Philosophical success

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Abstract   Peter van Inwagen proposes a criterion of philosophical success. He takes it to support an extremely pessimistic view about philosophy. He thinks that all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions fail, including the argument from evil. I'm more optimistic on both counts. I'll identify problems with van Inwagen's criterion and propose an alternative. I'll then explore the differing implications of our criteria. On my view, philosophical arguments can succeed and the argument from evil isn't obviously a failure.

1 Introduction

When do philosophical arguments succeed and when do they fail? A criterion of philosophical success would help us answer this question and might help us answer other important questions. Drawing on recent work on this issue, I'll offer a criterion and explore some of its implications.

This issue is important for at least two reasons. First, a criterion can be useful. It might help us craft and assess arguments. Consequently, it might influence our views, perhaps leading us to adopt some positions and reject others. Or it might help us reach more tentative conclusions, e.g., that some arguments don't work, that some arguments are better than others, or that some positions have better arguments for them than rivals.

Second, a criterion can have broader implications. I'm especially concerned with the potential implications for philosophy's value. Many people—some philosophers

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included—have pessimistic views about philosophy. A criterion could support or discredit such views. Peter van Inwagen proposes a criterion and takes it to support a very pessimistic view (2006, pp. 37–55).[1] He thinks that all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions fail, including the Argument from Evil. I'm more optimistic on both counts. I'll identify problems with van Inwagen's criterion and propose an alternative.[2]

I'll start by explaining what van Inwagen and I mean by philosophical success. In the process, I'll state his criterion of success. Then, I'll identify problems with it and develop a better one by revising his criterion. I'll conclude by highlighting the different implications of our criteria, both for philosophy generally and for the Argument from Evil in particular.

2 Criteria

I started by asking when philosophical arguments succeed and when they fail. You might think that the answer is obvious. Good arguments succeed. Bad ones fail. Good ones are either sound or they're strong in some other way—inductively or abductively, say. And bad ones aren't.

These answers are too simple. It's not always obvious when arguments have these features. It's not always obvious what it takes to have them. And it's not obvious that having these features is sufficient for some important kinds of philosophical success. We need to know more. For example, how much justification do premises need? How strong must inductive or abductive arguments be? Van Inwagen emphasizes the relevance of such questions by pointing out that success can depend on one's purposes in giving an argument (2006, p. 40; cf. Otero 2013, pp. 4182, 4187). For example, one might want to convince others that some claim is true. Success at that depends on what one's audience is like, e.g., what they know, believe, and find intuitive. Success criteria must be sensitive to the purposes that philosophers can have in giving arguments.

Van Inwagen tries to give a general criterion of philosophical success, one that presumably makes success a matter of achieving important, widespread purposes that philosophers have. I'll follow his lead and identify some of these purposes below. His criterion appeals to the concept of an ideal philosophical debate, which he describes as follows. A proponent and an opponent of a proposition p debate each other before an audience of people who are agnostic about p. The proponent uses arguments to try to get the audience to believe p. The opponent tries to frustrate this with objections. Everyone has unlimited time and resources to think, as well as the highest degree of philosophical virtue, e.g., intelligence, skill, and objectivity. And

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[1] Fischer and Tognazzini cite others who propose similar criteria (2007, p. 459). For other recent work defending pessimistic views see Brennan (2010) and Ballantyne (2014a). For a classic statement of a pessimistic view see Russell (1997, pp. 154–155).

[2] In a review of van Inwagen's (2006) book, Hasker (2007) suggests looking for alternative criteria, but doesn't propose any.

the audience is impartial in the following sense: they don't initially think that one of the positions being debated is more likely to be true.

Put in these terms, here's van Inwagen's criterion.

