

# ON AN ALLEGED PROOF OF ATHEISM: REPLY TO JOHN PARK

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In a recent article in this journal<sup>1</sup>, John Park presents what he takes to be a deductive proof that the theistic God does not exist. That is because the theistic God is supposed to be omnibenevolent, and Park argues against this being so. Since God is not omnibenevolent, concludes Park, the God of theism does not exist.

Park summarizes his argument as follows:

Like the logical problem of evil, the moral epistemological argument is a logical contradiction problem for theism. There is a contradiction in the fact that God is omnibenevolent, God has the power to provide knowledge of good and evil to human beings, and God at times gives immoral laws to people. (p. 127)

Park goes on to spell out the argument further, where 'God' is shorthand for 'the God of theism':

God's omnibenevolence means that he has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that when God provides humans with laws and commands, they always should be moral rather than immoral ones. Given that God has full knowledge of what is objectively right and wrong and that he has the power to perform divine revelation, when he does provide humans with moral precepts and orders, they must be moral rather than immoral. However, God apparently does not always provide human beings with beliefs of objectively virtuous laws and commands. At times God seemingly gives people maxims of utter depravity and

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<sup>1</sup> John Park, 'The Moral Epistemological Argument for Atheism', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), 121-142.

wickedness. The contradiction lies in the fact that some of the purported moral knowledge that is given to humans by divine revelation is at times ethically and objectively wrong. Therefore, the existence of God and the existence of the supposed immoral mandates are incompatible with each other, where given the immoral mandates, we may conclude that the omnibenevolent God really does not exist. Notice that in order to form the contradiction, one merely needs only one immoral command from God. (p. 127)

For the sake of the discussion, I lay out the main lines of the argument as follows:

- (1) God is omnibenevolent. (Assumption to be disproven)
- (2) If God is omnibenevolent, then if God provides humans with laws and commands, they will always be moral. (Premise)

So,

- (3) If God provides humans with laws and commands, they will always be moral. (1,2,)

However,

- (4) At times, God seemingly gives people laws and commands of utter depravity and wickedness.

So,

- (5) It is not the case that if God provides humans with laws and commands they will always be moral. (3,4)

So,

- (6) God is not omnibenevolent.

So, (7) the God of theism does not exist.

A few preliminary notes:

- Although Park is otherwise categorical in asserting that God does sometimes give morally depraved commands, in his summation Park states only that this is ‘seemingly’ the case. This is unfortunate, since there is no logical contradiction between a proposition *p* and a proposition that states that *seemingly* not-*p*. That is because *seemingly* not-*p* is consistent with the seeming being deceptive or otherwise discounted. So, no contradiction results. So, I delete ‘seemingly’ in (4) in favour of a categorical assertion.

- Park apparently intends that God fully knowing right and wrong and being able to reveal such are included as part of what he means by God being omnibenevolent. Then one could deny that God is omnibenevolent by denying any one component of omnibenevolence.

Now, premise (1) states the premise to be rejected because it will generate a contradiction. (2) states what Park takes, apparently, to be a conceptual truth. (3) follows deductively from (1) and (2). Park spends several pages to establish premise (4) categorically, without ‘seemingly’. His examples of horrid commands are from the Bible. Park cites chapter and verse from the Old Testament, in the main, and some from the New Testament. Park observes that God allows for slavery and blood vengeance, that God commands unjustly the death penalty for a wide number of actions, and does not deal well with women. God commands immoral warfare, such as the eradication of Amalek, and commands Moses to kill innocent people in war, tantamount to ethical cleansing. And so on. Given (4), (5) and (6) follow in turn.

Let us look at the overall logic of the argument. Park argues for a contradiction between two propositions:

- (1) God is omnibenevolent.

And

(4) At times, God gives people laws and commands of utter depravity and wickedness.

Now, from the fact alone that two propositions are contradictory it follows that one must be false. However, nothing yet follows about which of the two is false. As far as the above argument is concerned, one could just as well deny (4) as deny (1). And, indeed, there are many people who deny (4) in any case. There are those who do not believe in God in the first place. Some believe in God but do not give credence to stories of the Bible. Marcion and some Gnostics believe that YHVH of the OT is not God. People of Eastern religions fail to believe in God or the Bible at all. To none of these will Park’s argument constitute a proof for the non-existence of God. In fact, Park himself does not believe (4) to be true. Altogether, we are talking about a vast number of people. They will simply deny (4). No contradiction arises for them.

The situation here is quite different from what it is with the logical problem of evil. There the existence of evil is manifest to all, while God’s

existence is not. So it makes sense to try to use evil to get a contradiction with the existence of God and then to conclude that God does not exist. But here that the stories of the Bible depicting YHVH as giving immoral commands are true is not manifest to all and easily denied by a great proportion of humankind, as it is by Park.

