

Explaining Evil

MARK BERNSTEIN

*Division of English, Classics, Philosophy and Communication, The University of Texas, San Antonio,
Texas 78249-0643*

Abstract. In the past few years, the focus of arguments against theism has shifted. Where previously the existence of evil has been thought by many demonstrative of the impossibility of God's existence, now it is frequently purveyed as merely evidence against the existence of a Supreme Being. Even this more modest claim has been forcefully denied by William Alston and Peter van Inwagen. I argue that their arguments are not persuasive. Not only do they suffer logical flaws but, if accepted, actually have pernicious effects on the values of reasoning and religious practice.

That there is evil in the world is my non-negotiable point of departure. Instances of undeserved pain and suffering provide us with our most poignant examples. Infants are born with spina bifida and leukaemia, virtuous middle-aged and elderly slip on patches of ice, breaking legs and hips, innocent squirrels and cats are hit by speeding cars resulting in untreated injuries or lingering death. The traditional problem of evil is the problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent being. At first blush, it appears that a being who is all-knowing (and so, presumably, knows about all the occurrences of evil), all-powerful (and so, presumably, can prevent all these evil occurrences), and all-good (and so, presumably, wants the world to contain no instances of evil), cannot exist in an evil-infected world. Recent work in this area has convinced many that this problem has been solved and that there is no logical inconsistency in thinking of God and evil occupying the same world.¹ Although I remain sceptical of the viability of this solution, the traditional problem of evil is not this paper's target. Rather, I intend to discuss another problem that the existence of evil apparently causes with theism. Assuming that the traditional problem of evil has been satisfactorily resolved, the existence of evil still appears to provide evidence against the existence of God. The evidentialist, as we may dub him, claims that the magnitude and distribution of evil provides a *prima facie* reason for the rejection of theism.

¹ Most famously, cf. Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper, 1974). I should also make clear that I am working within the traditional notion of 'free will theism', the position that grants free will, minimally, to both God and human beings. Of course, precisely how free will is to be understood is another, rather contentious, issue. Fortunately, we need not worry about the intricacies of this debate; an intuitive, commonsense understanding suffices for our purposes.

I

Although the nature of evidence, or the evidential relationship is far from transparent, the following principle would appear formally uncontentious.

- (E) If an event or state of affairs E is to count for evidence for some theory T then the existence of E is more likely (probable) to occur if T than not T.

Those who take the magnitude and distribution of evil as evidence against theism, *eo ipso*, take it as evidence for atheism, and therefore hold

- (A) The actual magnitude and distribution of evil in our world is more likely given atheism than given theism.

(A) requires explication. Most important is the fact that the nature of the likelihood (or probability) is epistemic. That is, (A) effectively asserts that for all we know (or consonant with all of our knowledge), the existence of evil is more likely on the hypothesis of a godless world than on the hypothesis of a godly one. This type of probability is quite different than so-called ‘objective’ or ‘a priori’ probability which assesses the likelihood of events from the perspective of an ideal observer. The disparity between these two sorts of probabilities can be enormous. Suppose that to the best of our knowledge there lies before us a series of twenty distinct numbers. The epistemic probability of any one of those numbers being randomly chosen is 5%. However, in truth we have miscounted and there are really fifty distinct numbers in the series. The objective probability of that particular number being chosen is only 2%. Gambling fortunes have been lost and won on far less confusion.

Why must the likelihoods be understood epistemically? Recall that the evidentialist is claiming that the pain and suffering in the actual world provides us with a reason, admittedly defeasible, to reject theism. An objective probability with which we had no subjective relationship could hardly play this role. To understand (A) as stating that the probability of evil on atheism is greater than the probability of evil on theism, but not relative to any knowledge that we have, eliminates the possibility that this world’s evil can play a role in our rational deliberations concerning the existence of God.

