

## **Refuting van Inwagen's 'Refutation': Evidentialism again**

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### **Introduction**

It is no longer widely regarded as true that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God. Some worlds, perhaps some not so distant worlds, contain both a perfect being and preventable evil.<sup>1</sup> After a lamentably long time, we're told that it might even be the case that the actual world is among them. But, how likely is that to be true?

According to the evidentialists, the amounts and kinds of evil that we actually observe, though consistent with the epistemic position that God might exist, constitute *prima facie* evidence against God's actual existence. So, in the absence of additional contravening evidence, theism is not a belief that any rational person in our actual epistemic situation can maintain.<sup>2</sup>

The strongest version of the evidential argument from evil takes the following general form.<sup>3</sup> There is an hypothesis *HI* that is inconsistent with theism, and that explains the extent and kinds of suffering in the actual world far better than the hypothesis of theism. Since there has been no plausible response on behalf of theism, and since there is no reason to believe that such a response is forthcoming, hypothesis *HI* is epistemically preferable to the hypothesis of theism. Given our epistemic situation, then, theism is not a rational belief.

In section 1, I present the strong evidential argument from evil in detail and the well-received refutation of the argument developed by Peter van Inwagen. In section 2, I show that the strong evidential argument from evil has not been refuted. Indeed, not even weaker versions of the argument have been refuted. In section 3, I show that, even in the absence of prior probabilities for theism and atheism, the evidential argument from evil has not been refuted.

### 1. The strong evidential argument from evil

Let 'S' stand for the proposition describing in detail the actual amount, kinds, and distribution of suffering of all sentient beings who have ever existed. Let 'theism' stand for the proposition that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being who created the universe. 'Atheism' will, then, stand for the negation of theism as described. The evidential argument from evil constitutes a defense of the following proposition:

E.  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism}) > \Pr(S / \text{Theism})$ .

The probabilities in E, and throughout, are intended to be epistemic probabilities, probabilities relative to the 'epistemic background' or epistemic situation of an individual or community. So, unlike objective probability, the epistemic probability of *S* on atheism, for instance, need not be the same for all individuals or communities.<sup>4</sup>

The epistemic challenge to the theist presented by the fact of *S* is not at all surprising. Suffering is an intrinsic evil. If an omnibenevolent being were to allow such suffering, it would presumably, at the very least, be distributed according to desert. An omnipotent and omniscient being *could*, presumably, so arrange matters that only those sentient beings who so deserving are so served. The actual pattern of suffering recorded in *S* is not what we would expect under the assumption of theism.

The extensive suffering of sentient beings is just what we would expect given pure chance and the biological utility of pain. It has little or nothing to do with one's moral status before a perfect being. *S* rather records a pattern of suffering considerably more probable under the assumption of atheism.

Peter van Inwagen declines the option of offering another theodicy in response to the evidential argument from evil. It is acknowledged, earnestly, that there is no convincing argument that *S* is to be expected under the assumption of theism. On the contrary, van Inwagen maintains that no one is in a position to know even the probability of *S* under the assumption of theism. The latter half of the inequality specified in E cannot be determined, given our epistemic situation, and so, van Inwagen maintains, we lack epistemic warrant to assert E.

The argument for the claim that we can not know the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  turns on several controversial theses about the epistemology of metaphysical possibility and intrinsic value.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, these theses need not be engaged. Rather, let's concede van Inwagen's claim,

V. Given our epistemic situation, we cannot know the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$ .

In section 2, I show that the strong evidential argument from evil is valid in spite of V. And so are several weaker versions of the evidential argument.

## 2. The evidential argument with prior probabilities

Van Inwagen maintains that since  $V$  is true, the evidential argument does not succeed in establishing  $E$ . Though we know that  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$  is high, we do not know what to say about  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$ ; since we do not know their relative value, we do not know that  $E$  is true.

Does the fact, alone, that  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$  is high provide any epistemic preference to atheism over theism? Van Inwagen notes that "... [he] should be very surprised to learn of someone who believed that the premisses of the [following] argument entailed its conclusion".<sup>6</sup>

EAE I.

1. The probability of  $S$  on atheism is high.
  2. The probability of  $S$  on theism is unknown.
  3. Atheism and theism are inconsistent.
  4.  $S$  is known to be true.
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$\therefore$  For anyone in our epistemic situation,  $S$  constitutes a *prima facie* reason against theism.

Suppose that our epistemic view was agnostic prior to learning that  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$  is high, and learning the full extent and depth of the suffering specified in  $S$ . If so, then our prior, uninformed epistemic probabilities for atheism and theism are equal. It follows that EAE I is valid.

Consider the following argument whose structure is identical to EAE I. Suppose that there are two coins, Coin A and Coin B. Suppose we know that Coin A is two-headed. The probability that Coin A will come up 'heads' if tossed is high; it is, in fact, 1. We know nothing about the probability tossing 'heads' on Coin B. Coin B might be biased, it might not be, we simply have no idea. We do know that exactly one coin was tossed and that it came up 'heads'. Finally, prior to learning that a 'heads' was tossed, suppose that the epistemic probability that Coin A was tossed equaled the epistemic probability the Coin B was tossed.

