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Evil and the complexity of history: a response to Durston

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Abstract: Kirk Durston recently presented an argument aimed against evidential arguments from evil predicated on instances of suffering that appear to be gratuitous; ‘The consequential complexity of history and gratuitous evil’, Religious Studies, 36 (2000), 65–80. He begins with the notion that history consists of an intricate web of causal chains, so that a single event in one such chain may have countless unforeseen consequences. According to Durston, this consequential complexity exhibited by history negatively impacts on our grasp of the data necessary to determine whether or not an evil is gratuitous. He therefore concludes that our epistemic condition poses an insurmountable barrier towards the inference from inscrutability to pointlessness. By way of reply, I contend that Durston’s argument is flawed in two significant respects, and thus the evidential argument emerges unscathed from his critique.

With the demise of logical arguments from evil, greater attention came to be focused on evidential arguments, particularly those beginning from our observations of seemingly pointless, horrific evil. For over a decade, however, evidential arguments have been subjected to a concerted and formidable critique in the hands of ‘sceptical theists’. According to this group of theists, our impoverished cognitive condition precludes us from justifiably inferring from the inscrutability of instances of evil that there are in fact evils that have no point. In ‘The consequential complexity of history and gratuitous evil’, Kirk Durston has lent his support to this position by way of an argument that is somewhat unique in the sceptical theist literature. I intend to show, however, that Durston’s argument fails to further the sceptical theist cause. I will begin with an outline of Durston’s case against evidential arguments, before proceeding to identify two ways in which his reasoning has lead him astray.

Durston’s argument from the complexity of history

The central premise in Durston’s argument is that history is ‘consequentially complex’. By this he means that ‘history is composed of a web
of innumerable interacting causal chains, many of which are composed of millions of discrete events. As a result, ‘changing one event not only changes the entire causal chain from that point onward to the end of history, it also changes the evolution of all other causal chains that interact with the revised causal chain at any point in the future’. To highlight the consequential complexity of history, Durston imagines what may have transpired had Winston Churchill’s mother, on the night her son was conceived early in 1874, fallen asleep in a slightly different position so that ‘the precise pathway that each of the millions of spermatozoa took would have been slightly altered’. The odds are, according to Durston, that an individual with a very different chromosomal combination than Winston Churchill’s would have been born, ‘with the likely result that the evolution of World War II would have been substantially different from what actually took place’. Thus, an apparently insignificant event (the sleeping position of Churchill’s mother on the night in question) had consequences of great moral significance that could not have been recognized until many years later.

Durston goes on to outline the implications of the complexity of history on evidential arguments from gratuitous evil. He begins with the commonly accepted definition of gratuitous evil: an evil is gratuitous if and only if God could have prevented it without forfeiting some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil. Given this definition, to determine whether a particular evil is gratuitous we must have at our disposal two bodies of data:

1. the instance of evil E together with its morally significant consequences, and
2. the morally significant consequences of substituting E with some other event.

The first set of data would inform us of the negative intrinsic value of the initial evil event along with the intrinsic values of all the consequences of that evil event that will be actualized to the end of history. Thus, the overall net value of the initial evil event (call it A) is the sum of all the intrinsic values, both positive and negative, of that event together with all its actual consequences. Durston states this schematically as follows:

$$A = E + C_1 + C_2 + C_3 + \ldots + C_{\text{end}}$$

However, according to the thesis of the complexity of history, a single event leads to an exponentially increasing number of consequences, affecting an increasing number of causal chains. Therefore, the consequences that flow from E are likely to include billions or more discrete events. In that case, our knowledge of the consequences of E would clearly be miniscule in comparison with the entire set of E’s consequences to the end of history. If we were therefore asked to adopt one of the following three positions,
(1) A is positive;
(2) A is negative; or
(3) we do not know whether A is positive or negative,

the most rationally defensible position to take could only be (3).

A similar problem affects the second body of data relating to the consequences of preventing E in favour of some other event. This set of data informs us of the overall value of the best alternative that God could actualize (call this B), where this value is the sum of the intrinsic value of S – the event that God substitutes for E – and the intrinsic values of all the consequences of S. Put schematically:

\[ B = S + C_{B1} + C_{B2} + C_{B3} + \ldots + C_{B-end} \]

Calculating the value of B, however, proves to be just as difficult as calculating the value of A. If S takes the place of E, the consequences that follow from S would include the subsequent decisions of free agents. In other words, the elements in the chain \( C_{B1}, C_{B2} \) and so on would mainly consist of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. But then to know the consequences of substituting E with S would require nothing less than middle knowledge. Lacking such knowledge, we cannot know what free decisions would be made subsequent to S, and so we are unable to ascertain the value of B.

