

## ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE AND EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** I defend the first premise of William Rowe’s well-known arguments from evil against influential criticisms due to William Alston. I next suggest that the central inference in Rowe’s arguments is best understood to move from the claim that we have an *absence of evidence* of a satisfactory theodicy to the claim that we have *evidence of absence* of such a theodicy. I endorse the view which holds that this move succeeds only if it is reasonable to believe that (roughly) *if there were such a theodicy, we would probably know it*. After conceding that there may be modest prima facie support for this latter claim via the Principle of Credulity, I consider and reject four more ambitious arguments in its favour. I conclude that this necessary condition on Rowe’s crucial inference has not been shown to be satisfied.

### 1. TYPES OF THEODICIES AND ROWE’S ARGUMENT

A *theodicy* is an account of some good, *g*, for the sake of obtaining which an omnipotent, omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting some evil, *e*, to occur.<sup>1</sup> Some theodicies, like the traditional soul-making theodicy, are *patient-centred*: they maintain that *e*’s permission is justified by some *g* which, primarily, is good *for the sufferer*. Others, like the traditional free will theodicy, are *non-patient-centred*: they maintain that *e*’s permission is justified by some *g* which is *not*, primarily, good for the sufferer. Typically, theists and non-theists agree that no non-patient-centred theodicy could be the *whole* of God’s reason for permitting some instance of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Many theodicies of both types involving *known goods*<sup>3</sup> have been suggested and discussed by philosophers: these are *proposed* theodicies. But, apart from these, it is at least conceivable there exist presently-unknown theodicies of each type: these are *unproposed* theodicies.<sup>4</sup> Such theodicies might involve known goods, or they might involve goods not presently known. More speculatively, perhaps, there might be *unknowable* theodicies, and these might involve known, unknown, or even *unknowable* goods. (The table below illustrates these categories.<sup>5</sup>) And, it is at least conceivable that somewhere within these categories there are philosophically-defensible theodicies.<sup>6</sup>

Patient-Centred Theodicies			Non-Patient-Centred Theodicies		
Unproposed		Proposed	Proposed	Unproposed	
Unknowable	Knowable			Knowable	Unknowable
Known goods (7)	Known goods (3)	Known goods (1)	Known goods (2)	Known goods (4)	Known goods (10)
Unknown goods (8)	Unknown goods (5)			Unknown goods (6)	Unknown goods (11)
Unknowable goods (9)					Unknowable goods (12)

William Rowe's famous evidential argument from evil begins with the following claim concerning two appalling instances of suffering, E1 and E2.<sup>7</sup>

**(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.**<sup>8</sup>

This claim holds that there are no adequate theodicies in categories (1), (2), (3), (4), (7), and (10). From this premise, Rowe infers that, probably,

**(Q) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.**

This claim holds that there are no adequate theodicies in *any* of categories (1)-(12). Rowe maintains that if we are justified in believing (Q) on the basis of our belief that (P), "...then, since we see that (Q) would be false if [God] existed, we are justified in believing that [God] does not exist".<sup>9</sup> This suggests that the argument should be completed as follows:

**(R) If an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being exists, some good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting E1 or E2.**<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, probably,

~ **(G) No omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being exists.**

The most controversial step in this argument is the inductive inference from (P) to (Q). In a 1996 paper, Rowe attempts to bypass this by arguing directly from (P) to ~(G).<sup>11</sup> In what follows, when I refer to Rowe's crucial inferences, I have *both* of these moves in mind. Before discussing them directly, however, I will first examine some notable criticisms of (P) due to William Alston.

## **2. ALSTON'S CASE AGAINST (P)**

Many theists agree that there are no adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 in categories (1) and (2).<sup>12</sup> But William Alston has claimed that even if this is so, nobody is justified in believing (P), since it is *possible* that there are adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 somewhere in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10).<sup>13</sup> It is important to see that Alston's case against (P) is *not* an appeal to the possibility of theodicies involving *unknown* goods: this would be irrelevant to (P), which concerns only *known* goods.<sup>14</sup> Rowe misses this point when he says that "... Alston concedes that he hasn't shown that we cannot be justified in believing that no good we *know of* justifies God in permitting E1 and E2".<sup>15</sup> Alston concedes no such thing: his criticism of (P) is very much concerned with *known* goods. Moreover, Alston does not address whether we *cannot* be justified in believing that no known good justifies God in permitting E1 and E2; he means only to argue that we *are not* justified in believing this.<sup>16</sup> He defends the latter claim by urging, modestly, that it is a *logical* or *epistemic* possibility that there are adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 somewhere in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10). Alston further claims, more ambitiously, that it is a *live possibility* that there are such theodicies. I will consider each strategy in turn.

## 2.1. ALSTON'S MODEST CASE AGAINST (P)

Alston says that

... we are not warranted in supposing that the possible reasons we have been extracting from theodicies exhaust the possibilities for *patient-centred* reasons God might have for permitting Bambi's or Sue's suffering. Perhaps, unbeknownst to us, one or the other of these bits of suffering is necessary, in ways we cannot grasp, for some outweighing good of a sort *with which we are familiar*.<sup>17</sup>

This is a claim about unproposed, patient-centred theodicies involving known goods, and Alston explicitly extends it to both non-patient-centred theodicies and unknowable theodicies involving known goods. Alston's position, then, is that there *may be* adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10). In 1996, he returns to this point. He first claims that there are *unexperienced* known goods,<sup>18</sup> and that, since we have only a minimal grasp of such goods, for all we know they *may be* live candidates for adequate theodicies relevant to E1 and E2. From this speculation, he concludes that "...we are in a bad position to determine whether the magnitude of the good is such as to make it worthwhile for God to permit a certain evil in order to make its realization possible".<sup>19</sup> Alston takes this to show that we are not justified in believing (P).

Alston's other argument for this conclusion refers to the *conditions of realization* of known goods. Alston thinks it *may be possible that* certain evils (such as E1 and E2) are necessary conditions for the realization of goods with which we are familiar. If these goods are sufficient to justify God's permission of E1 and E2, then there are theodicies for E1 and E2 in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10). Alston makes the point rather modestly in the following two passages:

I am *not trying to show that there are* conditions of realization that are unknown to us. On the contrary. By mentioning such *putative possibilities*, I mean to indicate that we are not in a position to determine the extent to which there are such additional conditions and what they are. Hence we are in no position to assert, with respect to a given [known] good that is not disqualified by a low degree of value, that a certain kind of suffering is not required for the realization of that good.

