Should We Want God to Exist?
Explaining Evil and Pragmatic Belief

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Evil exists.

- We can all agree on this.
- Humans do awful things to each other.
- Natural evils cause horrible suffering.
- Animal suffering widespread and often seems pointless.
The Problem of Evil

• If God is all good, God would want to prevent evil.
• If God is all powerful, God could prevent evil.
• Evil exists.

• Can the theist explain evil, especially pointless evil?
Theism vs. Atheism

• Most focus on the question: which offers the better explanation of evil?
• Here, I’d like to focus on another question: which offer the more desirable explanation of evil?

• Two parts to the talk:
  • Part 1: We should want the theistic explanation of evil to be true.
  • Part 2: In some cases, this can provide a good reason to believe that God exists.
Part 1: Explaining Evil
Atheist’s Explanation of Evil

• The world is a harsh place.
• There’s a lot of pointless evil.
• Since there’s no powerful, loving Creator, the evil and suffering we experience isn’t that surprising.
Theist’s Explanation of Evil

• Because God is all-good, God has a reason or purpose for allowing evil. For example:
  • Free-will
  • Soul-making
  • Natural laws
  • Incarnation/Atonement

• Skeptical theism: we may not always know God’s reasons or purposes.
Two questions:

• Which explanation of evil is more likely to be true?
• Which explanation of evil is more desirable?

Example: my car is broken into.
  • Explanation 1: I was robbed.
  • Explanation 2: An eccentric billionaire broke into my car so he could leave wads of cash in my glove box.
We should prefer the theistic explanation of evil.

• If atheism is true:
  • Most evil has no purpose or reason.
  • Much, if not most, evil is gratuitous.
  • Many injustices will never be rectified. Many evildoers won’t be held accountable.
We should prefer the theistic explanation of evil.

• If theism is true:
  • Evil has a reason or purpose (e.g. free will, soul making, natural laws, incarnation or atonement, or a purpose or reason we aren’t aware of).
  • There is significantly less, if any, gratuitous evil.
  • There is ultimate cosmic justice. Evildoers will be held accountable.
Even if the atheist can offer a better explanation of evil, the theist’s explanation is preferable.
Objection: Who cares!?  

• Who cares about which explanation we should desire?  
• We want to know the truth! So we should ignore our desires and focus on the evidence.  
• Otherwise, we’re just engaging in wishful thinking!
Part 2: (The Rationality of) Pragmatic Belief
What is pragmatic belief?

• Pragmatic belief is belief aimed at the good.
  • Pragmatic = practical.

• Examples:
  • Believing the best of my husband because it is good for my marriage.
  • Believing you have free will because otherwise you’ll be depressed and feel out of control.
  • Believing your team will win because you want them to win.
Morpheus: Do you believe in fate, Neo?
Neo: No.
Morpheus: Why not?
Neo: Because I don’t like the idea that I’m not in control of my life.
Is pragmatic belief irrational?

• What I will argue: it depends.

• Sometimes, yes.
  • Example: Justin watching the World Cup.

• But in other cases, no.
  • Example: Mary’s belief in God.
The difference between Justin and Mary

• Justin’s belief is totally unsupported by the evidence. It is irrational.
• Mary’s belief, on the other hand, is supported by the evidence.
• Our evidence only takes us so far.
  • Sometimes, evidence is complex and difficult to evaluate. It may not directly point us to believe a certain theory.
  • In fact, our evidence might support opposing theories equally well.
    • Example: jurors in a courtroom.
"...Interestingly enough, there was a period of transition, a period during which I could move back and forth at will, in the "duck-rabbit" fashion, between experiencing the image as representing the world as self-subsistent and experience the image as representing the world as dependent."
My Proposal

- When our evidence doesn’t tell us what to believe, **pragmatic reasons** can break the tie and help us decide what to believe.

- Example 1: Believing the best of my husband.
- Example 2: Surviving a serious surgery.
- Example 3: Back to Mary.
But shouldn’t we follow the evidence?

• **Evidentialism:** you should believe what is supported by your evidence.

• If practical reasons are *tiebreakers* when your evidence is balanced, then you aren’t violating evidentialism.

• You still believe what is supported by the evidence. The evidence just supports multiple things equally well.
Back to the problem of evil...

• Earlier, we saw some reasons to think that the theist’s explanation of evil is more desirable than the atheist’s.

• Suppose you’re torn between theism and atheism; both are well-supported by your evidence.

• Then, the fact that the theist offers a more optimistic, desirable explanation of evil gives you a reason to be a theist.
Lesson 1: The Theism/Atheism (A)symmetry

• When we provide arguments for God’s existence, one of the things we are trying to do is create an **asymmetry** between theism and atheism.
  • Does the evidence support theism or atheism?
  • **Evidence/arguments** may not be the only way to create an asymmetry.

• There are **value differences** between theism and atheism, and these value differences can also create asymmetries.
Lesson 2: Bathwater, not Baby

• Pragmatic belief is not always irrational (and doesn’t always conflict with evidentialism).
• A warning: Be careful! This is not a license to start engaging in wishful thinking and ignore evidence. We should not believe things that are clearly false because it would be good if they are true.
• At the same time, we shouldn’t throw out pragmatic reasons altogether.
Lesson 3: Seeking Truth and Goodness

• When talking to others about our faith, we shouldn’t just provide arguments and evidence to raise the probability that theism/Christianity is true.

• We should also talk about the goodness of theism/Christianity, so they want it to be true.

• Faith involves desire.
  • Faith and religious commitment require both elements: belief/evidence/truth and desire/goodness.
Conclusion

• Should we want God to exist? Yes!
  • I’ve provided one reason to answer yes, regarding evil.
  • But this only scratches the surface.

• Does it matter if we want God to exist? Yes!
  • (1) desire can break evidential ties when deciding what to believe.
  • (2) this is a part of having faith in God.