

## God, Schmod and Gratuitous Evil

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It is common these days for theists to argue that we aren't justified in believing atheism on the basis of evil. They claim that neither facts about particular horrors nor more holistic considerations pertaining to the magnitude, kinds and distribution of evil can ground atheism since we can't tell whether *any* evil is gratuitous.<sup>1</sup> In this paper we explore a novel strategy for shedding light on these issues: we compare the atheist who claims that there is no morally sufficient reason for certain evils with the physicist who claims that there is no causally sufficient reason for some events.

Here are some important truths about the physicist's belief that will be central to our discussion.

i. It is a belief that is rather ambitious because of the negative existential that appears in its content. Of course, not every negative existential claim is ambitious. "There is no duck in this spot" is hardly more ambitious than "There is a parrot in this spot". It is not particularly difficult to justifiedly believe negative existentials which are about some particular location since, in conjunction with certain necessary truths, they are entailed by positive existentials about that location. But this is not the case with existentials which assert that there is nothing of a certain sort *anywhere*. They can't be so easily deduced from statements describing what is going on at specific locations.<sup>2</sup>

ii. The physicist's belief that some events have no causally sufficient reason is justified. Most of us, at any rate, will concede this. Scientific inquiry is standardly regarded as a paradigm of rationality and the discovery of indeterminism is commonly heralded as one of its greatest triumphs. If our reader is unwilling to concede this, she should take the topic of this paper to be: supposing that belief in indeterminism is rational, what does that tell us about the epistemic status of atheism based on gratuitous evil?

iii. Indeterminism has some consequences for the nature of supernatural reality. Let *Schmod* be an incorporeal being that is essentially omnipotent and omniscient, and who, necessarily, ensures that every event has a causally sufficient reason. The claim that

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<sup>1</sup> There are many analyses of gratuitous evil floating around these days. We avoid that morass by asking our reader to fill in her favorite definition, so long as the result is that if an evil is gratuitous, then there is no morally sufficient reason for it. By 'morally sufficient reason for an evil' we mean a state of affairs connected with that evil in such a way that if there were a God, that state of affairs would justify God in permitting it.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, if it were analytic or apriori self-evident that every determined event has causal determinants that are spatio-temporally contiguous, then the physicist's claim would not be so ambitious as we are suggesting. But we are inclined to concur with the current mainstream that denies that causal action at a distance can be rejected on apriori or linguistic grounds.

Schmody exists is inconsistent with indeterminism. Hence, the physicist's belief in indeterminism commits him to denying the existence of Schmody.

The remainder of this paper has two parts. In part I we employ the analogy between the atheist and the modern-day physicist to show that some recent objections to rational belief in gratuitous evil imply that the physicist is not justified in believing in causal indeterminism. In part II we use that analogy to explore three related but different questions.

- A. Can the atheist provide the theist with a convincing argument that concludes that atheism is more likely than theism, given certain facts about evil both accept?
- B. Can someone be justified in believing in gratuitous evil?
- C. Can facts about evil form the rational basis for atheism?

## I

Keith Yandell notes that any argument for atheism based on evil will require something like the following as a premise: necessarily, if God allows any evil, then He has a morally sufficient reason for doing so. He goes on to claim that no argument for atheism could proceed from such a premise. For if it is true, then each evil has the property of being an *x* such that, if God exists, He has morally sufficient reason for permitting *x*. Call that property *P*. He then presents his crucial second premise: "It seems clear that any evil that has *P* is not an evil whose existence provides evidence against God's existence." He infers that that each evil is evidentially impotent against theism. (A formally similar argument nets the conclusion that evil altogether lacks evidential force.) Let's focus on his second premise. Why should we suppose it is true? Presumably, because if an evil has *P*, then it will not provide evidential support for the claim that there are evils that lack a morally sufficient reason. In that case, since every evil has *P*, no evil can be used as a basis for inferring that theism is false.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the sense that something fishy is going on here. The victory is too quick, too cheap. The offending item, we submit, is

- Y. If an evil has *P* -- the property of being such that if God exists, it has a morally sufficient reason --, it isn't evidence that there are evils for which there is no such reason.