VIC   An argument for p succeeds iff a proponent of p in an ideal philosophical debate could use it to get the audience to believe p (2006, p. 47)

VIC doesn't state the general purposes against which it measures success. Below, I'll suggest one important purpose that van Inwagen seems to have in mind. I'll also identify some problems with VIC, or at least with van Inwagen's interpretation of it. But VIC has several virtues worth highlighting first. I'll try to develop a criterion that retains the virtues without the problems.[3]

The first virtue of VIC is that it's better than some alternative criteria that van Inwagen considers and rejects. One is that an argument succeeds iff it would convince any sane, rational person (2006, pp. 39–40). Another is that an argument succeeds iff it would convert an ideal opponent of its conclusion (2006, pp. 42–44). Van Inwagen quickly rejects these criteria on the grounds that they're too demanding. He says that no philosophical argument could have such power.

I agree that these criteria are too demanding. But we must explain why they're too demanding (I'll eventually appeal to the explanation to raise problems for VIC). Recall, van Inwagen says that success can depend on one's purposes in giving an argument. The nature of philosophy seems to constrain one's purposes in certain ways. For example, some purposes are incompatible with philosophy. If you're trying to deceive others, for example, you're not doing philosophy—not well, at least. Other purposes are compatible with philosophy but not necessary for doing it, well or otherwise. The above criteria are too demanding because you can do philosophy well even if your purpose in giving a philosophical argument isn't to convince any sane, rational person or to convince ideal opponents of your conclusion. Less ambitious purposes seem to be compatible with doing philosophy and doing it well. I expect that most readers will agree with these claims. For any who don't, I'll give some arguments against the above criteria later. The arguments will show that the above criteria are too demanding. They'll also apply to VIC and show that VIC is too demanding.

Here's a second virtue of VIC. It says that philosophical arguments succeed iff they would convince people who have certain characteristics constitutive of philosophical virtue.[4] This is indicative of a feature that's constitutive of the kind of success that van Inwagen and I have in mind, a feature that he doesn't make explicit: a successful argument for p would be able to *impart knowledge* of p if p

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[3] Some may worry that VIC overemphasizes argumentation and inappropriately excludes other philosophical goals for which we might want success criteria. If you share this concern, just take VIC and the criterion that I'll propose to be (general) criteria of argumentative success in philosophy.

[4] Recent work using criteria like VIC tends to emphasize this feature, specifically the appeal to ideal agnostics. See, e.g., Fischer (2013, p. 298) on abortion, King (2013, p. 82) on free will, and Tognazzini (forthcoming, p. 10–11) on free will.

were true (cf. Otero 2013, pp. 4185–4186).[5] The appeal to the *ideal* debate is meant to track this feature and to do so more reliably than non-ideal alternatives. Arguments can have this feature even if they wouldn't convince the incompetent or biased, say. And not just any way of convincing is indicative of it. Convincing people by exploiting their incompetence or their biases isn't.

These virtues suggest a third virtue of VIC. On VIC, philosophical success requires giving good reasons for a conclusion. It's not about convincing the opposition. The nature of the debate highlights this. The objective of p's proponent is to convince the audience, not the opponent. What the opponent thinks has no direct bearing on whether the argument succeeds. The proponent of p can appeal to claims that the opponent rejects. In the context of the ideal debate, it would be pointless for the opponent to object that this begs the question. If the audience might accept those claims, the opponent must offer substantive objections to them (2006, p. 46; cf. Fischer and Tognazzini 2007, pp. 459–460).

So much for VIC's virtues. Unfortunately, VIC also has some serious problems. Van Inwagen thinks that no philosophical argument for a substantive conclusion succeeds on VIC (I'll say why in the next section).[6] But he thinks that VIC is "very liberal" (2006, p. 50). In fact, he calls it "the most liberal possible criterion" (2006, p. 53, n5). I disagree. We can and arguably should be more liberal. I'll show this by identifying and discussing two oversights that van Inwagen makes. My proposed criterion will remedy these oversights.

First, van Inwagen doesn't say how strong arguments must be—e.g., how much evidence or justification they must give for their conclusions—in order to convince the ideal audience. More formally, he doesn't say what *standard of evidence* the audience would use to evaluate arguments. He does say that the opponent of p would try to cast doubt on arguments for it (2006, pp. 45, 51). But it's not obvious how much doubt it would take to keep the audience from being convinced. Van Inwagen only says some suggestive things about this. Some of his remarks suggest endorsement of very strong standards. For example, he says that the opponent of p would try to establish things "like" this:

> [The proponent of p] hasn't established the truth of the third premise of her argument beyond a reasonable doubt (2006, p. 46).

