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Evil, the human cognitive condition, and natural theology

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Abstract. Recent responses to evidential formulations of the argument from evil have emphasized the possible limitations on human cognitive access to the goods and evils that might be connected with various wordly states of affairs. This emphasis, I argue, is a twin-edged sword, as it imperils a popular form of natural theology. I conclude by arguing that the popularity enjoyed by Reformed Epistemology does not detract from the significance of this result, since Reformed Epistemology is not inimical to natural theology, and Reformists themselves concede the usefulness of theistic proofs.

1

Recent responses to evidential versions of the argument from evil have focussed our attention on the limitations of our cognitive access to the goods or evils that might be connected with various worldly states of affairs. This highlighting of our limitations is used in order to undermine the inference at the heart of William Rowe's early formulation of the anti-theistic argument.[1] The inference is as follows, where 'E' refers to the slow and painful death of a fawn from burns incurred in a lightning-ignited forest fire:

(1) No good we know of justifies God in permitting E.
(2) So [probably] no good at all justifies God in permitting E.

If there is an evil for which there is no morally sufficient reason (MSR) for God's allowing it, then God does not exist. Hence, if Rowe's inference is a good one, E provides probabilistic evidence of God's non-existence. The key idea, then, is that our failure to find any MSR for E is sufficient justification for our assuming that there is no MSR for this evil.

What some theists have claimed is that the move from (1) to (2) is justified only if we have reason to believe that the goods we know of are fairly representative of the total range of intrinsic goods there are. If the goods we know of are not so representative, and if we are unable reliably to estimate the range of goods that might be beyond our powers of discovery[2], then we

[1] 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **16** (1979), pp. 335–41.

[2] Proponents of this view often use the phrase 'beyond our ken' to describe those MSRs that we are unable to discover with our own powers. In this context, the phrase is infelicitous: 'beyond one's ken', in its ordinary usage, means beyond one's powers of comprehension. But not everything that is beyond one's powers of discovery also is beyond one's comprehension; I might not be able to discover on my own

should suspend judgment as to whether there is an MSR for E, and (thus) we should suspend judgment regarding the evidential impact on theism of evils like E.

As it happens, these theists maintain, we are indeed unable to estimate the degree to which the goods we know of exhaust the total range of goods there are. William Alston states the point as follows:

> Given what we know of our limitations – the variety of questions we don't know how to answer, the possibilities we can't exclude of realms of being to which we have no access, our ignorance even of many of the details of human history, and so on – how can we suppose that we are in a position to estimate the extent to which the possibilities we can envisage for divine reasons for permitting evils even come close to exhausting the possibilities open to an omniscient being? It is surely the better part of wisdom to acknowledge that we are groping in the dark in assessing the extent to which we can survey the whole field.[3]

Stephen Wykstra argues for basically the same conclusion by invoking a principle he calls CORNEA (Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access). Applied specifically to the case of Rowe's fawn, CORNEA states:

> On the basis of his seeing no God-justifying good served by the fawn's suffering, Rowe is entitled to claim 'It appears that there is no such good' only if it is reasonable for Rowe to believe that, given his cognitive faculties and the use he has made of them, if the fawn's suffering served such a good, he would likely see (have epistemic access to) it.[4]

But this condition is not fulfilled, says Wykstra, given the limitations on our knowledge of the connections between certain goods, and the worldly states of affairs that, for all we can determine, might be their necessary preconditions. We are forced, then, to suspend judgement regarding the evidential import of evils like E. Borrowing a label from Richard Gale, I shall call the defensive strategy of putting in question our cognitive access to potential MSRs for various evils Defensive Scepticism (DS).

In what follows I present defensive sceptics with a dilemma: either there is still room for an atheist to use an inverse-probability argument from evil that significantly reduces theism's epistemic probability, or the theist can avoid this sort of argument, but at the cost of relinquishing inverse-probability arguments *for* God's existence. I shall indicate in the concluding sections why the second horn of the dilemma is not so innocuous as it might seem in the light of the anti-evidentialist sentiments shared by many defens-

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the answer to a physics problem, but that in no way entails (or even makes probable, so far as I can see) that I'll be unable to comprehend the answer if the instructor explains it to me. The point is germane, since if defensive sceptics were to claim that the MSR for E might be one that we would be unable to comprehend even were God to reveal it to us, then the sense in which we can refer to the reason for God's allowing E as a genuinely moral one becomes unclear.

[3] 'Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil', in Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 318.

[4] 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.* p. 129.

ive sceptics, and also why DS might undermine other forms of natural theology in addition to the type based on inverse-probability.

