

Dream Skepticism and the Problem of Evil

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I. INTRODUCTION

Is there anything new to be said about the problem of evil? Theists who defend the reasonableness of belief in both God and evil typically try to offer a plausible theodicy, a set of reasons why God would allow or cause pain and suffering. Hick and Swinburne offer theodicies. Some theistic critics of arguments from evil, such as Plantinga, propound a defense, a possible state of affairs whereby God and evil co-exist. Wykstra and Alston argue that advocates of evidential arguments from evil such as Rowe make the overly ambitious claim to have justified belief that some evil is pointless. They think that even justified belief (and thus also knowledge) that some evil is pointless is beyond our ken.

This might seem to cover all possible replies theistic critics of arguments from evil could make. Apparently, it is not. In a recent article Gabriel Citron proposes to attack the premise about the very existence of horrific suffering instead. He tries to undermine arguments from evil by arguing that suffering might not be real after all. Citron thinks that this is an effective reply to all arguments from evil. Is it?

I shall argue that the answer is “no.” I have a few objections to the argument, and I will argue for a handful of conclusions. First, there are three ways whereby the arguments from evil need not be committed to knowledge for certain that there is horrific suffering. Second, the premise about waking life being always indistinguishable from dreams is either unknown, false, or not even justifiably believed. Third, the premise connecting indistinguishability to ignorance invokes a too-strong concept of knowledge by requiring infallibility. Fourth, what we might discover when we wake up favors arguments from evil, rather than Citron’s

skeptical theism. Last, theists should abandon dream skepticism in favor of theodicies, defenses, and arguments for God's existence.

There are several arguments from evil, and Citron cites a generic one:

- A1. Horrific suffering occurs (horrific in amount, kind, and intensity).
- A2. Without a morally justifying reason, a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being would not allow horrific suffering to occur.
- A3. There is (probably) no morally justifying reason for a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being to allow horrific suffering to occur.
- AC. By A1, A2, and A3, it follows that there (probably) does not exist a God who is perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient. (Citron 248)

Citron argues against A1 this way:

- B1. For any experience that one actually undergoes, it is possible—in a phenomenally indistinguishable manner—to dream that one is undergoing it, including experiences of the very worst sufferings.
- B2. If it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake.
- B3. From B1 and B2 it follows that one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake, and therefore it is always epistemically possible that one is dreaming.
- B4. It is possible for a dream of suffering even of the very worst sufferings to entail no actual horrific suffering for the dreamer (or even very little actual suffering at all).
- BC. From B3 and B4 it follows that it is epistemically possible that no horrific suffering occurs (or even that very little suffering occurs at all). (Citron 249-250)

II. NOT NECESSARILY COMMITTED TO A1 AS KNOWN

There are several problems with this argument and the defense of it. Let's begin with Citron's claim that all arguments from evil state that it is certain that horrific suffering exists. He writes: "The reason that my defense has such power is because it undermines a premise which both logical and evidential arguments take to be absolutely—rather than merely probably—true. Logical and evidential

arguments...agree that it is certain that horrific suffering occurs (i.e. A1)" (Citron 263).

But this is not necessarily so. Although philosophers who advocate arguments from evil typically do think that it is evident that horrific suffering exists, their argument need not have that commitment. Instead, atheists can challenge theists about the consistency of their beliefs. Even if it were not certain that horrific suffering exists, theists believe that it does. That theists believe there is horrifying suffering is the only reasonable, straightforward explanation of the fact that they typically address the problem of evil, taking it to be a challenge to their beliefs. Therefore, the dream argument is not a successful reply to several arguments from evil, namely, all those that are not committed to the knowledge of real existence of horrific suffering. Citron misstated many atheists' arguments. There is a different proposition that would suffice, namely, theists believe that there is horrific suffering.

What about those arguments from evil that, instead of challenging the consistency of theistic beliefs, argue straightforwardly for the non-existence of God on the basis of horrific suffering? Is Citron's argument successful there? Even here atheists can postulate a different and more modest claim. Rather than "It is certain that there is horrific suffering," atheists can use the premise "It is a justified belief that there is horrific suffering." Let me try to show why.

