

Axiology, Realism, and the Problem of Evil*

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Discussions of the problem of evil presuppose and appeal to axiological and meta-ethical assumptions, but seldom pay adequate attention to those assumptions. I argue that certain theories of value are consistent with theistic answers to the argument from evil and that several other well-known theories of value, such as hedonism, are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with theism. Although moral realism is the subject of lively debate in contemporary philosophy, almost all standard discussions of the problem of evil presuppose the truth of moral realism. I explain the implications of several nonrealist theories of value for the problem of evil and argue that, if nonrealism is true, then we need to rethink and re-frame the entire discussion about the problem of evil.

1. Introduction

The traditional problem of evil asks whether the existence of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good is compatible with (or is probable given) the existence of so much evil and suffering in the world. Any answers we give to this question presuppose some particular theory of value. The plausibility of proposed answers to the problem of evil depends on the plausibility of the standards of value they presuppose or employ. This is an obvious point, but it hasn't been sufficiently noted or appreciated in the literature on the problem of evil. I sketch some standard theistic replies to the argument from evil and argue that all of these replies are inconsistent with the hedonistic theory of value (HTV). The HTV cannot be reconciled with any plausible solutions to the problem of evil. I also argue that Moore's theory of value and certain versions of perfectionism are inconsistent with standard theistic replies to the argument from

* I am very indebted to the late Phil Quinn for his helpful comments and correspondence on this paper; he will be greatly missed. Thanks also to Charles Taliaferro, Ken Thompson, Jason Kwall, Joe Mendola, Paul Moser, and Bill Tolhurst for helpful criticisms and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

evil. W. D. Ross, by contrast, has a theory of value that makes it very easy, arguably too easy, to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of a perfect God.

Almost all discussions of the problem of evil presuppose the truth of moral realism, i.e., the view that value judgments (moral judgments) are objectively true or false (correct or incorrect) independently of what rational beings believe or desire (and independently of what rational beings would believe or desire under ideal conditions). Since many philosophers reject moral realism (and because the truth of moral realism is open to serious question), it is important to consider the implications of nonrealist moral theories for the problem of evil. I consider three such theories—the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value, emotivism, and the divine preference theory of value. The problem of evil appears very differently in light of these theories. The rational desire-satisfaction theory of value and emotivism commit us to relativism about the problem of evil (by this I mean that these theories commit us to the view that the statement “the existence of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good is (in)compatible with the existence of so much evil and suffering in the world” is neither objectively true nor false). I also argue that emotivism commits us to a kind of “voluntarism” about the problem of evil. (If emotivism is true, then it is rational to accept standards of value that make it possible to justify the actions of an omnipotent God who chose to create a world with so much suffering and evil. Emotivism also implies that it is rational to accept standards of value that make it difficult or impossible to justify the actions of an omnipotent God who chose to create a world with so much suffering and evil). I examine three versions of the divine preference theory of value. Given the first two versions of the divine preference theory, it is impossible to raise the problem of evil and the problem disappears. According to these theories, God’s will is the ultimate standard of good and bad, and no conceivable facts about the extent of suffering in this world could count as evidence against God’s goodness. I take this to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of those two theories. The third version of the divine-preference theory avoids this objection.

2. The Argument from Evil

Some versions of the argument from evil attempt to show that the existence of any evil anywhere in the universe is incompatible with the existence of a perfect God. These are not the strongest versions

of the argument. The existence of a perfect God might be compatible with the existence of *some evil*, but still be incompatible with the *amount* and distribution of suffering and evil in the world. Many people claim that much of the suffering that exists is gratuitous or pointless. A stronger version of the argument from evil can be stated as follows:

1. If God were omniscient and perfectly good, then God would try to prevent or eliminate all of the gratuitous or pointless evil that exists in the universe. [Gratuitous evil is evil whose badness is not outweighed or counterbalanced by the goodness of the other things for which its existence is somehow necessary.]¹
2. If God were omnipotent, God could do anything that God tried to do.

Therefore,

3. If there were an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good God, there would not be any gratuitous evil in the universe.

But,

4. Gratuitous evil exists. Some of the great evils that exist are not necessary for the existence any of greater goods (or counterbalancing goods).

Therefore,

5. There does not exist an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God.

¹ Cf. Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 38-52. Pike claims that in order to solve the problem of evil we need to be able to justify the claim that God has "morally sufficient" reasons for allowing the evils that exist. I take it that a necessary condition of X's being a morally sufficient reason for evil E is that the goodness of X outweighs or counterbalances the badness of E.

