

Peter van Inwagen's Defense

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Here is a recipe for a simple and powerful argument against the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect god. Let x be any actual, contingent instance of suffering that does not contribute to any known outweighing good:

- (P1): x occurred and was a contingent and pointless evil – it did not, in fact, contribute to any outweighing good.
- (P2): If x occurred and was a contingent and pointless evil, then there is at least one possible world, w , where x does not occur and w is better than the actual world. That is, there is a possible world that realizes all of the goods of this world without the unnecessary suffering caused by x .
- (P3): An omnipotent, morally perfect creator did not create a world as good as w .¹
- (P4): If an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists and there is a world w without the contingent and pointless evil, the omnipotent, morally perfect creator would create a world at least as good as w .
- (C): No omnipotent and morally perfect creator exists.

With the recipe in hand, it is an easy (if perverse) exercise to find candidates for x . The Holocaust? The excruciating death of an isolated fawn in a forest fire? The rape and mutilation of a woman? Peter van Inwagen dubs arguments that follow roughly this schema “local arguments from evil,” because they depend crucially on identifying a particular instance of a pointless evil. Local arguments like the one surveyed are not particularly new; one lurks, for example, in the wings of Ivan Karamazov’s famous rejection of theism in Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But in the past few decades, the local argument has enjoyed a strong revival of philosophical interest. Nowadays, it is more often posed in probabilistic terms, as in Rowe (1979)’s version – if probably x is a pointless evil, then probably an

¹ Note that here I understand omniscience to be one aspect of God’s omnipotence.

omnipotent, morally perfect creator does not exist. In either the simple or probabilistic formulations, local arguments pose a bedeviling challenge for theists. The recipe's form is valid. So we must either reject one of the premises or accept the atheistic conclusion. And the premises each seem quite defensible. The world provides a panoply of seemingly pointless horrors to run the first premise. (P2) follows from a natural understanding of contingency and pointlessness. Only a strange sort of modal realist – someone who thought God created many possible worlds – would reject (P3).² And the final premise seems to follow from a plausible version of the principle of beneficence: all else equal, moral agents will try to bring about the best overall state of affairs that they can. God – if he exists – could bring about a world that lacked the contingent pointless evil in question, and presumably he could do this without making any comparable sacrifice. So if there were a God, he would have chosen to create a world better than one with contingent pointless evil.³ Together, the premises constitute one of the most challenging formulations of the problem of evil.

What should the theist do? Some philosophers like Wykstra (1984), Alston (1991), Howard-Snyder (1996), and Bergmann (2001) focus their attention on arguing that (P1) is unjustified. But rather than trying to explain the outweighing good for every candidate pointless evil (a monumental task!), their strategy is to convince us that we are not justified in taking ourselves to be reliable judges of what is all-things-considered good or bad (see Chapter 29). They insist that, *for all we know*, there is an outweighing good for every candidate for *x* and so, for all we know, there are no actual pointless evils. This strategy defuses the local argument. But it leaves the theist in an awkward position of claiming that, for all he knows, the Holocaust, the fawn, the rape and murder, and so on are justified by some outweighing good. Do we not know enough of how our moral universe works to confidently declare that these evils are morally unjustified? Some theists – myself included – find ourselves unsatisfied toeing the line that, for all we know, there are absolutely no pointless evils. Which raises a question: *must* theists hope there is a particular divine justification for each of the evils in our world?

Van Inwagen thinks not. He offers an innovative defense to the local argument that allows the theist to maintain that there are some pointless evils without falling into contradiction. His defense rests crucially on counterexamples to the moral principle that motivates (P4). In this chapter, I will consider van Inwagen's defense to the local argument from evil, situating his defense in the context of his thinking about problems of evil more generally. Here is how I will proceed. In the first section, I will outline van Inwagen's answer to the different, global argument from evil and his theory of what precisely a defense against a problem of evil must accomplish. In the second section, I will unpack van Inwagen's distinctive response to the local argument from evil. In brief, van Inwagen contends that God faced a kind of practical sorites problem in deciding which world to create, and for this reason, he could not eliminate every pointless evil. In the third section, I will consider three objections to van Inwagen's practical sorites approach to the local argument from evil, and I will suggest replies. Finally, in the fourth section, I will consider two possible extensions

² But see Hud Hudson's contribution to this volume.

