

DANIEL HOWARD-SNYDER

INTRODUCTION:

The Evidential Argument from Evil

1. The "Problem" of Evil

Evil, it is often said, poses a problem for theism, the view that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being, "God," for short. This problem is usually called "the problem of evil." But this is a bad name for what philosophers study under that rubric. They study what is better thought of as an argument, or a host of arguments, rather than a problem. Of course, an argument from evil against theism can be both an argument and a problem. Some people realize this for the first time when they assert an argument from evil in print and someone publishes a reply in which numerous defects and oversights are laid bare for the public eye. And if it turns out that there is a God and He doesn't take kindly to such arguments, then an argument from evil might be a big problem, a very big problem, for one who sincerely propounds it. Typically, however, an argument from evil is not thought to be a problem for the atheist. But if not for the atheist, for whom is an argument from evil a "problem"?

Perhaps the theist. The theist, however, may rightly find the premises or inferences of arguments from evil dubious and hence no problem at all. Perhaps, then, an argument from evil is a problem for the theist who finds all its premises and inferences compelling. But even then it might not be a problem, since she might have more compelling grounds to reject the conclusion than to accept all the premises and inferences. Perhaps, then, an argument from evil is a problem for the theist who finds all its premises and inferences compelling and who has lousy grounds for believing theism and she knows it. In that case an argument from evil might be a problem for the theist, at least if she is reasonable. For she might feel strongly inclined to believe there is no God, or at least that, in some sense, she ought to believe that there is no God. No doubt, this could be a troubling state of mind, one that might properly be called a problem. But in that case calling what philosophers study under the name "the problem of evil" a problem is highly misleading. For no philosophers today take the state of mind of the cognitively dissonant theist as their object of study when they study what they refer to as "the problem of evil."

One might think that what philosophers study under the name "the problem of evil" are arguments that should lead the theist to the cognitively dissonant state of mind just sketched, and so, by extension, such an argument is rightly called a problem for the theist. But this rationale for calling what philosophers study under the name "the problem of evil" a problem is highly contentious, to say the least. For an argument from evil *should* lead the theist to cognitive dissonance only

if the argument is good, and there is broad disagreement over whether any argument from evil is good. Of course, those convinced that some argument from evil is not defective and that it should lead the theist to cognitive dissonance might properly call it a problem. But why should the rest of us join them? It seems to me, therefore, that we, or at least a great many of us, should stop using "the problem of evil" as a name for what philosophers study under that rubric. If a singular term must be used, "the *argument* from evil" is more apt.

It is customary to distinguish two families of arguments from evil, calling one "logical," "deductive," or "a priori" and calling the other "evidential," "inductive," "empirical," "probabilistic," or "a posteriori." But these too are poor names for that to which they refer. For, if their names are any guide to the contrast (as they are supposed to be), logic is relevant to the members of the first family but not the second, and the members of the second family are meant to be evidence while the first are not. But this is hardly the case. As the chapters in this book indicate, evidential arguments involve quite a bit of logic, both deductive and inductive, and everyone agrees that they must stand up to the canons of logic. And every undeniably logical argument is superlative evidence against theism, if it is a good argument. Moreover, every undeniably logical argument has a premise that can only be known a posteriori, by empirical means, namely, a premise about evil, e.g., that it exists. And every undeniably evidential argument has a premise that can only be known a priori, e.g., a premise about what counts as good evidence or what we rightly expect from God in the way of preventing evil. And many "inductive" arguments from evil are, on the face of it, deductively structured.

So what is this distinction between logical and evidential arguments from evil?

2. *Logical Arguments from Evil*

Perhaps we can best get at the question by looking at the most famous members of each family. If there is a distinction between logical and evidential arguments from evil, then J. L. Mackie's argument is the paradigm member of the logical family. Mackie asserted that not only can it be shown that

religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian . . . must be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be *disproved* from other beliefs that he also holds.[1]

The putative disproof to which Mackie alluded is the problem of evil. As Mackie conceived of it, the problem of evil was "a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs" that were "essential parts of most theological positions." The three beliefs he had in mind were these: "God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists." [2] Mackie was aware that, on the face of it, there was no inconsistency here. Thus, he said,

to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms "good," and "evil," and "omnipotent." These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.

