God and the Canaanite Destruction:
Implications of an atheist's premise

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Introduction:
Could an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good God ever permit, condone, or even orchestrate the large-scale death or killing of a population group? The catalyst for this question comes from accounts in the Bible of God commanding or bringing about the destruction of the ancient Canaanite society and, ultimately, most of humanity during a future time popularly known as Armageddon.

A premise advanced by atheist philosopher William Rowe is that the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God is incompatible with gratuitous, or pointless, evil. God, therefore, must prevent any gratuitous event from happening. It follows from this that for a series of events, when that series reaches a point where further events in the series become gratuitous, then God must terminate the series. This has enormous implications for societies and human civilization. By the atheist's own premise, he must conclude that if a society reaches the point where their net moral value is about to become gratuitous, then God must terminate that society if He is perfectly good, all powerful, and all-knowing. This raises two concerns, which are discussed in the closing sections.

Gratuitous evil:
In philosophical discussions of the problem of evil, *gratuitous evil* is generally defined as an event or state of affairs that God could have prevented without forfeiting some greater good or permitting some evil as bad or worse. Since the definition indicates that the consequences of an event are what determines if it is gratuitous or not, one can see that it is not merely the event or state of affairs that is at question, but also the moral value of all the consequences, to the end of history, of permitting the event compared with the moral value of all the consequences, to the end of the alternate history, of not permitting the event, or of substituting the best alternative to the event. The difference between the total moral value of those two sets of consequences give us the net moral value of the event, which may be negative or positive. The proposition advanced by the atheist that God cannot permit gratuitous evil essentially requires that God cannot permit events with a net moral value that is negative. It follows from this,

therefore, that if a society is about to enter into a state of a negative net moral value, then God cannot permit that society to continue.

The net moral value of an event or state of affairs:
To know if an event or a state of affairs is an instance of gratuitous evil, we must know the net moral value of that event. The first step in determining the net moral value of an event is to calculate the total moral value of the actual event, which is the sum of the intrinsic moral values of the event and all its consequences to the end of history. Let us call the total moral value of the actual event 'A'. For example, if the intrinsic moral value of the event is denoted by E, and the intrinsic moral values of each of the consequences are denoted by C_1, C_2, C_3, … C_{end}, then

$$A = E + C_1 + C_2 + C_3 + \ldots C_{end} \qquad (1)$$

The second step is to calculate the total moral value of the best alternative to that event or state of affairs. Let us call this total moral value 'B'. For example, if the intrinsic moral value of the best alternative event is denoted by S, and the intrinsic moral values of each of the consequences are denoted by C_{B1}, C_{B2}, C_{B3}, … $C_{B\text{-}end}$, then

$$B = S + C_{B1} + C_{B2} + C_{B3} + \ldots C_{B\text{-}end} \ . \qquad (2)$$

The net moral value M_{net} of any event or state of affairs is simply the difference between the total moral value of the actual event and the total moral value of the best alternative or,

$$M_{net} = A\text{-}B \ . \qquad (3)$$

A gratuitous evil, therefore, can be defined as any event or state of affairs for which M_{net} is negative. A negative M_{net} entails that the actual event or state of affairs, when considered along with all its consequences to the end of history, contained more evil than some other, better, alternative. In that case, God was not justified in permitting it. Given the initial premise, for any event, if M_{net} is negative, then God does not exist or,

$$\text{if negative } M_{net}, \text{ then no God.} \qquad (4)$$

The corollary is that if God exists, then there can never be an event that has a negative net moral value or,

if God, then no negative M_{net} .   (5)

To sum up, if God exists, then he cannot permit an event or state of affairs that has a negative net moral value.

As an aside, it should be pointed out that since we are not omniscient, but have only a miniscule knowledge of all the consequences of any event to the end of history and even less knowledge of any alternate history, we are in no position to know, for any event or state of affairs, if M_{net} is negative or positive unless the omniscient being gives us that information. It follows from this that we are not in a position to know what God should and should not permit in this world. The subject of net moral values and our inability to know whether they are positive or negative, barring the omniscient being telling us the answer, has been covered elsewhere.[1-3]

God and the net moral value of societies and civilizations:
If a people group or a society, H, has a positive net moral value, then to destroy that group, or to permit that group to be destroyed, would be a gratuitous evil. If God exists, therefore, then He would not destroy H if M_{net} is positive. In other words,

> For any H, if M_{net} is positive, then God must not permit the destruction of H.   (6)

If a people group H has a negative net moral value, then from proposition (5), God must not permit H to continue.