[O]ur grasp of the conditions of [some known good's] realization *may not be* sufficient for us to say with justified confidence that God could have realized that good without permitting the evil in question and without making too much of a sacrifice of good (or prevention of evil) elsewhere in the [overall] scheme.<sup>20</sup>

Again, Alston takes these considerations to show that we are not justified in believing (P).

Alston's position seems to be this: since it *is* (1991, 1996) or *may be* (1996) possible that there are theodicies relevant to E1 and E2 in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10), we are not justified in believing (P). On one plausible reading, then, Alston is committed to thinking that the *logical possibility* (1991, 1996) or *epistemic possibility* (1996) that there are such theodicies is sufficient to undercut our justification for believing (P). But this seems extreme. Since Alston offers no reason to think that this is a unique problem with respect to (P), it sounds as though he tacitly relies on general principles such as these:

**If it is logically possible that there is an  $x$ , we are not justified in believing that there is no  $x$ .**

**If it is epistemically possible that there is an  $x$ , we are not justified in believing that there is no  $x$ .**<sup>21</sup>

But these principles are dubious: if the logical or epistemic possibility of there being an  $x$  were *automatically* to defeat our justification for believing that there is no  $x$ , then – implausibly – we would not be justified in asserting *any* negative existential claim (unless it concerned a state of affairs known to be impossible). I conclude that Alston’s modest case against (P) is unsuccessful.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.2. ALSTON’S AMBITIOUS CASE AGAINST (P)

While the mere logical or epistemic possibility of there being an  $x$  cannot itself defeat the justification for believing that there is no  $x$ , the situation is different with *live* possibilities: it is generally thought that the *live* possibility of there being an  $x$  *does* (or at least *could*) undermine justification for believing that there is no  $x$ . Alston offers two arguments for the claim that it is a *live* possibility that there are unproposed adequate theodicies involving known goods (theodicies in categories (3), (4), (7), and (10)):<sup>23</sup> the argument from *progress*, and the argument from *omniscience*.<sup>24</sup> The former appeals to the development of human knowledge throughout history:

The pervasive phenomenon of human intellectual progress shows that at any given time in the past there were many things not known or even conceived that came to be conceived and known at a later stage. The induction is obvious. It would be highly irrational to suppose that we have reached the limit of this process and have ascertained everything there is to be learned. This creates a presumption that with respect to values, as well as their conditions of realization, there is much that lies beyond our present grasp.<sup>25</sup>

There may well be a pervasive phenomenon of human intellectual progress. And this phenomenon may indeed create (or, better, *motivate*) the general fallibilist presumption that Alston has in mind. But Alston offers no reason for thinking that this general fallibilist presumption is itself sufficient to support his highly specific claim that it is a *live* possibility that *there are unproposed adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 involving known goods*. And it is difficult to see how any such general presumption *could* itself support such a particular claim.

That said, the following specific induction would be directly relevant: suppose that human beings had a long history of discovering that previously-inscrutable evils were in fact conditions for the realization of some *known* goods which proved to be at the heart of some adequate theodicy for those evils.<sup>26</sup> This, I think, *would* motivate the specific presumption required: it would show it to be a *live* possibility that there are unproposed theodicies for E1 and E2 involving known goods. But, of course, no such history is recorded, so this cannot help Alston’s case.<sup>27</sup>

Alston’s second argument (for the claim that it is a *live* possibility that there are *unproposed* theodicies relevant to E1 and E2 involving *known* goods) appeals to God’s omniscience:

... our topic is not the possibilities for future human apprehensions [of known goods<sup>28</sup>], but rather what an omniscient being can grasp of modes of value and the conditions of their realization. Surely it is *eminently possible* that there are *real possibilities* for the latter that exceed anything we can anticipate, or even conceptualize. It would be exceedingly strange if an omniscient being did not immeasurably exceed our grasp of such matters. Thus there is an *unquestionably live possibility* that God’s reasons for allowing human suffering may have to do, in part, with the appropriate connection of those sufferings with [known] goods in ways that we have never dreamed in our theodicies. Once we bring this into the picture, the critic is seen to be on shaky ground in denying, of [E1 or E2], that God could have any patient-centred reason for permitting it, even if we are unable to suggest what such a reason might be.<sup>29</sup>

I am sympathetic to the spirit of Alston's move here, but his argument is unpersuasive. Certainly it is true that, *if there were* adequate unproposed patient-centred theodicies involving known goods (theodicies in categories (3) and (7)), an omniscient God would know this. But Alston wants to show that it is a *live possibility* that there are such theodicies, and the only support offered for this claim seems to be his suggestion that 'it is *eminently possible* that there are *real possibilities* for' what God can grasp of value that we cannot. This sounds like a shift from mere *logical* (perhaps even *epistemic*) possibility to *live possibility*.<sup>30</sup> Since neither logical nor epistemic possibility entail live possibility, this move requires further support to be convincing. I conclude that neither Alston's modest nor his ambitious case against (P) is successful.

### 2.3. FROM (P) TO (P')

I take it, then, that Alston has failed to show that critics of theism do not justifiably believe (P). But I agree with Alston's claim that formulating the evidential argument in terms of (P)

... gives the false impression that the main problem is one of generalizing to all goods from known goods, whereas the main problem is not that but rather the inference from "We cannot discern any way in which God would be morally justified in permitting E1 or E2" to "There is no such way".<sup>31</sup>

(P) gives this misleading impression because it is a broad claim concerning *each* of categories (1), (2), (3), (4), (7), and (10) – the categories concerned with *known* goods – even though the only evidence for (P) is the generally-uncontested claim that there are no adequate theodicies for E1 and E2 in categories (1) and (2).

We might say, then, that (P) suppresses an important inference from a claim concerning categories (1) and (2) to a claim concerning categories (1), (2), (3), (4), (7), and (10). I have been criticizing Alston's efforts to undermine this inference, but, while I believe them to be unsuccessful, this should not be construed as an endorsement of the inference. I believe that it will remain controversial, and for this very reason, it should be made explicit in the argument from evil. This is easily done by reformulating (P) so that it no longer suppresses the inference in question: I propose to replace

**(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.**

with

**(P') We know of no good state of affairs' *being such* that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.**<sup>32</sup>

While (P) claims that there are no satisfactory theodicies in categories (1), (2), (3), (4), (7), and (10), (P') claims only that there are no satisfactory theodicies in categories (1) and (2).<sup>33</sup> From this generally-uncontested ground, then, defenders of Rowe's earlier arguments can try to secure (Q), and thereby  $\sim(G)$  via (R), or, in the spirit of Rowe's later argument, defenders of Rowe can try to secure  $\sim(G)$  directly. And, of course, critics of Rowe can try to block both moves.

