

# 11 The “Range” Argument from Evil

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... whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews 11:6 (RSV)

It is an honor to have been asked to contribute a paper to a *Festschrift* for John Martin Fischer and it is a pleasure to do so. A paper to be included in a volume honoring a scholar need not, speaking strictly, address that scholar’s work, but I would not dream of contributing an essay to a book honoring John that was not about his work. That resolution, however, confronts me with a problem, for the only things worth anyone’s attention that I have to say about John’s contributions to philosophy pertain to his well-known and influential work on the relation (or lack thereof) between determinism and moral responsibility, and those things I have already said<sup>1</sup>—and said as well as I shall ever be able to.

The only solution to this problem seems to me to be to reply to one of John’s criticisms of my own work—which carries the danger of my own work, rather than John’s, becoming the topic of this chapter. My only excuse for risking this unseemly outcome is that when I tried to think of a topic for the essay that addressed John’s work and about which I had something to say that I had not already said, only this came to mind.

I will reply to a criticism of the “defense” that was the core of my book *The Problem of Evil*.<sup>2</sup> This criticism was presented in a critical study of the book by John and his frequent collaborator Neal A. Tognazzini.<sup>3</sup> (I will refer to Fischer and Tognazzini as ‘the Critics’ in the sequel.)

There are only two ideas to be found in *The Problem of Evil* that might possibly be thought of as original. They are as follows:

—It is consistent with theism to suppose that many, perhaps most, of the evils of the present age of the world are due to chance, and that there is therefore no explanation of why they occur. (But theism

does imply that there is an explanation of why evils that have no explanation occur.)

—Let us say that an “argument from evil” (sc., for the non-existence of God) is an argument whose premises are statements about the evils to be found in the world and whose conclusion is that if the world has been created by—or even if there exists—an omniscient and omnipotent being, that being lacks some other of the traditional divine attributes (benevolence, for example, or moral perfection).<sup>4</sup> In that sense of ‘argument from evil,’ there are two importantly different arguments from evil. There is the *global argument from evil*, which proceeds from the premises ‘The world contains a vast amount of horrendous evil’ and ‘If the world had been created by a benevolent being (who was also omnipotent and omniscient), it would not contain a vast amount of horrendous evil’. And there is the *local argument from evil*, which proceeds from the premises ‘The world contains *this* horrendous evil’<sup>5</sup> and ‘If the world had been created by a morally perfect being (who was also omnipotent and omniscient), it would not contain *this* horrendous evil’. These two arguments are sufficiently different that it is essential to consider them separately.

The Critics accept the distinction between global and local arguments from evil but contend that there is a third type of argument from evil, the *range argument*, and that, even granting that the replies to the global argument and the local argument presented in *The Problem of Evil* succeed, the ideas on which those replies are based cannot be adapted or extended so as to provide a reply to the range argument.

In [Section 11.1](#), I will summarize the presentation of and the commentary on the global and local arguments in *The Problem of Evil*. [Section 11.2](#) will be devoted to a presentation and discussion of the range argument. The discussion will center on an important ambiguity in the presentation of the global argument in *The Problem of Evil*, an ambiguity that was also present in the reply to the global argument. Because of this ambiguity, the global argument can be understood in either of two ways. One of them is the way I meant it to be understood. The other, which had not occurred to me, is the way the Critics have understood it. (Their understanding of the argument is wholly defensible. If they have not understood the argument as its author intended it to be understood, that is the author’s fault and not theirs.) When the ambiguity has been removed, and the global argument and the reply to the global argument have been stated in words that clearly express the argument I intended to address, it will be seen that the replies to the global and local arguments can be modified so as to produce a reply to the range argument.

Section 11.3 (like proposition 7 of the *Tractatus*) consists of a single necessary remark.

### 11.1 Global and Local Arguments

I present first a précis of the central argument of Lecture 4 and Lecture 5 (“The Global Argument from Evil” and “The Global Argument from Evil Continued”) of *The Problem of Evil*.

Let this be our statement of the global argument:

1. The world contains a vast amount of evil
2. If the world had been created by a benevolent being (who was also omnipotent and omniscient), it would not contain a vast amount of evil
3. If God exists, the world was created by a benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient being

*hence,*

God does not exist.

