

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 33 | Issue 2

Article 1

4-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Callahan, Laura Frances (2016) "On the Problem of Paradise," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201631556

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol33/iss2/1>

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ON THE PROBLEM OF PARADISE

Laura Frances Callahan

Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs (BHI) claim that evil must be evidence against God's existence, because the absence of evil would be (presumably excellent) evidence for it. Their argument is obviously valid on standard Bayesian epistemology. But in addition to raising a few reasons one might doubt its premise, I here highlight the rather misleading meaning, in BHI's argument, of evil's being evidence against God. BHI seek to establish that *if* one learned simply "that there was evil," perhaps via an oracle, one would gain evidence of some strength or other against God. But when we commonly observe that there is evil in the world, we learn a stronger proposition. And determining the evidential impact of that stronger proposition is not so easy. The interesting questions about the evidential impact of even a general awareness of evil in the world remain open.

1. Introduction

Is evil in the world evidence against the existence of God?¹ Many—both theists and atheists—think so. Of course, such theists may maintain that, on balance, the totality of evidence bearing on God's existence points in the other direction. But some—notable recent representatives being Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann (hereafter HSB)²—think we should not take evil to be evidence against God's existence at all. When we weigh up considerations for and against theism, evil ought not even to come into play. Roughly, this is because we have no good reason for thinking evil confirms atheism over theism.

In a highly interesting recent paper, Matthew Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs (hereafter BHI) evaluate many of the dialectical moves and arguments in recent literature on evil and evidence.³ However, in what follows I will focus exclusively on one point they make. BHI attempt to meet HSB's challenge to provide good reason for thinking evil

¹More fully, "Is the proposition that there is evil in the world evidence against the proposition that God exists?" For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that propositions are what confirm and are confirmed in evidential relationships, and I will follow the literature in using nouns and noun phrases ("evil in the world," "the existence of God") as shorthand for those propositions.

²Howard-Snyder and Bergmann, "Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism."

³Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence."



confirms atheism over theism by inviting us to consider what they call the “problem of paradise.” Their argument purports to establish that evil is evidence against God’s existence.

If it were successful, this argument would seem to establish an important conclusion. BHI are careful not to claim that evil is decisive or even strong evidence against God’s existence; however, their claiming that it is definitely evidence of some strength or other is still quite interesting. But it seems to me that one may well doubt their argument’s success. First, dialectically, it is not an effective argument against radical skeptical theists like HSB who (it seems) should simply deny its premise. Indeed, I will argue that even if one isn’t a radical skeptical theist, one might well doubt BHI’s needed premise. Moreover, even if one takes the argument to be sound, one should note that what BHI think “evil being evidence against God” amounts to is a somewhat unintuitive, highly qualified claim. Their conclusion, then, understood in the qualified way in which they mean it, seems not to engage with the reasons that most philosophers (and theists) have wondered whether evil constitutes such evidence.

I will proceed by first reviewing the arguments from HSB and BHI in section 2. Then I will comment very briefly on BHI’s dialectical effectiveness against radical skeptical theism in section 3. In section 4, I review some basic facts about what rational agents do when they learn a proposition in various ways, and then in sections 5 and 6, I argue that a realistic construal of learning about evil does not have the result that rational individuals definitely should treat evil as evidence against God. Before closing, in section 7 I note a separate objection to BHI’s argument: that atheism as they conceive of it is too broad and amorphous to obviously predict much.

2. Arguments from HSB and BHI

HSB present their argument as follows:⁴

- (1) Grounds for belief in God aside, evil makes belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism only if somebody has a good argument that displays how evil makes atheism more likely than theism.
- (2) Nobody has a good argument that displays how evil makes atheism more likely than theism.
- (3) So, grounds for belief in God aside, evil does not make belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism.

Now, a few clarifications: for HSB—and throughout this paper—“theism” is just the proposition that God—i.e., a unique omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent creator of the universe⁵—exists. It is not as

⁴HSB, “Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism,” 14.

