Underestimating the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: I argue that philosophers generally underestimate the cogency of the Evidential Argument from Evil. I present two sub-arguments for my conclusion. The first sub-argument—the "Moral Argument"—holds that philosophers probably underestimate the strength of God's moral reasons. Given the real-world track record of changes in philosophers' and laypersons' moral attitudes, we should suspect that God's moral reasons are more demanding than most philosophers regard them to be. The second sub-argument—the "Well-Being Argument"—holds that given demographic facts about Anglophone philosophers, we should expect that these philosophers underestimate the magnitude of evil in the world. Anglophone philosophers therefore overestimate the probability that God has a justifying reason for this evil, and underestimate the probability that the Evidential Argument from Evil is cogent.

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1. Introduction

According to the Evidential Argument from Evil, the observable facts of "evil" (suffering, premature death, and moral wrongs) are evidence against orthodox philosophical theism: the belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect God.[1] This argument normally cites first-order evidence: the observed facts of evil and our evidence about the intentions and actions of an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being. But recent work in epistemology explores the importance of higher-order evidence.[2] David Christensen explains:

[1] I proceed with landmark examples in mind: Mackie (1955), Rowe (1979), Draper (1989), Tooley (2012); Tooley (2022, § 3).

[2] Feldman (2005); Kelly (2005); Matheson (2009); see especially Christensen (2010). See the essays in Klenk (2019) for recent work on higher-order evidence about moral epistemology.

> Sometimes … evidence rationalizes a change of belief precisely because it indicates that my former beliefs were rationally sub-par …. If I learn that I've been systematically too optimistic in my weather predictions, I may also be rationally required to decrease my credence in fair weather tomorrow. But in this case, the indication that my former beliefs are suboptimal is no mere byproduct of my reasoning about the weather. (Christensen, 2010, 185)

In this paper, I present higher-order evidence about the Evidential Argument from Evil. I argue that Anglophone philosophers, in general, are probably overly optimistic about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being, given the facts of evil in the world. I have two main arguments for my thesis: the Moral Argument and the Well-Being Argument.

2. The Moral Argument

To say that a being *S*'s moral reasons are "stronger" than some population *T* believes these reasons to be is to say that *S* has more overall moral reason to promote some good, or avoid some potential wrong, than the average member of *T* believes that *S* has moral reason to do. Here are four examples of ways in which moral reasons might be stronger than we thought:

1. Beneficence: Given that a certain creature *C* is morally considerable, there might be stronger moral reason to sacrifice more, or work harder, in order to benefit *C* than *T* believes.
2. Moral Considerability: There might be more entities, or types of entities, with moral considerability than *T* believes that there are.
3. Moral Arbitrariness: More properties might be morally arbitrary (i.e., fail to justify unequal treatment or disregard) than *T* believes to be morally arbitrary.
4. Limits of Authority: Authority might be less permissive than *T* believes it to be.

I'll now elaborate about these examples.

To begin with, obligations of *beneficence* are obligations to improve others' lives, even at some cost to ourselves. (Importantly, both consequentialists and deontologists recognize obligations of

beneficence, even if the former emphasize such obligations more.)[3] Second, *moral considerability* is the familiar notion that only certain types of entity can be the bearers of moral rights, or can be wronged, or must be treated with respect, or are included in the moral community (Gruen, 2022, § 1). Almost no one believes that it is morally wrong to kill harmful bacteria, and almost everyone who believes in moral obligations believes that it is usually morally wrong to kill innocent adults. Yet even given that a creature has moral considerability, there may be further debate about which of its properties permit certain otherwise-immoral treatment. For example, we normally believe adult humans are morally considerable, but most of us also believe that killing in self-defense can be permissible. Whether a person is attacking you is morally significant. In contrast, skin color is instead *morally arbitrary*: roughly, it does not justify otherwise-wrong or unequal treatment.[4] Finally, even beyond these factors, we sometimes believe that certain agents have more *moral authority* and thereby a wider set of moral permissions than others do. In particular, we generally believe that governments and police officers have such a wider set of moral permissions.[5] (I speak here of governments, but many people believe that other forms of authority, such as parenting, might grant similar permissions.)[6] Thus, there are four important ways in which someone's moral reasons might be stronger than the average member of some population believes them to be. And there might be corresponding ways in which a being's moral reasons to prevent some evil are stronger than the average human or the average philosopher believes them to be.

