Small Evils and Live Options

A New Strategy against the Argument from Evil

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ABSTRACT: Many philosophers have thought that aggregates of small, broadly dispersed evils don't pose the same sort of challenge to theism that horrendous evils like the Nazi Holocaust do. But there are interesting arguments that purport to show that large enough aggregates of small evils are morally and axiologically equivalent to horrendous evils. Herein lies an intriguing and overlooked strategy for defending theism. In short: small evils, or aggregates of such evils, don't provide decisive evidence against theism; there's no relevant difference between horrendous evils and aggregates of small evils; hence horrendous evils must not provide decisive evidence against theism, either.

The world contains many bad things, among which are famine, war, and disease. Atheists have long argued that the existence of these and other bad things poses an insurmountable problem for theism. After all, why would a perfectly good, all knowing, all powerful being allow them to exist? This is the so-called problem of evil. Here I explore a new response on behalf of the theist. It proceeds from two claims. First, small evils like hangnails intuitively don't pose a very strong challenge to theism. Apparently, neither do aggregates of such small evils, so long as those evils are dispersed in such a way that they don't impact any particular life very much. Second, there's no intrinsic axiological or moral difference between horrendous evils and large enough aggregates of small evils. This philosophical claim is counterintuitive but as we shall see quite defensible. Anyone who accepts both claims is in a position to resist the argument from evil. After all, horrendous evils pose no greater challenge to theism than aggregates of much smaller evils do, and these constitute only weak, or at least nondecisive, evidence against theism.

The strategy I propose is deliberately modest. Its goal isn't to show that the existence of evil presents no challenge to theism whatever, but that arguments from evil aren't as compelling as they might at first seem. To put it in Jamesian terms, theism can remain a "live option" for a rational person after the strongest arguments from evil have been considered.[1] The theist can afford to be modest because arguments from evil are generally ambitious; they

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1. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *William James: Writings*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 457–9.

are supposed *settle* the debate in favor of atheism.[2] To use a boxing analogy, the theist can lose this round with the atheist on points (that is, concede that evil constitutes evidence for atheism), provided that he avoids receiving a fight-ending knockout blow (that is, refutation). The purpose of this essay is to show that the most plausible versions of the argument from evil aren't sufficient to show that theism is an unreasonable position all things considered.

For the record, I'm an atheist, but an atheist who wants to avoid overstating the case against theism. I used to think that Rowe's evidential argument from evil (about which more shortly), or some variation of the argument from evil that is close to it, was a decisive argument for atheism. I still think that the existence of evil is strong evidence against theism. But largely because of the reasoning I outline here, I'm no longer sure that the problem of evil is decisive. So although this line of reasoning comes from a philosophical opponent (in one important respect, at least), I hope theists will see that it's put forward in a friendly spirit.

1. Evidential Arguments from Evil

The so-called problem of evil goes as far back as Epicurus. The challenge is for the theist to explain how a God with the attributes of perfect goodness, knowledge, and power is compatible with the pervasiveness and degree of the evils in the world. The problem is usually put forward as an argument for atheism, not a quandary that theists must sort out among themselves; I'll refer to it as the "argument from evil" when it's intended as an argument for atheism. Atheists advancing the argument from evil contend that these things cannot be reconciled, so that it's rational to conclude that God doesn't exist. In the middle of the twentieth century, J. L. Mackie construed the argument from evil as a challenge to the logical consistency of theism.[3] That construal fell out of favor, however, because it seemed too easy for the theist to find strategies for avoiding contradiction.[4] Since then, philosophers have preferred "evidential" formulations of the argument, which either lack the premise that God is logically incompatible with evil, or else concede that the argument contains a premise that can only be established through fairly sophisticated inductive reasoning.[5] Here's an influential version of the eviden-

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2. For an unusually modest version of the evidential argument from evil that is an exception see William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. D. Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 262.

3. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–12.