⁵HSB *themselves* don’t clarify the claim “God exists.” But they are directly responding to an essay by Rowe, who writes, “Theism is the view that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being (God)” (Rowe, “Evil is Evidence,” 4). BHI, likewise, are

clear what they mean by “atheism.” But BHI, in objecting to HSB’s argument, take atheism to be just theism’s negation.⁶ Also, given that HSB are attempting to establish the evidential irrelevance of evil, we ought to understand their repeated use of the clause “evil makes atheism more likely than theism” as something like, “evil raises the likelihood of atheism over theism,” or, “evil confirms atheism over theism.” Whether evil makes atheism more likely overall is clearly a further issue. Understood this way, BHI deny premise 2. They claim *they* are in possession of a good argument that displays how evil confirms atheism over theism.

Their argument employs formal Bayesian models, in which “a piece of evidence is evidence for a hypothesis just in case that evidence raises the *probability* of that hypothesis . . . just in case that evidence is likelier to come about if the hypothesis is true than if the hypothesis is false.”⁷ Of course, both “evidence” and “probability” are understood variously—controversies which neither BHI nor HSB address explicitly. It seems charitable (or at least harmless) to understand BHI as discussing *normative subjective* probabilities. BHI will argue that evil is evidence against God, meaning roughly that rational agents downgrade (to some, perhaps tiny, degree) credence in God’s existence because of it.⁸

BHI’s crucial claim—what I have referred to in the introduction as their “premise”—is that the absence of all evil is epistemically likelier to come about if theism is true than if atheism is. This will be intuitively compelling, the story goes, for anyone who reflects on *paradise*.

Consider a world of pleasures with no pain, of goods with no evil—an Eden. If the world were like that, then we think that would constitute a fairly overwhelming argument for the existence of God. . . . But if the probability of God is higher given the complete absence of evil (in an Edenic

clearly attempting to weigh in on existing arguments (including, in the problem of paradise argument discussed here, HSB’s own). In a footnote, they claim:

Unless otherwise noted, we use the term ‘God’ in a fairly loose, minimal way. Our arguments are consistent with, but do not presuppose, the traditional conception of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. For these purposes, take the hypothesis that God exists to be the hypothesis that an extremely knowledgeable, extremely powerful, extremely benevolent being exists (BHI, “Evil and Evidence,” 1n2).

“BHI’s explanation of the problem of paradise argument (“Evil and Evidence,” 5), where they consider theism as an instance of “H” and atheism as an instance of “~H,” commits them to this definition.

⁷BHI, “Evil and Evidence,” 3–4, emphasis mine.

⁸BHI do not in the problem of paradise section address the situation in which a reasonable person antecedently *knows*, *is certain*, or even (*flat-out*) *believes* that God exists, and the limitations on their argument I wish to press will not appeal to these possibilities. (BHI do however discuss the possibility of knowing theism to be true in section 12.1 of their paper.) Moreover, BHI do not weigh in on cases in general where one has irrational priors (although they do consider one case of odd priors; “Evil and Evidence,” 6n15). The claim is not that for any agent, regardless of her priors, rationality requires downgrading confidence in theism. Rather, it’s something like: for agents with roughly normal or rational priors, rationality will require *their* downgrading confidence.

world), then the presence of evil (as in our world) must reduce the probability of God.⁹

Note that one need not make any *particular* probability assignments about the likelihood of evil on theism and atheism in order for this to be convincing; one need only make a certain comparative judgment about those probabilities. (“Paradise” is likelier conditional on theism than on atheism.) And that comparative judgment does seem, perhaps, difficult to deny. But once one has granted that the absence of evil is evidence for theism (i.e., it’s more likely to occur on theism than on atheism), one must also conclude that the presence of evil is evidence against theism. After all, if the absence of evil is likelier to occur on theism than on atheism, then the *presence* of evil must be likelier on atheism than on theism.

To help illustrate how BHI are thinking of evidence and the importance of relative likelihoods, I will include here the helpful diagrams from the following section of their paper, depicting what happens when we rational agents learn there is evil in the world.¹⁰ We start with some assignment of prior probabilities to the world being in each of the following four states:

Theism	Theism	Atheism	Atheism
No evil	Evil	No evil	Evil
[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]

Then, upon learning that there is evil in the world, we eliminate [1] and [3].