Initially, (A) should strike us as plausible. The very same reasons that many believe speak for the incompatibility of the existence of God and evil can be transported to support the weaker evidential thesis. But it is not merely the existence of evil that speaks against God’s existence; we also need to deal with evil’s allocation. Even granting that God’s creation of sentient beings (or, at least, humans) mandated the existence of evil, it is difficult to understand why God apparently permits (if he does not cause) indescribable horrors to occur to babies and the adult just. On the other hand, evolutionary and biological facts seem to account for both the existence and random

distribution of pain and suffering. The brief story is that sentient capacity has survival value. A species whose members felt no pain upon entering a fire or having rocks fall on them would likely not last too long. And, since evolution would seem to have no place for deserved or morally-apportioned pain and suffering, it should be expected that the good and innocent should fare proportionately as well and poorly as the bad and guilty. Thus, it seems reasonable to believe that the existence of evil is more likely in an atheistic world.

Peter van Inwagen and William Alston are two major thinkers who believe otherwise. Insofar as the arguments of these two formidable thinkers are found wanting, evidentialism's reasonableness is given some confirmation. I argue that their anti-evidentialist strategies are unsuccessful.

II

In an article of great verve and originality, Peter van Inwagen takes up the theist's task.² His strategy is to argue that we are in no epistemic position to assign any probability, or even range of possibilities, to the existence of pain and suffering on the hypothesis of theism. Since no such assignment is possible, (A) is rendered vacuous. If we have no idea of the likelihood of there being pain and suffering in a God-filled world, then we lack the epistemic warrant to claim that the probability of the existence of pain and suffering given atheism is greater than the probability of pain and suffering given theism. This being the case, the evil in the actual world provides us with absolutely no reason to reject theism.

How is this task to be carried out? Van Inwagen will present us with a 'defence', 'a story according to which God and suffering of the sort contained in the actual world both exist, and which is such that (given the existence of God) there is no reason to think that it is false, a story that is not surprising on the hypothesis that God exists' (p. 141). A defence, then, is a narrative that accommodates the actual world's evil with the existence of God and is true 'for all we know'. Upon understanding a defence, the amount and allocation of pain and suffering no longer strikes us as (epistemically) surprising; given that there is a God, this story of reconciling his existence with evil comports with the rest of our knowledge.³ Defences, then, are to do more

² Cf. Peter van Inwagen's 'The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence' in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (ed. James E. Tomberlin; Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991). The article is reprinted in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). All page references are to the printing in *Philosophical Perspectives*.

³ An event's low probability is not always associated with high (epistemic) surprise. Randomly picking the Queen of Hearts from a normal deck of cards has the low probability of 1 in 52. But we ought not to be surprised in the sense that this card being randomly chosen has as good (or bad) a chance of being chosen than any other particular card. Similarly, we may not be surprised at the truth of a defence (since

than just defend; rather than merely thwart the threats posed by evil, they show how, without the burden of epistemic discomfort, evil fits within theism. Van Inwagens ‘defences’ are a species of general theodicy.

Defences, therefore, undermine or ‘chip away’ at the atheist’s case. We should no longer believe that the only epistemically possible explanation of evil relies on a godless world. In fact, if other, substantially variant defences are proffered, further erosion of the argument from evil would occur simply in virtue of the fact that more live options to account for evil in a God-filled world would be available. But defences putatively accomplish even more. Defences give us reasons for believing that theism yields no *prima facie* grounds for expecting a pattern of suffering different from that in the actual world. Since they are unamenable to any non-comparative probability assessment, even a very general ones (e.g. ‘very likely’, ‘fairly probable’ and ‘quite improbable’), we are left in no position to compare the respective likelihoods of evil on theism and evil on atheism.

Van Inwagen constructs his story with care admitting that there are points throughout the narrative that rely on controversial modal and metaphysical theses. Fortunately, we need not enter these somewhat murky waters for my concerns focus on the viability of the strategy rather than its details. I will accept, *arguendo*, that van Inwagen’s narrative does constitute what he calls a ‘defence’. I want to investigate whether any defence of the type van Inwagen envisions can accomplish its purpose of falsifying (A) and so eviscerate evidentialism, at least insofar as van Inwagen interprets it.