### 3. ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE AND EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

The inference from (P') to (Q) is, I believe, best understood to move from a claim concerning the *absence of evidence* to a claim concerning the *evidence of absence*: (P') contends that we have no

evidence of a satisfactory theodicy for E1 and E2, and this is thought to render probable the claim, (Q), that there just are no such theodicies. (Put another way, the inference generalizes from a claim concerning theodical categories (1) and (2) to a claim concerning *all* the theodical categories.) Similarly, Rowe's later inference from (P') directly to  $\sim(G)$  is best understood to move from the absence of evidence of adequate theodicies directly to evidence of the absence (i.e., non-existence) of God.<sup>34</sup> It is true, of course, that absence of evidence is neither identical to, nor entails, evidence of absence.<sup>35</sup> But Rowe's inferences are obviously not meant to be deductive; and, *if certain conditions are satisfied*, the absence of evidence can give strong inductive support to a claim concerning the evidence of absence. In Section 4, I identify one such necessary condition with respect to Rowe's inferences, and in the remainder, I claim that this condition has not been shown to be satisfied.

#### 4. A NECESSARY CONDITION ON ROWE'S INFERENCES

Rowe first defends the inference from (P) to (Q) with enumerative induction. He urges that

... we 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. If I encounter a fair number of pit bulls and all of them are vicious, I have reason to believe that all pit bulls are vicious.<sup>36</sup>

(With respect to (P'), this argument can be understood as an enumerative induction from the claim that we *know of* no adequate theodicies with respect to E1 and E2 to the claim that there *are no* such theodicies.) In response, Alston argues that the inference from (P) to (Q) is not a typical case of enumerative induction.<sup>37</sup> He holds that "[t]ypically, when we generalize from observed instances, at least when we are warranted in doing so, we know quite a lot about what makes a sample of things like that a good base for general attributions of the property in question", and he suggests that we have no such knowledge in the relevant case.<sup>38</sup> In terms of (P'), Alston's position would be that we have no reason for thinking that our failure to find adequate theodicies with respect to E1 or E2 is a good basis for concluding that there are no such theodicies.

Rowe agrees that his initial defence of the inference from (P) to (Q) is inadequate.<sup>39</sup> He concedes that this argument can establish only that (P) makes (Q) more probable *than it would otherwise be*, not that (P) renders (Q) *more probable than not*.<sup>40</sup> And Rowe notes that showing this *latter* claim is essential for showing that one is justified in believing (Q) on the basis of (P). Rowe does offer an argument for thinking that (P) makes (Q) more probable than not, but his argument depends on the undefended claim that  $\Pr(P/G\&k) = 0.5$ .<sup>41</sup> Suppose, however, that  $\Pr(P/G\&k)$  is not just 0.5, but very high. This, as many theists have argued, would surely undercut the inference from (P) to (Q): it would show that one's belief in (P) provides no strong support for belief in (Q).<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, if Rowe's inference is to go through, Rowe needs to show that it is reasonable to believe that

$\Pr(P/G\&k)$  is *not* high.

I take it that the foregoing applies *mutatis mutandis* to the inference from (P') to (Q): if *this* inference is to go through, Rowe needs to show that it is reasonable to believe that

$\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is *not* high.

Since Rowe offers no such reason, his argument is insufficiently-supported.

As noted earlier, Rowe's latest evidential argument attempts to bypass the troublesome inference from (P) to (Q): using Bayes' Theorem, Rowe argues directly from (P) to  $\sim(G)$ .<sup>43</sup> This move, then, is not from the absence of evidence of a satisfactory theodicy to evidence of the absence of one, but is instead a move from the absence of evidence of a satisfactory theodicy directly to the claim that God does not exist. Rowe concedes, however, that if  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  were high, then (P) would not significantly lower the probability of (G). Rowe replies to Wykstra's argument for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  is high,<sup>44</sup> but, as Bergmann correctly notes, this cannot show that Rowe's argument succeeds: Rowe still bears the burden of showing that  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  is *not* high:

The problem with Rowe's [1996] argument is that he doesn't clearly address the concern that P fails to provide *significant* support for  $\sim G$ . He seems to think that, in response to this worry, he needs to show only that we have no good reason to think  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  is high (this is what he argues for in response to Wykstra). But that isn't true. What he needs to show is that we have good reason to think  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  is *not* high. Otherwise, he hasn't shown us that P significantly lowers the probability of G.<sup>45</sup>

In his recent reply to Bergmann, Rowe explicitly accepts this burden of proof: he agrees that the success of his new argument depends on there being good reason to think that  $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$  is not high.<sup>46</sup> And again, I take it that the foregoing applies *mutatis mutandis* to the inference from (P') to  $\sim(G)$ : this inference can succeed *only if* it is reasonable to believe that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is *not* high.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. $\text{PR}(P'/G\&k)$ AND SKEPTICAL DEFENCES OF THEISM

In order for Rowe's arguments to persuade, then, we need some reason to believe that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. In what follows, I argue that while this probability claim may be thought to enjoy limited *prima facie* plausibility, four more ambitious arguments in its defence fail. In recent years, the term *skeptical theist* has been applied to some of those who resist inferences like Rowe's. But this term overdetermines the position, since one could of course resist these inferences without being a theist. For this reason, Howard-Snyder prefers the expression *skeptical gambit* for the strategy, and (I presume) *skeptical gambiteer* for one who employs it. By itself, however, this locution underdetermines the context, and so I propose to use the expression *skeptical defender of theism* (SDT) to refer to those who resist inferences like Rowe's.

But some further distinctions are needed, since there are various ways of so resisting. Let us say that a *negative* SDT claims that certain arguments for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high fail. This position, of course, is consistent with agnosticism concerning  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$ .<sup>48</sup> A *positive* SDT, in contrast, claims that it is *not* the case that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is low. A *modest positive* SDT claims only this, but an *ambitious positive* SDT goes further by claiming that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is *high*.<sup>49</sup> As will be evident, I position myself only as a *negative skeptical defender of theism* in what follows.