The conclusion drawn by Durston is that we cannot know what constitutes the best alternative for God to actualize. One may agree with this, however, while insisting that we do know of better alternatives open to God, for surely we can imagine a world better than ours, perhaps in virtue of containing S but not E. But Durston rejects this commonsensical assumption. He argues that if the alternative world in question (call it W) includes the decisions of free agents, then we do not know if God can actualize W. For whether W includes S but not E is not up to God alone, but also depends on the free decisions of W's inhabitants. But the inhabitants of W may never make all the necessary free decisions, under any possible circumstances, in order to bring about S rather than E. Due to our lack of middle knowledge, we do not know what decisions such free agents would make and thus we do not know whether God can actualize W. We are therefore unable to postulate what may constitute a better, let alone the best, alternative for God to actualize, thus giving us further reason to think that attempts at calculating B are doomed to failure. Once again, agnosticism over the value of B seems the most rational position to adopt.

Durston then proceeds to show how this agnosticism leads to grave difficulties for non-theists like Rowe and Russell who develop atheological arguments based on gratuitous evils. To judge whether an evil is gratuitous, we must compare A and B. More precisely, if the difference between the values of A and B is positive (in which case, the value of E along with its consequences is greater than the value of the alternatives), then God is justified in permitting the given evil. Conversely,
if the difference between A and B is negative, then God is not justified in per-
mitting the evil. This suggests the following definition of gratuitous evil:

\[(G) \text{ An instance of evil E is gratuitous if and only if } A - B \text{ is negative.}\]

Due to the complexity of history, however, we lack virtually all the data necessary
to determine the values of A and B. Durston compares our predicament vis-à-vis
gratuitous evil with the attempt to establish whether A–B is positive or negative in
relation to the following problem:

\[
A = -7 + 2 - 3 + 1 + 2 + \text{millions of unknown numbers of unknown sign.}
\]

\[
B = 4 + 2 + \text{millions of additional unknown numbers of unknown sign.}
\]

Just as we could not fail to be agnostic about the sign of A–B in this case, so too
we cannot determine, with respect to any evil or group of evils, that A–B for such
evils is negative and therefore gratuitous. The complexity of history thus under-
mines evidential arguments from evil that begin with our observations of evils
that appear to be gratuitous.

**Objection 1**

If Durston is correct, then for any evil E that takes place in our world,
we cannot determine whether or not E is gratuitous – put differently, we cannot
determine whether or not God was justified in permitting E. And this because of
our lack of knowledge of the data necessary to make well-grounded determi-
nations of the aforementioned sort. But if this is the case with actual evil states of
affairs, why could it not also apply to actual good states of affairs? Paralleling
Durston’s argument, one may argue that we are never in a position to determine
whether God is justified in allowing a good event G to take place, for to determine
this we would need to know all the consequences that flow from G till the end
of history, as well as all the consequences of substituting G with a state of affairs
of lesser intrinsic value. Consider, however, the following patently good state of
affairs: donating money to a children’s hospital. Can we justifiably assert that
God, should He exist, would be justified in permitting this good to take place?
Apparently not, if Durston’s argument is followed to its logical conclusion.

This points to the underlying problem with Durston’s argument: it takes for
granted unreasonably high standards for making acceptable moral or evaluative
judgments. In many cases, we do not need to know the remote and indirect
consequences of a particular action or event in order to make an adequate
judgment regarding its overall value. In donating money to a charity, in providing
food and shelter to one’s children, in caring for one’s sickly grandmother, and in
numerous other instances the action in question can be deemed to good – and
thus God is justified in permitting it – regardless of our incomplete knowledge of
the consequences such actions may have in the distant future. In like manner,
knowledge of the overall value of an evil event need not presuppose extensive knowledge regarding its consequences. Clearly, we can justifiably assert that many evils (e.g. lying to one’s wife, the theft of a car) are underwritten by outweighing goods (e.g. free will) even though we do not know the impact such evils have on events taking place in centuries to come.