EAE II.

- 1'. The probability of tossing 'heads' given Coin A is 1.
  - 2'. The probability of tossing 'heads' given Coin B is unknown.
  - 3'. One and only one coin was tossed.
  - 4'. It is known that the tossed coin came up 'heads'.
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$\therefore$  For anyone in our epistemic situation, the fact that the tossed coin came up 'heads' constitutes a *prima facie* reason against Coin B.

Now, notice that EAE II is valid. Given premise (2') we know nothing about the actual probability of tossing 'heads' given Coin B. But, we do know that the probability of tossing 'heads' given Coin B *might be* 1. If the probability is 1, then given premisses (1'), (3') and (4'), the probability that Coin B was tossed must be equal to the probability that Coin A was tossed. In short, if the probability of tossing 'heads' on Coin B is 1, then the fact that a coin was tossed and it came up 'heads' entails that the probability Coin B was tossed is 0.5.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the probability of tossing 'heads' on Coin B might be less than 1. If so, then given premisses (1'), (3') and (4'), we know the probability that Coin B was tossed is less than 0.5.<sup>8</sup> We can conclude, then, that the premisses of EAE II entail that the probability that Coin B was tossed is *0.5 or less*, and the probability that Coin A was tossed is *0.5 or greater*. EAE II establishes that there is *prima facie* reason against Coin B.<sup>9</sup>

If the probability of *S* given atheism is 1, an assumption that is not at all unreasonable, then EAE I analogously establishes that anyone in our epistemic situation has a *prima facie* reason against theism. EAE I establishes not E but E1.

$$E1. \Pr(\text{Theism} / S) \leq 0.5 \ \& \ \Pr(\text{Atheism} / S) \geq 0.5$$

E1 is weaker than E. Given E, and our prior probabilities, we would know that  $\Pr(\text{Atheism} / S) > \Pr(\text{Theism} / S)$ . Because it could not be the case that *S* provides more evidence for theism than it does for atheism, E1 tells us that the posterior probability of theism could not be higher than the posterior probability of atheism.

$$E2. \Pr[\Pr(\text{Theism} / S) \leq \Pr(\text{Atheism} / S)] = 1$$

Since no one could be correct in epistemically preferring theism to atheism, given *S*, the strong evidentialist argument from evil is valid. *S* provides *prima facie* reason against theism.

But, consider weaker versions of the evidentialist argument from evil based on the assumption that the probability of *S* given atheism is less than 1.

EAE III.

- 1''. The probability of *S* given atheism is 0.9.
- 2''. The probability of *S* given theism is unknown.
- 3''. Atheism and theism are inconsistent.
- 4''. *S* is known to be true.

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∴ For anyone in our epistemic situation, *S* constitutes a *prima facie* reason against theism.

EAE III establishes E3.

$$E3. \Pr[\Pr(\text{Theism} / S) \leq \Pr(\text{Atheism} / S)] = 0.9$$

We know that the posterior probability of theism,  $\Pr(\text{Theism} / S)$ , is greater than the posterior probability of atheism,  $\Pr(\text{Atheism} / S)$ , if and only if theism is more likely than atheism on  $S$ .<sup>9</sup> We have assumed that the likelihood of atheism on  $S$  is 0.9. Given our epistemic situation, no value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  is more probable than any other. The epistemic probability, then, that the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  exceeds the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$  is 0.1.

Since it is very *improbable* that  $S$  provides *more* evidence for theism than for atheism, E3 tells us that from our epistemic perspective the posterior probability of theism has small chance of exceeding the posterior probability of atheism. In this epistemic situation, attenuated as it is, there remains *prima facie* reason against theism.

Weaker versions of the evidential argument from evil which assume, minimally, a likelihood greater than 0.5 of atheism on  $S$  are, for similar reasons, also valid. Weaker versions of the argument show, as should be expected, that it is improbable (though perhaps not very improbable) that the value of  $\Pr(\text{Theism} / S)$  exceeds the value of  $\Pr(\text{Atheism} / S)$ .

### 3. The Evidential argument without prior probabilities

Suppose that we do not know the value of either  $\Pr(\text{Theism})$  or of  $\Pr(\text{Atheism})$ . Even if we knew the likelihood of theism on  $S$  and atheism on  $S$ , we could not derive their posterior probabilities. It is true nonetheless that both the strong and weak evidential arguments from evil are valid.

Consider the strong evidential argument under which we assign  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$  the value 1. As noted above, it might also be the case that  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism}) = 1$ . If so, then  $S$  provides no greater confirmation for theism than it does for atheism. Of course, it might be the case that  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  is less than 1. If so, then  $S$  provides greater confirmation for atheism than for theism. In any case, we know that E4 is true.

