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Review: The Evidential Argument from Evil

95. Ibid., p. 165.
96. Ibid., p. 139.
97. Ibid., p. 169.
98. Ibid., p. 167.
99. James, 'Will to believe', p. 20.
100. Ibid.
101. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 174.
102. Letter of W. James to Mark Baldwin, 1899, Perry, *The Thought and Character*, Vol. 2, p. 243.

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Book reviews

Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* [The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, xx, bib., and 357 pp. US$ 45.00 (Hb); US$ 22.50 (Pb)

This well-constructed volume contains a mix of sixteen previously published and new essays on the evidential argument from evil by leaders in analytic philosophy of religion. Howard-Snyder suggests that the phrase 'evidential argument from evil' ('EAE') is truer to the philosophical issue of evil and suffering than the title 'evidential problem of evil', since it is not clear for which philosophers evil *is* a (philosophical) problem (p. xii).

Two of the many types of EAE are central to this volume, namely, that of Paul Draper and that of William Rowe. Draper uses comparative probabilities to argue that the likelihood of HI (that God is morally indifferent) is much greater, given the pattern of pleasures and pains in the world, than is T (that God is creator and all-good). By using comparative probabilities, Draper avoids the pitfall of setting questionable antecedent probability figures in the use of Bayes' Theorem. Rowe argues that humans cannot see a reason that would justify an omnipotent, perfect being to allow *particular instances* of horrible evil, or the *amount* of evil, and concludes that, probably, there *is* no reason that would justify God in allowing these particular instances. By arguing this point, Rowe appeals compellingly to evils (e.g. the burnt fawn [evil E1] and the molested girl Sue [E2]) that seem bad enough to warrant *prima facie* disbelief in a God who cares for us. Rowe's new Bayesian version of the EAE introduced here, however, falls into the pit Draper (and Hume) nicely avoided.

Two essays in the volume (chapters 3 and 4) focus elsewhere. Swinburne examines the modal relationship between allowing evils and achieving goods. He claims our twentieth-century outlook misses the fact that a wide range of evils truly are *necessary* for the *possibility* of achieving particular great goods. Stump argues that Aquinas' view of suffering — that evil is medicine for sick souls leading to true fellowship with God — is foreign to our everyday sensibilities. Yet, Aquinas' outlook has many merits we should remember, e.g. that understanding and pursuing real happiness should involve more mental energy than solving evils however terrible they be.

Draper (new essay) argues that his comparative-view EAE completely avoids the response of *skeptical theism*. This view held by many theists (e.g. Alston, van Inwagen, perhaps Wykstra and Plantinga) says that humans do not have the capability to judge whether God would likely have

a reason to permit the deep evils in the world. Draper adds that skeptical theism is two-edged, making claims of natural theology also skeptical. Plantinga (new) forces Draper to redefine key terms and rethink his claims about how the pattern of goods and evils in the world seem to each person's unique epistemic situation.

Van Inwagen (old) holds that we do not know enough to make probability assignments about God, justifying goods, and evils. We need only some independent *defense*, true *for all anyone knows*, to justify retaining belief in God given the world's evil. Van Inwagen (new) responds to several essays, defines and employs the concept of epistemic probability over that of 'surprise', and defends his position in (old) by an adroit use of counterexamples; however, a number of his rejoinders rely too heavily on 'intuition' in no way shared by proponents of both sides (cf. Gale's rebuff, p. 213).

Plantinga and Alston (both old) defend the claim that for all we know, God has reasons for allowing evils beyond our ken; God *does* intervene (for all we know) imperceptibly to lower the number of evils to 'n%' (Alston); and, none of the three currently popular theories of probability allows the nontheist objective ascriptions of probability values to construct an EAE that is compelling to the theist (Plantinga). Wykstra argues that morally deep worlds are expectable, given God's omniscience and our present cognitive capabilities. Rowe's argument based on the core beliefs of Theism does not satisfy: it would not be unexpectable that God-justifying goods be 'far-in-future' goods, for all we know about God's purposes. Also, careful Bayesian analysis shows that the same datum expected on one hypothesis and not that surprising on another (an 'unbalanced datum', p. 146) levers greatly *against* 'half-belief' but barely at all against 'belief'. However, one may well turn a purported problem for nontheists into one for theists by redefinition: describe the nontheist as the believer (in the nonexistence of God because of evil) and theist as the 'half-believer' (one who cannot fully allow evil to count decisively against belief).

Russell recommends an abductive EAE, an 'inference to the best explanation' approach. In contrast to Rowe's EAE, *apparently* pointless evil no longer plays a central role in Russell's presentation. He argues that God could have *intervened* and prevented Rowe's E2 case, without making the world massively irregular. Given (*pace* Swinburne and Van Inwagen) that we *can* imagine such a world, God, if existent, would have intervened and eradicated E2 (but He did not). Russell offers perhaps the best of Rowe, Draper, and Gale's insights combined into one argument.

Russell's flaw, however, goes back to human 'seeability' and relies too heavily on empirical observation of goods. Alston (new) says that Russell assumes we can do an adequate search for possible goods that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2. However, *a priori* a complex *God-justifying good* is likely to be beyond observation (p. 319) because of our utter unfamiliarity with the conditions of realization of very complex divinely-purposed goods. Howard-Snyder tries to defeat the nontheist's confidence in the inferential strength central to Rowe's argument, the inductive step that moves from 'no goods we know of' to 'no goods whatsoever' would justify God in permitting E2.

The dialogue between the essays is well orchestrated. Another strength lies in the presentation of some difficult philosophical notions in easy-to-understand terms. While nominally about evil, many different advancements in epistemology and Bayesian analysis add to its net worth, achieving an even greater good from its already engaging treatment of evil.

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Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, xi + 180 pp. US$ 24.00

Professor Anthony C. Thiselton is Professor of Christian Theology at the University of Nottingham and Canon Theologian of Leicester Cathedral. Knowing this about him, that he is a theologian and a cleric and English, portends the agenda of his new book. As a theologian and cleric, he might be expected to be concerned to defend not only the theological enterprise, but the traditional forms of it; and so he does. Coming from the English theological tradition, he might also be expected to hold the movement of post-modernism, a movement that is associated with the continent, in contempt, and to do so in a language that is clear, straightforward and direct; and so he does.

Professor Thiselton's contempt for the postmodern conception of the self and God notwithstanding, he does acknowledge some of its positive contributions. As he puts it, the post-modernist exposure of claims to truth as being disguised claims to power must be acknowledged as an appropriate criticism of much of Christian theology. Thiselton agrees with this much of the postmodernist critique, especially when we look at the way the Church has turned its pretension to truth into occasions for manipulation, into occasions for crass and brute bids for raw power and control.

But postmodernism, Thiselton argues, has gone too far. Not all interests in the truth are surrogate interests in power. Nietzsche and Foucault, who started the postmodernist ball rolling, a ball that Derrida and his followers picked up and ran all the way with, make the mistake of thinking that