III

Van Inwagen sees no problem in making sense of, and attributing truth to, the non-comparative judgment that the probability of the magnitude and distribution of pain and suffering on the supposition of atheism is high. In fact, he seems to suggest that there is good reason to believe its truth. Nonetheless, he argues this provides no reason to prefer atheism to theism, for if it did the following argument would be valid.⁴

- (1) The probability of evil on atheism is high.
- (2) We do not know what to say about the probability of evil on theism.

it may be as probable as any other defence in being true) and yet its probability of being true (given theism) may be quite low. Although van Inwagen is more comfortable speaking in terms of (epistemic) surprise than probability, he thinks that, for his purposes, nothing substantive hangs on the distinction. Cf. van Inwagen, notes 7 and 10.

⁴ Cf. van Inwagen, pp. 151–2. I actually slightly simplify van Inwagen’s argument but in no way, I think, that corrupts it. Instead of speaking of the probability of evil given atheism, van Inwagen relativizes the probability to what he calls ‘the hypothesis of indifference’: ‘Neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons’ (p. 137).

- (3) Atheism and theism are inconsistent
- (4) Therefore, for anyone in our epistemic situation, the existence of evil constitutes a *prima facie* case for preferring atheism to theism.

For those who have doubts about the quality of reasoning involved, van Inwagen offers some remedial help with an argument of similar form and whose invalidity is said to be even more obvious.

- (1*) The probability of the existence of intelligent life on God wanting intelligent life is high.
- (2*) We do not know what to say about the probability of the existence of intelligent life on atheism.
- (3*) God and atheism are inconsistent.
- (4*) Therefore, in our epistemic situation, the truth of the fact that intelligent life exists constitutes a *prima facie* case for preferring God's existence to atheism.

Van Inwagen reports that he would be 'very surprised' to learn of someone who thought this argument valid.

I am unconvinced. First, we must be clear that the probabilities referred to in premises (1) and (1*) are understood epistemically. Thus, it is not that the objective probabilities are high, but that, for all we know these probabilities are high. Van Inwagen himself emphasizes this point,⁵ a point that if neglected, will lead one, too easily, to believe that these arguments are invalid.

Suppose that you are aware that your wife bought a winning lottery ticket. Although you are unsophisticated about the workings of lotteries, having no idea of the frequency of winning tickets, you do know that there are exactly two stores from which this ticket could have been bought. You know that the probability of receiving a winning lottery ticket from store A is very high (*mirabile dictu*, store A employed a poor statistician) and you have no idea what the probability is of a winning lottery ticket being purchased from lottery B. From which lottery would you bet that the winning ticket came? Or, what amounts to much the same thing, from which store would you buy your next lottery ticket?

Or, consider a similar case where your husband brings home a can of Pepsi. There are only two stores from which he could have purchased soft drinks. You know the first carries a very high percentage of Pepsi vs. Coca Cola. (Assume these are the only two soft drinks.) You have no idea of the cola distribution in the other store. Nor do you have any notion of the distribution of colas – or even food items – in general. You are offered \$1 million dollars to correctly predict the store from which he bought the Pepsi.

⁵ Cf. van Inwagen, pp. 137, 151.

I say you are rational to choose store A while, apparently, van Inwagen thinks that this displays no more rationality than flipping a coin as an instrument of choice. If one does side with choosing store A, it is difficult to explain the rationality of this decision without accepting the following, exactly parallel argument, as valid.

- (1**) The probability of the Pepsi on store A is high.
- (2**) We do not know what to say about the probability of Pepsi on store B.
- (3**) Store A and store B (insofar as supplying the Pepsi) are inconsistent.
- (4**) Therefore, for anyone in our epistemic situation, the bought Pepsi is a *prima facie* reason for it coming from store A.

Effectively, van Inwagen believes that (1), (1*) and (1**) respectively, add nothing material to the argument; the evaluation of the evidential relationship between the premises and the conclusion does not, in any degree, get respectively influenced by these first premises. But, surely, this must be mistaken. Let the probabilities referred to in these premises be inordinately high (say, 99.9%) and reflect upon which side of the issue you would place your wager. Then assign an inordinately low probability (say, 0.1%), and reflect upon whether the side you choose changes. If, as I am suggesting, a change does occur, van Inwagen would appear to be at a loss to explain why it does unless he simply insists that the change is irrational. Without compelling reason to this effect, it is difficult to understand why we should accept van Inwagen's assertion that these arguments are invalid, let alone obviously so.