Theism	Theism	Atheism	Atheism
No evil	Evil	No evil	Evil
[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]

Now, having observed evil, we are certain that the world is either as in [2] or [4]. Standard Bayesian updating requires that we then preserve the ratio of our prior probabilities for [2] and [4], but “expand” these to cover 100 percent of our epistemic probability space.¹¹

The prior probability for theism was, before learning there is evil in the world, just $P([1]) + P([2])$. The prior probability for atheism was $P([3]) + P([4])$. But now the probability for theism is just $P([2])$, and that for atheism just $P([4])$. Whether the probability for theism drops in this

⁹BHI, “Evil and Evidence,” 4–5.

¹⁰Diagrams from BHI, “Evil and Evidence,” 6–7. I have followed BHI in making each numbered section an equal size. Although proportional sizes would have aided visualization, I am not comfortable making assumptions about how large these boxes should be with respect to theism and atheism. Some of my reasons for this will become clear in section 6.

¹¹See van Fraassen (*Laws and Symmetry*, 161–162) on “Muddy Venn Diagrams.”

maneuver depends entirely on whether $P([3])$ was a smaller percentage of the total prior probability for atheism than $P([1])$ was of the total prior probability for theism. Or in other words, it depends on whether theism lost a *bigger portion of its probability space* when [1] and [3] dropped out.

When BHI present the problem of paradise, they are actually inviting us to consider the opposite maneuver. What if, instead of eliminating [1] and [3] on finding evil in the world, we had found ourselves in "paradise" and so eliminated [2] and [4]? Well, BHI think this would obviously confirm theism. So, [4] must be a bigger portion of atheistic probability space than [2] is of theistic probability space. This entails, mathematically, that [3] is a smaller portion of atheistic probability space than [1] is of theistic probability space. Hence, say BHI, evil is evidence against God.

3. *Dialectical Limitation: Skeptical Immunity*

Now, this "problem of paradise" argument may beg the question against BHI's putative target interlocutors. As I understand them, HSB and other radical skeptical theists are convinced of the epistemic probabilistic independence of theism and the world's being in any certain state with respect to goods and evils. If this is correct, they can simply deny that BHI's comparative claim about the likelihood paradise on theism vs. atheism "sounds right," or at least that this is significant. After all, they might say, these probabilities are unfathomably complex matters, and even making a comparative judgment of the kind BHI suggest requires an ability to assess modal and moral facts that we simply don't have.¹² The proper response to BHI's suggestion might seem to be a shrug, not a nod. Dialectically, then, BHI's problem of paradise would fail as a response to HSB.

BHI do acknowledge this important limitation, noting "our arguments are not compatible with radical uncertainty about the probabilities involved."¹³ However, presumably BHI expect that *many* (including perhaps some less-radical "skeptical theists") will find their particular judgment about the comparative likelihood of paradise on theism vs. atheism highly intuitive and difficult to deny. They also attempt to dissuade readers from the radical uncertainty that would block their argument by, following others in the recent literature on skeptical theism, drawing attention to the way such uncertainty seems to commit us to skepticism on other matters.¹⁴ To those who (perhaps swayed by BHI's other arguments) are *not*

¹²See HSB ("Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism," 22). See also Peter van Inwagen (*The Problem of Evil*, 115–116), who defends a similarly extreme modal/moral skepticism.

¹³BHI, "Evil and Evidence," 14.

¹⁴See, e.g., BHI, "Evil and Evidence," 15; Hasker, *Triumph of God*, 121; Maitzen, "The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism"; Maitzen, "Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation"; O'Connor, "Theistic Objections to Skeptical Theism"; Wilks, "The Global Skeptical Response to Skeptical Theism." See also Howard-Snyder ("Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism" and "Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection, and Commonsense Morality") for an interesting defense of skeptical theism against the charge of requiring moral skepticism.

radical skeptics about moral and modal reasoning with probabilities, BHI's problem of paradise argument may indeed seem convincing.

