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EKSTROM ON FREE WILL AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Thomas D. Senior

Laura Ekstrom's book, *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*, is an important contribution to the literature on the problem of evil. In particular, she calls into question the assumption of the value of free will that virtually all defenses and theodicies depend upon (explicitly or not). In this critical reply, I will hit on three topics: skeptical theism and immediately justified belief in pointless evil, the hybrid response to the problem of evil, and the legitimacy of living a religious life without believing that "God exists" is objectively true.

§1. Skeptical Theism and Immediately Justified Belief in Pointless Evil

In my paper "Skeptical Theism, CORNEA, and Common Sense Epistemology," I defended a relatively standard skeptical theist response to the problem of horrors and clueless evils (horrors are intense suffering of individuals, mass suffering and death; clueless evils are evils that we find ourselves clueless about what could justify them). First, I argue against the claim that belief that certain evils are pointless can be immediately justified or properly basic. Second, I defend the standard skeptical theist line that we aren't in a position to reasonably infer that evils are pointless on the basis of our having no good idea what reason God could have for justifiably allowing them. Ekstrom thinks I'm wrong on both accounts (see 103–112).

My first point focuses on a paper of Trent Dougherty's in which he argues that what he calls "common sense epistemology" licenses the belief that some evils are pointless in a way that makes them immediately justified or properly basic.¹ According to Dougherty, commonsense epistemology is committed to the following principle: if it seems to S that P, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing that P. This principle is sometimes called the principle of credulity and the belief that it is true goes by the moniker "phenomenal conservatism."

¹Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism."



I think phenomenal conservatism is neither commonsensical nor true. Briefly, my position is that there are certain classes of appearances that do generate *prima facie* justification, but there are many others that don't. When, in standard conditions, I see my copy of *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will* on my desk (i.e., when I have a visual appearance that the book is on the desk), my belief is *prima facie* justified. But if it always seems to a racist that people with a certain skin color are not trustworthy (i.e., if they appear untrustworthy to the racist) the racist is not thereby *prima facie* justified in each of her specific racist beliefs about the untrustworthiness of the individuals she sees.

On my view, a significant part of human cognitive development involves learning which seemings are to be taken seriously and which aren't. A natural thought here is that the seemings that generally produce true beliefs are epistemically significant, while seemings that tend to produce false beliefs are not. If this is right, then the appearance of pointlessness regarding an instance of evil generates *prima facie* justification only if it is grounded in a reliable process or capacity. But why should we think that we have a justifying-reasons-for-evil tracker? Even given theism, there's no reason to think we are so equipped. Note that I'm *not* claiming here that there is no good reason to think some evils are pointless; for all I've said so far, perhaps there is good reason. The present point is simply against the claim that an appearance of pointlessness is sufficient for *prima facie* justification.

Ekstrom objects to my use of racist intuitions in this context because there are significant disanalogies between them and the appearances of the pointlessness of evils. For the record, I agree with her on this. But the point of the racist appearances discussion of my paper was broader in scope. It was intended to be a counterexample to the unrestricted principle of credulity/phenomenal conservatism. And it was that principle that Dougherty invoked in his defense of the claim that belief that an evil is pointless is immediately justified.

§2. *The Hybrid Response*

One of the important points that Ekstrom makes in her book is that in responding to the problem of evil, it is not enough to argue, for example, that free will is necessary for (say) morally significant action. For even if that argument succeeds, it won't be a viable response to the empirical problem of evil unless a case can be made that the pain and suffering that is generated as the result of free will is outweighed by the morally significant action that it allows. And given the amount, intensity, and distribution of pain and suffering, that looks like a hard case to make.

I think this point has not been appreciated in the literature and Ekstrom is right to insist that any theodicy of the form "good G couldn't be had (at least feasibly) without putting up with some evil" is inadequate without making plausible the further claim that "the obtaining of G is worth the

cost of allowing the amount, intensity, and distribution of suffering that we find at the actual world." I suggest that the reason this point has been overlooked is this: the logical problem of evil (as discussed by Mackie and Plantinga) doesn't depend on any claim about quantity or quality of evil; if it is successful, it shows that the existence of *any* evil is incompatible with the existence of God. On the other hand, discussions of the evidential problem of evil tend not to rely heavily on considerations of free will, at least not as the primary good they extol. The main responses to the evidential problem tend to emphasize goods of soul-making or communion with God—or else eschew the need to specify a God-justifying good altogether by claiming that given the gulf in understanding between God and humans, we shouldn't expect to know what those goods are even if they exist.

Now, as Ekstrom has noted, the goods of soul-making and communion with God (and others used as responses to the evidential problem) apparently presuppose that free will is required to secure those goods. So, again, the value of free will surfaces even when it is not the primary point of contention.

On the face of it, one would expect a successful theodicy to make use of multiple goods, as opposed to a single God-justifying reason. This seems plausible to Ekstrom too. But I think that she does not fully appreciate all the ways in which a world without free will is inferior to a world with creatures who at least sometimes possess libertarian freedom.

