

Response to Wunder: objective probability, non-contingent theism, and the EAAN

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Abstract: This article is a response to Tyler Wunder’s ‘The modality of theism and probabilistic natural theology: a tension in Alvin Plantinga’s philosophy’ (this journal). In his article, Wunder argues that if the proponent of the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN) holds theism to be non-contingent and frames the argument in terms of objective probability, then the EAAN is either unsound or theism is necessarily false. I argue that a modest revision of the EAAN renders Wunder’s objection irrelevant, and that this revision actually widens the scope of the argument.

Introduction

In recent years, Tyler Wunder has argued that Alvin Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN) suffers from an insuperable dilemma: if its proponent holds that theism is non-contingent and frames the argument in terms of objective probability (which Plantinga does), it is either unsound or entails that theism is necessarily false. Thus, one must frame the argument in terms of epistemic probability, affirm a form of contingent theism, or embrace a horn of the dilemma. In this article, I grant Wunder’s objection, but show that the EAAN can be easily reconstructed in a way that allows its proponent to continue to hold theism to be non-contingent and frame it in terms of objective probability while avoiding both horns of Wunder’s dilemma.

The evolutionary argument against naturalism

The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN), developed by Alvin Plantinga,¹ claims that the objective probability of one’s cognitive faculties being reliable (R) is low given the conjunction of naturalism – the thesis that

there is no God or anything at all like him – (N) and evolution (E); that the reflective naturalist who accepts E and sees this has a defeater for R; that anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for all of her beliefs (including N&E); and hence N&E is self-defeating. Put more formally, the argument is:

- (1) $P(R/N\&E)$ is low.
- (2) Anyone who accepts (believes) N&E and sees that $P(R/N\&E)$ is low has a defeater for R.
- (3) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she thinks she has, including N&E itself.
- (4) If one who accepts N&E thereby acquires a defeater for N&E, N&E is self-defeating and can't rationally be accepted.
- (5) Therefore, N&E can't rationally be accepted. (Plantinga (2011b), 344–345)²

For the purposes of this article, we will assume that if premise (1) is correct, that the rest of the argument follows. I will not defend its premises here.³

Wunder's objection

Tyler Wunder (2013; 2015) notes that Plantinga accepts that theism is non-contingent and that he frames the EAAN in terms of *objective* probability. This, he claims, raises trouble for the argument: it entails that it is unsound or that theism is necessarily false.⁴ Wunder's objection is roughly as follows. The objective probability of X on Y is undefined if the objective probability of Y is zero. Now, if theism is non-contingent, then, if theism is true, it is necessarily true, which entails that N is necessarily false, and hence its (N's) probability is zero. (The reverse holds as well: if N is true, then theism is necessarily false.) Hence the objective probability of a conjunction containing N as a conjunct will be zero. So, any substitution instance of $P(X/N\&Z)$ will have a defined value only if N is possibly true, and N's possible truth entails the necessary falsehood of theism.⁵ Thus, if theism is necessarily true then N is necessarily false, and it follows that $P(R/N\&E)$ is undefined rather than low, and hence premise (1) is false and the EAAN is unsound (Wunder (2015), 392). On the other hand, if $P(R/N\&E)$ is not undefined, then (by the above reasoning) it follows that theism is necessarily false, a conclusion Plantinga no doubt seeks to avoid. Thus, the EAAN – if it is framed in terms of objective probability and theism is held to be non-contingent – faces a dilemma: either it is unsound or it entails that theism is necessarily false.⁶

Wunder says that Plantinga (in correspondence) conceded this point. In response, Plantinga, according to Wunder, suggests 'that the probabilities at work in the EAAN should now be read as epistemic probabilities: epistemic probability, says Plantinga, can disregard the probability calculus' (Wunder (2015), 394). Wunder notes that this concession is significant since '[e]very major

published version of the argument, of those addressing the distinction between objective and epistemic probabilities, has (thus far) been explicitly presented in terms of objective probability' (*ibid.*). Hence the EAAN is dealt a great blow: if framed in terms of non-contingent theism and objective probability, it faces an unattractive dilemma, and if framed in terms of epistemic probability, it is a significant deviation from the original argument.⁷

Responding to Wunder

Let us grant that Wunder's criticism is successful; Plantinga can no longer claim that the objective value of $P(R/N\&E)$ is low while affirming that theism is non-contingent.

