

## **John Beversluis and the Problem of Evil**

### **Thomas Talbott**

In an article that I wrote back in 1987,<sup>1</sup> I sought to make some ideas then current in the philosophical literature available to a wider audience of non-philosophers. I was also very hard on John Beversluis, author of *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (1985), and even implied, perhaps with less charity than I should have manifested, that his treatment of the problem of evil failed to meet even minimal standards of philosophical competence. I fully expected, therefore, that his response, as set forth in the 2007 revision of his book, would be less than perfectly warm and welcoming. But when, at the behest of others, I finally got around to reading that response, I was stunned. For what I encountered was an amazing disregard for logical rigor, some appallingly bad arguments, and an even more appalling ignorance of the current *philosophical* literature on the problem of evil.

My friend, Victor Reppert, once distinguished between harsh criticism and unfair criticism, pointing out that, to be fair, harsh criticism carries a heavier burden of proof. Beyond that, a harsh-sounding criticism is almost impossible to avoid, I suspect, when one is required to correct a persistent pattern, however unintentional it may be, of distortion, slanted quotation, and outright misquotation. The more egregious the pattern of distortion, moreover, the easier it should be to meet the heavier burden of proof and the more important it is to correct the record, which I intend to do below.

### **When Ignorance Is Bliss**

When comparing his 2007 discussion of the problem of evil with his 1985 discussion, the first thing one observes is that in some 23 years Beversluis has done virtually nothing to catch up in his own discipline. He has somehow managed to ignore an entire generation of contemporary philosophers doing philosophy of religion; worse yet, he ignores what the best *atheistic* philosophers have written on the subject, even as he ignores what various theistic philosophers have written. He appears not to have read a single important philosophical work, published after the 1970s, on the problem of evil.

But why, it might seem fair to ask, should any of this even matter, given that Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* back in the 1940s? The answer is that Beversluis

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<sup>1</sup> See "C.S. Lewis and the Problem of Evil," *Christian Scholar's Review* XVII (1987), pp. 36-51.

not only examines Lewis's own arguments, but also responds to criticisms inspired by more recent philosophical work. Here is a particularly instructive example: In response to my suggestion—which is pretty commonplace nowadays—that at least some possible (or logically consistent) worlds belong to the set of worlds that God was powerless to create, Beversluis stumbles headlong into Leibniz's Lapse, as Plantinga dubbed it back in the early 1970s. He thus writes:

That is even more puzzling. How could God be “powerless” to create a “logically consistent” world? Since self-contradictory tasks are the only restrictions on Omnipotence and since the creation of a “logically consistent” world involves no such task, what is the problem? (p. 244).

Because such questions have been answered hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of times over the past four decades, it is simply astonishing that Beversluis would pose them as if there were no standard answers to them. And contrary to his contention in the very next sentence that I gave “no explanation” myself, one of my purposes in that 1987 article was precisely to make the standard explanation available to non-philosophers (see pages 39-42 of that article). But perhaps my own explanation was insufficiently clear or in some other way deficient. If so, then I suggest that Beversluis consult one of the better atheistic or agnostic philosophers in an effort to discover the answer to his questions. After all, some very good atheistic and agnostic philosophers—names like William Rowe, Bruce Russell, Paul Draper, and Michael Tooley immediately come to mind—have made important contributions to our understanding of the anti-theistic argument from evil, particularly in its inductive (or evidential) form. So perhaps some atheistic philosopher could explain to Beversluis why, given that God cannot perform logically inconsistent tasks and given the *possibility* of so-called libertarian freedom, indeterminism, or even random chance, it follows that many possible worlds, perhaps even infinitely many of them, will belong to the set of worlds that God was powerless to create (or, more accurately, to make actual).<sup>2</sup>

The failure even to understand Leibniz's Lapse, as Plantinga called it, probably also explains why Beversluis mangles my own argument so badly. He purports to

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<sup>2</sup> Here is a simple example illustrating why a logically consistent world might be such that God could not create it without performing a self-contradictory task: As Plantinga pointed out almost 40 years ago, atheists believe that at least one and perhaps infinitely many logically consistent worlds include no Creator. But for God to actualize any one of these logically consistent worlds, assuming that they are indeed logically consistent, surely would require that he perform a self-contradictory task.

quote me, for example, as *asserting* the following proposition, which I shall here call, appropriately enough, the Beversluis Distortion (BD):

BD: Any such world [that is, any world with less pain and suffering than exists in the actual world and any world without cancer] that God could have created would have contained a less favorable balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world (p. 244).