4. E.g., see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 12–24. Other strategies for resisting this putative refutation of theism can be found in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5. See Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Introduction," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, xiv.

tial argument from evil by William Rowe, who is one of the people credited with beginning the evidential turn:[6]

Rowe's Direct Induction Argument from Evil[7]

> 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 [omnipotent,] omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering if it [sic] could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

> 3. [Therefore,] There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.[8]

Rowe gives a well-known example of an apparently unjustified instance of intense suffering. He imagines a fawn that is badly burned in a naturally caused forest fire, so that it suffers for several days before finally dying. It's difficult to account for this evil in a way that's obviously consistent with God's goodness and other attributes. Defensive maneuvers that theists often make don't seem to handle this case very well. The existence of free will isn't very helpful, since a natural disaster is responsible for the fawn's suffering.[9] John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy, according to which God allows some evil to occur so that people have the opportunity to morally grow, isn't very promising either. It's hard to believe that Rowe's fawn is getting anything good out of this experience, especially given that animals don't seem capable of developing moral virtues like fortitude. Also, although many philosophers reject hedonism, the idea that pleasure is the only intrinsic good in the world and pain is the only intrinsic evil, nearly everyone thinks that suffering is bad. Allowing it needs to be justified.

Philosophers have advanced, and criticized, many different versions of the evidential argument from evil. Rowe's original argument is an example of what Michael Tooley calls the "Direct Induction Version" of the argument. That is, it makes an inference from observed evils to the improbability of theism without contrasting theism with a rival hypothesis (other than atheism).[10]

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6. See Trent Dougherty, "Recent Work on the Problem of Evil," *Analysis Reviews* 71 (2011): 560–73.

7. This title is mine, not Rowe's.

8. William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 336. Considering criticism, Rowe recasts his argument in "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 262–85.

9. This is the idea that God allows certain evils to occur because he could only eliminate them by eliminating free will, which is a greater good. See, e.g., Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29–34.

10. Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, accessed December 2, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil.

An alternative strategy inspired by Hume and championed by Paul Draper is to use indirect induction. This employs an inference from observed evils to a hypothesis, other than simply atheism, that is inconsistent with theism. Draper argues that the existence of evil is evidence for 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."[11]

Rowe later pursues a different evidential argument from evil that is based on Bayesian probabilistic reasoning.[12] Tooley pursues yet another strategy, bringing an account of the logic of probability to bear on the question.[13] Much recent work on evidential arguments from evil focuses on the formal properties of specific strategies. Theists hoping to neutralize these arguments often attempt to undermine general patterns of inference that purport to establish that observed evils render God's existence improbable.[14] I am not going to give a narrowly tailored response of this kind. Instead, I contend that accepting certain controversial but defensible ethical claims can provide theists with new resources for resisting the argument from evil in any of these forms.[15]

If this reasoning is correct, then someone who thinks that enough small evils morally and axiologically add up to horrendous evils could reasonably think that we have less evidence against theism, or less evidence in favor of some rival hypothesis to theism, than it would at first seem. To focus on Draper's view, the existence of horrendous evils initially seems like stronger evidence for an indifferent universe than the existence of many small evils. If further analysis reveals that horrendous evils pose no special challenge to theism, then our evidence for an indifferent universe will turn out to be weaker than it had seemed to be relative to the theistic hypothesis. This strategy doesn't purport to entirely resolve the problem of evil for the theist, since small evils might (and I think do) still constitute considerable evidence against theism. The hope is that this strategy could show that the problem is *manageable* even if it isn't resolved. The theist's inability to account for evils large and small wouldn't itself constitute proof that atheism is the most ratio-

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11. Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 332.

12. Rowe, "The Evidential Problem of Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 262–85.

13. E.g., Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," and "Inductive Logic and the Probability that God Exists: Farewell to Skeptical Theism," in *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jake Chandler and Victoria S. Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 144–64.

14. See, e.g., Steven John Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 126–50; and Alvin Plantinga "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 151–74.

15. Note that although I recognize important differences between different versions of the argument from evil, I will often refer to "the argument from evil" in a generic way when these differences aren't important, as is often the case here.

nal position all things considered, let alone rationally inescapable, even if it does provide some grounds for doubt.