One final point that highlights the dramatic ramifications of van Inwagen's position. Not only does the actual strength of the probabilities not affect our justification in believing the atheistic hypothesis for the reason of existent evil, van Inwagen is also committed to the insignificance of the fact that we, especially from the time of Darwin, find the strength of the probability of evil on the atheistic hypothesis increasing. Presumably, van Inwagen would agree that the evolutionary research in the last 150 years has resulted in raising the probability of evil on the atheistic hypothesis; i.e. would agree that it has been raised relative to a prior time, not relative to evil on the theistic hypothesis. But if this enhanced probability of evil on the atheistic hypothesis has absolutely no effect on the probability of evil in a God-filled world, one must look at all the churchmen, philosophers, scientists and lay people as rather misguided in thinking that, from a perspective of natural theology, such scientific advances must be addressed. Have the thousands of discussions and papers that treat this debate as a rational one (i.e. not one to be settled by faith) been, for all intents and purposes, a waste of time? If van Inwagen is right, then unless we somehow reach a better

understanding of the motivations and intentions of God (if there be one), none of this scientific progress has any relevance for evil being evidence for atheism.

IV

William Alston, using William Rowe's evidentialist argument as a foil, also argues that the existence of evil affords us no reason whatsoever for the belief in atheism.⁶ Alston's paper revolves around his claim that we are not rationally justified in accepting the first premise of Rowe's argument.

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.⁷
- (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

To Alston, then, Sally is truly suffering great pain from her spina bifida, Mary's fall and ensuing broken hip is a true evil, and Bambi's (the deer's) third degree burns as the result of a forest fire is a real horror. What we are unjustified in claiming about any of these instances of suffering (and therefore instances of evil) is that God has the power to prevent them without losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil. To Alston, we are never in an epistemic position that warrants a claim stating that God lacked sufficient reason or justification for allowing an evil to exist.

Why not? Although there is no single individual barrier to our attaining this privileged epistemic state, in general, our problem is one of 'cognitive limits'. Being the cognitively finite beings that we are, we can neither gather all the data, comprehend the enormous complexity, know of all the possibilities, or make well-considered value judgments, revolving around any particular instance of evil. God may not be wholly inscrutable but he is difficult to scrutate. This being the case, we are never in an epistemic position that allows us justifiably to claim of any instance of evil that it is 'gratuitous';

⁶ William P. Alston, 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition' in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (ed. James E. Tomberlin; Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991). Rowe's justifiably famous paper is 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, no. 4 (Oct. 1979).

⁷ Although not directly relevant for this paper, I commend reading van Inwagen's critique of this premise in his essay 'The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God', in Thomas V. Morris ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). This article is reprinted in his anthology *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

that, in other words, it is of such a kind that God had sufficient reason not to permit it but nevertheless did. In effect, we can always create individualized defences, epistemically possible narratives, that explain why God had good reason to allow the particular instance of evil in question.

To exemplify. Mary falls down a flight of stairs resulting in a broken hip and much pain. Why did God allow this apparently gratuitous suffering to exist? Maybe this accident provides Mary with the best opportunity of achieving certain good qualities, say, courage, perseverance, and patience. But you say that Mary already has these admirable character traits in abundance? Perhaps, but what you cannot justifiably preclude is that sustaining this putative misfortune gives Mary her best chance of eternal communion with God. Perhaps suffering through this experience gives Mary her best opportunity of accepting God into her heart and recognizing him as her lord and saviour.

