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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE PROCREATION ANALOGY

John McClellan

A prominent Christian apologist suggests it is inconsistent for an atheist to have a favourable attitude towards procreating while maintaining that a loving God would not place vulnerable beings in such a harmful world. I put this analogy to the test with a series of thought experiments, revealing crucial disanalogies between God and procreators that absolve the atheist from the charge of inconsistency and draw the reader's attention to the central issues on the problem of evil as debated by contemporary philosophers.

The perennial question of whether an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God would subject vulnerable beings to suffering such as we encounter on Earth is known among philosophers as the 'problem of evil'. In a recent book on this problem, Oxford Christian apologist Vince Vitale makes the following provocative argument:

> [I]n normal cases of procreation, parents risk bringing a child into a lot of suffering [. . .] knowing full well that one day the child will suffer death [. . .] What follows is that if there is good reason to think that human procreation can be an act of love – despite its great cost – then there is also good reason to think that God's creation of the world we live in could be an act of love. (Vitale and Zacharias 2014: 76–7)

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Vitale thus suggests we treat God's subjection of sentient life to the many dangers of our world as being on a moral par with human procreation. This argument is ground-breaking if sound, since it would provide theists with a quick response to critics who allege that the world's suffering is evidence against God's existence; they may simply press their critics to decide whether to give up the objection or else stop celebrating new births in their families and communities. I aim to show that there are important disanalogies, though, between God and procreators that render Vitale's argument unsuccessful.[1] I will also show, perhaps more charitably, that Vitale's analogy can be used as an engaging new avenue to arrive at what contemporary philosophers consider to be the central issues in the problem of evil.

A Working Assumption

Some readers may be surprised to learn of a group of philosophers called 'anti-natalists' who deem procreation morally objectionable on account of the suffering it enables.[2] (I say '*some* readers', as those who have already completed a course in philosophy will know by now not to be surprised to find at least a few philosophers maintaining almost any position.) Anti-natalists would presumably welcome Vitale's analogy, not, of course, as a way of getting God off the hook for suffering but as a way of upholding their view that intentionally bringing about sentient life in a world like this one would be wrong for *any* rational being (divine or not). It is not my objective to debate the anti-natalist position; rather, I will assume throughout my discussion that the more common sentiment regarding procreation is true, namely that a human child is an unmeasurably valuable creature, whose arrival in this world is (at least typically) a fitting occasion for celebrating. Even so, readers should know their options, and the anti-natalist position is one that easily affords the critic of theism a logically consistent response to Vitale's analogy.

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Recognizing the Full Extent of Suffering Enabled by Procreation

With my working assumption in place, the first step in critically evaluating Vitale's analogy to is to notice that it actually goes much deeper than he suggests. Vitale's description of the analogy focuses on the fact that a procreator's child is guaranteed to experience a fair amount of suffering (i.e. death at the very least) while merely risking the *potential* for tremendous suffering, which makes it open to the obvious objection that God's case is considerably different in that he would have foreknown that the potential for tremendous suffering would *in fact* be realized for many of his created beings. And since most readers would think it morally corrupt for a person intentionally to seek to conceive a child while having reason to expect it would lead a life replete with suffering (e.g. when there is known to be a very high risk of debilitating disease), we would seem to have reason to think God corrupt for doing likewise.

A deeper description of the analogy reveals, however, that it would be a mistake to think that procreation – even under the most optimal expectable conditions – has only a slight chance of leading to misery. A true appreciation of the suffering enabled by procreation requires one to consider not just the expected welfare of one's immediate offspring but also that of one's further descendants. And when one takes all those persons into consideration, the likelihood that one's procreation will breed misery becomes very high indeed. Almost every family tree, after all, has what we might call its *misery branches* – people who have an incredibly difficult life. Thus one has every reason to expect similar results among one's own lineage. This somewhat morbid thought (which those anti-natalists would certainly welcome) is not likely to occur to most procreators, but it does have the virtue of being true. When we apply the distinction between the suffering likely to be encountered by one's immediate offspring and that of one's further descendants, the appearance of disanalogy

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between God and procreators dissipates. After all, it is not inherent to theism that God has ever directly created – that is, in a way analogous to birthing one's own children – any being whom he expected to suffer tremendously. Theistic evolutionists, for example, would assure us that our ancient unicellular ancestors certainly had no qualms with their lot in life. The theist is thus free to think of any beings who have encountered tremendous suffering in the years subsequent to God's creative action as being God's own less fortunate 'descendants'.

There are, however, a number of genuine disanalogies between God's creation and human procreation to consider in evaluating Vitale's argument. I will now discuss three disanalogies I find ultimately irrelevant before raising two I find damning.