II

In a later article, Rowe has reformulated his evidential argument in Bayesian terms.[5] The argument I shall give here differs from Rowe's only in the formulation of the key observation statement (P), which Rowe gives as 'No good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 [the fawn's suffering, a case of natural evil] and E2 [the rape and murder of a young girl, a case of moral evil].' My formulation of P will be more general, in order more directly to confront certain of Wykstra's remarks. Let P be formulated as follows:

> P: Many of the world's evils are such that no good we know of[6] justifies God in permitting them (Rowe's E1 and E2 are examples of such inscrutable evils).

What we want to know is how P is evidentially related to another proposition, G, that God (an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent creator of the world) exists. According to Bayes's theorem, we determine P's evidential bearing on G by first coming up with values for the following:

(1) Pr(P/G&k) (i.e. the conditional probability of P, given G and given also k, our background knowledge about the world, including our knowledge of what sorts of goods and evils actually occur);
(2) Pr(G/k) (i.e. the prior probability of theism);
(3) Pr(P/k) (i.e. the prior probability of P).

The value for Pr(G/P&k) – the probability that God exists given P&k – is determined by multiplying (1) and (2), and dividing this result by (3). In general, a hypothesis has its probability raised by evidence in direct proportion (a) to the degree to which the hypothesis probabilifies the evidence and (b) to the prior probability of the hypothesis, and in inverse proportion to the degree to which the evidence is likely to obtain independently of whether the hypothesis is true.

Suppose we make the following assignments of probability:

(1) $Pr(P/G\&k) = 0{\cdot}5$ (I shall discuss this assignment in detail below);
(2) $Pr(G/k) = 0{\cdot}5$ (Rowe suggests this assignment in order to avoid begging the question against either the theist or the atheist prior to a consideration of the impact of inscrutable evil on G);

What about (3) Pr(P/k)? This value is equal to $[Pr(P/G\&k) \times Pr(G/k)] + [Pr(P/-G\&k) \times Pr(-G/k)]$. Given the values stipulated in (1) and (2),

[5] 'The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look', in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.* Chap. 14.

[6] Along with Rowe, I interpret 'know of' here to mean not just goods we know to have obtained, but goods we can imagine obtaining.

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above, we can determine the values for all of the elements here but Pr(P/−G&k). Rowe, using his version of P, claims that −G entails P, and so Pr(P/−G&k) = 1, and if his argument for this is sound then the same goes for my version of P. Rowe's argument is based on the fact that the negation of his version of P involves the statement that God exists[7], and so −G must entail P. If this is right, then the value for Pr(P/k) is 0.75. Applying Bayes's theorem, Pr(G/P&k) then comes out to 1/3, though whether this is a figure low enough to justify claiming that God does not exist is another matter that I shall leave to the side.[8]

All of these assignments of probability are open to dispute. Alston, for example, finds difficulties in Rowe's argument that (−G.k) entails P.[9] What I want to concentrate on, however, is Pr(P/G&k). I put the value at 0·5, and Rowe assigns the same value to his version of P, though at places he intimates a belief that the value is actually lower since we should expect God to reveal the MSRs for evils like E1 and E2 in order to help us cope with them. But to the extent that P's probability given G&k is actually greater than 0·5, if it is, P's negative evidential impact on hypothesis G is less. So if a theist could make it plausible that our failure to find MSRs for many evils like E1 and E2 is quite likely given G&k, then the degree of disconfirmation of G by P will thereby be shown to be small; if it could be shown that Pr(P/G&k) = 1, then G would emerge completely unscathed by Rowe's argument.

The point is important for Wykstra, and for anyone else who holds what appears to be Wykstra's view about the actual value of Pr(P/G&k). To make the point clear, let us distinguish between a strong and a weak view regarding the likelihood of our discovering God's reasons for allowing all of the world's evils:

Weak: So far as we can tell, P is as likely as not given G&k.
Strong: So far as we can tell, P is more likely than not given G&k.

Wykstra understands that, strictly speaking, only the Weak view needs to be established in order to undermine Rowe's inductive inference in his earlier argument from 'No good we know of justifies God in permitting E' to '[Probably] no good at all justifies God in permitting E.'[10] In order justifiably to make this move, Rowe must assume that if E has an MSR, then

[7] Rowe takes the negation of his P to read: 'God exists & there is a good we know of & that good justifies him in permitting E1 and E2.' The negation of my P then is: 'God exists & there is a good we know of & that good justifies him in permitting all but a very few of the world's evils.' But see below where I mention Alston's criticism of this tactic of Rowe's in coming up with a value for Pr(P/−G&k).

[8] See Wykstra's comments on this matter in 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', pp. 130–2.

[9] 'Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil', in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.* pp. 313–14.