I say "may" and "seem." In what follows I want to examine two reasons to worry about their argument that make no appeal to our total inability to make the relevant kinds of modal or moral judgments.¹⁵

4. Interlude: Learning a Proposition

BHI are asking us to think about the impact on rational individuals of learning that there is evil in the world. In this section, I want to call attention to the fact that there are many *ways* to learn that there is evil in the world (to learn *any* proposition, in fact). For example, I suppose one could be told the proposition by some highly reliable testifier—perhaps an oracle. Alternatively, one could simply observe one's own or others' pain and *conclude* that there is evil in the world. But each of these methods of learning that there is evil would result in a different total strength of the proposition learned. From an oracle one could perhaps glean the bare fact that there is some evil, but from observation one will gain knowledge of particular evils as well. There is, then, the possibility that what is actually learned in various learning-about-evil scenarios will have *different* effects on the credence adjustments of rational individuals.

It may be helpful to illustrate this possibility with an example. Imagine that you are going to be given a cake tonight. It's your birthday, and your friend Sue is coming over, having promised to bring you one. You know that it's going to be one of three kinds: chocolate, coconut, or lemon. You also know that she will not fail to bring some sort of sauce or topping—either whipped cream or gelato. If she brings chocolate or coconut cake, then it will probably be whipped cream—but just possibly gelato. On the other hand, if she brings lemon, then she will likely bring gelato. You are secretly hoping to have her gelato, but you really have no idea which of the three sorts of cake she will bring.

Now, I want to make a distinction between two ways you might learn that Sue is not going to be bringing chocolate cake tonight. You might be told, in conversation with a highly credible source (perhaps Sue herself), "I'll give you a hint—it's not going to be the chocolate this time." If that happened, you would rationally adjust your credences by eliminating the possibility of chocolate and renormalizing (i.e., increasing your credence in each of the other possibilities so that they collectively sum to 1, in a way that preserves the initial ratios among them). And this would look structurally similar to the exercise BHI recommend above. Gelato is *likelier* than it was before given that Sue is not bringing chocolate, because the (now eliminated) regions of probability space in which Sue brings chocolate

¹⁵Nor will I object to any particular interpretations of probability or evidence mentioned in the previous section. In general, I am attempting to see what we should think of BHI's argument even if we are happy to consider it largely on BHI's own turf.

constituted a larger percentage of the total regions in which she brings whipped cream than of those in which she brings gelato.

But there's another way you could learn Sue will not be bringing chocolate cake: by learning the stronger proposition that instead she will be bringing coconut cake. This is a very simple point, but the illustration will prove helpful. If Sue walks in displaying a coconut cake but with its accompanying topping still packed away out of sight, you will adjust your credence that she has brought gelato *down*.

Intuitively, both of the scenarios just described are ones in which you learn that Sue isn't bringing chocolate cake. But because the ways you learn this in each scenario differ, and specifically because in the second scenario you "simultaneously" learn a stronger proposition, these scenarios require different rational adjustments to your assessment of the probability of having gelato.

Similarly, I want to stress that what one actually learns when one learns about evil in the world (i) will be a stronger proposition than merely "that there is some evil," and (ii) may not obviously or necessarily require a negative adjustment to one's credence in theism.

5. A New Proposition to Consider: *M*

To show this, I don't need to make any contentious empirical claims about the very specific propositions people learn about evil or their evidential impact. Instead I will consider an extremely weak proposition, one almost as weak as the bare fact that there is some evil. (In the next section I will briefly defend the claim that we need to consider a proposition at least this strong, in thinking about the evidential impact of evil.) Here my aim is just to introduce the proposition and address a few possible misunderstandings.

BHI's partitioning of probability space into "Evil" and "No evil" worlds seems to me to ignore an important and relevant distinction among the former. BHI invite us to consider the existence of an Edenic "paradise" (henceforth "P"), and I grant here that this is a coherent possibility. But there's another extreme possibility worth considering: the world being a cruel wasteland (henceforth "W"), where there is absolutely no beauty or joy or comfort or kindness or love—only much suffering and evil.

