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# STONE'S EVIDENTIAL ATHEISM: A CRITIQUE

Timothy Pawl

In a pair of recent articles, Jim Stone presents a new version of the Evidential Argument from Evil. I provide two arguments against Stone's Evidential Problem of Evil, one from the dialectical standpoint of a theist, the second from a dialectical standpoint that is neutral between theism and atheism. In neither case, I argue, should an interlocutor accept all the premises of the argument.

## *Introduction*

Of all the arguments against the existence of God, the arguments gathered together under the heading "The Problem of Evil" are surely the most pressing for the theist. And within that unholy alliance, the arguments with the most bite are the evidential arguments from evil. I present Jim Stone's new and interesting version of the Evidential Argument.<sup>1</sup> I provide two arguments against Stone's Evidential Problem of Evil, one from the dialectical standpoint of a theist, the second from a dialectical standpoint that is neutral between theism and atheism. My goal is to show that neither a theist nor a neutral observer should judge the argument to be sound.

From the theistic standpoint, I argue that a member of just about any religious tradition has good reason to reject one or more of the premises. My example of a religious tradition is Christianity, but others would work just as well. In particular, Stone's new Evidential Problem of Evil either presupposes something no member of a religious tradition would grant or else falls prey to an objection Stone himself raises from Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense.

I provide an additional argument from a neutral standpoint. I parody the form of Stone's argument to show that there is good reason to believe that one of his premises is false.

## *Stone's New Evidential Argument Against Evil*

In two recent articles, Jim Stone provides a novel evidential argument against theism. In this section I provide his considered formulation of the argument, along with any background information necessary for tracking

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<sup>1</sup>Jim Stone, "Evidential Atheism," *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003), 253–277. This presentation will include the modifications Stone makes to the argument in his, "CORNEA, Scepticism and Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89:1 (2011), 59–70.



it. Stone asks us to consider this claim, which he calls MT: “[e]very significant suffering that makes up the widespread and terrible suffering we see about us results in an outweighing positive or negative utility.”<sup>2</sup> What we see of suffering, claims Stone, makes it improbable that there is an outweighing utility for every instance of suffering; that is, what we see of suffering makes MT improbable. Furthermore, probably, if God exists and the world is not zany (this notion will be spelled out more fully later in this section), there would be an outweighing utility for every instance of suffering. Most likely, then, it is false that both God exists and the world is not zany. However, probably, the world is not zany. If one conjunct of a conjunction is probable, and the conjunction as a whole is unlikely, then the remaining conjunct must have a very low probability. Therefore, it is very likely that God does not exist.

Stone’s current version of this argument goes as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1. What we see of suffering makes MT improbable (premise).
2. We are justified in believing that the conjunction, *C*, of theism and “we are not in a zany world” entails MT (premise).
3. For any propositions *p* and *q*, if what we see makes *q* improbable, and we know *p* entails *q*, then *p* is unlikely given what we see (premise).
4. If what we see of suffering makes MT improbable, and we have the justified belief that *C* entails MT, then *C* is unlikely, given what we see (substitution from 3).
5. *C* is unlikely, given what we see (1, 2, 4).
6. If one of the two conjuncts in a conjunction with a likelihood of 0.19 or less is probable, then the other conjunct has a probability of no more than 0.2111 (premise).<sup>4</sup>
7. Probably we are not in a zany world (premise).
8. Theism is a long shot (0.2111) given what we see of suffering (5, 6, 7).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See Stone, “Evidential Atheism,” 258. Elsewhere, Stone restricts MT to natural evils, saying “Let me stipulate that MT concerns only natural evil.” See *ibid.*, 266.

<sup>3</sup>Stone, “Evidential Atheism,” 267–268.

<sup>4</sup>Here, briefly, is how Stone arrives at this figure. Stone stipulates that for a belief to be justified (as he is using the term), it has to have a probability of at least .9. Since premise 1 and premise 2 are both justified, each has a probability of at least .9. The probability of a conjunction with independent conjuncts is the product of the probability of its conjuncts. The conjunction of premise 1 and premise 2, then, has a probability of at least .81. That conjunction entails  $\sim C$ , and probability is preserved under entailment. So  $\sim C$  has a probability of at least .81. Thus *C* has a probability of at most .19. If one of the conjuncts of *C* were to have a probability of .9, and *C* has a probability of at most .19, then we can determine the upper limit of the probability of the other conjunct by determining what number, multiplied by .9, yields .19. That number is .2111.