Indeed, (Y) has horribly implausible consequences. To see them, consider the following parallel argument the schmodyist might mount against the quantum physicist. "For every event, necessarily, if Schmody exists, there is a causally sufficient reason for it. However,

- Y\*. If an event has *P\** -- the property of being such that if Schmody exists, there is a causally sufficient reason for it --, it isn't evidence that there are undetermined events.

Thus apparently indeterminate events are impotent as an evidential support for indeterminism." But this conclusion is false.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Problem of Evil and the Content of Morality," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 17 (1985), pp. 140-41.

It is worth pausing to note what, in general, is wrong with Yandell's argument. A state of affairs D is *prima facie* evidence for atheism if theism coupled with D entails some proposition Q that is improbable. But D will nonetheless have the property that if theism is true, Q is true. Hence, even if D is such that if theism is true, so is Q, that does not preclude arguing from D to atheism on the grounds that (i) Q is probably false and (ii) since theism and D entail Q, theism is probably false too.

A more popular argument targets one who argues that there is gratuitous evil on the grounds that, so far as she can tell, there is no morally sufficient reason for some evils. Call this fact about many evils 'inscrutability'. An increasingly popular theistic response runs like this:

1. We are justified in believing that there is no morally sufficient reason for E given E's inscrutability only if we would be able to discern it, were there one.
2. We probably wouldn't be able to discern a morally sufficient reason, were there one.
3. So we do not justifiably believe that there is no such reason given E's inscrutability.

In support of (2), theists sometimes argue that if there were a God, He would be infinitely more knowledgeable than ourselves; so we should not expect to discern His reasons for permitting any given evil -- we should expect E to be inscrutable. Here's Alvin Plantinga on the matter:

[O]nly if we had good reason to think we would be privy to God's reasons for permitting evil, only if there were some reason to think that if we can't see what reason God might have for a given evil, [is it then] likely that he does not have a good reason. But there is no reason to think such a thing. If indeed there is such a person, a God, an omniscient, omnipotent eternal person, then in many situations, it would probably be difficult for us to see what his reason for what he does would be.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, Stephen Wykstra argues,

The outweighing good at issue is of a special sort: one purposed by the creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are somewhat greater than ours. How much greater? A modest proposal might be that his wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one month old infant's.... If such goods as this exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them.... [B]ut if outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one month old should discern most of his parent's purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer -- which is to say, it is not likely at all. So for any selected instance of intense

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<sup>4</sup> "Epistemic Probability and Evil" (manuscript), p. 8; published in *Archivio Di filosofia* LVI (1988).

suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this.<sup>5</sup> Wykstra and Plantinga are not alone in this *Appeal to Omniscience*, as we shall call it. William Alston joins them in remarking that "It would be exceedingly strange if an omniscient being did not immeasurably exceed our grasp of such matters," just before inferring that the atheist is poorly placed to infer pointlessness.<sup>6</sup> And it is a refrain often heard from the theist on the street.

Notice that the schmodist could make an analogous appeal to show that observations by physicists do not provide evidence that some events are causally undetermined. "After all," he might begin, "the determining cause at issue is purposed by an omnipotent and omniscient being who gets his kicks by guaranteeing that each event is causally determined. And surely his wisdom and vision is much greater than ours. So, if causally sufficient reasons exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them. But if determining causes of the sort at issue produce events that our best physics classifies as undetermined, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one month old should discern how its parents determine the behavior of their TV and video by way of remote control -- which is to say, it is not likely at all. So for any selected event, there is good reason to think that if there is a determining cause of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this."

