

Theistic Arguments from Horrendous Evils

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Abstract: While the existence of horrendous evils has generally been taken to be evidence against the existence of God, some philosophers have suggested that it may be evidence for the existence of God. This paper introduces three main kinds of theistic arguments from horrendous evils: the argument from objectively horrifying evils, the pragmatic argument from evil, and an argument from reasonable responses. For each of these arguments, I will first reconstruct a standard version of the argument, before suggesting ways the argument may be challenged, or further developed.

1. Introduction

While the existence of horrendous evils has generally been taken to be evidence against the existence of God, some philosophers have suggested that it may be evidence *for* the existence of God. Broadly speaking, these philosophers have constructed arguments from the existence of horrendous evils to the conclusion that (a) God's existence is either possible, probable, or necessary and/or (b) we ought to believe in the existence of God.¹ This paper provides a survey of three key kinds of theistic arguments from horrendous evils.

¹ My reference to 'God' in this paper will refer to standard conceptions of the omni-God. However, the arguments made may easily be modified for other conceptions of 'God'.

Like other versions of theistic arguments, the theistic arguments from evil refer to a family of arguments. The common feature of these arguments is that they appeal to the existence and extent of evil to demonstrate that God (*probably*) exists. In this paper, I present three strategies that have been employed to construct theistic arguments from *horrendous* evils.² In what follows, I discuss an argument from objectively horrifying evil (S2), a pragmatic argument from evil (S3) and an argument from reasonable responses (S4). For each of these arguments, I will first reconstruct a standard version of the argument, before suggesting ways the argument may be challenged, or further developed.

2. An Argument from Objectively Horrifying Evils

Theistic arguments from objective evil can be found in various forms.³ This paper will focus on Plantinga's version of the argument (Plantinga 1997, 2005, 2007), given his concern with objectively *horrifying* evil. A helpful summary of the aim of Plantinga's arguments is that he is attempting to answer the question, 'What is so deeply disturbing about horrifying kinds of evil?' In attempting to provide an answer, Plantinga's discussion results in an argument from objectively horrifying evil. While Plantinga has never formally formulated this argument, he has presented this argument in various works, with different emphases. In this section, I attempt to reconstruct what I think is a faithful version of Plantinga's argument. In several of his works

² As will be evident in the discussion that follows, there is more than one way to conceptualise the notion of 'horrendous evils'. Despite these conceptual differences, this paper focuses on 'horrendous evils' conceived broadly, as opposed to 'ordinary' or 'domestic' kinds of evils (see Adams 2013, 162).

³ Some recent examples of theistic arguments from objective evil can be found in Rogers (2005), Dougherty and Walls (2012, 376-377), Trakakis (2018, 85-88) and Turek (2020). Craig used his version of the argument in debates against Tooley (Craig and Tooley 1994), Sinnott-Armstrong (Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2000) and Grayling (Craig and Grayling 2005). Additionally, many theistic arguments from objective evil are strongly related to some theistic arguments from morality, see Lewis (1960), (De Cruz and De Smedt 2017, 64-66), (Evans 2018) and (Baggett and Walls 2019).

(1997, 2005, 2007),⁴ Plantinga proposed variants of an argument which can be roughly formulated as follows:

1. There is real and objectively horrifying evil in the world.⁵
2. Theism has more resources than Naturalism to explain (1).⁶
3. Therefore, Theism is preferable to Naturalism.

