Problems of Evil

This paper is a very broad-brush introduction to my way of thinking about problems of evil. While I note some of the places in which my views are controversial, I attempt neither justification nor defence. I shall say little about arguments from evil; some of what I have to say on that topic is said in Oppy (2013a)(forthcoming a)(forthcoming b). I begin with an account of worldviews, and the proper ways to go about comparing and assessing worldviews.

1. Worldviews

In theory, worldviews are comprehensive accounts of our world and our place within that world. In practice, what I shall call ‘worldviews’ are merely gestures towards worldviews properly so-called; what I shall henceforth call ‘worldviews’ are accounts that fall well short of being comprehensive.

Suppose that we model a worldview as a set of sentences in a natural language (e.g. English). We can think of the worldview that is modelled as the logical closure of the given set of sentences. But, for any set of sentences that models a consistent worldview, there will be sentences S for which it is true that neither S nor ~S belongs to the logical closure of that set of sentences. In practice, this will be true for sentences that already belong to the natural language; in theory, we can appeal to merely possible extensions of the vocabulary of our natural language.

Perhaps we should rather say that worldviews are comprehensive fundamental accounts of our world and our place within that world. However, it is not clear that this would mark an advance: for why should we suppose that current natural languages are adequate for the formulation of all claims that would figure in any comprehensive fundamental account of our world and our place within that world? Given the expressive incompleteness of current natural languages, we may as well pretend that worldviews are comprehensive accounts of our world and our place within that world.

2. Variety of Worldviews

Given that worldviews are comprehensive accounts of our world and our place within that world, there are very many distinct worldviews. There are religious worldviews: Buddhist
worldviews, Christian worldviews, Daoist worldviews, Hindu worldviews, Jain worldviews, Jewish worldviews, Muslim worldviews, Shinto worldviews, Sikh worldviews, and so on. There are also worldviews that are, at best, marginally religious: Confucian worldviews, many traditional indigenous worldviews, and so forth. And there are non-religious worldviews: humanistic worldviews, naturalistic worldviews, materialistic worldviews, and the like.

Moreover, the diversity that we see at one level of description of worldviews is replicated at lower levels. Among Christian worldviews, there are Eastern Orthodox worldviews, Catholic worldviews, Protestant worldviews, Restorationist worldviews, and other assorted worldviews, e.g. those associated with the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church, the Anglican Church, and so on. Among Protestant worldviews, there are Anabaptist worldviews, Baptist worldviews, Pentacostalist worldviews, Adventist worldviews, Lutheran worldviews, Calvinist worldviews, and other assorted worldviews such as those associated with Methodism, Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and so forth. And so on.

Given the diversity of worldviews, it is obvious that no worldview commands the assent of a significant proportion of the population of the world. For any entertained worldview, that worldview is not the worldview of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the earth. Of course, if we appeal to higher-level kinds, then there are kinds of worldviews that command the assent of significant proportions of the world’s population—e.g., it is plausible to claim that a significant majority of people have a religious worldview. But the comparison and evaluation of worldviews at higher levels seems evidently intractable: e.g., how could anyone seriously hope to argue that, simply as such, non-religious worldviews are better than religious worldviews?

3. Questions about Worldviews

Comparison and evaluation of worldviews is central to philosophy of religion. Of course, religions are more than religious worldviews: religions ‘include’ people, behaviours, practices, institutions, histories, documents, artefacts, and so on. And there are philosophical questions to be asked about the ‘included’ people, behaviours, practices, institutions, histories, documents, artefacts, and so forth. Moreover, similar points can be made about worldviews that are non-religious or, at best, marginally religious: these worldviews are also ‘associated’ with people, behaviours, practices, institutions, histories, documents, artefacts, and the like; and there are philosophical questions to be asked about these ‘associated’ people, behaviours, practices, institutions, histories, documents, artefacts, etc. But, alongside philosophical questions about people, behaviours, practices, institutions,
histories, documents, artefacts, and so forth, there are philosophical questions about worldviews that deservedly occupy a central place in philosophy of religion.

Given the diversity of worldviews, it is natural to ask whether some are better than others. Is there one among the worldviews currently entertained that is true? Are there some among the worldviews currently entertained that are closer to the truth than other worldviews currently entertained? Is there one among the worldviews currently entertained that is uniquely epistemically justified? Are there some among the worldviews currently entertained that are better epistemically justified than other worldviews currently entertained? Is there one among the worldviews currently entertained that explains all of the relevant data better than any other worldview currently entertained? Are there some among the worldviews currently entertained that explain all of the relevant data better than any other worldviews currently entertained? And so forth.