[10] Actually, Wykstra concedes that he failed to make it clear enough in his 1984 article ('The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **16** (1984), pp. 73–93) that only the weak view needs to be established. He clarifies the point in his response to criticisms by Rowe. See 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', pp. 136–8.

probably it would be discoverable by us. If the Weak view is correct, then there is good reason to believe that E's MSR would not be discoverable by us, since many observed evils would have MSRs we can't discover.

But the justification Wykstra adduces for accepting (at least) the Weak view would appear to justify the Strong view, instead, in which case we have grounds for rejecting both Rowe's earlier argument, and my slightly altered version of his later argument. Wykstra likens the odds of our finding the MSR for all or even most of the world's evils to those of a one-month-old infant's discovering its intelligent human parents' reasons for subjecting it to some unpleasant experiences. (Wykstra invites readers to adjust the child's age to fall in line with their own estimations of the cognitive gap separating us from omniscience, but he himself appears to regard the one-month figure as appropriate.) Surely, if this is Wykstra's estimation of our odds of discovering God's reasons, then he holds the Strong view. A similarly low estimation of the odds of our finding the MSRs for most of the world's evils is expressed by F. J. Fitzpatrick, who claims that 'The theist's own conception of the nature of God, and of the severely limited extent of human knowledge of this divine nature, should lead him to conclude that [the failure to find an MSR for evils like E1 and E2 is] not to be despaired at, but [is] actually to be *expected*.'[11]

Now there are two ways in which one might argue that humans are *un*likely to discover God's reasons for permitting evil. One might:

(1) claim that it is antecedently improbable that God would give us the requisite intellectual powers for the task;
(2) claim that we have independent reason to believe that the range of MSRs to which we are privy is only a small portion of the total range of MSRs (this amounts to the claim that we have reason to believe that, whatever the antecedent probability, God *did* not give us strong cognitive powers in the relevant respect).

It is a fact not given much attention by defensive sceptics who talk about human cognitive limitations that, whatever these limitations are, they are determined in large part by our creator. Why suppose that God is responsible for our cognitive limitations? Because it was God who is supposed to have endowed us with our human nature – a nature that doubtless places limits on the knowledge we can achieve without the benefit of divine revelation. This is not to say that God is responsible for all instances of human ignorance. My ignorance of last night's ball game score, or of how to do integral calculus, is my own fault, since I have chosen not to exercise my ability to learn these things. But surely there are some limitations on my and every other human's knowledge that obtain simply by virtue of the fact that we are finite, fallible

[11] 'The Onus of Proof in Arguments about the Problem of Evil', *Religious Studies*, **17** (1981), p. 38 (emphasis added). Fitzpatrick professes his indebtedness in formulating this view to M. B. Ahern; see the latter's *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Schoken Books, 1971).

creatures. Presumably, it is these broad cognitive limitations to which Alston and Wykstra appeal in order to show that the condition expressed in Wykstra's CORNEA principle is not satisfied in the present case. But since God is responsible for our humanity, is it not God who has determined that the MSR(s) for many evils should be undiscoverable (or, at least, undiscovered) by humans? Thus, if it is true that, for some reason or other, God is unlikely to endow His creatures with broad powers in this context, then it is probable that humans will fail to find the MSR(s) for many evils.[12]

Unfortunately, (1) clearly is not available to theists who employ the defensive strategy under consideration, since the same modesty about our cognitive abilities that is being recommended by Wykstra and the others would seem to enjoin them to refrain from guessing just how much knowledge God would choose to give to humans. God might, for all we know, have morally sufficient reasons for giving us very broad powers, in which case Pr(P/G&k) is low, or He might have morally sufficient reasons for giving us very limited powers, in which case Pr(P/G&k) is high. Since the whole point of DS is the idea that we really just don't know what morally sufficient reasons God has for doing all the things he does, we cannot say what sorts of powers He is antecedently likely to give to us.

But perhaps defensive sceptics can argue that the odds of our failing to find the MSR for many evils are high on grounds other than the antecedent probability of God's giving us the right powers – i.e. the odds are low given the proposition that God exists (G), combined with one or more propositions known independently of G. Two possibilities suggest themselves, neither of which seems tenable. First, the theist might point out that if God's cognitive powers are infinite, while ours are only finite, then an infinite distance separates us (cognitively) from God, and our odds of discerning His reasons are virtually nil.

What is at issue, however, is the range of potential MSRs to which we are privy, compared with the range to which God is privy, and it is not at all clear that the range of (candidate) MSRs for allowing the various evils in this world is literally infinite. At the very least, it is unclear what would justify a defensive sceptic in *assuming* that the range is infinite. Perhaps we also have no reason to assume the contrary, but then the defensive sceptic still is not entitled to assign low probability to our discerning God's reasons.