³ Note that (P4) does not assume that if an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists, he will choose to create the best possible world. There may be no absolutely best possible world. The premise merely assumes that a morally perfect, omnipotent being would choose to create a world without pointless instances of suffering. See Rowe (2002) for discussion of the "no best world" arguments, which also raise problems for the principle of beneficence.

of van Inwagen's practical sorites model – it may give nonuniversalist theists a defense against the problem of Hell, and it may provide a way of reconciling the doctrine of the Fall with gradual human evolution. Because of limits of space and considerations of focus, I will not address two other noteworthy features of van Inwagen's defense: his theory of pre-Lapsarian animal suffering and his open theism. Both are philosophically important and controversial. But they are somewhat subsidiary to these other issues, and I can only recommend them to the reader for further research.

Van Inwagen and Skeptical Theism

Van Inwagen's thinking on the problem of evil develops over the course of several key papers, beginning with "The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy" published in 1988. The mature and comprehensive statement of his views comes in the 2003 Gifford Lectures and corresponding book: *The Problem of Evil*. Van Inwagen's work in this period fits closely with two trends in analytic philosophy of religion since the early 1970s, namely a renewed interest in free will defenses and the rise of different forms of skeptical theism. To understand van Inwagen's approach to the problem of evil, we must appreciate how he fits with these two trends.

Van Inwagen takes care to distinguish local arguments from evil (like the one surveyed in the introduction) from what he calls "the global argument from evil." The global argument runs as follows:

- (1) We find a vast amount of truly horrendous evil in the world.
- (2) If there were a God, we should not find vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world.
- (C) So, there is no God.

Most theists want to resist the second premise, and they can do this in one of two ways. The first strategy is to explain why the premise is false. The second strategy is to argue that given our limited evidence, we cannot know that the premise is true. Following Plantinga (1974), understand a *defense* as any possible proposition r , which if added to the proposition that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good entails that God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing it. *Theodacists* put forward a defense that they think is justified by their evidence. They attempt to explain evil in light of their religious beliefs. In contrast, *skeptical theists* apply a weaker standard – they put forward candidates for r that they insist cannot be ruled out by the available evidence (see Chapter 29). They do not further insist that their story is true or justified.⁴ This weaker standard is enough for r to be a counterexample to a given argument from evil. From Plantinga onward, a growing number of philosophers of religion have pursued skeptical strategies, and van Inwagen has been a leader in this movement.

An example makes the distinction between theodicies and mere defenses more clear. Suppose an atheist presses the global argument from evil. A theodacist might respond by

⁴ It is important to note that there is another, related sense of *skeptical theism* that does not apply to van Inwagen's theory. Some use the term as a label for theists like Wykstra, Alston, Howard-Snyder, and Bergmann who are skeptical about the truth of (P1) of the local argument from evil.

insisting that God wanted to create a world with free creatures and orderly laws of nature. Such a plan required God to create a chancy world, risking vast amounts of evil. Some evils arise directly from the abuse of his creatures' free wills. Other evils arise from natural disasters and his creatures' inability to cope with them. The theodicist says that, in fact, that was the divine plan. And though God could prevent any particular evil from occurring, eliminating most or all of the evil would prevent his creatures from exercising freedom, prevent them from having awareness of their morally distorted state, prevent them from participating in God's plan of redemption, and result in a massively disorderly world. Given that this story is justified, our theodicist concludes that the second premise of the global argument from evil is false. This is a full-blown free will theodicy (see Chapter 14).

The skeptical theist may offer a similar story to rebut the global argument from evil. But he will demure in insisting that *his* story is true or justified. Rather, he will say that, *for all any of us know*, this story about God's plan of creation and redemption is true. We are in no position to rule it out. So we should suspend judgment on the second premise of the global argument from evil. Whereas the theodicist claims to grasp some of God's reasons for allowing evil, the skeptical theist does not. Van Inwagen presses exactly this kind of defense in response to the global problem of evil. He calls it the "expanded free will defense," and he insists that, for all any of us know, it is true.

What should we make of the strategy? Ideally, theists would have full-blown theodicies on hand to answer arguments from evil. But at some point, our knowledge of God and his reasons runs out, and we must turn to mere defenses. If we no longer demand a high level of justification for the defense, how do we judge whether a particular defense is good or bad? Setting the appropriate burden has been a vexed issue. Presumably, the defense should not be trivial – *r* should not just be the proposition that God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing it. The defense should gesture at the content of a possible divine reason for allowing evil. And it needs to be the kind of story that for all we know is true. But it is not obvious how to interpret the "for all we know" standard. Van Inwagen's views about what a successful defense must accomplish evolve over the course of his writing.