He then comments: “Talbot does not tell us how he knows that [BD is true] and offers no justification for his claim [that it is true]. He just asserts it” (p. 244). But in fact, had Beversluis not inexplicably separated BD from the modal operator within whose scope it falls, he might have seen that I was neither asserting it nor claiming to know it is true. For here is what I actually wrote (*italics added*): Certain Beversluis claims “are beside the point, *since the following possibility remains*: Any such world [that is, any world with less pain and suffering than obtains in the actual world] that God could have created would have contained a less favorable balance of good over evil than exists in the actual world” (p. 41). My claim, in other words, was just this: It is possible that BD is true (even as it is possible that BD is false), and I went on to point out that unless Beversluis has a kind of knowledge that many philosophers deny even of God—what the Molinists call middle knowledge—then he is in no position to say whether BD is true or whether it is false. I simply must assume, moreover, that Beversluis understands the difference between claiming that some proposition is logically possible and claiming that it is true. If so, then the Beversluis distortion, as I have called it, was either deliberate or the result of an almost unbelievable carelessness.

So we can already draw, I believe, an important moral here. If someone without philosophical training were to read the Beversluis critique without reading my original article, such a person might easily conclude that Beversluis had utterly devastated my argument. Indeed, that is precisely why I was finally persuaded to state a few things for the record, something I was initially reluctant to do. For Beversluis employs all the right lingo [e.g. “That is even more puzzling” (when it isn’t); “Talbot gives no explanation” (when he in fact does give one); what Talbot “does say logically commits him to” *p* (when it doesn’t, as I’ll demonstrate below)]. But as we have just seen, nothing of substance lies behind the superficial rhetoric—which is, ironically, the very kind of charge that Beversluis himself levels against Lewis. In the case of Beversluis, it is true.

## Another Appallingly Bad Argument

Here is another example of what I call “an appallingly bad argument.” In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis remarked that “with our friends, our lovers, our children, we ... would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes.” And in the first edition of his book, Beversluis wrote the following about this very passage: “It is hard to know what Lewis is driving at here. What ‘modes’ does he have in mind?”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, James Petrik<sup>4</sup> and I both suggested in separate articles that there should be little difficulty in seeing what Lewis was “driving at here,” and we both cited some specific illustrations of how a person might pursue happiness “in contemptible and estranging ways.” But we did not, of course, confer with each other and give exactly the same illustrations. So here, incredibly, is how Beversluis responds:

Talbott and Petrik disagree. According to them, I have misunderstood Lewis. *However, they disagree among themselves about what he means, so they cannot both be right* [my italics]. According to Talbott, he is thinking of the racist who finds satisfaction in the suffering of minorities, the rich who grow richer while their neighbors starve, and the intellectual who seems happy only when devastating an opponent. According to Petrik, he is thinking of the “lifestyles” of the pimp, the drug dealer, the serial killer, the child molester, the slum lord, and so forth (p. 256).

Now in what way, according to Beversluis, do Petrik and I supposedly disagree just because we give different illustrations of the same basic idea? Is Beversluis seriously suggesting that Petrik would reject some of my examples or that I would reject some of Petrik’s examples? For that matter, has he given a single reason to deny that Lewis would have accepted all of Petrik’s examples, all of my examples, and a host of others as well? Or, finally, would Beversluis himself deny that a racial bigot (my example) and a drug dealer (Petrik’s example) might *both* be pursuing happiness in contemptible and estranging ways? This really is hilarious. What could Beversluis possibly have been thinking here?

It gets worse. As just pointed out, Petrik and I both gave specific illustrations of what it means to pursue happiness *in contemptible and estranging ways*. But in-

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<sup>3</sup> See page 114 of the 1985 edition.