Will justified belief fairly depict evidential arguments from evil like those William Rowe and Bruce Russell advocate? It might be objected that Rowe and Russell regard cases such the fawn (Bambi) and little girl (Sue) as known certainties. I point out only the more modest claims their arguments require, not what they actually believe.

This reply reminds me of a criticism I once heard leveled against an argument Peter Geach advanced. Geach had argued for the conclusion that if there is personal survival after death, it consists in literal resurrection of the same body. Someone attacked Geach's argument for the (alleged) unreasonable belief in personal survival. When I pointed out Geach's argument did not commit him to personal survival after death, the reply was that Geach believed it.

Well, yes, Geach did believe it, but his philosophical argument was altogether different. Only Geach's argument, its premises, conclusion, and the relations between them should be criticized, not Geach himself. Since his argument did not include the statement, there is literal bodily resurrection, the argument cannot be criticized on that ground.

Analogously, it is of course true that Rowe and Russell think they know cases like the ones they cite. However, the necessary commitments of their arguments are another matter. The same rules apply to believers and atheists. Thus, Citron's dream skepticism is unsuccessful reply to evidential arguments from evil that do not require the known certainty of cases of horrific suffering.

There is a third problem with premise A1. Some arguments from evil do not entail that there is horrific suffering. Those that argue that God would abolish all evil whatsoever fit this description.

Take Mackie's, for example:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three. (The problem does not arise only for theists, but I shall discuss it in the form in which it presents itself for ordinary theism.) However, the contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'. These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. (Mackie 200-201)

Let us sum up the argument thus far. There are three ways whereby the arguments from evil need not be committed to knowledge for certain that there is horrific suffering. For one, atheists can challenge theistic belief by pointing out that theists themselves believe that there is horrific suffering. For another, atheists can appeal to the justified belief (rather than the known certainty) that there is horrific suffering. Third, some arguments from evil entail only that there is evil, but not that there is horrific suffering. Even Citron grants that nightmares are themselves bad (evil).

III. KNOW DREAMS INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM WAKING LIFE?

The criticism of arguments from evil might be qualified (scaled back) in order to cover only those that entail that it is known for certain that there is horrific suffering. In itself that is a significant retreat. But the problems are not limited to the statement of the arguments from evil. They are not limited to premise A1. There are also objections to the skeptical defense itself.

Consider:

- B1. For any experience that one actually undergoes, it is possible—in a phenomenally indistinguishable manner—to dream that one

is undergoing it, including experiences of the very worst sufferings.

Can Citron consistently maintain that he knows that B1 is true? B1 is an introspective premise about being unable to distinguish dreaming from actually witnessing or undergoing horrific suffering. But if even ordinary perception never amounts to knowledge, then less reliable introspection does not constitute knowledge, either. My point is that Citron's own argument relies on knowledge he apparently rejects.

Is premise B1 true? I shall argue that B1 is true if the possibility is merely theoretical or logical, but not if the possibility is epistemic, not in a way that supports his skeptical argument. The interpretation of B1 that Citron needs is at best dubious and at worst false.

If we acknowledge that—sometimes—we cannot distinguish being awake from being asleep, it is because we correctly remember, while awake, that we had taken a dream to be wakeful experience. It is noteworthy that this observation presupposes that we are awake. Only on that basis could we know, or justifiably believe, the true but very qualified version of B1 that we sometimes cannot tell the difference.

Is it really true that we cannot distinguish being awake from being asleep and dreaming? One major problem with premise B1 is that it states something that is or can be true while a person is asleep and generalizes it to waking life, too. Under what circumstance is it possible for a dream to be indistinguishable from waking life? When a person dreams. But it does not follow from the assumption that dreams are sometimes taken to be real wakeful experience that no distinction can be made while awake. B1 is ill-supported.