Those standard replies to the argument from evil which attempt to explain *why* God allows so much evil to exist² involve making one or more of the following arguments:

- A. Evil does not exist. What we call “evil” is merely an absence of good.
- B. The free will defense. The existence of evil is a consequence of God’s having given human beings free will. Free will and human autonomy are such great goods that a world with both free will and evil is better than a world with neither.
- C. The existence of evil is necessary for the existence of moral goodness and moral virtues (in humans). Moral virtues such as benevolence, self-sacrifice, courage, and honesty and integrity in the face of temptation all require the existence of suffering and other evils. Moral goodness and moral virtues are so valuable that a world with both evil and moral goodness is better than a world with neither.
- D. The existence of evil is necessary for certain greater goods that human beings enjoy in the afterlife.

Let me offer some observations about these four replies. Each of these replies attacks premise 4 of the foregoing argument. Reply A is quite implausible. Intense suffering is not merely an absence of goodness. A person who is being tortured suffers from something more than a dearth of goodness. Neither B nor C *alone* constitutes a plausible answer to the argument from evil. The view that free will is a great

² Not every theistic response to the argument from evil attempts to give specific reasons *why* God permits (or might permit) so much evil to exist. (Not every theistic response to the argument from evil attempts to explain *which goods* the existence of so much evil and suffering is necessary for.) One very important theistic response to the argument from evil is that, given the limitations of human knowledge and the circumstances of human life, we wouldn’t be in a position to understand *why* God allows so much evil and suffering to exist, even if God had good reasons for allowing so much evil to exist. See Steven Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 138-160, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 286-310. Also see the book of *Job*. Howard-Snyder and Wykstra argue that our inability to give any plausible account of why God allows so much suffering and evil to exist does not make it improbable or unlikely that there are good reasons why an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God allows there to be so much suffering and evil.

good does not (by itself) solve the problem of evil. Many “natural evils,” e.g., the suffering caused by earthquakes, floods, and volcanoes, do not result from the exercise of free will. It is also questionable that B (alone) provides an adequate explanation of evils that result from human action. Many of the evils that result from war and crime would not exist were it not for the extreme vulnerability of human beings to injury and suffering. God could have given us free will, without making us so very liable to injury and suffering at the hands of our fellow creatures. Instead of creating human beings, God could have created humanoid Super-Heroes with armor plating and made the earth a Garden of Eden without material scarcity. Reply C is also unsatisfactory taken by itself. God could have created humanoid creatures who innately possess excellences of character or moral virtues such as honesty and courage.³ By so doing God would have created a world that contains far more virtue and far less pain than our own world.

Reply B is unconvincing by itself and so is C. However, taken *together*, B and C might provide an adequate solution to the problem of evil. For it is possible that excellences of character (moral virtues) possess far more value when they result from the exercise of free will than when they are innately implanted by God. It is possible that moral goodness that results from free actions is such a great good that it outweighs the badness of all the evils that God permits in order for it to develop. However, there are two serious problems with this line of argument. 1. It’s not clear that the existence of *so much* intense suffering is necessary for the development and exercise of moral goodness. It seems that a world with far less suffering would allow adequate scope for the development and exercise of moral virtues. 2. If moral goodness that results from free will is a very great good, it would seem to follow that moral badness that results from free will is a great evil. It’s not clear that the total value of all the moral goodness in the world outweighs the total badness of all the moral badness, suffering, and other evils that God permits in order to promote moral goodness.

If the goods that people enjoy in the afterlife include or require moral goodness that results from the exercise of free will, then reply D involves an extension of replies B and C. Reply D claims that in looking for reasons why God permits suffering and evil we should not

³ I am construing moral virtues as desirable traits of character that involve pronounced behavioral and affective dispositions. Courage and honesty are clear examples of moral virtues. I do not take it to be a conceptual truth that virtues develop as the result of free will. Since this claim is open to debate, I would like to *stipulate* it for the purposes of the present paper. This makes salient the genuine distinction between having a *trait of character* such as honesty which involves having complex dispositions to act and feel in certain ways and being responsible and thus praiseworthy or blameworthy for having that character trait.

confine ourselves to reasons and purposes that are fulfilled during our earthly lives. This reply merits special comment. 1. There are many possible afterlives that an omniscient and omnipotent God could provide for human beings; we can't even begin to imagine all of the possibilities. In light of this, the argument from evil assumes an almost impossible burden of proof—the argument needs to show that there is no *possible* afterlife such that (i) it includes goods for which the evils of our earthly lives are necessary and (ii) the value of those goods outweighs or counterbalances the disvalue of the evils of in question. 2. Since it is possible that those who are morally bad in their earthly lives become morally good in the afterlife,⁴ reply D greatly diminishes the problem of moral badness noted above. 3. I am inclined to think that D must be part of any adequate answer to the argument from evil. Many great evils that we observe do not seem to promote any comparable goods in this world. Often, suffering embitters people rather than ennobles them. Sometimes evil and suffering cause people to become morally depraved. Some people have (earthly) lives that, on balance, are not worth living, lives that are not a benefit to those who live them. There are many lost souls whose earthly lives seem to be bad, on balance, and many such people aren't guilty of any moral failings that make them deserving of such bad lives. Nothing we see in this life seems adequate to justify all the evil and suffering that exist.