Nearly forty years have passed since Mackie published his famous "logical problem" of evil, as he called it. (So far as I know, this is where we get the name from.) Like logical positivism, Mackie's argument has found its way to the dustbin of philosophical fashions. Why?

Mackie claimed it was *impossible* for

G. God is omnipotent and God is wholly good,

and

E. Evil exists

both to be true. This would be evident, he said, in light of the moral principle

MP1. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can,

and the proposition

L. There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

But G, MP 1, and L rule out the possibility of E only if both L and MP 1 are necessary truths. If they are not, a wholly good omnipotent thing, say, a person, might permit evil, either because her goodness does not rule out the possibility or because she cannot eliminate evil entirely. Are they both necessary truths? Properly understood, L is.[3] But MP 1 is not. If a wholly good person had a morally justifying reason to permit evil she could prevent, she might not eliminate evil as far as she can. A more plausible moral principle for a Mackie-style logical argument from evil is this:

MP2. A wholly good thing eliminates evil as far as it can, unless it has a morally justifying reason not to.

But G, MP2, and L rule out the possibility of E only if it is a necessary truth that there is no morally justifying reason for a wholly good thing to permit preventable evil. However, nothing we know rules out the possibility that there is a morally justifying reason for a wholly good thing to permit evil she could prevent. Indeed, consider the proposition that

J. There is a morally justifying reason for God to permit evil He could prevent, a reason we could not know of, and He permits evil for that reason, and evil results.

Nothing we know rules out J as a possibility; and nothing we know rules out the possibility that G and J are both true. But if both G and J were true, then E would be too. And it would also be true that we could not know the reason God permitted evil. Thus, for all we know, G and E are compatible even if we cannot think of a morally justifying reason for God to permit evil. [4]

Mackie's aim was to "disprove" theism, and thus to show that theistic belief is "positively irrational." Toward that end, his logical argument had a premise that said theism is incompatible with some fact about evil. But note that it was not any old fact about evil that was purportedly incompatible with theism. It was a fact that we know with certainty: that there is evil. Of course, there are other facts that might have served his purposes just as well, e.g., the fact that there is suffering that results from natural disturbances like earthquakes and diseases (so-called "natural evil"), or the fact that a particular infant was intentionally scalded to death with boiling water by its parents on November 24, 1991, in Seattle, or the fact that there is a whole lot of undeserved horrific evil in the world. Each of these facts can be known with certainty. But our present point is this: allowing that Mackie's argument is a guide, we can think of a "logical argument from evil" as one which has a premise that says God and some known fact about evil are *incompatible*, and we can think of an "evidential argument from evil" as one that lacks such a premise. That is, we should expect that paradigm members of the evidential family will either (i) entirely lack a premise that says that God is incompatible with some fact about evil, or (ii) if they have such a premise, the putative fact about evil cannot be known with certainty, e.g., it might be claimed to be probable to some significant degree, or reasonably believed. As it turns out, this is what we find.

3. *Evidential Arguments from Evil*

In chapter 1, William Rowe puts the evidential argument from evil roughly like this:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good.
2. God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good.
3. So, God does not exist.

Premise 2 says that the existence of God is incompatible with each instance of preventable intense suffering the permission of which is not required for some greater good. We have here, then, an argument from evil that asserts that the existence of God is *incompatible* with some purported fact about evil. But note that it is not a known fact. As Rowe points out, "we cannot know with certainty that instances of suffering of the sort described in 1 do occur in the world." Rather, he

says, we have "rational grounds" for believing 1, grounds which "render 1 probable to the degree that it is more reasonable to believe 1 than to suspend judgment on 1." So this popular version of the evidential argument conforms to our distinction.

Since 1979, Rowe has articulated two other evidential arguments from evil, both of which he discusses in chapter 14. They rely on the following inference:

P No good we know of justifies God in permitting *E1* and *E2*
(where *E1* and *E2* are cases of especially horrific evil); so,
it is quite probable that
Q. No good at all justifies God in permitting *E1* and *E2*.

