

## Reply to Goldberg's "Van Inwagen's Two Failed Arguments for the Belief in Freedom"

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Mr. Goldberg (2010) argues that Peter van Inwagen (1983) fails in two different ways to defend his indeterminist position. In general, I think that he is right that van Inwagen fails, but my reasons for thinking so are different from Goldberg's, in both instances.

Let's first consider the argument that Goldberg says van Inwagen employs with respect to the skepticism analogy. According to Goldberg, van Inwagen thinks that these two argument forms, offered against indeterminism and in favor of skepticism, respectively, are parallel:

If M(oral responsibility) justifies F(freedom), then M justifies I(indeterminism).  
M does not justify I.  
So, M does not justify F.

and

If I am justified in (the truth of my ordinary) B(eliefs), then I am justified in thinking  $\sim U$ (universal Deceiver exists).  
I am not justified in thinking  $\sim U$ .  
So, I am not justified in B.

To begin with, I do think that Goldberg properly captures van Inwagen's formulation of these allegedly two analogous arguments. On this formulation, however, the two arguments don't seem to be parallel, so something is amiss even before we get to Goldberg's point about the self-referentiality issue involved in the second argument. On this formulation of the arguments, there seem to be three terms involved in the indeterminism argument, while there are only two involved in the skeptical argument (or there are 4 in the first and 3 in the second). Setting out the argument in this way seems to set the whole approach of reasoning by analogy on the wrong foot, and this is not insignificant, as we shall see later.

But it appears that it is indeed van Inwagen's argument. Now, Goldberg tells us that van Inwagen charges that the objection to the argument that moral responsibility justifies belief in freedom is weak. But that is

not what van Inwagen says—rather, it is the objection to the argument that moral responsibility justifies belief in *indeterminism* that van Inwagen says that he is indisposed to accept, in his present mood. So, it is an objection to *this* argument that he says finds a parallel in the skeptical argument. The problem of the formulation of the argument thus once again creates a disruption in analyzing van Inwagen's allegedly analogical reasoning. As I understand the rather confused parallel, the problem is that, in both of the analogous arguments, the kind of things that would provide support for our original belief (in the truth of our everyday beliefs, on the one hand, and in free will on the other) are not the kinds of things that provide good reasons for the things we want (reasons to believe that there is not Universal Deceiver on the one hand, and reasons to believe in indeterminism on the other). Just as justification for ordinary beliefs rests on a different plane (in a different language game, Wittgenstein would say) than does justification for believing that there is no Universal Deceiver, so does justification for free will rest on a different plane (different language game) than does justification for belief in indeterminism. So far, then, I would have to defend van Inwagen against Goldberg.

But let us now turn to Goldberg's analysis. On his reading of the arguments, there is a failure of analogy between the two cases that van Inwagen compares, for the reason that the skeptic's argument is self-refuting in a way that the indeterminist's argument is not. The skeptic, according to Goldberg, must claim to know at least one truth—that there is a Universal Deceiver—in order to reach his skeptical conclusion, a situation that would be most embarrassing for the skeptic. There is no analogous self-refutation in the indeterminist's argument. As van Inwagen formulates the argument, however, I don't see that there is any reason to conclude that the skeptic does in fact make a knowledge claim. All the skeptic needs to say (and all that he seems to say) is that we are not justified in believing that there is *not* a Universal Deceiver to meet his skeptical ends. He does not require a positive thesis on this issue at all. Now there might be a question, as Goldberg notes, of the whether even the process of reasoning could be cited as providing justification for a conclusion about deceivers at all—but if there is such a question, it is open to the skeptic to retort that even *that* response provides some reason for believing that there could be a deceiver, and thus that he is justified in his nervousness. He doesn't need to establish that there *is* a Universal Deceiver, that is to say, in order to get his skeptical conclusion out; his only concern is that there is no justification for believing that there *isn't* such a deceiver.

Except that there is: van Inwagen has argued in a previous chapter, as Goldberg points out, for the impossibility (or at least the serious undesir-

ability) of our holding inconsistent views, and holds as assumptions in the above arguments that the truth of our ordinary beliefs is inconsistent with the existence of a Universal Deceiver, and that moral responsibility is inconsistent with determinism. For van Inwagen, as Goldberg tells us, the very act of deliberating undermines the alleged determinist's belief in his determinism, since to do otherwise would be "to condemn [himself] to a life of perpetual logical inconsistency" (Van Inwagen, 1983, p. 160). Now, Goldberg is not worried about this purported hell, because he points out that people do without damage sometimes hold inconsistent beliefs, as is evidenced by some of the well-known examples adduced in arguments concerning epistemic closure. Goldberg goes even further, maintaining that *not* holding inconsistent beliefs in certain cases is irrational. This is because of the fact that we all encounter two epistemic imperatives, as William James long ago told us: to seek truth, and to avoid error. If we want to maximize the number of truths we accept, as those of the more reckless but ambitious temperament are wont to do, then we ought to just go ahead and accept desirable beliefs, even if they do happen to be inconsistent with other of our beliefs. If, on the other hand, we are nervous about accepting beliefs that might not be true, then we should pursue the other path. Given the demonstrated in-principle inevitable uncertainty that the sciences seem to have established, it would seem that Goldberg is right that we should opt for the path of more openness. I would only add to Goldberg's acknowledgement of the importance of the difference in the informational content contained in various candidate beliefs (and the difference in value that then piggybacks on that informational content), that one's *purposes* also do and should direct the truths that one accepts. Although the content of a belief that I choose to accept might actually be less informative than another one with which it is inconsistent, objectively speaking, since we never do in fact speak objectively, at least not in any very strong sense, my purposes and needs may be as big a factor in determining the beliefs I accept as either the truth value of others of my beliefs, or the information content of competing ones.

### **Works Cited**

- Goldberg, Zachary J. (2010) Van Inwagen's Two Failed Arguments for the Belief in Freedom. *Southwest Philosophy Review* 26(1): 43-50.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. (1983) *An Essay on Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.