## 6. ARGUMENTS FOR THE CLAIM THAT $\text{PR}(P'/G\&k)$ IS NOT HIGH

So, those who endorse Rowe's argument need to provide reason for thinking that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, and there are various ways in which critics might respond. How might one show that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high? One modest approach is to claim that this judgement enjoys *prima facie* plausibility. As Richard Swinburne notes, "[a] supreme principle which covers the justification of belief ... is surely the principle which has been called the Principle of Credulity – that, other things being equal, it is probable and so rational to believe that things are as they [epistemically] seem to be (and the stronger the inclination, the more rational the belief)".<sup>50</sup> One might argue that the Principle of Credulity is relevant in this context: it *just (epistemically) seems to us*, some might say, that on G&k, it is not likely that we would know of *no* good state of affairs' being such that an

omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2. Thus, via the Principle of Credulity, we are entitled to believe that, *ceteris paribus*, it is the case that on G&k, it is not likely that we would know of *no* good state of affairs' being such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.

Those who want to resist the argument at this point may avail themselves of either an ambitious or a modest response. The former flatly denies that the Principle of Credulity is appropriately deployed in this domain. A *modal skeptic*, for instance, might hold the general view that none of our intuitions about complex counterfactuals should even be deemed *prima facie* plausible.<sup>51</sup> The latter, more modest response concedes that the Principle of Credulity indeed yields *prima facie* reason to believe that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, but claims that this amounts to very little.<sup>52</sup> For instance, one might argue that this *prima facie* plausibility is undercut or rebutted by the presence of some defeaters for this belief.<sup>53</sup> I note these moves only *en passant*: space does not permit their examination. Instead, since I suspect that defenders of Rowe would prefer stronger support (than that which may be conferred by the Principle of Credulity) for the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, I now turn to four more ambitious arguments in defence of this claim. I show that they fail.

### 6.1. EPISTEMIC ACCESS TO KNOWN GOODS AND THE UNLIKELIHOOD OF UNKNOWN GOODS

Michael Tooley offers an argument that can plausibly be construed to conclude that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is *not* high.<sup>54</sup> This argument may be expressed as follows:

- |   |
|---|
| <p>(1) If some <i>known</i> property is good-making, then, probably, it appears so to us.<br/> (2) It is probable that there are no <i>unknown</i> good-making properties.<sup>55</sup></p> |
|---|

Therefore, probably,

- |  |
|--|
| <p>(3) <math>\Pr(P'/G\&amp;k)</math> is <i>not</i> high.</p> |
|--|

In defence of premise (2), Tooley argues that the history of intellectual inquiry in the last few thousand years "...does not consist in the recognition of more good-making and bad-making properties, or right-making and wrong-making properties. It consists, rather, in a gradually increasing ability on the part of humans to respond appropriately to those properties *wherever* they occur" (115). We have, Tooley thinks, discovered all the good-making properties we are likely to discover. This argument has been criticized. Daniel Howard-Snyder offers a hypothetical 'punctuated equilibrium' account of moral progress, on which our failure to discover new good-making properties in the last few thousand years is entirely unsurprising. Since we cannot rule out this account, Howard-Snyder urges, our confidence in (2) should be undermined.<sup>56</sup> More tellingly, Bergmann notes that the conclusion that we have discovered all the good-making properties we are likely to discover simply does not warrant (2).<sup>57</sup>

What about Tooley's first premise? In order to motivate this claim, Tooley distinguishes knowledge of morality from knowledge in other areas of human inquiry:

In many areas, truth may well remain forever hidden from our gaze. In mathematics, one may contemplate a proposition, without even suspecting that it is a theorem, let alone discovering a proof of it. In physics, we may never arrive at a totally satisfactory theory of the physical world, with the result that we may be totally unable to describe the causes of events that are perfectly familiar to us. Can morality be just like that? Could there, for example, be some property with which we were all perfectly familiar, which was of great moral significance, but which never struck any human, at any time, as having any moral importance at all? Or could there be a property of states of affairs that was good-making, but which seemed to



all humans, at all times, to be a bad-making property? Could there be a property of actions that was wrong-making, but which all humans firmly believed was right-making?<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, Tooley thinks that these questions should be answered negatively, but he offers no explicit argument for this doctrine of epistemic accessibility. He does explain, however, why he holds this view:

The main ground of this feeling, I think, lies in the idea, first, that a property cannot be morally significant in itself unless the belief that something has that property, or the belief that some possible state of affairs or action would have that property, has the power to affect one's motivation in certain ways, and secondly, that the belief that a property is morally significant in itself arises out of an awareness of the intrinsically-motivating quality of the relevant beliefs.<sup>59</sup>

These considerations strike me as incomplete at best.<sup>60</sup> The first claim seems to state a necessary condition on some property's being morally significant: a property is morally significant *only if* the belief that some state of affairs has (or might have) that property has the power to affect one's motivation. But – even if such a connection exists – this has nothing to do with epistemic transparency: no connection is here suggested between a property's moral significance and one's *awareness* of that significance. Tooley's second consideration posits some (presumably causal) connection between the *belief* that a property is morally-significant and the *awareness* of the motivating powers of beliefs concerning that property. But even if such a connection exists, this just does not show that we would likely be aware that our beliefs have the power to motivate.

Further, even if Tooley's premises were both well-supported and true, they would still provide only weak support for his conclusion. Recall the formulation of (P'):

**(P') We know of no good state of affairs' being such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.**

Tooley's premises do not show that the probability of (P') on (G) and k is low, because, even if we have significant epistemic access to all goods, and even if it is unlikely that there are any unknown goods, we might still be unaware of myriad ways in which these known goods might feature in unproposed theodicies.

## 6.2. PATIENT-CENTRED RESTRICTIONS ON THE PERMISSION OF SUFFERING.

Proponents of the evidential argument from evil sometimes stress the idea that certain known moral principles govern the permission of evil. Rowe, for instance, suggests that

... we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary.<sup>61</sup>

In a similar vein, Tooley suggests that

... it is morally permissible for an omnipotent and omniscient being to allow a morally innocent individual to suffer only if that suffering will benefit the individual in question, or, at least, if it is sufficiently-likely that it will do so.<sup>62</sup>

Let us call this the *patient-centred* restriction on the permission of suffering.<sup>63</sup>

Tooley thinks that this restriction can be used to show that it is unlikely that a given instance of suffering is morally justified, even if the theist appeals to the possibility that the reason for the sake of which the evil is permitted is beyond our ken:

... suppose that the [appeal to theodicies beyond our ken<sup>64</sup>] rests upon the idea that, if God exists, humans will have very limited knowledge of certain non-moral facts – specifically, those concerning certain states of affairs that play an essential role in God’s grand plan for the world. Can this be the basis of a serious objection to the argument from evil? Suppose that certain intrinsically undesirable states of affairs are such that we cannot immediately detect the existence of any appropriately-related goods that would justify the evils in question. We apply our knowledge of the relevant moral principles to the situation, and conclude that there could be a good that would justify an omnipotent and omniscient being only if some condition *C* is satisfied. Perhaps we conclude, for example, that the evil in question can only be justified if humans survive death, or if they have libertarian free will. Making use of the non-moral information we have, we then determine that while it is possible that *C* is true, it is very unlikely that this is the case. We therefore conclude that it is very unlikely that there is a morally sufficient reason for the evil in question.<sup>65</sup>

Tooley’s idea, then, is that if the reasons why God permits evils are beyond our ken, we should nevertheless expect a patient-centred condition *C* to be satisfied.<sup>66</sup> Since it’s unlikely that such a condition is satisfied, Tooley concludes, it’s not reasonable to suppose that evils are permitted for the sake of reasons beyond our ken. While Tooley does not explicitly use these considerations to urge that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, I believe that his remarks suggest just such an argument:<sup>67</sup>

AT: There are adequate theodicies relevant to E1 and E2 beyond our ken.  
 PCS: Patient-centred condition *C* is satisfied.<sup>68</sup>

(1) If (G & AT), then PCS.

**(2) We know of no state of affairs’ being such that, in virtue of it, PCS.**

**Therefore, probably,**

**(3) ~PCS**

Therefore, probably,

(4) ~(G & AT)

Therefore, probably ,

(5) If G, then ~AT

This argument can be understood to support the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, so if it is a good argument, the necessary condition on the success of Rowe’s crucial inferences is satisfied. But note that this argument depends on the very sort of inference currently under dispute: the inference from (2) to (3). Why suppose, for instance, that our absence of evidence concerning some patient’s post-mortem recompense for suffering justifies belief in the absence of such recompense? In order to defend the inference from (2) to (3), an argument is needed for the claim that  $\Pr((2)/G\&k)$  is not high. It is difficult to imagine how such an argument could succeed, since this would involve showing not only that, probably, no *known* condition *C* is satisfied, and, in addition, that either there are no *unknown* conditions *C*, or that there are such conditions, but they are probably not satisfied. I conclude that – at minimum – this argument from patient-centred restrictions fails, since it objectionably relies on the very sort of inference it purports to defend.

### 6.3. DIVINE SILENCE

Michael Bergmann notices that Rowe offers an argument which might be understood to support the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. Bergmann finds this argument in the following passage from Rowe:<sup>69</sup>

When God permits horrendous suffering for the sake of some good, if that good is *beyond our ken*, God will make every effort to be consciously present to us during our period of suffering, will do his best to explain to us why he is permitting us to suffer, and will give us special assurances of his love and concern during the period of suffering. Since enormous numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of any such divine presence, concern, and explanations, we may conclude that if there is a God, the goods for the sake of which he permits horrendous human suffering are more often than not goods we know of.<sup>70</sup>

As Bergmann points out, Rowe appears to assume here that divine silence in the face of human suffering could not be justified. This move should not be suppressed. One might make it explicit, and at the same time include it an argument for the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. This can be done in the following fashion, in the spirit of Rowe's remarks:

S: There is divine silence.<sup>71</sup>

SJ: There is some good that justifies God in permitting divine silence.

AT: There are adequate theodicies relevant to E1 and E2 beyond our ken.<sup>72</sup>

(1) If (G & AT) then ( $\sim S \vee SJ$ )

**(2) We know of no good state of affairs' being such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permission of divine silence.**

Therefore, probably,

**(3)  $\sim SJ$**

(4) S

Therefore, probably,

(5) S &  $\sim SJ$

Therefore, probably,

(6)  $\sim(\sim S \vee SJ)$

Therefore, probably,

(7)  $\sim(G \& AT)$

Therefore, probably,

(8) If G, then  $\sim AT$

This argument can be understood to support the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, so, again, if it is a good argument, the necessary condition on the success of Rowe's crucial inferences is satisfied. But Bergmann rightly points out that this argument depends on the inference from (2) to (3), which is precisely the sort of inference under dispute.<sup>73</sup> Rowe concedes as much in his reply to Bergmann.<sup>74</sup> As displayed, then, this argument fails to provide *independent* support for thinking that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high.

One way to avoid this problem is to establish (3) without using (2) as a premise. In his recent reply to Bergmann, this is just what Rowe attempts to do.<sup>75</sup> Surprisingly, however, Rowe does not argue for SJ using *different* premises: instead, he urges that SJ is inherently implausible: "My reply is that [ SJ ] is an *inherently* implausible idea, not dependent for its implausibility on a *prior rejection* of one or more skeptical theses".<sup>76</sup> So Rowe, in effect, *asserts* (3) without arguing for

it. In my view, this move is unacceptable. For one thing, it is a conversation-stopper, because if the theist fails to *just see* this (alleged) inherent implausibility, no arguments can be offered to help her see it.<sup>77</sup> Worse, if this “inherent implausibility move” is deemed acceptable in this controversial context, it might just as well be deployed earlier in the philosophical conversation about evil: it might be suggested that it is *inherently implausible* that an adequate theodicy exists for some horrific instance of evil. Or, for that matter, this move might be used at the outset of the discussion: it might be suggested that the very idea that God exists is *inherently implausible*. Such ‘short-circuiting’ moves are unlikely to impress the theist, nor should they. I conclude, then, that Rowe’s latest attempt to defend the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high fails.

#### 6.4. ORDINARY MORAL REASONING

Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy recognize that the crucial step in the evidential argument from evil requires that it be reasonable to believe that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high.<sup>78</sup> But they also claim that those skeptical of this probability-claim commit themselves to a reprehensible skepticism concerning ordinary moral reasoning.<sup>79</sup> Although not explicitly deployed in this manner, the argument may be taken as intending to offer indirect support for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. Almeida and Oppy reason as follows:

Our central claim is that, if the considerations to which ‘sceptical theists’ appeal – considerations of human cognitive limitations in the realm of values (and perhaps elsewhere as well) – were alone sufficient to undermine the noseem inference in evidential arguments from evil, then those considerations would also be alone sufficient to undermine familiar and ordinary kinds of moral reasoning. If the kinds of considerations to which sceptical theists appeal entail that we can assign no probability to the claim that there are great goods that are secured by the failure of a perfect being to prevent [E1 or E2], then the kinds of considerations to which sceptical theists appeal also entail that we can assign no probability to the claim that there are great goods that are secured by our failure to prevent [E1 or E2]. But if we assign no probability to the claim that there are great goods that are secured by our failure to prevent [E1 or E2], then we cannot arrive at a reasoned view about whether or not to intervene to prevent [E1 or E2]. And that’s not an acceptable result.<sup>80</sup>

