



The Undeniable Reality of Evil: a Response to W.J. Mander

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Introduction

Mander (2017) argues for the bold thesis that the non-existence of evil should be considered by theists as a serious solution to the problem of evil. In this paper, I argue that Mander has failed to show that the Unreality-of-Evil thesis (UET) is a serious solution to the problem of evil. In doing so, I argue that (i) the reality of evil is a Moorean fact, and that (ii) UET implies an unacceptable skepticism about normative knowledge in general. I also argue that UET unacceptably implies that (iii) God endowed us with severely dysfunctional cognitive faculties, and that (iv) failing to fulfill our obligations to God is not bad or evil. Furthermore, I argue that (v) even if one grants UET, the theist has gained nothing substantial: the atheist can just rephrase the problem of evil to be the problem of suffering and pain. Lastly, I argue that (vi) UET is not a viable solution for the majority of theists, whose scriptures unequivocally teach the reality of evil.

Before evaluating Mander's position, it is important to understand what it is, and what it is not. In his article, Mander is not attempting to show that UET is *the* solution to the problem that evil poses to (traditional) theism. Rather, he is arguing for the more modest position that 'contrary to received opinion, denial of the reality of evil *might* serve as an effective solution to the problem of evil' (p.15) [emphasis added]. He is merely arguing that UET 'has as much rationale to be pursued as [other putative solutions to the problem of evil] currently "on the market",' (p.15) and that it is 'plausible enough' (p. 2) to be placed on the pool of live options for theists.

Moreover, Mander is not arguing that evil does not exist because no values whatsoever exist. In fact, in his article he takes the existence of God and goodness as a given. For example, he states that

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the problematic we are considering only begins once we assume the *reality* of divine *goodness*. We are interested here in approaches which take a different attitude towards the good than they do towards what is bad, approaches which are realist about the one but dismissive of the other, whereas the naturalistic point of view is sceptical about *both* (p. 2).

Therefore, UET is not meant to entail that goodness does not exist, but only that evil doesn't. For in addition to the above excerpt, he states the following: ¹

On the classical theistic view, the occurrence of evil is certainly a fact, albeit a negative one, *while the alternative view which we are considering in this paper holds precisely that there is no such fact*. To claim that evil is unreal is to hold that synthetic propositions about what is or is not evil are all necessarily false, in the same way that an atheist holds that all factual propositions about God are false [emphasis added] (p. 2).

So Mander is arguing that the traditional theist can hold to anti-realism about evil whilst still being a realist about goodness. Mander's UET is meant to be a thesis that can be affirmed by theists. Now, affirming the conjunction of traditional theism and UET is a rather strange position,² and as we shall soon see, it is a highly implausible one.

One may wonder how Mander attempts to argue for UET. The answer is quite simple: what we take to be evil is not actually evil in light of a suprahuman normative standard or a suprahuman perspective. Mander calls these two 'more plausible ways' (p.5) of fleshing out the Unreality-of-Evil thesis, the 'higher-standard view,' (HSV) and the 'wider-perspective' view (WPV). HSV is simply the view that our standard for what is evil may differ from a higher standard, viz., God's standard; what we take as evil, like the Holocaust, might not be evil on God's standard. WPV is simply the view that when we take a wider perspective on life, a bird's eye view of the cosmos, what we previously thought of as evil from our narrow perspective actually turns out to be no such thing. Now, although Mander claims that HSV and WPV are (substantially) distinct, I see no good reason for believing that they are; indeed, his introductions of these two views are so intertwined that one is left with the impression that HSV and WPV are merely different ways of stating the same view. After all, God, qua perfect, has the widest perspective possible. Indeed, Mander even admits that

not all scholars have noted the difference between these two answers, and the likely reason for this is that they fit rather neatly together. That is to say, it may plausibly be thought that God both uses a higher standard of value *and* sees the world more completely (p.8).

I also do not note a (substantive) difference between HSV and WPV here. To say that what we take to be evil is not really evil when we look at the world with a wider perspective is merely to state that there is a correct normative standard higher than

¹ UET entails anti-realism about both badness and evil, and so I speak of evil and badness interchangeably.

² In what follows I take UET to entail traditional theism and the existence of goodness.

ours. But since God is omniscient and sees the world from the widest perspective possible, then that higher standard will just be his standard.

Objections to UET

Having elucidated Mander's position, we can now move on to evaluating it. In what follows I raise a number of objections to UET.

The Existence of Evil Is a Moorean Fact

First, it is simply a Moorean fact that evil exists. The propositions that the Holocaust was immoral and evil, and that severe depression is bad, are far more plausible than the premises of any argument that can be marshaled against them. One may object that I am merely begging the question against Mander here. However, even if affirming that the Holocaust was immoral, or that severe depression is bad, is technically question begging, this would not mean that the affirmation is incorrect; after all, there are many disputes in Philosophy that are ultimately disagreements about fundamental intuitions. To take a rather uncontroversial example, the dialetheist holds that the classical logician who intuits that the law of non-contradiction is a Moorean fact will say that the classical logician is just begging the question. But that doesn't mean that the law of non-contradiction is not true. I hold that the proposition that the Holocaust was evil and immoral, regardless of whether it is a Moorean fact, is far more plausible than its negation; and so even if affirming it is question begging, that is irrelevant to its truth. Indeed, by my lights, and dare I say by most properly functioning lights, it is clearly true. Now, Mander is certainly aware of this objection, and he responds by making a distinction 'between appearance and reality, between what looks bad and what genuinely is bad (p.8).' He grants that things appear to us to be bad or evil, but believes that it is not implausible that our intuitions here are mistaken; for Mander, evil, unlike pain, is not a phenomenological given, but an interpretation thereof. I consider this objection in multiple sections below.

