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THE INSCRUTABLE EVIL DEFENSE AGAINST
THE INDUCTIVE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

James F. Sennett

In this paper I offer a defense against the inductive argument from evil as developed by William Rowe. I argue that a key assumption in Rowe's argument—that the goods we know of offer us good inductive grounds to make certain inferences about the goods there are—is not justified. Particularly, I argue that *inscrutable evil*—evil such that any good it might serve is not open to human scrutiny—is not, in and of itself, good reason to believe that there is any unjustified evil. I then develop the defense by introducing the notion of a *relevant inductive sample* and arguing that there is good reason to assume that the goods we know of are not a relevant inductive sample of the goods there are—a fact that compromises any strength Rowe's argument might seem to have.

It is the purpose of this paper to present a defense against the inductive argument from evil—the argument that the presence of evil in the world inductively supports or makes likely the claim that an omnicompetent God does not exist.[1] I will concentrate on the argument offered by William Rowe, though I believe that my defense can be revised so as to meet the objections of any other plausible inductive argument.[2] I focus on Rowe because he is undoubtedly the dean of contemporary analytic philosophers working in this field, and because I see his argument to be the clearest, most easily understood, and most intuitively appealing of those available.

In calling my position a "defense," I take advantage of the very useful distinction between defense and theodicy, made famous by Alvin Plantinga.[3] A theodicy purports to offer reasons for God's allowance of evil, while a defense has a much more modest task. It seeks simply "to establish that a given formulation of the problem of evil fails to show theism to be inconsistent or improbable."[4] A defense against the *deductive* argument from evil, such as the free will defense, only needs to describe possible states of affairs that entail that God coexists with evil. These states do not need to be actual (indeed, they do not even need to be probable), nor do they need to describe what the justification for evil in those states might be. A defense against the *inductive* argument from evil would likewise describe a state of affairs entailing that God and evil coexist. However, such a defense must be more than simply possible. It must be likely or probable enough to outweigh the likeli-

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hood involved in the argument.[5] Still, a defense need not offer an *explanation* for evil. It need only provide a scenario under which God's allowing evil is plausible, whatever his justification might be.

I

In its most recent form, Rowe's inductive argument from evil considers specific cases of natural evil (a fawn dying a slow, agonizing death in a naturally caused forest fire) and moral evil (the brutal rape and fatal beating of an innocent five-year-old girl).[6] Calling the first "E1" and the second "E2," Rowe argues that

> P: No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2

is true and constitutes good reason for inferring

> Q: No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting E1 or E2.[7]

Q, together with the assumption that an omnicompetent God would allow only morally justified evil (an assumption I will grant in this paper),[8] entails that such a God does not exist.

Notice that the only real difference between P and Q is that the words "we know of" appear in the former and not in the latter. Inherent in the inference from P to Q is the assumption that what we know about good and evil is good reason to draw certain conclusions about the nature of all good and evil, including that about which we have no knowledge. Rowe presents a perfectly natural justification for this assumption:

> [W]e are justified in making this inference in the same way we are justified in making the many inferences we constantly make from the known to the unknown. All of us are constantly inferring from the A's we know of to the A's we don't know of. If we observe many A's and all of them are B's we are justified in believing that the A's we haven't observed are also B's.[9]

According to Rowe, the inference from P to Q is as natural, permissible, and rational as many others made on a daily basis—for example, the conclusion that all pit bulls are vicious, given that many have been found to be vicious.[10] Rowe admits that this inference is susceptible to defeating information, but so are all such inferences. This fact alone certainly does not block the rationality of other inductive generalizations. Hence, in the absence of defeating information, P renders Q more likely, more rationally acceptable, than its negation. Since Q entails the denial of God's existence, P apparently makes the denial of God's existence more rational than its acceptance.

Consider the notion of *inscrutable* evil: evil such that human beings are unable to discern any divine justification for it—that is, any reason an om-

nicompetent God might have for allowing it.[11] The genius of Rowe's argument can be represented as the charge that

P*: There is inscrutable evil

inductively supports

Q*: There is unjustified evil.