This line of thought is obviously flawed for just the same reason the Appeal to Omniscience does not work in the hands of Wykstra and Plantinga. In both cases, what is at issue is the extent of our access to a certain domain. That an omniscient being would know lots more than us in general shows nothing about whether we are ignorant of items in some particular domain. Just as the scope of Schmod's knowledge by itself does not show that we would be unable to discern a causally sufficient reason for each apparently indeterminate event were one there, so the scope of God's knowledge does not, by itself, show that we would be unable to tell there was a morally sufficient reason for some horror were there one. So Plantinga, Wykstra and Alston must do more in defense of (2).

As well as getting illicitly involved with the Appeal to Omniscience, Alston also develops another argument against the atheist. He observes that her claim is a member of the class of ambitious negative existentials and "that to be justified in such a claim one must be justified in excluding all the live possibilities for what the claim denies to exist."<sup>7</sup> Thus:

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<sup>5</sup> "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1984). For a more thorough assesment of Wykstra's argument, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), p. 45, ed. James E. Tomberlin.

<sup>7</sup> Alston, p. 36. Like Alston, we leave at the intuitive level the notion of a live possibility. Our focus in this paper steers us away from an assessment of the full range of considerations he brings to bear against the evidential argument from evil.

4. We justifiedly believe there is no morally sufficient reason for E only if we justifiedly exclude all the live possibilities in which there is such a reason.
5. We are in no position to rule out the live possibility that there are morally sufficient reasons for E that are unknown to us, and perhaps unknowable by us.
6. So we don't justifiedly believe that there is no such reason.

In support of (5), Alston argues that since we've steadily progressed in the discovery of values, and ways they might be realized (as we have in other areas of inquiry), we've good inductive reason to infer that there are values, and conditions for their realization, unknown to us. Surely, then, it is a live possibility that there is a sufficient reason for God to permit E, and every other apparently gratuitous evil, one that we are ignorant of.<sup>8</sup>

The driving force here is a sort of intellectual modesty, certainly a virtue in itself. But if we let our modesty have too much of an impact on the assessment of our epistemic status, we're in for a rough ride. Consider an argument isomorphic to Alston's, directed by our schmodist at the physicist: "We are unable to rule out the live possibility that, unbeknownst to us, there are causally sufficient reasons -- guaranteed by Schmod -- for those many apparently indeterminate events. After all, 'the development of physical science has made us aware of a myriad of things hitherto undreamed of, and developed concepts with which to grasp them -- gravitation, electricity, electro-magnetic fields, space-time curvature, and so on. It is an irresistible induction from this that we have not reached the final term of this process, and that more realities, aspects, properties, and structures remain to be discerned and conceptualised.'<sup>9</sup> So the physicist is not justified in believing that there is no causally sufficient reason for those events which are apparently causally undetermined." The lesson here is that if we are to make room for the rationality of many of our most important theoretical beliefs, we can't let intellectual modesty call the tune.

The thrust of Part I can be summarized in a dilemma posed to Yandell, Wykstra, Plantinga, Alston and those sympathetic with their reasoning: "Concede that the possibility of Schmod undermines the rationality of our best physics or else admit the failure of your arguments."<sup>10</sup> Bear in mind here that even those who doubt the rationality

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<sup>8</sup> Alston, pp. 44-45 and 58-59.

<sup>9</sup> The sentences enclosed in single quotation marks are Alston's, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> An anonymous referee from this journal suggested a "possible disanalogy" between the cases of God and Schmod, namely: "the theist's claim is that there is a God who is a morally perfect being, and perhaps that claim would be empty of meaning unless it had consequences of *some* kind for the kind of things we expect to find in the world, whereas maybe the Schmod hypothesis has no such consequences." Since Schmodism entails determinism, this amounts to the suggestion, which is surely implausible, that theism may have empirical cash value, whereas the hypothesis of determinism has none! It is to be conceded, of course, that the thesis of determinism doesn't by itself logically entail any proposition whose truth we can observe. But the same goes for any theoretical statement, including theism, and hardly points to the conclusion that the thesis of determinism is empty of meaning.