[12] The ascription of responsibility for our limitations to God will be resisted by theists inclined to attribute our cognitive incapacities to our sinfulness. On this view, the Fall of mankind effected (among other things) a corruption of our ability to trace connections between various goods and the worldly states of affairs they necessitate. In short, our wickedness makes us less privy to God's reasons.

But even assuming that some account could be given for just exactly how a sinful character interferes with one's cognitive powers, why less sinful people don't seem to be any more privy to God's reasons for allowing evil than very sinful people, and what the mechanism of inheritance of an evil will could be, still there remains the question of what it is that determines just how *much* sinfulness interferes with one's cognitive powers. It seems that God either would have to institute some law-like regularity governing the process, or directly intervene in individual cases to determine the amount of impairment. In either case, it still is God who determines the extent of our limitations.

Do we have any other independent reason to think that we are unlikely to find most of the MSR(s), even if such there are? Well, we certainly have reason to believe that we are error-prone. The whole history of science is littered with false theories once taken for true by the best minds of the times. Perhaps, as defensive sceptics sometimes muse, our discovery of moral truths can be likened to our investigations of nature. Induction from our past failures in so many intellectual endeavors perhaps gives us strong reason to believe that in the project of finding MSRs for the world's evils, we are still at an immature phase of development, and are consequently unlikely to succeed.

The problem with this line of argument is that it forms part of the core of DS to claim that when it comes to estimating just how many candidate MSRs we don't know about, we have no way to know how many there are. Just how much still falls outside our view is something we can know only by stepping outside of our limited perspective and surveying the whole field, which obviously is impossible. There is a conceptual difficulty inherent in judging at a given time just how much knowledge of a subject one lacks, unless one has some means of surveying the whole field and comparing it with what one has so far mastered. In some contexts, we can do this: I can scan the titles of the articles in last year's volume of *Physical Review*, and, from my inability to recognize most of the topics, I can infer that there is a considerable amount about contemporary physics I'm unfamiliar with.

But how would this work in the present context, in regard to candidate MSRs for inscrutable evils like E1 and E2? Here, we have no means of stepping outside our limited perspectives and surveying the whole field. For all that we can tell, the range of MSRs we can survey might be only a small portion of the total range (i.e. God might have given us very limited powers in this regard), or the portion we see might be very large, though the MSRs we seek still fall outside it. Since we have no way to know either way, we are forced to remain agnostic here.

This is precisely what many defensive sceptics want to argue, but their examples belie these arguments by strongly implying that our failing to find MSRs in many cases is very much to be expected. Recall Wykstra's infant/parent analogy, which Alston refers to as 'apt'; Alston himself uses the example of a scientific neophyte's grasping a seasoned physicist's reasons for accepting a physical theory, or a beginner's odds of understanding why a world-class chess player chose to make a certain move.[13] All of these analogies suggest a very low estimation of the likelihood of our discovering God's reasons in most cases, and thus a value higher than 0·5 for Pr(P/G&k).

Wykstra is undoubtedly correct when he claims that, the greater is the cognitive distance between us and God, the greater is the likelihood that there are reasons God has for permitting evil of which we have no inkling.

[13] See Alston's 'Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil', pp. 317–18.

And, to be sure, there are certain areas in which we can be fairly certain that God's knowledge vastly outstrips ours. No doubt God's knowledge of the location of every atom of copper in the universe is much superior to mine and every other human's. Is this sort of information relevant with respect to God's MSR for allowing E1? I'm inclined to doubt it, though if I am to be modest about my grasp of God's reasons then I should refrain from claiming to know that it is not relevant. Intuitively, though, it seems more likely that relevant information will pertain to things like possible deep restrictions on the creation of worlds, or about other realms of being, as Alston suggests. In these areas, is the knowledge we have only a small portion of the knowledge God has (i.e. has God endowed us with significant access to such information, or limited access)? I find it hard to tell, since in these cases I can find no analogue to my perusal of *Physical Review* in my earlier example. And, of course, that there *might* be other realms of being, or that there *might* be deep and unsuspected restrictions on the creations of worlds, does not compel us to assign a high value to Pr(P/G&k); it compels us to admit that we cannot assign a value higher or lower than 0·5.

In sum, without being able to claim (reliably) that God is unlikely for some reason or other to give us cognitive powers extremely limited in comparison with His own, we are unable confidently to assign low probability to our discovering most of God's MSRs unless we have independent reason to severely devalue our knowledge (in the relevant respects, whatever they are) in relation to God's, in the way that I have reason to severely devalue my knowledge of contemporary physics in relation to that had by a working physicist. But the means of my arriving at this conclusion in the physics case seem to lack any analogue in the case of MSRs for the world's evils.