<sup>5</sup>Stone gives this argument, aside from the change to the consequent of 3 (and hence slight changes in 4 and 5), in “Evidential Atheism,” 267–268. I discuss those changes in discussing the relevant premises below.

Stone writes: "I submit that [this argument] provides a strong *prima facie* case for theism's implausibility."<sup>6</sup>

A few notes on the argument are in order. Stone uses the term "probable" in a technical sense. He writes:

My concern is the epistemic likelihood that a thesis has for a believer given her grounds for believing it. Let us say that *p* is "probable" for *S* when *S* has grounds for believing *p* such that a fully rational person given them would, on that basis, affirm *p*—not merely judge that *p* is a better bet than not-*p* . . . . So *p* is "probable" for *S* only if *S*'s grounds justify or warrant *S*'s believing *p*.<sup>7</sup>

Justification, claims Stone, requires a high degree of probability. Stone sets a probability required for justified belief at .9, though he notes that even if the probability for a belief to be justified were set at .8 his argument would still succeed.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the first two premises, since we are justified in believing it, has a probability of .9 or higher (given the high probability that Stone says justification requires). And so, given the rule of reasoning expressed in premise 3, it follows that theism is unlikely. Stone reasons as follows:

"not-MT" and "not-MT entails [not-C]" each have a probability of .9, their conjunction has a probability of .81; as that conjunction entails [not-C], and likelihood is preserved under entailment according to the probability calculus, [C] has a likelihood of no more than 0.19—a long shot.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows I will consider each of the premises, giving detail where needed and explaining Stone's modifications where relevant.

MT mentions instances of outweighing utility. An instance of suffering *results in an outweighing positive utility* when an intrinsic good occurs, the utility of that intrinsic good outweighs the disutility of the suffering, and that intrinsic good would not have occurred had that suffering not occurred.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, an instance of suffering *results in an outweighing negative utility* when an intrinsic evil is avoided, the utility of the avoidance of that

<sup>6</sup>See Stone, "CORNEA, Scepticism and Evil," 12. Stone includes an antecedent to his claim, but it is irrelevant to my point here. His full claim is: "Supposing we're in the universe we wish to explain, I submit that EPE . . . provides a strong *prima facie* case for theism's implausibility." So, Stone claims here that the argument above provides a strong *prima facie* case for theism's implausibility, supposing we are in a universe we wish to explain. I doubt Stone or I will see much opposition to the affirmation of this supposition. So this argument is purported to provide a strong *prima facie* case against theism.

<sup>7</sup>Stone, "Evidential Atheism," 254.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 261–262.

<sup>10</sup>For instance, Bob suffers a severe sickness. During this sickness Bob's father nurses Bob back to health. The close physical proximity and dependence of Bob on his father leads them to a deeper love for one another. Years later, Bob smiles and says to his father, "Dad, thank God for that sickness many moons ago, because had it not happened, we wouldn't be as close as we are today." That love is an intrinsic good. The utility of the persisting love outweighs the disutility of the fleeting sickness. And, had Bob not fallen ill, he and his father would not have grown in their love. And so, Stone would claim here that the sickness results in an outweighing positive utility.

intrinsic evil outweighs the disutility of the suffering, and that intrinsic evil would not have been avoided had that suffering not occurred.<sup>11</sup>

Stone notes that many theists will deny this first premise due to the Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access, which Stephen Wykstra abbreviates "CORNEA":

On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim "it appears that *p*" only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.<sup>12</sup>