What does Plantinga mean by “real and objectively horrifying evil”? While Plantinga does not provide a straightforward definition, he provides a list of such evils and describes several features of this kind of evil. Plantinga provides a sample list of evils that fall under this category:

Examples would be certain sorts of appalling evil characteristic of Nazi concentration camps: guards found pleasure in devising tortures, making mothers decide which of their children would go to the gas chamber and which be spared; small children were hanged, dying (because of their light weight) a slow and agonizing death; victims were taunted with the claim that no one would ever know of their fate and how they were treated. Of course, Nazi concentration camps have no monopoly on this sort of evil: there are also Stalin, Pol Pot and a thousand lesser villains. (Plantinga 2005, 326; see also Plantinga 1997, 70-71; Plantinga 2007, 225)

The first feature of evils of this type is that they “involve human cruelty and wickedness” (Plantinga 1997, 72).⁷ By this, Plantinga is not trivialising evils that are caused by non-humans (say, animal savagery or natural evils). Instead, he focuses on human wickedness because his concern is not with suffering *per se* but with the wickedness present in such suffering. He

⁴ Additionally, Van Inwagen provides a passage from his correspondence with Plantinga where Plantinga provides a similar articulation of this argument (Van Inwagen 2003, Chapter 1 footnote 14).

⁵ Part of the intuition behind objectively *horrifying* evils is that there is a class of evils (call it what you may – e.g., ‘radical’, ‘absurd’, ‘useless’, ‘gratuitous’, ‘wasteful’) which are *objectively* wrong – that is, the force of their ‘wrongness’ is much stronger than it is in cases of ‘ordinary’ suffering or evil (such as the slightest toothache, see Swinburne (1998, xii).

⁶ Plantinga defends this claim in greater depth elsewhere, see for instance (Plantinga 2010).

⁷ Concerning this point, Plantinga’s concern diverges from Adams’, since for Adams, evils that do not involve *human cruelty and wickedness* can still be horrendous since her emphasis is not on the *intention* of actor but its *effect* on the participants (whether inflicted by humans or non humans – broadly, including animals and the ‘natural world’). On the other hand, given Plantinga’s focus on the *intention* of the action, he distinguishes his notion (which requires *human cruelty and wickedness*) from that of ‘natural suffering’ such as cancer and animal suffering (Plantinga 2007, 225).

explains that part of what makes these evils horrific is not merely that they involve suffering, but that they involve wickedness:

What is genuinely abhorrent is the callousness and perversion and cruelty of the concentration camp guard, taking pleasure in the sufferings of others; what is really odious is taking advantage of one's position of trust (as a parent or counsellor, perhaps) in order to betray and corrupt someone: what is genuinely appalling, in other words, is not really human suffering as such so much as human wickedness. This wickedness strikes us as deeply perverse, wholly wrong, warranting not just quarantine and the attempt to overcome it, but blame and punishment. (Plantinga 1997, 72)⁸

A second feature of evils of this type is that they are objectively evil in the sense that they are not dependent on any individual's perspective. Plantinga writes, "These states of affairs, one thinks, are objectively horrifying, in the sense that they would constitute enormous evil even if we and everyone else came perversely to approve of them" (Plantinga 2005, 326) and "it isn't just a matter of personal opinion that the thing in question is abhorrent, and furthermore it doesn't matter if those who perpetrate it think it is good, and could not be convinced by anything we said" (Plantinga 2007, 224). Relatedly, to say that these evils are *really* evil assumes a metaethical commitment to moral realism. That is, when we describe the evils listed above as 'objectively horrifying evil', we are not merely expressing our personal opinions or sentiments, instead, we are (also) reporting a moral fact about these states of affairs.

Assuming that we are willing to accept the first premise, Plantinga provides several related but importantly distinct arguments for the second premise.⁹ The first argument is the argument from *moral obligation*.¹⁰ According to Plantinga, the existence of "genuine and appalling wickedness" depends on the conceptual notion of moral normativity: the belief that

⁸ As suggested above, while Plantinga focuses on 'wickedness', the argument may be variously rendered by other accounts of evil, such as 'radical', 'useless', 'wasteful', 'horrendous', 'gratuitous'.

⁹ As noted above, Plantinga defends this claim in greater depth elsewhere (e.g., Plantinga 2010).

¹⁰ In order to support premise two, one may also appeal to various kinds of arguments of the sort listed in footnote three above.