B1 is also inconsistent with points Citron makes and must make. We readily distinguish waking life from dreaming while we are awake, and Citron himself repeatedly does so throughout his article. Here is one example: "Dreams are often unlike waking life in many ways—even in their phenomenal aspect. Sometimes they are hazy and patchy, sometimes bizarre, and sometimes even impossible in ways that waking life is not (Citron 250). Here's another: "I remember an 'epic' dream that I had one night as a young teenager, in which I dreamed almost an entire life-narrative" (251). The only way to know or reasonably believe such statements is to be able to distinguish being awake from being asleep. Thus, the inference from "while asleep it is possible to mistake a dream for real waking life" to "for any experience (wakeful or not) it is possible to dream one is undergoing it" is invalid.

That last inference might appear to be valid, but that is an illusion. I think it is only because the standards for possibility have been liberalized from epistemic to logical ones. Even if we grant that it is a logical (merely theoretical) possibility that someone can dream the content of wakeful experience, that does not entail that

we do not know we are awake when we are. It is a mere theoretical or logical possibility, not an epistemic one. This is especially striking when we consider, not a momentary experience, but the suggestion that dreams might last an entire lifetime (251). We know we are awake much of the time throughout our lives, although it is a mere logical possibility that we dream it all. The trouble for Citron's argument is that he needs the stronger claim that it is epistemically possible that all of life is but a dream, that we do not know that it is not a dream. The inference trades on an equivocation.

Is B1 even a justified belief? It can and probably would be replied that Citron's argument requires only justified belief (not knowledge) that its premises are true.

This is a good but at best inconclusive reply. It is good, since it avoids the contradictory reliance on knowledge of the premises while undercutting that very knowledge. However, it is inconclusive and ultimately self-defeating.

Citron appeals to the reader to consult his experience in order to verify the inability to distinguish dreaming from wakeful experience. We are tacitly asked to remember individual cases where we took a dream to be real. It is reasonable to contend that we know (and thus justifiably believe) that there are such individual cases. But isolated cases are one thing. Every case is another. B1 is much stronger. B1 has consequences for every claim to have justified belief on the basis of perception, not just about horrific suffering. Thus, it would undermine several claims Citron himself makes, including B1. Are you merely dreaming that you cannot distinguish being awake and perceiving and actually perceiving? Thus, if we shift from knowledge to justified belief, dream skepticism means that B1 is an unjustified belief. Dream skepticism cannot be invoked selectively.

Let's summarize. In part 1 I argued that Citron's statements about A1 are false. He has misstated the necessary commitments of arguments from evil. In part 2 I argued that Citron's own criteria for knowledge entail that B1 is neither known nor a justified belief. I also argued that B1 is true only in a way that does not help his argument based on dream skepticism.

IV. TRUISMS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE VS. B2: IS B2 TRUE?

Let's begin with a truism about sleep and perceptual knowledge:

T: If someone is asleep, she does not know that her perceptions are of real events;

and its contrapositive:

CT: If someone does know that her perceptions are of real events, then she is not asleep.

There are no explicit modal operators in T and CT. T states a condition under which someone would lack perceptual knowledge of real events. CT, on the other hand, states a condition that must be met for perceptual knowledge. I write “no explicit modal operators,” since there are implicit ones. The scope of the modal operator in T is over the entire conditional, not its antecedent or consequent. The same is true of CT.

The acceptability of B2 pivots on conceptual truths about knowledge. But note how it and its contrapositive differ from T and CT:

B2. If it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one’s waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake.

and its contrapositive:

CB2. If one can know whether one is dreaming or awake, then it is impossible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one’s waking life.

I think there is a problem with the modal operators can, must, and impossible and their scope. Let’s begin with the concept of knowledge. Take the truth condition for knowledge: If S knows that p, then p must be true. This does not mean that the consequent is necessarily true, but that the entire conditional is. Thus the concept of knowing allows for the possibility of knowing contingent truths. Likewise, consider empirical knowledge, a reworded statement of CT: If S empirically knows that p, then S is awake. We might put it this way: If S empirically knows that p, then S must be awake. Again, this does not mean that the consequent is necessarily true, but that the entire conditional is. Further, if we expand the consequent, so that the conditional is “if S empirically knows that p, then S must be awake and know she is awake,” the words “must be” do not, despite its placement in the statement, apply to the consequent in isolation from the antecedent. Thus, the conceptual truth about empirical knowledge is consistent with the contingent fact that one is awake. Thus, empirical knowledge does not rule out the possibility of being unable to distinguish being awake from being asleep. Empirical knowledge precludes actually being asleep. On this interpretation B2 and CB2 are both false.

