

Notes on M. Vargas: *Evil and the Ontology of the Undead*

What sorts of things can be known about the undead?

Distinguish conceptual truths from non-conceptual truths

These are truths that are *grounded* in concepts
Sometimes called “logical truths” or “trivial truths”

Example: All bachelors are men.

Why is this a conceptual/logical/trivial truth?

NOTE: We don’t need to do any empirical research or gather any data to figure this out.

What might be some other examples? (group discussion)

What is a conceptual truth about the undead?

“It is a requirement that there be some death involved prior to undeath”

We don’t need to find any undead to verify this

But conceptual truths are *trivial*—they’re not very interesting.

To know more about the undead, we’d need to know more about the “way the world is put together”—and by doing this, we may come to change the way we think about them.

A puzzle to think about: Vargas says that “there can be conceptual truths about things that do not exist.” But he also says that there may be non-conceptual truths about the undead (which, presumably, don’t exist). This is an odd thing to say.

Consider the following: Dracula does not exist.

Aren’t we referring to *something* when we talk about Dracula? If so, then must he not exist *in some sense*?

Discuss for a while: Introduce Russell’s theory of definite descriptions

Consider the following: Dracula prefers London to Paris.

Back to Vargas—

What are some non-conceptual truths that we might discover about the undead?

A. Are there *different kinds* of undead?

There seem to be *different kinds* of undead. That is, there are different ways of being undead (whether there really are different kinds is not a conceptual matter!)

- 1) Undead of supernatural origin
 - a. Brought about by an intentional work of magic, for example
 - i. Example?
- 2) Artificially created undead
 - a. Brought about intentionally, but not magically
 - i. Example?
- 3) Natural undead
 - a. Not a product of intention
 - i. Example?
 - ii. Vargas includes viruses and viroids
 1. If these qualify, then it's likely that they're the largest number of undead

B. Are the undead *evil*?

The undead kill us, eat brains, etc. Does this mean that we should expect that the undead will mostly be evil?

Vargas answers 'no', by appeal to other things we know about the world

First, he limits his scope of inquiry to what he calls *malevolent evil*. This is the possession and action on non-instrumental motives "to harm others, [and] to damage the welfare or well-being of others"

Distinguish: Instrumental and non-instrumental desires
 Non instrumental motives are motives that cannot be explained by appeal to other beliefs or desires that I have

Groups: One example of each

Malevolent evil: Give clip from *Halloween*

So: Should we expect that the undead will be evil in this sense?

Prob 1: They will lack the requisite motives
 -Many of the undead (if not *most*, because of the number of viruses/viroids) lack the motives required for this because they lack motives at all (zombies are unsophisticated, viruses are not conscious, etc.)
 -Even if they *have* motives (think vampires, smart zombies), they're likely to be purely instrumental
 "If there were a way to get fresh brains without harming the welfare of anyone, I suspect zombies would be perfectly satisfied." (49)

Prob 2: Even if it's possible that some undead have these motives, we have no reason to think that the motives will occur with greater frequency than they do among the living—much less should we assume that they'll be any more likely to *act* on them

We ascribe evil for two reasons, but neither is very good

1. The undead *do* harm us
 - a. But this doesn't make them evil
2. We need to make sense of strange phenomena
 - a. But why assume that evil is the explanation?

“It's time for us to abandon our prejudices about the undead. It may not be evil to portray them as we do, but it is wrong.”

What does this mean?