“there is a way rational creatures are *supposed* to live, *obliged* to live” (Plantinga 1997, 73). And more specifically, “the *force* of that normativity – its strength, so to speak – is such that the appalling and horrifying nature of genuine wickedness is its inverse” (Plantinga 1997, 73). However, Plantinga thinks that this kind of strong normativity cannot be provided by naturalism since, on a naturalistic worldview, “Hostility, hatred, hostility towards outsiders or even towards one’s family is to be understood in terms simply of the genes’ efforts (Dawkins) to ensure its survival” (Plantinga 2007, 225). Presumably, on a naturalistic worldview, there might be some weaker sense of normativity (we have social or species-prioritising obligations), the inverse of which can be cashed out as something like “foolishness and irrationality,” but this is not strong enough to accommodate the notion of ‘real and objectively horrifying evils’. Theism, on the other hand, in positing a Divine Lawgiver, entails a strong normativity which comes with moral obligations of cosmic magnitude, the inverse of which can be cashed out as ‘real and objectively horrifying evil’.

Relatedly, a second argument for premise two is the argument from *moral realism*.¹¹ Simply put, the belief that ‘There is real and objectively horrifying evil in the world’ presupposes a belief in moral realism. Plantinga’s account can be supported by proponents of evolutionary debunking arguments. While there are various kinds of evolutionary debunking arguments, most arguments appeal to a naturalistic evolutionary narrative in support of a conclusion of either moral scepticism or moral anti-realism.¹² On the other hand, Plantinga argues that theism provides strong support for moral realism. Consequently, given that premise one is dependent on moral realism, and theism (rather than naturalism) provides better

¹¹ See a similar argument in Dougherty and Walls (2012, 377-378).

¹² For instance, see Joyce (2006) and Street (2006).

conceptual support for moral realism, then theism provides better conceptual resources to support premise one.

A third argument is the argument from *human wickedness*. As noted previously, Plantinga's concern is not with suffering *per se*, but with wickedness.¹³ He acknowledges that "as much misery and suffering can occur in a death from cancer as in a death caused by someone else's wickedness" (Plantinga 2005, 326; see also Plantinga 2007, 225). What, then, accounts for the difference between suffering from cancer and suffering from someone else's wickedness? Plantinga argues,

The difference lies in the perpetrators and their intentions. Those who engage in this sort of evil are purposely and intentionally setting themselves to do these wicked things. But why is that objectively horrifying? A good answer (and one for which it is hard to think of an alternative) is that this evil consists in defying God, the source of all that is good and just, and the first being of the universe. What is horrifying here is not merely going contrary to God's will, but consciously choosing to invert the true scale of values, explicitly aiming at what is abhorrent to God. This is an offence and affront to God; it is defiance of God himself, and so is objectively horrifying. Appalling evil thus has a sort of cosmic significance. But of course there could be no evil of this sort if there were no such being as God. (Plantinga 2005, 326; see also Plantinga 2007, 224-225)

In short, Plantinga thinks that theism (rather than naturalism) has a better answer to the question, 'why are wickedness and wicked acts objectively horrifying?' Similar to the previous arguments, naturalism would explain wickedness and wicked acts in evolutionary categories – for instance, as a transgression against cooperative norms. However, as before, Plantinga thinks that this sort of explanation fails to capture the 'objectively horrifying' nature of such evils.

¹³ 'Objectively horrifying evil', for Plantinga, is therefore more concerned with *moral* evil than *natural* evil.

Instead, under theism, wickedness and acts of wickedness are said to be ‘objectively horrifying’ because they stand in direct opposition to all that is ‘Good’.

How effective is Plantinga’s argument? Let me briefly suggest two ways we may either develop or challenge the argument.

The first way is to consider the possibility and probability that naturalism cannot accommodate “real and objectively horrifying evil.” Can naturalistic views accommodate and satisfactorily explain the strong objectivity that Plantinga thinks needs to be presupposed for “real and objectively horrifying evil” to exist? Clearly, Plantinga does not think so.