The friend of CORNEA will deny premise 1 because our cognized situation, what we see of suffering around us, would not likely be discernibly different were every suffering to have some outweighing positive or negative utility. For, were every instance of suffering to have some outweighing utility, it would almost certainly be due to some powerful, knowledgeable, good designer (call it God), and not merely due to chance. But God, with his vast intelligence, could foresee and plan outweighing utilities far beyond our ken. We should expect such outweighing utilities beyond our ken, were there a God. And so, were there outweighing utilities for all evils, we would expect some (perhaps many) of these outweighing utilities to be entirely beyond our current cognitive reach, making them appear to have no outweighing utility. So it isn't true that if MT were false our cognized situation concerning suffering and its outweighing goods would be discernibly different than it would be in a world where there is outweighing utility for every suffering—either way, there would be suffering that appears pointless. Given CORNEA, we have reason to doubt the truth of premise 1.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Return to the Bob example. Suppose Bob is plotting the murder of his father so that he can reap the benefits of a plump life insurance policy. But just before Bob puts the malicious plan into action, he suffers a severe illness and his father nurses him back to health. The close physical proximity and dependence of Bob on his father leads Bob to put off his patricidal plans. Years later, Bob smiles and says to himself, "Dad should thank God for that sickness many moons ago, because had it not happened, he wouldn't be alive today." That prevention of pecuniary patricide is an avoidance of an intrinsic evil. The utility of preventing patricide outweighs the disutility of the fleeting sickness. And, had Bob not fallen ill, he would have killed his father for financial benefits. So Stone would claim here that the sickness results in an outweighing negative utility. Premise one claims that what we see of suffering makes it improbable that *every* instance of suffering results, as these Bob tales do, in some positive or negative utility. These Bob examples are my own, not Stone's.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), 73–93. Reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Adams (Oxford University Press, 1990), 152.

<sup>13</sup>Stone's first response to CORNEA was to argue that it is false. See "Evidential Atheism," 263–265. However, Stone later comes to view CORNEA as entailed by Bayes's Theorem. See Stone, "CORNEA, Scepticism and Evil," 8. His considered response is that CORNEA is true, but that it alone cannot defeat the argument; we have other reasons for thinking that premise 1 is true. Stone ("CORNEA, Scepticism and Evil," 3) cites Wykstra's 2004 Central APA talk, "Stone-Ground CORNEA: A Rebuttal," as pivotal in his coming to see that his earlier argument against the truth of CORNEA is fallacious.

Unlike many other critics of the evidential argument, I will grant Stone premise 1, for the sake of argument. There is a burgeoning literature on CORNEA to which I have nothing to add here. It is my goal in this paper to show that *even if 1 were true*, there still would be good reasons to deny the soundness of the argument.

Stone's original formulation of the second premise was "we are justified in believing that theism entails MT."<sup>14</sup> Stone rejected that formulation due to considerations that Plantinga raises with his Free Will Defense (FWD). Stone reads the FWD as providing a possible state of affairs in which theism is true and it is false that every significant suffering we see results in an outweighing utility.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Free Will Defense provides a possible scenario where theism is true and MT is false, and so "that theism entails MT" is false, given the FWD. For when I rob an old lady (call her Maud), according to Stone's understanding of the FWD, there isn't any positive or negative utility, say, my having freewill, in which this act *results*. Rather, the utility of my having efficacious free will is already there and would be there even if I didn't rob Maud. So there is an instance of suffering—Maud's suffering—that doesn't result in some positive or negative utility ("result" in the understanding spelt out above in the discussion of premise 1). Stone calls such instances of suffering which do not result in positive or negative utility "pointless evils"; others in the debate call them gratuitous evils.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Stone concludes, theism is compatible with pointless moral evils.<sup>17</sup>

Theism is compatible with pointless natural evils as well, claims Stone, since, for all we know, God could have made beings with efficacious free-will who rebelled against God—call them fallen angels, or demons—who cause all the forest fires, cancer, and other "natural evils" of the world. For the same reasons as given above, the evil these beings cause is compatible with theism and pointless. Thus, theism is compatible with pointless natural evils. Since natural and moral evils are taken to divide all evils between them and theism is compatible with pointless evils of each type, theism is compatible with pointless evil *simpliciter*.<sup>18</sup> And thus, we have reason to believe that theism does not entail MT, contrary to the original

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<sup>14</sup>Stone, "Evidential Atheism," 260.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 266.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>17</sup>A referee points out that the defender of the FWD might believe that God could not prevent the evil of Maud's being robbed without losing a greater or equal good or incurring a greater or equal evil. And so God's allowing Maud to be robbed is *not* pointless. The referee generalizes this to all cases of moral evil. If this referee is correct, then Stone has not shown that theism does not entail MT. I leave this question to one side. My goal in this paper is to show Stone's current version of the argument to be faulty; it is not to question or challenge the steps he took to arrive at this version. If this referee is correct, then there is *another* reason to challenge Stone's argument.