2.1. Human Moral Reasons

Evan G. Williams (2015) argues that we are likely to be in the process of committing or allowing extreme moral wrongs. He has two main types of argument for his thesis. Inductive arguments hold that humans have historically made many mistakes in moral judgment. Disjunctive arguments hold that there are many ways of ending up at the incorrect moral judgment, especially when

[3] Kant famously considers beneficence an imperfect duty, but still, a duty (Kant, 1996 [1785], 4:423). Ross considers beneficence important enough to name it as its own prima-facie duty (Ross, 1930).

[4] I'm borrowing this terminology from Rawls (1999, 63), although it may be misleading to say (e.g.) that race is morally *arbitrary*; it's obviously extremely morally significant. Instead, I am calling a property "morally arbitrary" when it does not justify disregard, disrespect, nor inequality.

[5] Most saliently, police have a monopoly on force and legislators have a monopoly on legislation. See, e.g., Huemer (2013, pt. I) for examples.

[6] Only in the late twentieth and the twenty-first century have philosophers begun to seriously question the limits of parental rights and the thesis that parents essentially own their children (cf. Brennan and Noggle, 1997; Hall, 1999). The famous case of Gregory Kingsley, who "divorced" his parents, was decided in 1992 (Depalma, 1992).

settling on the correct overall judgment may require finding the correct judgments about a host of sub-questions, so it's a priori probable that our judgments have gone wrong somewhere. And arguments analogous to the inductive and disjunctive arguments should lead us to suspect that the world is worse than we believe it to be, from the perspective of God's allowing various evils.[7]

Beneficence: One classic intuitive test of the strength of our obligations is the Singer-Unger style of argument for intervening in the case of world poverty (Singer, 1972; Unger, 1996). Unfortunately, the PhilPapers surveys have not yet asked philosophers directly about altruism (PhilPapers, n.d.a). But crucially, the literature shows that philosophers in the twentieth century have moved in the direction of surmising that we have stronger reasons for beneficence than we thought we did (and stronger reasons than most people, including most philosophers, think we do),[8] and almost no one argues that it is positively wrong to act genuinely altruistically.[9] Thus, one might make an inductive argument and a disjunctive argument. The track-record argument here might be relatively weak, because as noted, it is not clear that the strongly altruistic position is the majority among philosophers. However, the disjunctive argument is stronger: the edges of the range of live options seem to be (1) that we are about adequately altruistic and (2) that we are insufficiently altruistic, and so it is prior-improbable that among the live options ("we are sufficiently altruistic," "we should be somewhat more altruistic," "we should be strongly more altruistic") the "sufficiently altruistic" position is correct.

Moral Considerability and Moral Arbitrariness: If we expand our circle of moral considerability, then this circumscribes the set of morally permissible actions. Similarly, if we expand our list of properties that count as morally arbitrary (again, "arbitrary" in the sense that these properties do not justify otherwise-wrongful treatment, disregard, nor disrespect),[10] then this also reduces the quantity of morally permissible actions. And most of the time, philosophers and

[7] For a useful overview of human moral progress, see also Sauer et al. (2021).

[8] Of course, ancient philosophers argued for obligations of promoting the common good or the good of others (Aristotle, 1984, bks. VIII and IX), and medievals also agreed that there are obligations of charity (Aquinas, 1911, II-II, q. 23 a. 3). But it is difficult to find philosophers writing before utilitarianism who argued that we have strong obligations to give up items of substantial value to ourselves in order to help strangers. Aquinas (1911, II-II, q. 23 a. 3) thought we had stronger obligations to people nearer to us. No one can deny that Singer and Unger staked out a position that was relatively rare before their work.