I claim that, intuitively, such a possibility is at least as coherent as P. In support, I'd like first to point out that P itself isn't terribly coherent. BHI instruct us to imagine P as follows: "Hold fixed as best as possible the amount and kinds of goodness of our world, but remove all the evil and suffering."¹⁶ I am not at all sure how to follow these instructions. (For example, am I allowed to "hold fixed" goods like compassion, or the pleasures of hard-won achievement, despite the fact that these logically entail some suffering? Moreover, wouldn't a true "Edenic paradise" (BHI's other gloss on P) contain not only less evil but more good than our current

¹⁶BHI, "Evil and Evidence," 4n12.

world?) Given that their description of P is nonspecific and problematic, I take it that W's being "as coherent" does not require much. I am roughly thinking of W as the world that results when we hold fixed (and maybe also increase) the amount and kinds of evil and suffering in the world, but remove all goodness. Note that *both* P and W are additionally, notoriously problematic if we slip into thinking of these as maximally good and bad worlds.¹⁷

Also, note that the idea is not that the world in W is similar to Hell, on a classical Christian understanding. It is not built into W that any sentient beings in the world are being tortured by God or any supernatural being, just as it is not built into P that all sentient beings in the world are being supernaturally blessed.

If W is at least as coherent as P, then it seems natural to me to distinguish at least three important possibilities where BHI identify two: no evil (P), total or extreme evil (W), and "some" or "middling" evil (M).¹⁸ I take it this is a more helpful way to partition our epistemic probability space. This is true at least in part because, as I argue below, it better isolates what we learn about evil in realistic learning scenarios. And if this is the case, then we need to distinguish between two importantly different ways of learning that one is not in P: either one learns it *simply*—perhaps from a credible source, via testimony; or one learns specifically *that one is in M*.

6. Learning Too Much

The only realistic or common way to observe that one is not in paradise ($\sim P$) is via observing, specifically, that there is some middling level of evil in the world (M), or in other words that the world is a *good-and-bad* place. Consider the temporality of this learning process. Even if such learning happens very quickly, one is unlikely to hit upon evil in isolation. A human life that has reached some age at which observation is possible will, presumably, have experienced nourishment and human touch, at a minimum. But I do not want to get mired in early childhood psychology. My basic point is that the world is a mixture of good and evil (M), and it presents itself as such. We learn $\sim P$ (and, as it happens, $\sim W$) by rapid deduction from M, or from "the strange mixture of good and ill which appears in life."¹⁹

Note that this method of learning resembles the version of my cake example in which Sue walks in, not only *without* a chocolate cake, but *with* the coconut instead. What happens to the idealized Bayesian agent when

¹⁷On some views of evil, on which it is a *privation*, the difficulties raised by maximally bad or evil worlds may differ from those raised by maximally good ones. However, it would be odd, to say the least, if the effectiveness of BHI's argument depended on any specific view of evil. Thanks to Donald Bungum for raising this issue.

¹⁸This is oversimplifying, of course. There are in fact infinitely many possibilities—"M" is a broad family of ways the world might be.

¹⁹Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XI, 113.

she learns M? Borrowing from BHI’s illustrations, she would perform the following elimination:

Theism	Theism	Theism	Atheism	Atheism	Atheism
P	M	W	P	M	W
[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]	[9]	[10]

In order for this operation to disconfirm theism, it would have to be the case that $(P([5]) + P([7]))$ is a greater proportion of the total prior probability of theism than $(P([8]) + P([10]))$ is of the total prior probability for atheism. Now, there are some prior probability distributions for which this would be the case. But is it obvious that this will be the case, for each and every rational prior probability distribution?²⁰ In their paper, BHI appealed to the simple idea that P is more likely on theism than atheism, and therefore they could claim, “There is a wide range of reasonable-seeming probability assignments for which our reasoning holds.”²¹ But there is no similar, intuitively compelling comparison of the likelihood of “either P or W” occurring conditional on theism vs. atheism. After all, perhaps W seems far more likely on atheism than on theism, and this tipping of the scale would compete with the opposing weight that, as BHI claim, stems from the “problem of paradise.”