Both arguments have what amounts to the premise that Q entails there is no God. However, they differ over what bridges the gap between P and Q. One asserts that "we are justified in moving from P to Q in the same way we are justified in making the many inferences we constantly make from the known to the unknown," namely, by way of enumerative generalization. The other employs Bayes's Theorem, and certain argued-for assignments of value to it, to conclude that P makes Q considerably more likely than not. In both cases there is a premise, i.e. Q, that says some purported fact about evil is incompatible with theism. But, again, note that purported fact is not known. Rather, Q is argued for in the way suggested. Of course, there are other grounds for believing Q on P (See, e.g., chapters 10 and 11.) But in each case, Q is based on grounds insufficient for knowing Q with certainty. At best, these arguments make Q likely to a significant degree or reasonable to believe, given P and other information.

Each of the evidential arguments thus far mentioned has a premise that says some fact about evil is incompatible with theism. It is then argued that the fact in question is likely to some degree or another or reasonable to believe, given some other fact which is itself known or argued for. But an evidential argument might not proceed like this. For example, in chapter 14 Rowe defends a Bayesian version of the evidential argument that bypasses Q altogether, one that goes straight from P to the conclusion that theism is probably false. Another example is Paul Draper's argument in chapter 2. Draper asks us to consider a serious alternative hypothesis to theism. He calls it the hypothesis of indifference (HI):

Neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons.

Let O stand for a statement reporting known facts about sentient creatures experiencing pain and pleasure. And let a theistic story be any attempt to explain O in terms of theism. Draper claims that, given what we know apart from O, HI explains O much better than theism. He glosses this as the claim that

C. O is antecedently much more probable on the assumption that *HI* is true than on the assumption that theism is true.

That is, given what we know apart from O, the probability of O on HI is much

greater than the probability of O on theism, or, in short, $\Pr(O/HI) > \Pr(O/theism)$. Draper's premises are:

1. Given the biological role played by both pain and pleasure in organisms, independent of the effect of theistic stories on $\Pr(O/theism)$, C is true.
2. Theistic stories do not significantly raise $\Pr(O/theism)$.

If C is true, says Draper, we have a prima facie reason to reject theism. For present purposes, note that, even though O is known, Draper's argument does *not* employ a premise that says that theism and O are incompatible. So it too conforms to our distinction between logical and evidential arguments from evil.

While my sampling of arguments is necessarily limited, it seems that we can distinguish arguments from evil along the lines suggested, even though that distinction is badly named. So-called "logical" arguments from evil have a premise that says theism is incompatible with some known fact about evil; so-called "evidential" arguments do not.

While we may easily draw this distinction, we are hard pressed to defend its significance. I'm afraid I don't have much to say about the matter, except for the obvious. I mean, whenever one meets what its author purports to be an *argument* from evil (in contrast with, say, the sort of response to horrendous evil that you might find in Albert Camus's *The Plague* or Elie Wiesel's *Night*), one ought to consider whether the author intends to assert that facts about evil known with certainty are incompatible with theism. If she does, then one should query why the argument is riot dubious for the same reason that Mackie's argument from evil is dubious. If she does not-that is, if she intends to say that facts about evil which are known with certainty make theism significantly unlikely, or that theism is incompatible with certain facts about evil that are themselves quite likely-then one needs to think hard about the sorts of issues this book is about.

4. Central Issues in Evidential Arguments from Evil

It would be pointless, and a grave injustice, were I to try here to summarize the work of each contributor. Instead, I shall briefly sketch what I think are some of the main issues at stake in the debate over the evidential argument from evil and where they are discussed in the essays that follow.

4.1 ISSUES COMMON TO EVERY EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

Three fundamental issues arise with respect to every evidential argument from evil.

First, one might argue that even if an evidential argument counts against theism, the *total* evidence makes theism quite likely or sufficiently reasonable to believe. This raises with a vengeance the question of whether, on the whole, the total evidence supports theism. I can't go into that here.[5] Alvin Plantinga, however, gives this question an interesting twist toward the end of chapters 5 and 13. After finding fault with different evidential arguments from evil, he argues that even if

they showed what they purported to show *the theist* might well have much better nonpropositional grounds for her theistic belief than any argument from evil provides her with *propositional* grounds against it. And whether this is so is largely a matter of whether God has given us certain cognitive powers, as classical theism asserts. Thus, according to Plantinga, whether theistic belief is rendered unreasonable by any evidential argument from evil depends on whether classical theism is true.[6]

A second issue that cuts across versions of the evidential argument from evil is this: suppose we knew of some plausible justifying reason for God to permit the sorts of evil we find in our world, a *theodicy*. In that case, one might think that evil would not count against theism at all. In chapter 3, Richard Swinburne argues that we know of a number of actual greater goods that moral and natural evil serve and that these goods constitute major strands *in* a viable theodicy. In chapter 4, Eleonore Stump argues that reflection on Aquinas's commentary on job and his general account of suffering as medicine for a cancer that hinders us from eternal communion with God shows that how we look at suffering is a consequence of much larger issues, specifically, our views about the nature of human happiness and the goal of human life. She urges that to assess the prospects for theodicy we must first resolve these larger issues. I refer the reader to the bibliography for other works of theodicy, e.g., those by Marilyn McCord Adams and John Hick.