Almeida and Oppy illustrate their position by recasting their evidential argument from evil as an argument in favour of a *human being’s* intervening to prevent some instance of evil, and then claiming that skepticism concerning such an inference is unreasonable.<sup>81</sup> Their move may similarly be applied to my reconstruction of Rowe’s argument:

**(P\*)** *I know of no good state of affairs’ being such that my obtaining it would morally justify me in permitting E1 or E2.*

**(Q\*)** *No good state of affairs is such that my obtaining it would morally justify me in permitting E1 or E2.*

So, Almeida and Oppy are committed to the view that anyone skeptical of the move from (P) to (Q) should also be skeptical of the inference from (P\*) to (Q\*). And they see this as a fatal problem for the skeptical defender of theism, since they maintain that moral reasoning requires us regularly and confidently to make inferences of just this form: “Our moral practice – our ordinary moral reasoning – shows that we do think it unlikely that there are goods beyond our ken which would justify us in not preventing [E1 or E2]”.<sup>82</sup> If we are unwilling inductively to infer (Q\*) from (P\*), then “...there is a massive impediment to our reasoning to the conclusion that we ought to try to

prevent [E1 or E2]”.<sup>83</sup> (This is why I treat their argument as an *indirect* argument for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high.)

Several replies to this line of argument may be imagined. First, it might be argued that, contra Almeida and Oppy, skepticism about the move from (P') to (Q) need not lead to skepticism concerning the inference from (P\*) to (Q\*<sup>\*</sup>).<sup>84</sup> But even if it does lead to such skepticism, one might plausibly claim that this is not problematic for the skeptical defender of theism, since our ordinary moral reasoning simply does not require inductive inferences like (P\*)-(Q\*<sup>\*</sup>). This can be shown in two ways. An ambitious argument would show that inferences like (P\*)-(Q\*<sup>\*</sup>) simply are not persuasive, from which it follows that our ordinary moral reasoning (presumed here to be generally-successful) does not require them.<sup>85</sup> But a modest argument will suffice.<sup>86</sup> Almeida and Oppy repeatedly suggest that inferences like (P\*)-(Q\*<sup>\*</sup>) are *necessary conditions* for the relevant sort of moral reasoning, but this can be denied. Specifically, this can be denied by offering a model of the relevant sort of moral reasoning that does not require the (P\*)-(Q\*<sup>\*</sup>) inference. Here is one such model:<sup>87</sup>

- (P\*) I know of no good state of affairs' *being such* that my obtaining it would morally justify me in permitting E1 or E2.
- (S) I have no good reason to believe *that* there is a good state of affairs such that *my* obtaining it would morally justify me in permitting E1 or E2.<sup>88</sup>
- (T) I have fulfilled my relevant epistemic and moral duties in considering whether there might be a good state of affairs such that my obtaining it would morally justify me in permitting E1 or E2.
- (U) If (P\*), (S), and (T), I am entitled to believe that I am not justified in permitting E1 or E2.
- Therefore,
- (V) I am entitled to believe that I am not justified in permitting E1 or E2.

It seems to me that (V) secures the sort of moral reasoning that concerns Almeida and Oppy, and that this argument is plausible. If so (or if some other argument for the conclusion is plausible), then Almeida and Oppy are mistaken when they claim that our ordinary moral reasoning *requires* inferences like (P\*)-(Q\*<sup>\*</sup>). And if our ordinary moral reasoning does not require such inferences, this indirect argument for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high fails.<sup>89</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

Rowe's important evidential arguments from evil depend, respectively, on the inferences from (P) to (Q), and from (P) directly to  $\sim(G)$ . I have argued that William Alston's criticisms of (P) fail, but that (P) should nevertheless be replaced with (P'), to better capture the spirit of Rowe's inferences. The inference from (P') to (Q), I have claimed, is a move from the absence of evidence of a satisfactory theodicy in categories (1) and (2) to the claim that no such theodicy exists in any of the twelve categories. Rowe's later inference from (P') directly to  $\sim(G)$ , I have suggested, is best understood to be a move from the absence of evidence of a satisfactory theodicy in categories (1) and (2) to the claim that God is absent (i.e., does not exist). Inferences from absence of evidence to evidence of absence can be persuasive, provided that certain conditions are satisfied. In this case, if Rowe's inferences are to persuade, it must be reasonable to believe that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. Rowe, as noted, concedes as much.

One might think that, given the Principle of Credulity, it is reasonable to suppose that this probability claim is *prima facie* plausible. (I mentioned, *en passant*, two ways in which the critic of Rowe's argument might respond.) But surely the defender of Rowe's argument would prefer stronger support for the claim that  $\text{Pr}(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. I have considered and rejected four

more ambitious arguments in defence of this claim, thereby offering what I call a *negative skeptical defence of theism*. I take it, then, that a necessary condition on the success of Rowe's central inferences has not been shown to be satisfied. If I am right to reject these four arguments, the defender of Rowe's inferences has at least three possible avenues of response: she can (1) reject the claim that it must be reasonable to believe that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high for Rowe's inferences to succeed; (2) concede that it must be reasonable to believe that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high, but argue that *prima facie* support for this claim via the Principle of Credulity is sufficient; or (3) offer new arguments for the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. I doubt, however, that any of these strategies is promising.\*

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, I will stipulate that such a good may also be the *prevention of an evil e2* such that, had *e2* occurred, the world would have been worse off (*ceteris paribus*) than it is given the occurrence of *e*.

<sup>2</sup> More on this in Section 6.2., below.

<sup>3</sup> I use this term in Rowe's wide sense:

What counts as a "good we know of"? I do not mean to limit us to goods that we know to have occurred. Nor do I mean to limit us to those goods and goods that we know will occur in the future. I mean to include goods that we have some grasp of, even though we have no knowledge at all that they have occurred or ever will occur ("The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look", in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 264).

<sup>4</sup> Many responses to the problem of evil turn on the possibility of there being philosophically-defensible – but yet unproposed – theodicies.

<sup>5</sup> This way of categorizing theodicies is suggested by remarks in William Alston, in "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition", in Tomberlin, J.E. [Ed.], *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* [Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991], 29-67. (Subsequent page references to this article will refer to the 1996 reprint in Daniel Howard-Snyder's *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, 97-125). I thank Steve Wykstra for suggesting the terms 'proposed' and 'unproposed' in place of 'known' and 'unknown'.