But there is an additional reason for taking remote consequences to be irrelevant to the question of whether a particular evil serves a greater good. It is sometimes held that God could not be justified in permitting an instance of suffering for the sake of some good unless the sufferer partakes of that good. This view appears to be quite plausible, at least with respect to terrible evils such as Rowe’s E1 (the excruciating death of a fawn trapped in a forest fire) and E2 (the sexual abuse and murder of a five-year-old girl). For as Rowe points out, ‘we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary’.  

Therefore, apart from goods that can only be actualized in the afterlife (e.g. the beatific vision), any other good must be present at some point during the sufferer’s lifetime, otherwise that person will have no opportunity to share in the relevant good. If this is the case, however, there is simply no need to examine the causal chain extending from the death of the suffering individual to the end of history when considering what purpose, if any, was served by the evil endured by that individual. One need only focus on the goods that could be realized in the course of the sufferer’s life. Considerations such as these undercut Durston’s scepticism regarding our ability to determine whether God could have a morally sufficient reason for permitting instances of evil.

Objection 2

A second difficulty with Durston’s case concerns his claim that, due to a lack of middle knowledge, we have no way of knowing whether there was an alternative better than E that God could have actualized. As we have seen, an objection that quickly comes to mind is that we have little trouble imagining worlds better than ours. It therefore seems that we do know of better alternatives that were open to God. Rowe makes this point forcefully in relation to E2:

Consider all those possible worlds with (as much as possible) the same past as the actual world but in which God brings it about that the little girl’s attacker is so overcome with sorrow on seeing the terror in her face that he lets her go, physically unharmed. Undoubtedly, some of these worlds are worse than the actual world and many are better. Is it reasonable to believe that an omnipotent being was unable to create any of these better worlds, rather than the actual world? It seems incredible that this should be so.

Similarly, nearby possible worlds in which prior to New Year’s Day of 1986 (when E2 took place) the little girl dies peacefully in her sleep or her attacker is seized by
a fatal heart attack are clearly better alternatives, and it is difficult to see why God would be incapable of creating one of them. To be sure, Durston does not claim that God cannot create such worlds, but only that we do not know if He can, due to our lack of middle knowledge. Durston’s point here is that we simply do not know whether, in any alternative world inhabited by significantly free agents, such agents would make all the necessary free decisions to ensure that \( E_2 \) does not take place. If these possible free creatures do not in any circumstances make the requisite decisions, then the better world in question cannot eventuate, and so even God would be powerless to bring it about. This, however, overlooks that fact that God could, as in Rowe’s hypothetical scenario, directly intervene to prevent \( E_2 \). Furthermore, even if it is granted that we do not know which better worlds God can actualize, it seems implausible that God cannot actualize any of them.

Durston’s response to this line of thought is startling. ‘We are mistaken’, he writes, ‘if we believe that we can think of a better world’.\(^{13}\) He bases this position on the following considerations drawn from the complexity of history:

(A) We do not have sufficient knowledge of the world’s causal chains and individual effects to know what this world is like to the end of history. If we do not know what this world is like to the end of history, then it is impossible for us to compare it to other worlds to see if they are better.\(^{14}\)

(B) The complexity of history prevents us from knowing what any alternative world would be like to the end of its history if we deleted just one event.\(^{15}\)

In response to (A), suppose that there are two possible worlds, \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \), with the former being actual and containing \( E_2 \) while the latter being merely possible and lacking \( E_2 \). Suppose further that \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \) share the same past up to some point reasonably close to when \( E_2 \) actually occurred. At that point, God intervenes in \( W_2 \) so that the little girl dies peacefully in her sleep. We may also suppose that the subsequent history of both \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \) is not significantly different. In that case, \textit{contra} (A), we can compare these two worlds even though we do not know much about them. All we know is that \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \) are identical in nearly all respects, and that is sufficient to judge which of the two is preferable from a moral standpoint.

This response, however, does not take into account the point made in (B). The foregoing scenario depicted with respect to \( W_2 \) may be misleading, for as Durston points out,

\begin{quote}
Given the consequential complexity of history, when we propose deleting a particular event from the world, we are actually proposing deleting all the billions of consequences of the event strewn throughout myriads of interrelated causal chains stretching to the end of history. The deletion or substitution of just one event is actually the deletion or substitution of an entire complex branch of history that may be so large as to affect the entire historical network at some point in the future.\(^{16}\)
\end{quote}
Thus, by deleting $E_2$ we may not end up with a world such as $W_2$ whose subsequent course of history is very much like that found in the actual world. Rather, in light of the consequential complexity of history, it is quite possible (if not highly likely) that the deletion of $E_2$ would lead to a world with a radically different future. But if we do not know what the future in $W_2$ would be like, we cannot compare this alternative world to our world. Durston therefore concludes that 'the activity of thinking of better worlds is not an activity humans are capable of'.

