

Faith and justice – an experimental approach in philosophy of religion

In our research we aim to demonstrate that according to the concept of justice, employed both by atheists and believers when assessing typical cases, God cannot be held to be just. Specifically, we take to task the line of argument defending God proposed by Plantinga in his book *God, freedom, and Evil* as we consider it to be in direct conflict with the common notion of fairness.

We also aim to show that the believers who reason in accordance with Plantinga's scheme often realize that it implies a different concept of justice. We attempt to explain how they cope with this problematic situation and how they tend to use one instead of two separate notions.

One of the arguments against theism asserts that God, defined as an omnipotent and morally perfect person who created the world, cannot be reconciled with the presence of evil. Morally perfect and therefore wholly good person will eliminate all the evil that can be eliminated [Mackie, 1955]; evil exists, however, thus there can be no person both wholly good and omnipotent. Against this theists argue that it is possible that evil is necessary, and God could not create a world without evil, or that such a world would be worse than the present one. Because omnipotence is considered as an ability to do anything which is not logically impossible, the necessity of evil would justify its existence. It is very important that although theists point this possibility out, they cannot give any particular reason for all the presence of evil [Plantinga, 1977].

We employed this argument schema for the concept of justice, while originally it is used with the concept of goodness, and show how the notion of justice used for judging God differs from the one used for judging human agents. Therefore, if this inquiry is correct, we showed that God could not be considered righteous in the common meaning of this term.

To test people's intuitions about justice we have constructed a questionnaire in two forms: MG and GM. The MG questionnaire contains two descriptions and two questions related to each of those descriptions.

Description 1. Suppose that Ms. Elizabeth has four children. She has established some rules, for example: brush your teeth after eating, neither swear nor provoke a fight, do your homework. Nevertheless, Ms. Elizabeth rewards and punishes her children utterly randomly: a child who violated a proscription or did not fill a warrant might be punished as well as rewarded. A child who obeys all the rules might be rewarded but also punished. Often Ms. Elizabeth does not pursue any action.

According to modern (and former) theories of psychology and pedagogy, the behavior of Ms. Elizabeth cannot be accounted for by any meaningful pedagogical aim. (Although it does not mean that Ms. Elizabeth does not raise her children in accordance with some hidden plan).

Question 1: is (according to your moral judgment or the definition of justice you consider right) Ms. Elizabeth just with reference to her children?

- (a) Yes (b) No (c) I cannot determine

Description 2. Suppose that God exists, is capable of influencing the world, and passed a law to the people (for example in the form of myths or holy scriptures), which they are ordered to obey. But there is no correlation between obeying this law and personal well-being. The life of people who respect the law may be fortunate and worthy as well as miserable and full of disappointments. The life of individuals who do not live up to the rules varies from happy to very unhappy. One can be unhappy for many reasons – because of actions of others, because of one’s own wrong choices but there are also many causes for which no one is responsible – epidemics, famines, quakes, floods. The same situation occurs in case of happiness. Some can achieve happiness by their own effort but the fact that someone is born in a rich peaceful country rather than in a poor one is completely arbitrary.

According to the current state of knowledge this situation cannot be justified (although it does not mean that God does not have a hidden plan which is realized in this way).

Question 2: is (according to your moral judgment or the definition of justice you perceive right) God from *description 2* just with reference to mankind?

- (a) Yes (b) No (c) I cannot determine

The only difference between questionnaires MG and GM is the order of the descriptions (which is revealed by the abbreviations: MG stands for Mother/God and GM denotes God/Mother). 236 questionnaires have been gathered. Among them there are 115 of MG-type and 121 of GM-type.

The results show that the interviewees who have read the description of Elizabeth’s behavior tend to judge God as more unjust than those who have not. The interviewees who have read the God case tend to judge Elizabeth as more just than those to whom her case was presented as the first one. This allows us to state that those two descriptions are usually found similar. Under this assumption, we introduce two models of reasoning which can explain the results quite well.

In ordinary cases, like the mother's case, the following reasoning occurs. When an agent pursues some morally significant actions, those who judge him or her seek for a consistent pattern or explanation of the behavior observed. Let us, for the sake of the argument, assume, as in the cases discussed here, that the judges are to determine whether the agent is just. If only one sufficiently matched pattern is found, the agent is judged according to it. It does not matter that it is possible that some other better pattern exists – the judgment remains until such a better pattern is found. The incomplete knowledge of agent’s motives does not matter either since they are deducted from agent’s actions.

