

The "Inductive" Argument From Evil: A Dialogue*

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The following is a conversation between Beatrice Leaver, Athea Ist, and Agnes Tic. Bea and Athea teach philosophy--Bea at a Christian college, and Athea, at a large midwestern university. Agnes is an attorney. Now in their thirties, the women were suitemates in college, together with Iris.

Iris has just lost her six-year old daughter. Bea and Athea have flown to Flint to be with her. They stay with Agnes, who has remained closest to Iris. It is early evening, the day after the burial. Iris, severely depressed, has been hospitalized under medication. Bea and Athea are talking with Agnes in her house.

1. EVENING

1. 1 In Agnes's living room.

Athea: I still don't understand how it happened, Agnes. Could you go over it again?

Agnes: Well, here are the essentials. Iris divorced Bo eight months ago, and after Iris met Jim, Bo went over the edge. New Year's Eve, Iris was at the local pub with Jim. Bo came in, and got so abusive he was thrown out. When Jim dropped Iris off, Bo was waiting inside. He threatened her, but Iris took a swing at him and somehow knocked him out. She left him on the floor and went to bed. At 3:45 the brother came in and found Carrie's body. She'd been beaten over most of her body and strangled to death. Bo was arrested, and Iris thinks he did it. She thinks he tried angel dust again that night.

Athea: It's all so hard to believe. How is Iris taking it?

Agnes: I'm afraid for her, Athea. She blames herself for not calling the police while Bo was unconscious. She kept saying she couldn't go on living if she didn't believe in a loving God--that "all things work together for good to those who love God." This, for good? To me it is blackness. I keep thinking of Carrie's innocent eyes . . . and I don't know whether Iris can recover again. You know how Carrie's been the center of her life ever since her first husband died.

And I can't get rid of the thought that this just shouldn't happen. Remember how, when we were seniors, I stopped believing in God? Well, now and then I've wondered if maybe the folks at home weren't right after all; last fall I even tried going to church again. But this thing--I can't see how a God could allow it. Of course, I wouldn't say that to Iris. But I've wanted to talk about it with someone. I even dug out my old philosophy book and read an article by an Oxford philosopher named Mackie. Now it hits home.

Bea and Athea (simultaneously): What do you mean?

Agnes (with a wry smile): I'd almost forgotten both of you teach philosophy. Remember our ethics prof? "What exactly do you mean?", he'd ask. Carrie's death makes me think maybe

he was right; he claimed that evils like this conclusively prove that there's no God--none like the Baptists believe in, anyhow.

[Athea and Bea are silent.]

Agnes: I know it seems weird, but last night I actually worked out an argument, hoping we could talk like we used to in college. Maybe it's because, not knowing what I believe, I had no words to offer Iris; I could only sit and cry with her. Or maybe I'm using intellectual analysis as a sedative, to escape the pain of these past days.

Bea: Agnes, I don't think there *are* words for a time like this. Saint Paul says "Weep with those who weep"; perhaps your tears were far better than any words could be. But if you think some intellectual analysis will be a respite--well, there are much worse ways of escaping.

Athea (staring into her glass of wine): That's for sure. Maybe talking will keep us from drowning in this stuff. Let's hear your proof, Agnes.

Agnes: Okay. I started with two simple ideas. The first is that if God is all-good, as Christians say, he has to be *against* intense suffering, just as a good mother is against her child's suffering. I mean, a good mother does sometimes *allow* her child to suffer greatly--say, by having a tonsilectomy. But she doesn't *like* this suffering, and she's not indifferent about it, either; she's *against it*, in itself. So she would allow it only if this served some purpose--only if she thought this served some sufficient good. And isn't that also true for a good God? To allow such suffering for no purpose would mean God is either indifferent to it, or actually likes it for its own sake. And that would mean he's not wholly good.

Then I tried to clarify what it is to "serve some sufficient good." I saw that it's not enough for allowing the suffering to produce the good. Some painful surgery might produce some good result--but suppose there were some way to get this good equally well, but without the suffering. Some "Plan B," I'll call it. Wouldn't a morally good person have to use the Plan B? And isn't the same true of God, if he is good? I think so. So I wrote:

If God exists, then (being all-good) he would not allow any instance of intense suffering unless doing so served some sufficient good, and there were no "Plan B"--no equally good way to get this good without such suffering.

From there it was simple logic. God is supposed to be omnipotent, so he can do anything. But then he would always have a "Plan B." It follows, doesn't it, that if God exists, he would not allow any instance of suffering, so no suffering would occur. But it does occur. So it follows that God doesn't exist. It looks like I should give up my indecisive agnosticism and embrace atheism.

