

Evolutionary theodicies - an attempt to overcome some impasses

Abstract:

Mats Wahlberg argues that evolutionary theodicies fail to show how an evolutionary process was necessary in order to reach the goal(s) God is said to have had when creating our world. The authors of this article argue that Wahlberg's critique fails if one takes into consideration the distinction between type- and token-values. The question that guides Wahlberg's discussion is whether or not unique type-values require an evolution in order to be instantiated or not. He does not, however, discuss whether unique token-values require evolution. This article will address this question, and argue that the theodicies he claims to fail does not do so for the reasons put forward by Wahlberg if interpreted as focusing on token-unique values. The authors will also argue that theodicies other than those evaluated by Wahlberg succeed in identifying type-unique values that can only be brought about through evolution.

German abstract:

Mats Wahlberg argumentiert, dass evolutionäre Theodizeen nicht zeigen, wie ein evolutionärer Prozess notwendig war, um das Ziel zu erreichen, das Gott bei der Erschaffung unserer Welt gehabt hat. Die Autoren dieses Artikels argumentieren, dass Wahlbergs Kritik nicht haltbar ist, wenn man die Unterscheidung zwischen Typ- und Token-Werten berücksichtigt. Die erkenntnisleitende Frage für Wahlbergs Diskussion ist, ob eindeutige Typ-Werte eine Evolution erfordern oder nicht, um somit instanziiert zu werden oder nicht. Er diskutiert jedoch nicht, ob einzigartige Token-Werte eine Evolution erfordern. Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit dieser Frage und argumentiert, dass die von Wahlberg angeführten Theodizeen nicht aus den von ihm vorgelegten Gründen aussageelos sind, wenn sie auf die Darstellung von einzigartigen Token-Werten hin interpretiert werden. Die Autoren argumentieren auch dafür, dass

andere als die von Wahlberg ausgewerteten Theodizeen einzigartige Typ-Werte sind, die nur durch die Evolution bewirkt werden können.

Keywords: evolution, theodicy, indeterminism, token-values, type-values.

I Introduction

Evolutionary theodicies are attempts to explain how the suffering and waste inherent in the evolutionary process is coherent with the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God. Mats Wahlberg identifies two conditions that theodicies of this kind seek to satisfy:

(A) The Necessity Condition: The good secured by the permission of the evil, E, would not have been secured without permitting either E or some other evils morally equivalent to or worse than E.

(B) The Outweighing Condition: The good secured by the permission of the evil is sufficiently outweighing.¹

He then considers several theodicies falling into one of the following two categories: (1) those who argue in favor of an anthropocentric omega point for creation and (2) those who do not. When these theodicies present different goals that they argue could only be reached through evolution, Wahlberg confronts them with a Twin-Earth counterexample: a universe molecule-by-molecule identical to ours, but created *ex nihilo* by God without a process of evolution. Wahlberg argues that all theodicies he considers fail to show how an evolutionary process was necessary in order to reach the proposed goals.

¹ Mats WAHLBERG, "Was Evolution the Only Possible Way for God to Make Autonomous Creatures? Examination of an Argument in Evolutionary Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2015): 38.

We will argue that the theodicies Wahlberg evaluates do not fail the Twin Earth-test if one takes into consideration the distinction between *type- and token-values*. A value in our universe is here understood as everything particular beings within it appreciate. A type value is a value that can be instantiated at several times and places, e.g. joy. A type-value is unique if it has intrinsic properties different from other values, e.g. fun is a type-unique value in virtue of having different intrinsic properties from peace, love etc.² A token-value is an instantiation of a type-value *at a certain time and place*, e.g. the joy of attending the party yesterday at my neighbour's house. Thus, the joy I experience as I write this article is token-unique from my joy yesterday at the neighbour's house.