Wykstra's mention of the idea that if God exists then this is likely to be a morally 'deep' universe – meaning that many goods are likely to be difficult to discover from our limited perspective – does not solve the problem, since by labelling the universe 'deep' in this sense it is already being assumed that our perspective is in fact severely limited in the relevant respect. That God did severely limit our perspective in this way by endowing us with cognitive powers that permit only very limited access to candidate MSRs is what needs to be argued. Once we have established that God did give us limited powers in the relevant respect, we then are entitled to call this a deep universe in Wykstra's sense.

Rowe justifies his assignment of 0·5 to Pr(P/G&k) simply by arguing that we've so far been given no compelling reason to make any higher assignment (Rowe claims to find relevant disanalogies that vitiate Wykstra's infant/child analogy). But this appears to make room for the possibility that the defensive sceptic might be able to come up with a better analogy to justify assigning a value greater than 0·5 to Pr(P/G&k). My point is that this cannot be done.

In other words, the problem is not that Wykstra's particular analogy is not a good one, as Rowe argues, but that defensive sceptics cannot appeal to any analogies in this context, since any such analogy will involve some commitment about the extent of the powers of moral penetration God has given us, and since, for the reasons given above, the extent of these powers seems unknowable by the defensive sceptic's own lights.

So it appears that theists must confine themselves to the Weak view – so far as we can tell, P is as likely as not, given G&k (i.e. (Pr(P/G&k) = 0·5). And so the (partial) disconfirmation of theism by Rowe's revised argument cannot be avoided by assigning a high value to Pr(P/G&k).

III

Despite this result, it turns out that whether or not an atheist truly can capitalize on the defensive sceptic's commitment to the Weak view by invoking Rowe's argument depends on how certain questions regarding the interpretation of epistemic probability are resolved. What is crucial here is that in order for Rowe's argument to work, the following inference must be sound:

(1) So far as we can determine, given G&k it is no more likely than not that P.
(2) So the conditional epistemic probability Pr(P/G&k) is 0·5.

Peter van Inwagen's[14] view of epistemic probability, which he offers in the context of discussing the evidential argument from evil (specifically, a version offered by Paul Draper), does not countenance the move from (1) to (2) in certain cases. On van Inwagen's view, we are entitled to make an assignment of epistemic probability only in cases where we have information relevant to the objective probability of the proposition in question. Epistemic probability judgements, says van Inwagen, are epistemic judgements about objective probabilities – attempts to use the information we have to estimate the number of possible worlds in which a certain proposition is true. Where we have no information relevant to the objective probability (as is true in the present case, van Inwagen argues), we must refrain from making any assignment of epistemic probability at all.

Van Inwagen would attack the inference above by claiming that premise (1) hides an ambiguity. In general, there are two ways in which it can be the case that a certain proposition r is no more likely than not, given what we know. In one case, we have information that seems logically relevant to r's objective probability, and the information makes r and its denial equally likely. For example, if r states 'Joe will choose to drink red wine with dinner', and my background knowledge includes the information that in the years

[14] 'Reflections on the Chapters by Draper, Russell, and Gale,' in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.* ch. 11.

I've known him Joe has chosen red wine half the time, then there is an obvious connection between k and r, and it is such that, given k, r is as likely as not.

But there are other cases in which we simply have no information at all that is relevant to r. Van Inwagen would maintain that we are in this situation with respect to Pr(P/G&k): Nothing we know about G, and nothing in our background knowledge, is logically relevant to determining P's probability. In cases such as this, on van Inwagen's view, *no* conditional epistemic probability assignment can justifiably be made, even though, strictly speaking, it is true that so far as we can tell P is as likely as not, given G and k; what *makes* it true in this case vitiates the move to the conclusion that Pr(P/G&k) = 0·5.

I incline toward sympathy with van Inwagen on this point. It would seem odd to assign 0·5 epistemic probability to Pr(quantum theory is correct/Bill Clinton is president), just because the background knowledge in this case gives us no more (discernible) reason to expect that quantum theory is correct than to expect that it is not correct. For argument's sake I shall accept this restriction on epistemic probability assignments, while noting that issues pertaining to the interpretation of epistemic probability judgements are still being debated by epistemologists and philosophers of science.