The argument is valid, and premises (1) and (3) are beyond dispute—although, philosophers being philosophers, they have been disputed.<sup>6</sup> I approach the argument by imagining its being offered in a certain carefully delimited dialectical situation. I feign that my creatures Theist and Atheist are engaged in a lengthy public debate concerning the existence of God. Their audience is composed of neutral agnostics—agnostics who not only do not profess to know whether God exists, but also who do not assign a higher subjective probability to either of the theses ‘God exists’ and ‘God does not exist’ than to the other. (But they are also *interested* agnostics: each of them would very much like to know whether God exists.) And the “dialectical situation” is this: Theist is trying to convince the agnostics that God exists (or, failing that, at least to convince them to regard his existence as more probable than his non-existence), and Atheist is trying to convince the agnostics that God does not exist (or, failing that, at least to convince them to regard his non-existence as more probable than his existence). Moreover, each will do his or her best to convince the audience of agnostics that the other’s arguments, for one reason or another, fail to prove their point.

It is, as I tell the story, currently Atheist’s turn to present her case, and she has offered the above argument.

Theist then responds by attempting to cast doubt on premise (2) of her argument. This attempt takes the form of the presentation of a “defense”—a story the teller does not maintain is true but does maintain is not known

to be false—a story according to which God exists and, for a reason that is presented in the story, allows vast amounts of evil to exist. In presenting this story, this defense, to the audience of agnostics, Theist is hoping that each of them will react to the story by saying something along the lines of “I don’t know whether God exists, but if he does, the rest of that story might well be true too. For all I know, if a benevolent God exists, and if he were in the circumstances set out in Theist’s story—which he very well could be—, he would allow a vast amount of evil to exist. I certainly don’t see any reason to rule it out.”

It will be stylistically convenient for me to have a compact way to describe the reaction Theist hopes for. Let us say that what Theist hopes for is that the agnostics will “accept his story as a defense.”

Theist hopes that the agnostics will accept his story as a defense simply because anyone who does accept his story as a defense will not accept premise (2) of Atheist’s argument—for any such person will believe that a world that had been created by an omnipotent and omniscient and benevolent being might (for all that person knows) contain a vast amount of evil. It is important to keep it in mind that if  $p$  is “the rest of that story” (that is, if Theist’s defense is the conjunction of ‘God exists’ and  $p$ ), one could both accept the story as a defense *and* judge that the probability of  $p$  on ‘God exists’ was very low. (The probability of ‘There is an apple in that box’ is very low on ‘There is something in that box.’ But no one whose only knowledge of the content of the box was that it contained *something* would affirm confidently that it did not contain an apple.)

A defense, then, is analogous to what, in American legal practice, is sometimes called an “alternative theory of the crime”—a true-for-all-we-know story the counsel for the defense tells to the jury which implies the innocence of the accused and is consistent with all the supposedly damning evidence that the counsel for the prosecution has presented to them. We might press this analogy a bit and describe the debate between Theist and Atheist in forensic terms: theism is in the dock, and the charge is that it is in conflict with the observed facts; Theist is the counsel for the defense and Atheist the counsel for the prosecution and the agnostics are the members of the jury; Theist’s “defense” is an alternative theory of the crime.<sup>7</sup> And a defense counsel, in presenting an alternative theory of the crime, will be concerned only with what the jury will find plausible; a defense counsel will simply not care whether opposing counsel regards the alternative theory of the crime as plausible. But jurors, however naively credulous some of them may on occasion be, are not going to regard just any story as plausible. There would obviously be no point in a defense counsel’s presenting an alternative theory of the crime that (although logically consistent) was wildly at variance with the judgments about what is and what is not a “real possibility” that the jurors would be likely to make. (That

a bored child, turning the dial of a combination lock idly and at random, should happen to hit upon the lock’s combination and open the safe to which it gives access is certainly possible in more than one sense of ‘possible,’ but no one would say it was a *real* possibility. That the fingerprints on the murder weapon the District Attorney has said are Alice’s are actually those of Alice’s separated-at-birth monozygotic twin—of whom all records had been lost—is certainly *possible*, but no one would say it was a *real* possibility.)

