

CONCERNING THEODORE DRANGE'S ARGUMENT FROM EVIL FOR THE NONEXISTENCE OF GOD

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- AE: I first define an expression that will be used in the argument:
- Situation L = the situation of the amount of suffering and premature death experienced by humans in the world at the present time being significantly less than what it actually is at present. (In other words, if the actual amount, at present, is, say, a total of n units of suffering and premature death, then in situation L that amount would be, at present, significantly less than n units.)
- Then AE, making reference to situation L, can be expressed as follows:
 - (A) If God were to exist, then he would possess all of the following four properties (among others):
 - (1) being able to bring about situation L, all things considered;
 - (2) wanting to bring about situation L, i.e., having it among his desires;
 - (3) not wanting anything else that conflicts with his desire to bring about situation L as strongly as it;
 - (4) being rational (which implies always acting in accord with his own highest purposes).
 - (B) If a being who has all four properties listed above were to exist, then situation L would have to obtain.
 - (C) But situation L does not obtain. The amount of suffering and unfairness in the world at the present time is not significantly less than what it actually is at present.
 - (D) Therefore [from (B) & (C)], there does not exist a being who has all four properties listed in premise (A).
 - (E) Hence [from (A) & (D)], God does not exist.¹

In the recent past, Professor Theodore Drange of West Virginia University has launched a twofold attack on traditional views of the existence of God. In a seminal article reproduced on the Secular Web's site entitled "Arguments from Evil and Nonbelief," Dr. Drange mounts a case against classic theism predicating its notion of an omnibenevolent God. His shorter articles have been subsequently matured in his book, *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God*.² Although I find Drange's approach to be erudite, I believe that his argument is dubious. In this article we shall explore the Argument from Evil as presented by Dr. Drange to see if the conclusion that God does not exist is warranted.³

Philosophers who are aware of various historical theodicies understand that much of the tension between the existence of God and the existence of evil center around Epicurus' famous presentation of the logical problem of evil.⁴ Fortunately for contemporary defenders of classic theism, the logical problem of evil is no longer a penetrating issue in academia. Instead, philosophers have now conceded that the logical problem of evil is no longer a successful criticism of theism.⁵ I fervently desiderate that further research in this field will reflect this.

Permit me to begin by addressing those premises in Drange's argument that I find acceptable. First, it does not strike me as too controversial to accept premise (A2) since God, as an omnibenevolent being, would certainly have within His heart a profound desire to see all persons have their suffering and premature mortality reduced. And this is not idle philosophical speculation since the New Testament has already made it clear that

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand

slowness. He is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish*, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9; *NIV*; emphasis mine).

Secondly, it also seems to be that (A4) is certainly true given the logical requirements for bringing about our space-time universe equipped with fine-tuned initial conditions that are delicately balanced to permit life on earth.⁶ Intelligence *par excellence* is mandatory to create such a universe that conforms to an intricate web of natural laws. And intelligence of this magnitude certainly requires a sense of rationality. But the statements presented in (A1) and (A3) seem to me to be unwarranted as the following discussion shall elucidate.

I. CONSIDERING ALL THINGS

Drange suggests that God is able to bring about a situation such that “the amount of suffering and premature death experienced by humans in the world at the present time being significantly less than what it actually is at present. (In other words, if the actual amount, at present, is, say, a total of n units of suffering and premature death, then in situation L that amount would be, at present, significantly less than n units.”⁷ Premise (A1) supposes that God can bring about this situation “all things considered.” One way in which Drange supposes that this can be achieved is “for him to have made the earth a calmer and more stable planet, with much fewer storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Then there would not occur so much suffering and premature death as a consequence of such natural catastrophes.”