In his paper ‘Naturalism, Theism, Obligation and Supervenience’, Plantinga spells out one strategy for supporting premise two (Plantinga 2010; see also Plantinga 2005, 325). He presents a negative argument against what he takes to be the strongest argument for the view that naturalism can accommodate objective morality. Roughly, he argues that even if the naturalist can show that there exists some naturalistic property that is equivalent to moral obligation, the naturalist would not have succeeded in showing that the obligation is therefore naturalistic. Importantly, Plantinga is not alone in thinking that naturalistic views do not accommodate strong objective morality. For instance, J. L. Mackie famously remarked that “If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them.” (Mackie 1982, 115-116). Here, then, there is much potential for fertile discussion.¹⁴

A related way depends heavily on the status of moral objectivism and moral realism. Many philosophers have proposed arguments against moral realism and objectivism, including

¹⁴ For instance, see Mackie (1982), Railton (1986), Boyd (1988), Copan (2003), Wielenberg (2009).

evolutionary debunking arguments.¹⁵ Further, some philosophers and cognitive scientists have remarked, for instance, that “It is, we think, a mistake just to say that ordinary people subscribe to some form of moral objectivism” (Sarkissian et al 2014, 187). On the other hand, moral realism appears far from dead (e.g., Shafer-Landau 2003, Cuneo 2007, Enoch 2011). Interestingly, in the 2020 PhilPapers Survey, 37.35% of respondents (mainly philosophers) “accept” moral realism and an additional 24.72% “lean towards” moral realism, constituting a 3.49% increase in favor of moral realism from the 2009 survey (Bourget & David J. Chalmers (ms.)). Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt argue that from a Cognitive Science Research perspective, “There is empirical support for the claim that humans are intuitive moral realists, i.e., that they intuitively believe that morality is objective and that it does not change according to cultural preferences” (De Cruz and De Smedt 2017, 65). In any case, much of the intuitive appeal of this argument depends on one’s metaethical commitments.¹⁶

The notions of moral objectivism and realism, however, have important implications for proponents of specific versions of arguments from horrendous evils *against* the existence of God. Several such arguments begin with premises that assume moral objectivism and realism, such as ‘gratuitous evils exist’ (e.g., Rowe 1979, McBrayer 2010). Consequently, given that proponents of such arguments assume moral objectivism and realism in order to support a central premise in their arguments, they may, themselves, be committed to the kind of principles required by Plantinga’s first premise.

3. The Pragmatic Argument from Evil

¹⁵ See Vavova (2015) for a helpful survey. There are other significant positions that has not been discussed here, such as moral error theory.

¹⁶ Although not exclusively so. One may, of course, be a moral realist without being a theist – one strategy would be to adopt some other way to ground one’s moral realism.

Marilyn McCord Adams has proposed a pragmatic argument from horrendous evils, with the catchy slogan ‘God because of evils’ (Adams 2013).^{17, 18} The pragmatic argument focuses on the “*the entrenched practice* of trying to organize one’s activities and efforts around worthwhile goals and experiences so as to make a life for oneself that is rich in positive meaning, and from *an entrenched attitude* of hopefulness that expects a sufficient measure of success to make life – if not highly satisfying – at least decidedly worth living” (Adams 2013, 160-161). Adams’ argument is an ad hominem argument, targeted at agnostics and atheists who possess the entrenched attitudes and/or participate in the entrenched practices noted above.

Adams begins her argument by claiming that “*Robust realism demands confrontation with the horrendous, with the fact that our world is incessantly productive of evils of the prima facie life-ruining kind*” (Adams 2013, 162). For Adams, horrendous evils refer to “evils participation in the doing or suffering of which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole” (Adams 2013, 162).