<sup>4</sup> See “In Defense of C.S. Lewis’ analysis of God’s Goodness,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36 (1994), pp. 45-56.

stead of responding to these illustrations, Beversluis simply changes the subject and talks about something else altogether, namely, what it means, according to Lewis, to say that God is wiser than we are in moral matters. He says that, according to Lewis, “many of the things that children think are good (or good for them) are not good and that therefore God, being wiser, cannot be faulted for failing to keep us well supplied with them” (p. 256-257). That may be true enough as far as Lewis’s understanding of God’s greater wisdom went. But what on earth does it have to do with pursuing happiness *in contemptible and estranging ways*? When Beversluis goes on to write: “I do not understand why they [Petrik and Talbott] disagree with this interpretation,” one wants to throw up one’s hands helplessly. Which idea is he talking about here? Is it the idea of pursuing happiness in contemptible and estranging ways? Or, is it the idea of God being wiser than we are in moral matters? In my 1987 article I give an interpretation of *both* ideas, along with specific illustrations of why neither of them implies a retreat from our ordinary moral concepts. My analogy to illustrate how we stand with respect to God’s greater wisdom was not the racial bigot who pursues happiness in contemptible and estranging ways; it was instead that of primitives who conclude that men and women in white coats and bearing long needles are cruel to children. But unfortunately, Beversluis simply ignores this discussion altogether.

### **Making It Up Out of Whole Cloth**

Beversluis writes:

Although Talbott does not explicitly say so, what he does say logically commits him to the view that if there was a “logically consistent” world with a greater balance of good over evil than ours that God could have created, it is *not* the sort of world he would want to create. The question of *why* he would not want to is left unanswered. Talbott prefers to traffic in possibilities and “might have beens” (p. 245).

With respect to the final sentence above, almost any philosopher, I should think, would ask: “Gee Beversluis, aren’t you and your critics *both* talking about possible worlds? And isn’t a possible world just a set of possibilities and “might have beens?” Indeed it is. A very rough definition of a possible world might be “a complete description of the way things might have been.” But let that pass.

The important point is that Beversluis here attributes to me a view I do not hold—namely, that even if God could have actualized a better world *as a whole*, he would not have wanted to do so—and Beversluis then complains that I never an-

swer the question of why God wouldn't have wanted to actualize such a world if it were within his power to do so.<sup>5</sup> It is a neat trick if you can get away with it. But why, I ask, does Beversluis attribute to me a view I claim not to hold? He admits that I do not express it explicitly, but insists that something I have said "logically commits" me to it. If that were true, however, then the procedure he should have followed would have been obvious. If you claim that an acceptance of some proposition  $p$  logically commits one to some other proposition  $q$ , the obvious way to establish such a claim is simply to deduce  $q$  from  $p$  (or perhaps to deduce  $q$  from  $p$  in conjunction with some set of necessarily true propositions). If I should claim, for example, that Beversluis's own belief that he exists logically commits him to the existence of God, then I had better be prepared to make some careful deductions. So what deductions, careful or otherwise, does Beversluis make at this point. Remarkably, none at all; even more remarkably, he does not even identify a relevant belief of mine that supposedly entails the belief he attributes to me. It is as if I should assert dogmatically that Beversluis's own beliefs logically commit him to the existence of God and make no effort to identify the *specific* beliefs I have in mind. That would surely be irresponsible, and Beversluis's own claim, I think it fair to say, is no less irresponsible than that.

### **Where I Am Most Vulnerable**

At the end of my 1987 article, I intentionally ventured into some controversial territory and made some statements that sometimes seem controversial even in my own eyes. I did so because of my conviction that theists need to "bite the bullet," so to speak, and not simply ignore the hardest cases, such as the suffering of children. I thus expressed the hopeful belief that

every innocent child who suffers will one day look upon that suffering as a privilege because of the joy it has made possible: the joy of knowing that one has been used by God in the redemption of others, the joy of that final union or reunion in which love's triumph is complete and all separation from others is finally overcome. I would ask but two things of those who reject such a view: first, that they resist the tempta-

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<sup>5</sup> Were Beversluis even vaguely familiar with current literature on the subject, he would have known that, according to many philosophers, the very idea of the best possible world, like that of the highest possible number or the largest possible universe, is simply incoherent. So, according to these philosophers, no matter what world God creates (or actualizes), there will be some other world he could have created with a better overall balance of good over evil.

tion to moralize, and second that they consider the alternatives carefully (p. 50).