Although there is a ring of truth about this (that God is capable of instantiating anything that is not logically impossible for Him to do), Drange’s premise hinges on the misunderstanding between what it means to have a *possible* world versus what it means to have a *feasible* world. With respect to the logical possibility of a world where situation L is true, we must concede Drange’s presumption here. There is nothing self-contradictory or illogical about God actualizing a world where less evil occurs in order to bring about the same good. I certainly can at least *conceive* of such a world. So the question of God’s existence will not be solved by appealing to logical impossibility. Now what about the notion of feasibility about there being a world such that natural disasters are reduced with respect to the amount the actual world contains? A world is said to be feasible for God if such a world is possible and can be successfully brought about. Notice that we would not be interested in what is merely possible for God. But there are reasons to think that God cannot bring about an infeasible world (without advocating the Eastern tradition that surmises that God can bring about logical contradictions). Consider the following counterfactual statements logically possible for Ivan to perform:

1. If Ivan were in situation S then, possibly, he would enroll in Philosophy 101

and

2. If Ivan were in situation S then, possibly, he would not enroll in Philosophy 101.

Either (1) or (2) are logically attainable and are not impossible to conceive of as viable options for Ivan. In this case, necessarily, if Ivan were in situation S (such that S prompted Ivan to enroll in Philosophy 101 or not) then either (1) or (2) is true. But the careful thinker will consider that

it may not be feasible for God to create a world for Ivan where *S* exists and one of the options not ensue. This is not an exercise in logical bifurcation; just consider that the following statement may possibly be true for Ivan who possesses free will:

3. Under no circumstances will Ivan enroll in Philosophy 101.

Perhaps it is Ivan's detest for the Greek classics or his disdain for critical thinking (maybe Ivan is a fideist who follows the thought of Karl Barth). Whatever the reason Ivan has for never freely choosing to actualize (2), it is possible that (3) forever precludes (1) from being feasible for God. So there is no world that God could create that could guarantee (2). The only way God could actualize (2) would be to usurp Ivan's freedom and to determine the outcome of Ivan's enrollment in situation *S*. This conclusion substantiates the incompatibilist's thesis that

4. God cannot determine a causal agent to freely bring about a specific action.

To acknowledge (4) as false would be to affirm a logical contradiction. No being, no matter the magnitude of their power within the constraints of their own ontology, could bring it about that the will is free of causal determinism and yet itself be causally determined to enact a specific course of action.⁸ Since the resolution is not to employ a possible world that is infeasible for God, then the theist is within her epistemic rights to invoke the problem of free will.

Furthermore, there is yet another feature of feasible worlds unavailable to God. These worlds may contain conditions such that there is no optimal quantity of believers. For example, it is possible that all feasible worlds where situation *L* is brought about entail:

5. All possible worlds for God where situation *L* is feasible are underpopulated.

Maybe God can bring about situation *L* to Drange's satisfaction, but the sacrifice is that the world only contains two people in it. Perhaps God creates Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where the serpent is not allowed to persuade Eve, and therefore Adam, to inaugurate an evil act by disobeying God. Such a world might envisage an everlasting life in paradise. Moreover, perhaps Adam and Eve do not consider having children as they wallow in their contentment for being together with God by themselves. But there is no reason to think that a world where only Adam and Eve exist is to be preferred over a world where millions exist *even if some people ultimately succumb to suffering and premature death*. No one should deny the millions who would live full lives with a minimal amount of suffering and evil so that those who are subject to those conditions can avoid them. During the Patriarchal Age when infant mortality was poor, it was foreseen that parents would inevitably lose some children to natural life-ending circumstances. This is why the Patriarchs often had many children. But their understanding that some of their children would die was not an overriding factor in a desire to perpetuate their lineage. It is also possible that one's offspring will end up being an evil person, as in the case of Antiochus IV. Was Antiochus III supposed to avoid child-rearing due to the possible outcome that his child may extirpate Jews in Egypt? The detractor to this argument could suggest that this is not analogous because human beings cannot foresee such disaster and, therefore, create alternative circumstances to avoid it. Yet this brings us to the inevitable concluding possibility given that (4) is true and that (5) is unacceptable:

6. It is not feasible for God to create a world with as much good in it without as much evil as the actual world has.

Therefore, given that (4) cannot be brought about, there is no guarantee that situation L can feasibly be actualized and, hence, (6) is possibly true. It is also possible that (5) is true such that those feasible worlds where situation L ensues are grossly underpopulated. This would not be a formidable option for God if He can bring about more people who would benefit from life than not. Hence, we have seen that (A1) is false because it may not be feasible for God to bring about situation L given that (6) is possible.