Another possible disanalogy, suggested by William Alston, is that perhaps it is easier to check on whether an event is determined than whether an evil is gratuitous since we have good a priori reasons for thinking that the proximate causal determinants of an event are spatio-temporally contiguous. That would

of our best physics are hardly tempted to do so on the basis of scare stories about possible supernatural realities; yet the writers that we criticize are committed to rejecting the rationality of physics on that basis. Thus those writers can hardly fail to be embarrassed by our dilemma.

## II

A. In arguing from evil, most atheists undertake a certain offensive project: to show, by standards and evidence the theist will accept, that atheism is more likely than theism. This project will succeed only if the atheist finds some proposition pertaining to evil to whose truth atheists and theists will all agree. Call this proposition *Evil*. She then has to argue, first, that given the thesis that there is no God, Evil is just the sort of thing one would expect, and second, that Evil is very unlikely on the hypothesis that God exists.

The theist can offer persuasive reason to think that the prospects for this offensive project are dim. For example, she might follow Peter van Inwagen's line of thought, which we present in this paragraph with minor modifications. Suppose we let Evil be a proposition that describes "in some detail the amount, kinds and distribution of suffering -- the suffering not only of human beings, but of all the sentient terrestrial creatures that there are or ever have been."<sup>11</sup> There are propositions that entail Evil and which we haven't any idea whether they would be true given theism. Here's one candidate: God justifiably permits Evil to be true because the only worlds He could actualize which contained a morally preferable distribution of suffering would be ones which were massively irregular, and a world with massive irregularity is not preferable to one in which Evil is true. (A "massively irregular world" is a world in which the laws of nature fail in some massive way.) Other candidates van Inwagen does not entertain involve the free acts of invisible non-human agents, suffering contributing to our well-being in an afterlife or to the future lives of non-human onlookers, that there are values that permitting Evil is necessary to secure but which, owing to an incomplete moral theory, we are ignorant of, and so on, as well as combinations of these. The problem is that it seems that we haven't the foggiest idea what the likelihood of one or another of these Evil-entailing propositions is given theism; thus, we are in no position to assign a probability to Evil on theism.

In trying to respond to this line of thought, the atheist will be hampered by the following features of her epistemic situation. First, it is extremely hard to judge what

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make it much easier to rule out determinism than the thesis that all events have a morally sufficient reason. However, the idea that we can reject action at a distance on *a priori* grounds seems hardly one that can be taken seriously in the age of modern physics: hence we don't find this worry particularly pressing. We might add that even given the rejection of action at a distance, once one takes seriously the possibility of causal determination by a proximate supernatural being, ruling out determinism starts to look like a difficult task indeed.

<sup>11</sup> "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), p. 137, ed. James E. Tomberlin. We refer the reader to it for a thorough discussion of why the atheist's prospects for responding to the argument are poor.

sorts of worlds an omnipotent being would be able to create. To judge this involves, *inter alia*, judging what sort of alternative systems of natural law are possible. None of us pretend to have much of an idea about that. And even if we did, we would be extremely hard pressed to cognize what worlds with alternative systems of law would look like and what their comparative value would be. Second, we have little idea of the details of what sort of afterlife, if any, a God would provide for creatures and in particular how what happens there would be related to earthly existence. Third, we have little idea of what sort of non-human beings, if any, God would choose to create and how they would be causally related to the lives of humans.<sup>12</sup>