He also repeatedly compares the audience to a criminal jury (2006, pp. 45, 66–67, 90–92). So clearly one standard he has in mind is the beyond a reasonable doubt

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[5] Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne for suggesting the conditional formulation. I've put things this way because I take—and VIC apparently takes—success to be about "evidence and rationality, not the truth" (Ballantyne 2014b, p. 530). Ballantyne characterizes what he calls *knockdown* arguments in this way. He says that knockdown arguments "guarantee the strongest of rational credences for our beliefs, but not the truth itself" (ibid.). I've characterized success in a similar but weaker way—at least, it's weaker assuming that knowledge doesn't require the strongest rational credence.

[6] He says little about what counts as substantive beyond giving some examples of substantive and non-substantive theses (2006, p. 39–40). Ballantyne questions his way of drawing the distinction (2014b, p. 531). I share Ballantyne's concerns but won't pursue them.

standard [BARD].[7] But some of his other claims appeal to other standards. For example, he objects to the Argument from Evil with a version of the free will defense. He says that his defense includes controversial claims, including claims that entail free will's existence. But he insists that such claims aren't "known to be false or probably false or unreasonable to believe"(p. 71).

In this quote, van Inwagen invokes several standards of evidence. He does so indirectly, by citing some features of his claims about free will. The features are supposed to show that arguments that are incompatible with his claims about free will don't satisfy certain standards. Each disjunct in the quote corresponds to a standard or set of standards. *Unreasonable to believe* corresponds to BARD or something similar. On BARD, an argument succeeds iff a reasonable person couldn't reasonably doubt the conclusion given the evidence presented (this includes both the premises of the argument and any arguments given for the premises). *Probably false* corresponds to probability-based standards. Examples include the preponderance of the evidence standard [PoE] and the clear and convincing evidence standard [CACE]. On PoE, an argument succeeds iff it establishes that its conclusion is more likely true than not. On CACE, an argument succeeds iff it establishes that its conclusion is substantially more likely true than not.[8]

What about *known to be false*? Van Inwagen appeals to this standard repeatedly (2006, pp. 71, 78, 80, 85, 90, 92).[9] But it's not obvious how strong this standard is. That depends on a controversial issue: how demanding the justification requirement for knowledge is. Van Inwagen seems to think that the justification requirement is very demanding, but I could be wrong.[10] At any rate, I've noted three representative

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[7] Below, I'll challenge the view that philosophical success requires satisfying BARD. But some of the motivation for this view can be undercut immediately by noting that the criminal jury analogy is misleading. An ideal audience is deciding whether to believe propositions of the form "p is true" or "p is false," where *p* is a substantive philosophical thesis. Criminal juries aren't just deciding whether to believe analogous propositions of the form "The defendant is guilty" or 'The defendant is not guilty." They're also deciding whether to hold someone criminally liable or not by reaching a verdict with one of these propositions as its content. Because of this, they should use a very strong standard of evidence like BARD. Van Inwagen's criminal jury analogy misleadingly suggests that the ideal audience has a task that calls for comparable standards. It's not obvious that they do.

[8] An anonymous referee worries that I might have misinterpreted the disjunction in the above quote. The referee suggests interpreting the disjunction as follows: the claims about free will aren't known to be false, aren't known to be probably false, and aren't known to be unreasonable to believe. I agree that this is a plausible reading. But that's consistent with my point here: van Inwagen appeals to several standards of evidence. On the proposed reading, he does so by highlighting what it takes to know certain claims (e.g., knowing that "p is unreasonable to believe" requires more evidence than knowing that "p is false" or that "p is probably false"). I think that we must consider the relationship between knowledge and standards of evidence to formulate a good criterion of success. The criterion that I'll give is the result of my attempt to do this.