2. The Special Significance of Concentrated Evils

Intuitively, horrendous evils present stronger evidence against God's existence than aggregates of widely dispersed small evils of the same total disvalue. If these evils are distributed so that they don't render any life not worth living, or even significantly diminish the overall wellbeing of any single person, then they don't seem to constitute very strong evidence against theism. Many philosophers interested in the problem of evil, theist and atheist alike, explicitly emphasize the special problem that very large evils pose for theism. On the theist side, Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Southerland write that the threat to theism comes not from ordinary evils, but from "horrendous evils," which they define as being so severe that they make the life of the victim unbearable.[16] Tooley, an atheist, agrees:

> So, for example, consider a world that contains a billion units of natural evil. Is this a good starting point for an argument from evil? The answer is that, if either a deontological approach to ethics is correct, or a form of consequentialism that takes the distribution of goods and evils into account, rather than, say, simply the total amount of goods and evils, whether this fact is an impressive reason for questioning the existence of God surely *depends on further details about the world*. If those billion units are uniformly distributed over trillions of people whose lives are otherwise extremely satisfying and ecstatically happy, it is *not easy to see a serious problem of evil*. But if, on the other hand, the billion units of natural evil fell upon a single innocent person, and produced a life that was, throughout, one of extraordinarily intense pain, then surely there would be a very serious problem of evil.[17]

Tooley concedes that the persuasive force of the argument from evil depends on considerations beyond the overall amount of evil the world contains, though it's not clear whether that persuasive force is rational or purely emotional—more on that later. The further considerations Tooley thinks are important include how the evils are distributed, and what ethical theory is true. Even "a billion units of natural evil" could on his reckoning fail to amount to "an impressive reason for questioning the existence of God" depending on

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16. Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplement 63 (1989): 298–9.

17. Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (emphasis added). Note that Tooley includes an important caveat. The distribution of evils is only relevant to motivating the argument from evil "if either a deontological approach to ethics is correct, or a form of consequentialism that takes the distribution of goods and evils into account, rather than, say, simply the total amount of goods and evils." In section 3 I will return to this point and argue that the caveat isn't so important.

the answers to these other questions. Rowe and his frequent theist detractor, Peter van Inwagen, concur with Tooley that the argument from evil depends upon factors beyond the sheer amount of evil that the universe contains. Here's Rowe:

> In his discussion of the evidential argument from evil, van Inwagen says that the amount of evil in the world is not the central difficulty. I think he is right about this point. If each particular evil itself were itself bad, but not too bad, then even if the total amount of evil in the universe was enormous, *we would not be faced with the central problem raised by the evidential argument of evil*. For it is horrendous evils that are the focus of the evidential argument from evil.[18]

Philosophers' tendency to choose ghoulish examples to motivate the argument from evil also underscores their belief that the evils we find most shocking and abhorrent pose a special problem for theism. Rowe in one place mentions the real life case of a five-year-old girl who was raped and strangled to death.[19] Even this might not be the most repellent incident discussed in the academic literature on the problem of evil.[20] The discussion of such horrors would be gratuitous if only the total amount of disvalue in the universe that mattered. I take it that these philosophers are doing more than indulging an interest in the ghoulish; I assume that their examples reflect the belief that it matters to the theism-atheism debate that some of the evils in the world are *horrendous* in a way that such examples vividly illustrate.

Imagine an alternate world that lacks the worst evils we find in the actual world. Murder, rape, and torture never occur either because people aren't inclined to do those things, or because they are for some reason unable to act on their worst intentions. We can allow smaller moral evils like lying and promise-breaking to remain. As for natural evil, there's no predation, extreme illness, severe birth defects, or debilitating parasites, only toothaches, canker sores, and the like. Intuitively, the argument from evil is much less forceful in a world like this. We might think that's because this fictional world has less evil overall than the real world. But, as several philosophers have pointed out, the sheer amount of evil in the world doesn't seem to be the main issue. In any event, we can stipulate that this world has as much evil as the real world, or even more, by imagining that it exists for much longer, or that it contains a greater number of inhabitants each of whose blissful lives contains a trivial bit of disvalue. It doesn't seem that the argument from evil would be as compelling, or even more compelling, in these worlds as it is in the actual world. To

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18. William Rowe, "Peter van Inwagen on the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 426 (emphasis added). See also Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96–7.

19. William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument From Evil: A Second Look," 262.

20. The example in van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 97, is a contender.

further press the point, consider the following modified version of Rowe's argument in which I've substituted "minor annoyances" for "intense suffering":

Evidential Argument from Evil Lite

    (1) There exist instances of *minor annoyances* which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some equally *annoying* or slightly more *annoying* thing to occur.

    (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any *minor annoyances* if it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some equally *annoying* or slightly more *annoying* thing to occur.