Before I defend that last claim, I offer a caveat. As someone who is sympathetic to skeptical theism, I risk inconsistency here. On the one hand, I'm inclined to think we shouldn't have confidence that if there were God-justifying reasons for every evil, we'd be able to know/justifiably-believe/understand them. But I'm now going to talk about the fundamental choices that confronted God at creation and what God would have had better reason to do. How is this not philosophical hypocrisy?

The skeptical theism that I endorse is perhaps more tentative than what others accept. I certainly don't claim that it is obviously true. Nor do I think it is clear that we are never in a position to imagine whatever God-justifying goods there are. Maybe in making us in God's image, God has granted us epistemic access to the important range of goods and values. But, by my lights, the skeptical theist's claim is at least as plausible as is the claim that these goods are within our epistemic reach. And given the dialectic, that seems to me all the theist needs to have a substantial reply to the evidential challenge. But even if that's sufficient for having a "substantial" reply, it's not clear exactly what precisely "substantial" comes to here and the theist shouldn't be satisfied with that if she can do better. An argument that it is more rational to accept skeptical theism than it is to think the range of divine goods is in our cognitive kin is something for which the skeptical theist should strive.

Now back to my main reply to the claim that hybrid accounts are insufficient as a response to the problem of evil. It seems to me that, on the face

of it (i.e., as far as I can make out), when deciding what kind of creation to bring about, God is faced with these three big-picture choices (among countless others, of course). Either God could create a deterministic world or an indeterministic world. Were God to choose the latter, God would have yet another choice to make: either the indeterministic events would enable libertarian freedom or they would not (e.g., God would bring about such a world if God were to create a universe containing quantum indeterminacy but no agents with libertarian freedom). God might have pretty good reasons to create each of these three world types. The indeterministic world without libertarian freedom would be a world with no evil and yet might provide God with a canvas with great beauty that also gave God surprises (on the assumption that indeterministic events are not foreknowable and might sometimes have surprising outcomes). On the other hand, God may want a world that was fully under God's authority and control and so God completes a canvas exactly to God's liking. God could do this by creating a deterministic world either with or without creatures with compatibilist freedom.

What's in it for God if God creates a deterministic universe? As suggested earlier, maybe creation is God's self-created canvas and divine artistic expression is the purpose. Or maybe God is like a nerdy kid who loves Erector Sets and LEGO bricks, and has maximal ingenuity when it comes to engineering a universe. Or maybe God is the ultimate writer/director who wants to produce the drama than which none greater can be staged. So, there are imaginable goods that God could bring about in a deterministic universe. From what I can tell, these same goods could be had in an indeterministic universe without libertarian creatures. And, as mentioned above, God could also have the pleasure of being surprised if the indeterminism had interesting and unpredictable results.

Would these creative projects be worthy of the greatest possible being? I have no idea. But I do think that the kind of world that God could create if God were to create libertarian free agents would have much to say for it compared to a world without them. (In what follows I will use "freedom" and "free" to denote libertarian freedom.)

This list will be of no surprise to Ekstrom, but I find it more compelling than she does. Here is a catalog of goods that can be found only in a world with free agents.

1. Created agents who engage in loving relationships with God (and each other) without being coerced or otherwise causally necessitated to do so. Now I agree with Ekstrom that there are many manifestations of love that do not require free agency. The love I have for my wife, my children, and my grandchildren are not (direct) products of my will (free or otherwise). But the relationships I have with those folks are significantly enhanced by the loving things we do for each other, and if those actions are freely undertaken, their value increases dramatically.
2. Created agents are able to be causally and morally responsible (to a degree) for the kind of character they have and the persons they become.

3. Created agents have the ability to work cooperatively and corporately for the good (that is, just as it is a good thing when agents freely do the good individually, it is good (perhaps greater) when many agents work together to do a good thing they couldn't do acting only as individuals).
4. Created agents are, to an extent, individually responsible for the way that the world turns out.
5. Created agents are, to a greater extent, corporately responsible for the way the world turns out.
6. Created agents are able to do good acts for which they are responsible and deserve moral praise.

Created agents who have the abilities enumerated above are considerably greater agents than those whose actions, characters, and accomplishments are all the causal result of prior events over which they had no control.

None of this will be news to Ekstrom. The point of contention is the extent to which the goods enumerated above (as well as the many others I haven't listed) are cumulatively weighty enough to be worth the amount, intensity, and distribution of evil—in particular the pain and suffering—that we find in the world.