The defense Theist presents to the audience of agnostics—the “expanded free-will defense,” (EFWD for short)—can be found on pages 85–91 of *The Problem of Evil*. It comprises about 2000 words, and there is no satisfactory way to compress it to any useful degree. Still, I need to say something about it; here is a sort of gesture in the direction of a brief statement of EFWD.

God created humanity by miraculously raising a certain population of clever primates to rationality. These primates, these animals who had begun to be human beings at a certain point in their lives, enjoyed the Beatific Vision and were united with God and with one another in a union of perfect love. But a union of love requires free assent to that union by all parties, and human beings for some reason freely dissolved their paradisaical union with God and struck out on their own. The results were catastrophic. For these human beings did not simply become beasts again: they continued to be rational animals, but their rationality was no longer operating under the conditions for which it had been designed—namely, union with God. The genes they had inherited from millions of generations of non-rational animals were meant to be co-present with rationality only in beings in union with God. These “feral” human beings began to exhibit the only behavior that is possible for rational primates who are not in union with God: exploitation, abuse, torture, theft, revenge, mass murder, war, racism, slavery, sexism, rape, and all the sins mentioned in n. 4. Moreover, malefic behavior was not the only consequence of their separation from God. By choosing not to be in union with him, they brought upon themselves senescence and death by senescence, disease, and the deaths and suffering caused by natural disasters. God, however, is Love and has put in place a rescue plan—a plan to save separated humanity from self-elected ruin by restoring the broken bonds of love. (To save them from the consequences of “the Fall,” let us say.) But—since love implies the free union of the lover and the beloved—human beings must freely choose to cooperate with God in the great task of putting his plan of atonement (at-one-ment) into operation. And this they will do only if they believe

that such a plan is needed, only if they see that the world is in a perilous state, and that human beings cannot, by themselves, put things right. And this they would not do if God were to “cancel” all the baleful consequences of the Fall and institute an hedonic paradise by a continual flood of miracles. One of many conditions necessary for God’s plan of atonement to succeed is that a significant proportion of humanity should be frequently engaged in saying to itself, “I wasn’t born for an age like this. Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?”<sup>8</sup> God does, in fact, protect human beings from much of the suffering that would be the natural consequence of the Fall, but he must leave a vast amount in place—for if he did not, our species would lose the end for which it was made, which would be to lose a literally *infinite* good. And even if human beings do not have the right to permit others to suffer so that goods that outweigh the disvalue of the suffering may come to them, their Maker has that right.

One aspect of the suffering God leaves in place is that human beings are the playthings of chance: in the present state of things, it is inevitable that bad things will happen to some people. But which bad things happen, which people they happen to, and when they happen, is a matter of sheer, blind, meaningless chance. That is part of what being separated from God means: being afflicted by evils resulting from the intersection of causally independent sequences of events—or, to put the matter more simply, from being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

If the members of the audience of agnostics accept this story as a defense (that is, accept the story of which the offset text is a brief and unsatisfactory précis as a defense), they will not be converted to atheism by the global argument from evil. (Nor will the argument lead them to raise the subjective probability they assign to atheism significantly.)

What, then, of the *local* argument from evil? We cannot begin our discussion of the local argument with a statement of the argument, for—see note 5—there is really no single local argument from evil. There is, rather, a local argument from evil for every evil. I will consider the local argument whose premises refer to the assassination of Martin Luther King (“the Assassination”). What I say in response to this argument is intended as a model for a reply to any local argument. The local argument based on the Assassination can be expressed in any of several essentially equivalent ways, this one among them:

1. The Assassination was an evil
2. If the Assassination had not occurred, the world would be no worse than it actually is<sup>9</sup>

3. If a morally perfect being knew that it was able to prevent a certain evil and knew that the world would be no worse if it prevented that evil than it would be if the evil occurred, it prevented the evil
4. If God exists, he knew at some point before the Assassination that it would occur unless he prevented it, and he knew that he was able to prevent it, and he knew that the world would be no worse if he prevented the Assassination than it would be if he did not prevent it
5. If God exists, he is a morally perfect being
6. If God exists, he prevented the Assassination
7. God did not prevent the Assassination

*hence,*

God does not exist.<sup>10</sup>

We may note that even if the agnostics accept EFW as a defense, that will not be of use to Theist when the debate has turned to the local argument—for EFW purports to explain why God allows a vast amount of evil to exist, but it does not even purport to explain why he allows any particular evil to exist. And (we may further note) if God had prevented the Assassination from taking place, the world would still contain a vast amount of evil. And, therefore, if God's purposes indeed require the existence of a vast amount of evil, those purposes would not have been frustrated by the prevention of the Assassination.