For sake of simplicity and clarity, I will work with this formulation of the argument throughout this paper.[12]

II

Stephen Wykstra points out that Rowe's argument works only if he is justified in believing that, were God to exist, the phenomena of inscrutable evil would appear to us differently from the way they in fact do.[13] But, Wykstra argues, there is no justification for such a claim. Wykstra speaks of goods that are "beyond our ken"—that is, goods that we cannot recognize or understand as goods. Since God can recognize and understand such goods, Wykstra maintains that, if theism is true, then it is likely that the goods served by many instances of suffering will be just such goods—those beyond our ken. Thus, we should expect that many of the instances of suffering we see will not appear to us to be justified. Therefore, Rowe's assumption that the existence of God would make it likely that many evils would appear to us differently than they do (i.e., many evils that do not now appear to us as justified either would not occur or would appear to us as justified) is unfounded.

In response, Rowe finds fault with Wykstra's move from "[God] can grasp goods beyond our ken," to "It is likely that the goods in relation to which [God] permits many sufferings are beyond our ken." Rowe asserts that this move makes sense only if "the goods in question *have not occurred*, or…remain quite unknown to us [once they have occurred]." But, Rowe asserts, there is little in the assumption of theism that warrants either of these claims.

> The mere assumption that [God] exists gives us no reason whatever to suppose *either* that the greater goods in virtue of which he permits most sufferings are goods that come into existence far in the future of the sufferings we are now aware of *or* that, once they do obtain, we continue to be ignorant of them and their relation to the sufferings.[14]

That is, Rowe charges that Wykstra's defense requires that he have reasons for

(1) All inscrutable evil serves goods that are beyond our ken,

and there is no such reason, even given the existence of God. But Rowe is mistaken in thinking that Wykstra must have reasons for (1) in order to make a case against the inference of Q* from P*. All that is required is that (1) be no less likely than not—that is, that there is not reason sufficient to justify

denial of it. Since the existence of God entails that there is no unjustified evil, the existence of God plus the existence of inscrutable evil entails (1). That is, if God *does* exist, any inscrutable evil must be due to the fact that the goods that justify such evil are goods that we cannot discern as goods. There is no reason to assume that such a scenario is either impossible or *a priori* improbable. Therefore, at worst the existence of God *simpliciter* offers no reason to assume (1) to be more or less likely to be true. Hence, evidence that God does not exist must consist not only of the presence of inscrutable evil, but also of reason to assume that (1) is less likely than not. As long as (1) is considered no more likely to be false than true, one does not have a case for the denial of theism.

This line of thought is what I call "The Inscrutable Evil Defense." The key premise of my argument is

> (2) If God exists and is omnicompetent, then it is at least no less likely than not that all inscrutable evils serve goods beyond our ken.

(2) is the claim just argued for—that theism is at worst neutral with regards to (1). But more can be said on behalf of (2). Specifically, given that there is no reason to think that all evil will serve discernible goods, there is no reason to deny, and perhaps some reason to assert, that the line of demarcation between inscrutable evils and other evils just is the line of demarcation between evils serving goods beyond our ken and those serving goods we can discern. That is, the reason why these evils are inscrutable is precisely that they are the ones serving indiscernible goods. There is no *prima facie* reason to reject this assumption in favor of an atheistic deduction. At the very least, such an assumption is no less likely than not. This alone entails (2).

Now, (2) maintains that God's existence renders (1) *at least* no less likely than not, given God's existence. If it is *simply* no less likely than not, or only more likely to an inductively insignificant degree, then the existence of God and (1) together do not inductively support ¬P*. On the other hand, if it renders (1) more likely than not to an inductively significant degree, then the existence of God and (1) together inductively support P*. Hence, (2) entails

> (3) Either the existence of an omnicompetent God and (1) together inductively support P*, or they do not inductively support its denial.

(3) entails that P* must be accompanied by some reason to assume that (1) is less likely than not in order to make a case against theism. Absent such reason, P* alone cannot make a case against theism. So, it follows from (3) that

> (4) P* alone does not make the existence of God less likely than not.