Athea: You've certainly remembered your logic lessons well, Agnes. But there is a problem with one of your premises. Theism does hold that God is omnipotent, but as some theists explain it, this means that he can do anything power can do. And as Aquinas said, power cannot do self-contradictory things, like make square circles. So even though the theistic God is omnipotent, he might, to obtain certain goods, *have to* allow certain evils. That's the idea behind the "Free Will Defense"--to have creatures with real moral freedom, God has to allow the possibility of the creature choosing evil.

Agnes: I see what you mean. But Athea, you believe that there is no God. Do you have some better argument against theism?

Athea: I think so. But it's nearly seven; let's continue over dinner. Shall we go to the Indian restaurant again?

1.2 At the House of India

Agnes: So what is *your* reasoning, *Athea*?

Athea: Like you, *Agnes*, I believe that a good God would not allow evils like Carrie's death unless doing so served some "sufficient good," as you called it. And I, too, tried to prove there *couldn't* be any such good. But now I think that's the wrong approach. The important thing is the obvious thing: no matter how hard we look, we don't see any sufficient good. This itself gives us good reason to believe there is no such good--and hence, no God.

Agnes: But isn't that the "fallacy" of arguing from ignorance? Isn't it like concluding that there is no life on other planets, since we don't know of any?

Athea: No, I'm not arguing from our ignorance but from our knowledge. We know of particular evils like Carrie's murder. We also know of many good things, and when we reflect on them, we see that none of them is "God-justifying" with respect to this particular evil. This knowledge that all the goods we *know* of are "non-God-justifying" gives us good reason to think that *all* goods are non-God-justifying. This is an inductive inference of the sort we rely on all the time. For example, that we know of no copper that is insulative gives us good reason to believe that no copper is insulative. That we see no elephant in this room gives us good reason to think there *is* no elephant in the room. These aren't arguments from ignorance; neither is mine.

Agnes: So your argument isn't meant as proof giving 100% certainty, but as inductive evidence justifying a high degree of confidence. Is that what you mean by "good reason"?

Athea: Exactly. And because my evidence doesn't give 100% certainty, it could be outweighed if there were enough evidence that God does exist. But I don't think there is. So on the basis of my inductive evidence, I think reason requires us to believe that there is no God-justifying purpose for certain evils, and hence, that God does not exist.

Agnes: That sounds plausible to me. But our philosophy prof always said we should test arguments by seeing if they can survive serious objections. So let's do that with yours. It would be nice if we could write it out premise by premise. Unfortunately we don't have any paper . . .

Athea: No problem--philosophers write on whatever is at hand, so I'll just use this napkin. My central argument is this:

- (P1) Carrie's murder was, in itself, a very bad thing.
- (P2) If there was no sufficiently good point served by allowing this very bad thing to happen, then God, if he exists, would have prevented it.
- (P3) There was no sufficiently good point served by allowing this very bad thing.
- (C1) Therefore, if God exists, he would have prevented this thing from happening.
- (P4) God did not prevent this thing from happening (since it did happen).
- (C2) Therefore, God does not exist.

Now premises 1 and 4 seem beyond dispute. And we've already agreed on premise 2 in discussing your argument, *Agnes*. So the only premise to worry about is P3. And the heart of my case is that we can defend P3 *inductively*. Since this will be a subargument for P3, I'll write it using lower case indices. Bea, could you pass that napkin?

(p1) After careful reflection, we see no good point served by allowing this bad thing to occur.

(p2) If, after careful reflection, we see no sufficiently good point served by allowing some bad thing to occur, then we have some reason to believe there is no sufficiently good point served by allowing it to occur.

(c1) Therefore, we have some reason to believe there is no sufficiently good point served by allowing it to occur.

(p3) We have no outweighing reason to believe the contrary (that there is a sufficiently good point served by allowing this evil).

(p4) If we have some reason to believe some proposition, and no decent reasons to believe the contrary, then on balance, reason requires us to believe that proposition.

(c2) Therefore, reason requires us to believe that there is no sufficiently good point served by allowing this bad thing to occur.

[Athea slides the napkin to Bea and Agnes]: Voila!

Agnes: I see what you're doing. You first conclude, at c1, that your inductive evidence gives *some* reason to believe P3 of your main argument. You then infer, at c2, that since there is no evidence to outweigh this reason, we are rationally required to believe P3. Bea, what do you think about this?

Bea: Interesting--by stating her inductive principles as premises p2 and p4, the subargument for P3 has become a deductively valid argument. As you know, I believe in God. Since I reject the conclusion, I've got to look for some false premise, and I think the problem must lie in this subargument from our *not seeing* any God-justifying good. It reminds of those bugs we have here: though you feel their bite, they are so small you can't see 'em, so they're called "*noseeums*." I'd like to baptize Athea's subargument the "*noseeum* argument." And I see three things to scrutinize in it.