4. Assessment of Worldviews

Since we model worldviews as theories, we can subsume questions about the comparison and evaluation of worldviews under questions about the comparison and evaluation of theories. There is, of course, no agreement about how theories should be compared and evaluated. Many favour Bayesian methods. However, it seems to me that, at least in the kind of case presently before us, Bayesian methods are intractable: in particular, there is no acceptable, tractable method for assigning prior probabilities to theories. Given the intractability of Bayesian methods, it seems reasonable to me to seek an alternative method, couched in terms of the weighing of theoretical virtues. I shall provide a very sketchy outline of my preferred account in the following section.

Given the sheer diversity of worldviews, one might hope to reduce the task of comparison and evaluation by treating worldviews in groups, or collections, or packages. Equivalently, given the sheer diversity of worldviews, one might hope to reduce the task of comparison and evaluation by treating ‘abbreviated’ worldviews, in which particular sub-views are put forward for evaluation. However, as we shall see, while some parts of the proper process of evaluation of worldviews can accommodate this kind of ‘abbreviation’, there are other parts of the proper process of evaluation of worldviews that cannot accommodate this kind of ‘abbreviation’.

5. Three Stages of Assessment
There are three stages in the proper comparative evaluation of worldviews.

1. **Articulation**: The first stage is the formulation of worldviews as articulated theories. If there is to be genuine comparative evaluation of worldviews, then we need to formulate all of the to-be-compared worldviews to the same level of detail, and with the same degree of care.

2. **Internal Evaluation**: The second stage is the determination of which worldviews fail on their own terms. On the one hand, worldviews may be inconsistent; on the other hand, worldviews may be inconsistent with data. The paradigm case—and, in the eyes of some theorists, the only case—is logical inconsistency.

3. **Comparative Evaluation**: The third stage of assessment is the determination of which worldview (if any) that survives the second stage of assessment is most virtuous: which worldview scores best on an appropriate weighting of theoretical commitments—ontological commitments, ideological commitments—explanation of data, predictive accuracy, fit with well-established knowledge or well-established theory, and so forth.

Each of these stages of assessment merits some further comment.

The significance of the first stage of assessment is hard to exaggerate. If we do not compare and assess best formulations of competing worldviews—formulations made with the same level of care to the same level of detail—then our comparison and assessment is almost certainly going to be worthless. If we compare our own carefully formulated detailed worldviews with carelessly and sketchily formulated competitors, it is London to a brick that we shall arrive at the conclusion that our own worldviews are to be preferred. But it is obvious that any such performances are empty, and remains so no matter how much others who share our own worldviews congratulate us on our achievements.

If a worldview fails on its own terms as a result of logical inconsistency, then it will be possible to give a logical demonstration of this failure. Moreover, in any interesting case, it will be possible to give a logical demonstration of the logical inconsistency of a worldview iff it is possible to give a logical demonstration of some key thesis that is rejected by the failed worldview from claims all of which belong to that failed worldview. As I noted above, it is controversial whether there are other kinds of inconsistency that can cause worldviews to fail on their own terms. Some may think that there are cases of probabilistic inconsistency, or explanatory inconsistency, or the like that, while they are not cases of logical inconsistency, are nonetheless cases in which worldviews fail on their own terms. If there are interesting cases of this kind then, I suppose, there are analogous connections between establishing the non-logical inconsistency of the worldview and giving a successful non-logical argument for a key thesis that is rejected by the failed worldview. For the purposes
of the present discussion, I shall take no stance on the question whether there can be successful “non-logical” arguments.

In order to compare and assess properly articulated worldviews that survive internal evaluation, we may need to have a method for weighing theoretical virtues. In cases where one worldview dominates another—i.e. in cases where, for each of the theoretical virtues, a given worldview scores better than another—we need no further method in order to arrive at the conclusion that we should prefer the dominating worldview. But in the remaining cases—i.e., in cases where one worldview scores better than a second on some of the theoretical virtues, but worse than that second on other theoretical virtues—it is clear that some further method is required. It is no easy matter to provide such a method; there is certainly no current agreement about how to weigh theoretical virtues.

