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# Σ God, Evil and O Simulation

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The occurrence of evil is often used as an argument against the existence of a benevolent god. Against this, theists typically make excuses for the occurrence of evil. One of these is that humans need to be given freedom to act. It is argued that this is flawed, because God should be able to provide each of us with a personal world that allows freedom to act, while insulating each of us from everyone else's actions. Any being who cannot do this is not worthy of being called "God", and rather than believe in a god that could do this, but chooses not to, we should doubt that a benevolent god, as typically believed in by theists, exists.

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# 1 Introduction

Theists typically believe that God is good. If so, why would he allow extreme suffering or harm? To some, the answer is simple: God does not exist. Others try to justify extreme suffering. This article will focus on suffering and harm inflicted by people, such as torture and murder in concentration camps. Theists have all kinds of excuses for these things. A common answer is that humans need freedom to choose right or wrong. This is flawed. What I will say here will also relate to extreme suffering, even when it is not caused by people, such as that of people with terrible, prolonged illnesses or who lose their loved ones in natural disasters.

## 2 The Argument

Suppose God is good. Suppose also that humans need to be allowed freedom of action. For example, God cannot magically descend from the sky and rescue concentration camp victims: If people want to pursue careers as concentration camp guards, they need to be allowed to do that, free of well-meaning interference from God.

Nevertheless, all of this suffering that people inflict on each other would pain God. There should, however, be a simple solution for God, as follows.

*God puts each of us in his/her own personal “world”, populated by fake people for us to help or torture and murder as we see fit.*

We have the freedom to spend our time helping old people to cross the street, or torturing and murdering people in concentration camps. The old people, the concentration camp victims and anyone else we meet are fake, however. Nobody really benefits or suffers as a result of our actions, for each of us is the sole inhabitant of his/her personal “world”. We never know this because all these people seem real.

This might be done in a number of ways. God could literally make a separate “world” or “universe”<sup>1</sup> for each of us, populating it with realistic simulations of humans, which act as humans are supposed to act, but are devoid of any real consciousness or feelings. These people could be sophisticated robots that appear to be alive, even when analyzed carefully, or they could be like people on the holodeck in *Star Trek*, or they might be remotely controlled by God. If making each of us a personal universe is extravagant (strange if God is supposed to be able to do anything), God could put each of us on his/her own personal planet, in the same galaxy, or in different galaxies, with the same kinds of fake people. God might not even go that far and just arrange for each of us to be born, and live out our entire lives, in a small capsule, our brains interacting with a computer generated virtual reality like that in films like *The Matrix*, with each of us in a *separate* virtual reality, rather than the shared virtual reality of *The Matrix*, or God could bypass the computers and just put perceptions of a fake reality directly into the mind of each of us.

Each of us is free to choose good or evil as we see fit, without any consequences of our choices for other people. By putting us all in separate worlds, God has protected us from each other. Further, God could use an approach like this to protect us from the very worst suffering, even if a human does not cause it. It might be useful for me to meet someone who has lost all of his loved ones in a tsunami, maybe so that I can be moved to compassionate behavior and clock up metaphysical air miles, but all those people being hurt so much in my world *do not exist* – and God could be selective about the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the word “universe” in a diminutive sense here.

kinds of situations into which he puts real people. He need not actually put a real person in the situation of experiencing anything so dreadful in his/her personal world.

### 3 Objections

**Objection 1: What you say is silly and impossible: God could not do it.**

**Reply:** Now we know that you do not think God can do anything. In fact, he does not even come close to being able to do anything. He is not even as powerful as the AIs in *The Matrix* or the director in *The Truman Show*. It is hard to see why he should even be called “God” and how he could have created the universe with such limited ability.

**Objection 2: People need to be able to choose good and evil.**

**Reply:** Like the last objection, this was already answered by the argument itself. People’s experiences, and the choices facing them, in this situation, are no different from those in a normal existence. People have just as much freedom of choice in these simulations as they would in real-life. Only the *effects* of their choices are different.

**Objection 3: But that would not be *real* good and evil.**

**Reply:** Surely it matters if the sick child that someone saves or the person that someone tortures is real? Why should it matter though? A person who has chosen to act one way or another has still chosen to act that way, even if unknown to him/her, real people are being insulated from the consequences. If a man picked up a gun that he thought was loaded, aimed it at an intended victim and pulled the trigger, we would say that the man had chosen to kill someone: We would still say that even if we had secretly removed the bullets from the gun first – and most courts would say that too. Would anyone really argue that if we had decided *not* to unload the gun, we would have done something good, by injecting some much needed meaning into the would-be killer’s choices at the expense of his victims? If we demand that real people suffer then we have to ask *why*: There is no reason beyond some need for gratuitous violence. Simply declaring that the suffering must be *real* suffering, without explaining what this achieves, is simply declaring the suffering an end in itself. Should we think that the reality of the suffering of a concentration camp victim is desirable because it gives *meaning* to the choice of the person who decided to inflict it? This is ethically indefensible: It assigns the victim the status of a film extra. Even if *some* suffering were justified, God would not have to use an absolute version of what is described here: God could put everyone in the same world, secretly removing victims of torture from the world, and putting them somewhere else, when there has been enough suffering to provide sufficient meaning, replacing them with simulations that can go on being tortured – or people destined to be tortured could be played by fake people from the start. If suffering is needed to provide meaning, a place like Auschwitz should provide more than enough meaning.

