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NECESSARY GRATUITOUS EVIL: AN OXYMORON REVISITED

Keith Chrzan

William Hasker argues that if God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, then morality is undermined. If morality is a great enough good that God need not prevent gratuitous evil, then atheistic arguments from the existence of gratuitous evil cannot succeed. Hasker's argument confuses the issue, however, because gratuitous evils not necessary for the preservation of morality exist and suffice to support an evidential atheistic argument.

In his recent contribution to this journal,¹ William Hasker discusses the concept of gratuitous evil and its relation to theodicy. Specifically, he attempts to blunt William Rowe's² atheistic use of gratuitous evil by arguing that gratuitous evil is necessary. Hasker's paper is rife with clever arguments but his central argument contains a flaw. Because he equivocates in defining "gratuitousness," Hasker's argument succumbs to a very slightly modified version of Rowe's argument.

Hasker opposes William Rowe's "evidential argument from evil." If we let gratuitous evil mean evil "not necessary for the creation of a greater good or for the prevention of some equal or greater evil,"³ Rowe's evidential argument from evil goes like this:

Gratuitous evils exist;
God would prevent gratuitous evil;
Therefore there is no god.⁴

The gist of Hasker's case occurs in this argument:

1. "God has arranged things in such a way that human beings make morally significant free choices between good and evil".
2. "In order for human choices to be morally significant, morality must not be undermined".
3. "If God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, then morality is undermined".
4. Therefore, "it is not the case that God is morally required to prevent gratuitous evil."⁵

If no evils were gratuitous, any evil would necessarily lead to a greater good and the prohibition against, say, harming others, would be unintelligible.



Hasker follows Michael Peterson's lead in suggesting that the free will defense may be stretched to justify God's permission of gratuitous evil.⁶ He has even taken things a step further and suggested the mechanism whereby free will justifies gratuitous evil.

First, just as Peterson does,⁷ Hasker equivocates on the meaning of gratuitous evil. After telling us that gratuitous evil is evil not necessary for the production of greater good, Hasker argues that it *is* necessary for preventing the undermining of morality. If an evil is justified because morality is undermined in its absence, it is odd to construe that evil as gratuitous: preventing the undermining of morality seems like a pretty great good.

Let's call gratuitous evil necessary for the maintenance of morality "necessary" gratuitous evil; and let "unnecessary" gratuitous evil denote gratuitous evils not necessary for the maintenance of morality. Now there are two clearly defined sets of gratuitous evil, those necessary and those unnecessary for the maintenance of morality. Rowe's case can be reconstructed from unnecessary gratuitous evil, and the problem of evil arises anew (note that, but for the equivocation noted earlier, it would be the *same* problem). Unnecessary gratuitous evil suffices to contradict the existence of God.

Hasker addresses the issue of unnecessary, or "excessive" amounts of gratuitous evil. He argues that to reconstruct Rowe's argument from excessive amounts of gratuitous evil one would have to know both what an optimal amount of gratuitous evil is (the amount that, just barely, keeps morality from being undermined) and that actual gratuitous evil exceeds that optimal amount. He goes on to show the problems that would undermine morality if moral agents would or could know both of these things.

But clearly one does not need to know both of these things to refashion Rowe's argument. One can imagine examples of knowing that something is too much without knowing the exact right amount. Hasker thinks such examples have in common a "feature which vitiates" their use: they describe a situation wherein there is no exact right amount.⁸ But consider this example: heartworm pills contain arsenic—a little in a dog's bloodstream kills the larval parasites without adversely affecting the dog. I carelessly give my dog Fyodor some heartworm pills without reading the dosage information. If I find Fyodor dead of arsenic poisoning, I can safely conclude that I've given Fyodor too many heartworm pills, more than an optimal amount. I can conclude this even without consulting the dosage, information printed on the box of pills. Note that in this example, however, there is an exact right amount of heartworm medicine, the dosage that is optimal. One can imagine countless other examples: I know I've taken too much time to get to the movie theater when Mel Gibson has already killed the bad guys, even if I don't know what time the movie started (the *exact* time listed in this morning's paper), etc.

Nor do we need such artificial examples to conclude that Hasker is wrong

about excessive gratuitous evil. Recall that excessive gratuitous evil is the gratuitous evil that exists over and above the (minimum) amount necessary to prevent the undermining of morality. This implies that excessive (unnecessary) gratuitous evil exists if any diminution in the amount of gratuitous evil fails to undermine morality. In just one of his several feats of mass homicide, Stalin conducted a terror-famine that killed 7 million Soviet peasants in the 1930's. A decade later, in addition to starting a war costing tens of millions of lives, Hitler murdered 6 million Jews; and 30 years after that, Pol Pot slaughtered perhaps 2 million of his subjects. If one fewer small child had perished in each of these atrocities, would morality be undermined? What about 1,000 fewer small children in each? No one (but God) knows what an optimal amount of gratuitous evil might be, but pretty clearly morality would not be undermined had fewer children died in any, or each, of these horrors. Gratuitous evils could have been fewer with no undermining of morality, so excessive, unnecessary gratuitous evil exists.

We can safely conclude that there is too much gratuitous evil, that some actual gratuitous evil is excessive, or unnecessary, unless we can answer "Yes" or even "Gee, I'm not sure" to some such question as "Would morality be undermined by a Holocaust of 5 million lives, a terror-famine of 4 million souls and/or a Cambodian depopulation of only a million lives?" There is so much unnecessary gratuitous evil, however, that we are nowhere near the point where such questions are even slightly difficult. Suppose conclusive evidence emerges that the lunatic fringe has been right all along, that the Holocaust never occurred. Would Hasker think morality undermined, or consider morality even slightly impaired? Would he begin to construct atheistic arguments because of his conviction that significant moral freedom did not exist? Pretty obviously not. I conclude that unnecessary gratuitous evil exists, and God does not.

Clearly we need not know the optimal amount of gratuitous evil to know that what we have is too much. Hence Hasker's case against reconstructing Rowe's argument from unnecessary or excessive gratuitous evil fails. So Hasker's argument succumbs to a Phoenix-like resurrection of the argument from unnecessary gratuitous evil and it fails to stop the evidential problem of gratuitous evil.

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NOTES

1. William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), pp. 23-44.

2. William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 333-41.

3. Hasker, p. 24.

4. Rowe, p. 336.

5. Hasker, p. 30.

6. Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 105.

7. Keith Chrzan, "When is a Gratuitous Evil Really Gratuitous," *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24 (1988), pp. 87-91.

8. Hasker, footnote 27, p. 43.