II. THE INDISCERNIBLE DESIRES OF GOD

Classic theism has generally held to the following primary attributes prescribed to God: God is (a) personal; (b) omnibenevolent; (c) omnipotent; (d) omniscient; (e) transcendent; and (f) a necessary being. Drange's contention in proving the nonexistence of God concerns the difficulty of reconciling the truths of (b) and (c) with the reality of the actual world since the actual world could possibly contain less evil and suffering than what is currently present. We have already seen how (a) and (c) are logically compatible with the actual world in which we live. But, more fundamentally, I have to call premise (A3) on God's desires into question for it does not take into account the entirety of God's inseparable desires. Drange writes:

“It might be thought that since God is omnipotent, he cannot have conflicting desires. The term ‘conflicts’ in premise (A3) conveys the idea that it would have been impossible even for God to satisfy both desires simultaneously. But for God, nothing is impossible. Hence, he cannot have such conflicting desires, which makes premise (A3) automatically true.”⁹

At first blush I cannot help but ask why God cannot have conflicting desires. In fact, I should hardly think it inconceivable, especially when we consider that some desires are more benevolent than others, that God could have desires in conflict. This is not mere academic or blind speculation since God's desires are seen to be in conflict in ethical decision-making dilemmas that His free creatures are required to make. Think of a situation in the 1930's where a soldier for the established Nazi party visits the home of a man who is harboring Jewish refugees. Upon the visit of this soldier who pressures the home's tenant to reveal the location of the Jewish refugees, a moral dilemma ensues. Either the tenant tells the truth but participates in being responsible for the Jews' capture and death or he lies to protect the sanctity of their lives. In this situation, no doubt God desires that all men tell the truth but He also requires that all men preserve life when possible. But it is clear that God's desires come into conflict in this hypothetical situation. Does this mean that God's desires cannot be in conflict and, thus, we have a logical contradiction? Not at all. The desires of God certainly entail a hierarchical situation preserving the ethical right to trump a moral ought so that the higher of the two will be preserved. This means that the tenant is ethical in lying to the Nazi inquisitor in order to preserve a higher moral obligation: the sanctity of life.¹⁰

In a similar vein, the classic theist can survive Drange's awkward attack here by merely positing the following possibility:

7. God's greatest desire is to bring all human beings to salvation.¹¹

Only when Drange thinks of God's desires to ameliorate human evils as His highest desire does Drange think that evil discount's God's existence. Indeed, I should wonder why one would *not* discount God's existence if it were on this basis only! However, when we unravel the indiscerptible desires of God we see that one of those desires envisaged by (7) is God's desire to bring all people to salvation. On this basis the presence of evil does not appear all that improbable, especially if such evils must occur in order to satisfy (7). The only possible escape for Drange here is to argue for the falsity of (6); but in the absence of any defeaters to (6) and the theodacists are within their rights to maintain the inscrutability of God's desires. Moreover, given the factual truth of (7) it should not appear that God's existence is disconfirmed on the basis of (A3).

III. CONCLUSION

Dr. Drange has raised some important issues in the consistency of God's attributes with respect to His omnibenevolence and His omnipotence. He has argued against God's existence on the basis of a logically possible world where the same good exists but with lesser evil. As I have argued, there is no way to determine if such a world is feasible for God to create given the stubborn factor of creaturely freedom. Secondly, Drange has attempted to discount God's existence on the basis of reducing evil being the highest desire of God. But we have seen no good reason to think this because Drange has wrongly assumed that the highest desire of God is amelioration and not the desire to see all persons saved. Furthermore, he has clearly proposed a false assumption in his argument because it is not true that God cannot have conflicting desires. Therefore, classic theists have no good reason to reject the existence of God on the basis of Drange's Argument from Evil.