<sup>6</sup> I make no claim concerning whether these categories (actually or possibly) contain philosophically-defensible theodicies.

<sup>7</sup> This argument is discussed in "Evil and Theodicy", *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 119-132; "Ruminations about Evil", *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* (1991): 69-88; and "William Alston on the Problem of Evil", in [Senor, T., Ed.], *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faiths*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 71-93.

E1 is the hypothetical example of a fawn, trapped in a forest fire and horribly burned, who suffers for days before dying. This example was introduced to the literature by Rowe in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-341. E2 is an actual case of a of a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who was beaten, raped, and strangled to death by her mother's boyfriend on New Year's Day, 1986. This example was introduced into the literature by Bruce Russell, in "The Persistent Problem of Evil", *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 121-139.

<sup>8</sup> In papers published in 1996 and 1998, (P) claims that there is no known good that justifies God in permitting E1 and E2 ("A Second Look", and "Reply to Plantinga", *Nous* 34 (1998): 545-552.) But Rowe takes pains to render this *conjunctive* formulation consistent with his earlier *disjunctive* version of (P) by allowing *conjunctive goods*:

Since we are talking about a good that justifies God in permitting E1 and E2, we should allow, if not expect, that the good in question would be a *conjunctive* good. Perhaps there is a good we know of that justifies God in permitting E1. Perhaps there is a good we know of that justifies God in permitting E2. If so, then we will allow that it is true that some good we know of (a conjunction of the goods in question) justifies God in permitting E1 and E2. It should be obvious that I am trying to pose a serious difficulty for the theist by picking a difficult case of natural evil, E1 (Bambi), and a difficult case of moral evil, E2 (Sue). Should no good we know of justify God in permitting either of these two evils, P is true ("A Second Look", 264).

<sup>9</sup> "Evil and Theodicy", 126.

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<sup>10</sup> Rowe never explicitly defends anything like (R); he seems to take it for granted as a necessary truth. (See “A Second Look”, 284, note 22.) Many theists agree with (R)’s claim that the existence of God is inconsistent with the existence of any gratuitous evil, but there are noteworthy dissenters, such as John Hick (*Evil and the God of Love*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition [London: MacMillan Press, 1973], 333-336); Michael Peterson (*Evil and the Christian God* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982], 79-120); Peter van Inwagen (“The Problem of Air, the Problem of Evil, the Problem of Silence”, in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 151-174; Yandell (“Gratuitous Evil and Divine Existence”, *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 15-30); and William Hasker (“The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil”, *Faith and Philosophy* 9: (1992): 23-44.)

<sup>11</sup> “A Second Look”, 270.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Swinburne is an exception. See his *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> “The Inductive Argument from Evil”, 108-109; and “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil”, in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 324-325. On Alston’s view, categories (4) and (10) can at best provide *partial* reasons, since he thinks that no non-patient-centred good can provide the whole of God’s reason for the permission of E1 and E2 (“The Inductive Argument from Evil”, 111). A complete, adequate theodicy might be *conjunctive*, however, by employing elements from both the patient-centred and non-patient-centred columns.

<sup>14</sup> Alston does appeal to the possibility of unknown goods, but this is relevant only to his efforts to undermine the inference from (P) to (Q): it is no part of his case against (P) itself. (“The Inductive Argument from Evil”, 108-109, 119; “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts”, 325).

<sup>15</sup> “A Second Look”, 281. See note 8 for Rowe’s treatment of *conjunctive* goods.

<sup>16</sup> “The Inductive Argument from Evil”, 110; “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts”, 325).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109 (emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> Such as, for Alston, the good of *writing great poetry* or the great good of *experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God* (“Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts”, 324). For Rowe’s definition of a ‘known’ good, see note 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 324, 325, respectively. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>21</sup> There are, of course, many senses of ‘epistemically possible’. Here are three (with thanks to Mike Bergmann for helping to clarify matters here):

- (a) P is epistemically possible iff we don’t know that  $\sim$ P. (For all we know, P.)
- (b) P is epistemically possible iff we don’t justifiedly believe  $\sim$ P. (For all we justifiedly believe, P.)
- (c) P is epistemically possible iff for all we know or justifiedly believe, P.

On the first – stronger – reading, the second principle I attribute to Alston seems straightforwardly implausible, since it seems to imply that knowledge and justification covary in this context:

**If we don’t know that there is no x, we are not justified in believing that there is no x.**

On the second – weaker – reading, the principle becomes trivial:

**If we don’t justifiedly believe that there is no x, then we are not justified in believing that there is no x.**



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Hence, on the third reading, the principle is either implausible or trivial.

<sup>22</sup> Others have argued that positions like Alston's lead to some form of inappropriate skepticism (Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil", in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 208-9; Bruce Russell, "Defenseless", in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 196-198; and David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, [Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998], 220-1) and these charges have not gone unanswered (see Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil", *Nous* 35 (2001): 289-293; Alston "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts", 321-322; and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil", in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 292-293). But this discussion typically concerns Alston-style worries about the inference from (P) to (Q), not Alston's case against (P) itself. While it may be that the latter argument "...does not rely on a general skepticism about our cognitive powers, about our capacity to achieve knowledge and justified belief" (Alston, "The Inductive Argument From Evil", 121), his modest case does appear to rely on the implausible principles noted.

<sup>23</sup> While I am at present only interested in Alston's case against (P), I should note that Alston takes the arguments from progress and omniscience to be relevant *both* to the rejection of (P) *and* to his efforts to block the inference from (P) to (Q). On the page immediately following these arguments in his 1991 paper, he says:

I have been arguing, and will continue to argue, that Rowe is not justified in asserting P, since he is not justified in supposing that none of the particular goods we have been discussing provide God with sufficient reason for permitting the suffering of Bambi and Sue. But even if Rowe were justified in asserting P, what I have just been contending is that the inference from P to Q does not go through ("The Inductive Argument from Evil", 110, and see also "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts", 325).

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder deploys similar arguments in his effort to block the (P)-(Q) inference ("The Argument from Inscrutable Evil", 301).