Now, Q* entails that God does not exist. Therefore, P* would make Q* more likely than not only if P* would make it more likely than not that God does

not exist.[15] But we see by (4) that P* does no such thing. Therefore, we can conclude

> (5) Inscrutable evil is not good evidence for unjustified evil (i.e., P* does not inductively support Q*).

Without the assumption that (1) is less likely than not, Rowe's argument does not go through.

III

In this section I will explore the exact nature of the defect in Rowe's reasoning from P* to Q*, which is exploited by the Inscrutable Evil Defense. Concerning the analogous inference of *All pit bulls are vicious* from the evidence *I have encountered a fair number of pit bulls and they were all vicious* (alluded to in section I above), Rowe points out that the evidence justifying the inference could be defeated by discovering that "all the pit bulls I've encountered have been trained for fighting...[and] there are many pit bulls that are not so trained."[16] The defeat Rowe alludes to is evidence that the sample of pit bulls to which he has been exposed is not a relevant sample for the inductive inference he makes. Prior to acquaintance with such evidence, Rowe is *prima facie* justified in believing that his sample is relevant for the inference. But if he encounters the evidence, he loses his justification. So, in the absence of defeating evidence, Rowe has no reason to believe

> (6) The pit bulls I have encountered do not constitute a relevant inductive sample for the inference in question.

This lack of reason for (6) (among other things) gives him *prima facie* justification for making the inference.

Likewise, Rowe is *prima facie* justified in making the inference from P* to Q*, in part, because he has no reason to believe

> (7) The goods we know of do not constitute a relevant inductive sample of the goods there are,

which is the analogue to (6) for this inference. The truth of (7) would defeat the support of Q* by P*. That is, the conjunction of P* and (7) would not inductively support Q*. So, if one is justified in believing (7), then one is not justified in inferring Q* from P*.

I will now present three arguments that, coupled with the assumption that an omnicompetent God exists, each constitute good reason for believing (7). As such, these arguments constitute, separately and conjointly, evidence sufficient to defeat the inference from P* to Q* for anyone properly appreciative of them.

First, the existence of an omnicompetent God entails that there is at least one super-human intelligence and moral sensitivity in the universe. There-

fore, there is some being capable of grasping concepts, ideas, or situations infinitely above what we are able to grasp. Yet one assuming that (7) is false assumes that human moral sensitivities are capable of grasping enough truth from the goods they can discern to make very large generalizations about all the goods there are. Such an attitude displays a human chauvinism that is certainly out of place in a world of super-human moral sensitivities. Given omnicompetence, there is reason to believe that (7) is true and to reject the inference from P* to Q* as unjustified.

Second, Judaeo-Christian tradition teaches that humanity is "fallen," and that among the consequences of this fallenness is a perverted moral outlook—one that often mistakes good for evil and evil for good—and one that cannot begin to fathom the purposes of God. From such a viewpoint, belief of (7) is virtually mandatory. Far from being part of a relevant inductive sample, many of the "goods" we know of may not even be goods at all. Our moral sensitivities are not only too limited to justify denial of (7), as in the first argument above. They are also "out of tune," and at times deliver unreliable pronouncements. Hence, at least one representative theistic tradition offers good evidence to believe (7).

One important objection to this argument must be addressed before I go on. Rowe argues that no expansion of theism (such as the Judaeo-Christian tradition) is any more likely than basic theism (i.e., the belief that an omnicompetent God exists), given the existence of inscrutable evil.[17] Since any expanded theism entails basic theism, the former will be at least as improbable as the latter, given the existence of inscrutable evil.[18] However, Rowe also discusses a response to this claim from Robert Adams, who argues that one must simply make a judgment between two hypotheses: (i) that basic theism is significantly less probable given inscrutable evil than it is prior to such consideration; and (ii) that a given expanded theism is not significantly less probable than basic theism. Rowe assumes that the first hypothesis is true, and therefore concludes that the second, even if true, does not help the theist's case. But, Adams points out, it is not clear that this is the only, or even the most rational, course to take. If instead we first assume that (ii) is true, then if the expanded theism under consideration succeeds in explaining the presence of inscrutable evil, there is little reason to believe that (i) is true, or to be worried about it if it is.