Irrelevant Disanalogy 1: The Procreator's Hope for a Good Outcome

The first genuine disanalogy lies in the fact that procreators can at least *hope* things will go relatively well for all their descendants such that every single one of them will be fortunate enough to dodge all of life's worst tragedies. But an omniscient God could not have had any similar hope when deciding whether to populate a planet like Earth with vulnerable, sentient beings; he would have known *infallibly* that such a decision would lead to the sometimes tremendous suffering that has in fact occurred.

Though genuine, we can easily dismiss this difference as irrelevant with the following thought experiment. Imagine a psychic, Miss Molinita, has somehow proven herself infallible concerning facts philosophers call *subjunctive conditionals* about the future. That is, for every question of the form 'What *would* happen *if* . . .?' Miss Molinita will supply an infallible answer (assuming one pays her adequately, of course). So suppose my wife and I decide to consult with Miss Molinita on our decision of whether to have children.

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After exchanging pleasantries, getting the incense flowing, and rubbing a few gemstones on each other's foreheads (or whatever else one does on such an occasion), we share with Miss Molinita our concern that our procreative act would lead to frequent and sometimes tremendous suffering among our descendants to which she replies, 'Yes. Yes, it most certainly would. That'll be a hundred bucks.'

The result of our brief exchange is that whereas I previously believed my procreating would *very likely* result in frequent and sometimes tremendous suffering, I now know it to be an *inevitable* result. As a quick test for relevance, we may simply ask whether this new information has changed the status of our procreating from a morally permissible action (and even an occasion to celebrate) to a morally impermissible one. Surely Miss Molinita's 'revelation' was not *that* significant. She merely confirmed our pre-existing expectation, thereby removing the *very slight* hope we had that all of our descendants would avoid lives rife with suffering. Since it would be absurd to suggest that the permissibility of procreation (or most any behaviour) lies in the hope that the hardly possible will happen, we must conclude that real-world procreators who lack any such guarantee that tremendous suffering will occur in their lineage are not thereby in a position relevantly disanalogous from God's.

Irrelevant Disanalogy 2: The Procreator's Lack of Detailed Information

There is something else disanalogous to consider about God's expectation of future suffering beyond its infallibility. God (at least as traditionally conceived) would have foreseen all the gory details of the future suffering resulting from his creation of life on Earth, whereas procreators have absolutely no knowledge of such details. We cannot even know who our descendants would be much less any specific details about what they would experience. This makes our decision to enable their suffering much less personal

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than God's, which one might be tempted to think constitutes a relevant disanalogy.

To test this difference for relevance, we can expand upon the previous thought experiment. Imagine that my wife and I make a follow-up visit to Miss Molinita. No longer content with knowing *in abstracto* that our procreating would lead to frequent and sometimes tremendous suffering, we now ask for some of the harsher details. Miss Molinita produces a crystal ball, motions for us to produce another hundred-dollar bill, and invites us to gaze upon some of the more severe bouts of suffering our descendants would encounter should we decide to procreate.[3]

We see a young woman writhing in pain as she lies dying from a tragic accident, and we then watch as her two young children grieve inconsolably over her passing. Next, a middle-aged man spirals into a long and dark depression after his wife leaves him for someone he considered a close friend. A bit further into our subjunctive future, a woman looking to escape the hustle and bustle of life with flying cars and robotic colleagues is bitten by a mosquito while hiking in the Smoky Mountains and contracts a virus (not known in our own time but somewhat common in hers) that leads to a crippling and incurable muscular disorder. Additional disturbing scenes flash by until we can no longer bear to watch. Sensing our dismay, Miss Molinita places her crystal ball back under the table and asks, 'Are you *sure* you want to go through with this procreation business?'

The reader must decide whether these dramatic and troubling scenes would give me and my wife a compelling moral reason not to procreate. (Doubtless, this experience would be a real mood-killer, but probably nothing a little dessert and Al Green couldn't fix in our case.) It seems most sensible to me to maintain that procreating would still be morally justified under these circumstances. The scenes we saw are exactly the sort of scenes (broadly construed) any prospective procreator should expect to see if she had access to Miss Molinita's crystal ball, and I submit that the moral status of a potential behaviour is not likely to change

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when one obtains detailed information about the effects of that behaviour given that one already expected effects of that sort. I would add in this particular case that it would be a real shame if my wife and I were to dwell too much on the disheartening scenes Miss Molinita showed us to the detriment of failing to imagine the *many* more much happier scenes our procreating would probably bring about. Thus I conclude that the fact that real-world procreators lack all such detailed information about their descendants is another irrelevant disanalogy between procreators and God.