I won't venture any further assessment of these proposed solutions to the problem of evil. Whether successful or unsuccessful, replies A-D are all inconsistent with the HTV and several other well-known theories of value.

3. The HTV and the Argument from Evil

Replies A, B, and C are all inconsistent with the hedonistic theory of value. According to the HTV, pain is a positive evil (bad). Reply A denies this and, therefore, is inconsistent with the HTV. Both B and C commit one to the view that things other than pleasure (free will and/or moral goodness) are intrinsically good. Although this is less obvious, reply D is also inconsistent with the HTV. According to the HTV, the only good that anyone can enjoy in the afterlife is pleasure. A hedonist who wants to endorse D needs to say something like the following “suffering in our earthly lives is necessary in order for us to enjoy the greatest possible pleasure in our afterlives.” But this couldn't be true if God were omnipotent. Consider any kind of pleasure that we might enjoy in an afterlife following an earthly existence that involves

⁴ Cf. John Hick's “soulmaking” theodicy in *Evil and the God of Love*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

suffering. An omnipotent God could have so constituted us that we enjoy that same pleasure without prior suffering. It won't do to claim that reflection on one's past suffering will enhance the pleasure one enjoys in heaven; God could give people in heaven false memories of past suffering. On purely hedonistic grounds, this would be preferable to our experiencing suffering in our earthly lives.⁵ To my knowledge, there is no plausible reply to the problem of evil that attempts to explain *which goods* make it necessary for God to allow the existence of so much suffering and evil that is consistent with the HTV. The HTV cannot be reconciled with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God.⁶

One might object that my argument commits the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. For all that I have shown, there might be a plausible solution to the problem of evil that is compatible with the HTV. This *is* possible, but it is very unlikely. From a hedonistic point of view, our world seems so obviously imperfect, and so full of gratuitous suffering (for a hedonist, any suffering that doesn't contribute to greater pleasure is gratuitous), that it is difficult to imagine that it could have been created by an omnipotent, omniscient being whose aim was to maximize the pleasure and minimize the pain of sentient creatures. An omnipotent God could *easily* make human life more pleasant by making the following changes in our world (my list could be extended greatly):

⁵ Here, I am assuming that the pleasantness or unpleasantness of an experience is simply a function of its immediate introspectable qualities (or one's preferences with respect to those qualities).

⁶ Others have remarked on the apparent conflict between the HTV and attempts to answer the argument from evil. Terrence Penelhum, writes the following:

Christianity obviously rejects the thesis that pleasure is the only good... It even more obviously rejects the thesis that pain is the only, or even the greatest evil... ("Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, Robert and Marilyn Adams, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 79).

A. C. Ewing writes:

It also seems obvious to me that the problem [the problem of evil] is quite insoluble if hedonism be true... (*Value and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 228.)

Also see John Hick *Philosophy of Religion*, fourth edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 45-6 and *Evil and the God of Love*, revised edition (New York: Harper, 1978), p. 259 and Marilyn Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 210. None of these four philosophers presents a sustained argument for this claim.

- (a) Make humans less prone to boredom and more appreciative of good fortune.
- (b) Eliminate painful degenerative physical ailments such as arthritis.
- (c) Change human nature to make people less aggressive and less inclined to violence.
- (d) Change the earth's climate. Give all regions of the earth a comfortable climate, or else make the earth much larger so that every person has the chance to live in a place that has a climate agreeable to her.
- (e) Make sexual pleasure more prolonged.
- (f) Make human beings less prone to depression and anxiety and give everyone a cheerful disposition.

There may be good reasons why a perfect God does not make any of the changes noted above. But surely God did not create the world as we know it as part of a plan to make human existence as pleasant as possible.

4. Other Theories of Value and the Problem of Evil

The HTV is not the only theory of value that is inconsistent with traditional theism. Moore's theory of value also seems to be inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. Moore claims that by far the best things in the universe are "the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects."⁷ According to Moore, the three greatest evils are 1) the "enjoyment or admiring contemplation of things which are themselves evil or ugly," 2) "the hatred of what is good or beautiful," and 3) intense pain.⁸ Moore's theory is asymmetrical in that he takes intense pain (by itself) to be a great evil but does not take intense pleasure (by itself) to be a great good. Moore claims that the ideal doesn't include any evil. It would be better if the universe did not include any evil, even though this would make it impossible for moral goodness to exist. Moore claims that moral goodness is not a great

⁷ *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 188.