<sup>18</sup>Better, perhaps, to say that this demon response entails that all evil is moral evil, and then distinguish between moral evil caused by humans and moral evil caused by fallen angels.

formulation of premise 2. Stone concludes, “[a]s theism is consistent with pointless suffering, it evidently does *not* entail MT” (his emphasis).<sup>19</sup>

On account of this, Stone has to find a way to modify the original second premise of the argument so that its antecedent *does* entail MT. For, if he does not, then he will not be able to apply premise 3 to 1 and 2. And so, it is important to note, however Stone modifies the original 2, the thing he must secure is an antecedent that entails MT, otherwise he’ll have the very same problem he admits to having with the original 2; he will have made no progress toward giving a sound evidential argument from evil.

In modifying the argument to respond to this objection, Stone employs the concept of a “zany” world. Since the concept of a zany world features prominently in the forthcoming argumentation, and since he says relatively little by way of explication of it, I will quote his introduction of it in full here. He writes:

[M]y response [to the fact that theism alone does not entail MT] is to modify EPE [the Evidential Problem of Evil]. A “zany” world involves, relative to our probable beliefs about the actual world, a bizarre scenario, an improbable ontology, or a plainly factually mistaken claim. Demon worlds are zany, for instance. So as not to beg the question against theism, we will proceed on the (reasonable) supposition that a world’s having God in it does not make it zany.<sup>20</sup>

According to Stone, theism conjoined with “our world is not zany” entails MT. In what follows, my analysis of this argument will focus heavily on whether or not we have reason to think that our world is zany.

One thing to note before discussing the remaining premises is that the modified 2 still does not secure an entailment between the antecedent and the consequent. This is because MT entails the existence of “widespread and terrible suffering” around us. The existence of God in a non-zany world does not *entail* widespread and terrible suffering, though. It is logically possible that God create a non-zany world lacking suffering. For instance, God could create a deterministic universe of great beauty that lacks sentient creatures. And so it is possible that the antecedent be true and the consequent be false. Thus, the entailment claim is false. To save the entailment, Stone would have to reword MT.<sup>21</sup> In what follows, I will assume that there is a way to reword MT such that it doesn’t include the existence of widespread and terrible suffering.

Concerning the remaining steps in the argument, I have little to say. Premises 3 and 6 are truths of probability.<sup>22</sup> 4 follows from 1–3; 5 from 1,

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<sup>19</sup>Stone, “Evidential Atheism,” 266.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>I thank Thomas Flint for this point.

<sup>22</sup>Stone’s third premise is revised from the original. Originally, it read “for any propositions p and q, if what we see makes q improbable, and we have a justified belief that p entails q, then what we see makes p unlikely” See Stone, “Evidential Atheism,” 267. That is false, however. As Michael Almeida notes in footnote 8 of his “On Stone’s Evidential Atheism,” *Theoria* 76:1 (2006), an additional necessary condition must be met for 3 to be

2, and 4; and 8 from 1–7. This leaves premises 2 and 7 to be evaluated. In the next section I discuss these premises. I show that a theist should reject one or the other of these premises. In the following section, I further show that, for reasons independent of theism, there is good reason to reject premise 7.

### *A Dilemma About Zanyness*

Consider two premises of Stone's argument. Premise 2 states *that we are justified in believing that, necessarily, if God exists and the world is not zany, then every significant suffering that makes up the widespread and terrible suffering we see about us results in an outweighing positive or negative utility*; and premise 7 states *that probably, we are not in a zany world*.

My argument, summarized, is as follows. Either the main religious traditions of the world require one to affirm propositions that entail that the world is zany or they do not. If the main religious traditions of the world entail that the world is zany, then no religious theist—no theist who is part of a mainline religious community—will affirm premise 7, that, probably, the world is not zany. If the main world religions do not require one to affirm that the world is zany, then no religious theist need grant premise 2. In what follows I will provide examples from traditional Christian theism, though the point can be made equally well using examples from other religious traditions.<sup>23</sup>

A question: Is the following, or any part of it, a bizarre scenario? A virgin gives birth to a God-man who, within the next forty years, heals the sick, raises the dead, walks on water, casts out demons, dies for the sins of the world, descends into Hell, rises from the dead, ascends into Heaven and, much later, during a bodily resurrection of all people who have ever died, comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, founding a kingdom that will have no end. Given our probable beliefs, would this occurring make the world zany? I'm not sure what Stone would say. Consider the options.