[9] After making the disjunctive claim above, he notes that his free will defense appeals to incompatibilism. Curiously, all he says about incompatibilism is that it isn't known to be false (2006, p. 71). He no doubt thinks that incompatibilism isn't known to be probably false either, though I'm sure that many would disagree with him. He definitely thinks that it's reasonable to believe, but I'm not sure how many would disagree with him.

[10] Some of his claims about what we know suggest this. For example, he says that we don't know that human rationality could have arisen through purely natural causes (2006, p. 93). I disagree. I suspect that

standards: one comparatively weak (PoE), one moderate (CACE), and one strong (BARD). I'll assume that the justification requirement is similar enough to one of these for my purposes.[11]

I suspect that van Inwagen thinks that the Argument from Evil satisfies none of the representative standards. Whatever the case, not all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions are obviously like that. VIC should be revised to make explicit the role that standards of evidence play in success evaluation. Here's a proposal.

> An argument for p succeeds iff the audience in an ideal debate would conclude that it satisfies the appropriate standard of evidence.

By "the appropriate standard" I mean the weakest evidential standard satisfaction of which would make the argument able to impart knowledge that p if p were true. The criterion leaves open what that standard is and whether this is an invariant or contextual matter. Philosophers will disagree about such issues. Consequently, they'll apply the criterion differently.[12] I'm ambivalent between something like PoE and something like CACE. I'm ambivalent between them as candidates for the one invariant standard, if there is one. And I'm ambivalent between them as candidates for a typical standard that would hold in typical contexts, if contextualism is true. I suspect that most philosophers would lean towards something like CACE and would reject strong standards like BARD as too demanding.[13]

This criterion improves on VIC. It implicitly acknowledges that there are different standards of evidence, since the appropriate standard is just one of many available standards. It implicitly acknowledges that a given argument might fare differently on these different standards. It doesn't make controversial assumptions about what the appropriate standard is. And it's consistent with the intuitively attractive view that philosophical success can come in degrees. Some arguments

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Footnote 10 continued

van Inwagen and I just disagree about how much it takes to know this claim. But it's possible that we disagree about what evidence there is for it or about how much justification the evidence provides (he isn't just asserting that we don't know this claim because it's false). He also seems to think that we don't know that human rationality isn't the product of extraterrestrial genetic engineering (ibid.). I'm not as confident that I'm correctly interpreting the paragraph where he discusses the latter possibility, though.

[11] For each standard, there are philosophers who identify or are open to identifying the requirement with it or with something similar. Conee and Feldman endorse BARD (2004, p. 296). Kelp and Kusch formulate theories that draw on Craig's (1990) work. Kelp thinks that views like Craig's commit one to something like CACE (2011, p. 64). Kusch is open to weaker standards (2011, p. 11). On the other hand, Bonjour (2010) thinks that conclusive evidence is required for knowledge, i.e., evidence that guarantees truth: the beyond a shadow of a doubt or Cartesian standard. Hannon criticizes Bonjour's argument. Drawing on Craig's work, Hannon says that there are reasons to "expect downward pressure on the standards required for knowledge" (2014, p. 1136).

[12] Ideal audience members might disagree among themselves. This suggests more complicated ways to revise VIC. I won't try to do so, but my second revision of VIC below may partially address this issue.

[13] Or at least they should. Here's why. Many philosophers seem to think that they know the truth of at least one substantive philosophical thesis on the basis of argument. If satisfying a standard like BARD is necessary for knowledge, they're probably wrong. Van Inwagen goes further than me here. He says that most philosophers think that there are *knockdown* arguments for some such theses (2004, pp. 338–339). He thinks that there are no knockdown arguments. Ballantyne (2014b) clarifies what knockdown arguments are and challenges van Inwagen's view about them.

may only satisfy the appropriate standard. Others may satisfy stronger ones. We could call the latter more successful.[14]

I have no argument for the view that a specific standard, e.g., CACE, is the appropriate standard (in general or for typical contexts). But there are at least two reasons to disfavor very strong standards and to favor comparatively weaker ones. First, there's an intuitive idea that van Inwagen appeals to: if a standard is so strong that no philosophical argument for a substantive conclusion can satisfy it and there are weaker standards, the standard is too demanding. This seems to rule out strong standards like BARD.