6. Data and Established Theory

There is a decision to be made about our use of the term ‘data’. On the one hand, we might think of our data as something that is independent of our worldviews. On the other hand, we might think of our data as the claims that are common to all of the worldviews that are being assessed. If we suppose that data is something independent of worldview, then we shall say that worldviews fail on their own terms when they are inconsistent or inconsistent with data (as we said above). If, on the other hand, we suppose that data is that part of worldviews that is common to all, then we shall say that worldviews fail on their own terms when they are inconsistent; but we shall add that worldviews can be inconsistent in those subparts that do not contain data.

There is also a decision to be made about how to handle other well-established domains of knowledge. It is fairly standard to suppose that ‘fit with well-established knowledge’ or ‘fit with well-established theory’ is one of the most significant theoretical virtues. For the purposes of evaluation of worldviews, we might suppose—or perhaps stipulate—that ‘data’ includes well-established knowledge and well-established theory. However, if we proceed in this way, then the assessment of ‘fit with well-established knowledge’ or ‘fit with well-established theory’ will be part of the ‘internal evaluation’ of worldviews; and, moreover, we cannot then simply suppose that data are just the claims that are common to all of the worldviews being assessed.

The neatest solution, I think, is to insist that only claims that are common to the worldviews in question are data. Insofar as well-established knowledge or well-established theory is common to the worldviews in question, it counts as data; insofar as well-established
knowledge or well-established theory is not common to the worldviews in question, it is only taken into account when we reach the stage of comparative evaluation.

7. Theism and Naturalism (Best Formulations)

Suppose that we are interested in comparing theistic worldviews with naturalistic worldviews. Since there are substantive differences between distinct theistic worldviews, and substantive differences between distinct naturalistic worldviews, the most that we can hope to do, in a single comparative step, is to compare one sufficiently well-worked out theistic worldview with one sufficiently well-worked out naturalistic worldview. The most important thing is that we should have best formulations of theistic and naturalistic worldviews worked out to the same level of detail, and to whatever level of detail is appropriate for the purposes of our comparison.

I shall suppose, for the purposes of future discussion, that naturalism says, at least, that causal reality is natural reality: there are none but natural causes involving none but natural entities. And I shall similarly suppose that theism says, at least, that God is the supernatural cause of natural reality (and perhaps of further supernatural domains as well).

These brief characterisations capture what I take to be an important truth about naturalism and theism. First, there are no entities in which naturalists believe but theists do not; but there are entities in which theists believe, but naturalists do not—at least God, and perhaps also angels, demons, and so forth. Second, there are no events in which naturalists believe, but theists do not; but there are events in which theists believe but naturalists do not—God’s creation of the natural world, God’s acting in the history of the natural world, perhaps angels and demons acting in the history of the natural world, and so on.

Of course, it should not be immediately assumed that this important truth about naturalism and theism points to an all-things-considered reason to prefer naturalism to theism. The additional entities that are postulated by theism might pay their way because they lead to better explanations of data, or improved predictions, or better fit with other established theory, or unification of fundamental principles, or the like. However, if all else is equal—i.e. if, on all other considerations, theism manages nothing better than a tie with naturalism—then there is, indeed, all-things-considered reason to prefer naturalism to theism.

8. Simplicity
The important truth about naturalism and theism discussed in the previous section may be restated as the claim that naturalism is *simpler* than theism. Naturalism says that there is nothing but the natural world, and that the natural world instantiates none but natural properties. (For the purposes of this accounting, ‘topic neutral’ properties are stipulated to count as natural properties.) Theism says that there is more on each count: there is more than the natural world, and there are instantiated properties that do not figure among the natural properties. On point of both ontological and ideological commitments, theism has more commitments than naturalism has.

Perhaps some might be moved to complain that this accounting fails to pay proper heed to the doctrine of divine simplicity. On a rough and ready understanding of that doctrine, it entails both that it is not really correct to say that God is an additional ‘thing’ and that it is not really correct to say that the divine attributes are additional ‘properties’. Setting aside worries about the coherence of the doctrine of divine simplicity—even in this rough and ready formulation—there are at least two lines of reply. First, even if we grant that God has *sui generis* ontological standing, it remains that case that God has *some* ontological standing; and so it remains that case that there is an ontological cost to be added to the theoretical balance sheet. Second, in most interesting cases, there are many other entities and properties that theism adds to the natural entities and natural properties of a corresponding naturalism: angels, demons, miracles, and so forth. Even if God added nothing to the theoretical balance sheet, it would still typically be the case that, on point of both ontological and ideological commitments, theism has more commitments than naturalism has.