First, we might scrutinize p1. Don't we see *any* good that might justify God in allowing this evil? What about free will? But suppose that doesn't work, and we see no other sufficient good. We must then look carefully at p2. Is *seeing* no good really evidence that there *is* no such good? Perhaps this "inductive" inference is fallacious in some way. If neither of these work, we might challenge p3. Even if Athea has given us some evidence there is no such good, can't we find positive evidence outweighing this? Evidence that God exists would be evidence that there is some such good even though we don't see it. Are we so sure there isn't evidence for God sufficient to balance Athea's negative evidence?

Agnes: Well, I want to discuss each of them, even if it takes all night. When else will I be able to talk with two philosophers like you? But why don't we pay the tab and go down the street--there's a place called "Mother's" that has absolutely sinful desserts.

1.3 At Mother's

Agnes: Let's begin with p1, then. Bea, what good might justify God's allowing a thing like Carrie's murder? As a Christian, surely you think you see something explaining it.

Bea: Be careful with the "surely" there, Agnes. Christians don't claim *they* are omniscient. But some theists do propose some possible goods that might do the job. In the case of a *moral* evil, like this brutal murder, human choice is clearly involved. On one view, God sets before us options for good and evil, and, to some extent, leaves it up *to us* which we choose.

He has placed us in a world in which our choices make real differences, not just to ourselves but to others: whether others flourish or perish is, in many ways, up to us. Isn't it

a good thing that we have this kind of significant freedom, and a world in which it can be meaningfully exercised?

Agnes: I suppose it is a good thing. And it does seem that this freedom would be compromised if God always stopped moral evils from occurring. Suppose he made bullets vaporize before they struck humans--or made everyone like superwoman, with no kryptonite around. Then our world would be one in which we could not choose to hurt another. Perhaps we could form intentions to hurt others, but we'd soon learn we couldn't ever carry them out. But then we'd lack freedom. So if God wants a world with this good of freedom in it, doesn't he clearly *have* to allow evils resulting from free choices, including the evil of Carrie's being murdered? What do you say to that, Athea?

Athea: Even if I grant that moral freedom is a good thing, there are problems. Couldn't an omnipotent God make us so we are free, but always freely choose to do right? This doesn't seem a contradiction--some Christians even believe that angels like Gabriel are like this. Couldn't Omnipotence make us all like Gabriel? If not, is freedom to *hurt* others really worth the price tag? Like Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor," I'm not sure such freedom is worth the torment of one little child like Carrie.

If these problems are solved, the biggest problem remains. For it would just mean that God, to have such freedom in his universe, must *sometimes* allow moral evils. Not that he'd *always* have to allow them. A mother, to teach her daughter responsibility, must *sometimes* allow what results from her wrong choices. But she needn't *always* do this: she could still intervene *sometimes* to prevent dreadful catastrophes. Similarly, obtaining moral freedom doesn't require God *always* to allow moral evils. So this good doesn't clearly explain, or justify, his allowing the moral evil of Carrie's being murdered.

Bea: I tend to agree. Theists, unlike eighteenth-century deists, believe God is active in his creation. He's not a clockmaker who made the world and left it to run on its own. As a theist, I think that God does *sometimes* intervene to prevent moral evils. It is only his doing this *always* that would destroy freedom.

Agnes: So Athea, how does this help you? We've agreed that if God exists, he will sometimes intervene to reduce evil. So what? In concluding that God doesn't exist, are you supposing that such interventions never occur? What evidence is there for that? Maybe Bo was first going to kill the whole family, and God intervened by helping Iris to knock him out. Bo is no midget, you know.

Bea: No, Agnes; remember how this issue arose. The question was whether we see any good that would justify God's allowing this evil. *You* suggested that to have the good of freedom, God *clearly had to* allow Carrie's murder. This, Athea is saying, falsely assumes that our having freedom requires *no* interventions from God. For we've agreed that God can *sometimes* intervene without destroying this good of freedom.

Athea: Thanks, Bea. I see why your students are never sure whose side you are on. But you're exactly right. To see moral freedom as a good justifying God's allowing Carrie's murder, we would have to see that his intervention on *that* occasion would have compromised this good. My argument is that we don't see that at all. In fact, I think (though my argument doesn't demand this) that we see the contrary. If Iris's knocking Bo out the first time (with or without Divine assistance) didn't compromise his freedom, it sure seems that stopping him one more time wouldn't either.

Agnes: Wait a minute. I just remembered a principle from my ethics class. It was that similar cases must be judged similarly. If, under certain circumstances, I should keep a promise, then under similar circumstances, you should too. If one sees no relevant

differences in the circumstances, fairness requires there be no difference in one's judgment about what should be done. So if we accept your claim that God should intervene to prevent Bo from carrying out his murderous intention on *this* occasion, won't you have to say that about the *next* occasion too? And so also for the *next* occasion. But that would mean he should *always* so intervene, which you granted is false, for that *would* destroy freedom. Doesn't this refute your claim? Or do you reject the principle about judging similar cases similarly?