IV

It seems, however, that if we accept this understanding of epistemic probability, and accept also the modest estimation of our cognitive abilities explicit in DS, then we must jettison inverse-probability arguments *for* God's existence along with Rowe's anti-theistic argument. Richard Swinburne popularized this form of natural theology in his *The Existence of God*.[15] The idea is that certain facts, such as (say) the existence of certain sorts of regularity or cosmic 'fine-tuning' in nature, appear to be more likely to obtain if God exists than if He does not. More formally, where 'e' represents one of these state of affairs or some combination of them, Pr(e/G&k) > Pr(e/−G&k).[16] Thus, by inverse probability, Pr(G/e&k) > Pr(−G/e&k), so long as any difference in the prior probabilities of G and of −G does not counter-balance e's confirmation of G. Similar arguments (of varying strength) can be constructed using other evidence, such as religious experience, the phenomenon of widespread religious belief, successful petitionary prayer, and any other circumstance that seems more likely to obtain if God exists than if He does not.

[15] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). See also George Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977).

[16] Swinburne often uses " ≫ " here, meaning the fact in question is *much* more likely to obtain if God exists than if He does not.

Unfortunately, the defensive sceptic who rejects Rowe's inverse-probability argument from evil because he holds a view about epistemic probability along the lines of van Inwagen's is barred from using arguments of this sort.[17] For any of the things the theist cares to use in the argument (e.g. widespread religious experience apparently of God), we are not in any position to know just how likely it is that God would actualize such a state of affairs – no epistemic probability can be assigned to Pr(e/G.k). After all, for all we can determine, any such state of affairs might bring about an evil that could not be offset by any greater good God could actualize. God's causing certain people to have experiences in which it seems to them that God is present, for example, might have disastrous moral consequences that lie beyond our powers of discovery. Implausible as that might at first seem, remember that according to the defensive sceptic, it is a live possibility – the exact probability of which we are in no position to judge – that God's preventing the fawn's suffering might lead to a worse evil that lies beyond our powers of discovery.[18]

Thus the defensive sceptic is presented with a dilemma: either admit that an atheist can assign 0·5 probability to Pr(P/G&k) on the basis of our having no information logically connecting P and (G&k), in which case one required element in the Bayesian argument is secured for the atheologian. Or one can appeal to a view about epistemic probability that prohibits assignments of probability in cases such as this, in which case a whole class of very popular arguments to show that God does exist must be abandoned.

IV

Some might question the significance of this result, given the widespread popularity among philosophically-inclined theists (including defensive sceptics) nowadays of anti-evidentialism – the view according to which rational theistic belief need not be supported by (propositional) evidence. One version of this view, which I shall call the Reformed view, has it that theistic beliefs can enjoy 'properly basic' status. Very roughly, the core idea is that just as beliefs like 'I see a tree' can be held rationally without being derived from any other beliefs in one's noetic structure, so 'God created this', a belief one might acquire while looking at a flower, can have the same status.

[17] It should be noted in regard to Swinburne that he does not appeal to goods beyond human powers of discovery in his response to evidential arguments from evil. Swinburne believes that we can identify certain goods we know to obtain that are logically dependent on the possibility of certain evils, and that are morally sufficient to outweigh those evils.

[18] A similar argument is mentioned in a footnote to Richard Gale's 'Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil' (Chapter 11 in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.*), but the argument is vitiated by Gale's use of a Cartesian evil demon hypothesis to make the case that there might be evils connected with seemingly good worldly states of affairs; this extravagance is un-needed in order to make the point, and it makes the argument vulnerable to certain objections arising out of the peculiarities of the version of DS it is aimed at. See van Inwagen's article cited in note 14.

Since this proposition entails the proposition that God exists, one can, on the Reformed view, have a rational derived belief in God's existence, based on a properly basic theistic belief like the one just mentioned.[19] Does this mean that being deprived of the use of a certain sort of natural theology need not be a cause for concern among defensive sceptics who also subscribe to the above form of anti-evidentialism?

Not by any means. Indeed the Reformed view's ablest and most outspoken defender, Alvin Plantinga, concedes the usefulness to theists of natural theology even if beliefs about God can be properly basic.[20] Perhaps the most obvious reason is because theistic beliefs are not basic for *everyone*, even if they are for some people. Not everyone comes to believe 'God created this' when looking at a flower, and some don't have experiences in which it seems to them they hear the voice of God. Natural theology might help make these people more open to the possibility (or probability) that God exists, and this might pave the way for their coming to have the sorts of experiences enjoyed by other believers.[21]

A less obvious reason for concern over the loss of a popular class of theistic proofs is the following. Even those who believe that religious experiences can ground justified beliefs about God typically concede that such experiences are capable of grounding only a limited theistic hypothesis, such as 'there is a powerful and wise being who loves me unconditionally'. The latter would be no insignificant bit of information to come by, to be sure, but it is a far cry from a ramified theistic proposition such as that 'there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, eternal and immaterial creator of space-time'. None of the reports of religious experiences I know of involve God's imparting this sort of information to the subject of the experience, but that God has these other attributes is something that theists do uphold, and believe they are rational in upholding. Natural theology might provide rational justification for holding beliefs about God that seem not to be supported by religious experience alone. Alston, in his recent book on religious (or what he calls 'mystical') experience, *Perceiving God*, suggests that natural theology might be a useful supplement to such experiences in supporting a detailed picture of the divine nature:

[19] Alvin Plantinga describes and defends a version of this view in numerous places. See, for example, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', *Nous*, **15** (1981), pp. 41–51. For some criticisms of the view, see Richard Grigg, 'The Crucial Disanalogies Between Properly Basic Belief and Belief in God', *Religious Studies*, **26** (1990), pp. 389–401.