The question that guides Wahlberg's discussion is whether or not unique type-values, e.g. free will, require an evolution in order to be instantiated or not. He does not, however, discuss whether unique *token-values* require evolution. In what follows we will also address this question, and argue that the theodicies he claims to fail his Twin Earth-test, does not do so if interpreted as focusing on token-unique values. We will also argue that theodicies other than those evaluated by Wahlberg succeed in identifying type-unique values that can only be brought about through evolution.

II Successful evolutionary theodicies

One of the most sophisticated evolutionary theodicies developed to date is the one presented by Keith Ward in his book *Divine Action* (1990/2007).³ Ward

² The term "intrinsic properties" here refers to all characteristics other than spatio-temporal location.

³ Keith WARD, *Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007). The authors of this article have in various publications sought to refine Ward's proposal by introducing certain conceptual modifications (see REMOVED FOR THE SAKE OF BLIND REVIEW).

offers a theodicy that with some further conceptual development is capable of showing how both type- and token-unique values in our universe require evolution.

Ward does not employ the type/token distinction on values. Yet he does argue that God could not have created you in another universe. Insofar as identity between two spatio-temporal bodies requires numerical and structural identity the other “you” would not really be you.⁴ This would be the case even if you had never been born, because what makes you you is the particular structure of the causal nexus that makes your history distinct from others. This means that evolution is necessary for the token individuals of this world to exist (condition A), and the outweighing condition for them is the eternal life that God reveals to them in salvation (condition B).

Yet there are also unique type-values in our universe that require evolution – or more precisely: they require that God fine-tuned a genuinely undetermined universe where life could arise through evolution. Although evolution may of course take place in a determined universe, we are here presupposing that the evolving universe under scrutiny is characterized as indeterministic. Examples of unique type-values within such a universe are genuine independence (that beings to some extent, influence what happens), self-creating creation (that beings cause their own characteristics over time), the creativity of creation (that new things occur), and surprise (that unexpected things occur).⁵ If God were to

⁴ Keith WARD, *God, Chance & Necessity* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 193, *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 38-39.

⁵ In *Divine Action* Ward lists five reasons for God to create the world. The first is that God adds values to the world when he creates beings capable of appreciating the world. The second reason is that by creating our world, God creates unique values which otherwise would not have existed. Thirdly, because of the first two reasons, in creating such a world God himself will also experience new kinds of values. The fourth reason is that the world

make our universe *ex nihilo* today it would not be as independent as if God did not, it would not be as self-created as it is now, it would not be the result of the creativity of creation, and the result would not be genuinely new to God (presupposing that God does not know the future).

It is important to note that we are here talking about the universe as we are familiar with it today, i.e. as created from nothing and as a product of evolution in which indeterminism has played a constitutive part. Thus a universe created by God *ex nihilo* today would not be a new to God *today*. One could object to our suggestion by arguing that today's universe, if it was created by God today, could nevertheless actualize the above mentioned type-values of relative independence and creativity (etc.) in the future. This is of course true, but it would do so because indeterministic evolution was allowed to continue. It does not invalidate the claim that these values could only be actualized this way.

However, one could further object that even if these values required evolution in order to be actualized, God could have created an evolving universe *ex nihilo* as it is today, sparing the cosmos of a vast period of no biological life and merely bacterial life. Why could not God just have brought us on stage straight away!? Against this objection, we would insist that the whole idea of an indeterministic evolution is that God does not know beforehand (and thus cannot control) how the cosmos will evolve in detail, including the time it would take for certain things to happen. Even if God had created human lifeforms *ex nihilo* yesterday in an indeterministic universe, a meteor could wipe out all life tomorrow and

expresses God's imagination, and the fifth is that the world makes it possible for God to enter into loving personal relationships with creatures, and that doing so is part of God's nature as love (*Divine Action*, 23-36). We have selected four examples here that we find apt to exemplify type values that could not have been created from nothing but rather presuppose indeterminism.

biological evolution would have to re-start. Indeterministic evolution is of value to God because it actualizes the above mentioned type-values.