[9] There are ethical egoists in the history of philosophy, but most work on ethical egoism is devoted to refuting it (Shaver 2022, § 2). Rand (1964) is probably the most-famous defender of something like ethical egoism, but she has few supporters in present-day philosophy. In the PhilPapers (n.d.e) survey, 1741 philosophers responded to the question about normative-ethical theories, and exactly zero expressed support for egoism.

[10] Cf. Taylor (2022, § 3.3) on defining "racism."

laypersons have regarded the group of morally considerable entities to be smaller than it turns out to be, and have regarded properties to be morally significant more often than they truly are. In most of human history, wars of imperial and religious domination were viewed as permissible.[11] So was slavery, including race-based slavery.[12] Women had second-class status in society.[13] Many believed that disabled people needed no special protection, and indeed, could be permissibly treated as the subjects of medical experiments (Baudouin, 1990). And unfortunately, philosophers have often been no better than the general population in this regard.[14]

Now let's turn to present-day issues in applied ethics and social-and-political philosophy. There is disagreement within Anglophone philosophy about omnivorism and about distributive justice in general. Yet nearly all the debate today is between those who believe that the allegedly disadvantaged group in question is disadvantaged to roughly the *correct* degree, versus those who hold that the disadvantaged group should be disadvantaged substantially *less*.[15] Almost no one argues that intentional torture-for-fun of nonhuman animals is permissible or obligatory;[16] and almost no one thinks that poor people's money should more-frequently be transferred to the rich.[17] Consensus, if it is achieved, will probably be somewhere in the range that nonhuman animals should enjoy more protections, and that poor should receive more redistribution. We have expanded our conception of the borders of moral considerability and we have expanded our

[11] While ancient and medieval philosophers sometimes wrote about *jus ad bellum*, even those philosophers who argue for just-cause requirements are often very sympathetic to wars of conquest and those allegedly justified by divine command (Cox 2016).

[12] John Locke (1980 [1690], ch. 3–4) may be the first well-known Anglophone professional philosopher to argue against slavery, although his example is obviously complicated by the fact that his other projects involved supporting slavery (Armitage, 2004; Farr, 2008). Only in the mid-eighteenth-century do we start to see sustained arguments against slavery in general (Fletcher, 1933; Jaucourt, 2007 [1765]).

[13] While there were feminist writers in the Renaissance (Schneir, 2014), philosophical feminism really gained momentum in the eighteenth century (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Williford, 1975; Landes, 2022).

[14] See for example Aristotle (1998, 1254b14) on gender, and the essays in Zack (2017, pt. I) on race. More generally, see Rodgers and Thompson (2005).

[15] The case of abortion is interesting, but the recent debate mainly concerns whether fetuses have moral rights that outweigh the rights of the mother (Boonin, 2003; Napier, 2011; Greasley, 2017; Nobis & Grob, 2019). Thus, the debate fits into the aforementioned schema: Should the fetus be disadvantaged less, or the same amount? Should the mother be disadvantaged less, or the same amount? But no one argues that abortions should involve *more* pain to the fetus, or that pregnant people should *also* have to wear a scarlet letter "P."

[16] To be sure, a few philosophers argue that nonhuman animals have no moral rights at all, but no one seems to think that torturing animals is permissible (Kant, 1997 [1784–5], p. 212). With a few antecedents (Bentham, 1970 [1789], p. 283n; Salt, 1892), the academic-philosophy animal-rights movement began in earnest in the 1970s (Godlovitch et al., 1971; Singer, 1974 and 1975; Regan, 1975; Clarke, 1977). It is difficult to find work in the philosophical literature arguing that we currently treat nonhuman animals too well.

[17] Even committed classical liberals and libertarians commonly make appeals to progressive goals (Zwolinski, 2016; Brennan, 2012, ch. 7).

conception of the set of morally arbitrary qualities. This expansion appears to be true of laypersons as well.[18] As before, there is an inductive argument that laypersons and philosophers tend to underestimate the extent of moral considerability and the prevalence of morally arbitrary properties, and a disjunctive argument that of the live options, the correct judgments are probably in the direction of greater extent of moral considerability and in the direction of fewer morally significant properties.