Theist has a reply to the local argument<sup>11</sup> that presupposes the correctness of his reply to the global argument but goes beyond it. And this reply turns on vagueness—which some readers of *The Problem of Evil* (the Critics among them) have found surprising.

If Theist's reply to the global argument is right, then, for all anyone knows, if there is a God, his purposes require the existence of a vast amount of evil. And, it was observed, if the Assassination were to have been prevented, there would still have been a vast amount of evil.<sup>12</sup> And so it would be if the world contained two fewer evils, or three fewer, or a thousand fewer, or a million. Nevertheless, this cannot go on forever (as they say). Elon Musk is vastly, absurdly rich. If he pays a fine of \$1.00, he will still be vastly, absurdly rich. If he pays a fine of \$2.00, he will still be vastly, absurdly rich. And so for fines of \$10, \$100, and 1 billion dollars. Nevertheless, this cannot go on forever. If (as of the day of writing) he pays a fine of 147 billion dollars, he will not be vastly, absurdly rich. And yet there is no dollar amount—\$143,299,983,211, for example—such that if Musk paid a fine in that amount (or any lesser amount), he would be vastly, absurdly rich, and if he paid a fine that was 1 dollar (or any number of dollars) greater, he would not be vastly, absurdly rich. There are people who are

vastly, absurdly rich and there are people who are not, and there is no sharp line that separates the former from the latter. In a precisely analogous way, there are worlds that contain a vast amount of evil and there are worlds that do not—and there is no sharp line that separates the former from the latter.

If, therefore, the world contains a vast amount of evil, and God in his benevolence wishes to reduce the evils of the world to the lowest level that is consistent with there being a vast amount of evil—well, he *won't* have that wish, since he'll know that there is no such “lowest level,” there is no least amount of evil that counts as “a vast amount.” What God will do—what God *can* do—is to make a morally arbitrary choice about how much evil the world is to contain. And that is something moral agents, human as well as divine, must sometimes do. (Atlantis is sinking. You are the captain of an evacuation vessel. There are 1000 people on the island. Your ship will accommodate 500 comfortably, and 600 with difficulty. If you let 650 people on board, there is a real danger that the ship will be swamped and everyone will die. If you let 700 on board, it is as nearly certain as anything can be in this life that everyone will die. And yet in no case will allowing *one* more person to come aboard significantly increase the danger to the ship as a whole. If there is a queue of people on the dock, clamoring to be allowed on board, you *must* shut the hatch in the face of someone whose life you could have saved—and saved at no significant risk to others.)

And that is what is wrong with premise (3) of the local argument: it forbids a “morally perfect” being to make a morally arbitrary choice as to how much evil the world will contain.

What I have said in this chapter is neither an adequate statement of the global and local arguments nor an adequate statement of Theist's response to the two arguments. But adequate statements of these two arguments and of Theist's response are not essential to the project of this chapter, for the Critics concede for the sake of argument the adequacy of Theist's response to the global and local arguments. These statements have been provided so that I may refer to various components of the two arguments in my discussion of the Range Argument.

## 11.2 The Range Argument

Let this be our statement of the range argument:

1. If God exists, the amount of evil in the world falls within a reasonable range
2. The amount of evil in the world does not fall within a reasonable range

*hence,*

God does not exist.



The Critics offer the following argument for (2)

Couldn't someone plausibly address God as follows:

I know that in order for your plan of atonement to succeed, the world must contain a vast amount of evil. I also know that for any particular horror I choose, your choice to include that horror may just have been the result of your drawing a morally arbitrary line. But what about the Holocaust? Did the world really need to include the Holocaust, with its billions of horrors? Surely a world without the Holocaust would still have contained a vast amount of evil—plenty to ensure the success of your plan of atonement. So doesn't it seem that including the Holocaust is just overkill?

We submit that the theist needs a defense against this charge and, significantly, neither van Inwagen's defense against the global argument nor the defense against the local argument will work in this case.