    (3) Therefore, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

We can imagine a counterpart to Rowe's fawn that experiences something trivially unpleasant, for example, it brushes against thorns, feels chilled by a cold wind, or experiences momentary anxiety after being unable to see its mother nearby. Aside from a few brief displeasures like this, the deer's life is about as pleasant as a deer's life could be. I find it hard to believe that *this* argument, illustrated with this example, could induce much doubt about the existence of God, particularly among people who are convinced that God exists. It's hard to say what exactly makes it less compelling than Rowe's actual argument with his example of the suffering deer. The change from large to small evils doesn't affect the validity of the argument, and so it must make one or both premises less plausible. That means that at least one of the following claims must be true:

    (1) For any instance of evil, it's more likely that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being couldn't have prevented it (without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some bad or worse evil to occur) if that evil is small rather than large.

    (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being is more likely to prevent unjustified evils He could prevent (without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some bad or worse evil to occur) if those unjustified evils are large rather than small.

Neither is unproblematic. As far as (1) is concerned, although many philosophers think that horrendous evils are harder for the theist to account for than small ones, it's unclear why this would be. The free will and soul-making defenses don't obviously do a better job of accounting for petty evils, like canker sores and mosquito bites, than large ones. That's especially true when such evils afflict animals that lack free will and are incapable of moral virtue. I think an examination of other theodicies will also yield that result that it's unclear why small, dispersed small evils seem so much less threatening to theism. Turning to (2), it's hard to believe that a perfect God would allow *any*

unjustified evil to occur whatsoever if there were no cost to His preventing it. Perhaps, though, it has some plausibility on the grounds that it would be even more surprising to discover that God permits large unjustified evils than that He permits small ones.

The best way I can see to make sense of these conflicting intuitions is by appeal to "skeptical theism." This is the idea that we aren't in a position to know whether apparently unjustified evils are actually unjustified; hence the atheist lacks grounds for asserting that the evils we observe are strong evidence against the existence of God.[21] The skeptical theism defense seems intuitively stronger when the evils that need to be accounted for are annoyances rather than genocides. If the only evils we know about are relatively small, then it seems reasonable to say: "I don't know how the existence of this bad thing is compatible with God's existence, but I assume that there's some way that the issue is resolved that is beyond my current ability to see." That line is harder to take when the evils being discussed are momentous. Admittedly, I'm not sure why that is, but I find the intuition hard to shake and so, apparently, do others.

3. The Small Evils Argument

I'm now ready to advance my main argument:

Small Evils
    (1) Many small apparently pointless evils aren't compelling evidence against God's existence.
    (2) If many small apparently pointless evils aren't compelling evidence against God's existence, then the evil of the actual world isn't compelling evidence against God's existence.
    (3) Therefore, the evil of the actual world isn't compelling evidence against God's existence.

By "compelling evidence" I mean evidence strong enough to change the mind of a rational person in the absence of convincing arguments to the contrary. If Small Evils is sound, then arguments from evil fail to refute theism. The existence of evil might reduce the probability of theism, though not to the point that belief in theism becomes epistemically impermissible, that is, unreasonable. So how do the premises hold up? In the previous section, I attempted to elicit intuitions in favor of (1). Moreover, we've seen that many philosophers, including atheists, find these intuitions compelling. So I turn my attention

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21. For examples of this kind of defense, see Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 278–96; Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 151–74; Stephen Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 126–50.

to (2), the claim that if small, apparently pointless evils aren't compelling evidence against theism, then neither are the horrendous evils of the actual world. We should accept that premise if we should embrace

> *Axiological Parity*: For any possible world with a finite number of horrendous evils, there is a possible world that has no horrendous evils but has a greater number of small evils with the same total disvalue

and

> *Moral Parity*: There is no inherent moral difference between (*a*) doing something horrendously evil or allowing something horrendously evil to occur, and (*b*) doing or allowing some larger number of nonhorrendous evils.

These claims are counterintuitive and might cause some readers to balk. But let me say two things about why a theist might want to adopt them. The first is a bit shameless: the theist might adopt them precisely because they help fend off the argument from evil. I call this "shameless" jokingly because I know it could be perceived to be an epistemically pernicious instance of motivated reasoning. Nevertheless, I think it's sometimes legitimate to adopt philosophical positions in order to avoid undesirable conclusions. For example, it seems acceptable to change your epistemic views in order to avoid skepticism. Responses to the argument from evil have relied on a number of controversial philosophical claims, including that good intentional actions are better if they are caused by libertarian free will,[22] and that we all have souls that can be perfected through tribulation.[23] Many theists accept these positions before they begin considering how to respond to arguments from evil, so their reliance on them isn't necessarily *ad hoc*. But I think they might also legitimately adopt these positions, or others, in the course of trying to think of a response to the argument from evil. For example, van Inwagen has argued that it would be a great evil if God intervened too frequently, since it would disrupt the regularity of the world.[24] This could help explain why God doesn't intervene more frequently to make the world better. I think that if a theist takes himself to have significant evidence in favor of God's existence, he may reasonably adopt van Inwagen's view because it offers the best defense of theism. If that's right, then he may likewise adopt *Axiological Parity* and *Moral Parity* in defense of theism even if he doesn't have independent support for those claims.