In earlier work, like van Inwagen (1998b), he hews to the notion of a defense inaugurated by Plantinga. He insists that a successful skeptical theist defense to the global argument from evil must meet two criteria. First, the actual amount of suffering must be highly probable given the conjunction of theism and the defense. Second, we must not be in a position to tell how probable the defense is given theism. For many candidate defenses, van Inwagen does not think we are in a position to judge their probability given theism. This is because van Inwagen endorses a much more general modal skepticism; he insists that while we can judge the probability of certain propositions of ordinary life reliably (i.e., the probability that a light will turn on when the switch is flipped), we are not in a position to judge the probability of more esoteric philosophical propositions like those of the expanded free will defense. (See van Inwagen 1979; 1998a for more detailed exposition of his modal skepticism)

In *The Problem of Evil*, van Inwagen frames the theist's burden somewhat differently, though his later view is compatible with the earlier probabilistic approach. In the book, van Inwagen thinks that we should imagine the theist and atheist as participants in a forensic debate, offering and rebutting arguments on the proposition that God exists. He then defines a burden for philosophical success in such a debate:

An argument for p is a success just in case it can be used under ideal circumstances, to convert an audience of ideal agnostics (agnostics with respect to p) to belief in p – in the presence of an ideal opponent of belief in p . (van Inwagen 2006, 47)

A defense is successful with respect to a given argument from evil if and only if introducing the defense prevents the ideal agnostics from believing the conclusion of the argument. In applying this standard, it matters a great deal how we characterize the ideal agnostics. Van Inwagen proposes that they are an audience of very intelligent people from our time and culture. They possess a high degree of philosophical ability and intellectual honesty. Before the debate begins, they have no opinion on the question of whether God exists. They are willing to spend as much time as necessary considering the arguments offered by the ideal debaters. And they at least partly share van Inwagen's modal skepticism. Finally – though he is not as explicit about it – it is also clear that he imagines the ideal agnostics as scientifically informed and inclined to believe in laws of nature and modern evolutionary biology.⁵

The “ideal debate” apparatus has been a controversial part of van Inwagen's later approach to the problem of evil. For example, Swinburne (2007) objects that the ability to persuade an audience who has suspended judgment on many philosophically important matters should not count for or against a given philosophical argument, since it is hard to see that such an audience is “rational” in a contentful sense of the term. Further, there are particular aspects of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense that we may worry ideal agnostics would *not* suspend judgment about. For example, as part of his expanded free will defense, van Inwagen contends that for all we know, God miraculously raised a small breeding population of our earliest ancestors to rationality within a single generation, and this breeding population was responsible for a historical Fall – a first moment of mankind turning against God. (See van Inwagen 2006, 85–86.) This sudden Fall assumption reconciles two other components of the expanded free will defense. First, his defense contends that the Fall was a result of the misuse of man's rationality and freedom. Second, his defense includes a nonuniversalist assumption – if rebellious mankind does not freely cooperate with God's plan of redemption, they face eternal separation from God in the afterlife. If rationality and freedom emerged only very gradually, then there would be populations of our early human ancestors such that it is indeterminate whether they were rational and free and so indeterminate whether they could rebel or cooperate with salvation. But the afterlife options are presumably determinate; hence the apparent need for a sudden, determinate Fall.

Would ideal agnostics go along with the sudden Fall component of the free will defense? The success of van Inwagen's particular expanded free will defense depends crucially on how the ideal agnostics view evolutionary psychology. In particular, they must suspend judgment on whether humans developed the capacity for rationality and freedom rapidly and miraculously or whether it took many generations. To some, this may seem like an esoteric philosophical proposition meriting skepticism. But I suspect other readers will think this free will defense is likely to be ruled out by whatever mature theory of human evolution we ultimately settle on. In the fourth section, I will return to the question of what van Inwagen and his supporters ought to say about the Fall. I think he can make the

5 This comes out most clearly in Lecture 7 of *The Problem of Evil*.

expanded free will defense immune to evolutionary objections by expanding his response to the local argument from evil. It is this topic to which we now turn.

Pointless Evils and Practical Sorites Problems

Van Inwagen's response to the global argument from evil fits squarely with the popular skeptical theist trend in recent philosophy of religion. But when we turn to the local argument from evil, van Inwagen departs from the norm in a significant way. The most common strategy for addressing the local argument from evil focuses on the first premise: the assumption that there are identifiable, contingent, pointless evils. While many philosophers advance further skeptical hypotheses for explaining particular pointless evils, van Inwagen instead offers an explanation for why an all-powerful and loving God may nevertheless allow some contingent pointless evils. Indeed, a curious feature of van Inwagen's approach is he is unwilling to be skeptical about pointless evils when he is skeptical about so much else.