Limits of Authority: Only relatively recently did many philosophers begin to question whether citizens might have some inherent moral rights, regardless of whether the monarch granted such rights, and begin to question whether government power should be absolute (Philpott 2022). Similarly, philosophers have only relatively recently begun to defend the view that governments have no authority at all.[19] It would follow that the subjects of authority possess more rights, or the authority has stricter limits on what it may do, than we generally have believed them to possess.

Someone might now object as follows:

> [Objection] But just because philosophers' opinions have changed doesn't mean that they've moved closer to the truth.

Reply: I grant that one might question whether philosophy in general makes progress.[20] However, I feel safe for the purposes of this paper in assuming that racism and sexism are morally wrong, that nonhuman animals are commonly morally wronged, that there are moral limits to the authority of a monarch, and so on. Of course, one might question whether the typical *theist* philosopher is a progressive liberal. The answer is unclear, but there is certainly a substantial portion of theist philosophers who are in fact moderately progressive and moderately liberal.[21] And I would not

[18] Public acceptance of animal rights (Rifkin, 2015) and progressive taxation (Gallup, n.d.; Sawhill & Pulliam, 2019) has increased or remained steady in the last 10–20 years.

[19] There are strands of anarchism in ancient political philosophy and religion (Fiala, 2022), but anarchism did not become prominent again in political philosophy until the late nineteenth century. As part of this defense, philosophers have argued that human beings tend to overestimate, because of psychological bias, the moral permission that authorities might have (Huemer, 2013, ch. 6).

[20] See Chalmers (2015). But the main examples he adduces are not examples of overarching moral progress such as the ones surveyed in this paper. See also Sauer et al. (2021) for an overview of moral progress.

[21] We can approximate an answer by noting that of 233 theists in the PhilPapers 2020 survey, 78 (i.e., about 33%) accepted egalitarianism, while of 232 theists, 52% accepted communitarianism (PhilPapers, n.d.b). On the assumptions that egalitarians tend to be progressive and libertarians tend to be liberal; that at least some communitarians also have some progressive or liberal attitudes; and that most of the moral progress identified in this subsection is on the less-controversial sides of progressive liberalism; we can estimate that at least one-half of theists would support most of the moral progress identified in this subsection.

expect there to be any credible theist philosophers who still support slavery and segregation, or disenfranchising women, or absolute power in monarchs.

2.2. God's Moral Reasons

If our moral reasons for beneficence are stronger than we generally believe them to be, or the group of morally considerable entities is larger than we believe it to be, or more properties are morally arbitrary than we thought were morally arbitrary, then that's prima facie reason to believe that *God's* moral reasons for beneficence and for protecting vulnerable creatures are also stronger than most philosophers believe them to be.

The exception is that we have sometimes taken forms of authority to grant more permission than we thought they did, but in general, that applies *a fortiori* to an authority of God's stature. Commentators about the Problem of Evil sometimes speak as if God's position as authority excuses him from some obligations to us.[22] But as we've seen, humans probably overestimate the amount of moral permission granted by authority. Relatedly, some philosophers try to explain the facts of evil by citing God's permission to punish sinful humans, but historically, we have moved to be more and more skeptical of corporal punishment.[23]

God would therefore have moral reason to prevent more of the world's evil, or create more goodness, or otherwise permit creatures to suffer fewer harms, than he has. After all, the basis of the standard Problem of Evil is that God's moral perfection is analyzable, at least partly, in terms of commonsense (human) moral norms. Most commentators about the Problem of Evil assume that whether an evil is gratuitous depends on whether its prevention could have been accomplished by an omnipotent being without thereby sacrificing an equal or greater good; it does not depend inherently on whether it is God or humans who do the prevention.[24]

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[22] See Swinburne (2004, 257–258), whose approach to the Problem of Evil substantively depends on such an analogy. See also Murphy (2017) for a recent example.

