vagueness in the “implications of God’s attributes”. (It’s not clear either what it means for an attribute to have implications, or for an implication to be vague.)

<sup>30</sup> Stone (2003, 271) offers a similar argument.

<sup>31</sup> He offers a variant of this example (pertaining to parking fines) in his 1988b, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Van Inwagen offers a variant of this story in his 1996, 234.

<sup>33</sup> To my knowledge, Dragos is the first commentator to explicitly identify the appeal to satisficing implicit in van Inwagen’s argument. Dragos rightly chides Jordan (2011) for merely insisting without argument that van Inwagen’s appeal to satisficing is illegitimate. My goal here is to provide at least some of the needed argument.

<sup>34</sup> The material in the remainder of this section also appears in my paper entitled “Can God Satisfice?”, which is forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*. It is reprinted here with permission.

<sup>35</sup> He cites Skyrms (1990) and Rubenstein (1998) as examples. Schmidtz (2004) is another.

<sup>36</sup> Dreier (2004) would agree. He defends a form of ethical satisficing, but argues that *rational* satisficing is incoherent. Schmidtz (2004), who defends satisficing in non-idealized contexts, would also agree, since he holds that “one’s choice is rational only if one does not recognize clearly better reasons for choosing any of one’s forgone alternatives” (38).

<sup>37</sup> Henden says that

in order for [an agent’s] reason as viewed from one of those perspectives, to be a rational ground for choice, it is not sufficient that it is good enough from that perspective: she must also have a reason for *choosing to view* her option from that perspective rather than the other perspective, and that reason must be better, or at least not worse, than whatever reasons she has for choosing to view it from the other perspective. Thus, the claim that there is no all-encompassing perspective from which the satisficer may view her reasons, amounts, I think, to abandoning the rational perspective altogether, since the rational perspective, by definition, is the all-encompassing perspective (349).

Henden himself defends a further sense of satisficing – *de dicto genuine satisficing* – on which an agent is rationally permitted to choose an option in cases where she knows that a better option is available in her set of options, but does not know which one it is. Clearly, this account of satisficing is also inapplicable to the divine case.

<sup>38</sup> Thanks to Luke Gelinas for helping to make this point clear.

<sup>39</sup> William Rowe (1993, 228; 1999, 102-3; 2004, 82) appeals to this point in his criticism of Adams (1972).