Now, one might think W actually seems more likely on *theism*, given that the worst worlds we can imagine contain something like specifically “Dante-an” horrors—horrors for which the existence of God seems required. But this objection seems to derive much of its force from a confusion. Remember that the use of “theism” and “atheism” is quite artificial here; the distinction does not map neatly onto the divide between “supernatural” and “natural” worldviews. Atheism actually encompasses versions of pantheism and also, e.g., theories on which there is a unique and omnipotent but *evil, hateful* creator. The question to focus on is: is the worst world (W) more likely on the supposition that there is a *unique, good God*, or on the supposition that there is *any other arrangement “in the heavens?”*²² And I submit that, even if the latter answer is not obvious, it is certainly plausible. Once we have to take into account the effects of eliminating both P and W, it is simply not clear that finding middling evil in the world should reduce a rational person’s credence in theism. This is just an instance of the non-monotonicity of evidence in general; whether $\sim P$

²⁰I do not mean to weigh in here on whether there *can* be more than one rational set of priors. My argument will work in either case.

²¹BHI, “Evil and Evidence,” 7.

²²The probability of W on atheism will be affected not only by the various versions of atheism but also their relative probabilities. Still it seems reasonable to think the probability of W on atheism could be higher than on theism.

confirms atheism does not settle whether M or the stronger propositions about evil we actually learn do likewise.²³

But perhaps, instead of idealizing our common learning-via-observation of the world, BHI want to model an even more highly idealized, oracle-delivery sort of learning. One has no idea whether or not there is evil in the world, and one learns (simply) that there is. One updates accordingly, redistributing one's credences between W and M.

The primary issue with this construal of BHI's argument is that the extraordinary character of the imagined learning process renders it irrelevant to the interesting, ongoing debate at hand over the evidential impact of facts about evil.

What is at stake, when we ask whether evil is evidence against God? What do we really want to know? Well, we might want to know whether learning about *particular* evils in the world always constitutes evidence against God's existence; then BHI's argument would clearly be irrelevant. They are instead concerned with something like a general awareness of evil. But let's grant that the evidential impact of a general awareness of evil is also interesting. We might indeed want to ask, "Is there-being-evil-in-general evidence against God?"

But even in asking *that* question, I (at any rate) would want to know something importantly, subtly different than the proper response to learning that there is evil from an oracle. I would want to know whether people, insofar as they are rational, must at some point downgrade their assessment of the probability of God's existence in light of what they actually learn about evil in the world. Must a general awareness of evil sit on the negative side of an evidential scale, so that we say things like: "When I think about [the testimony of a trusted community, the fine-tuning argument, and "religious" or "spiritual" experiences I've had] it seems to me quite likely that God exists. But then when I think about what I've learned about evil in the world, I step that back (a little bit, or a lot)"?

The problem is that BHI's argument is not straightforwardly relevant to that question, either. What we learn about evil in the world is much richer than $\sim P$; it's certainly at least as strong as M. And M—the fact that there is some middling amount of evil in the world—*may*, but certainly does not *obviously* or *necessarily*, require negatively adjusting one's probability for God's existence. Call this the "realistic learning" limitation on BHI's argument; their conclusion properly understood is just silent on what rational agents should do with facts about evil in even halfway realistic learning scenarios.

7. Atheism As a Predictor

Finally, allow me to return to a point I made in the previous section and explain why I take this to ground a true objection to the soundness of

²³For a statement of monotonicity and discussion of some of the trouble such an assumption can cause, see Fitelson and Hawthorne, "The Wason Task(s) and the Paradox of Confirmation."