⁸ *Principia Ethica*, pp. 208-212.

good; its goodness does not counterbalance the evil of great suffering.⁹ Thus, the problem of evil cannot be solved by showing that the existence of evil is necessary for the existence of moral goodness. Moore concedes that it is *possible* that evil contributes to the value of a larger organic whole. But he claims that we have no reason to think that this is the case:

Accordingly we have no reason to maintain the paradox that an ideal world would be one in which vice and suffering must exist in order that it may contain the goods consisting in the appropriate emotion toward them. It is not a positive good that suffering should exist, in order that we may compassionate it; or wickedness, that we may hate it. There is no reason to think that any actual evil whatsoever would be contained in the Ideal. It follows that we cannot admit the actual validity of any of the arguments commonly used in Theodicies; no such argument succeeds in justifying the fact that there does exist even the smallest of the many evils which this world contains. It *might* be the case that the existence of evil was necessary, not merely as a means, but analytically, to the existence of the greatest good. But we have no reason to think that this *is* the case in any instance whatever.¹⁰

Some perfectionist or Aristotelian theories of value hold that the development and exercise of intellectual and/or artistic abilities is the greatest good that human beings can enjoy. On some readings, Aristotle himself holds such a theory. Such theories are very difficult to reconcile with any plausible answers to the argument from evil. Given that these are the greatest goods that human beings can enjoy, it is difficult to see how God could be justified in failing to make the human condition more conducive to the development and exercise of intellectual and/or artistic abilities. God could have given us greater intellectual and artistic abilities and created an environment in which everyone has the leisure and opportunity to fully develop and utilize these abilities. (To date, very few human beings have enjoyed enough leisure to fully

⁹ *Principia Ethica*, p. 221. Thomas Hurka holds very a similar view about the value of moral goodness and the moral virtues. He classifies them as “second-order goods” (they are goods that consist in having appropriate attitudes toward good and bad things). Hurka holds roughly that virtue is the love of the good (and hatred of the bad). He thinks that moral virtues are intrinsically good, but substantially less valuable than the “first-order goods” of pleasure, knowledge and achievement. (Since virtue is a second-order good, the value of virtuous acts normally doesn’t counterbalance or outweigh the badness of the first-order evil of pain and suffering.) Hurka’s theory of value is very uncongenial to theistic replies to the problem of evil. (See, Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially, pp. 156-161.) Hurka’s powerful defense of his theory of value is a serious challenge to conventional theism.

¹⁰ *Principia Ethica*, p. 220.

develop and utilize their intellectual and artistic abilities.) According to the kind of perfectionist theory in question, there are no other greater goods that God promotes by failing to make our circumstances more conducive to the development and exercise of intellectual and artistic abilities.

Here, it might be objected that there are important perfectionist goods that require the existence of suffering and evil. For example, some artists can't perfect their talents unless they portray the human condition in all its variety, including moral depravity, suffering, and responses to suffering. Artists can't portray these things well unless they vividly imagine them and they can't vividly imagine them unless they experience and/or observe actual instances of them. Hence, the existence of moral depravity and intense suffering is logically necessary for some artists to develop their talents.¹¹ Even if we grant that the existence of *some* moral evil and suffering is logically necessary for certain artists to develop their talents, this does nothing to gain-say the claim that, given the truth of perfectionism/Aristotelianism, there is a great deal of gratuitous evil and suffering. There seems to be much more moral evil and suffering in the world than is needed for artists to observe and experience. God could so order the world that a relatively small number of morally depraved and/or very unhappy people serve as exemplars for artists to observe. If great artists need to suffer firsthand, God could still greatly reduce the suffering of those of us who are not great artists. Great art can take as its subject and inspiration positive goods such as human love and desire, the beauty of the natural world, and the vision of God. (I suspect that the present objection requires us to overvalue "dark" artistic visions such as that of Edvard Munch.) I also question whether directly experiencing or directly observing complex bad phenomena is necessary for creating great artistic portrayals of those phenomena. Steven Crane wrote one of the most compelling accounts of the experiences of soldiers in combat without directly experiencing or observing combat. Morally good people are capable of understanding and depicting moral evil.

In contrast to hedonism and perfectionism/Aristotelianism, Ross defends a theory of value that makes it much easier, arguably *too easy*, to answer the argument from evil. Ross holds that the only things that are intrinsically good are: 1. morally virtuous actions and dispositions, 2. knowledge (and, to a lesser extent, true opinion), and 3. pleasures that are not "undeserved" (not the pleasures of morally

¹¹ I owe this objection to Phil Quinn in correspondence and have freely used his formulation of the objection.

bad people) and not the result of bad dispositions, e.g., malice.¹² Ross claims that moral virtue has incomparably greater intrinsic value than either pleasure or knowledge—the value of *any* amount of moral virtue (however small) exceeds the value of *any* amount of pleasure or knowledge (however great).¹³ Assuming that the disvalue of pain is comparable to value of pleasure, Ross is committed to the view that the value of any amount of moral virtue outweighs the badness of any amount of pain, i.e., any universe with moral goodness (however little) and pain (however much) is better than no universe at all and better than any universe that has pleasure (however much) and no moral goodness. On Ross's view, the intrinsic badness of all the pain and suffering in the world is quite insignificant from the point of view of the universe. God is justified in permitting any amount of suffering if it is necessary for the existence of the slightest amount of moral goodness. A theist who adopted Ross's theory of value would still face the objection to reply C noted earlier, namely, that, in our world, the value of moral goodness is counterbalanced by the disvalue of moral badness. We can avoid this problem if moral goodness is a great good and moral badness is a much smaller evil, but such a view seems implausible on its face.