It shouldn't come as a great surprise to the atheist if she found herself unable to pull off the offensive project. For notice that the physicist's prospects for accomplishing the corresponding project are equally bleak. Suppose he argued against the schmodist as follows: "Given quantum physics, experimental data D is just what one would expect. However, if schmodism were true, D would be extremely unlikely. Therefore, D provides good *prima facie* grounds for accepting indeterminism, hence for rejecting schmodism." The schmodist might well reply as did our theist: "There are certain propositions such that the conjunction of any of them with schmodism entails D. Moreover, we are in no position to judge what the probability of any of them is on schmodism. Consider, for example, P, the proposition that Schmod has a fetish for deceiving the best physicists into thinking that some events are undetermined. Who's to say how likely it is that this fetish accompany the fetish for determinism? We are in no position to engage in supernatural psychology. Since we can't evaluate the probability of P on schmodism and P entails D, it follows that we can't evaluate the probability of D on schmodism."

This strikes us as impeccable reasoning, at least as impeccable as that of the last paragraph but one. And it serves to show that the physicist has little hope of accomplishing the offensive project.

**B.** It is important to see, however, that none of this shows that the physicist is unjustified in his belief in indeterminism. He will rightly concur that we cannot judge the probability of D on schmodism since we are unable to judge the probability of D-entailing propositions given schmodism. How, then, can the physicist be justified in assigning a higher probability to indeterminism on D? Here's how: he's justified in assigning schmodism a low prior probability. In that case, schmodism conjoined with whatever D-entailing proposition you please -- say, P -- is very improbable on D not because schmodism coupled with P would lead one to expect something other than D and not because P is improbable on schmodism alone, but rather because he justifiably assigns schmodism itself a low antecedent probability.

Someone might well adopt a similar strategy in defending her belief in gratuitous evil. The gratuitousness of certain evils -- say, the suffering of a certain fawn in a forest fire --

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<sup>12</sup> Much more could be said by way of vitiating the offensive project. See the articles by van Inwagen and Alston cited above, and William Hasker's "Suffering, Soul-Making, and Salvation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* (March 1988), especially pp. 16-17.

is not something she observes directly but infers on the basis of certain assumptions regarding which possibilities she ought to take seriously and which not. If she proceeds after the manner of our physicist, she will not take seriously such possibilities as animals having an afterlife, their being attacked by invisible non-human free agents, their inspiring non-human agents to heroic and undetectable deeds or our axiological ignorance. She could not quickly dismiss these possibilities if she took theism seriously. Hence, in inferring that there is gratuitous evil, she assigns theism a low prior probability.

In both cases, our protagonists employ theoretical considerations in drawing a certain sort of inference from some data. Both rely, *inter alia*, on claims to the effect that a certain range of possibilities are unlikely, or need not be seriously considered. There is, in general, nothing improper about this sort of procedure. It is an instance of what Clark Glymour calls *the bootstrapping strategy*. Put simply, his core idea is that some hypothesis H of a theory T is deduced from evidence E using T itself and it is that deductive relation which makes E confirm T. In *Theory and Evidence*, Glymour explicates this idea in great detail, and he has subsequently modified his account in response to his critics. However, for the following reasons, the details of his work need not concern us here.<sup>13</sup> First, the philosophy of science industry devoted to figuring out the best detailed elucidation of the bootstrapping idea has reached no clear consensus. Second, the details of Glymour's own account is geared to the confirmation of general theoretical laws and that is not what interests us here. Third, as even Glymour admits, the core idea that drives his account can be stated without the use of any grand formal apparatus and, so long as it is fundamentally correct, can in itself give us valuable insight into the nature of confirmation. As far as our paper is concerned, then, the pertinent point is that the bootstrapping idea is widely regarded as the most promising avenue to an account of how nuggets of data confirm particular hypotheses. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that a fruitful account of confirmation will embrace it. With that in mind, it will be useful to introduce a notion of *internal justification*, which we define as follows:

E internally justifies one in believing H if and only if H, or 'H is probable', can be deduced (in a manner acceptable to the ideal bootstrapping account of confirmation) from E together with the theory that one accepts.

(We leave it to the philosopher of science and epistemologist to flesh out the parenthetical clause.)