You may be skeptical about the demandingness claim, though. So I'll say something in its support. Recall, I said that being able to impart knowledge is constitutive of the kind of success that van Inwagen and I have in mind. In many contexts, satisfying comparatively weaker standards seems sufficient for knowledge (cf. Hannon 2014, p. 1137).[15] Those who think that philosophy isn't like that must say why. They must cite features of it that support their view. And there's an obvious candidate feature that they can appeal to: widespread philosophical disagreement.[16]

Citing this feature does the job only if success in the relevant sense requires the ability to resolve widespread disagreement. But it doesn't obviously require that. Recall my discussion of the success criteria that van Inwagen rejects. I said that they're too demanding because philosophy doesn't constrain our purposes as much as they would. One can do philosophy and do it well even if one isn't trying to give arguments that satisfy them. The same holds here. One can do philosophy well even if one isn't trying to give arguments that would resolve widespread disagreement. An argument could impart knowledge that its conclusion is true even if it can't resolve widespread disagreement over the truth of its conclusion. Of course, being able to resolve widespread disagreement might be indicative of an especially high degree of success. More people might get knowledge as widespread disagreement gets resolved. But being able to resolve widespread disagreement isn't obviously necessary for success. So the presence of widespread philosophical disagreement doesn't obviously support very demanding standards of evidence in philosophy.

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[14] There may be multiple reasons to call such arguments more successful, but here's what I'm thinking: the stronger the rational credence that a successful argument gives for belief in its conclusion, the more successful it is (cf. note 5 above).

[15] Van Inwagen seems to agree. Elsewhere, he applies such a view to controversial claims like political, philosophical, and religious claims (1996, pp. 30–34, 43). He thinks that certain evidence can justify one in believing claims that are reasonably rejected by equally qualified people who have the same evidence. And he seems to think that such evidence can produce knowledge. Regarding some of his own controversial philosophical beliefs, he says: "I … believe these things, and I believe that I am justified in believing them. And I am confident that I am right" (1996, p. 30). This sounds like he takes himself to know these claims, despite granting that his evidence for them doesn't meet standards like BARD. He suggests that this can be explained by the hypothesis that sometimes people have "insight" into certain issues that other people lack (1996, pp. 30, 34, 40–43). (He seems to assume throughout most of his discussion that insight isn't evidence; see, e.g., 1996, pp. 40–41). I take him to be talking about intuitions here. I suspect that he uses the word "insight" because it's a success term. I discuss the significance of intuitions for philosophical success below.

[16] Ballantyne challenges arguments for the claim that knockdown arguments are harder to come by in philosophy than in other fields (2014b, pp. 536–542). And he argues that widespread disagreement doesn't preclude the existence of knockdown philosophical arguments (2014b, pp. 534–535).

You might disagree. You might think that you can argue for very strong standards by appealing to claims about the significance of peer disagreement. For example, you might think that the rational response to peer disagreement about one's beliefs is to substantially lower one's credence in the relevant propositions. And you might think that this undermines the ability of an argument to impart knowledge of its conclusion in the presence of peer disagreement. My second reason for comparatively weaker standards raises a problem for such arguments, as well as other arguments for strong standards: arguments for strong standards face a self-defeat problem. Take the view that an argument succeeds iff it satisfies BARD. Arguments for that view almost definitely won't satisfy BARD. They'll almost definitely be subject to reasonable doubt. So they'll almost definitely be self-defeating. This reasoning doesn't show that no such argument can satisfy BARD, of course. But it does establish a strong presumption against the view that philosophical arguments succeed iff they satisfy BARD. Given this, we're not justified in accepting that view or calling arguments failures on the basis of it without an argument for it that isn't self-defeating. Similar considerations apply to other strong standards, including those applied by the demanding criteria of success that van Inwagen rejects. The stronger a standard is, the higher the probability that arguments for it will be self-defeating, since those arguments will be harder to justify on their own terms. So the stronger a proposed standard is, the stronger the presumption against it.[17]