[20] There is an ambiguity that needs to be removed in order not to misrepresent Plantinga: he believes that there are good uses to which a compelling natural theology could be put, if there were such a thing; but Plantinga does not believe that there are any good natural theological arguments for God's existence. For my purposes it is enough that Plantinga makes the first concession, since it shows that reformed epistemology is not inimical to natural theology. See Plantinga's 'The Reformed Objection Revisited', *Christian Scholar's Review*, **12** (1983), pp. 57–61.

[21] There is evidence that Pascal held a view similar to this on the religious usefulness of natural theology. See Terence D. Cuneo, 'Combating the Noetic Effects of Sin: Pascal's Strategy for Natural Theology', *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), pp. 645–662.

We have repeatedly pointed out the limits of what God experientially presents Himself to us *as*. With rare exceptions one doesn't suppose that God presents Himself as creator, three Persons in one Substance, the actor in salvation history, or even omnipotent, omniscient, and *a se*. To get all that we have to go to revelation and natural theology.[22]

A final consideration is one I can only allude to here. According to Reformists, properly-basic beliefs are not invulnerable to having their justified status undermined. Just exactly what the circumstances have to be like in order for this to happen is a thorny matter, and I will not try to spell out any set of conditions here, but clearly it will involve the believer being presented with evidence that the putative object of his experience (the experience that grounds the belief(s) in question) does not exist, or that his experience was for some other reason non-veridical.[23] If a theist with a (so far) properly-basic belief about God does find himself under the burden of appealing to evidence in order to counter any evidence against the verdicality of his experience, then natural theology can be of obvious service to him.[24] The more likely it is, on independent grounds, that God exists, the more likely it is that putative experiences of God are veridical. Just *how much* more likely this is depends of course on the amount and type of evidence there is for God's existence; what is important is that there is here a role for natural theology, even if, under the right circumstances, beliefs about God can be properly basic.

What all of this shows is that the Reformed view is not inimical to natural theology: the Reformist is one who claims that a person can have rational theistic beliefs not acquired on the basis of any propositional evidence, *not* that such evidence has no value for religion at all. Indeed, as shown above, evidence is very far from useless even if the Reformed thesis is true.[25]

All of which brings us back to inverse-probability arguments. It is worth noting just how much popularity these arguments enjoy, and not just among philosophical theologians. Though most ordinary believers who engage in the corresponding process of reasoning would not know it by its technical name, their reasoning often does seem to take this form: 'It just doesn't seem likely', they are wont to say, 'that there could be so much beauty, order, and harmony in the world – or that there could be any world at all – if there is no God. If there is a benevolent and powerful creator, however, it seems quite likely indeed that there should be such things. At least, these things are

[22] William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 293.

[23] See Robert Audi's discussion of the defeasibility issue in his 'Direct Justification, Evidential Dependence, and Theistic Belief', in Audi and Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 139–66.

[24] Cf. Richard Lints, 'Irresistibility, Epistemic Warrant, and Religious Belief', *Religious Studies*, **25** (1989), p. 432.

[25] There are stronger versions of 'anti-evidentialism' than the version considered here: Karl Barth's hostility toward any natural theology typifies a much more severe strand of anti-evidentialism that appears to be far less popular nowadays than is the variety I'm considering.

not nearly so surprising if God exists than they would be if He does not.' This is inverse-probability reasoning, and it is quite popular among philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Adopting the defensive sceptic's position, then, in combination with van Inwagen's understanding of epistemic probability judgements, in order to avoid Rowe's later version of the argument from evil, is not without considerable cost for theists who seek evidence to support fully ramified theistic beliefs, or who seek to employ natural theology for any of the other purposes mentioned above.

V

By way of conclusion it is worth considering what might be a broader implication of DS, still in the context of natural theology. Perhaps it is not just arguments based on inverse-probability that DS imperils. To see why, we need to consider two possible explanations (not mutually exclusive) for what sort of ignorance prevents our discovering E's MSR: ignorance of relevant moral facts, or ignorance of relevant non-moral facts.