5. Moral Nonrealism and the Problem of Evil

Almost all discussions of the problem of evil presuppose the truth of moral realism. Moral realism is the view that normative judgments are objectively true or false independently of what rational beings believe or desire and independently of what rational beings would believe or desire under ideal conditions. Moral realism and non-realism are not first-order theories of value, rather, they are metaethical views about the *status* of normative judgments. [Note that, according to this definition of moral realism, the divine command theory (of right and wrong) and the divine preference theory (of value) are non-realist theories. If we modify the definition of moral realism to say that moral realism is the view that normative judgments are objectively true or false independently of what *human beings* believe or desire and independently of what *human beings* would believe or desire under ideal conditions, then the divine command theory and the divine preference theory both count as realist theories.] Many contemporary philosophers reject moral realism, and I believe that it

¹² W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), Chapter 5.

¹³ *The Right and the Good*, Chapter 6.

is an open question whether moral realism is true.¹⁴ I will briefly describe three important nonrealist theories and their implications for the problem of evil. Standard discussions of the problem of evil don't make any sense given the truth of moral nonrealism. If moral/axiological nonrealism is true (and, for my part, I think that it is true), then we need to completely rethink the problem of evil. Discussions of the problem of evil need to be sensitive to the controversial metaethical assumptions on which they rest.

Most theistic replies to the argument from evil make claims of the following sort:

- I. God permits the many evils we see in the world in order to bring about or allow X, Y, and Z.
- II. An omnipotent omniscient God could not have brought about or allowed X, Y, and Z without either: (i) allowing the existence of the evils that exist or (ii) allowing some alternative set of evils (E1, E2, and E3) to exist.
- III. The evil of E1, E2, and E3 (taken together) is as great as or greater than the actual evils of the world.
- IV. God is justified in allowing so much evil and suffering to exist, because the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs or counterbalances the badness of all the evil that exists and God couldn't have brought about or allowed X, Y, and Z without either: (i) allowing for the evils that actually exist or (ii) allowing some equally great or greater set of evils to exist.

Theists who attempt to answer the argument from evil often go to very great lengths to defend statements of type II. Questions about the nature of omnipotence and what kinds of worlds an omnipotent God could or could not create loom large in discussions about the problem of evil. Philosophers need to do much more to defend the standards of value and the metaethical assumptions to which they appeal when they defend or attack statements such as III and IV.

The rational desire-satisfaction theory of value is a prominent and widely accepted nonrealist theory of value. It has been defended by such philosophers as Brandt, Hare, Rawls, and Gauthier. This theory says roughly the following:

¹⁴ For the record, I think that moral realism is false. See my book *Value and the Good Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), Chapter 7.

Something is intrinsically good provided that it is rational for people to desire or prefer that it exist (or occur) for its own sake; something is intrinsically bad provided that it is rational for people to desire or prefer that it not exist (or not occur) for its own sake.¹⁵

Moral realists hold that there are objective standards of value and that statements such as III and IV are true or false independently of what rational beings believe or desire (and independently of what they would believe or desire under ideal conditions). However, according to the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value, there is no independent fact of the matter that the goodness of X, Y, and Z does or does not outweigh the badness of all the evil in the world. Whether or not the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs the badness of all the evil and suffering in the world, depends on whether rational and informed people would prefer the world as it is to worlds without any evil and without X, Y, and Z. It is possible that different people would have conflicting preferences about such matters if they were fully informed and rational. If people's rational informed preferences about the evils of the world and X, Y, and Z could conflict, then the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value does not allow us to say that statements of types III and IV are objectively true or false.

Whether it is possible for rational people to have conflicting preferences about such matters depends largely on what we mean by "rational preferences." Canonical versions of the rational desire-satisfaction theory, including Brandt's, appeal to very "thin" concepts of rationality according to which a desire is rational provided that it is adequately informed and consistent. These theories employ "procedural" theories of rationality according to which the rationality of a desire depends on how it was formed. Such theories place no explicit limits on the contents or objects of rational desires. Since it is a nonrealist theory, the rational desire-satisfaction theory cannot be combined with a "moral realist theory of rationality" according to which moral facts are logically prior to facts about what is rational and irrational, and determine, at least partly, what is rational and irrational. Moral realist theories of rationality hold that standards of rationality include such principles as the following: it is *prima facie* irrational to prefer the bad

¹⁵ Note that I state this as a theory of intrinsic value as opposed to a theory of human welfare. (On this distinction, see my *Value and the Good Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), Chapter 3.)