9. ‘Evil’

In the literature about ‘problems of evil’, there is some discussion about alleged connotations of the word ‘evil’. According to some, ‘evil’ is an expression that has no proper use in non-theistic worldviews: for, according to those who defend this view, something is evil if and only if it is contrary to the will of God, or the like. Moreover, according to some, the fact that ‘evil’ is an expression that has no proper use in non-theistic worldviews somehow insulates theistic worldviews from objections involving considerations about evil. I see at least three difficulties for this claim.

First, even if it were necessarily true that something is evil iff it is contrary to the will of God, that would not establish that use of the word ‘evil’ carries the connotation that things to which the word applies are contrary to the will of God. Common usage could—and, indeed, surely does—establish that ‘evil’ can be a synonym for words like ‘bad’, ‘harmful’, and the
like; and these words plainly do not carry any connotation that things to which they apply is contrary to the will of God.

Second, even if it were true that the word ‘evil’ does carry the connotation that things to which the word applies are contrary to the will of God, that would make no difference to the second stage in the comparison and evaluation of worldviews. If theism fails on its own terms because it is committed to making logically contradictory claims about God and evil, then it fails on its own terms even though the word ‘evil’ carries the connotation that things to which the word applies are contrary to the will of God.

Third, even if it were true that the word ‘evil’ does carry the connotation that things to which the word applies are contrary to the will of God, we could simply recast the subject matter of our discussion in terms of suffering. In particular, when we come to the third stage in the comparison of worldviews, we can ask whether theism or naturalism gives a better explanation of the data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe. In asking this question, we can carry over taxonomy familiar from discussions of evil: e.g., that there is (moral) suffering that is caused, at least in part, by human agency; and that there is (natural) suffering that is not caused, even in part, by human agency. Moreover, in asking this question, it is clear that we can carry over all of the responses and distinctions made familiar in discussions couched in terms of ‘evil’: e.g. we can distinguish cases of horrendous suffering from more minor cases of suffering; and we can suppose that considerations about free will might go at least some way towards explaining why there are cases of (moral) suffering caused, at least in part, by human agency.

10. Internal Defeat

The question whether considerations about evil lead to the internal defeat of either theism or naturalism is intimately connected to the question whether there is a successful argument from evil that defeats either theism or naturalism.

I take it to be obvious on its face that there is no argument from evil that defeats naturalism. If there were to be such an argument, then it would be an argument that contained a non-redundant premise about the distribution of evil in the universe: that there is evil, or that there is moral evil, or that there is natural evil, or that there is a lot of evil, or that there is a lot of moral evil, or that there is a lot of natural evil, or that there is horrendous evil, or that there is horrendous moral evil, or that there is horrendous natural evil, or that there is a lot of horrendous evil, or that there is a lot of horrendous moral evil, or that there is a lot of horrendous natural evil, or the like. But how could a claim like one of these be a non-redundant premise in a successful argument against naturalism?
I anticipate that some may object that there are conditions that must be satisfied in order for there to be a distribution of evil in the universe: for example, that there must be creatures that are capable of suffering. If it turns out that naturalism can give no consistent account of the presence in the universe of creatures that are capable of suffering, wouldn’t that be an argument from evil that defeats naturalism? Not at all! If it turns out that the claim that there are living organisms capable of suffering is inconsistent with other naturalistic principles then, while naturalism will be defeated, claims about the distribution of evil in the universe will not be non-redundant premises in arguments that exhibit that contradiction.

By way of contrast, it is not obvious on its face that there is no argument from evil that defeats theism. It is conceivable that fully articulated theistic worldviews are rendered inconsistent by claims about the distribution of evil in our universe. Consequently, it is conceivable that there are successful arguments from evil—containing non-redundant premises about the distribution of evil in our universe—which exhibit the relevant inconsistencies. Moreover, it seems unlikely that one could hope to respond to the thought, that fully articulated theistic worldviews are rendered inconsistent by claims about the distribution of evil in our universe, by giving a demonstration of the consistency of one or more fully articulated theistic worldviews. After all, on the one hand, it is doubtful whether we could construct even one fully articulated theistic worldview; and, on the other hand, there are severe limitations on our ability to prove that theories are consistent.