A second response is that there are independent motivations for accepting *Axiological Parity* and *Moral Parity*. Both follow from consequentialism, according to which the moral status of an action depends upon the overall

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22. Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 84.
23. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 253–61.
24. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 113–34.

goodness or badness of its consequences. Any theist who accepted consequentialism would already be committed to these claims, so there would be nothing ad hoc about appealing to them in defense of theism. One doesn't have to be committed to consequentialism to accept *Axiological Parity* and *Moral Parity*, either. Alastair Norcross contends that these claims can both be justified on intuitive grounds and not simply derived from consequentialism, even though he believes that consequentialism is the correct view.[25]

Norcross's argument can be summarized as follows.[26] A world that contains one large evil seems to be better than a world that doesn't, but also has many evils that are only slightly less bad. By the same token, it seems better to cause or allow a harm of certain degree of severity than to allow many harms that are each *slightly* less bad. For example, it's better to cause one death than millions of injuries that are so grievous that they are only slightly preferable to death.

Both moral and axiological senses of "better than" are transitive, so we can imagine a third set of evils that are slightly less severe, but much more numerous, than the second set of evils. It seems that if these evils are numerous enough, then they would add more disvalue to the world than would the second class of evils, and that it would be preferable to allow the fewer, but more severe, evils to occur. This logic can be reiterated indefinitely, so that great quantities of trivial evils could morally and axiologically equal or outweigh enormous evils. If that is right, then *Axiological Parity* and *Moral Parity* are both true.

I find Norcross's reasoning compelling, though I admit somewhat disturbing. He reaches conclusions that strike me as intuitively wrong, for example, that it could be morally permissible, and even optimal, to sacrifice the life of one child to prevent a finite number of headaches. But for present purposes, we need only think that accepting his conclusions is *epistemically permissible*—that is, not unreasonable. I think it clearly is. His premises are intuitive, almost to the point of being irresistible, I think, and there's nothing wrong with his logic. If that's right, then, given the plausibility of (1), we might reasonably accept Small Evils. Of course, this doesn't rule out the possibility that others could reasonably reject one of the premises. So Small Evils doesn't refute evidential arguments from evil in the sense of showing that they shouldn't have any persuasive force for anyone. What Small Evils does do is show that these arguments fail to refute theism, that is, that they can be reasonably resisted. That's an interesting result. But there are objections to consider.

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25. Alastair Norcross, "Headaches and Human Lives," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1997): 135–67; and "Great Harms from Small Benefits Grow: How Death Can Be Outweighed by Headaches," *Analysis* 58 (1998): 152–8.

26. See Norcross, "Headaches and Human Lives," 137–41.

4. Objections and Replies

Objection 1: This reasoning proves too much. After all, if we accept it, then the theist can dismiss any evil, no matter how horrendous, as "no worse than so many headaches or hangnails" and thus not a significant problem for theism. Surely, though, that conclusion constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* against this defense of theism.

Reply: The theist presumably doesn't want a defense of theism that would cease to be effective if the world suddenly got much worse (as it indeed might). Disallowing any response to the problem of evil that would not apply to worse worlds therefore seems unfair to the theist. Note, moreover, that Small Evils doesn't render *any* conceivable arrangement of the world unproblematic for the theist. It would be especially hard to reconcile God's existence with a world that contained only evil, or with a world in which the evil seemed to vastly outweigh the good, even if the total amount of evil wasn't very great (for example, a small world containing one unit of goodness and ten units of evil). So if it turned out that evil dominates good in the real world, then Small Evils alone wouldn't offer a compelling defense of theism. Fortunately, it's at least not clear that this is the case in the real world.