We called this model *bottom-to-top* – firstly one judges the actions and then, according to these judgments, one judges the agent. Elizabeth was judged this way because in the light of her behavior she was usually found unjust although her motives were hidden.

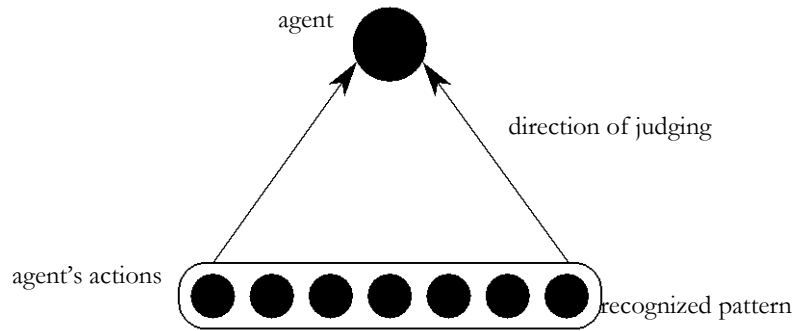


Figure 1. The bottom-to-top model

Judging God, when defending, proceeds in an opposite direction. Firstly, God is presumed just. Then, God's actions (which in *description 2* seem rather unjust) are assumed to fit some pattern according to which they would turn out to be just. This pattern does not have to be known. It is only necessary that such a pattern is possible. The only way to refute this reasoning in the eyes of those who use it is to prove that such a pattern is impossible, that its existence is logically incoherent. No highly probable but not unquestionable patterns matter as a counter-argument. Thus, in case of the incomplete knowledge of agent's motives refutation is not possible. We called this model *top-to-bottom* – first the agent, then the actions.

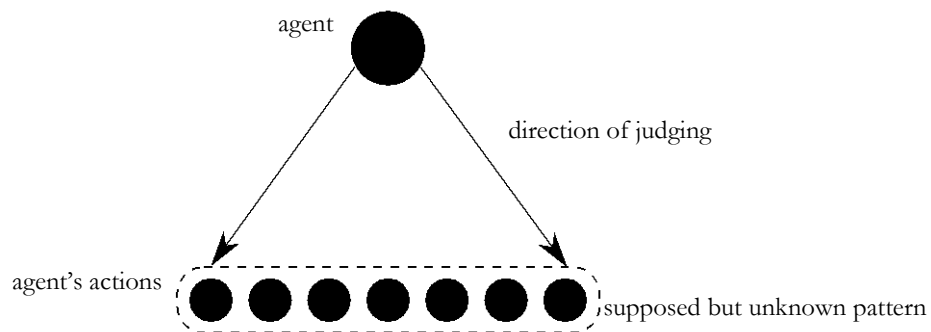


Figure 2. The top-to-bottom model

At this point one can assert that God cannot be just if the term *just* is used in its common everyday meaning – as a bottom-to-top concept. But the effect of changing the order of the questions proves something more. Those whose answers depend on the questions order realize that they use two concepts of justice instead of one. This bothers them. If they did not mind this, such an effect would not occur. Therefore, instead of reasoning in two separate ways – bottom-to-top for Elizabeth and top-to-bottom for God – they employ the mechanism from the first question to answer the second one. They do not want to relinquish the cohesion of their concept of justice for the sake of following their initial intuitions. This is how the difference in GM- and MG-distribution of answers occurs.

It would be a very interesting result if it turned out that those believers who defend God reason generally rather in the top-to-bottom way whereas others use the bottom-to-top mechanism in their judgments. Then there would be two distinct groups with different concepts of justice and therefore also different languages and different ways of judging. Within the groups their members would be able to conduct moral reasoning while one group would find the proofs of the other unpersuasive and incoherent.

The consistency of the distribution of answers regarding Elizabeth, observed in the MG-sample, suggests quite a dissimilar situation. We suppose that all regular judgments fall under the bottom-to-top model. The reverse mechanism is employed only when one is intent on defending a presumed position. Thus the motivation for using this mechanism seems to be emotional rather than rational.

References

1. Knobe J., Nichols S., *An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto*, [in:] Knobe J., Nichols S., *Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford 2008.
2. Mackie J. L., *Evil and Omnipotence*, (1955) *Mind, New Series*, 254.
3. Plantinga A., *God, freedom, and Evil*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977.