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<sup>13</sup> Clark Glymour, *Theory and Evidence* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1980). See also David Christensen, "Glymour on Evidential Relevance," *Philosophy of Science* 50 (1983) and John Earman and Clark Glymour, "What Revisions does Bootstrap Testing Need? A Reply," *Philosophy of Science* 55 (1988).

We have simplified Glymour's account in one important respect. He allows that E may confirm a universally quantified hypothesis H of the form 'For all x, x is F' to some degree if E, together with one's theory, entails an instance of H, where an instance will be of the form 'a is F'. We have ignored this for two reasons: First, Glymour is interested in the confirmation of general theoretical laws, while we are not. Second, this sort of weak confirmation is clearly not enough to confer justified belief in the hypothesis confirmed.



Most philosophers will think that internal justification is not sufficient for full-blooded justification. They will say that if E internally justifies us in believing H, but only because we accept a theory that we obviously ought not to accept, we will not be justified in believing H. However, it does seem that a necessary condition for our atheist to be justified in believing that there is gratuitous evil is that she be internally justified in believing that there is gratuitous evil. After all, she doesn't claim to just *see* the gratuitousness of an evil, as if by magic. Rather, she infers that claim from the data -- say, its inscrutability -- together with certain theoretical beliefs. Hence, there will have to be a theoretical bridge to a belief in gratuitous evil if that belief is to be justified.

To assess whether our atheist is justified in believing in gratuitous evil, it will be useful to separate two questions:

- (i) Is she internally justified in that belief?
- (ii) Given that she is internally justified, is she fully justified?

We shall address each in turn.

(i) One might argue that our atheist is not even internally justified in believing in gratuitous evil: "The atheist doesn't pretend to have a comprehensive list of values, nor does she know exactly how to compare all those values that she does know of. So how, then, can she be in a position to judge that some evil is genuinely gratuitous?"

The answer is that the atheist need not have a complete list of values in order to be internally justified in believing in gratuitous evil. Nor must she be able to compare all those values that she does know of. Rather she can reason the following way: "Evils that are not deliberately purposed or permitted by some well-intentioned agent will typically have no outweighing good appropriately related to them. For it would be near miraculous if all the evils brought about by the blind forces of nature or ill-willed persons just happened to have some morally sufficient reason. Now, the possibility that many evils are purposed or permitted by some well-intentioned agent is not one that I need to take seriously. Hence, even if I concede my objector's premise, my belief that some evil is gratuitous may still be internally justified."

Our atheist's internal justification is not vitiated by the possibility that there is a good-intentioned agent that oversees the course of history since the theoretical baggage she brings to the facts about evil includes assumptions which give such possibilities low antecedent probability. So they aren't a problem for her being internally justified in believing in gratuitous evil any more than possibilities involving Schrodinger are a problem for the physicist being internally justified in believing in causally indeterminate events given the analogous empirical data.

(ii) It might be argued that even if the atheist is internally justified, her hypothesis that there is gratuitous evil will not be *fully* justified. Here are two of the most likely reasons for believing this.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> We set aside an obvious third reason: that she has just as good a reason to believe theism is true as she does reason to believe some evil is gratuitous.

First, while the atheist is confronted with a long tradition of people who believe in God, the physicist is not confronted with a long tradition of people who believe in Schmod. It would be unreasonable to regard a possibility that many of one's fellows take to be actual as not serious. Thus our atheist is unjustified since she concludes that there are gratuitous evils without taking seriously a possibility that she ought to take seriously.