What Park's argument really does is present an *ad hominem* dilemma for believers in the Bible, who, if Park is right, will be caught in assenting to both of the contradictory propositions. That this is the true import of the argument is clear from the way Park deflects some of the attempted rejoinders to his argument. He can write in response to a suggestion of how to get out of his conclusion things like: 'I take it that most theists will not espouse this strategy' (p. 132). Or 'The burden of proof falls squarely on the theist' (p. 134). These quotations show that Park is after showing a contradiction in the beliefs of most theists, from which, the argument would be, it follows that most *theists* must give up their belief in God. This falls short, though, of being a *proof* of God's nonexistence, *per se*.

This way of understanding Park, and I can think of no better, has several problems. As an *ad hominem* dilemma against a theist, the theist could give up either one of the propositions forming the contradiction. It need not be the one that says God is omnibenevolent. Indeed, for the theist, that God is omnibenevolent might well be more entrenched, more foundational, to her thinking than that the Bible truly reports on God's evil decrees. Park has given an ostensible dilemma for the theist, but without providing any reason why a theist should reject one specific proposition in the contradiction rather than the other.

Secondly, Park misconceives the logic of some of the rebuttals to his argument. Park considers a theistic rejoinder that says that passages in which God is reported to have given immoral commands are simply not to be believed. God never really gave these commands. The passages are fabricated or misunderstandings and are not to be taken as revelatory. Park objects that the Bible is said to be 'holy', which should include all passages. So, Park avers, the theist cannot take this tack. But this reply is not to the point. Park should accept this rejoinder as showing that one *could* believe in God's omnibenevolence by denying premise (4). And the theist can do so simply by giving up the idea that every single Biblical passage truly reports God's commands and actions. The theist then will have to modify only the idea that the Bible being 'holy' implies that every word is to be affirmed. On what grounds *must* the theist give up on her central belief in God's omnibenevolence in order to solve the dilemma,

rather than make this secondary adjustment about the Bible being 'holy'? Park offers no grounds.

Park further objects to the above rejoinder:

The theist may respond that since God is omnibenevolent, only the moral commands are really from God while the immoral ones must be fabricated or must be misinterpretations. This is the criterion for separating legitimate holy passages from the illegitimate ones.

However, the question at hand is whether the supposed God gave immoral commands or not. If one states that the supposed God did not do so because he is omnibenevolent, then one has simply begged the question at hand.

Park does not tell us just what question is being begged here and until he does so his reply is not very helpful. For there does not appear to be any question being begged. If the question is whether God gave immoral commands, then to say that God could not have done so because God is omnibenevolent does not beg any question. It is to give a direct *answer* to the question, and one justified from a theistic point of view. For this reply by Park to have plausibility he should explain why any question is here being begged.

Park also considers a theistic rejoinder that he calls an 'appeal to ignorance':

God works in mysterious ways, and human beings are ignorant of his 'big picture', purposes and final educational means. One cannot know God's ultimate plan or purpose similar to how a small child cannot fully understand her parents' intentions, but one must be assured that the ultimate plan is such that somehow no logical contradiction exists.

Park rejects this rebuttal as follows:

However, the fact that God works in mysterious ways does not necessarily mean that no contradiction exists. For, in making such a move, the theist does not take into account that it could equally be the case that even though the supposed God works in mysterious ways, the apparent contradiction still persists. It does not immediately follow from the appeal to ignorance that the contradiction has been eliminated. The property of 'working in mysterious ways' does not in-and-of-itself necessarily lead to the fact that the supposed contradiction must then be eradicated. Rather, at this first initial stage of assessing the appeal to ignorance and the property 'working in mysterious ways': it is equally

rational to conclude that there still may be a supposed contradiction or there may not be one, and thus, an agnosticism is warranted regarding the efficacy of the appeal to ignorance. It is equally rational that God works in mysterious ways always towards good or perhaps, on the other hand, sometimes towards evil. If the theist then claims that the supposed contradiction must be eradicated if God works in mysterious ways because the purported God is omnibenevolent, then this is once again begging the question.

I take Park's point to be that:

(8) God works in mysterious ways

does not give us a reason for thinking that the contradiction does not exist. That is because (8) is consistent with the truth of (4) and any other component of Park's argument. And that is correct. (8) is consistent with God being evil, in whole or in part. God might work in mysterious ways and yet be evil. Hence, (8) gives us no reason to think that the contradiction does not exist.