(2007: 472)

It seems to me that what this argument principally shows is that my formulation of the Extended Free Will Defense was defective—defective in that in describing the amount of evil that God would have to leave in place in order for his plan of atonement to succeed, I did not clearly distinguish between ‘a vast amount’ and ‘the actual amount’ (the actual amount of course being vast). I expect this failure was due to my tacit assumption that proponents of the global argument thought that the actual amount of evil was inconsistent with the existence of God simply because it was vast.<sup>13</sup> It did not occur to me that anyone might say, “Yes, although some vast amounts of evil are certainly inconsistent with the existence of God, it may well be that there other, smaller vast amounts (vast but *less* vast) that are not.”

To answer the range argument, it suffices to answer the “Holocaust” argument for premise (2). And to answer the Holocaust argument, it is necessary first to ensure that EFWD not say simply that God's purposes require a vast amount of evil, but to say explicitly that they require evil in an amount not significantly less than the actual amount. Let us use ‘Æ’ as a proper name for the actual amount of evil. A minor alteration to the statement of EFWD will suffice: namely, to replace

... but he must leave a vast amount [of evil] in place

with

... but he must leave in place an amount of evil that is not significantly less than Æ

The Critics' defense of premise (2) of the range argument must now affirm that someone could "plausibly address" God in these words:

I know that in order for your plan of atonement to succeed, the world must contain an amount of evil that is not significantly less than  $\mathcal{E}$ . I also know that for any particular horror I choose, your choice to include that horror may just have been the result of your drawing a morally arbitrary line. But what about the Holocaust? Did the world really need to include the Holocaust, with its billions of horrors? Surely a world without the Holocaust would still have contained an amount of evil that was not significantly less than  $\mathcal{E}$ —enough to ensure the success of your plan of atonement. So doesn't it seem that including the Holocaust is just overkill?

Suppose someone did address God in those words. That person has asked a question. One can sometimes make a philosophical point by asking a question ("Whence, then, is evil?"), but what one needs to *establish* a philosophical point is a *principle*—a *proposition*. In the present case, or so I judge, an "obligatory removal of superfluous evil" principle is what is required to establish the implication of the question—namely, that a being in the position God is in (in the EFW) would have been morally required to prevent the Holocaust. And—so I further judge—the principle is (or is at least very close to) this:

If one is aware that a certain holisometric<sup>14</sup> evil will exist unless one prevents it, and if one is aware that this evil could be prevented without making the world a worse place than it would have been if that evil had been allowed to exist, and if it is morally permissible for one to prevent that evil, then one ought to prevent it if one can.

Let us call this principle the Obligatory Removal of Superfluous Evil Principle (ORSEP). It seems to me that the speaker must be tacitly appealing to the ORSEP, or at least to something in the neighborhood of the ORSEP, owing to the fact that, 'Permitting the Holocaust to occur is "overkill"', means 'It isn't necessary for God to permit the Holocaust to exist in order to ensure that that the amount of evil in the world not be significantly less than  $\mathcal{E}$ .'

If the ORSEP and a few relatively uncontroversial truths about God (given his existence) and the world imply that God ought to have prevented the Holocaust, similar applications of the ORSEP imply that he ought to have prevented the Atlantic slave trade, ought to have prevented the Great Leap Forward, ought to have prevented the Yezhovshchina, ought to have prevented the Killing Fields, .... In fact, those who affirm the ORSEP are

committed to the thesis that God ought to have prevented *every* holisometric evil—for each of them is overkill. And I am fairly sure that a world in which there were no holisometric evils and was as much like the actual world as that condition allowed would contain significantly less evil than  $\mathcal{A}$ . But, according to EFWD, the Atonement is possible only if the evils of the world are not significantly less than  $\mathcal{A}$ . If therefore, God is to secure the existence of the atonement, he must allow some holisometric evils to occur: he must look at all the evils that (absent some action on his part) await his creatures and—as it were—draw a line through the midst of them and prevent those that lie on one side of the line from occurring and permit those that lie on the other to occur. (This visual model of the choice that confronts God is overly simple in at least this respect: a holisometric evil need not lie cleanly on one side or the other of an imaginary dividing line like ours. Suppose, for example, that God foresaw in 1930 that without his intervention a vast, composite evil that human beings would call ‘the Holocaust’ would occur, a pan-European horror that would result in the deaths of all 9 million of the Jews in Europe. And suppose that the line he subsequently drew was so placed that 3 million of those deaths fell on the “prevent” side and 6 million on the “allow” side. Is this a case of “the Holocaust” falling on the “allow” side of the line? That would be one way to fill out language of the “dividing line” metaphor, but in my judgment, there is a better way: say that in this case, the line *passed through* the Holocaust, resulting in its being diminished. In what follows, however, I’ll assume for the sake of simplicity that the line passes always *between* and never *through* holisometric evils.<sup>15</sup>)