to the good (where what is good or bad is independent of what is rational or irrational).¹⁶

Suppose that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient God who permits the evils and suffering of the world for the sake of X, Y, and Z. Is promoting X, Y, and Z a morally sufficient reason for God to permit so much evil to exist? According to the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value, the answer to this question depends on the following: knowing everything there is to know about God's reasons for allowing so much evil to exist and knowing about all of the alternative worlds God might have created, would we prefer that God have created this world instead of some other world with less evil and suffering? It is possible that knowledge of God's reasons for permitting so much suffering and evil to exist would reconcile everyone to the evil and suffering of this world. God's reasons might seem very compelling on examination, but we can't know for certain that this is the case. Given nonrealism, there is no independent fact of the matter that the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs the badness of all the suffering in the world. Given nonrealism, God's reasons for allowing so much evil to exist can't include the independent fact (independent of what it is rational for us to desire) that the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs the badness of all the suffering and evil in the world. The rational desire-satisfaction theory implies that whether the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs the badness of all the suffering and evil that exist depends on the preferences we would have if we were fully informed, and there is no reason to think that the rational preferences of different people couldn't conflict.

There is a great deal of evidence that, even when fully informed or corrected by adequate information and requirements for consistency,

¹⁶ Bernard Gert holds such a view. He defines rationality and irrationality in terms of "lists" of goods and evils:

People act irrationally when they act in ways that they know (justifiably believe), or should know, will significantly increase the probability that they, or those for whom they are concerned, will suffer any of the items on the following list: death, pain (including mental suffering), disability, loss of freedom, or loss of pleasure, and they do not have an adequate reason for so acting. A reason for acting is a conscious belief that one's action (or the rule or policy that requires the action) will significantly increase the probability that either someone will avoid suffering any of the items on the previous list or they will gain greater ability, freedom, or pleasure ("Rationality and Lists," *Ethics*, 100, 1990, p. 280).

The things that make for irrational acts, e.g., death and pain, are all evils (bads); the things which make for rational actions, e.g., freedom and pleasure, are all goods (pp. 281, 283, and 285). Therefore, Gert's theory defines acting rationally in terms of choosing what is good and avoiding what is bad. In what follows, I will be talking about *standard versions* of the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value that employ procedural informed-desire theories of rationality.

our desires depend on idiosyncratic causes, so that people who are fully informed and consistent can have deeply conflicting intrinsic preferences about a great many matters. Some people have desires that are consistent with the hedonistic theory of value, others have desires that are not consistent with the HTV, i.e., they have strong intrinsic desires and aversions for things other than pleasure or pain. Such desires could persist in light of relevant information and the satisfaction of the other requirements of procedural theories of rationality. That, alone, would be enough to create disagreements between the informed preferences of different people concerning issues relevant to the problem of evil, e.g., preferences between various possible worlds that do or do not include X, Y, and Z and E1, E2, and E3. There is a tremendous amount of fundamental normative disagreement between people who agree about all relevant facts, e.g., disagreements about such things as the permissibility of lies that don't cause harm to others, the permissibility of the institution of capital punishment, the permissibility of assassinating a tyrant to prevent a war that will kill millions of people, and the intrinsic value of malicious pleasure. Since many of the parties to these disagreements have preferences that closely track their normative beliefs, it is likely that the rational preferences of different people about issues relevant to the problem of evil could sharply conflict. According to the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value, there are no independent axiological facts to which our preferences must conform on pain of error. If people's informed rational preferences about the evils of the world and the goods for which those evils are necessary could conflict in the way that I have suggested, then the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value does not allow us to say that statements of types III and IV are objectively true or false. In that case, the theory seems to commit us to relativism about the problem of evil. It commits us to the view that it is "true for" some people that the goodness of X, Y, and Z outweighs the badness of all the evils in the world and "true for" others that the goodness of X, Y, and Z does not outweigh the badness of all the evils that exist.

Talk of relativism can be misleading here. An omnipotent, omniscient deity exists or does not exist quite independently of what we believe or desire. The statement that an omniscient, omnipotent God exists is objectively true or false. However, given the rational desire-satisfaction theory of value, there is no independent fact of the matter that such a God is or is not perfectly good.