We are not convinced by this line of thought. Do we really think that our physicist's belief would suddenly become unjustified if he moved to a country where there was a long tradition of schmodism and nevertheless upheld the same theory? While socio-historical facts might affect what someone *believes* to be a serious possibility, to suggest that they somehow directly affect what *is* a serious possibility is to court confusion of the worst kind.<sup>15</sup>

Second, a theist might see things this way:

[H]e may be inclined to think of the atheist as the person who is suffering, in this way, from some illusion, from some noetic defect, from an unhappy, unfortunate and unnatural condition that has deplorable noetic consequences. He may see the atheist as somehow the victim of sin in the world -- his own sin or the sin of others.... [O]ne who does not believe in God is in an epistemically defective position -- rather like someone who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks that she is a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings or consciousness. In this way the believer inverts Freud and Marx, claiming that what they see as sickness is really health and what they see as health is really sickness.<sup>16</sup>

In light of this cognitive malfunction the theist may conclude that the atheist's belief in gratuitous evil is not fully justified.

The atheist, of course, will hardly be persuaded by this line of reasoning. However, we can see that she is going to have a hard time satisfying the theist that she has shown herself justified. To accomplish this task, she either will have to show that even if that cognitive malfunction of which the theist speaks were to obtain, that would not affect the epistemic status of her belief in gratuitous evil, or else she will have to convince the theist that those tenets described in the above quote are false. In our opinion, the best the atheist can do by way of responding to the theist is to show internal justification and then go on to show, perhaps, that her theory meets certain general standards of plausibility that the theist will accept. If this is not enough for the theist, the two mixes of epistemic norms and theory will preclude successful dialogue.

Even if she fails, it does not follow that the atheist is not fully justified in believing there is gratuitous evil. It merely follows that she cannot *show* she is justified (to the satisfaction of the theist). Our analogy is useful here. Imagine that our physicist encountered a bunch of schmodists who claimed that by embroiling themselves in

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<sup>15</sup> See Mark Heller's "Relevant Alternatives," *Philosophical Studies* (1989) for a fine discussion of this point.

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, p. 36.

empirical science, physicists have closed their minds to supernatural reality, that what they see as epistemic virtue is really sickness, that what they see as cultish madness is really health. The physicist will undoubtedly have a hard time convincing them that her belief in indeterminism is justified. But that hardly implies that the physicist's belief in that hypothesis is not fully justified.

Let's sum up. The thrust of the preceding discussion is that if our atheist is reasonable in not taking theism seriously, then not only will the facts about suffering that she discovers confirm the hypothesis that there is gratuitous evil relative to the theory she holds, but, moreover, in the light of those facts, she will be internally justified in her belief that there is gratuitous evil. In Part I, we found problems with a variety of arguments that attempt to show, without assuming the truth of theism, that no one is justified in believing that there is gratuitous evil. The upshot of Part II thus far is that all such arguments will be doomed to failure unless it is shown that the atheist *must* take theism seriously in order to be justified in believing some evil is gratuitous.

C. There is a final important issue to which we now turn, one which can hardly have escaped the attentive reader. To what extent might a belief that God doesn't exist be reasonably *based on* considerations about evil? The analogy with the physicist is again instructive. He brings to the evidence a belief that such possibilities as Schmod need not be taken seriously. Such beliefs are crucial in enabling him to infer indeterminism from the experimental evidence justifiably. It would be quite misleading, then, for him to say to the schmodist: "Well, I used to be unsure about schmodism. But then I looked at the experimental evidence and saw that indeterminism was correct. Seeing that indeterminism implies that Schmod doesn't exist, I concluded that there is no Schmod."

Thus the experimental data don't form the basis for the physicist's disbelief in Schmod in any sense of 'basis' which implies that learning the former preceded the latter. But a claim about the basis of one's belief need not be a genetic claim; the basis of one's belief at a time might be that which constitutes its rational grounds at that time, and that in turn may have little to do with the way one originally arrived at the belief. Even so, it is misleading to describe the observational evidence as the 'basis' of the belief that Schmod doesn't exist. Two points are relevant here.