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true: the prior probability of p must be higher than the posterior probability of q. That is, the probability of p without taking into account what we see must be higher than the probability of q after taking into account what we see. In light of this, Stone changed the consequent of 3 from the original "then what we see makes p unlikely" to the new "then p is unlikely given what we see." This change removes the *makes* from the original consequent. This allows for instances where, for instance, p is unlikely *on* the evidence in question, but not *made unlikely by* that evidence. See Almeida, "On Stone's Evidential Atheism," 9, for a counterexample to 3 as originally stated. Almeida presents some clever and complex objections to Stone's argument in this article. Stone responds to at least some of them in "CORNEA, Scepticism and Evil." I leave it to the reader to judge whether those objections have been met.

<sup>23</sup>My strategy here is to show that Stone's argument is not dialectically useful against the theist of any mainline religious group, since such a theist will have reason to reject either premise 2 or premise 7 of the argument. I am not giving an argument *for* God's existence. Likewise, the prior probabilities of Christian doctrine are not germane to my argument. Christian doctrines are given merely as examples. I thank an anonymous referee for noting that I need to make this point.



If he says “yes”—that what all traditional Christians believe in virtue of being Christian entails that the world is zany—then no Christian will grant him that 7, *probably, the world is not zany*. A similar question can be asked using Muslim or Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist examples. Thus, if Stone answers “yes,” then his religious interlocutors will deny 7.<sup>24</sup>

If Stone says “no”—that the contents of traditional Christian theism do not entail that the world is zany given our probable beliefs—I don’t see what makes a demon world zany. If our probable beliefs do not entail that a world in which Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead or changes water into wine is zany, what makes them deem as zany worlds where demons cause natural evil? My point here is not that traditional Christianity *is* zany. My point is that, as far as comparative judgments of zaniness go, if the doctrine of the Trinity of persons in the Godhead is not sufficiently bizarre, all by itself, to render the world zany, then I see no warrant in judging a demon world to be zany.<sup>25</sup> If the creedal statements of traditional Christianity do not make the world zany, then we need to see evidence for why demons causing natural evil does.

Recall Stone’s reason for moving from mere theism to C in the antecedent of 2. Conjoining theism with the claim that the world isn’t zany was supposed to cut out the defenses that make some people say, “Oh, come on!” Stone noted that though theism doesn’t entail MT, if we can rule out bizarre scenarios like demons causing natural evil, then perhaps we could secure an entailment between theism plus whatever-we-use-to-rule-out-demon-scenarios, on the one hand, and MT, on the other.

The problem, though, is that if such a conjunction does not rule out virgin births and salvific deaths, guardian angels and prowling devils looking for

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<sup>24</sup>A referee wonders: if Christianity itself is sufficient to render a world zany, is not that a strike against the truth of Christianity? Christianity would, then, have to be such that it is bizarre, false, or ontologically improbable given our probable beliefs about the actual world. But being bizarre, false, or ontologically improbable given our probable beliefs about the actual world is a bad-making quality, and in fact should count as evidence against a view. And so the Christian (or, any religious theist who affirms enough supernatural activity to render a world zany) gets out of the Evidential Argument from Evil only to land in the bonfire of zanity.

A first thing to note here is that, even if the referee were right on this point, it wouldn’t show that this response to Stone’s argument is faulty. Rather, it would show that this response opens the respondent up to another, distinct, problem. And it would be a problem only if the religious theist weren’t prepared to accept that, given her stripe of theism, the world is, in fact, zany. One way for a proposition to be zany is for it to be bizarre, and the religious theist might not see any problem in her religious beliefs being counted as bizarre. In fact, some religious philosophers have argued against other religions precisely because they lack miracles, divine signs, or wonders (e.g., see the medieval Christian arguments against Islam premised upon the claim that Mohammed performed no miracles). Divine signs and wonders, such as parting a sea, or turning water into wine, though, surely seem bizarre. And so the religious theist I have in mind might see no problem with her religious views entailing that the world is zany. She might desire such a consequence.