END NOTES

1. T. Drange, "Arguments from Evil and Nonbelief" (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore_drange/aeandnb.html).
2. Idem, *Nonbelief and Evil: Two Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998).
3. Drange is careful to point out that a portion of his Argument from Evil serves instrumentally as the backdrop to his more belabored Argument from Nonbelief. Specifically, the premise that he finds the most controversial is the one that suggests that God does not want anything more than to actualize His desire to bring about a possible world where unacceptable conditions are reduced. He writes:

"Since the argument is valid, the only way to attack it would be at one of its premises. And the one which I think is most vulnerable would be premise (A3). That is all I shall say about AE in this essay. I present it here only as background material for the discussion of ANB, which I regard to be the stronger of the two arguments" (Drange, "Arguments from Evil and Nonbelief").

The Argument from Nonbelief concerns the nonexistence of God based on the idea that God is able and would desire to bring about a specific possible world. This possible world (W) is such that all persons are aware that God exists, that He loves humanity, and that He has provided humanity with an afterlife. Because W is one that entails the desire of God to maximize a world where all persons come to believe in Him, He would bring it about that all persons actually would come to believe in Him. Due to the prematurity of death and the pervasive evil that exists, Drange suggests that such a situation envisaged by W is perturbed and is not instantiated as the actual world (W^*). Given the alleged moral necessity impressed upon by God's attributes, we are supposed to see:

$$\Box(W \rightarrow W^*)$$

Although a thorough criticism of the Argument from Nonbelief is certainly beyond the scope of this article, a swift refutation of its modal necessity can be noted. One of what renders the necessity of W^* from W false based on the premises of the Arguments from Evil and Nonbelief is that there *are* overriding desires to the immediate deficit of amelioration and belief. We shall discuss the overriding desires over amelioration in the Argument from Evil's relevant premise in this article. But, with respect to the Argument from Nonbelief, there is no reason to think that God would have the overriding desire to inform the entire populace of His existence if it is possible that either (a) such persons would never respond affirmatively if they heard of Him, or (b) such persons would not invest their hearts and souls to Him if they heard of Him. Such a world where these overriding desires exist (W^o) render the following possibility:

$$\diamond(W^o \rightarrow \sim W)$$

such that detractors to Drange can properly acknowledge:

$$\diamond(W^o \rightarrow [\sim \Box(W \rightarrow W^*)])$$

The detractor need not commit herself to *believing* either (a) or (b); she need only accept that (a) and (b) are *possible* existent desires that would override God's desire to inform an entire populace of His existence.

4. For a recapitulation of Epicurus' statement, see David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. 64. Hume's essay with which this quote belongs is also cited in M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach, and D. Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 260.

5. Peter Van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5: *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991), p. 135; Alvin Plantinga, "Tooley and Evil: A Reply," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1981): 74; William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5, p. 29.

6. I should say that much of the present-day research concerning finely tuned antecedent conditions necessary for the existence of *Homo sapiens* on earth are coming not just from teleological theists but from the mainstream of the astrophysical sciences. See John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); P.C.W. Davies, *The Physics of Time Asymmetry* (London: Surrey University Press, 1974); Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

7. Drange, "Arguments from Evil."

8. See Ed L. Miller, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992), pp. 401-407. Determinism in its own right evinces a world where causal agents act in such a way that they could not have done otherwise. These determined outcomes are the result of antecedent causes. Regardless whether one makes the distinction between *hard* determinism and *soft* determinism, the theological determinist cannot escape the inevitable reduction from the soft to the hard. All actions would be the result of either antecedent external causes or antecedent internal causes; but they are not the result of an exercise of the *free* will nonetheless.

9. Drange, "Arguments from Evil."

10. To see how the Christian ethic envisages such conflicting scenarios and how such an ethical system conjoins various rules in moral decision-making, see Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An*

Introduction to Ethics (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), pp. 99-116. The Christian ethic is permeated with the need to override ethical principles with weightier ones.

11. See 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.