It is central to understanding Adams’ argument to note that her notion of ‘horrendous evils’ bears at least three important differences from Plantinga’s notion of ‘objectively horrifying evils’. First, while Plantinga is primarily concerned with only *moral* evils, Adams’ concern is not restricted in the same way. Second, while Plantinga’s narrative appears to emphasise the ‘captives’ as the sufferers and the ‘captors’ as the wicked ones, Adam’s account

¹⁷ Adams has presented a sound bite of this argument in Adams (2009). Similar versions of this argument can be found in Jackson (2021) and Jackson (ms.).

¹⁸ There are related pragmatic arguments from the Axiology of Theism (e.g., Penner and Arbour (2017), Loughheed (2019), Loughheed (2020), Loughheed (2022), Licon (2021)). Some of these arguments may be related to (and may be reformulated as) pragmatic arguments from horrendous evils. A related strategy some philosophers of religion take is to demonstrate that the narrative/worldview of theism is *preferable* or is more effective in reaching some pragmatic end than non-theism, with pragmatic ends broad enough to include: which narrative is preferable, or helps us cope better, or helps us make sense of horrendous evils better etc. While this doesn’t obviously provide an *argument* for theism (in the traditional veristic sense), it still provides an argument for why theism may be *preferable* to non-theism. This approach is often used by philosophers such as Alister McGrath (e.g., McGrath 1995).

considers anyone who *participates* in the evil as sufferers – for, she thinks, even the ‘captors’ suffer in life-ruining ways. Finally, while Plantinga’s paradigmatic list of evils appears to only concern large-scale evils, what Adams calls “[d]ramatic examples,” Adams’ own list of evils includes “domestic” horrors, which for her, include,

corporate cultures of dishonesty co-opting workers into betraying their deepest values, parental incest, school-ground bullying, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves the most, schizophrenia and severe clinical depression, and degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer’s and multiple sclerosis that unravel and/or imprison the person we once knew. (Adams 2013, 162)

Building on this, Adams argues that such evils (especially the ‘domestic’ variety) “infest human lives” (Adams 2013, 163). Due to this, Adams argues that

Universal human horror-participation makes optimism irrational, and the attempt to secure lives of positive meaning futile, unless our horror-infested world includes a horror defeater, an agency powerful and resourceful, ready, willing, and able enough to make good on horrors, not only in the world as a whole but within the context of the individual horror participants’ lives. (Adams 2013, 166)

Given that, in a non-theistic framework, we have no good reason to believe that there will be a horror defeater, she concludes that the non-theist has two options. Either she accepts theism (for Adams, “biblical religion”) because it is able to support her life posture of entrenched optimism, or she needs to give up her optimistic life posture. Adams argues that alternative life-postures would be more coherent for a non-theist who is also a robust realist about horrendous evils, including “qualified realism, dampened or dashed hopes, and/or curtailed meaning-making” (Adams 2013, 167-172). Consider Adam’s argument:

- (1) Horrendous evils exist.
- (2) If horrendous evils exist, robust realism demands confrontation with the fact that the world is filled with evils of the life-ruining kind.

- (3) If we adopt robust realism, we also either (a) believe in a horror defeater or, (b) we do not believe in a horror defeater.¹⁹
- (4) If (3a), then adopting a posture of optimism makes much sense (i.e. optimistic entrenched practices and attitudes).
- (5) If (3b), then adopting a posture of optimism makes little sense.
- (6) Therefore, if (1), (2), (3), and we want to adopt a posture of optimism, it follows that we ought to believe in a horror defeater.

For Adams, belief in a horror defeater of this kind is coherent with a belief in the God of biblical religion (Adams 2013, 171-172). Presumably, a horror defeater must have the capacity to defeat horrors, the willingness to defeat horror, and must have given us some reason to think that s/he will defeat horrors one day. Consequently, Adams concludes that “The God of biblical religion is poised to do the work of horror defeat” (Adams 2013, 172).²⁰

A potential response to Adams is to decide not to take on the life posture of optimism. Adams has responded to this response, “this is true about any argument. If you don’t like its conclusion, you can reject its premise, and the point of offering an argument is to get people to reflect upon the premises explicitly and to examine their commitments to them. I think optimism and idealism tend to be deeply rooted in individuals’ personalities and so it’s not something that they can easily give up...” (Adams 2009). This is why Adams describes her argument as an *ad hominem* one, targeted at “atheists and agnostics who are purpose-driven optimists yet committed to being realistic” (Adams 2013, 166).