Athea: No, I don't reject the principle: if the circumstances aren't different, the judgment shouldn't be either. But we need a broad enough notion of "circumstances." If drunk drivers are killing people, it might be right for the police to test randomly selected motorists at checkpoints, but not right to test everyone. One might think that this violates your principle: isn't stopping one like stopping another? Not really. There might be a certain threshold number of people stopped, such that as you pass that threshold you start getting bad effects--say, causing long delays, so that drivers get hostile and cause more accidents than drunkards. The number of drivers you've already checked can be *part* of the circumstances in deciding whether to check one more driver. So you might rightly *not* stop one more driver, because as you reach that threshold, the circumstances *are* different.

So also with divine interventions. It might be right for God (if he existed) sometimes to prevent a person's evil actions, but after a certain number of interventions, a threshold may be reached where further interventions would have very bad effects--say, the person feeling that he lacks real freedom of action. As that "freedom threshold" is reached, it might not be right for God to intervene once more.

Bea: That seems sensible to me, *Athea*. I would also apply it to God's intervening to prevent "natural evils," due to accidents and the like. The real problem now seems to be this. You allow that to have the good of moral freedom, there are "freedom thresholds" which, once reached, would justify God's *allowing* moral evils of murder and the like. But you don't think this good justifies God's allowing this evil of Carrie's death. So you must be supposing the "freedom threshold" has not been reached in this case. What reason is there to suppose that?

Agnes: Can I suggest one? Suppose you were a cop and you saw the little girl being brutalized by someone. Would you have thought: "Well, I've got to be careful: maybe one more intervention will cross some threshold, making the person feel he lacks choice, so he doesn't try to be good any more than I try to fly?" Of course not. If anyone proposed this as an excuse for *your* not intervening, you'd dismiss it as ludicrous. Why should we take it more seriously as an excuse for *God's* not intervening?

Bea: I once heard a similar argument from a philosopher named David Conway. At first it seemed quite compelling. But then I read *The Existence of God* by Richard Swinburne. Swinburne criticizes the assumption that since we'd have a duty to stop something, so would God. There is, he says, no reason to think God is in the same position as we are. For one thing, if God exists he knows much more than we do; and differences in knowledge can make differences in duties. If someone is choking, it might be right for a doctor to cut open his throat, but wrong for me (lacking his medical knowledge or skill) to do so.

Athea: I agree, *Bea*, that one can't simply argue "from us to God." But there's a better way to interpret Conway's argument. What is important is *why* we think the cop should intervene: we judge that his intervening would not cross any "freedom threshold," that is, would not begin to compromise freedom in a way that produced threshold effects worse than the evil at issue. There may be some such freedom threshold, but we are confident it is not here, or we would not intervene so confidently ourselves.

Here's another idea. Why do we think that one more human intervention would not cross any "freedom threshold?" I think it's because we don't see how it would. So we are relying on a "noseeum" inference. Well, we also don't see how a further *divine* intervention would cross a "freedom threshold." So isn't a noseeum inference justified here too? Especially since God could intervene covertly, say, by waking Iris with the thought of checking the children. If the freedom threshold Wouldn't have been violated by Iris's waking naturally and stopping Bo, why would it by God's waking her?

Bea: I don't know, *Athea*. I think you've put your finger on an important problem, and I don't know how to answer it. It strikes me that the problem also arises for "natural evils," and that even believers can be gripped by it.

Let me explain. We've seen that if God *always* intervened to prevent evils, certain goods might be lost. But theists believe God does *often* guide and protect us. Perhaps we've had loved ones escape tragedy by some fortunate coincidence: believers (if they are not deists) will see this as God's providential care. But what, then, if my child drowns, and wouldn't have, if the lifeguard had only turned his eyes to the corner of the pool? God averted one close call last month; couldn't he avert one more now? It seems so implausible, especially when tragedy strikes close to home. You've helped me see an important problem, and I want to think about it more.

Agnes: It makes me wonder if deism isn't the best theism after all. Your God intervenes to protect little children sometimes, but other times he must regretfully let nature take its toll on them. How does he decide? "Shall I protect this child? Careful now--I've already had to protect X children already this month." I can imagine God thinking: "The heck with this; it's too much fiddling around. I'll just make a universe and let it roll."

Bea: I can feel the pressure toward that way of thinking, though I think it's to be resisted. But for now, I will concede *Athea*'s first premise. We do not see a good justifying God's allowing Carrie's being murdered. Maybe free will is a good justifying God's allowing this; but given *Athea*'s threshold arguments, I don't see *how* it does so. So why don't we turn to p2 in her sub-argument? Suppose we don't see any God-justifying good for this. Is this evidence there *is* no such good?

Agnes: Why don't we continue over a brandy? There's a quiet place, the Barrister, just around the corner.