What I propose to show here is that we can restate the argument in terms of a proposition which is a subset of N , but does not entail N . This will enable us to continue to use objective probability while attacking N and holding theism to be non-contingent. The proposition is this:

Divine Distance (D): God, or anything at all like him, did not intervene (or order the world from the beginning) to ensure that his creatures' cognitive faculties are reliable.⁸

Let us further stipulate that those who hold D hold materialism about human beings as well, for this is a stipulation that Plantinga makes about N – those who hold N , he thinks, typically hold materialism.

We may now state the EAAN as follows:

- (1*) $P(R/D\&E)$ is low.
- (2*) Anyone who accepts (believes) $D\&E$ and sees that $P(R/D\&E)$ is low has a defeater for R .
- (3*) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she thinks she has, including $D\&E$ itself.
- (4*) If one who accepts $D\&E$ thereby acquires a defeater for $D\&E$, $D\&E$ is self-defeating and can't rationally be accepted.
- (5*) Therefore, $D\&E$ can't rationally be accepted.

Four things to note: (a) this revised version of the EAAN is stronger than the original: it now, in addition to N , attacks some versions of theism (versions in which God takes a hands-off approach to the development of his creatures' intellect). (b), D is a subset of N ; N entails D , but D does not entail N . This is because N affirms that there is no God or anything at all like him, which clearly entails that God did not intervene to ensure the reliability of his creatures' cognitive faculties. In light of this, we can see that *all* naturalists affirm D . Thus, the original target of the EAAN – N – is still hit by it. In other words, if the naturalist who accepts $D\&E$ sees that $P(R/D\&E)$ is low, then – since they affirm that $D\&E$ holds – they have a defeater for R , and the conclusion of the EAAN follows.⁹ (c), this version avoids

Wunder's objection, for it does not commit its defender to making an objective probabilistic judgment about *N*, which, Wunder claims, entails the necessary falsity of theism or the falsity of premise (1). This is because *D* is compatible with both *N* and theism,¹⁰ and hence to make a claim about the objective probability of *R* on *D&E* does not commit one to saying that *N* is possibly, and therefore necessarily, true, and hence Wunder's objections are irrelevant. In other words, to make a claim about $P(R/D\&E)$ does not commit one to making a probabilistic judgement about *N* or a conjunction containing *N* as a conjunct, which is what got us into trouble in the first place; to say that $P(R/D\&E)$ is low does not commit one to saying that *N* is true or false. Hence, the EAAN can still be framed in terms of objective probability without entailing the necessary falsity of theism or the falsity of premise (1*); Wunder's objection is rendered toothless. And (d), it is fairly obvious, I take it, that Plantinga's argument for the truth of premise (1) supports the truth of premise (1*): what drives his argument is the unguided nature of the evolutionary process combined with the lack of connection between behaviour and belief content (which, he argues, follows from materialism). For creatures of which *D* holds, their evolution will be, clearly enough, unguided as well, and hence Plantinga's arguments for premise (1) will (roughly) equally support premise (1*).^11

Conclusion

In this article, we granted the success of Wunder's criticism of Plantinga's EAAN, but have seen that his objection can be easily avoided by framing the argument in terms of $P(R/D\&E)$ instead of $P(R/N\&E)$. I conclude, therefore, that Wunder's objection is not a serious threat to the EAAN.¹²