BHI's argument, no matter how limited we allow its conclusion to be. BHI's treating "atheism" as the negation of traditional monotheism renders judgments about what would be likely conditional on atheism extremely difficult to make. Atheism, for them, is just too broad a hypothesis to predict much. Although I have so far tried insofar as possible to accept many of BHI's assumptions and intuitions, I think that once one fully appreciates what is needed in order to assess the likelihood of some piece of evidence conditional on atheism—i.e., considering its likelihood on all disparate "worldviews" other than traditional monotheism and then accounting for the relative likelihoods of those worldviews—one may well be skeptical even of BHI's "intuitive" judgment in the problem of paradise. Is paradise really more likely on theism than on its negation, given that its negation includes forms of pantheism, belief in Life Forces, etc.? The more I think about it, the less sure I am. Call this the "too-broad competitor" objection.²⁴

Now, if BHI were to redefine atheism more naturally, their judgment that paradise would confirm theism over atheism would be more difficult to deny (for those of us who aren't radical skeptical theists, anyway). But note, first, that my "realistic learning limitation" would remain in force for the imagined reconstruction. And second, note that paradise might then also seem to confirm *other* competing worldviews relative to theism or atheism (a certain, very happy pantheism, perhaps). If this were the case, BHI still could not claim that learning one is not in paradise (as from an oracle) should definitely lower one's confidence in theism. Instead it might just lower the ratio of one's probabilities for theism vs. atheism; both absolute probabilities could increase.

8. Conclusion

BHI point out that *if* paradise is more likely on theism than on its negation (a somewhat dubious premise, given the dialectical limitation and the too-broad competitor objection I've pressed), *and* we are happy to think of "evil" as just the fact that there is some—the kind of fact one might learn from an oracle but far too thin to be learned realistically—then, evil is evidence against the existence of God. This is, to my mind, less interesting or important than it might at first seem.

I claim it's more natural to think of "evil" as the evil we learn about via ordinary learning processes, and also more natural to think about goods and evils in the world *together*. These assumptions underlie my realistic learning limitation. In closing, I'd like to acknowledge explicitly that even "M" is clearly far too thin a proposition to capture what we actually learn when we observe goods and evils in the world. We don't *merely* learn that the world is both good and bad. Instead we observe particular evils that suggest some narrow *sliver* of M—"about this much evil and good,

²⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee from this journal for encouraging me to develop this point into a separate objection.

including events X, Y, Z . . .” Questions about the conditions under which such a specific proposition should count as evidence against the existence of God seem, to my mind, to lie at the heart of the interesting issues in this debate. Unfortunately, addressing such questions properly would require a *much* longer discussion.

Here, in closing, I want to just (all-too-briefly) consider one “BHI-style” response to such questions that has been suggested to me. Could we say (bracketing my too-broad competitor objection for the moment) that, for all rational individuals, the worse the world is, the greater the evidence against theism? I think not. Even if one accepts that paradise is quite likely on theism, one needn’t think that extremely-good-but-not-perfect worlds are at all conditionally likely. Imagine an “almost Edenic paradise” where one person, on one day, gets a hangnail. Is that a world God would be at all likely to create? Presumably, systemic and even substantial patterns of evil are more likely conditional on theism, given that God would have to have good reason for permitting any at all. Note that all theodicies and defenses identify (possible) *value* in God’s allowing some evil in the world. At any rate, many versions of theism that theists in fact find quite plausible, whether explicitly paired with theodicy or not, predict substantial evil. (BHI explicitly acknowledge this in section 5 of their paper, where they say evil is not evidence against Christianity.) Moreover, it is clear that for many such actually-believed versions of theism, disconfirming “surprises” could occur in either direction—i.e., the world could be too good. One attracted to the classical Christian doctrine of Hell might rationally downgrade the probability of theism upon learning (somehow) that it didn’t exist. The evidential impact of evil on theism is an extremely complex and messy affair, best acknowledged as such.²⁵

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²⁵I am very grateful to each of Matthew Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs for helpful comments on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Branden Fitelson, Timothy O’Connor, Daniel Rubio, Stephen Wykstra, Dean Zimmerman, and the editor and reviewers of this journal for extensive feedback that has much improved this article. Finally, I would like to acknowledge audiences at the 2015 SWIP Women in Philosophy workshop at the University of York, and also the 2015 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Messiah College, who responded to a closely related presentation.

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