Rowe responds that one pursuing Adams' strategy must

> *argue* that E [the evidence of inscrutable evil] does not significantly disconfirm RST [Restricted Standard Theism—i.e., basic theism] by showing that there are not implausible hypotheses that, when added to RST, produce a result that both accounts for E and is not significantly less probable than is RST itself. To pursue this...way would be to endeavor to give some not implausible suggestions concerning [God's] reasons for permitting E. Whether the theist can succeed in this task remains to be seen.[19]

But again Rowe has described the task before the theist too strongly. The theist need not provide an expanded theism that gives "suggestions concerning [God's] reasons for permitting *E*." All she needs to do is provide "not implausible" suggestions concerning the relationship between God and the world that make it likely that there would be inscrutable evil—regardless of the actual purposes God has in permitting it. (Rowe seems to have conflated the distinct tasks of theodicy and defense, identified in the introduction to this paper.) The version of expanded theism I have employed here—basic theism plus the doctrine of the fall—offers a "not implausible" reason to assume that there would be inscrutable evil, and therefore accomplishes the task at hand.[20]

But perhaps the best argument for (7) is one from analogy. The goods my ten-year-old daughter knows of are in no way a relevant inductive sample of the goods I know of. This fact causes conflict and consternation between us at times, and may even drive her to the conclusion that some of my decisions and actions, which bring what she discerns as evil into her life, cannot possibly serve any good purpose—a conviction as inescapable to her mind as is Q* to Rowe's mind. This fact is due to my daughter's developmental status, which prevents her from perceiving or conceiving the evidence that would defeat the support her observations give to her conclusion that I am causing her evil for no good purpose.

Certainly there is at least as much difference between human moral posture and that of an omnicompetent God as there is between those of my daughter and me. Hence, the evidence of disparity between my daughter's moral perspective and mine is good evidence for a similar disparity between mine and God's. Since such a disparity defeats the assumption that the goods she knows of are a relevant inductive sample of the goods I know of, it also defeats the assumption that the goods I know of are a relevant inductive sample of the goods God knows of (i.e., of the goods there are). That is, it is good evidence for (7). But, of course, if (7) is true, then the argument from P* to Q* is no stronger than the argument about pit bulls, given the defeating evidence (that is, not strong at all). The sample is not sufficient to support the induction.[21]

IV

I have not argued that no one can justifiably infer Q* from P*. However, my argument does have the consequence that anyone justified in making the inference is in such a situation purely because of an unappealing sort of epistemic ignorance. The defeaters I have introduced are not so obscure or esoteric as to be available only to the scholar or the deep thinker. In fact, they are quite obvious and natural within the theistic tradition. A minor excursion into possible rebuttals that the theistic community could offer to Rowe's argument would reveal these and similar retorts. In fact, I maintain

that such defeaters are *so* readily available that most people who would feel tempted to make the inference from P* to Q* could uncover them with only a minimum of effort. If this is so, such people may be guilty of epistemic neglect in not making the minimal effort to uncover them, and therefore unjustified in making the inference anyway. After all, the issue at stake here—the existence of God—is important enough to call forth at least a minimum of inquiry from one who would dare to make an inference to a conclusion on the matter.

So a trilemma faces the one who would ground her atheism in the inference from P* to Q*. Either she has reason to believe (7) or she does not. If she does, then she is not justified in making the inference. If she does not, then there are two possibilities. At best she lacks such reason due to ignorance, and therefore is not in the most desirable epistemic situation. She is justified in making the inference from P* to Q* only by default, and not because of any competence in reasoning. At worst she lacks reason for (7) because of epistemic negligence in failing to uncover the relevant defeaters. In this case she is unjustified in her failure to believe (7) and unjustified in inferring Q* from P*. Either way, the power of Rowe's inductive argument for undergirding atheism has been severely compromised.[22]

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NOTES

1. The term "omnicompetence" names that property borne by an object just in case it is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect.