So much for van Inwagen's first oversight. Here's his second: he overlooks differences in intuitions. This is a consequence of one of his assumptions. Because the debate is ideal, he assumes that ideal audience member's responses will be uniform (2006, pp. 51–52). That is, he assumes that they'll all accept p, reject p, or stay agnostic.[18] But this isn't guaranteed if they have different intuitions. People with different intuitions may find an argument's premises or implications more or less attractive. Consequently, an argument may convince some and not others, even when all the relevant parties are using the same standard of evidence. The ideal nature of the debate wouldn't obviously eliminate all such differences. It eliminates things like bias and incompetence. But such things aren't obviously the only sources of differences in intuitions (cf. Huemer 2013, pp. 49–50).[19,20]

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[17] Notice: van Inwagen's claim that all philosophical arguments for substantive theses fail faces a similar self-defeat problem. Assuming that it's a substantive thesis, then no philosophical argument for it can succeed if it's true. Thanks to Ceth Lightfield for recommending that I be explicit about this.

[18] Given this assumption, one might wonder why van Inwagen defines success in terms of convincing an ideal *audience*, rather than an ideal thinker. I suspect that it has something to do with the criminal jury analogy. Maybe he defines success in this way so that he can make the analogy. Or maybe he defines it in this way because the analogy is fundamental to his thinking about success. Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne for raising this issue.

[19] Van Inwagen notes that audiences from different times and cultures would reach different verdicts about certain arguments (2006, pp. 47–48). Differences in knowledge and beliefs are obviously part of the explanation. But differences in intuitions are too. He assesses success by looking to an ideal audience drawn from our own time and culture (ibid.).

[20] Soerensen (2013) makes a similar point. She doesn't mention intuitions, but she identifies various factors that could prevent an ideal audience from reaching unanimity (2013, p. 307). She also argues that van Inwagen's criticisms of the argument from hiddenness are inconsistent with VIC. She seems to think that the reasons why suggest that certain theists shouldn't accept VIC.

This suggests a way to further revise VIC.
An argument for p succeeds iff *enough* of the audience in an ideal debate would conclude that it satisfies the appropriate standard of evidence.

This leaves open what counts as enough. As above, worries about demandingness and self-defeat favor comparatively weaker requirements. I think that we should reject very demanding requirements outright, e.g., unanimity or very large supermajorities. But it's not obvious to me that we should reject even very weak requirements. Maybe an argument succeeds to some extent even if it would only convince a few members of an ideal audience. That seems like a mark of limited success. Then again, you might think that the fewer ideal audience members an argument would convince, the less likely it is that the argument can impart knowledge even if its conclusion is true. This might be a good reason to reject very weak requirements. I'll take no stand on this.

One might object to my claim that we can reject very demanding standards here, though. One might think that an argument's inability to convince *all* or *almost all* members of an ideal audience is a good reason to think that it fails. One might take the fact that the argument wouldn't convince some ideal thinkers to be indicative of a defect in it that constitutes grounds for calling it a failure.[21] This objection isn't compelling. It takes the fact that a small number of ideal audience members wouldn't be convinced to be indicative of failure even when very many more equally ideal audience members would be convinced. The fact that very many ideal audience members would be convinced seems to indicate that the argument isn't defective at all, or at least not defective in a way that makes it a failure. The objection seems to weigh failure to convince ideal thinkers much more heavily in success evaluation than it weighs convincing ideal thinkers. There's no obviously good reason to do that. A more plausible view is that arguments that wouldn't convince all or almost members of an ideal audience aren't unqualifiedly successful. They're successful to some degree, but not as successful as arguments that would convince all or almost all members of an ideal audience.

We now have a rough criterion of success that retains VIC's virtues and avoids the problems with VIC that I've identified. In the next section, I'll discuss the different implications that these criteria have for philosophy generally and for the Argument from Evil specifically.