¹⁹ Another way this argument may be formulated would be to substitute the notion of ‘cosmic justice’ with that of ‘horror defeater’ (see, for instance, Jackson (2021) and Jackson (ms.)). A more general approach to supporting this premise can be found in Nagasawa: “By appealing to items beyond the material universe, such as God and the afterlife, theists can develop numerous approaches to the problem, approaches to which atheists have no access” (Nagasawa 2018, 161-162).

²⁰ Adams expands on this notion in Adams (2006).

There are at least three potential concerns with Adams' arguments, though not concerns that are insurmountable. First, one might argue that even if we accept Adams' claim that the condition for optimism is a belief in a horror defeater, it appears that Adams makes the jump from a horror defeater to the God of biblical religion too quickly. Presumably, other kinds of horror defeaters might be proposed. To be successful, those accounts would minimally require the horror defeater to have the capacity for horror defeat, the willingness for horror defeat, and to have given us some reason to think that it will defeat horrors one day.

A second concern is that premise four is doing a lot of the work and is not immediately obvious. While many theodicians and philosophers have proposed arguments in favor of this premise, there are others – theists and non-theists – who disagree. For instance, Sarah Pinnock writes about Bloch's analysis regarding a utopian end of history:

When Bloch observes that positing the certainty of a utopian end of history "in the face of the misery of the world" is "both wicked and feeble-minded," his outrage is not only a dispute about historical dialectics but a moral criticism (PH III 1372). Bloch considers it an offense to victims to place their suffering in a dialectical scheme, which is the antithesis of recognizing and lamenting the horrible and wasteful suffering of the past. (Pinnock 2002, 67)

Relatedly, John Roth argues,

Eschatological hopes hinge on some version of an instrumental view of evil. They differ, however, in their optimism about evil's being overcome by good... A protesting theodicy affirms that any overcoming of this kind, at least from a human perspective, should be less well regarded. The reason is clear: too much has been lost. (Roth 1981, 8)

A paradigmatic example of this is Ivan's response in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan asks about the redemption of a mother's tears, and he asks, "But how, how will you redeem them? Is it possible? Can they be redeemed by being avenged? But what do I care if they are avenged, what do I care if the tormentors are in hell, what can hell set right here, if these ones have already been tormented?" (Dostoyevsky 1879, 245).

A third concern for Adams' account is that, in order to justify premise five, Adams only discussed several non-theistic accounts (Camus, Russell and Nagel). To conclude from the account of three non-theistic thinkers either that non-theism is incompatible with a horror defeater or that non-theism cannot justify optimism without a horror defeater might appear slightly premature. Adams has not argued that the views of Camus, Russell and Nagel are *representative* of *all* non-theistic accounts (though the heading 'non-theistic alternatives' might appear misleading). What is significant, however, is that Adams has at least argued that optimism is coherent with theism; and the burden of proof is on the non-theist to come up with an alternative account that is able to provide a *better* support for horror defeat or optimism than Adams has.

It is worth noting that a related argument that depends on an attitude of optimism can be found in Nagasawa (2018).²¹ Nagasawa argues that many theists and atheists endorse 'existential optimism', "the thesis according to which the world is, overall, a good place and we should be grateful for our existence in it" (Nagasawa 2018, 154-155). But, if we also subscribe to "the scientific fact" that our existence depends in meaningful ways on the cruel suffering of many others, then it creates a paradox with endorsing 'existential optimism'. Like Adams, he suggests that theism has more resources than atheism to address this paradox and thus concludes that "The problem of evil, or at least the existential problem of systemic evil, provides a reason to give up atheism and a motivation to adopt theism" (Nagasawa 2018, 162-163).