In his papers and book, van Inwagen is primarily concerned with what he calls "horrors"—pointless evils of a significant magnitude. Recall that it is part of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense that God had to permit some amount of evil in the world in order to implement his plan of creation and redemption. Does the expanded free will defense entail that the actual amount of evil was determinately required for realizing God's plans? According to van Inwagen, we have no reason to think it does. And if the amount of evil required by the expanded free will defense is indeterminate, then God is susceptible to a kind of practical sorites problem. For this reason, he may be required to allow pointless evils. In this section, I will unpack the practical sorites problem and show how it bears on the local argument from evil.

Before considering van Inwagen's argument, it will be helpful to have a theory of practical sorites problems. This theory is more general than any that van Inwagen formulates, but it will give us a common framework for understanding his cases. Let us define a *policy* as any rule of the form "If X, then bring about Y. Otherwise bring about Z." Call X the policy's *condition* and Y and Z its *mandates*. An example of a policy might be "If Joe goes to college, buy him a car. Otherwise do not." Practical sorites problems arise whenever an agent tries to apply a policy in a situation that meets the following criteria: (1) the policy's condition is susceptible of indeterminacy (including higher-order indeterminacy), (2) the policy is being applied in a context where its indeterminate cases exist, and (3) the policy only has determinate mandates.⁶ When trying to make a decision in such a situation, agents will inevitably be forced to arbitrarily choose among the mandates. To get a feel for how these problems come about, consider an example:

The Hoosier Hair Sorites

Suppose the state of Indiana decides to have a "Barely Not Bald" contest and to give a prize to the man with the least amount of hair on his head who is not bald. There is exactly one award and we are intent on giving it out. We first disqualify anyone with a

6 Or at least mandates that are more determinate than the condition.

very abnormal hair distribution – for example, we would not let a man with a single long hair tightly wrapped around his head compete. We then line up every man in the state of Indiana from hairiest to baldest. On the leftmost end of the line, we have a very hairy man. On the rightmost end, we have a man with a shiny pate. In between, there is a line of men from left to right who gradually have less and less hair. The policy we follow is this: *If someone is not bald and there is no not bald man with fewer hairs on his head, then give him the award. Otherwise, check the next man to the right.* Now suppose we work our way down the series from left to right, applying the policy to each man. Presumably the rightmost man and his neighbors should not get the award. As we move further down the series, at some point, we will need to give out the award. But which particular man deserves the award? For any man in the middle of the series, it seems arbitrary to say that he is not bald while his neighbor to the right is. You can imagine the first man to be classified as bald protesting: “But why don’t you pick me for the award – how could one or two hairs make a difference!”

Our policy for the Barely Not Bald contest meets the three conditions. The cutoff for baldness and its converse is susceptible of indeterminacy: while some people are definitely bald and some people are definitely not, many others are in the hair penumbra. Further, the policy is being applied in a context where indeterminate cases exist. And finally, there are only two determinate mandates—give the award or not. So it seems it is just not possible to give the award without making an arbitrary distinction. For any reasonable candidate for Barely Not Bald, there will be men to his right and left that seem equally deserving.

In the grand scheme of things, baldness sorites problems are insignificant. The practically minded can save headaches and tax dollars by just refusing to hold contests like Barely Not Bald. But van Inwagen thinks there are morally significant practical sorites problems that are harder to avoid, and these should lead us to question the moral assumption behind the fourth premise of the local argument from evil. Recall the premise:

(P4) If an omnipotent, morally perfect creator exists and there is a world w without the contingent, pointless evil, the omnipotent, morally perfect creator would create a world at least as good as w .⁷

(P4) seems true only if we assume that moral perfection requires that God eliminate every contingent pointless evil. But van Inwagen argues that when faced with a practical sorites problem, a moral agent is not obligated to eliminate every pointless evil. He proposes a series of cases to motivate his rejection of the assumption behind (P4). For example:

The Sentencing Official Sorites

Blodgett has committed a felonious assault and justice dictates that he now go to prison. Suppose you are an official charged with determining exactly how many days he spends

⁷ In fact, van Inwagen (2006, 98) directs his counterexample at the following principle: “If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally perfect creator would have left that horror out of the world he created – or at any rate he would have left it out if he had been able to.” I have condensed it for ease of exposition.

in prison. You intend to hand down the best overall sentence – the sentence that meets the standards of justice without causing Blodgett any pointless suffering. The policy you follow is this: *If n is a just sentence for assault and there is no shorter sentence that is just, then give Blodgett the sentence. Otherwise, check the policy for $n - 1$ days.* Some possible sentences are determinately unjust: 0 days is far too little and 100 years is far too much. Other sentences are in the penumbra: it is just not determinate whether they are the minimum just sentence. You begin by proposing a sentence of 1023 days. Blodgett protests that a sentence of 1022 days would also meet the standards of justice and would cause him slightly less suffering. So if you are committed to handing down the best overall sentence, you ought to reduce his sentence by at least one day. Blodgett can continue to file appeal after appeal of this nature. As the sentencing official, you will either be marched appeal-by-appeal to reduce his sentence to an unjustly low number of days or you will dig in your heels at an arbitrary point in the appeals process. (See van Inwagen 2006, 101–102 for discussion of the case.)