3 Implications

Recall, van Inwagen thinks that all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions fail. In defense of this claim, he appeals to actual philosophical disagreements. He says that if any such argument satisfied VIC, then "to a high probability, assent to [its conclusion] would be more widespread among philosophers than assent to any substantive philosophical thesis actually is" (2006, p. 53). He takes actual disagreements to be strong evidence of widespread failure. I don't.

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[21] Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this objection.

It's not obvious that actual disagreements are strong evidence of failure on a criterion of success like mine. The prospects for success turn on controversial issues, among them what the justification requirement for knowledge is. Without tackling such issues, it's premature to endorse van Inwagen's failure claim.

Consider a somewhat idealized example. Suppose that all philosophers are familiar with the arguments for a substantive thesis p and that 70 % of them accept p. According to the recent PhilPapers survey, some such theses have comparable support among actual philosophers.[22] 70 % is a lot, but it leaves a substantial minority who don't accept p. Is that good evidence that all the arguments for p fail? Well, the fact that many philosophers aren't convinced suggests that the arguments lack some justificatory power. If they were more powerful, more philosophers would probably be convinced. But do the numbers show that the arguments are *failures*? If you endorse a very demanding criterion of success, you'll probably say that the numbers do show this. But the more liberal your criterion, the less inclined you'll be to say that. To call the arguments failures on this basis, we need reasons not to be so liberal. The reasons I've given for comparatively weaker standards should give us pause here.[23,24]

What about the Argument from Evil? Initially, the numbers here look similar to the numbers in the above case. The Philpapers survey says that a substantial majority of respondents among target faculty accept or lean towards atheism: 72.8 %. However, 72.3 % of target faculty who specialize in philosophy of religion accept or lean towards theism. Specialists tend to be more familiar with the arguments. So one might think that, upon closer inspection, the relevant numbers suggest that the Argument from Evil fails even on a liberal criterion of success. Then again, selection effects arguably play a significant role here. Theists may be more likely to specialize in philosophy of religion. And, as van Inwagen himself

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[22] 70 % is comparable to some of the higher values in the survey. See Bourget and Chalmers (2009), http://philpapers.org/surveys/. Also see Bourget and Chalmers (2014).

[23] Consider the self-defeat worry. Suppose you think that a philosophical argument succeeds only if it would convince more than 70 % of philosophers. Do you have an argument for that view that would convince more than 70 % of philosophers? I doubt it. Or consider the demandingness worry. Do you think that one can do philosophy and do it well in giving philosophical arguments, for substantive conclusions, that don't convince more than 70 % of philosophers? I think one can. Do you think that a philosophical argument for a substantive conclusion that fails to convince more than 70 % of philosophers can still impart knowledge if it's conclusion is true? I think that it can.

[24] An anonymous referee asks: Are the philosophers all convinced by the same argument for p? Or have different arguments generated a consensus? These questions are important because one might think that there can be a strong numbers-based argument for failure even when all or nearly all philosophers accept p. If the philosophers are convinced by different arguments and each argument only convinces a relatively small number of them, one might think that all the arguments for p are failures, even on a liberal criterion. This reasoning is mistaken. Assume that there are n arguments that have generated the consensus. We can construct the following argument.

(1) Either the premises of argument 1 are true or the premises of argument 2 are true… or the premises of argument n are true.
(2) Therefore, p.

A numbers-based argument for failure doesn't obviously work against this argument. So I think that it doesn't matter whether one argument or different arguments have generated a consensus.

insists, an argument's inability to convince committed opponents of its conclusion isn't a mark of failure. So these numbers aren't obviously good evidence that the Argument from Evil fails on a liberal criterion.

But van Inwagen doesn't just appeal to such numbers to defend theism against the Argument from Evil. He levels a specific objection against the argument: the Free Will Defense. He thinks that the Free Will Defense demonstrates that the argument is a failure. One could agree with him about this even if one rejects his view that all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions are failures. So let's consider whether he's right about the Free Will Defense and the Argument from Evil.