However, I think that it is quite clear that no one has yet produced an argument which shows that our current best partially articulated theistic worldviews are rendered inconsistent by claims about the distribution of evil in our universe. When we examine extant arguments from evil, we always find that the (perhaps merely alleged) contradictions involve claims that theists can—and typically do—reasonably reject.

Mackie (1955) derived a contradiction involving the claims that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do and that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can; but, in agreement with Plantinga (1974), theists invariably reject one or both of these claims. Rowe (1979) derived a contradiction involving the claims that there are instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse and that 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; but theists invariably reject one or both of these claims (with most rejecting at least the first).

I anticipate that some may insist that, while theists do reject key claims in arguments that would otherwise show that their theism is contradictory, there are costs involved in the rejection of these claims. I agree that there may be costs involved in the rejection of these claims; but I do not agree that this is an objection to what I have just said. We are here
considering whether best formulations of theism are subject to internal defeat; it should not be surprising that best formulations of theism avoid internal defeat, though perhaps at the cost of some loss of overall theoretical virtue. Of course, whether there is loss of overall theoretical virtue is a question for the third stage of comparison, to which we now turn.

11. Comparison

It is not a straightforward matter to assess the bearing that considerations about evil have on the determination of the comparative theoretical virtues of theism and naturalism. Ultimately, determination of the comparative theoretical virtues of theories is a global matter: what counts is which theory does better overall, on an appropriate weighting of theoretical commitment, explanation of data, predictive accuracy, fit with established knowledge, and so forth. In particular, then, when it comes to questions about data, what matters is which theory does better at explaining total data. However, it does not follow—at least not immediately—that no interest attaches to the question what difference data about the distribution of suffering and flourishing in the universe makes to the assessment of the comparative overall virtue of theism and naturalism.

A natural first thought is that, in order to make a serious comparison of the explanatory powers of—the goodness of the explanations of data offered by—competing theories, we shall need to make a piecewise comparison of the theories over an appropriate partition of the total data. If we are to compare the performance of two theories against a large amount of data, then we must be able to assess each of the theories, against portions of that data, for such as things as consistency with the data, goodness of explanation of the data, and so forth. But, if we are able to compare the performance of two theories against portions of a large amount of data, then, at least in principle, we should also be able to trace out dependencies between particular theoretical commitments of those theories and particular portions of that total data.

Roughly speaking, it seems to me that, while there are no particular theoretical commitments of naturalism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, there may be particular theoretical commitments of theism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe.

On the one hand, there is no natural—non-gerrymandered—sub-theory of naturalism that prompts questions, or worries, or issues related to the distribution of suffering or flourishing in our universe. On naturalistic accounts of the origins and evolution of life on earth, there is nothing surprising about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of
the earth. In particular, there are no theoretical commitments of naturalism—no ontological or ideological commitments of naturalism—that are keyed to the data about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth; there are no special hypotheses that naturalists introduce to accommodate or to explain the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth.

On the other hand, it is pretty much universally recognised that the same is not true for theism. In this case, there may be natural—non-gerrymandered—sub-theories that do prompt questions, or worries, or issues that are related to the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, and, in particular, to the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. If we suppose—as theists typically do—that, in the beginning, there was nothing but a perfect being—omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so forth—and if everything else is the creation of that perfect being, then what explains the presence of evil in our universe? If we suppose—as theists typically do—that God exercises strong providential control over everything that happens and that God would prefer that we do not suffer, then why is it that we suffer as we do?

Furthermore, it is pretty much universally recognised that there may be theoretical commitments of theistic worldviews that are keyed to the distribution of suffering in our universe. Some theists suppose that the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe is a consequence of the activities of demons and other malign supernatural agents; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are demons and other malign supernatural agents is that this supposition explains the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe. Some theists suppose that God’s permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil that is found in our universe is, in part, due to God’s recognition that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being an at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being an at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil is that this supposition explains God’s permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe.