However, (8) fails to do justice to the position Park is rejecting. Consider the view of Mark Murphy, whom Park cites as an advocate of (8). Regarding the charge of wrongdoing by God in destroying the people of Jericho in the OT, Murphy invokes the view of sceptical theism to deflect this accusation. Murphy writes:

The sceptical theists have argued against the claim that the existence of these worldly evils calls into question the existence of a perfectly good God by denying that we have adequate reason to believe that we are well positioned to assess whether there are goods that justify the permission of those evils ... . There is no reason to suppose that the human being's grasp of intrinsic value and the means of realizing it is sufficient to give us justified confidence that God inadequately responded to the intrinsic value of the Jerichoites. To take the most obvious point, the destruction of the Jerichoites is, so far as we know, part of or the best means to an organic unity that has greater (or not lesser) intrinsic value than would be available by leaving Jericho more intact.

Murphy's argument is that human beings are not in a position to assert that when God destroyed the people of Jericho God was doing something morally reprehensible. We are not able to make such a judgment, Murphy is saying, because we are not in a position to know what God knows and plans, and what justifying goods God brings about in the larger picture

as a result of the destruction of Jericho. *For all we know*, God's action against the people of Jericho was well justified from a moral point of view. Applying this argument here, what will be said is that we are not in a position to assert

(4) At times, God gives people laws and commands of utter depravity and wickedness.

While the laws and commands *appear to us* to have been wicked, we are not in a position to say so. *For all we know*, God, could have been acting in full moral justification when giving those laws. That is because God, in God's immense power and knowledge, could have been acting in a good way, given the total, organic picture of reality. Since that is the rejoinder, what a full understanding of (8) is saying is that Park does not have a right to premise (4). Whether (4) is true or not is, on this rejoinder, beyond Park's or anybody else's ken.

Understood in this full way, contrary to Park, the rejoinder, to be successful, need not prove that there is no contradiction between (1) and (4). It would be enough to have neutralized (4) as assertible and thereby block the deduction from going forward. So, Park's reply to this rejoinder fails. There may be other ways to attack this rejoinder, for example, by saying that God's evil decrees are deontologically evil and cannot be overcome consequentially in the long run. However, Park provides no convincing reply in his discussion of this rejoinder.

I suspect that Park might have had in the back of his mind some additional premises that he failed to have appear in his argument. If so and if these were added, perhaps the problems I have raised would not be telling. If my suspicion is true, it would be good for Park, if he can, to flesh out his argument in a way that would avoid the problems I have raised.

Although Park does not succeed to prove that God is not omnibenevolent, there does remain a question about the issue Park raises. One might ask: Why does the OT, inspired by God, depict so *many* apparently cruel and vicious acts and commands of God? God should have inspired only books that recorded acts of God that people could hope to emulate in their own lives. God should be presented as demonstrably and convincingly supremely merciful and gracious, in ways with which we earthlings could identify. Even if God's apparently evil acts of the OT were not, for very deep reasons, evil but the epitome

of good, they did not have to be written, or should have been but minor themes in the OT. Has a loving God truly inspired the OT?

Imagine that an 'OT<sub>e</sub>' had presented God as acting and commanding *exclusively* – or nearly so – in ways that ordinarily if a human person acted in those ways they would be exceedingly *evil*. Then, surely, the above-discussed rejoinders would not be attractive to almost any theist. That would mean judging God to be omnibenevolent in the face of revelation that presents a radically different *picture* of God over all or it would mean dismissing the OT as a whole, or nearly so, as genuine revelation. And if an 'OT<sub>g</sub>' had presented God *exclusively* in ways that ordinarily if a human person acted in those ways they would be admired as exceedingly *good*, then the challenge would not arise at all. Now imagine OT's with a gradual gradation from OT<sub>e</sub> to OT<sub>g</sub> on the scale of 'evil' divine acts versus 'good' divine acts as the content of these works, respectively. At what point of the proportion of apparently bad to good would the balance tip to where the proposed solutions might be convincing? No algorithm determines where the tipping point would come. Where it comes for a particular person will depend prominently on a number of factors, including whether a person believes independently that God is omnibenevolent, that the OT really *is* about God, that God inspired the OT, and their judgment about the amount and horrendous quality of the apparent divine evil depicted.

So, my question is this: Suppose a theist becomes deeply shocked and thoroughly bewildered by what he takes to be the inordinate extent to which (on the face of it) massive evil is perpetrated and commanded by God in the OT. It is not a matter of his judging the right or wrong of an individual law or divine action or even a series of such. To his reflected judgment, the OT as a *whole* is now much closer to OT<sub>e</sub> than to OT<sub>g</sub>. The balance has lurched strongly in the wrong direction. Could such a theist then be warranted in coming to deny that God is omnibenevolent or that the OT cannot truly be depicting God?