Let’s contrast the pairs T and CT with B2 and CB2 again:

T: If someone is asleep, she does not know that her perceptions are of real events;

and its contrapositive:

CT: If someone does know that her perceptions are of real events, then she is not asleep.

Note how these differ from B2 and CB2:

B2. If it is possible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life, then one cannot know whether one is dreaming or awake.

and its contrapositive:

CB2. If one can know whether one is dreaming or awake, then it is impossible for a dream to be phenomenally indistinguishable from one's waking life.

Note that CB2 and B2 both require the infallibility of perception, the impossibility of making a mistake, for there to be perceptual knowledge. T and CT, on the other hand, require that there not be a mistake, but not the impossibility of making one. T and CT are in line with an ordinary concept of perceptual knowledge. We all know that perception is not infallible. We readily recognize that there are conditions under which it is unreliable or even mistaken. This includes some, but not all, circumstances when a person is awake. But we do not regard those facts as precluding all perceptual knowledge whatsoever. CB2 and B2, on the other hand, do regard those facts as precluding all perceptual knowledge whatsoever.

V. CRITERIA FOR KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTIFIED BELIEF?

I suspect that the reason behind the repeated self-reference problems with Citron's criteria for knowledge and justified belief is that they are too strong. Consider the alternative that allows for justifications on the basis of perception while allowing for error. Even if we cannot tell we are asleep when we sleep, when we dream, it does not follow that we cannot ever tell we are awake (not asleep) when we are awake. Selective skepticism can be employed only on the basis of the justified belief that there are justified beliefs.

I expect the challenge to prove that I know I am not dreaming. Well, I need not claim to know when I am awake; I only have to point out that Citron has not proven that it is epistemically possible that life is but a dream on the basis of a mere logical possibility that it is. Thus, Citron's central argument is unsuccessful.

VI. POSSIBILITIES WHEN WE WAKE UP

The dream skepticism Citron employs has unwelcome consequences for his theism, since everything depends on what turns out to be true when we wake up. He refers to waking up and discovering that “everything is actually completely fine” (Citron 249). But this speculation cuts both ways. There is nothing in Citron’s argument to rule out the possibility that everything is as bad, or worse, or much worse, than a nightmare. Consider an example he cites of an Auschwitz prisoner having a nightmare, and a fellow prisoner (Viktor Frankl) not waking him up because “no dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality of the camp” (247). However, if things were as bad, or worse, or even better, but not sufficiently better to rule out horrific suffering, Citron’s argument collapses.

Citron can reply that we do not know there are cases of horrific suffering. However, his argument entails that no apparent horrific suffering constitutes knowledge. But even in the absence of knowledge that there is horrific suffering, we could and still do know that there are countless more possibilities of Citron’s skeptical premise being false than true about the existence of horrific suffering. So, we can know that it is more probable, even if not certain, that some apparent cases of horrific suffering are real. Thus, his speculation hinders, rather than helps, his case.

It might be objected that these are metaphysical possibilities, rather than epistemic ones. Granted, but the metaphysical possibilities are related to epistemic ones. We know that there are many more possibilities that entail the existence of horrific suffering. It is logically possible that there are zero real instances of horrific suffering, but that is only one possibility.

VII. CONCLUSION

I have only suggested criteria for knowledge and justified belief that can be attained. A determined skeptic could dispute them and insist on very strong conditions. However, I think I have shown that theists would pay a price for that skepticism that many would be unwilling to pay. It would undermine many of their own arguments.

What options are open to theists? The attempt to undercut the justified belief that there is horrific suffering is a failure. Therefore, if there is any argumentative case for theism or against atheism, it will have to be with defenses, theodicies, and arguments for God’s existence.

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