Because God wanted to actualize values that are type-unique and token-unique, God had to create our universe by evolutionary means. The theological starting point of Keith Ward's evolutionary theodicy is that God is perfectly good and thus would want to actualize life-fulfilling values for everything God creates.⁶ In the Christian tradition the ultimate horizon of creation is to bring it into a mode of existence that is perfectly good: an eternal life in which all relationships including God and finite beings are fulfilled as loving mutuality. If this is the case, and if the only way to reach that goal is to actualize values with inherent possibilities of suffering then both conditions proposed by Wahlberg are satisfied.

Yet, not all values actualized in our universe are type-unique. A universe different from ours could be inhabited by happy (etc.) beings. But in Ward's and our view, God created our universe in order to actualize both type- and token-unique values. As noted, token-values are all instantiations of values occurring at a time and place. Among them are appreciated occurrences in the natural world such as a beautiful flower, or appreciated states of consciousness, such as being happy. While states of consciousness cannot be given an exact location, they are experienced by a person at an exact location, and in a specifiable duration of time.

A further clarification regarding the status of token-values is necessary for our argument to succeed. If a theodicy relies on the conceptual framework of substance ontology, one may argue that a token-unique value, e.g. a person,

⁶ Ibid.

could have existed either in this universe or in another universe. In such a conceptual framework personal identity is given by the substrate that all the person's properties are ascribed to.⁷ Thus one and the same substrate could either exist in one universe with one set of properties or in another universe with another set of properties, and it would be one and the same object. In contrast to this, our claim (and that of Ward) that the values of our universe are token-unique presupposes a relational (or structural) ontology where entities get their identity from their token-unique relations. Such an ontological framework is well defended in the book *Structure and Being* by Lorenz Puntel, yet can neither be presented nor discussed in depth here.⁸

What then are the necessary conditions for actualizing the type-unique values of our universe? First of all the universe has to have genuine indeterminism as an immanent characteristic. By calling the indeterminism genuine, we want to emphasize that the world really is capable of producing new and unexpected things both at micro- and macro-level which even God cannot predict where and when will happen. However, this does not mean that the possibilities inherent in our universe are absolutely unrestricted, i.e. that there are no metaphysical limitation to what might happen. God knows what can happen, but does not know what will happen (or when and where) in our universe if it is genuinely indetermined.

⁷ Such an ontology is perhaps most famously unfolded by John LOCKE in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1975), 2. 23. 4. A range of substance ontologies with a high degree of resemblance to that of Locke appear often in modern philosophy.

⁸ Lorenz B. PUNTEL, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

Even if type-values were actualized before the evolutionary process produced self-conscious communicative life forms, the fact that billions of years passed before self-consciousness evolved tells us that the space of possibilities in our universe must have been (and still is) of considerable “size”. The concrete way in which such indeterminism unfolds in our universe is spelled out by stochastic laws that determine on a general level what happens without doing so in detail. Micro-events may occur with no cause explaining why it happened exactly then and there, and this indeterminism spreads through to the macro-level of more complex events and the manner in which they occur.

Secondly, the actualization of type-values requires that our universe contain energy, variation and a relatively stable causal nexus. Together these are the constituents of the motor of biological evolution both before and after its onset.

An evolutionary theodicy of this kind avoids Wahlberg’s Twin-Earth objection. If the world were created *ex nihilo* it would have been less independent, less self-created, not creative (until now) and not a surprise to God. Wahlberg could of course object that the universe *from now on* could have been independent, self-creating (etc.), but our point is that evolution has actualized these values in the course of the very process itself, and that to a greater degree than if created from nothing in its current state: more independence, more self-creation (etc.). Furthermore, the actualization of these type-unique values is morally justifiable only insofar as it allows for certain token-unique values, and because God knows that despite everything unforeseen that might happen God is capable of bringing all creation to its fulfillment in an eternal life of love.⁹

⁹ This theodicy does not require universal salvation, only that a real opportunity of salvation is given to all (whatever this might mean).

III Literature

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