2. A powerful, though extremely technical, argument is offered by Paul Draper in "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23 (1989), pp. 331-50. I am confident that my defense can be translated into the probability calculus and shown to be an effective defense against Draper. This is a project I hope to undertake some time—though I know it will be, as they say, no mean task.

3. *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 192. Plantinga attributes this distinction to Henry Schuurman.

4. Michael Peterson, *et al.*, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 100.

5. Robert Adams makes this point nicely in "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," in James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidell, 1985), pp. 242f.

6. Rowe's argument was originally presented in *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1978), pp. 86-92. This argument was later developed and expanded in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335-41. Rowe responded to some important criticisms and presented a new formulation of the argument in "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in

Robert Audi and William Wainwright, eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 227-47. His latest formulation at the time of this writing is in "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16.2 (1988), pp. 119-32. While these latter two formulations differ in emphasis, the argument remains pretty much the same as it was in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." Rowe has responded to more criticisms and clarified some relevant issues in "Ruminations About Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 69-88.

7. "Evil and Theodicy," pp. 120ff. In "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," Rowe offers the following argument:

> (i) 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.

> (ii) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore

> (iii) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

This argument is deductive. The induction lies in the defense of the first premise. The argument from P to Q in the text is an argument for this premise.

8. For an important attack on this assumption, see William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 23-44. Rowe has responded to Hasker in section III of "Ruminations on Evil."

9. "Evil and Theodicy," pp. 123f.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

11. Throughout this paper I will speak of "justified" and "unjustified" evil with this sense in mind.

12. This revision actually strengthens Rowe's case. In the original argument, lack of known justification for a *given* evil is taken as evidence that *that* evil is unjustified. In my reformulation, the fact of inscrutable evil *in general* is taken as evidence that *at least some of it* is unjustified. My revision allows, as Rowe's original formulation does not, that some of the inscrutable evil considered is in fact justified. It only suggests that it is more reasonable to assume that some inscrutable evil is unjustified than to assume that all of it is justified.

13. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73-93.

14. "The Empirical Argument from Evil," p. 238.

15. It is a theorem of the probability calculus that, if $P(A/B)=n$ and A entails C, then $P(C/B) \geq n$. Therefore, since Q^* entails *God does not exist* $(\neg G)$, $P(Q^*/P^*) > 1/2$ only if $P(\neg G/P^*) > 1/2$. The latter is false, and so, therefore, is the former.

16. "Evil and Theodicy," p. 124.

17. "The Empirical Argument from Evil," pp. 239f.

18. It is a theorem of the probability calculus that, if A entails B, then $P(A/C) \leq P(B/C)$.

19. "The Empirical Argument from Evil," p. 240, n. 16.

20. It is arguable, I suppose, that this version of expanded theism is in fact significantly less probable than basic theism. I believe that there are good reasons for denying this claim, though I will not broach them here. Suffice it to say that, even if this version of expanded theism is significantly less probable than basic theism, the first and third arguments I give for (7) are grounded only in basic theism—deriving only from logical consequences of omniscience and moral perfection—and therefore do not rely on any such expansion.

21. Rowe has responded in conversation that my daughter may well understand that I am unable to bring about the good I seek without allowing the evil in question. But omnicompetence precludes us believing this of God, at least in many cases. The point here, however, is that the great disparity in the moral perspectives my daughter and I possess precludes her from understanding that there is *any* good being served *at all* by the evil. *A fortiori*, such a lack of perspective will also preclude her understanding how that good could be served without the evil. So also with our moral perspective *vis à vis* God's. If we can discern no good *at all* that would be served by inscrutable evil, why is it surprising that we cannot perceive a good for which such evil is a necessary condition? If the gap in moral perspective allows that inscrutable evil may indeed serve some indiscernible good, why should it not also allow that it is a necessary condition for this good, and hence justified by it?