Finally, in the next section I provide an argument independent of religious motivations against premise 7. If that argument is apt, then it is unlikely that our world is not zany. And if it is unlikely that our world is not zany, it shouldn’t worry a theist overmuch if her particular brand of theism does entail that our world is zany.

<sup>25</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for helping me clarify the point at issue in this paragraph.

the ruin of souls, the Trinity and the incarnation, I have trouble seeing how it rules out demon worlds. And, if it cannot rule out demon worlds, then C fares no better in entailing MT than mere theism did, since C would be consistent with a demon world. And a demon world, Stone readily admits, allows for the possibility of pointless evils. So if Stone answers "no" — that the contents of traditional Christian belief do not entail that the world is zany — then there is no entailment between the antecedent of 2 and its consequent. Adding the claim that the world is not zany to the antecedent of the original 2 does not yield an entailment between the beefed up antecedent and the consequent. His second premise, then, still faces the problem he introduced the concept of a zany world to solve. In other words, if he answers "no," then his religious interlocutors will deny 2.

In summary, Stone must grant the disjunction that the traditional doctrines of the main world religions, if true, entail that the world is zany or that it is not the case that they entail that the world is zany. If they do entail that the world is zany, then no religious interlocutor will affirm 7. If it is not the case that they entail that the world is zany, then no religious interlocutor will affirm Stone's revised 2. And so in neither case will a religious interlocutor affirm the truth of all of Stone's premises. Thus, the religious interlocutor will judge the argument to be unsound.

While my argument employed particularly Christian examples, one can run a parallel argument for practically any other religious group merely by changing the examples. Is a man's talking with an angel a bizarre scenario? Does the existence of a devil entail an improbable ontology? Would it be a bizarre scenario were every dead person to rise from his or her grave for a final judgment? If the answer to any of these three questions is "yes," then Judaism and Islam are both zany. It is true that an ontology including the mere existence of the devil wouldn't be as improbable as an ontology where the devil exists *and* freely causes so-called natural evils. That said, though, an improbable ontology or bizarre scenario is enough to entail a zany world. Even if the demons-causing-evil ontology is more improbable than a mere-demon ontology, the fact that the mere-demon ontology is improbable (if it is improbable) is sufficient for Islam and Judaism to be zany, along with Christianity.

I conclude that religious theists will not be moved by Stone's new evidential argument. What about those neutral to the truth of theism?

#### *An Inductive Argument for the Zanimess of the Actual World*

In what follows I will give a second argument against Stone's revised Evidential Problem of Evil, an argument that doesn't rely on the thoughts of religious believers and which is parallel to his own argument. I will argue that we have good reason to believe that 7 is false.

Something is zany relative to probable beliefs. Relative to *whose* probable beliefs? Given the probable beliefs of a second-century farmer, would a modern-day hospital—with all its technical wonders—be enough to make the world zany? For instance, would a heart or face transplant be a

bizarre enough scenario to render the world zany? If so, and if the beliefs of second-century farmers count in determining whether a world is zany, then we should deny 7, the claim that *probably we are not in a zany world*.

We should take careful note of Stone's language. He writes that a world is zany when "relative to *our* probable beliefs," it fulfills one or more of his three criteria. Perhaps we should take the first person pronoun seriously and think that a world is zany relative to our current epistemic state, and that premise 7 means to affirm that the world, given our contemporary epistemic state, probably isn't zany. Again we can ask, though, *whose* contemporary epistemic state? If Stone means probable *simpliciter*, as he defines it, he means the beliefs that almost everyone has, beliefs with a probability of 0.9 or higher, beliefs that a fully rational person would affirm (not just proclaim a good bet).<sup>26</sup> I'm not sure what probable beliefs most contemporary humans have in regard to the world, but I am the greatest living expert on my own beliefs, so I can speak somewhat confidently for them.

Do I have any groundings for belief such that, were a fully rational person to have them, she would find it probable that this world is not zany, and not simply claim it is a good bet that this isn't such a world? None of which I'm aware. Why think that earlier generations had a monopoly on the world being zany relative to their probable beliefs? A pessimistic induction leads me to think otherwise. Relative to the probable beliefs of everyone alive prior to Einstein, this world is zany (given that the truth of the Theory of Relativity and its entailments is a bizarre scenario, relative to their probable beliefs). Do I have any good reason to think that the same fate is not awaiting my own beliefs in light of a forthcoming scientific discovery? I am not aware of any such reason.