To make sure Blodgett serves some just sentence, you must allow him to serve at least one day in prison that causes him suffering and is not required by the dictates of justice. Judges often face a practical sorites because what counts as just admits of indeterminacy, actual crimes fall in the range of indeterminate cases, and the mandates of the law are highly determinate. It seems the rational way to respond to such situations is to enforce an arbitrary distinction among members of the indeterminate range. So here is a case where a powerful, morally motivated agent exists, there is an action that is overall better than the one the agent actually takes, but the agent is morally justified in his choice of action.

Van Inwagen thinks that for all we know, God is in a situation very similar to that of the sentencing judge. He argues that the expanded free will defense gives rise to a divine practical sorites problem:

The Divine Plan Sorites

Creating a world requires creating a world with some amount of evil. Suppose that amounts of evil are some aggregate of the number of instances of suffering and their magnitude, represented by non-negative integers. And suppose God adopts the following policy: *If n is an amount of evil that realizes my plan of creation and redemption and there is no lesser amount of evil that realizes the plan, then create the world with n evil. Otherwise check the policy for a world with $n - 1$ evil.* Some of the possible values for n determinately do not satisfy the condition for realizing God's plan. For example, God would not allow a world with little to no evil, since in such a world, free Fallen creatures would not appreciate the consequences of their actions or cooperate with the divine plan of redemption. Worlds on the other extreme are also impermissible: if world history were one continuous epoch of intense human suffering, then God would have no moral justification for creating the world. We may wonder exactly how much evil God needs to allow to realize his plan of creation and redemption. Van Inwagen thinks it is indeterminate whether the actual amount of evil is the amount that best serves God's plan of creation and redemption. And so there is a possible world with slightly less evil such that it also realizes God's plans. But God did not create that world. (See van Inwagen 2006, 106.)

Faced with practical sorites problems, the best we can do is arbitrarily choose one of the points in the indeterminate range to enforce the policy. In God's case, the mandates to create or not create are determinate, and the range of possible worlds to choose among is vast. For all we know, it is indeterminate whether the actual amount of evil is dictated by the expanded free will defense. So for all we know, a practical sorites problem led an omnipotent and morally perfect creator to create our world rather than a similar, slightly better one that is also in the indeterminate range. If the counterexample works, (P4) of the local argument from evil is false.⁸ Using van Inwagen's defense, theists can maintain that there are some pointless evils without succumbing to the local argument from evil.

Objections to van Inwagen's Defense

There are at least three objections one might raise to the practical sorites strategy for justifying pointless evils. I will present each in the voice of the objector, and then offer replies. Note that I assume that the objector agrees with the broadly consequentialist moral principle that motivates the local argument from evil surveyed in the introduction.

OBJECTION 1: *Van Inwagen's account of pointless evils does not improve upon the usual skeptical theist responses.*

All van Inwagen shows is that *for all we know*, there may be pointless evils because, for all we know, the expanded free will defense is true and God faced a practical sorites problem. He still does not give us any claim to be justified in believing the Holocaust, the fawn, or the rape and murder *are* pointless evils. So he has not improved on the usual skeptical responses to the local argument from evil—the responses which insist that for all we know there are no identifiable, contingent, and pointless evils.

REPLY: He has improved on the usual skeptical theist strategy, because van Inwagen's response to the local argument from evil could be taken up just as well by a theodist, someone who thinks they are justified in their beliefs about why God permits evil. A theodist could insist that the actual world is probably in the range of worlds that fulfill God's plan of creation and redemption, and that some evils are, nonetheless, gratuitous. So on its own, pointless evil does not provide evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, morally perfect creator. So the local argument is defanged for the skeptical theist and theodist alike.

OBJECTION 2: *A divine moral sorites would entail that divine justice is defective.*

There is an important disanalogy between the case of the sentencing official and the case of God. The sentencing official must operate with an imperfect standard of justice. He only has to make an arbitrary distinction between sentences because his policy's condition was imperfectly formulated. Indeed, if a given policy is susceptible to a sorites problem, that *shows* that the policy is imperfect. It reflects the limitations of the policymaker. But the divine policy of creation and redemption is perfect, and the divine policymaker is without defect. Therefore, God's policy of creation and redemption cannot be susceptible

⁸ For quite different reasons, Adams also argues that God is not morally obligated to create the best world he can. Adams's argument assumes a nonconsequentialist value theory and contends that God has duties to actual people, but no parallel duties to merely possible people in nearby worlds. See Adams (1972).

to a sorites problem. The examples of practical sorites problems that van Inwagen adduces are no evidence that God must allow pointless evils.