4. An Argument from Reasonable Responses to Horrendous Evils

²¹ Another argument that adopts a similar strategy can be found in Hasker (1981).

Versions of arguments from reasonable responses to horrendous evils can be found in Volf (2005) and Plantinga (2007). While Volf focuses on the response of protest, Plantinga discusses the response of revulsion. The argument from protest response can be found in Volf (2005) where he asks,

Why are we disturbed about the brute and blind force of tsunamis that snuff out lives of people – including children who were lured, as if by some sinister design, unto the beaches by fish left exposed in the shallows because waters had retreated just before the tidal wave came? If the world is all there is, and the world with moving tectonic plates is a world in which we happen to live, what's there to complain about? We can mourn; we've lost something terribly dear. But we can't really complain, and we certainly can't legitimately protest. (Volf 2005, 39)

Volf's account of suffering is clearly different from Plantinga's account, for his discussion focuses on the tsunami (presumably a kind of natural evil rather than moral evil). Volf, however, does not attempt to provide us with a clear definition of what he means by horrendous evils – that is not part of his project *per se*. While Plantinga's argument requires a belief that 'real and objectively horrifying evil exists', and Adam's argument depends a pragmatic entrenchment of optimistic practices and attitudes, Volf's argument is conditioned on a felt response (perhaps, an intuitive reactive response). In particular, the response of protest. For Volf, "protest" is stronger than 'mourning' and 'complaining'. Consider Volf's argument:

The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place, with no devastating mishaps, is tied to the belief that the world *ought* to be constituted in a certain way. And that belief – as distinct from the belief that the world just is what it is – is itself tied to the notion of a creator. And that brings us to God. It is God who makes possible our protest that there is evil in the world. And it is God against whom we protest. God is both the ground of the protest and its target. Almost paradoxically, we protest with God against God. How can I believe in God when tsunamis strike? I protest, and therefore I believe. (Volf 2005, 39)

Volf thinks a reasonable response to horrendous evil is that of protest. In fact, some may argue that to protest is almost a *natural* response (consider Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; or Berish in Wiesel's *Trial of God*). However, what motivates such a response? Volf argues that, on a naturalistic view of the world, there is nothing to complain

about, nothing to protest about, and no one to protest to. The condition for a protest response is the belief that the world *ought* not to be constituted in this way, which is built on expectations of what the world *ought* to be like.²² However, how can this moral *ought* be supported under a naturalistic picture of the world? Considering this, we might formalise Volf's argument as follows:²³

- (1) The protest response to horrendous evils is a reasonable one.
- (2) The condition for the protest-response is an expectation that the world ought not to be this way.
- (3) Under the naturalistic picture of the world, there is no way the world *ought* to be (merely a way that the world *is*).
- (4) Under the theistic picture of the world, there is a way that the world *ought* to be.²⁴
- (5) Consequently, the condition for the protest-response is a theistic picture of the world.

There are many aspects of the argument which need filling in – and we should note that Volf's aim was not to provide a formalised argument at all. One way to strengthen Volf's argument is to posit that *not* having a protest response to horrendous evils is unreasonable. One way of making this argument, which incidentally also lends support to the first premise, is to examine

²² A similar sentiment, based on the notion of expectation, can also be found in (McGrath and Bancewicz 2021). McGrath notes, "There is some fundamental human instinct which makes us say, 'look, surely it could be better than this? Surely we don't have to suffer?' But actually we don't know that at all. I think that this innate suspicion that there has to be a better world is actually very significant because where does it come from? It's in effect saying we have this deep moral sense that something is wrong with this. It's almost as if we anticipated there is a better world in which there won't be suffering" (McGrath and Bancewicz 2021).