[23] Historically, the death penalty (and other corporal punishment) was much more common. As for philosophers, only in the eighteenth century did philosophers begin to widely argue against the death penalty (Beccaria, 1986 [1764]). See Banner (2003) and Hoag (n.d., § 1.a) for useful overviews.

[24] Some philosophers argue that small amounts of gratuitous evil are compatible with God's existence (van Inwagen, 2006), but my arguments can be read as suggesting that there's probably more gratuitous evil than we think there is anyway. Some argue that God will create every universe worthy of creation, even though some contain gratuitous evil (Kraay, 2010), but such defenses do not appear to be very popular, and in any case, my arguments suggest that fewer universes are worthy than we thought were worthy.

A few philosophers have argued that God's moral obligations are fundamentally different or even nonexistent (Adams, 1999; Murphy, 2017; Rubio, 2018). But most commentators about the Problem of Evil hold that at least for all we know, God would have prevented more of the world's evils, except that he knows that such evils are necessary for equal or greater goods.[25] This is in fact compatible with saying that God is very different from us, and even with saying that God is not bound by obligations. (For all we know, God's nature gives him an even stronger reason to intervene to prevent evil than we have.) I add that as noted, human beings have a track record of overestimating the degree to which authority excuses one from moral obligations anyway, so we should err on the side of expecting him to have stronger moral reasons. Hence, there is no particular reason to believe that God's moral reasons would be *inherently* weaker, in this context, than our own. In turn, given the track record we've observed, we should suspect that God's moral reasons are stronger than most philosophers believe them to be, and so God, if he exists, would need a correspondingly stronger justification to permit the facts of evil we observe. Indeed, one might argue further that God's moral reasons might be inherently *stronger*, given his role as creator, his omniscience, or his rationality.[26]

This completes my initial presentation of the Moral Argument. If either this or the argument in the following section is cogent, then, I will argue, we should raise our credence that the Problem of Evil is cogent.

3. The Well-Being Argument

Briefly put, the Well-Being Argument holds that present-day Anglophone philosophers are likely to underestimate how bad the world really is from the perspective of well-being.

[25] This is most obvious when we read theodicists, but skeptical theists tend to agree as well. Alston (1991) explicitly denies the Rowean premise that we know there are probably gratuitous evils, and accepts the premise that God would eliminate such evils. Van Inwagen's (1991) story is not that God is fundamentally different from us in his moral agency.
[26] If we follow a broadly Anselmian conception of God, then we might think that a maximally great God is maximally *responsible* (cf. Murphy (2017, ch. 1) on conceiving of God's attributes in a maximally expansive way). Hence, such a being might have stronger moral reasons anyway. Similarly, some philosophers have argued that if you create a need in something knowing that probably, only you can help it avoid some harm, then that gives you a stronger obligation to help it (Boonin, 2003, ch. 4). In this case, God is analogous to a person who conceives a child with the option to prevents its having some need, but chooses that it have the need after all (because God could have constructed humans to be more resilient to harms).

We can surmise that the most-influential Anglophone, academic, professional philosophers are among the top 10% in well-being, globally.[27] In turn, we should expect that their judgments about well-being in the world should be somewhat biased by *familiarity bias*: they tacitly assume that humans' lives aren't that much different from their own. Philosophers, in general, probably estimate that the world is better from the perspective of well-being than it actually is. In contrast, philosophers who had to cope, on a daily basis, with war or famine would have a more realistic view of how bad the world really is. Similarly, Anglophone philosophers tend to be white (Schwitzgebel, 2020), and white people in Anglophone countries tend to be socioeconomically better-off than non-white people are (Bhutta et al., 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020). It's worth adding, also, that most present-day philosophers of any race, gender, or class are far better-off than were the people throughout most of history, so we are all likely to underestimate how bad the world really was in the past. Beyond this, people with higher academic achievement generally report more satisfaction with their lives (Bückner et al., 2018), and professional philosophers tend to have doctoral degrees.