When I wrote those words, I fully expected some vigorously expressed objections; I can even empathize with Beversluis's exclamation that he is "appalled by the *views* expressed in this passage" (p. 247), although the extent of his moral posturing in the context of his philosophical confusions strikes me as embarrassing, to say the least. Which belief, after all, would a simple peasant woman, having just lost a beloved child to illness, likely find more uplifting: the hopeful belief that some blessed good still awaits her child in the future, or the despairing belief that she has already witnessed the end of the story for her child? The charge that the more hopeful belief is an instance of wishful thinking is one that I can at least take seriously, as I pointed out at the end of my 1987 article. But how can one even take seriously Beversluis' charge in the first edition of his book that such a hopeful belief is morally repugnant?

Nor can Beversluis successfully undermine such hope with his contention that we have here "a paradigmatic example of a statement that could only be *known* to be true by a person who is omniscient."<sup>6</sup> He does not even consider the parallel claim that only an omniscient person could know with certainty that the very same statement is *false*. Indeed, the latter claim is the far more relevant in the present context, because the burden of proof always rests with those who claim to have a proof. If a theist should put forth a putative proof of God's existence, then the theist must meet the burden of proof every step of the way;<sup>7</sup> and similarly, if an atheist should put forth the argument from evil as a putative proof of God's non-existence, then the atheist must meet the burden of proof every step of the way. For as I said, the burden of proof always rests with those who claim to have a proof; it could hardly rest with those who do *not* claim to have a proof, and certainly no theist presents evil as a proof of God's existence. Accordingly, it is not my burden to prove that, for every horrendous evil, a morally sufficient reason for why God

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<sup>6</sup> This isn't quite right because an omniscient person could always reliably reveal the truth of the matter to someone who is not omniscient.

<sup>7</sup> Suppose, by way of illustration, that I should put forth some form of the Cosmological Argument (more specifically, the argument from contingency and necessity) as a proof of God's existence; suppose further that Beversluis should reply with the assertion that, for all we know, the universe itself is the necessary being; and suppose, finally, that I should then declare that only an omniscient being could know for sure that the universe is indeed the necessary being. Or, to put it another way, suppose I complain that Beversluis never explains how he knows that the universe is the necessary being; he just asserts it. Such a confusion on my part would parallel exactly the confusion that Beversluis repeatedly displays.

would permit it is possible; instead, the burden rests with Beversluis to prove that at least one evil is such that no morally sufficient reason for why God would permit it is even logically possible.

Beversluis goes on to write: “If Talbott is right, he is logically committed and morally obliged to oppose everyone dedicated to alleviating world hunger, ridding the world of terrorism, finding a cure for cancer,” etc. (p. 247). Now compare that sentence to a sentence of the following form: “If Talbott is right in accepting  $p$  (where  $p$  is specifically identified), then Talbott is logically committed to  $q$ .” Here, once again, we see that a cogent argument for the Beversluis claim would require two things: first, that he identify a relevant instance of  $p$ , and second, that he make some attempt to deduce  $q$  from  $p$ . But Beversluis does not so much as identify the proposition that he claims logically commits me to the moral obligation he alleges; much less does he make the required deduction.

Part of his problem arises from the imprecise way in which he talks about and compares possible worlds. He thus writes: “But to say that a world with cancer and the suffering of children would be *better* than a world without these evils is so outrageous—and so outrageously *ad hoc*<sup>8</sup>—that I will not dignify it with a reply” (p. 247). Curiously, despite declaring that he will not reply, Beversluis continues with a very confused reply derived from H.J. McCloskey. But the more important point is this: The putative assertion that Beversluis finds so outrageous is one that I find to be utterly meaningless and unintelligible. As my own thought experiment in the 1987 article was intended to illustrate,<sup>9</sup> it is just silly (and quite meaningless) to compare two worlds in the superficial way that Beversluis does above. At the very least, we need a lot more information about the two worlds being compared. For at least some putatively possible worlds with no cancer and no suffering on the part of the part of children will also be worlds in which no sentient creatures even exist, and other worlds with some cancer and some instances of suffering on the part of children may also be worlds in which all created persons (including all of the children who suffer) finally achieve supreme happiness and unending bliss. Would Beversluis seriously deny that at least one of the latter worlds would be better as a whole than at least one of the former worlds?