²³ Another way to formulate this argument is, instead of focusing on expectations, to emphasise that if the protest-response is rational, then there ought to be *someone* to protest against.

²⁴ There are various other ways that this premise may be further supported. For instance, Alister McGrath writes, "Deep within themselves they sense that there must be something better somewhere. These feelings are real and important, and they serve a vitally important function. Our natural instinct is to protest and shout out, "Why can't the world be better?" Then, McGrath asks, "Why do we possess such a deep-seated sense that things could be better than this? Where does this sense come from?" His answer, of course, is that the sense is God-given (McGrath 1995, 37-40).

characters such as Ivan Karamazov or Berish (as I have noted briefly), and the many accounts of sufferers of horrendous evils (such as the Holocaust) who have responded in this way.²⁵

Turning now to Plantinga's argument from revulsion response, he considers the wickedness involved in 'objectively horrifying evil', and asks, "On [a] naturalistic view, how [could we] make sense of ... our revulsion at evil[?]" (Plantinga 2007, 225). Presumably, the revulsion argument can follow the same formalisation as the argument from protest:

- (1) The revulsion-response to horrendous evils is a reasonable one.²⁶
- (2) The condition for the revulsion-response is an expectation that people *ought not* to act this way.
- (3) Under the naturalistic picture of the world, there is no way people *ought* to act (merely a way that people *do* act).
- (4) Under the theistic picture of the world, there is a way that people *ought* to act.
- (5) Consequently, the condition for the revulsion-response is a theistic picture of the world.

This version of the argument has overlaps with the argument from wickedness discussed above. More specifically, when reflecting upon such evil, we *ought* to feel a strong revulsion against it – that people have transgressed their moral obligation. And the kind of moral obligation here that is transgressed needs to correspond with the strength of the revulsion felt. According to the revulsion feeling, we are not merely turned off because an individual failed to act in terms of what is best for the species or community, but that they acted in a way that can only be described by terms such as wicked, cruel, and abhorring. This revulsion response can be felt

²⁵ Appeal to the literature on protest responses to horrendous evils (especially accounts by sufferers of horrendous evils) suggests that protest is, at least, a natural, or reasonable, or even productive response to horrendous evils. For instance, see (Roth 1981), (Blumenthal 2003), (Mandolfo 2007), (Katz, Biderman, Greenberg 2007).

²⁶ Similar arguments can be formulated with notions such as 'revolt' (e.g., Schwitzgebel 2021) or 'resentment' (Strawson 2008).

most clearly when we reflect on the wickedness involved in objectively horrifying evil.

Plantinga, for instance, describes such evils:

the story the prophet Nathan told David, at the sort of thing that went on in Argentina, Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany (Sophie's Choice); the case mentioned in Surin's book about the young child who was hanged and remained living for half an hour after he was hanged; the fact that the Nazis were purposely trying to be cruel, to induce despair, taunting their victims with the claim that no one would ever know of their fate and how they were treated; the thing from Dostoevsky, who says that beasts wouldn't do this, they wouldn't be so artistic about it. (Plantinga 2007, 225)

It appears to me that the strength of the argument is dependent on the revulsion feeling, and the strength of the revulsion feeling is dependent on how much intricacies go into describing the horrors. While some may dismiss this as mere rhetoric, it appears to me that this is better described, using a term from Adams, as 'robust realism' – facing up to the actualities of the horrors. Rhetoric might be involved, but it should not be used as grounds to dismiss the argument.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have presented three types of theistic argument from horrendous evil. I have shown that these arguments provide a direction, perhaps a template, for how theistic arguments from evil (and horrendous evils) can be crafted. I have also highlighted various ways to strengthen and challenge these arguments. It appears to me that theistic arguments from evil, such as those sketched out here, constitute a wealth of resources for philosophers of religion, and for natural theologians alike. The problem of horrendous evils is concerned with evils that appear to be almost an intrinsic part of the world as we presently know it, and as such, a philosophical engagement with these evils is of the greatest importance.

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