Emotivism is another prominent nonrealist moral theory. According to Ayer's version of emotivism, moral judgments are not statements that are true or false, rather they are expressions of attitudes such as "yea Cubs" or "boo Hitler." Moral judgments differ from mere expressions

of attitudes in that they are intended to influence the attitudes of others.¹⁷ According to emotivism, IV is not a statement that is true or false. Rather, it is an expression of approval for God's decision to permit so much evil in order to bring about X, Y, and Z. The judgment that the goodness of X, Y, and Z does not outweigh the badness of all the suffering in the world means roughly: "Boo God or anyone who would permit the evils of the world in order to bring about X, Y, and Z." Ayer says that the attitudes we express in our moral judgments can be rationally criticized only if they are inconsistent with other attitudes we hold or if they rest on false beliefs or incomplete information.¹⁸ Basic attitudes and basic moral principles that are consistently held in light of knowledge of relevant factual information cannot be rationally criticized. Ayer's view also seems to commit us to a kind of relativism about judgments of type IV, inasmuch as some people might be perfectly rational in holding attitudes of the sort expressed by IV and other people might be rational in holding contrary attitudes—attitudes that would be expressed by the judgment that God is not justified in allowing so much evil and suffering to exist, in order to bring about X, Y, and Z. Given the truth of emotivism, there is no independent fact of the matter that the goodness of X, Y, and Z does or does not outweigh the badness of the suffering and other evils of the world. According to Ayer, we have a *rationally underdetermined choice* between different basic standards of value. It is rational to accept standards of value that make it possible to justify the actions of an omnipotent God who chose to create a world with so much suffering and evil; it is also rational to accept standards of value that make it difficult or impossible to justify the actions of an omnipotent God who chose to create a world with so much suffering and evil. Ayer's theory implies that there is no objectively correct answer to the problem of evil. Rather, his theory implies that our rationally underdetermined *choice* of basic standards of value is consistent with either theistic or atheistic responses to the problem of evil. According to Ayer's emotivism, there is no single correct answer to the problem of evil, rather, as long as we are consistent and clear about the implications of the theories of value we accept, we can *choose* between theistic and atheist answers to the problem of evil. Thus, emotivism seems to commit us to a qualified "voluntarism" about the problem of evil.

I now turn to a less well-known nonrealist theory, the divine preference theory of value. Two versions of the divine preference theory are as follows:

¹⁷ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Second edition (New York: Dover, 1952), pp. 107-108.

¹⁸ *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 110-112.

DPTV1. If there exists an omniscient, omnipotent God who created the universe, then God's will is the ultimate standard of value. Something is intrinsically good provided that God prefers that it exist rather than not exist, other things being equal. (Alternatively, we could say that something is intrinsically good if God has an intrinsic preference that it exist rather than not exist.) It also follows that whatever world God chose to create is as good as or better than any other worlds God could have created instead. If such a God does not exist, then the goodness or badness of things is determined in some other way.

DPTV2. If there exists a deity who created the universe and who is much more knowledgeable and powerful than any rational being in the universe, then that deity's will is the ultimate standard of value. (Something is intrinsically good provided that God prefers that it exist rather than not exist, other things being equal. It also follows that whatever world God chose to create is as good as or better than any other worlds God could have created instead.) If such a God does not exist, then the goodness or badness of things is determined in some other way.

Given either of these theories, it is impossible to raise the problem of evil. If God's will is the ultimate standard of good and bad, then nothing God does (including his having created this world, instead of some other world) can possibly count as evidence against God's goodness. No conceivable facts about the extent of suffering in this world could count as evidence against God's goodness. If God's preferences are the ultimate standards of value, then whatever world God chose to create must be at least as good as any alternative world that he could have created instead. God cannot be faulted for having created this world as opposed to some other world that was within God's power to create. The problem of evil seems to disappear given DPTV1 and DPTV2. This strikes me as a *reductio ad absurdum* of DPTV1 and DPTV2. The problem of evil is a genuine problem. It is a serious question whether the existence of so much evil in the world counts as evidence against the existence of a good God. Any theory that denies that the argument from evil points to a genuine question/issue is *ipso facto* unacceptable.

We can avoid this problem if we modify the divine will theory along the lines of Robert Adams' second modified divine command theory of

moral wrongness.¹⁹ This modified divine preference theory reads as follows:

DPTV3. If there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving deity, then that deity's will is the ultimate standard of value. (Something is intrinsically good provided that God prefers that it exist rather than not exist, other things being equal. It also follows that whatever world God chose to create is as good as or better than any other worlds God could have created instead.) If such a God does not exist, then the goodness or badness of things is determined in some other way.²⁰

DPTV3 allows us to regard the problem of evil as a genuine problem. Given DPTV3, the existence of so much suffering (and ostensibly pointless suffering) could be taken to be *prima facie* evidence against the existence of a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and loving.²¹

Given DPTV3, there is no independent fact of the matter (no fact independent of God's will) that the goodness of the ends that God achieves by allowing so much suffering and evil to exist, does or does

¹⁹ Robert Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again." In Robert Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 128-143.

²⁰ I want to briefly note a possible problem with DPTV3. Many hold that the concept of love presupposes an independent concept of good and bad. On this view, to love someone is to desire her/his good or welfare for its own sake. If this view about the nature of love is correct, then DPTV3 is viciously circular. It is viciously circular to say that what is good and bad is determined by what a loving God desires and then go on to explicate what it is for God to be loving in terms of what is good and bad for humans (independently of what God prefers). For my own part, I agree that any plausible definition of love presupposes an independent standard of good and bad (or welfare) and I have formulated an alternative version of the divine preference theory that attempts to avoid this problem; see my *Value and the Good Life*, pp. 242-256. These issues are relevant to assessing the plausibility of the divine preference theory of value, but they needn't concern us here.