The line God draws must be either *morally determinate* or *morally indeterminate*. It is morally determinate if it is the only line that it is morally permissible for God to draw, and otherwise morally indeterminate.

The only candidate I know of for a morally determinate line between the evils God prevents and the evils he permits is this: it is the line (the one line) such that the evils that lie on the “permit” side are collectively neither significantly less than or significantly greater than  $\mathcal{A}$ . (If they were significantly less, God’s plan of atonement would fail. And God’s benevolence will not allow them to be significantly greater.) But there is no such line: “significantly greater than  $\mathcal{A}$ ” and “significantly less than  $\mathcal{A}$ ” are vague requirements, and even a holisometric evil is small in comparison with  $\mathcal{A}$ . The line God draws, therefore, must be morally indeterminate. There must be holisometric evils that it would have been morally permissible for God to place on the either side. (I would expect that if anything like EFWD is actually true, every holisometric evil could be placed on either side, but the argument does not require this premise.)

The reply to the “Holocaust” argument for premise (2) of the range argument is this and no more: the Holocaust is one of the actual holisometric evils that it was morally permissible for God to have placed on

either side of the line. And this reply is by no means counterintuitive. Suppose, by way of an analogy, that you are required by some authority to supply an “enormous” pile of bricks at your own expense. When you ask what ‘enormous’ means, you are told, “Not significantly smaller than the White House.” It seems you can get a real bargain on bricks if you purchase them in 5000-brick “clumps,” the cost of a clump being \$3000 and the volume of a clump being about 4 cubic meters—about the volume of a mid-sized car. The volume of the White House, you discover, is 30,000 cubic meters. You therefore put in an order for 7500 clumps of bricks—at a cost of \$22,500,000. Your horrified financial adviser protests:

I know that you are obliged to supply an “enormous” pile of bricks. I also know that for any particular brick I choose, your choice to include that brick in the pile may just have been the result of your drawing a financially arbitrary line. But what about that clump of bricks that was just delivered? Did the enormous pile of bricks really need to include that clump, with its thousands of bricks? Surely a pile without that clump would still have been enormous—large enough to fulfill your obligation. So doesn’t it seem that purchasing that clump that is just over-spending?

Let no one say that I have compared preventing the Holocaust to saving \$3000. I am calling attention to the logical analogy between

There is a number  $n$  such that if God had prevented  $n$  of the holisometric evils that have actually occurred, the amount of actual evil would have been significantly less than  $\mathcal{A}$ ; there is no *smallest* number  $m$  of holisometric evils such that if God had prevented  $m$  of the holisometric evils that have actually occurred, the amount of actual evil would have been significantly less than  $\mathcal{A}$

There is a number  $n$  such that if I had refrained from purchasing  $n$  of the clumps of bricks I have actually purchased, the volume of the resulting pile would have been significantly less than that of the White House; there is no *smallest* number  $m$  such that if I had refrained from purchasing  $m$  of the clumps of bricks I have actually purchased, the volume of the resulting pile would have been significantly less than that of the White House.

### 11.3 Concluding Remark

Of course, one may protest, “That’s all very well, but the line is *just in the wrong place*. There’s simply *too much* evil in the world.” But if you say that, you are advancing the global argument, not the range argument.