A problem arises, however, if H has a positive M_{net} for the first part of its history, but at some time T_{neg}, M_{net} becomes negative. In that situation, it would be a gratuitous evil if God did not permit H to exist for the first part of its history, but also it would be a gratuitous evil if God permitted H to exist past T_{neg}. Interestingly, the Bible records that God told Abraham that he and his descendants could not have the land of Canaan until 400 years in the future, because the sin of the Canaanites had not yet reached full measure (i.e., T_{neg} was still 400 years away for the Canaanite society)[4]. Note that the possible destruction of H is also considered in the computation of M_{net}. Recall that the net moral value is not just contingent upon the society only at that point in history, but also upon the consequences to the end of history of permitting or not permitting that society to continue. So the

contemporary moral value of a society may actually be positive at some point, but have a net negative moral value when the consequences of permitting the society to survive even another year are considered. We are now in a position to construct an atheist's argument for God terminating a society or people group.

The argument:
1. Assume for possible population group H, M_{net} is positive before T_{neg} and becomes negative at T_{neg}.
2. If God exists, then He cannot permit a state of affairs where M_{net} is negative. (from proposition (5); God cannot permit gratuitous evil) therefore,
    If God exists, then he must ensure that H is terminated at T_{neg}.

Two worries:
There are two worries that I would like respond to as both a philosopher and a Christian. The first is whether we can know when the destruction of a society is required. The second worry has to do with the harsh utilitarian nature of the above argument presented in the previous section.

With regard to the first worry, the short answer is that the consequential complexity of history makes it impossible for us to know when any event, series of events, or a society becomes gratuitous, requiring its termination, as I have argued elsewhere.[1-3] Thus, only an omniscient being would have the information required to know whether a civilization should be ended or not. Humans are morally obligated to act on the basis of what we could reasonably be expected to know. For the Christian, this would be summed up in what Jesus said were the two great commands: to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourself. Thus, the follower of Christ is obligated to carry on under the two great commands and leave the fates of societies and human civilization up to the all-knowing, all-powerful and perfectly good God.

With regard to the second worry, if it is morally necessary that a perfectly good God destroy a civilization or society at the point at which it becomes gratuitously evil, then what about the individuals within that civilization? There may be many good people within a society that is about to achieve a negative net moral value. A survey of the Bible seems to indicate that God's interest in civilizations is primarily due to his interest in the individuals that form that civilization. In the case of the end of the Canaanite society, God

said that He would send hornets ahead of the advancing Israelites to drive out the people from Canaan so that only those who remained would be destroyed.[5] Almost a thousand years later, when it came time to destroy the Israelite society, God again filters out those who are not to be destroyed. This appears to be a pattern throughout the Bible; advance removal of those to be saved, followed by the destruction of those who remain.

An interesting question, and more relevant to us today, is whether we as a human civilization are approaching the point where we become a gratuitous evil (humanity's net moral value becomes negative). How good have we been for the planet? Have we made a positive contribution to the galaxy? When we look at the daily news around the world, is the net moral value of humanity looking very positive from the viewpoint of an external, objective observer? Chilling questions indeed.

A complicating factor is that, according to the Bible, the net moral value of each individual without God is negative. It follows from the atheist's premise (5) that God must destroy every human being. God is the origin of perfect love, the origin of unspeakable beauty, the origin of flawless justice and perfection, of music, and every good thing given and every perfect gift. We, individually, have violated perfect beauty, perfect justice and flawless purity and continue to spread our moral imperfection through our thoughts and behavior. Since God greatly values and loves the individual, this creates a problem for God as the origin of both love and justice; flawless justice and perfect love are in direct conflict. What if God became a human being for the purpose of satisfying the demands of flawless justice so that He could then satisfy the demands of perfect love, and what if His name was Jesus Christ? He does not want to destroy the individual but, rather, restore the individual. In this way, a perfect God can be perfectly just, yet also justify perfectly those individuals who will accept what Jesus has done for him or her. If you wish to accept what Jesus has done for you in paying the demands of flawless justice for your moral shortcomings, and you desire to experience God's love for you as an individual beginning now, and lasting throughout eternity, and if you want to experience forever the enormous potential that God intended you to have, then express your desire to put your faith in Jesus with a prayer. Tell Him that you accept his payment for your sins, and that you want to experience his love for you, forever. Tell Him that you desire Him to come into your life and to make you the kind of person He originally created you to be.

References:

1. 'The consequential complexity of history and gratuitous evil,' Durston (2000) *Religious Studies*, **36**:65-80.
2. 'The failure of type-4 arguments from evil, in the face of the consequential complexity of history,' Durston (2004) *Philo,* **8**.
3. 'The complexity of history and evil: a reply to Trakakis,' Durston (2006) *Religious Studies*, **42**:87-99.
4. Genesis 15:13-16
5. Deuteronomy 7:20