This last rationale – that the suffering regardless of how horrible it may be may provide the victim with his or her best opportunity for a blissful afterlife – can be used in the case of any human tragedy. Gladys suffers in (virtually) indescribable ways from a rape. The act committed at knifepoint and her remaining thirty years on earth are filled with vivid flashbacks of the night of the atrocity. As a result, she is incapable of any close personal relationships (she has lost the capacity for trust) and spends the rest of her life in emotional turmoil. Moreover, the physical wounds have left her blind and immobile from the waist down. And, to punctuate this narrative none too soon, the rape is responsible for her continuous cluster headaches. Still, even in this circumstance, Alston denies that we have justification for a ‘gratuitous’ categorization. If God had interfered, for all we know, Gladys and perhaps the rest of the world, would have been even worse off.

The case for Bambi may require another type of defence. At least to many Judeo-Christian thinkers Bambi, in virtue of her non-human status, is essentially precluded from an afterlife. In such a case another narrative must be told. Here, an idea supplied by Bruce Reichenbach is solicited.⁸ A world with moral agents (individuals who can morally deliberate and act in accordance with and because of moral principles) is better than one without. God then creates such a world. But only in a lawlike environment can moral agents exist, for only in a world in which regularities dominate can individuals match their good and evil choices with consequences of their choices.⁹ Thus God can make exceptions (i.e. create miracles) but not too often, lest the necessary climate for the existence of moral agents disappear. Presumably, he would intervene in just the very worst cases. But, Alston claims that we are never in a position justifiably to judge that a particular instance (such as Bambi being burned to death in a fire) is in this special category. Bad as

⁸ Cf. Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

⁹ This is all quite arguable but I accept it for the sake of argument.

Bambi's plight is, we have no warrant for claiming that it ranks in the very small percentage of cases in which God intervenes in the natural course of events.

Still, one may ask why God, being omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent, did not create a natural order different than the actual one, one in which deer, for example, are impervious to the suffering and pain due to fires. The problem, here, is that we unwarrantedly assume that such a creation can have such isolated effects. For all we know, such a world – a world with deer who do not suffer from fire burns – may metaphysically require other changes in the world's constitution such that, on balance, this newly-created world contains far more suffering than the actual world. In contemplating worlds in which deer are immune from the pain of fire, worlds which are quite distant from our actual world, we especially need to recognize our cognitive limitations; instead of exercising our intuitions on cases which are so remote from our actual world experience, we should instead exercise our humility.¹⁰

v

Alston's arguments rely on the idea that to be justified in the belief that (1), to be justified in the existence of 'gratuitous suffering', one must be justified in excluding all the live possibilities for how a greater good (or some less bad evil) may ensue if God permits the occurrence of this evil. Alston argues that we are never justified in believing that we have totally excluded the options available to God, and so, we are not justified in asserting (1). He takes pains to emphasize that he does not rely on, indeed repudiates, scepticism regarding the reliability of our cognitive abilities. He accepts the fact that our cognitive abilities frequently justify our knowledge claims and it is to these typical norms of justification to which Alston appeals when he claims that Rowe's premise (1) cannot be justifiably asserted. When we apply our normal standards of epistemic justification to this very special claim, a claim that involves ourselves in a territory of which we know very little, our circumstances are '... very different from our more usual situation in which we are forming judgments and forming conclusions about matters concerning which we antecedently know quite a lot, and the boundaries and parameters of which we have pretty well defined' (p. 60). To Alston, then, the criteria for epistemic warrant are the standard ones; it is just that, in this very remote area of inquiry, they are inevitably unsatisfied.

I have two misgivings. First, that Alston owns a distorted notion of the nature of standard epistemic warrant. Secondly, his conception of hyperbolic

¹⁰ This attitude of Alston seems identical to van Inwagen's 'extreme modal scepticism' where he suggests that we are largely ignorant of modal matters remote from everyday concerns. In matters regarding counterfactual claims of bizarre content, we ought to withhold assessment and simply admit our ignorance. Cf. van Inwagen's introduction to *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*.

divine remoteness makes a sham of human rationality or Judeo-Christian religious practice.

Consider the following argument that purports to show that there is no ‘evil demon’, no individual who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnimalevolent.