I'll now consider an objection to the Well-Being Argument:

> [Objection] But if socioeconomic well-being is biasing Anglophone philosophers to think the world is better than it really is, then there should be correlations between theism and socioeconomic well-being. But in fact, the correlations are in the opposite direction: people in poor countries are more religious than people in rich countries (cf. Stastna, 2013).

Reply: I think there is an obvious error-theory here: The worse-off you are, the more beneficial religion is to your life. The key question for our purposes would be whether higher socioeconomic well-being makes one more likely to view the world in general as better. And it's likely that rich people do in fact believe the world is better than it is: at the very least, they are more likely to think that poor people deserve to be poor (Yin et al., 2021). Similarly, rich people seem to have trouble with empathy (Dietze & Knowles, 2020) and may be less altruistic (Kraus et al., 2012). Therefore, again, we have reason to believe that those who are rich from the global perspective—namely,

[27] Generally speaking, the most-influential Anglophone philosophers are professors of philosophy who have been active in their fields for at least a decade. On average, postsecondary philosophy or religion teachers make about $88,000 per year as of May 2021 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). If we assume that the 75th percentile is the most-influential philosophers, then they make at least $100,000/year, putting them near the top 10% in income. On the assumption that most of these philosophers own houses and retirement accounts, they are probably near the top 10% in wealth as well (World Inequality Lab, 2021, p. 10).

Anglophone philosophers—judge the world to be better than it actually is from the perspective of the typical evidence cited in presentations of the Problem of Evil.

Finally, someone might object to my entire project as follows:

> [Objection] You are trying to conclude too much from the armchair. You need to measure whether there are actual correlations between philosophers' attitudes on the Problem of Evil on the one hand, and their moral attitudes or well-being on the other.

Reply: Many factors can influence whether individual philosophers judge an argument to be cogent. Even if some individual philosophers who have lower-than-average well-being judge the Evidential Argument from Evil not to be cogent, my arguments imply that these philosophers are *still* generally underestimating its strength. To be clear, I am not arguing that philosophers who deny that we have strong moral reasons to intervene are more likely to reject the Evidential Argument from Evil; I am arguing that philosophers in general are likely to *underestimate* its strength. It's possible that other factors are mainly responsible for an individual philosopher's judgment about the Problem of Evil, and so no clear correlation emerges. But it wouldn't follow that most philosophers aren't underestimating the Evidential Argument from Evil.

4. Conclusion

I have presented two general arguments for raising our credence that the Evidential Argument from Evil is cogent. Yet a critic might worry that the *strength* of this higher-order evidence is still questionable.

My first reply is that given Tooley's (2022, § 3) favored approach to the Evidential Argument from Evil, if I'm correct that unknown wrong-making features are more probable than unknown right-making features, then the cumulative calculation may push us very strongly in the direction of atheism. This has the virtue of answering some critiques of Tooley's strategy,[28] but my overall argument does not depend on the cogency of Tooley's.

[28] For example, Otte (2013) offers a few objections to Tooley's argument, including questioning the Principle-of-Indifference-related reasoning in a key step. But my observations suggest that no such relative of the Principle of Indifference is required. We do not need to assume that the intrinsic probability of unknown right-making and wrong-making features is equal; we get by with the assumption that the prior probability of unknown wrong-making features is higher than the prior probability of unknown right-making features, which delivers Tooley's conclusion a fortiori.

Second, I admit that I have not attempted to offer a concrete estimate for *how* erroneous our judgments are. But given the historical facts supporting the Moral Argument, and the demographic facts supporting the Well-Being Argument, one might suspect that our judgments are very erroneous. The expansion of moral considerability and the set of morally arbitrary properties according to philosophers' judgments has been nearly monotonic, as has the increase in skepticism about the moral permissions of authority. And the degree of inequality between Anglophone philosophers and the global poor is still enormous.[29] Therefore, we should suspect that our judgments concerning the facts of evil substantially underestimate how bad the world really is, and in turn, substantially underestimate the strength of the Problem of Evil.

[29] World Inequality Lab (2021, 10). See n. 27 above.

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