Objection 2: If consequentialism is true, then many small evils may indeed be just as bad as fewer large evils. If, on the other hand, consequentialism is false, then it's more likely that we have good reasons for rejecting the idea that many small evils could be morally and axiologically on par with any horrendous evil (for example, a deontologist might think that no amount of small evils adds up to the evil of a rights violation). Either way, Small Evils is in trouble. Put in a different way, although each premise of Small Evils is defensible, the conjunction of both premises isn't defensible because the motivations for accepting each are in tension with one another—(1) relies on accepting deontic intuitions and (2) relies on accepting consequentialist intuitions.[27]

Reply: Consequentialism is consistent with thinking that certain distributions of evil within a universe are more likely to be justified for some unknown and perhaps unknowable reason than other distributions, even if the total amount of evil is the same. Consequentialism is also silent on how much evil the world can contain before it becomes unreasonable to believe in God. Most deontologists don't accept *Axiological Parity* and *Moral Parity*, but deontology is logically compatible with both premises of Small Evils. Accepting them doesn't preclude acceptance of an act-omission distinction, or the idea that categories of behavior like lying and promise-breaking are wrong for reasons that go beyond their consequences. Thus, both consequentialists and deontologists could accept this reasoning.

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27. I'd like to thank Steve Kershnar for pressing this objection.

Objection 3: We can more plausibly "run the argument the other way" through a so-called G. E. Moore shift and then debunk the intuitions that aggregates of small evils are less of a problem for theism than horrendous evils (that is, Small Evils premise 1). The Small Evils argument is:

> *A.*
> (1) Many small apparently pointless evils aren't compelling evidence against God's existence.
> (2) If many small apparently pointless evils aren't compelling evidence against God's existence, then the evil of the actual world isn't compelling evidence against God's existence.
> (3) Therefore, the evil of the actual world isn't compelling evidence against God's existence.

But we could also accept (2) and advance this argument:

> *B.*
> (3*) The evil of the actual world *is* compelling evidence against God's existence.
> (4) Therefore, many small apparently pointless evils are compelling evidence against God's existence.

In his argument against external world skepticism, Moore famously—perhaps *notoriously*—rejects abstract philosophical claims about knowledge when they are at odds with the immediate evidence of his senses, about which he is as certain as he can hope to be about anything.[28] By contrast, *A* and *B* are two contentious philosophical claims, neither of which is obvious:

> (*A*) The skeptical theism defense is a credible response when it comes to reconciling God's existence with apparently pointless evils that are small and dispersed.
> (*B*) The skeptical theism defense isn't a credible response when it comes to reconciling God's existence with apparently pointless evils that are large and concentrated.

A stalemate would be good news for the theist in this dialectical context. After all, the theist is playing defense: he only needs to show that his own position is reasonable, not that the atheist's position is unreasonable. But the atheist can use further reasoning to show that *B* is more plausible than *A*. For instance, it might be possible to debunk intuitions that we rely upon to support premise 1 of Small Evils, the claim that small evils aren't compelling evidence for atheism. Derek Parfit observed that human beings tend to make certain mistakes in "moral mathematics"; for instance, we tend to discount small risks of evil, and small harms, as if they had no normative weight at

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28. G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939): 273–300.

all.[29] In his defense of Parfit's so-called repugnant conclusion, Michael Huemer brings attention to additional evidence that people are generally bad at compounding very small numbers.[30] It's easy to imagine an evolutionary explanation for this: paying attention to very small harms, or very small risks of harm, might distract us from more pressing concerns. So evolutionary pressures might blind us to the true significance of small harms. Moreover, horrendous evils are generally harder to justify than small evils. Perhaps this leads us to conflate two different variables: severity and the likelihood of justification. This isn't a terrible heuristic: generally severe evils are harder to justify. Perhaps this heuristic distorts our intuitions, so that we don't sense that small evils are very difficult to justify. Thus it appears that the atheist has more than one way to discredit the intuitions that support the first premise of Small Evils, as the products of moral illusion.

Reply: This in my view is the most compelling objection; note, however, that its intuitive cost is quite high. It strikes me as unreasonable to think that this person must abandon theism, on the pain of being epistemically irrational, because the world contains some small evils. He could, and I think probably should, concede that the existence of that evil is evidence against his position, all else equal, but it's far from obvious that he'd be irrational to continue being a theist in the face of that evidence. This is especially true if he has other evidence in favor of God's existence, for example, persuasive arguments for theism or personal religious experiences that point to theism. Plausibly, it's more reasonable for a person like this to adopt skeptical theism in the face of inexplicable small evils than to abandon belief in God. So intuitively, the existence of small evils provides (at most) defeasible evidence for atheism.

