

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

IS GOD IS
WILLING TO HE ABLE
PREVENT EVIL BUT NOT
BUT NOT ABLE WILLING
THEN HE IS
IS NOT MALEVOLENT
OMNIPOTENT IS HE BOTH
ABLE AND
WILLING
THEN WHENCE
EVIL COMETH
IS HE
NEITHER
ABLE NOR
WILLING
THEN WHY
CALL HIM
GOD

- 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.

The Matrix

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.



Peter van Inwagen, Quam Dilecta

“...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.”

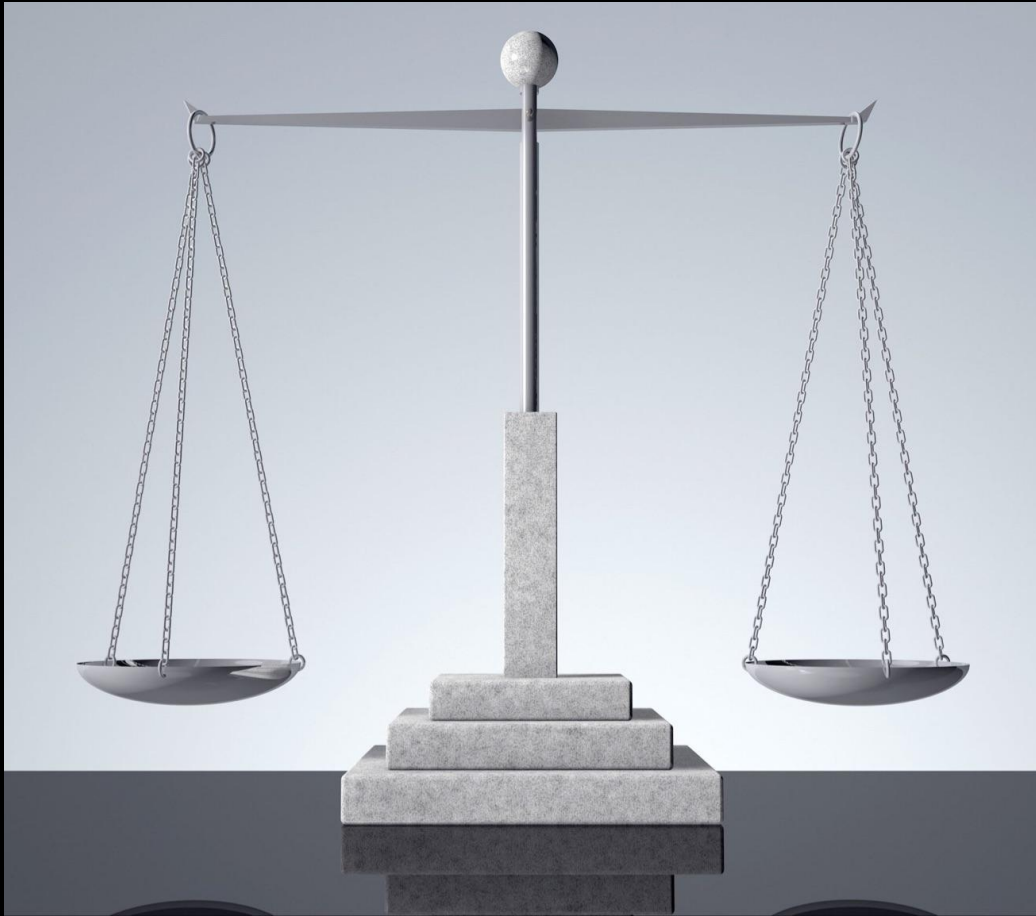


My Proposal



- 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?



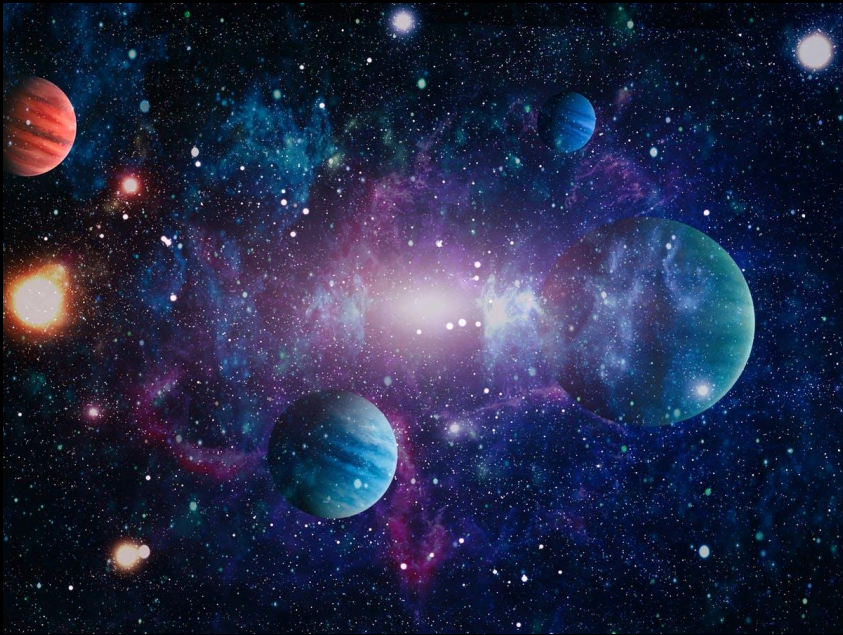
- **Evidentialism**: you should believe what is supported by your evidence.
- If practical reasons are **tiebreakers** when your evidence is balanced, then **you aren't violating evidentialism**.
- You still believe what is supported by the evidence. The evidence just **supports multiple things equally 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.