Of course, it does not follow, from the fact that in some theistic worldviews there are theoretical commitments that are keyed to the (explanation of the) distribution of suffering in our universe, that in all theistic worldviews there are theoretical commitments that are keyed to the (explanation of the) distribution of suffering in our universe. While the popularity among theists of the enterprise of constructing theodicies does suggest that there is widespread recognition that theistic worldviews should provide answers to questions or worries about the distribution of suffering in our universe and God’s involvement in and attitude towards that distribution, it remains open to theists to claim that those answers can be provided without appealing to any theoretical commitments that
are keyed to the provision of those answers. For all that has been said so far, it is at least conceivable that there are theistic worldviews in which there are no theoretical commitments for which it is true that the sole reason—or even the major reason—that theists have for taking on those commitments concerns their role in the explanation of the distribution of suffering in our universe.

If, for example, the main reason(s), for supposing that there are demons and other malign supernatural agents, have nothing to do with the explanation of the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe, then—it might be supposed—the invocation, of the activities of demons and other malign supernatural agents in the explanation of the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe, can be taken to mark no greater theoretical commitment for theism than is incurred by naturalism in the latter’s explanation of the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe. If, to take another example, the main reason(s), for supposing that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being a distribution of horrendous moral evil relevantly similar to the actual distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe, have nothing to do with the explanation of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe, then—it might be supposed—the invocation, of goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being a distribution of horrendous moral evil relevantly similar to the actual distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe, can be taken to mark no greater theoretical commitment for theism than is incurred by naturalism in the latter’s explanation of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe.

There are two cases to be distinguished. On the one hand, it may be that there are theoretical commitments directly attributable to theistic explanation of the distribution of evils in our universe. In this case, we can say that there is a good sense in which the distribution of evils in our universe favours naturalism over theism: *all else being equal*, these additional theoretical commitments would constitute a reason to prefer naturalism to theism. On the other hand, it may be that there are no theoretical commitments directly attributable to theistic explanation of the distribution of evils in our universe. In this case, we can only say that the distribution of evils in our universe favours neither naturalism over theism nor theism over naturalism: *all else being equal*, the distribution of evil in our universe constitutes neither a reason to prefer naturalism to theism nor a reason to prefer theism to naturalism.

Of course, as we noted earlier, *all else being equal*, the greater simplicity of naturalism does provide a reason to prefer it to theism. If, setting aside considerations about the distribution of evil in our universe, theism and naturalism are tied on all considerations other than simplicity, then, taking considerations about the distribution of evil in our universe into account would still yield the result that there is all-things-considered reason to prefer naturalism to theism.
While this last point is obvious, it is one that some—perhaps even many—theists have ignored. Some—perhaps even many—theists have claimed that considerations about the distribution of evil in our universe constitute the sole reason for so much as suspecting that there might be best non-theistic worldviews that are superior to best theistic worldviews. However, this assessment seems to me to be wildly mistaken. If there is no other domain on which theism has an explanatory advantage then—as I have just argued—naturalism’s superiority to theism is established even if there are theistic explanations of the distribution of evil in our universe that incur no ‘additional’ theoretical commitments. Moreover, while I cannot hope to argue for this here, it seems to me that naturalists can quite reasonably believe that there is no other domain on which theism has an explanatory advantage over naturalism. (I set out some of the case for this last claim in Oppy (2013b).)

12. Concluding Remarks

I have long insisted that many theorists—both theists and naturalists—greatly overestimate the significance of considerations concerning the distribution of evil in our universe for the evaluation of the comparative theoretical virtues of theism and naturalism. While I am tempted to think that, in fact, theists do typically incur ‘additional’ theoretical commitments because of the explanations they give of the distribution of evil in our universe—and while I assume that this is so in the relevant section of Oppy (2013b)—I do not think that it really matters whether I am right or wrong about this. Moreover, and more importantly, I do not think that there is much to be gained from arguing over this point: whether theists typically incur ‘additional’ theoretical commitments because of the explanations that they give of the distribution of evil in our universe has no special significance for either the second (‘internal’) or third (‘comparative’) stages of the assessment of best formulations of theistic and naturalistic worldviews.

One final observation: While I have said no one has yet produced an argument which shows that our current best partially articulated theistic worldviews are rendered inconsistent by claims about the distribution of evil in our universe, I have not said that we may reasonably suppose that no one will ever produce an argument which shows that our current best partially articulated theistic worldviews are rendered inconsistent by claims about the distribution of evil in our universe. I think that it remains an open question whether theists will ever provide a satisfying explanation of the emergence of imperfection from perfection that is posited in their theories; but I also think that it remains an open question whether naturalists will ever be able to demonstrate that there is an inconsistency in theories which posit that imperfection emerges from perfection.

References


