

Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thinking about Evil

Commentary

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Hyper-Past Evils: A Reply to Bogdan V. Faul

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Abstract: A reply to Bogdan V. Faul’s “Can God Promise Us a New Past? A Response to Lebens and Goldschmidt.” In this reply we clarify why it is that we regard a scene-changing theory of time to be an improvement over presentism from a theological point of view. We present two benefits: a scene changing theory allows God (1) to improve the past and it allows him (2) to give free will to human beings whilst ensuring that they hyper-will never have misused it. More generally, the scene-changing theory when compared to presentism has the more compelling account of the badness of past evils.

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1 Past evils and hyper-past evils

We argue that God can change the past and improve it by doing so.¹ Bogdan V. Faul thinks that our argument fails.² We call foul. Our arguments are fine. If there was a failure on our part, perhaps it was that we were not clear enough. We seek to remedy that here. Faul presents two distinct worries. We divide our article into two sections to deal with each in turn. This section responds to a worry about truth-makers and the badness of past evils. The second section responds to a worry about the necessity of evil.

We proposed a scene-changing theory of time. There are two basic ingredients to this theory. The first is a moving spotlight theory of time. The second is hyper-presentism. But the *essential* ingredients are just this: the reality of the past (as per the moving spotlight theory *or* the growing block theory *or* eternalism) in combination with hyper-presentism.³ Any such combination allows God to *improve* the world by changing the past.

Here’s how the recipe works. If the past contains horrors, well, then that’s bad. Why? Because on the scene-changing theory the past is a real country. And thus past horrors and present horrors are equally real, even if not equally close. The horrors are still happening over there in the past. That’s bad.

What if God were to change the past? That only makes sense if there’s another time-like dimension. Things change *over* time. If time itself is going to change, then it’s going to need its own time line. Let’s call that time line *hyper-time*. If God changes the past, then at one point in hyper-time the space-time block contains something in its past that it no longer contains at a later point in hyper-time. God could change the past over the course of hyper-time.

¹ Lebens and Goldschmidt, “The Promise of a New Past,” 1–25.

² Faul, “Can God Promise Us a New Past? A Response to Lebens and Goldschmidt,” 167–74.

³ Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism*, 248–9.

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At this point, Faul objects: “If the proposition that evils hyper-existed is true,” he avers, “then evil hyper-took place and there is no genuine elimination of evils.”⁴ The evil is still there. It’s just in the hyper-past. Accordingly, Faul thinks that the scene-changing theory has no advantage over presentism. Why? On each view, evils still occurred. On presentism, the evils occurred. On the scene-changing view, the evils *hyper-occurred*. Why then would God bother creating a scene-changing world instead of a presentist one? But as Mufasa would remind us: remember! The scene-changing theory is hyper-presentist. There is no country called the hyper-past.

Past evils are bad because they’re still there in the past. Even if there are true propositions about the hyper-past, they are not made true by the existence of hyper-past evil. Hyper-past evils are not anywhere. Not bad!

But if the hyper-past doesn’t exist, what *makes it true* that God changed the past? What *makes it true* that there hyper-were bad things, hyper-before God eliminated the evil? Our answer: properties held by the hyper-present. What makes it true that the past used to contain bad is neither the existence of bad events in the past (because God has removed them) nor the existence of bad events in the hyper-past (because there’s no such place). Rather, it’s that the hyper-present holds certain hyper-backward-looking properties.

Faul is unsatisfied:

Even if the nature of the thing which makes the propositions about hyperpast events true or false is different from what makes the propositions about existing objects true or false, it still suffices.⁵

Suppose he means this: even if the truth-makers for past-tense propositions and hyper-past-tense propositions are different, so long as they’re both truth-makers, then the truth that there are hyper-past evils is just as unfortunate as the truth that there are past evils.

At times, he takes our response to this problem to be that hyper-past-tense truths “are true only de-dicto, they are not true de-re, which makes the elimination of evils a genuine elimination.”⁶ He is unsatisfied by that response. Fortunately, it isn’t our response. It is just a consequence of our response. What is our response?

This: the scene-changing theory marks a difference between the badness of past evils and (what we take to be) the neutrality of hyper-past evils. The past exists and contains past evils. By contrast, the hyper-past doesn’t exist. Instead, the hyper-present contains something like a shadow in the form of hyper-backward-looking properties. Those properties make it true that there hyper-was a bad event. But the bad event is gone.