Notes

- 1 See van Inwagen (1997).
- 2 Van Inwagen (2006).
- 3 Fischer and Tognazzini (2007).
- 4 ‘Argument from evil’ is a traditional phrase. In this phrase, ‘evil’ has the sense it has in ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’ and ‘The evil men do lives after them,’ and not the sense it has in ‘If ye, being evil, know how. . .’ and ‘the Evil One.’ It is rather a milk-and-water word. Let us say that in this chapter, ‘evil’ abbreviates ‘horrendous evil’—and that horrendous evils comprise, at least, murder, torture, oppression, persecution, injustice, war and the bombing of civilians, genocide, poverty, starvation, exploitation, racism, slavery, the subjugation of women, rape, child abuse, cruelty to animals, the totalitarian state, famine, pestilence, grave birth defects and hereditary pathologies, and deaths and life-threatening losses from natural disaster.
- 5 The phrase ‘*this* evil’ refers to some particular evil—the agonizing death of a fawn in a forest fire, it may be, or the Holocaust. Strictly speaking, therefore, there are many local arguments from evil, as many of them as there are evils. Use of the phrase ‘*the* local argument from evil’ is a device that enables me to avoid unwelcome syntactical complexity in many sentences in the remainder of this chapter.
- 6 *Nihil tam absurde dici potest, quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum*—Cicero. (I will allow this judgment to remain in the decent obscurity of a learned language).
- 7 “But if Theist is right, there has been no ‘crime’—since theism is not inconsistent with the observed facts.” Fair enough. But the same point applies to ordinary “alternative theories of the crime”—for they might imply that what seemed to the police and the District Attorney to be a murder was really a suicide or a freak accident. What ‘alternative theory of the crime’ really means is ‘alternative interpretation of the District Attorney’s evidence.’
- 8 Orwell thought that if he had been “a happy vicar two hundred years ago” he would not have lived in “an age like this.” For my part, however, I regard the age I was not born for as having lasted considerably longer than 200 years. If I had to guess, I’d say that it was something like 20 times as long as recorded human history. “I wasn’t born for an age like this. Was Puzur-Ashur? Was Yasmah-Adad? Were you?” “I wasn’t born for an age like this. Was Ptahhotep? Was Thutmose? Were you?”
- 9 It might be argued that this statement could well be false, since King’s death was a “world-historical” event, and, for any world-historical event, *some* of the worlds in which that event does not occur are significantly worse than the actual world. But anyone writing on the local argument will find that there are stylistic advantages in discussing a local argument that pertains to a well-known event, and I, at least, find a distinction between world-historical and well-known events problematical. Anyone who wishes to may substitute some fictional unknown event for the Assassination in our discussion of the local argument.
- 10 This argument is not *quite* formally valid. Formal validity would require the addition of a few premises like ‘If God knew that he was able to prevent the Assassination, he was able to prevent the Assassination.’
- 11 That is, he has a reply to *a* local argument, and the replies to any two local arguments are essentially the same. The reply in the text to the local argument based on the Assassination can serve as a template from which the reply to the local argument based on any given evil can be constructed.

- 12 According to the theory of vagueness called *epistemicism*, any such counterfactual is false in some possible worlds: for any individual evil *e*, there is a world in which (i) *e* occurs, (ii) there is a vast amount of evil, and (iii) there would not have been a vast amount of evil if *e* had not occurred. For my part, I do not take epistemicism seriously, but there is no need for us to discuss the pros and cons of epistemicism, for the local argument presupposes its falsity. If epistemicism is true, and if there is a vast amount of evil, then, for no evil *e* can there be a reason to assent to the proposition that if God's purposes require the existence of a vast amount of evil, those purposes would not have been frustrated by the prevention of *e*.
- 13 Note the wording of premise (2) of the presentation of the global argument in [Section 11.1](#) of this chapter.
- 14 That is, an evil roughly the same size as the Holocaust. I will assume, simply for the sake of illustration, that the Atlantic slave trade, the Great Leap Forward, the Yezhovshchina, and the Killing Fields were holisometric evils.
- 15 When I speak of God's "drawing" a line or of his "placing" an evil on one side of a line, this is a matter of literary convenience. I do not mean to imply that God chose every detail of where the—of course metaphorical—line should go. Suppose, for example, that the universe is indeterministic and that God foresaw the Assassination as a possibility—its occurrence and nonoccurrence being both consistent with the state of things at some point earlier than April 4, 1968, and chose neither to ensure that it occur nor to ensure that it not occur. Then it just happened. And it might just as easily have just happened that it *not* occur. Nevertheless, as idiom has it, God signed off on it; to use more traditional language, he *permitted* it to happen. For that reason, I say that he "placed" the Assassination on the "permit" side of the line.

## References

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