REPLY: Why think that a policy's sorites-susceptibility entails that it is defective? The objection assumes that God would only formulate policies with determinate conditions and mandates, but van Inwagen argues that nothing in our understanding of God's nature requires this. As he puts it in van Inwagen (1995a, 103), "One might as well suppose that if God's purposes require an impressively tall prophet to appear at a certain time and place, there is a minimum height that such a prophet could have." We may even have reason to believe that some of God's policies must be indeterminate. For example, in van Inwagen (1995b), he suggests that part of God creating and maintaining a chancy world with free agents consists in him issuing indeterminate decrees. An indeterminate decree is a decree with a disjunctive form. For example, God may decree, "In March, let Alice accept a bribe or let her reject it." The upshot of an indeterminate decree is that God can be thought to be sustaining Alice (and everything else) through his decrees. But he cannot be thought to have willed that Alice accept the bribe, should that disjunct come about. If you think, like van Inwagen, that God can sustain the world by something like indeterminate decrees, then you ought to agree that the mere fact that a policy is indeterminate does not entail that it is defective.

OBJECTION 3: *Van Inwagen's defense is incompatible with prominent theories of indeterminacy.*

This last objection is somewhat more complex, but just as urgent. What view of indeterminacy does van Inwagen have in mind when he insists that it is indeterminate how much evil realizes the divine plan? Up until now, we have been somewhat cagey about how we should understand indeterminacy. But neither of the two most popular accounts of indeterminacy – the semantic theory and epistemicism – support van Inwagen's argument. And absent a convincing theory of indeterminacy, we should not believe that God is susceptible to a practical sorites problem. Take each of the two popular theories in turn.

On the semantic theory, indeterminacy is a feature of language that results from semantic indecision. (See Fine 1975 and Lewis 1993 for formulations of this theory.) A sentence is indeterminate if and only if there are multiple candidate meanings for one of its terms, and on some candidate meanings, the sentence is true, and on others, it is false. For example, the sentence "1023 days is a just sentence for assault" may be indeterminate because there are multiple candidate meanings for the predicate *is a just sentence for assault*. On some admissible interpretations for the predicate, 1023 counts as just. On other interpretations, only values less than 1023 are admissible. According to the semantic approach, the judge faces a practical sorites problem because the meanings of our predicates of justice are underdetermined. If we settled the meanings of all of the terms in his policy, he would no longer need to arbitrarily choose a sentence. He could choose whatever lowest value falls in the interpretation of the predicate *is a just sentence for assault*.

We cannot carry over this analysis to the case of God's plan of creation. According to the defense, God permits pointless evils because God faces a practical sorites problem – a problem of applying a policy with indeterminate conditions. And according to the semantic theory, indeterminacy can be resolved if language is made more precise. But there is no reason to think that truths about the moral permissibility of pointless evil depend on how language is fixed. For example, suppose the actual amount of evil is n . And suppose future generations of speakers come to fix the meaning of the predicate *is a necessary amount of evil to realize the divine plan* to include only numbers slightly less than n . Then on every

admissible meaning of the predicate, the sentence "The actual amount of evil is necessary to realize the divine plan" will be false. Would God then be immoral for creating the actual world when he determinately could have done better? Why should truths about God's justice depend at all on our linguistic practices? Perhaps the proponent of the semantic account of vagueness will respond that God's policy is stated in his own intractably indeterminate language, and that is why truths about divine justice are not hostage to changes in our human language. But then we are left defending the thesis that God has a unique language and he refuses to specify the meaning of some terms in it. This seems like a stretch.

Epistemicism is the second prominent theory of indeterminacy. According to epistemicism, there is a single denotation for every term, but indeterminacy comes about because some terms are such that it is impossible to know their denotation. The meanings of some terms are fixed in an inscrutable way. (See Williamson 1994.) For a toy example: an epistemicist might contend that there is a number of days that constitutes a minimum just prison sentence for assault, but we will never know the number, because it is impossible to know how the meaning of *is a just sentence for assault* was fixed. As with the semantic theory, it is hard to see how the epistemicist could make sense of van Inwagen's claim that God is susceptible to a practical sorites. First, God is omniscient, so presumably even if we do not know how the meanings of our terms have been fixed, he does. He knows every detail of the causal-historical processes, the intentional states, and the semantic laws that went into fixing our shared language. Second, according to epistemicism, there is an amount of evil that realizes God's plan of creation and redemption. So if God allows even one evil beyond this amount, he is not morally perfect. He did not create the unique and objectively best world.