- (1′) There exist instances of intense enjoyment which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater bad or permitting some pleasure equally good or better.
- (2′) An omniscient, wholly bad being would prevent the occurrence of any intense enjoyment it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater bad or permitting some pleasure equally good or better.
- (3′) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly bad being.

Alston, so it would seem, would need to reject this ‘argument from enjoyment’ for the non-existence of the evil demon. Of course, this certainly leaves it open to him to have other (justified) reasons for rejecting the demon’s existence. Still, one wonders what type of reasons Alston would and could accept. As evil has been thought (mistakenly, if Alston is correct) in providing some, and indeed the best empirical or cosmological evidence against God, one would think that the existence of good would provide some, and indeed the best, empirical or cosmological evidence against an evil demon. If evil does not, according to Alston, provide any evidence against the existence of God, so too, goodness should not be any counter-evidence for the existence of an evil demon. More generally, it would seem impossible that there could be any empirical evidence against the demon’s existence. After all, if such a demon exists, its plans and purposes would be as difficult to understand as God’s. The remoteness of the territory and its parameters would be as distant and foreign to us as those of a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent creature. In fact, for most of us they might be even more remote, owing to the fact that the psychology of pure evil may be more difficult to fathom than that of unadulterated good. But why stop the scepticism at evil demons; why not extend our agnosticism to powerful (but not omnipotent), clever (but hardly omniscient), and mischievous (but scarcely malevolent) extra-terrestrial tricksters? Or why even take a trip in space? It would seem that Alston’s reasoning can be easily adapted to show us that we have no justification to deny the existence of imperceptible leprechauns who manipulate our brains in a myriad of ways.

It is not merely that the existence of these individuals could not, at least on empirical grounds, be discounted. The more serious problem arises when we combine this result with Alston’s conception of normal epistemic justi-

fication which apparently requires the elimination of all these ‘live’ possibilities. If knowledge requires the elimination of the Evil Demon and the lesser deceivers and they cannot be epistemically eliminated any more than can their good counterpart, we are left in precisely the position that Alston finds objectionable, viz. scepticism infecting quotidian affairs.

Moreover, the divine realm cannot be (or at least should not be) quite as mysterious as Alston implies. After all, if one agrees to spend a great deal of time worshipping and following the edicts of a being, it only seems sensible to know some important facets of his personality and character. We, at least some of us, are wise, powerful and good. If we are to intelligibly attribute the properties of omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence to a being, they can differ only in degree, and not in kind, from the properties we mere mortals possess. Surely, we have some idea – and I think a fairly good idea – of how an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent individual behaves and what factors he considers important in motivating his actions. Without this assumption, the lives of devout Jews and Christians become a mockery. If Judeo-Christian religious observance is not irrational, we have a better idea of this remote territory than Alston allows. Alston is quite correct in saying that if there is a God, it is reasonable to suppose that he ‘... has more tricks up His sleeve than we can envisage’ (pp. 58–9). But we are nevertheless justified in thinking these tricks would not include a child’s painful spina bifida, an innocent fawn’s week-long excruciating suffering from a forest fire, or my grand-uncle’s torture and death in Treblinka.

VI

There is a curious remark of Alston’s that hints of (repressed) doubts that he may have of his position. Alston speaks of the ‘vale of soul making’ as one suggestion to explain God’s permitting evil. The basic idea is that by allowing pains and suffering to certain individuals, God is granting these persons the best chance for developing certain virtues that, in the long run, will provide them with better lives. The ultimate hope, of course, is that through the attainment of patience, courage, perseverance, and so forth, these individuals will become the sort of persons who will eventually enjoy blissful lives in communion with God. Yet, in the (real-life) case of Sue, a five-year old girl who was raped, beaten and strangled to death, Alston tells us that ‘it strains credulity to suppose that God would subject a five-year old to *that* for the sake of character building in the life to come’ (p. 40, his emphasis). Since five-year olds lack the requisite maturity to use such horrible suffering to aid them in developing good character qualities in the actual world, the ‘vale of soul making’ response to evil can have relevance for Sue only in the hereafter. But Alston rejects this alternative (and so rejects the ‘vale of soul making’ response as applicable at all to Sue and cases like hers) because he finds it

difficult to believe that God would allow Sue to go through her nightmare even for a blissful afterlife.