Third, evidential arguments from evil purport to show that it is likely to some degree or another that there is no God. But what concept of probability is being used here? I suspect that different concepts are employed in the arguments of, say, Rowe and Draper. Draper explicitly says that he means to be using what is called *epistemic probability*, as opposed to some more objective concept, e.g., statistical probability. Many interesting questions lurk here, some of which are taken up by Draper (chapters 2 and 9), Plantinga (chapters 5 and 13), and Peter van Inwagen (chapters 8 and 12). Be sure to read the notes for these chapters.

4.2 ARGUMENTS FROM INSCRUTABLE EVIL

Let us briefly turn to the most popular version of the evidential argument from evil, the argument that in various ways is defended by Rowe (chapters 1 and 14), Russell (chapter 10) and Gale (chapter 11). They claim that there is no justifying reason for God to permit certain particular horrific evils. At bottom, their basis for saying this is that they cannot see how any reason they know of justifies God in permitting those particular evils, or that no reason they know of does the trick. Call this "the inference from inscrutable to pointless evil." Three main issues lurk here.

First, we need to consider whether there are any plausible reasons that would justify God in permitting the sorts of horrors Rowe et al. point to. Even if we can think of reasons for God to permit moral and natural evil, however, it does not follow that they justify God in permitting any *particular* evil. And it is particular evils that Rowe et al. point to. An interesting question arises: What is it, exactly, that God *must* have a reason to permit? Suppose He has a reason to permit a good deal of undeserved horrific evil. Must He also have a reason to permit each particular horror, or certain narrowly defined kinds of horrific evil, e.g., murder, child

abuse, or suffering from disease? Of course, He *might* have such a reason. But Rowe et al. assume that He *must*. This issue is taken up explicitly in note 11 of van Inwagen's chapter 8, note 12 in Russell's chapter 10, van Inwagen's reply to Russell in chapter 12 and in §1 of chapter 15.[7]

The second main issue is raised most explicitly by Rowe (chapters 1 and 14) and William Alston (chapters 6 and 16). While Alston agrees that we cannot see how any reason we know of justifies God in permitting the particular evils Rowe et al. point to, he argues that they wrongly infer that no good we know of justifies God in permitting them, since we are in no position to make that judgment. Our grasp of the nature of some goods we know of may not allow us to assess their value properly. Moreover, our grasp of the conditions of their realization may not allow us to judge that they could have been realized without God permitting the evil in question. Rowe, however, cites several considerations that he believes make it eminently reasonable to affirm that no good we know of justifies God.

The third main issue is whether the inference from inscrutable to pointless evil is any good. One might argue that the best explanation of inscrutable evil is pointless evil (Russell, chapter 10),[8] or that if some good justified God, we would very likely know of it (Gale, chapter 11),[9] or that it is improbable in the extreme that there are goods outside our ken (Gale),[10] or that skepticism follows if we deny that certain horrific evils are not justifiably permitted by God (Russell and Gale), or that we have conducted the relevant search for reasons for God to permit these things (Russell), or that certain assignments to a Bayes theoretic formulation of the argument are justified (Rowe, chapter 14). In different ways, Alston (chapters 6 and 16), Plantinga (chapter 5), Wykstra (chapter 7), and the author of chapter 15 try to contribute to the dual thesis that not only are these bad reasons to draw the inference from inscrutable to pointless evil, but there is good reason to believe that the inference is *positively irrational*, to borrow Mackie's happy phrase.

4.3. EXPLANATORY ARGUMENTS

Contrary to popular opinion, not every evidential argument from evil employs the premise that there is no justifying reason for God to permit certain facts about evil. Recall the argument I attributed to Draper earlier, the conclusion of which is that the Hypothesis of Indifference (HI) explains known facts about sentient creatures experiencing pain and pleasure (O) much better than theism does, which he glosses as the claim that $\text{Pr}(O/\text{HI}) > \text{Pr}(O/\text{theism})$. A number of interesting issues need further study.