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently, Beversluis does not even know that to counter the claim of Mackie and McCloskey that theism is logically inconsistent, my hopeful belief need not be true or even plausible, but only logically possible; even an “outrageously *ad hoc*” thesis, in other words, will suffice quite well to rebut the Mackie and McCloskey charge of logical inconsistency.

<sup>9</sup> See pp. 41-42, and note in particular my explanation of why the thought experiment finally breaks down entirely.

So just what is the view, I ask, that Beversluis claims to be so outrageous? Is it the view that *some* putatively possible worlds without either cancer or the suffering of children are nonetheless inferior to the actual world? I see nothing outrageous about that. So is it, then, perhaps the view that no possible world without cancer is better than the actual world in which cancer exists for a season? As Beversluis himself admits, I never claim that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds;<sup>10</sup> hence, I have no need to deny that some possible worlds without cancer are better than the actual world. Neither is it my view that every instance of cancer or the suffering of children is a *logically necessary condition* of the goods that God allegedly brings out of them. But it is my view that certain great goods are essentially connected with (and thus justify) our human efforts to eliminate the scourge of cancer and a host of other evils. So again I ask: Just what outrageous view is it that, according to Beversluis, logically commits me to an obligation to oppose the elimination of evil?

Since Beversluis appears incapable of doing so, let me point out, in conclusion, where my own greatest vulnerability lies. Many atheistic philosophers now defend an inductive (or evidential) form of the argument from evil, and that form is not, in my opinion, entirely without merit. These philosophers argue as follows: Even though it is *logically possible* that an omnipotent God would have a benevolent reason, or a whole complex of reasons unknown to us, for permitting such horrendous evils as the suffering of children, we seem to have no idea of just what such a morally sufficient reason might be; hence, it seems improbable, they claim, that there should be any such reason. That, at least, is a position I can appreciate and respect. Although an assessment of our *total* evidence is tricky, I can accept the idea that certain horrendous evils, taken as an isolated body of evidence, lowers the probability that an omnipotent and perfectly loving God exists; it even renders, I believe, atheism a rational position for some people. But a successful evidential argument is also compatible, I would hasten to add, with its being absolutely certain, given someone's *total* evidence, that such a God exists; and this, I believe, is but one reason why theists and atheists can both profit greatly by continuing to explore together various issues of plausibility. For my own part, I agree with my atheistic friends that a worthy object of worship would never permit *irreparable* harm—that is, harm that not even omnipotence could undo in the future—to befall any of his loved ones. I also suspect that those atheists who regard immortality as a

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<sup>10</sup> That is not quite accurate. Here is what Beversluis actually writes: “Talbot does not say that the *present* world is the best of all possible worlds” (p. 244—my italics). But just what is the *present* world if not a particular slice of the actual world when the latter is conceived of as a maximal state of affairs? And clearly, what one might justifiably say about a particular slice of the world is very different from what one might justifiably say about the world as a whole.

bad thing, because life would eventually become (they say) dull and insipid, might inadvertently have provided a glimpse, however faint, into *one* of the reasons (though not the only one) that God permits horrendous evils over the short run even as he tries to enlist our aid in opposing them. For the conditions of enduring happiness and a worthwhile life without end—a life filled with adventure, new discoveries, satisfying victories over evil, ever more wondrous experiences, and a love that overflows to everyone—these conditions may be, even for an omnipotent being, much harder to meet than most of us can imagine. They may even require, I suspect, that God permit a host of indeterministic processes to proceed without interference. But that, of course, is a much longer story.....<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For one tiny part of the story, see the section entitled “Indeterminism, Separation, and the Mystery of Created Personhood” in my article “Why Christians Should *Not* Be Determinists: Reflections on the Origin of Human Sin,” *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (July, 2009), pp. 306-310 (or see pp. 11-18 of the typescript copy).