Here's the Free Will Defense in a nutshell. It says that God might have a good reason to permit evil. It says that there might be goods worth the cost of evil that even an omnipotent being like God can't secure without permitting evil. It holds that free will might be such a good or be instrumentally necessary for such goods. And it says that libertarianism about free will might be true, in some sense of "might."[25]

So understood, it's not obvious that the Free Will Defense demonstrates failure on a liberal criterion. Notice first that some of its key claims don't sit well with most philosophers, particularly the appeal to libertarianism. The PhilPapers survey provides relevant numbers here. Only 13.7 % of target faculty accept or lean towards libertarianism. 71.3 % accept or lean towards compatibilism or the view that we have no free will. Again, the results are significantly different among philosophers of religion. But philosophers of religion don't obviously have any special expertise about free will.[26]

These numbers suggest the following. Combining the Free Will Defense with a numbers-based argument for failure that focuses on the philosophical disagreements over free will won't obviously show that the Argument from Evil is a failure. This is because the above numbers provide no obvious reason to think that arguments against libertarianism are failures on a liberal criterion of success. For all the numbers show, maybe enough members of an ideal audience, applying whatever the appropriate standard of evidence is, could be persuaded by an anti-libertarian argument that libertarianism is false or probably false. If so, the Free Will Defense wouldn't obviously show that the Argument from Evil is a failure.[27]

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[25] Different free will defenders formulate the might claim differently, depending on which version of the Argument From Evil they're challenging (for a discussion of different versions of the argument, see van Inwagen 2006, p. 8). I'm assuming that van Inwagen would say that libertarianism might be true in the sense that it isn't known to be false or probably false or unreasonable to believe (though see note 9, above). He thinks that both logical and inductive versions of the Argument from Evil are failures (though he eschews the logical/inductive distinction).

[26] The numbers are comparable, but slightly different among target faculty specializing in metaphysics. 21.4 % accept or lean towards libertarianism. 68.8 % accept or lean towards compatibilism or the view that we have no free will.

[27] It's possible that more survey research could yield evidence that anti-libertarian arguments are failures on a liberal criterion, though. Recall, the PhilPapers survey results say that 71.3 % of target faculty accept or *lean towards* anti-libertarian views. It's not clear what "lean towards" means here. A fine-grained breakdown of the results show that 34.8 % accept compatibilism, 24.3 % lean towards it, 5.7 % accept the view that we have no free will, and 6.6 % lean towards that view. So, 40.7 % accept and 30.9 % lean towards anti-libertarian views. (I've omitted other potentially anti-libertarian options that very few

Furthermore, it's not obvious that one can't know, on the basis of argument, that libertarianism is false or probably false. Many philosophers seem to think that they know something like that. It's not obvious that they should accept that the Free Will Defense demonstrates that the Argument from Evil is a failure on a liberal criterion of success. Those who think that the Free Will Defense demonstrates failure should either give good reasons why it demonstrates this on a liberal criterion—e.g., by arguing that no anti-libertarian argument succeeds on such a criterion—or they should give good reasons to accept a relatively illiberal criterion. Van Inwagen does neither.

So, I think that we should say the same thing about the Argument from Evil that I said about all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions. Van Inwagen's declarations of failure are premature. Without an argument for a demanding criterion of success, I see no reason to conclude that the Argument from Evil is a failure, let alone all philosophical arguments for substantive conclusions. I suspect that many theist philosophers agree with van Inwagen about the Argument from Evil because, like him, they insist on subjecting it to overly demanding standards of success (cf. Lewis 2007, p. 231).

4 Conclusion

I've criticized VIC and developed an alternative that retains VIC's virtues without the problems. My criterion is consistent with a more optimistic view of philosophy and about the Argument from Evil than VIC is.

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Footnote 27 continued

respondents selected). Maybe a substantial number of philosophers in the lean towards group would characterize their attitudes towards anti-libertarian views as relatively weak. Maybe they'd assign relatively low probabilities of being true to such views or report relatively weak rational credences in favor of such views. If more surveys yielded information like that, there'd be a better case for the failure of anti-libertarian arguments on a liberal criterion. Whether it would be a strong case would still be debatable, though.

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