**Objection 4:** You want people to be protected from suffering caused by other people, but there is nothing special about that kind of suffering. You may as well ask God to prevent *any* suffering. This would result in a stifling, meaningless world where everyday human experience was limited. You think God should make it impossible for children to fall off bicycles while learning to ride them, or rather you want God to put real people only into worlds where it is impossible to fall off bicycles, or with no bicycles, or with rubber roads. The only valid worlds left for humans to inhabit would be twisted caricatures of what we call “reality”.

**Reply:** I have suggested that *extreme* suffering should be prevented, whether caused by other people or not, by God being selective about the situations into which real people are placed. We can debate the merits of what many of us might consider normal, everyday human experience, with trivial amounts of suffering, but it is absurd to suggest that *extreme* suffering somehow has to have any value. Even if it would be wrong to interfere with children’s experience of riding bicycles, suggesting that this justifies suffering in concentration camps is monstrous: Concentration camps have no use to an ethical person. The absurdity of the argument that extreme suffering needs to be allowed because preventing it would imply that all suffering, even all minor inconvenience, would need stopping too can be shown by our own societies’ attitudes to extreme suffering. We close concentration camps down and put the guards on trial. We send paramedics to help people in extreme pain. If someone said to a paramedic, while he/she was treating a terribly injured person, “You need to stop, because if you are philosophically consistent, treating that person means you would also deprive children of the experience of normal bicycle riding, in case they fall off,” we would think that person insane: Seeking to prevent certain levels of suffering is regarded by most of us as a vital part of goodness, irrespective of any debate about what everyday life should be like. For some reason, things are supposed to be different when we assess God’s ethics.

**Objection 5:** Suffering has value, because it can cause some people to do good deeds and become better people. How many people have been moved to good deeds, and being better people, by seeing scenes of children starving in Africa?

**Reply:** People could be moved by seeing the *fake* suffering of *fake* people. We also have the questionable use of the children in Africa to take everyone else on a fantastic voyage of self-discovery and ethical growth. What do *they* get out of this?

**Objection 6:** People need to suffer for their own good, to become better people.

**Reply:** Most people thinking this will probably not be in a concentration camp: It is easier to make an argument like this to justify *other people’s* suffering. A lot of people who suffer die soon afterwards, or are mentally damaged, making it hard to see how their suffering benefits them. Accepting an argument like this means accepting some absurd ideas. One is that concentration camp guards deserve the gratitude of their

victims for taking them on such a wonderful journey of self-improvement. Another is that we should get rid of doctors, nurses, police officers, social workers and aid workers as people like this, by trying to reduce the suffering of others, are getting between them and valuable experiences – and the point I already made about the absurdity of trying to imply that there must be any merit in *extreme* suffering, based on whatever value normal, everyday life has, applies here. Both ideas would be considered absurd by most people, and offensive by many, so why is it reasonable for God to act like this?

**Objection 7: Fake people would have the same consciousness as real people. It would be impossible for God to make “fake” people that did not suffer when they became victims of a “real” person.**

**Reply:** I think this is the most sophisticated objection, though it is unlikely to help many theists. Some philosophers think that consciousness is associated with the correct computation, and that the correct behavior implies the correct computation. They would regard *conscious behavior* as proof of *real consciousness*. Philosophers such as Professor John Searle reject this, saying that consciousness needs particular kinds of physical process that would not be present if it were mimicked.<sup>2</sup> If you are a theist, though, do you really want to go here? It would seem to be assuming a computational view of the mind, or something similar to it, or at least asserting that there is nothing special to distinguish the human mind from anything else that displays the same external behavior. If anything that merely *acts* like a human is conscious, where does this leave talk of souls and free will? Some theists may try a similar kind of argument, saying that it would be impossible even to mimic human behavior, maybe because some special physical processes causes it (which seems hard to reconcile with the view that humans have souls) or because souls are needed even to get human behavior. Both types of objection, however, are easily dealt with by suggesting that God should just control the fake humans directly, producing their behavior himself. This answers any objection based on the idea that even fake humans would suffer: Whatever is supposed to cause this behavior is inside God’s mind – meaning that labeling them as “computation” would be attempting to understand God in computational terms, which is hard to reconcile with typical religious views. It also answers the objection that only souls could produce the correct behavior by avoiding the need for any physical system to produce it.

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<sup>2</sup> Searle, J. R., 1980. Minds, brains and computers. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3, pp.417-457.

Searle, J. R., 1994. *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Searle, J. R., 1997. *The Mystery of Consciousness*. New York: The New York Review of Books.



**Objection 8: This is what is really happening. Each of us is in his/her personal world. God is truly wonderful to protect us in this way.**

**Reply:** I am unsure if I need to reply to this one. If it is correct, I do not exist and what you are reading now is merely an article by one of the fake people in your own world. For the sake of realistic appearances, however, I will attempt a reply. This is hardly a well-known justification for evil acts being allowed to occur in the world. I do not know anyone who uses it. Any theist holding such a view is admitting to some level of falsity in his/her experience. Once this is accepted, how do you even know that the evidence for the faker being what you think him to be is genuine? In any event, any theist holding this view should stop proselytizing, on account of none of the audience being real. In particular, I request that he/she desist from arguing with me, on account of me not being real.

## 4 Conclusion

The conclusion will be familiar to many readers. If God cannot do what is described here then he is not all-powerful and should not be called “God”. If, however, God can prevent people experiencing extreme suffering caused by other people, and the worst extremes of naturally caused suffering, yet chooses not to, then God is not good and does not deserve worship. My own answer is simple: I do not think God exists. I do not claim that this argument *proves* that God does not exist, but it should have *some* force against the idea of a kind, omnipotent being.

## 5 Bibliography

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