The atheist might want to bite the bullet here and say: "So much the worse for those intuitions. We should abandon the intuition that the skeptical theism defense is any better when it comes to small evils." The problem is that the argument from evil only seems compelling when it can be illustrated with examples of horrendous evils, such as sadistic child abuse. Notably, it doesn't seem persuasive when illustrated only with small evils. Now the atheist could insist this reflects our own psychological limitations; the fact that we're disinclined to accept an argument's conclusion doesn't mean that the argument is unsound. But it seems to me that persuasiveness is a feature of arguments that we should and do care about, since persuasion is one of the most important aims of philosophical discourse. I think it's largely for this reason that we don't think highly of arguments that beg the question in favor of true conclusions. If the best way of formulating the argument from evil robs it of persuasiveness—so that it would strike people in much the same way that Zeno's paradoxes usually do, as perplexing rather than compelling—then I assume there'd be much less interest in those arguments than there now is. So

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29. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 73–82.

30. Michael Huemer, "In Defense of Repugnance," *Mind* 117 (2008): 909–10.

debunking the intuitions that support *A* poses at least a *practical* problem for atheists who want to persuade theists and agnostics.

I also think that debunking strategies are unlikely to succeed. It's probably true that we often irrationally treat small harms and small risks of harm as being negligible. That insight about human psychology cuts both ways, however: we don't typically see large horrendous evils as being the equivalent of many small bad things. So we still don't know whether, when thinking about the problem of evil, it's most rational to regard aggregates of small evils in the way that we now think of horrendous evils, or to regard horrendous evils as no more troubling for theism than aggregates of small evils. To insist that we do the former begs the question against the theist who thinks we should do the latter. The argument that the severity of an evil is a useful heuristic for determining the probability that it's justified also seems misguided. As my modified version of Rowe's evidential argument from evil showed, many trivial evils seem pointless, and they are no easier to explain away with a theodicy than are large evils.

The theist, then, has three strategies for dealing with this objection to Small Evils:

- The theist can stand on whatever intuitions he has that support *A* and reject, or attempt to undermine, attempts to debunk those intuitions. Of course, the atheist could be equally rational in accepting the Moore-shifted counterargument. But recall my modest notion of the theist's task: he succeeds in responding to the argument from evil by avoiding refutation. He can do that by sticking to his guns in an intuitive standoff like this.

- The theist might assign probabilities to *A* and *B* and then calculate the total probability of theism given the existence of horrendous evil. This will result in a lower total probability for theism than simply accepting that *A* is correct, since the truth of *B* implies that we have very strong evidence for atheism (since both horrendous evils and aggregates of small evils are compelling evidence for atheism). Still the theist could plausibly concede that there is some probability that *B* is correct and reasonably believe that theism is true if he has other evidence in favor of God's existence.

- The theist might think that we should suspend judgment in response to this irreconcilable conflict of intuitions. That would deprive him of his ability to stand on the intuition that *A* is more plausible than *B*, but he can afford the gambit. Recall Tooley's insight that it's easy not to see a serious problem of evil if the evil in the world is widely distributed across an overwhelmingly happy universe. Without intuitions of the sort that incline the atheist to accept *B* over *A*, this is as much of an argument from evil as the atheist can muster. So a

suspension of judgment about intuitions of this kind will either nullify the argument from evil or greatly reduce its persuasiveness.

If the theist accepts the reasoning I've outlined in this essay, then he has available strategies for avoiding the conclusion that horrendous evils make belief in God unreasonable. That might not sound very ambitious, but again the theist just needs to play the atheist to a draw, or even just avoid a decisive loss, in the hopes that other considerations (for example, "Why is there something rather than nothing?") can later tip the scales in favor of theism. I don't believe he is likely to succeed in this, but I also think the atheist is overconfident if he thinks that some version of the argument from evil decisively refutes theism. If my reasoning here has been on point, then the theist has a strategy for avoiding a dialectical knockout. He might not win this round, but he lives to fight (that is, argue) another day. Theism probably remains epistemically a live option for some believers, notwithstanding the evils of the world, large and small.[31]