But what can it mean to say that the purported ‘vale of soul making’ explanation ‘strains credulity’ other than this explanation is implausible? Thus, unlike van Inwagen, Alston apparently can make sense, at least broadly, of the notion of a particular epistemically possible explanation for the existence of evil (i.e. a ‘defence’ in van Inwagen’s terminology) having some probability relative to the theistic hypothesis. Moreover, such an explanation can be legitimately discarded if this probability is sufficiently low. But if dismissals of some explanations are warranted, then we are far from cognitively ignorant about how an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being could and would respond in many situations. Assume, for the moment, that God cannot constantly interfere in horrible cases since continual intervention would vitiate the extremely high value of free will. Still, does it not ‘strain credulity’ that the value of free will would be thus diminished if God, in a minimal way, prevented Sue’s rape, beating and murder? After all, he is omniscient and omnipotent, and so if there is some possible way he could bring it about. Does it not boggle the mind that, necessarily, if free will’s value is to be maintained as justifying pain and suffering like Sue’s, this atrocity is to be allowed to occur? I simply ask the reader to reflect upon the relative credulity of (a) God permitting Sue’s horror for reasons of soul improvement, and (b) God’s permitting Sue’s horror because it is required for maintaining the value of free will that makes it a good important enough to offset so much of the actual world’s pain and suffering.

VII

I would like to close with some general remarks intended to suggest that there is a common thread that runs through the anti-evidentialist arguments of van Inwagen and Alston, as well as through the argument of Plantinga, the contemporary figure who is credited with the dismantling of the more traditional logical inconsistency argument. Although it would be an error to conflate evidence against theism with logical inconsistency, that the responses, at bottom, rest on the same supposition suggest that the differences between these two forms of argument should not be exaggerated.

While both van Inwagen and Alston share the view that the existence of evil provides no evidence for atheism, their strategies are superficially quite different. Van Inwagen concentrates on the relationship between evidence and probability and argues that we have absolutely no epistemic justification to claim that the quantity and distribution of evil on the atheistic hypothesis is more probable than on the theistic hypothesis. Therefore, it cannot legitimately be used in the atheist’s cause. Alston argues that we are never justified in claiming that God lacks sufficient reason for allowing the world’s

actual evil to exist.¹¹ Yet, the reasons for their positions are, at root, identical. Van Inwagen claims the probability assessments are impossible because we cannot, even roughly, evaluate the likelihood of evil on the theistic hypothesis. This, in turn, is explained by the inevitable failure of our merely human minds to comprehend the metaphysical complexity of the world and the mental complexity of God. Alston tells us that we are never justified in claiming that God allowed gratuitous evil because we are never in a position to either fully understand the interactions among worldly events or understand how an omniscient mind works. In the end, it is our ineliminable cognitive inaccessibility to God (if there is a God) that prevents us from warrantably using the argument from evil. In broad strokes, Plantinga uses a similar strategy to demonstrate the consistency of God and evil. It is logically possible that, as bad as situations are, any change may have been for the worse; as bad as Hitler was, God's interference may have metaphysically dictated even more horrendous tortures with even more deaths.¹²

We should be loathe to accept mysteries even in (perhaps especially in) our relationship with a Supreme Being. It tends to terminate discussions too easily; it invites insidious forms of relativism; it opens the door to a denigration of reason. In the hands of those less skilled than the aforementioned religionists, mysteries themselves, can be used to justify virtually any behaviour. If this observation provides an extrinsic reason for visiting additional care upon anti-evidentialism, so be it.¹³

¹¹ In fact, near the end of his essay Alston makes the stronger claim that '... it is *in principle* impossible for us to be justified ...' (emphasis added). At this point, it is not completely clear what modal status Alston believes his claim to have.

¹² Cf. n.1.

¹³ I thank Michael Almeida, A. P. Martinich and an anonymous reader for comments on an earlier draft.