References

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Notes

1. For different statements and discussions of it, see Plantinga (1993), *Idem* (2011a), *Idem* (2011b), Plantinga's contribution to Plantinga & Tooley (2008), and Beilby (2002).
2. What I label '(5)' Plantinga labels 'Conclusion'.
3. See Plantinga (2011a) and (2011b) for an up-to-date defence of the premises.
4. Richard Bosse, while disputing other claims of Wunder's, appears to agree with him on this point. See the conclusion of Bosse (2017), 10–11.
5. This is because N's possible truth means that there is a possible world in which God does not exist. But if theism is non-contingent and is true, then there are no such possible worlds.
6. Thanks to Ben Bavar for helping make this paragraph more perspicuous.
7. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Wunder also claims that his criticism 'completely undercut[s] the EAAN's] apologetic efficacy: on the assumption that theism is non-contingent, the naturalist can hardly be expected to convert to theism on the basis of an argument that can be sustained only if theism is necessarily false' (Wunder (2013), 74). However, it is, in my view, a mistake to think that the EAAN is supposed to convert the naturalist to theism. After all, the conclusion of the argument is merely that the conjunction of N&E is not rationally acceptable. Furthermore, the naturalist need not convert to theism to avoid this conclusion – she could simply give up N or E (to give up N does not commit one to theism). Of course, one could – as an anonymous referee does – make a case that Plantinga's background assumptions make it appear that the purpose of the EAAN is to convert the naturalist to theism. Since I do not wish to partake in a stodgy debate about proper Plantinga exegesis, suffice it to say that I do not think that a compelling case for this can be made.
8. Another proposition that could be used is D*: Nothing intervened to ensure the reliability of our cognitive faculties.
9. Remember, we are assuming that the rest of the EAAN follows if premise (1) (or (1*)) is true – we are not addressing objections to those premises here.
10. There is a small complication here that is worth mentioning. Plantinga says that traditional theists hold that 'God is the premier knower and has created us human beings in his image, an important part of which involves his endowing them with a reflection of his powers as a knower' (Plantinga (1993), 236) and that bare theists hold 'only that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good creator' (*ibid.*, 236 n. 25). It should be clear, then, that a traditional theist is committed to \sim D but the bare theist is not. So, if traditional theism is necessary – if it is *necessary* that humans that God creates bear his image – then premise (1*) will face the same problems as premise (1). One way to avoid this problem is to point out that one can hold bare theism to be necessarily true and traditional theism to be contingently true; that is, one can hold that God exists necessarily, but hold that his creating humans in his image is merely contingent. If a theist thinks that God created freely, then she will affirm this, since his creating freely entails that there are possible worlds in which God does not create anything and hence in which \sim D does not hold. Or, if a theist holds that it is possible that God create humans that are not made in his image, then she will not affirm that traditional theism is necessary. (And surely this is possible!) In any event, I know of no theist who holds that traditional theism (as defined above) is necessary, Plantinga included (at least, he is not on record – so far as I know – as affirming that traditional theism is necessarily true), nor is it clear to me what would motivate one to hold to such a view in the first place. Hence, I do not think this issue will affect proponents of the revised EAAN. This issue was brought to my attention by an anonymous referee, and many of the points made in this footnote are original to them.
11. Plantinga no doubt thinks this, since he takes something like D to be an alternative definition of N. He says that N is 'the idea, roughly, that there is no such person as God or anything at all like God – or if there is, this being plays no causal role in the world's transactions' (Plantinga (2011a), 435, emphasis mine). Note, however, that D is weaker than Plantinga's proposition, for D is consistent with God playing a causal role in the world's transactions – God could intervene (or plan) to ensure that group A's cognitive faculties are reliable but make no such effort in regard to group B.
12. Thanks to Ben Bavar, Adriane Hendricks, Reuben Hendricks, and Brett Lunn for comments on this article. And thanks especially to G. L. G. – Colin Patrick Mitchell – for particularly insightful comments.