On either of the two most common theories of vagueness, practical sorites problems do not convincingly explain why God would allow pointless evils.

REPLY: In response to this objection, van Inwagen and his supporters ought to take a skeptical stance toward the underlying theories of indeterminacy. Everyone involved in this debate can admit that the debate over vagueness is far from decided, and both the semantic theory and epistemicism have counterintuitive consequences. The semantic theory requires revision of our standard theories of truth, since it requires sentence truth be judged relative to precisifications of meaning. And epistemicism forces us to admit there is a single fixed denotation for terms like "bald" and "just." As it turns out, van Inwagen is neither an epistemicist nor a proponent of the semantic theory. (At one point, in considering the theories, he urges readers to "Let us leave them and return to the bright world of good sense." See van Inwagen 2006, 107.) In other work on composition and ontology, he defends a theory of metaphysical vagueness (e.g., see sections 17–19 of van Inwagen (1990)). Van Inwagen thinks there is a kind of indeterminacy *in the world* – indeterminacy that is not a function of ignorance or underdetermined language. According to proponents of metaphysical vagueness, even if we knew the meanings for all of our terms, it may still not be determinate whether a certain man is bald, whether a certain punishment is just or whether a certain world has the amount of evil that best realizes the divine plan. This theory of metaphysical vagueness will mesh with his defense to the local argument from evil. And faced with trading one of the popular, but nonetheless counterintuitive theories of vagueness for a novel and powerful response to the local argument from evil, I suspect some theists will happily strike the bargain. Still those who would take van Inwagen's defense are left with the difficult task of explaining metaphysical indeterminacy. This is among the most pressing worries for his theory.

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Applications: Universalism and the Fall

Suppose you have been convinced that van Inwagen has a viable response to the local argument from evil. How far can the practical sorites strategy extend? One of the more interesting variants of the argument from evil targets nonuniversalists – theists who believe in a populated Heaven and a populated Hell. Presumably, God has the power to determine who will be saved and who will be damned. Eternal damnation seems to many a particularly unjust evil that God not only permits but facilitates. And the threat of Hell features as a part of van Inwagen's expanded free will defense. (See van Inwagen 2006, 89.) Though van Inwagen never addresses the problem of Hell directly, his defense against the local argument from evil has an interesting application to traditional theist views of the afterlife. In this final section, I will tentatively survey this application. I will also suggest a related argument that improves the prospects for reconciling the expanded free will defense with gradual human evolution.

Sider (2002, 59) poses the following challenge for nonuniversalism: "any just criterion must judge created beings by a standard that comes in degrees, or admits of borderline cases; but no such criterion can remain simultaneously just – or at least non-arbitrary – and consistent with the nature of the (non-universalist) afterlife." Sider develops this into an argument against nonuniversalist theism. In particular, he targets nonuniversalists who believe that (1) the afterlife is binary (there are exactly two possible eventual outcomes for a person – determinately go to Heaven or determinately go to Hell), (2) where a person ends up is determined in some part by how he lives his life, and (3) God's rewards and punishments are just. Sider's argument runs as follows:

- (1) Whatever matters to salvation varies by degrees. For any criterion God may sensibly use to judge us, there is a sorites series of saints and sinners – an ordering of persons from most to least deserving of salvation and that ordering admits of gradual changes. (e.g., we might order people by how many good works they performed, how often they prayed, the intensity of their devotion, their degree of cooperation with the plan of salvation, or any combination of criteria).
- (2) Given nonuniversalism, there must be some sharp cutoff in the series such that individuals before that point go to Heaven and individuals after that point go to Hell. Call the person closest to this point on the Heaven side "A" and the person closest to this point on the Hell side "B".
- (3) Going to Heaven is a drastically better outcome for a person than going to Hell.
- (4) Given (3), B is overall much, much worse off than A.
- (5) But given (1), B is very similar to A with respect to whatever matters most to salvation.
- (6) Justice requires that the magnitude of a benefit or punishment should be proportional to the desert of the agent. If two individuals have similar moral standing, they should receive similar punishments or rewards.
- (7) Given (4) and (5), whatever criterion God imposes to distinguish A and B will violate a requirement of justice.
- (C) So there is no just criterion, and nonuniversalist theism is false.

There are ways to resist the argument. One might, for instance, deny the first premise and insist that salvation is a grace freely given to some and it is not at all determined by how

a person lives. One might deny that the ordering of saints and sinners is a sorites series and so insist that there is a great moral difference between A and B. One might even deny that Hell is much, much worse than Heaven for those who end up there.