Here’s another attempt to frame our response: what keeps past evils bad is that they’re happening, with all of their ugliness, in the past. But hyper-past evils are not happening anywhere. They’ve disappeared. A mere property remains in their place. That metaphysical difference in the nature between the truth-makers for past tense and hyper-past tense matters. This isn’t a distinction a presentist could draw. For the presentist, the badness of the past cannot be distinguished in this way, from the badness of a hyper-presentistic hyper-past. For the presentist, both sorts of evil are constituted by properties. Past evils are obviously bad, so, for a presentist, the instantiation of those properties must be a bad thing, and so must the instantiation of hyper-past evils. But, because we’re not presentists, we can make distinctions that the presentist cannot make. That’s why Faul is mistaken to insist that the scene-changing view could just as easily be replaced by bog-standard presentism – a point we expand upon in our original paper.

Sure, if God had created a world on a presentist model, he *wouldn’t* be able to improve the past. He could change it. But there would be no reason to think that his swapping backward-looking properties for hyper-backward-looking properties would constitute an improvement. But swapping a past *event* for a *property* really *does* look like an improvement. That’s something God could do if he made a scene-changing world, which he couldn’t do if he made a presentist world. That’s part of why we think theists should be scene changers. It makes sense for God to create a changeable past that can be *improved* over the course of hyper-time.

⁴ Faul, “Can God Promise Us a New Past? A Response to Lebens and Goldschmidt,” 171.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 170.

According to the presentist, what makes past evils bad is some property held by the present. We reject that claim. What makes past evils bad is that they're still there, in the past, being evil. Hyper-past evils, by contrast, are mere properties held by the hyper-present. Nothing to worry about.

In fact, we could recast our reply as an objection to presentism. Presentists have to accept that what makes present evils bad is very different to what makes past evils bad. Present evils are bad because they're happening. Past evils, according to the presentist, are bad because, even though they're *not* happening, and they don't really exist, it's a bad thing for the present to instantiate certain sorts of backward-looking properties. That's an odd consequence of presentism. The rest of us can answer that past evils are bad in exactly the same way present evils are bad: namely, they are bad events that exist! The presentist has to deny this. If you have already bitten this presentistic bullet, you might not be able to see the difference between replacing a bad event in the past with a mere hyper-backward-looking property. But we urge that that's merely a consequence of presentistic bullet-biting and not a powerful objection against us.

2 Proofreading

Faul's second objection is easy to state. No good God would allow for unnecessary evils, and yet we've rendered all evils unnecessary. Since one hyper-day God could remove all evil from the past, any evil in the hyper-interim needn't exist, and since it needn't exist, its existence is incompatible with God's goodness.

But we respond to this problem in our original article. On a traditional free-will defence, the presence of evil in the world, or at least the ever-present risk that evil will occur, is a necessary price God pays for the good of our freedom. We report and sympathise with Steven Maitzen's dissatisfaction:

To put it mildly, there's something less than perfect about letting a child suffer terribly for the primary benefit of someone else – whether for the benefit of a bystander who gets a hero's chance to intervene, or for the benefit of a childabuser who gets to exercise unchecked free will. If you doubt the previous sentence, consider whether you would dream of letting a child you love suffer abuse in order to secure either of those benefits.⁷

But, we argued that, unlike temporary evils, *hyper*-temporary evils might well be worth the price for human freedom. God is like a proofreader who allows us to write our own biographies. Once we're finished, He has us rewrite the passages that need editing. In this way, God is able to give us all free will and to ensure that we hyper-will never have abused it. Many of the details are worked out in our article. But the basic idea is that hyper-past evils are not bad, but they play a role. They allow the goods that remain in history to have been of our own authorship.

To summarise: there are certain values that God cannot get from a presentist world, values that He can get only from a hyper-time world. One value is the ability to improve the past. The other value, which follows from the first, is that God can ensure that we all have real freedom and that (even so) none of us hyper-will have ever set a foot wrong. The added value God would get from creating a scene-changing world is the value of proofreading.

We are grateful to Faul for engaging with our article, and for giving us this opportunity to clarify some of the more slippery details at its heart. Perhaps, one hyper-day we would have been clearer to begin with. And thus, perhaps, in the eschaton, his reply and our response hyper-will have hyper-vanished. Read them while you can.⁸

⁷ Maitzen, "Atheism and the Basis of Morality," 259.

⁸ We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This reply was also enhanced in light of "behind-the-scenes" conversations with Bogdan Faul, to whom we're grateful.

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