E4.  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism}) \leq \Pr(S / \text{Atheism})$

In words, E4 asserts that theism is not more likely than atheism on  $S$ . Since  $S$  does not provide greater evidence for theism than it does for atheism, we have *prima facie* reason against theism. Anyone who preferred theism to atheism on the basis of the evidence in  $S$  would be mistaken.

As above, suppose that the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Atheism}) = 0.9$ . Atheism is then very likely, but not certain, on  $S$ . If theism is more likely than atheism on  $S$ , then of course the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism}) > 0.9$ . By hypothesis, we do not know the value of  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$ . Given our epistemic situation, it is no more probable that  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  has one particular value, or range of values, than another. The epistemic probability that  $S$  provides more evidence for theism than it does for atheism is, then, 0.1, and we derive E5.<sup>10</sup>

$$E5. \Pr[\Pr(S / \text{Theism}) \leq \Pr(S / \text{Atheism})] = 0.9$$

Even granting that we do not know whether  $S$  actually provides more evidence for atheism than for theism, we do know that it is very improbable that  $S$  provides less evidence for atheism than it does for theism. Anyone who preferred theism to atheism on the basis of the evidence in  $S$  would probably be mistaken. And that is good *prima facie* reason against theism.

#### 4. Conclusion

Even if we concede that  $V$  is true, and that given  $V$  we lack epistemic warrant to assert  $E$ , we have seen that the evidential argument from evil remains valid. There is *prima facie* reason against theism in epistemic contexts characterized by  $E1$  and  $E2$ . And in contexts where even less is known,  $E3$  offers us reason not to believe theism is true. If we concede additionally that we do not know the prior probabilities of theism or atheism, we have found that  $E4$  and  $E5$  provide *prima facie* reason against theism. There is good reason to believe, then, that van Inwagen's refutation of the evidential argument from evil fails.

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#### Notes

1. Compare, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper, 1974).
2. By 'evidentialists' I refer to those who have offered a version of what has come to be called 'the evidential argument from evil'. For an early and formidable version of the argument, see William L. Rowe, 'The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism', first published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–441, but since widely anthologized. 'Theist' is used in Rowe's narrow sense meaning someone who believes in an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, supremely good being who created the actual world. For a more recent version of the evidential argument, consider Paul Draper, 'Pain and pleasure: An evidential problem for theists', *Nous* 23 (1989): 331–350.
3. Peter van Inwagen refers to the forthcoming argument as "... the most powerful version of the evidential argument from evil." See 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence' in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 135–165. Van Inwagen attributes the argument to Paul Draper, *Nous*, *ibid.* Draper cites David Hume as the originator, see *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Part XI) in *The Empiricists* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).
4. Nothing in the forthcoming argument turns on a more precise analysis of epistemic probability.
5. The controversial nature of these assumptions is expressly acknowledged by van Inwagen. See his 'the problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', *op. cit.*, p. 136.

6. Van Inwagen's version of the argument concludes with the claim that anyone in our epistemic situation would have *prima facie* reason for preferring atheism to theism. I draw the more cautious conclusion that anyone in our epistemic situation would have *prima facie* reason against theism. A *prima facie* reason against theism is a reason not to believe that theism is true. In rejecting the evidential argument from evil, and rejecting E, van Inwagen denies this claim. Compare 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', op. cit., p. 152 ff.
7. Since we have assumed that the prior probabilities of Coin A and Coin B are equal, and that the likelihood of Coin A on 'heads' equals the likelihood of Coin B on 'heads', it follows that their posterior probabilities are equal. It follows directly from Bayes's Theorem that if  $\Pr(p / h1 \ \& \ k) = \Pr(p / h2 \ \& \ k)$ , then  $\Pr(h1 / p \ \& \ k) > \Pr(h2 / p \ \& \ k)$  iff.  $\Pr(h1 / k) > \Pr(h2 / k)$ . Since we have assumed further that (tossing) Coin A is incompatible with (tossing) Coin B, the posterior probability of each must be 0.5.
8. Since prior probabilities are equal for Coin A and Coin B, and Coin A is more likely on 'heads' than is Coin B, it follows that Coin A has higher posterior probability. From Bayes's Theorem we get if  $\Pr(h1 / k) = \Pr(h2 / k)$ , then  $\Pr(h1 / e \ \& \ k) > \Pr(h2 / e \ \& \ k)$  iff.  $\Pr(e / h1 \ \& \ k) > \Pr(e / h2 \ \& \ k)$ . Since (tossing) Coin A is incompatible with (tossing) Coin B, and Coin B has a lower posterior probability, it follows that  $\Pr(\text{Coin B} / \text{heads}) < 0.5$ .
9. This is true, of course, under the assumption we have made that their prior probabilities are equal.
10. We could assign a higher probability to the proposition that  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism}) > 0.9$  iff. we had more reason to believe that  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  had some particular value or range of values. But by hypothesis, our epistemic situation offers us no reason to assign one value to  $\Pr(S / \text{Theism})$  rather than another. Each possible value, from our epistemic perspective, is equiprobable.

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