But if a theist opts into van Inwagen's defense for the local argument from evil, he will have an economical means to block the argument at premise (6). The considerations that explain why God would not eliminate every pointless evil also explain why the criterion of proportional justice may not apply in sorites contexts. The defense runs as follows:

The Nonuniversalist Defense

God has a criterion for salvation. And he has a policy of enforcing it that goes as follows: If a creature meets the criterion for salvation, then admit him to Heaven. Otherwise he will end up in Hell. In creating a chancy world with free creatures and orderly laws of nature, God risked creating people that would not meet that criterion. For all we know, that is his plan and this is the world he created. And for all we know, just as it is not determinate that there is a minimum number of horrors required to realize the divine plan, it is not determinate that there is a minimum cutoff for satisfying the criterion of salvation. For any person in the indeterminate range that God saves, he may just as well have saved a slightly worse person who is also in that range. But this is no moral flaw of God's, because – given that the criterion of salvation is indeterminate – it is not possible to always satisfy the proportional justice principle. In practical sorites situations, moral agents must arbitrarily discriminate between points in the series. For all we know, God faces a practical sorites in his plan of salvation. So, for all we know, premise (6) of Sider's argument is false.

The defense is very similar to the one offered for God's plan of creation and redemption. What is troubling is the stark difference between the mandates. In the original world-creation case, the nearby worlds merely suffer the misfortune of not being created. In the nonuniversalist case, person B suffers the actual misfortune of eternal damnation. And whereas in the previous cases, there seemed to be good reason to avoid the forced march to one extreme or another of the sorites series, in the case of Heaven and Hell, there does seem to be a good reason to prefer one extreme – it strikes many theists that there is good reason for God to choose a policy that admits everyone to Heaven. I do not wish to defend this in any detail as solution to the problem of Hell. Nor do I think that van Inwagen would particularly welcome it. But rather, I hope it shows the creative and fecund applications of the practical sorites defenses.

We can push the applications still further, and with respect to this second application, I am more optimistic that theists get something of real value. Recall that as van Inwagen formulates it, the expanded free will defense requires a single generation in human history when God miraculously raised our ancestors to rationality and freedom, precipitating their Fall. Some historical Fall assumption features in many orthodox Christian theodicies, and a sudden Fall seems indispensable to many philosophers who think that our special moral relationship with God is a function of our rationality and freedom. After all, the afterlife outcomes are determinate. But if rationality only developed gradually over a long period of evolutionary history, presumably there could be many generations of our human ancestors for whom it was only indeterminate whether they were rational and moral. How should God treat such creatures? Do they merit salvation or damnation? Or should they

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be treated however mere animals are treated? If God's differential treatment of rational and nonrational creatures is to be just, it seems we must assume that the event of the our attaining freedom, rationality, and moral responsibility was sudden. It must have been the kind of event that could create a sharp distinction between humans with an intimate relationship to God and mere creatures. Still, as noted back in the first section, this sudden Fall assumption creates grave worries for the expanded free will defense, because a sudden Fall is in tension with any evolutionary account of human psychology that entails we developed our moral capacities very, very gradually.

But if the practical sorites defense is viable, then it can be used to argue that the sudden Fall assumption is dispensable. Suppose there was no pair of generations in human anthropology such that it was determinate that our ancestors were nonrational creatures, and then it was determinate that our ancestors were rational agents. Suppose, rather, that there was an epoch – probably a quite long one – such that it was indeterminate whether humans were rational enough to be held morally responsible. This need not threaten orthodox teachings about the Fall, since it may still be that for some generation in that indeterminate range, God deemed those creatures to be sufficiently developed to be held morally responsible for their actions. God did not have to pick that generation; other generations slightly earlier or later were very similar with respect to every trait that matters, and they might just as well have been chosen. In determining when man bore his image, God made an arbitrary but nevertheless morally acceptable distinction when faced with a practical sorites problem. The upshot? Those attracted to the free will defense need not think human rationality appeared suddenly and miraculously; we might just as well assume that God arbitrarily chose a generation in the indeterminate epoch to start holding mankind responsible.

What lessons should we take from all of this? Van Inwagen's approach to the local argument from evil has potentially far-reaching theological implications – affecting not only how we think of the problem of pointless evils, but also how we think about arguments for universalism and the Fall. His overall approach offers us a model of providence where an all-powerful and morally perfect God must implement determinate policies in a world of intractable indeterminacy. This model will not please every theist, but it is an innovative version of the longstanding free will defense. And for those of us inclined to think that we are somewhat reliable detectors of pointless evils around us, van Inwagen's defense has much to recommend it.

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