First, one frequently hears that to evaluate the truth of theism we must assess whether it is the best explanation of some relevant range of data. But why suppose that theism is in the business of *explaining* anything, much less various facts about evil? Is theism an explanation? Is theistic belief properly treated as belief that a certain explanation is true, better than its competitors, or some such thing? Draper and others--both theists and nontheists--assume affirmative answers to these questions; but, so far as I know, no one has defended those assumptions in any convincing way. This issue is central to explanatory arguments from evil. For if

theism is not properly treated as an explanation (and we need not stoop to neo-Wittgensteinian perversions to say it is not), then those who cavil at theism for being a bad explanation are caviling up the wrong tree.[11]

Second, in chapter 16, Alston raises a number of considerations that shed doubt on whether Draper's argument really should be thought of as an explanatory argument from evil. At best, Draper focuses on only one factor in determining whether one explanation is better than another. And neither of the explanans he compares—theism and HI—can be properly thought of as explanations, since neither is specific enough to throw any light on why the explanandum, O, occurred. Perhaps there is little point in comparing the explanatory power of theism and HI vis-a-vis O without using theistic or HI-istic stories as bridge principles that shed some light on why O occurred.

Third, is it really true that, given the biological role played by both pain and pleasure in organisms, and that independent of the effect of theistic stories on $\text{Pr}(O/\text{theism})$, $\text{Pr}(O/\text{HI}) > \text{Pr}(O/\text{theism})$? In chapter 2, Draper defends an affirmative answer, while in chapter 13, Plantinga defends a negative one.[12]

Fourth, Draper argued that there were only two viable responses to his argument: (i) refute the argument by telling a theistic story that significantly raised $\text{Pr}(O/\text{theism})$, or (ii) make a case for preferring theism to HI that outweighs the prima facie case for preferring HI to theism. According to Peter van Inwagen, this list of responses is incomplete. If we simply could not know whether to expect O on theism, then we would be in no position to judge that $\text{Pr}(O/\text{HI}) > \text{Pr}(O/\text{theism})$, and this, argues van Inwagen in chapter 8, is indeed the case. In chapters 9, 10, and 11, Draper, Russell, and Gale argue that the epistemic and moral principles van Inwagen uses and assumes lead to objectionable versions of skepticism. Van Inwagen clarifies his view and defends himself in chapter 12.

As a matter of practical necessity I have only gestured at some of the issues that the authors in this book address. Nothing can replace the careful study of their essays, to which I hope my reader now quickly turns.[13]

NOTES

1. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200-212, reprinted in *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), and in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

2. Of course, anyone modestly acquainted with medieval philosophy will tell you that the proposition that evil exists is not an *essential* part of theism. Perhaps Mackie just meant to voice his conviction that it is exceedingly unreasonable for a theist to deny that evil exists, which seems quite right.

3. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 25, Art. 3, for the sort of understanding that's proper.

4. The point I'm making here was first made, I believe, by Nelson Pike in "Hume on Evil," *Philosophical Review* (1963), reprinted in *God and Evil*, ed. Pike.

5. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1979), for a contemporary treatment of the topic.

6. This idea of Plantinga's will be developed more fully in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). See also William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), for what else might be said in defense of *nonpropositional* grounds for theistic belief.

7. See also Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), and "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (Fall 1988), both in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (forthcoming).

8. See also Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), chap. 9.

9. See also William Rowe, "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

10. See also Michael Tooley, "The Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 89-134.

11. I do not mean to imply that Draper or anyone else is not aware of the importance of this issue. Indeed, Draper is so fully aware of it that he is the guest editor of a future issue of *Topoi*, the topic of which is "Is Theism a Theory?" See also John O'Leary-Hawthorne and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Are Beliefs about God Theoretical Beliefs? Reflections on Aquinas and Kant," *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

12. For another negative answer, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Theism, the Hypothesis of Indifference and the Biological Role of Pain and Pleasure," *Faith and Philosophy* (1994).

13. In writing this introduction, I am indebted to Paul Draper, "Probabilistic Arguments from Evil," *Religious Studies* (1993).