Ekstrom seems to think that evidence we have necessitates a single rational response: the goods that we have that require libertarian free will are not worth the cost of all the pain and suffering. Though I can at times feel the pull of her position, my more considered view is that I'm in no position to make that kind of judgment. For one thing, it seems to me that the difference in value between a world with free creatures and one without is hard to overstate. The goods made possible by a vast number of agents who have a true say in their character development, the relationships they choose to foster, the social goods they pursue, and even how the world turns out are (by my lights) virtually incomparable to those that can be had in a world without free creatures. When you add to this that God can offer postmortem goods to individuals who suffer greatly that could make up for (or even in Marilyn Adams's term "defeat") their intense suffering in this life, my inclination to think that the evidence that suffering in the world swamps the goods that free will allows is (to a degree) neutralized. That is, I'm inclined to adopt the skeptical theistic line regarding judgments about cumulative weightiness of evil vs. the cumulative good that a world with free creatures allows. In particular, I'm inclined to think that, as far as I can tell, the goods allowed by free agents might be worth the vast and intense suffering in the world. And given the dialectic—Ekstrom is proposing that the evil in the world is a defeater for theistic belief—this tends to neutralize the defeating effect the problem produces. That is, to the extent that it is rational to withhold both the claim that the suffering in the world outweighs the good that freedom makes possible and the claim that we are not in an epistemic position to make that comparative judgment (while noting the apparent dramatic significance in value between

worlds with free creatures and worlds without), Ekstrom's defeater is (to an extent, at least) neutralized.

§3. *Religion on the Cheap*

In the final chapter of her book, Ekstrom considers the possibility that a religious life might be worth pursuing even if one doesn't believe that God exists. Most of the space in this chapter is spent discussing religious anti-realism and religious naturalism. The first is the view that there are no objective truth-claims involved in the fundamental doctrines of religion. Commitment to religion and even to the existence of God is not taken to be commitment to anything that is *really* true. The naturalist rejects the metaphysics of traditional theism but maintains that meaning is found in religious experience and living the religious life.

I'm more or less in agreement with what Ekstrom says in this chapter, at least with respect to the views she discusses. She thinks that there is at least an implied inconsistency between the metaphysical commitments of the anti-realist/naturalist and their leading a committed religious life. I think she's right about that. My beef is rather with what she doesn't discuss: viz., the religious person with nondoxastic faith in God. Most of what I'm about to say comes from the work of William Alston and Daniel Howard-Snyder (although many others have argued for this too). Consider the following kind of case (which I expect is not uncommon). Suppose Cary is raised in a conservative Christian environment. His parents raise him to have no doubts about God's existence, plan of salvation, and moral code. As Cary matures, he reads more widely than his parents, goes to a state university where he takes philosophy and religion courses, and begins to have doubts. At first the doubts are about the fundamentalist aspects of his inherited faith (six-day creation, biblical literalism, the place of women in the church, etc.). Eventually, his doubts spread, and he becomes dubious of the divinity of Christ and even the existence of God. But he continues to think that there is something real beyond the natural world and to find comfort in and inspiration from the Christian story. Looking at various other religions and world views, he thinks that Christianity is at least as likely to be true as any of them. Cary's affective states are very much in line with the Christian teaching and tradition, and he is inclined to want to keep his membership in his local congregation, remaining active in their soup kitchen and homeless ministries. He even plans to continue going to worship services and his devotional life with the hope that it will lead to experiences that will restore his belief.

Now if I've got Ekstrom's view right, there will be a kind of incoherence between what Cary does and what Cary believes. He's acting on a religious ethic that, given his beliefs, is not likely to have an authoritative ground and giving alms in the name of someone to whom he prays who he doesn't believe exists.

Cary has what is known as nondoxastic faith. He withholds the proposition “God exists” while thinking it’s as likely to be true as its competitors. He thinks the world would be better if the Christian story were true and acts in accordance with the teaching of the tradition. But just what is the problem with Cary’s being technically agnostic but still holding to faith in God? Such faith doesn’t involve *bad faith*, as far as I can tell. Cary isn’t self-deceived or pretending to be something he’s not. And if there is some tension between what he believes and what he does, I think we can mitigate that by considering what the Carys of the world are supposed to do. If living the religious life appropriately requires belief in the central tenets of the tradition, then Cary will have to leave the church. But why? Obviously, there’s nothing problematic about going to services. What about full participation in the service? Is it inconsistent for him to say the Lord’s Prayer? I don’t see how it is. He thinks there might be One who hears it. How about reciting the Apostles’ Creed? Admittedly, he’ll have to think of it aspirationally—it’s what he wants to believe. But he can also think of it as a corporate, rather than individual, affirmation; it’s what the church believes. And prayer and reciting the Creed would seem to be the most potentially problematic aspects of the service. Attending, and even leading, education classes seems fine: he can teach what the church believes (or what the various options are) without duplicity. And clearly working in the soup kitchen and food pantry, even in the name of Christ, say, doesn’t imply belief. In short, then, the nondoxastic faithful are drastically different from the anti-realist/naturalistic faithful.

One final point: given that the cognitive component of nondoxastic faith is weaker than what is had in its doxastic cousin, it is plausible that the epistemic bar needed for that faith to be rational is lower as well. Just as the justification one needs to be justified in being psychologically certain that P is greater than what one needs for just believing P, it is plausible that the justification required for rational doxastic faith is greater than it is for rational nondoxastic faith. So, even if Ekstrom’s main argument constitutes a defeater for theistic *belief*, it may not for nondoxastic theistic faith.

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