Unmitigated Skepticism

Second, Mander's WPV and HSV ways of fleshing out UET amount to no more than the conjunction of UET and extreme skepticism regarding our intuitions as to what is evil. His position leads to an unmitigated and unacceptable skepticism, not just with respect to what we take to be evil, but about what we take to be good as well—indeed about our normative judgments in general. After all, if what we take to be the clearest paradigm cases of evil and badness are not in fact evil or bad; if the Holocaust and torturing innocent children for fun are not genuine instances of bad or evil actions, then on what basis can we correlatively say that what we take as paradigm instances of good actions are in fact good? It seems clear that our intuitions with respect to what is paradigmatically bad or evil are trustworthy if and only if our intuitions with respect to what is paradigmatically good are trustworthy. So UET entail an unacceptable skepticism about value realism in general, one which, though acceptable on a naturalistic worldview, is manifestly unacceptable on a (traditional) theistic worldview. After all, on theism, God is the

paragon of goodness who ostensibly created us with cognitive faculties reliable enough to know the good (at least when they are properly functioning).

Did God Give Us Defective Cognitive Faculties?

Third, as an addendum to the above point, UET implies that God endowed humans with severely defective cognitive mechanisms. After all, making judgments that something is bad or evil comes completely natural to us: it is a day-to-day reality for just about all of us. Moreover, such judgments literally fill the pages of history, and many come from the brightest lights to have ever lived. It just seems to be part of our cognitive mechanism to make value judgments about what is good and evil. But if the theist endorses UET, then he is in a quandary: why did God create us with such a severely flawed cognitive mechanism? No plausible answer appears to be forthcoming. Indeed, it is wildly implausible that God would endow us with such a severely defective cognitive apparatus. God, *qua* perfect, would want us to come to know the truth about the world, and so would endow us with a reliable cognitive mechanism. Therefore, the theist should not endorse UET.

God and Our Moral Obligations

Fourth, UET implies that failing to fulfill a moral obligation to God is not bad or evil, for on UET nothing is bad or evil. But clearly being derelict in one's duties to the supreme being is something that is not merely not good, but positively bad. Indeed, offenses against the supreme being are arguably among the worst possible offenses. Moreover, it would stand to reason that following the commands of God is good if and only if (intentionally) failing to follow them is bad or evil. But since on Mander's UET, goodness exists and traditional theism is true, clearly following God's commands is good. But then it follows that failing to follow God's commands is evil. So UET is false.

Substitute 'Suffering' or 'Pain' for 'Evil'

Fifth, Mander takes the normative judgment that suffering is 'bad' or 'evil' to be a philosophical judgment that is not immediately apparent, for he says the following:

Value is not defined phenomenologically. There is no feeling of goodness or badness. That is always a judgement. And as such it can be mistaken. Were good and evil qualities we could directly perceive, the theory that evil is an illusion would be absolutely untenable. But they are not; they are further inferences from or interpretations of what we sense (p.9).

We experience pain and suffering, but we don't experience them *as* bad or evil. These are further normative judgments; they are add-ons, so to speak. But even if Mander is correct that certain normative positions are not manifestly obvious and require some sort of additional philosophical interpretation (whether unconscious or otherwise), this doesn't go far enough in solving the fundamental motivation behind the problem of evil: the large amount of pain and suffering that exists in the world and which, Mander would grant, is directly experienced by humans. The atheist could grant that Mander is

correct about evil but can still rephrase the problem of evil as the problem of pain and suffering, and would maintain that the amount and severe type of suffering that is present in the actual world renders the existence of God improbable. One would expect that such pain qualia to be relatively minor or even nonexistent on theism, and that there should be more pleasurable qualia on theism. Therefore, denying the reality of evil doesn't relieve the theist of accounting for the large amount of suffering that is endemic in our world. The atheist can merely substitute 'suffering' or 'pain' for 'evil' in his argument against theism.

UET Is Incompatible with the Scriptures of Most Theists

Sixth, UET is incompatible with the scriptures of the majority of theists. The majority of theists have religious scriptures that unequivocally teach the reality of evil. This is obviously true with respect to at least the Abrahamic faiths, to which most theists subscribe. So even if Mander is correct that UET is as plausible as other theistic solutions to the problem of evil, it is not a feasible solution for the majority of theists for reasons independent of the aforementioned objections. For most theists, then, Mander's project is simply irrelevant.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that Mander's Unreality-of-Evil solution to the problem of evil is open to a number of powerful objections, and is thus extremely implausible. It is certainly not plausible enough to count among the theist's pool of live answers. The reality of evil is undeniable; and it certainly should be to a traditional theist who rejects value anti-realism.

Reference

Mander, W.J. (2017). The unreality of evil. *Sophia*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-017-0585-x>.