Durston rightly emphasizes the effects of deleting an event from history, as this can easily be disregarded when considering the value or purpose of a particular evil. However, the conclusion Durston draws from this seems to go well beyond the facts of the matter. Undoubtedly, the consequences of deleting or substituting $E_2$ from our world would be far-reaching, though it is difficult to say how far they would reach. Nevertheless, one would suppose that in deleting $E_2$ it is likely that the consequences would be better than those that result from the actual occurrence of $E_2$. But even if we assume that in some worlds the consequences are no better or even worse, surely there are also some worlds in which the consequences are better. Our lack of precise knowledge as to what our world and nearby possible worlds are like to the end of history is no impediment to seeing that at least some nearby worlds would have a brighter future than ours in virtue of not containing $E_2$.

**Conclusion**

Durston’s argument, I have argued, is open to two fatal objections. Firstly, our ignorance of the remote consequences of a particular event need not prevent us from arriving at an adequate assessment of the overall value of that event. Secondly, our lack of knowledge regarding the precise implications of deleting an event from our world’s history need not prevent us from making an informed judgement about the moral significance of that deletion. Durston, like many before him, is led to his brand of moral scepticism by holding to unreasonably high standards of knowledge in the realm of value. This only reinforces the suspicion that the scepticism of the sceptical theist runs too deep.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 65.
4. Ibid., 66.
5. Ibid.
6. The summary of Durston’s views that follows draws on ‘The consequential complexity of history’, 67–73.
7. This clearly shows that Durston accepts (without argument) a consequentialist reading of ‘gratuitous evil’. However, many advocates of the evidential argument define ‘gratuitous evil’ in a way that is neutral with respect to the truth of consequentialism – see, for example, William Rowe ‘The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 336, n.3; and Bruce Russell ‘The persistent problem of evil’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), 129. Even if, as Eric Reitan has argued, Rowe and Russell inadvertently propose a notion of ‘gratuitous evil’ that is committed to consequentialism, there is no need to (and perhaps good reason not to) conceive of gratuitous evil in this manner (see Eric Reitan ‘Does the argument from evil assume a consequentialist morality?’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 17 (2000), 306–319). Indeed, a non-consequentialist conception of gratuitous evil would avoid the objections raised by Durston against evidential arguments from evil.

8. I should mention that Durston begins his paper by taking for granted three assumptions drawn in large part from the work of Plantinga: (1) incompatibilism with respect to free will; (2) the view that there might be some restrictions on how much evil God can prevent in the course of achieving a greater good; and (3) the view that there may be worlds containing moral good that God cannot actualize, since the actualization of such worlds is partly dependant on the free decisions of its inhabitants and not solely on God (Durston ‘The consequential complexity of history’, 67–68). The first and third of these assumptions lie behind Durston’s argument above that we do not know whether God can actualize a better world. Despite my reservations regarding these assumptions, my critique of Durston will be made independently of their truth.

9. It may be pointed out, however, that later in his paper Durston revises this definition so as to allow evils to be classified as gratuitous if there is no compensation in this or the next life to those affected by the evil (Durston ‘The consequential complexity of history’, 75–76). The rationale for this amendment is the wish to avoid the ‘heartless’ view that God may be justified in permitting, say, the horrendous evil of a five-year-old girl being beaten, raped, and strangled to death solely for the sake of consequences (such as the prevention over the following three centuries of eight similar cases) that are not concerned with goods bestowed upon the little girl in question.


11. A further objection against Durston’s scepticism regarding our ability to determine the values of A and B is suggested by James Keller (‘The problem of evil and the attributes of God’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 26 (1989), 161), who emphasizes the relevance of determinism to this issue. In holding that God permits E for the sake of some good linked to E by a long, complex causal chain, one is assuming that causal laws are strictly deterministic. But if this view of causation is mistaken, then complex causal chains cannot be part of God’s reasons for permitting E. Thus, we need not look to all the consequences of E till the end of history in order to arrive at the value of A.


15. *Ibid*.