Irrelevant Disanalogy 3: The Procreator's Lack of Causal Responsibility for Dangers

A third genuine disanalogy that might be appealed to concerns the fact that God is commonly thought to be the engineer of the natural systems that so often cause suffering (e.g., weather systems, genetic processes, etc.). Procreators, of course, have little if any responsibility for the existence of these dangerous systems. So, does God's unique causal responsibility for these environmental features defeat Vitale's analogy? Not according to the following thought experiment.

Suppose Jones is a corrupt individual who has managed to conceal his darker side from the other residents in his community. The large wooded area behind Jones's house is full of diverse plant species, scurrying wildlife, and shallow streams – just the sort of terrain curious adolescents love to explore. He decides it would be great fun to construct a number of death traps scattered sparsely throughout his woods and then invite all the local children over to play. So, he spends an afternoon digging holes, placing blunt spikes at the bottom, and covering the openings with brush that would give way easily underfoot. He then posts signs signalling his open invitation for the children to play in his woods.

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Suppose next that Smith, a father of two and the first neighbour to see the invitation, takes a stroll through Jones's woods to scope the place out. Struck by the beauty he finds, he pauses to take in the particular scene of a winsome doe drinking leisurely from a gentle-moving brook. Just as he breaks into song, something strange about the patch of ground in front of him catches his eye. Brushing away the surface debris, he is shocked to discover one of Jones's horrid death traps! He then spots a couple of others as he moves gingerly out of the woods. When he returns home grateful to be alive, his children greet him at the front door asking, 'Will you *please* let us go play in Jones's woods after dinner?' Smith's reply: 'Yeah; go for it!'

Let us take stock of the immoral actors in this twisted tale. Jones makes our list for sure; he is a scoundrel who takes pleasure in engineering death traps for children. But Smith just as obviously belongs on our list. Imagine our righteous anger should Smith try to absolve himself of blame by exclaiming, 'What are you looking at me for? Jones is the one who set those traps!' The fact that Smith is not causally responsible for the existence of the traps is simply irrelevant. For the same reason, God's being responsible for the existence of the natural processes on Earth that cause suffering cannot *in itself* explain why it would be blameworthy for him to subject sentient life to those dangers but not blameworthy for procreators to do so.

This suggests a real point in Vitale's favour. Given our working assumption that procreation is (at least typically) an event to be celebrated, there evidently is a vast difference between the overall environment in which we live and procreate (i.e. Earth) and Jones's woods. That is, our world must overall be a fairly good place to live despite its many hardships and dangers; otherwise it would not be appropriate for us to willingly send our descendants out to play in it. One might well wonder alongside Vitale, then, why critics of theism would condemn God for putting us in a situation we are so happy to perpetuate.

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Damning Disanalogy 1: God's Safer Options

This brings us to a much more serious disanalogy. Even assuming we are right in thinking our world is an overall good one for vulnerable life and that our decision to perpetuate its existence is thereby justified, it is not at all clear that it would be justified if we had even better options. To think in terms of a different analogy, while no good mother would send a child to play in Jones' Woods, she might well allow him to play in the rather dangerous, gang-infested neighbourhood in which they live if her only alternative was keeping him inside and depriving him of sufficient opportunities for joy and social interaction. If, however, she lived in a much safer neighbourhood and chose to bus her child to play in a gang-infested neighbourhood for no apparent reason, we would rightly question her judgement. (The 'no apparent reason' qualifier is key here.) A similar charge can be made against God, who, being omnipotent, could have created a much safer world for vulnerable beings. God's position is thus seriously disanalogous to that of procreators who must choose whether to bring life into this world or no world at all. Indeed, if we *could* somehow make the world a significantly safer place on behalf of our descendants than it is for us today, it would seem reckless and heartless on our part not to. Thus Vitale's analogy, far from resolving the problem of evil, can actually be used to restate the case against theism: if God existed, he would have put sentient creatures in a safer environment given his option to do so.

That is not a decisive case against theism, of course. Many theists have long objected to the idea that God ought to have created a safer environment on the grounds that there are significant advantages to his placing sentient beings in a rather dangerous one. For example, many claim that such a world is best for the development of the most meaningful character traits such as compassion and courage, which can only really be demonstrated in response to tragedy. Others claim that human relationships are more meaningful in a dangerous world where time

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together cannot be taken for granted. Others argue that our vulnerability to significant harm encourages us to seek a deeper sort of spiritual welfare which God offers those who seek him. Whether these sorts of justifications for God's ways of engineering and managing the world – known as 'theodicies' – are sufficient has long been a central point of contention among philosophers. The takeaway for present purposes is that Vitale's analogy can in no way challenge those who reject all such theodicies given that procreators, unlike God, can be considered justified on account of their not having any safer option.