Had I lived prior to Antony van Leeuwenhoek's discovery of microbes in 1674, surely the claim that thousands of very small animals live inside my mouth and intestines would have qualified as a bizarre scenario and an improbable ontology relative to my probable beliefs. ("Do you really expect me to believe that there are thousands of creatures around and inside me that I can't see, some of which defend my body against others that cause much of the evil that I suffer, such as pneumonia? That is zany!") Today, however, such a scenario is not (or is only mildly) bizarre, and we think it isn't an improbable ontology relative to our probable beliefs. Am I 90 percent sure that there are no more such surprises coming my way? Why would I be?

One response goes like this: Of course the people of van Leeuwenhoek's time were flabbergasted by such a discovery. Who wouldn't be? However, the shock was relative to their *improperly grounded* beliefs. They didn't have any probable and well grounded beliefs whatsoever that a fully-rational person would, on the basis of those beliefs, affirm that "there aren't thousands of

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<sup>26</sup>Stone, "Evidential Atheism," 254: "The claim that p is probable *simpliciter* asserts that most everyone has grounds that make p probable for him."

creatures that live inside me, creatures that I cannot see, which cause much of the evils I suffer." If they thought they did, they weren't behaving fully-rationally. So, the microbes example isn't an example in which the world was zany to the probable and well grounded beliefs of seventeenth-century individuals. After all, what properly grounded justification could they have for the belief that "there aren't thousands of creatures that live inside me, creatures that I cannot see, which cause much of the evils I suffer" such that, given that justification, a fully-rational person would affirm the statement and not merely claim it to be a good guess? As such, this is not an example of a zany situation in the past.

This response, however, cuts both ways. For, suppose people in seventeenth-century Netherlands *did not* have proper groundings for their beliefs relative to which "there aren't thousands of creatures that live inside me, creatures that I cannot see, which cause much of the evils I suffer" is probable and thus makes a world in which such creatures exist zany. What are the proper groundings for beliefs that Stone has such that the claim "there aren't thousands of creatures that live *outside* me, creatures that I cannot see, which cause much of the evils I suffer" is probable relative to them? Sure, Stone would be flabbergasted if he were to find out there were demons who behaved in such a manner. However, the shock would be relative to his unjustified or improperly grounded beliefs.

On the other side of the dilemma, suppose that the people in seventeenth-century Netherlands *did* have properly grounded beliefs such that the existence of microbes is zany. In that case, why should I think that, probably, the world isn't zany now relative to my own properly grounded beliefs? Again, why should I think that the generations prior to mine had a monopoly on bizarre scenarios and improbable ontologies, relative to their properly grounded beliefs? And even if I do believe that my properly grounded beliefs are such that no truth I could ever learn would involve a bizarre scenario or an improbable ontology relative to them, *I certainly don't have justification to make that belief probable*, which is what premise 7 requires.

One can argue against premise 7 of Stone's argument in the following parallel of Stone's reasoning. Call a breakthrough in our scientific thought that entails a bizarre scenario or an improbable ontology, given our probable beliefs, a *Serious Scientific Surprise*. Examples of Serious Scientific Surprises include the discoveries of microbes, the theory of relativity, and quantum theory. Prior to each of these discoveries, their contents were viewed as improbable and bizarre, given the probable beliefs of the scientific community at the time. Consider this argument:

9. What we see of scientific advancement makes it improbable *that there are no more Serious Scientific Surprises coming our way* [call this italicized portion ~SSS] (premise).
10. We know that the world's being not-zany entails ~SSS (premise).

3. For any propositions  $p$  and  $q$ , if what we see makes  $q$  improbable, and we know  $p$  entails  $q$ , then  $p$  is unlikely given what we see (premise).
11. If what we see of scientific advancement makes  $\sim$ SSS improbable, and we know that the world's being not-zany entails  $\sim$ SSS, then it is unlikely that the world is not zany, given what we see of scientific advancement (substitution from 3).
12. Given what we see of scientific advancement, it is unlikely that we are not in a zany world. (9, 10, 11)

What we see of scientific advancement is that countless previous generations had beliefs upon which later scientific findings were bizarre and improbable. Furthermore, we see that we are not in a better epistemic situation concerning improbable or bizarre findings than those previous generations were. That is, we see that there is no good safeguard in place that assures that the world will not turn out bizarre or include an improbable ontology on our probable beliefs, as it has on the probable beliefs of all previous generations. Consider the premises of this argument.