When one makes an error in moral judgement, it might be because one has an impoverished understanding of goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness in themselves (for example, a rapist might not grasp the wrongness of harming others merely for his own gratification). On the other hand, the error might be owing to one's ignorance of certain non-moral facts that are nevertheless relevant to making a correct moral judgement about a particular situation (the rapist might grasp the wrongness of harming others for his own gratification, but fail to realize that his act does inflict harm). This is only a rough characterization of the distinction, but it will do to make the point I have in mind.

What, according to theists who defend DS, is the reason for our failure to grasp the MSR for evils like Rowe's E1 and E2? Do we fail to find it because our grasp of the very concepts of good and evil are (perhaps radically) defective, or because, though we can recognize good and evil when we see it, we simply don't have sufficient access to relevant non-moral facts (such as what metaphysical restrictions there might be on possible worlds), or both?

Most defenders of DS appear to emphasize our ignorance of relevant non-moral facts, perhaps out of (what seems to be a legitimate) fear that to attribute our failure to an impoverishment of our grasp of morality is to flirt with an unattractive moral scepticism.[26] There are those who argue that even emphasizing our ignorance of relevant non-moral facts invites an unpalatable scepticism with respect to everyday moral decision-making; if our non-

[26] This explanation appears to be implicit in Alston's explication of DS (see the quoted passage on p. 2); Cf. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil', in Howard-Snyder, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

moral intelligence is defective, then that has obvious implications for our ability to make reliable all-things-considered moral judgements.[27] I believe, though, that this is a consequence of DS easier for theists to live with than the consequences of supposing we might be moral idiots. Indeed, it is not clear to me that the problem of our degree of access to the full range of relevant non-moral facts in everyday cases is markedly worse for defenders of DS than it is even for those who do not hold this view.

But what is of chief interest here for my purposes is the following. If it is made an explicit component of DS that our understanding of facts about this universe and other possible universes may be severely limited, then other forms of natural theology – even those not based on any assumptions about what God is antecedently likely to create – might have to be regarded with a similar kind of scepticism. Van Inwagen provides a nice illustration of the point in his rejection of the most popular contemporary style of design argument: The one based on nature's seemingly fine-tuned physical constants.[28] Critics of this sort of argument point out the possibility of there being multiple universes with different fundamental constants, and they explain (non-theistically) our living in a hospitable universe in terms of the obvious selection-effect: We could not live in any of the universes inhospitable to life.

Defenders of the design argument sometimes dismiss such objections as vain attempts to avoid a theistic conclusion, but van Inwagen comes to the aid of the critic, claiming that we just are not in a position to say with any confidence whether the hypothesis of intelligent fine-tuning is more probable than a multiple-universe scenario. Van Inwagen uses this same scepticism about our knowledge of what there might be in order to undermine certain evidential arguments from evil.

This same modesty is forced on other defensive sceptics like Alston and Wykstra, whose versions of DS differ from van Inwagen's only in that they do not bother to articulate any possible story about why there must be evils like E. Van Inwagen's strategy is to suggest a story (the details of which need not detain us) that explains why God must allow evils like E1 and E2, and then claim that owing to our limitations we are unable to assign any probability to the story's being true.

If all of this is right then the implications for constructing philosophical arguments for theism are significant. I leave it open whether every theistic argument would be put in danger by DS in this way – that is something that can be established only on a case-by-case basis. But clearly at least one popular argument would be endangered. If natural theology retains for

[27] Cf. Evan Fales, 'Should God Not Have Created Adam?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **9** (1992), pp. 193–209 (esp. 203–6).

[28] See John Jefferson Davis, 'Design Argument, Cosmic "Fine-Tuning", and the Anthropic Principle', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **22** (1987), pp. 139–150. It should be noted that there are other ways to construct a theistic argument based on this information (as Davis makes clear by arguing from analogy), and DS need not imperil all of them.

theists the importance conceded even by Reformists like Plantinga, then these consequence of DS are profound enough to merit the attention of the view's defenders.[29,30]

[29] Wykstra and the others might claim that my emphasis on our non-moral acumen here vitiates my earlier argument regarding our inability reliably to gauge the range of candidate MSRs that falls outside our view. If the extent of the range we can survey can be limited by constraints on our non-moral knowledge, and if we can establish that our non-moral knowledge is so limited that the range of candidate MSRs to which we are privy is only a small portion of the total range, then defensive sceptics are justified in claiming that it is quite likely indeed that many evils' MSRs should escape us. But my earlier remarks were directed at our inability to determine whether God's knowledge of relevant non-moral facts far enough outstrips ours that we can confidently assign a high value to Pr(P/G&k).

[30] For comments on an earlier version of this paper I am indebted to Evan Fales and an anonymous referee.