Nor can the analogy help us evaluate the more popular response among theistic philosophers today known as 'sceptical theism'. In contrast to theodicists who try to offer justifying reasons for God's ways of engineering and managing the world, sceptical theists grant that we are unable to discern adequate reasons but argue that our inability to do so is hardly good evidence for thinking God would lack such reasons. They point out that we are significantly limited beings and maintain that we should consequently be strongly sceptical of our ability to discern whether a superior being such as God would have good reason to run the world as it is. While sceptical theism has a good bit of intuitive appeal, it has proven subject to many thorny objections, and the ongoing debate over it among philosophers of religion is rich and fascinating. For present purposes, we can be clear that *even if* critics of theism are too hasty in thinking there is no good reason for God's failing to exercise a safer option, they are nonetheless perfectly consistent (contra Vitale's analogical argument) in thinking we procreators are right to exercise the only option available to us.

Damning Disanalogy 2: God's Ability to Assist

Even if the critic of theism were to grant that an omnipotent being would be justified in subjecting life to Earth's harms despite his safer options, a second crucial

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disanalogy lies in the fact that Earthly sufferers are not overtly assisted by God despite his having the constant opportunity to do so. We procreators, on the other hand, are long gone prior to the suffering most of our descendants encounter, which presumably excuses us from not assisting them. If we imagine though (to indulge in one last bizarre thought experiment) that after thawing out from a cryogenically frozen state, I find myself face to face with those two grieving children I saw earlier in Miss Molinita's crystal ball, it seems obvious that I ought to care for them in any way I can. After all, I bear a marked responsibility for their desperate state, having knowingly (thanks to Miss Molinita) and willingly (thanks to Al Green) enabled it. I ought to try to comfort them, particularly if no one more suitable for the job is available. That is likewise what many atheists think God should do – and would do if he existed – on behalf of his many hurting 'descendants' who go uncomforted. Thus careful reflection on Vitale's analogy reveals a second way in which it may be more effective in restating the case against theism than in defending theism as Vitale intends: if God existed, sufferers would not go uncomforted in the way they appear to given his constant ability to assist.

As before, theists have responses in hand. Some claim that God offers ample assistance to sufferers through consolation in prayer. Others claim that the more overt assistance critics expect would make God's existence oppressively obvious. Others claim that God bestows upon those whose earthly lives are wrought with suffering an eternity of comfort and bliss. As before, there is a rich philosophical literature debating the merits of such theodicies, the present point being that Vitale's analogy again does not push us towards accepting them. Nor, once again, does it bolster the sceptical theist's move of arguing that we could not reasonably expect to discern God's reasons for not providing overt assistance. So, even if critics of theism are too hasty in thinking God would have no such reasons, they are perfectly consistent (contra Vitale's analogical argument) in thinking we

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procreators are excused – by virtue of our finitude – from failing to assist our suffering descendants.

Conclusion

The many philosophical controversies surrounding theodicies of all types and those surrounding the hotly debated sceptical theism constitute the core of the problem of evil in contemporary philosophy of religion. Vitale's analogical argument has the provocative initial appearance of a real game-changer in that it would offer theists a way to completely skirt such existing controversies; if God's subjection of sentient life to serious harm were sufficiently analogous to a typical procreator's decision to do likewise, a commitment to the moral value of procreation would compel one to take a positive stance towards God's creative act as well. Our more careful evaluation of this analogy, however, has shown that the two cases are not sufficiently analogous and that the more usual controversies cannot be so easily avoided.[4] The two damning disanalogies raised here, namely God's having safer options for his created environment and his apparent failure to provide assistance for many sufferers, vividly remind us just how difficult the problem of evil is for theists. These disanalogies also absolve anyone from the charge of rational inconsistency who, after joyfully celebrating the birth of a newborn baby, remains convinced that the world's suffering renders God's existence unlikely.

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Notes

[1] As a matter of full disclosure, I am in somewhat of a unique position to serve as critic of Vitale's analogical argument, having attempted a few years ago to develop and advance the same argument myself. I presented my version in a paper entitled

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'Procreating in a World with Evil: Theodicy by Analogy' at a joint meeting of the North Carolina Philosophical Society and the South Carolina Society for Philosophy (Elon University: February, 2012). I later abandoned the project after deciding it was doomed to failure for the sorts of reasons I present here.

[2] See, for example, a defence of anti-natalism in this journal from Harrison and Tanner (2011).

[3] Since the exact collection of possible descendants my wife and I would bring into existence would be contingent on a ridiculously vast array of minuscule contingencies (e.g. those that lead to the joining of a particular sperm to a particular egg), an astute reader might wonder how Miss Molinita could possibly know which of the correspondingly vast potential lineages to show us. But do not worry; she is that good.

[4] This is not to suggest that theists are forced to fall back on the choice between theodicies and sceptical theism. I myself recommend an alternative theistic response to the problem of evil in McClellan (2016).

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