²¹ For more on this see my *Value and the Good Life*, p. 254. Linda Zagzebski makes very similar claims about the implications of her "divine motivation" theory of value for the problem of evil. There is a sense in which the problem of evil "disappears" on her view. On her view, God's motives are the ultimate standards of value and standards of morality. Nothing is good or bad independently of God's being motivated to bring it about or prevent it. (Her theory clearly counts as a nonrealist theory, given my definition of moral realism.) Since God is omnipotent he is able to do whatever he is motivated to do. Any world that God brings about must be good. There is no independent standard of value by which we can say that the things that a loving omnipotent omniscient God has created are bad. However, given her theory, we can still regard the existence of so much suffering in the world as "evidence against the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God who is motivated by love," Linda Zagzebski *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 325.

not outweigh the badness of that suffering and evil. For DPTV3 the crucial question raised by the problem of evil is whether the existence of so much evil and suffering makes it implausible to think that an omniscient, omnipotent creator of the universe could also be loving. Our ignorance of God's actual reasons (if any) for permitting so much suffering and evil to exist, and the fact that we don't know all the possible reasons God might have, make it extremely difficult to judge this question. Suppose that we knew that an omnipotent, omniscient God created the universe. Suppose also that we knew why God chose to create this universe instead of some other possible universe with much less suffering. Even if we had knowledge of all God's reasons, it might be ambiguous or open to debate whether God's actions are consistent with God's being loving. Even with this knowledge of God's reasons, reasonable people who accept DPTV3 might disagree about whether such a God should be called loving. Again, it is possible that full knowledge of God's reasons for permitting evil would reconcile everyone to the evil and suffering of this world. God's reasons might seem very compelling to us. However, it would take great deal of independent argument to show that this is the case and, in the absence of such arguments, it is an open question whether reasonable informed people (reasonable people who have relevant information about God's reasons for creating this world as opposed to other worlds he could have created instead) could disagree about whether it makes sense to call God loving.

Of course, our actual situation is very different. We don't know God's reasons for having chosen to create a world with so much suffering; we can't even imagine all of the reasons why God might have chosen to create a world such as ours. In light of this, I think that it would be very unreasonable for someone who accepts DPTV3 to claim that the argument from evil shows that an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God does not exist. Our inability to divine *why* such a God would allow there to be so much suffering doesn't show that there can't be reasons that are compatible with God's being omniscient, omnipotent, and loving. Still, one might press the "evidential argument from evil" and claim that, since we can't imagine any reason why a loving, omniscient, and omnipotent God would allow so much evil to exist, it is unlikely or improbable that such a God exists. I can't begin to do justice to this argument in the present paper, but permit me a brief conjecture. Probabilistic arguments involve inductive inferences, but such inferences and reasoning are, in principle, illegitimate in the present case. We don't have any inductive basis for determining what sorts of universes omniscient, omnipotent, and loving deities are likely to create and what sorts of universes are likely to exist if such deities don't exist. We are familiar with only one universe and, for the purposes of

the present debate, we can't make assumptions about what kind of God (if any) created the universe.

6. Conclusions

Implicitly or explicitly, philosophers who venture assessments of the argument from evil almost always appeal to first-order theories of value. The plausibility of these assessments depends, largely, on the plausibility of the theories of value they presuppose. Some theories of value are consistent with theistic replies to the argument from evil. Other theories of value are difficult, if not impossible, to square with these replies. Those who discuss the argument from evil need to devote much more attention to justifying the standards of value to which they appeal. Almost all discussions of the argument from evil presuppose the truth of moral realism. If nonrealism is true, then we need to rethink and reframe the entire discussion about the problem of evil. (All nonrealist normative theories agree that statements of types III and IV are not objectively true independently of what rational beings believe or desire.²²) Contemporary discussions of the problem of evil are incredibly subtle and sophisticated in their discussions of metaphysical issues concerning omnipotence and what kinds of worlds an omnipotent God could create. However, these discussions are often very naive and dogmatic in their treatment of normative and metaethical questions.

²² Oddly enough, J. L. Mackie, one of the most important critics of moral realism, seems to assume the truth of moral realism in his discussion of the problem of evil. He appeals to statements to the effect that pain and suffering are bad (evil) and statements to the effect that certain kinds of universes that include no suffering or evil are better than the actual universe. He treats such statements as true independently of what anyone thinks. See Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence," in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 25-37 and his *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Chapter 9. Mackie's discussion of the problem of evil is arguably inconsistent with his rejection of moral realism and "objective values" in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977). I owe this observation to Linda Zagzebski.