First, at least part of the basis of the physicist's aschmodism will include one or more of the following: He finds it just obvious that schmodism is unlikely or else he sees that any theory involving Schmod will fail to satisfy certain global standards of plausibility that he endorses. Hence, at best, observational beliefs will form only part of the basis for rejecting Schmod. Second, there is a line of thought that suggests that observational evidence doesn't even form part of the basis. We here need to introduce a feature of Glymour's bootstrapping strategy that we omitted: for evidence E to confirm H relative to T, not only must it be possible to deduce H from E using T but there must be "a set J of *possible* values for the same initial quantities such that the same computations from J

result in a counterinstance to [H].<sup>17</sup> That is to say, there must be some possible data from the same evidential source as E which would disconfirm the hypothesis that E confirms. Clearly, this condition won't be satisfied by the physicist's theory since none of the relevant observational quantities could be combined in such a way that his theory would enjoin subscription to schmodism. His theory doesn't say "Don't take schmodism seriously unless you begin to accumulate evidence for determinism." It says, "Whatever the observational results, schmodism needn't be taken seriously." Thus no observational data could confirm schmodism relative to the physicist's theory. That in turn indicates that such data would play no part in the physicist's basis for rejecting schmodism.

Similar points bear on our atheist. If she is to infer gratuitous evil from the evidence reasonably, she will have to bring to that evidence the assumption that the possibility of theism need not be taken seriously and use it in inferring gratuitous evil. Thus the first point raised in the preceding paragraph will apply in this case too. Hence, facts about evil can provide only part of the rational basis for atheism. How about the second point above? That will depend on the exact nature of the atheist's theory. If it is a theory that, were certain possible moral facts to obtain, would permit one to infer that theism is probable or at least more probable than one previously believed, then facts about evil will form part of the basis for atheism. (For example, it might be a theory that, while assigning theism a low antecedent probability, enjoins one to raise that probability if confronted with an overwhelmingly just distribution of good and evil.) In that case, they will form part of the rational basis for the atheist's belief, albeit a small part: those facts will stop the low probability that one antecedently ascribes to theism from going up but they won't be why one ascribes a low probability in the first place. But if her theory says that theism is improbable no matter what moral facts one might confront, then facts about evil won't form even part of her basis for atheism.

Could facts about evil not only form part of one's basis for atheism in the sense that we have just explained but, moreover, lead one reasonably to believe that theism is even less likely than one previously thought? Given the result of section A, it is hard to see how. In that section we defended the view that one can't reasonably assign a probability to the facts about evil we observe on the assumption that theism is true. But the most plausible route for the atheist to use those facts to lower an already low probability she assigns theism would be on the grounds that were theism true, those facts would be incredibly improbable but were theism false, those facts would be hardly so improbable. That line of thought is ruled out if we are in no position to assign a probability to observable facts about evil on the assumption of theism. Thus, they seem insufficient to lead the attentive atheist reasonably to believe that the probability of theism is even lower than she previously believed. We can't help but conclude that many atheists writing on the

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<sup>17</sup> Glymour, *Theory and Evidence*, p. 115. Notice that a consequence of Glymour's account is that E may confirm H and H entail I and yet E not confirm I. But that is a *prima facie* desirable consequence. The truth that George Bush is president entails all the theorems of arithmetic; yet evidence for the former is not evidence for the latter.

problem of evil have been overly optimistic about the evidential power of facts about evil.

The analogy between our physicist and our atheist should, in one respect, be a cause for comfort to one who accepts gratuitous evil but, in another respect, a cause for concern. It is a cause for comfort since it indicates that *pace* Alston, Plantinga, Wykstra and Yandell, one can be justified in believing in gratuitous evil. It is a cause for concern because, insofar as the atheist's case for gratuitous evil is modelled on the physicist's case for indeterminism, facts about evil may well not do the epistemic work that she had hoped from them. First, it is unlikely that they will form part of an atheological argument that will convince the theist. Second, they will at best form only a part, perhaps a rather small part, of the rational basis for atheism.<sup>18</sup>

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