Premise 9 says that given these things we see of scientific advancement, it is improbable that there are no more Serious Scientific Surprises coming. Given that I see that countless previous generations have faced Serious Scientific Surprises, and that my own generation has no special protection against Serious Scientific Surprises, it is improbable that there are no more Serious Scientific Surprises coming our way.

Premise 10 states that we know that the world's being not zany entails that there are no more Serious Scientific Surprises coming our way. This is true, since, according to Stone, a world is zany if and only if it has, relative to our probable beliefs, an improbable ontology or a bizarre scenario or a plainly factually mistaken claim. If there is a Serious Scientific Surprise, as I have defined it, then there must be either a bizarre scenario or an improbable ontology relative to our probable beliefs (or both). And so if there is a Serious Scientific Surprise, then, given the definition of "zany," the world would have to be zany.<sup>27</sup> Contraposed, then, if the world is not zany, there

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<sup>27</sup>A reader has charged me with equivocation at this point, since a world with Serious Scientific Surprises is not the sort of zany world that Stone envisions. I deny the charge. One equivocates when one uses a term at least twice with at least two definitions. But here I have been careful to remain true to the definition that Stone has given to his term of art. I agree with the reader that Stone most likely did not have these sorts of cases in mind when defining the term "zany." But then it is incumbent on the proponent of this argument to define "zany" in such a way that avoids these cases. Such a definition will also have to count mere theism as non-zany, as Stone says, to avoid begging the question against the theist. Finally, to be dialectically useful against a religious theist, the definition will need to remain such that a theist would want to deny that the world is zany. It is no dialectical help to define "zany" such that a religious worldview that includes signs and wonders is a worldview that entails that the world is zany. If the definition of "zany" straightforwardly entails that, given any religious worldview, the world is zany, no theist, as I argue, will grant premise 7. My own thought on the matter is that defining the term "zany" in a dialectically useful way such that (i) naturalistic discoveries, (ii) a supernatural God and (iii) the truth of the main tenets of

cannot be any more Serious Scientific Surprises coming our way. So, we are justified in believing that the world's being not zany entails  $\sim$ SSS. And so, given the rule of reasoning expressed in premise 3, it follows that the world's being zany is likely.

We can follow Stone's reasoning concerning his premises 1 and 2 closely here, almost to the word. Each of 9 and 10 has a probability of .9 (given the high probability that Stone says justification requires). Their conjunction has a probability of .81; as that conjunction entails that we are in a zany world, and likelihood is preserved under entailment according to the probability calculus, "we are not in a zany world" has a likelihood of no more than 0.19—a long shot.<sup>28</sup>

So I don't think that Stone's premise 7, "probably, we are not in a zany world," has a likelihood above .9, and that a fully rational person would affirm it, and not merely claim it to be a good bet. Furthermore, I do think something much stronger: that, probably, we *are* in a zany world, given the argument from Serious Scientific Surprises.

I conclude that, starting from a dialectically neutral standpoint between theism and atheism, one has good reason to deny premise 7 of Stone's evidential argument. Hence, starting from such a standpoint, one has good reason to believe the argument to be unsound.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I have argued that Stone's new evidential argument from evil is unsound. I have argued this from two distinct dialectical standpoints: that of a religious theist, and that of someone neutral between theism and atheism. In neither case, I argue, will the person in that dialectical standpoint judge all of Stone's premises to be true.<sup>29</sup>

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the more populous religious traditions do not make the world zany, though demons causing evils does, will be a difficult task. Such a concept does not seem to cut nature at its joints.

<sup>28</sup>Compare to Stone, "Evidential Atheism," 261–262: "'not-MT' and 'not-MT entails atheism' each have a probability of .9, their conjunction has a probability of .81; as that conjunction entails atheism, and likelihood is preserved under entailment according to the probability calculus, theism has a likelihood of no more than 0.19—a long shot."

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