<sup>25</sup> "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts", 320. In his earlier paper, Alston puts the argument like this:

... our cognitions of the world, obtained by filtering raw data through such conceptual screens as we have available for the nonce, acquaint us with only some indeterminable fraction of what there is to be known. The progress of human knowledge makes this evident. No one explicitly realized the distinction between concrete and abstract entities, the distinction between efficient and final causes, the distinction between knowledge and opinion, until the great creative thinkers adumbrated these distinctions and disseminated them to their fellows. The development of physical science has made us aware of a myriad of things hitherto undreamed of, and developed the concepts with which to grasp them – gravitation, electricity, electromagnetic fields, space-time curvature, irrational numbers, and so on. It is an irresistible induction from this that we have not reached the final term of this process, and that more realities, aspects, properties, structures remain to be discerned and conceptualized. And why should values, and the conditions of their realization, be any exception to this generalization? A history of the apprehension of values could undoubtedly be written, parallel to the history just adumbrated, though the archeology would be a more difficult and delicate task ("The Inductive Argument from Evil", 109).

This argument has been alleged to rely on a tendentious analogy between knowledge of science and knowledge of values (Rowe, "William Alston on the Problem of Evil", 92 and Gale, "Some Difficulties", 209-210), and Alston has replied ("Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts", 320).

<sup>26</sup> Swinburne considers this thought experiment in a different context (*Providence and The Problem of Evil*, 28-29).

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<sup>27</sup> There may be, I suppose, a *via media* between Alston's (plausible, but too general) fallibilist presumption motivated by the development of all human knowledge and the (sufficiently-specific, but implausible) fallibilist presumption motivated by the imagined development of human knowledge concerning evils permitted for the sake of *known* goods. I suspect that any attempt to take this route will appear *ad hoc* and perhaps question-begging, but this remains to be seen: the burden of proof here is borne by defenders of Alston on this point.

<sup>28</sup> Alston means this argument to apply to both known *and* unknown goods, but only the former is relevant to his criticism of (P).

<sup>29</sup> "The Inductive Argument from Evil", 109 (emphasis added).

<sup>30</sup> In "William Alston on the Problem of Evil", Rowe diagnoses several similar shifts elsewhere in Alston's 1991 argument.

<sup>31</sup> "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts", 322. See also 315-316.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bergmann refers *en passant* to some worries concerning the formulation of (P), and suggests the following replacement:

**(P\*) No good we know of is known by us to justify an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2** ("Skeptical Theism", 294, note 9.)

I take this to be offered in the same spirit as my (P').

<sup>33</sup> In personal correspondence, Rowe cautions me that (P') may leave some readers with the impression that for all we know, there is no known good that we all know does *not* justify God in permitting E1 or E2. Rowe rightly urges that this impression would be misleading and objectionable, since we surely know of some known goods (such as Rowe's enjoyment in smelling a fine cigar) that they do *not* justify God's permission of E1 or E2. I agree that we know such things, and I am eager to avoid giving any impression to the contrary, but (P') entails no such position, nor – in my view – should it leave anyone with this impression.

<sup>34</sup> Wykstra vividly calls the former a *noseeum* inference ("Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil", in Howard-Snyder, D. [Ed.] *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996], 126); Howard-Snyder characterises it as an inference from *inscrutable* evil to *pointless* evil ("The Argument from Inscrutable Evil", 291); and James Sennett thinks of it as an inference from *inscrutable* evil to *unjustified* evil ("The Inscrutable Evil Defense Against the Inductive Argument from Evil", *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 220-229.) One advantage of my slogan is that it applies equally to Rowe's later argument.

<sup>35</sup> This logical gap has been cited in arguments for modal conclusions: for example, the late Boston University astronomer Michael Papagiannis famously defended the possibility of UFOs and alien abductions on such grounds (Bryan, C.D.B. *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T.*, [New York: Knopf, 1995], 230). More soberingly, appeal to this logical gap also seems to have underwritten much of the case for the recent war in Iraq: absence of evidence of weapons of mass destruction, we were told, did not constitute evidence of their absence. For representative remarks by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, see [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/08/iraq/main567410.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/08/iraq/main567410.shtml).

<sup>36</sup> "Evil and Theodicy", 123-4.

<sup>37</sup> Sennett also criticises this argument, in "The Inscrutable Evil Defense".

<sup>38</sup> "The Inductive Argument from Evil", 110.

<sup>39</sup> "William Alston on the Problem of Evil", 90-91, and "A Second Look", 267.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., and “A Second Look”, 284, note 16.

<sup>41</sup> “A Second Look”, 269. Constant *k*, of course, represents shared background knowledge. Rowe explains what is included in *k* as follows:

I take it as important here that *k* be restricted almost entirely to information that is shared by most theists and nontheists who have given some thought to the issues raised by the problem of evil. To this end, we will want to include in *k* our common knowledge of the occurrence of various evils in our world, including E1 and E2, as well as our knowledge that the world contains a good deal of evil. *k* will also include our common understanding of the way the world works, the sorts of things we know to exist in the world, along with our knowledge of many of the goods that occur and many of the goods that do not occur. Of course, *k* will not include the information that God exists or the information that God does not exist (“A Second Look”, 265).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Alston (“The Inductive Argument from Evil”; “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts”, Sennett (“The Inscrutable Evil Defense”; Howard-Snyder (“The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”); and Wykstra (“Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil”).

<sup>43</sup> “A Second Look”, 266-270.

<sup>44</sup> Wykstra’s argument is found in “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil.”

<sup>45</sup> “Skeptical Theism”, 281.

<sup>46</sup> “Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann”, *Nous* 35 (2001): 298 and 303, note 6. Almeida and Oppy explicitly accept a similar burden of proof in their formulation of the evidential argument from evil, in “Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 504.

<sup>47</sup> In correspondence, Bruce Russell has suggested that he is now inclined to deny that this is a necessary condition: he claims that certain arguments from his “Defenseless” may be deployed in support of the view that it is *not* necessary to believe that that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is *not* high in order for Rowe’s inferences to be persuasive. I will not consider this interesting objection here.

<sup>48</sup> Alston may be such an agnostic, and Howard-Snyder is too (see “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 304).

<sup>49</sup> Judging by Wykstra’s claims in “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments” (136-7), he now is a *modest* positive SDT, but he used to be an *ambitious* positive SDT (in “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 17 (1984): 73-94). Sennett appears to be an *ambitious* positive SDT (“The Inscrutable Evil Defense”, 223). And Bergmann is a *negative* SDT (in “Skeptical Theism”).

<sup>50</sup> *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 20. Swinburne applies this principle to the problem of evil by suggesting that it licences the inference from “Evil E *appears* to be gratuitous” to “Evil E *is* gratuitous”, unless there is either (a) strong positive evidence for the existence of God; or (b) a record of discovering with respect to many apparently-gratuitous evils that a theodicy works with respect to them; or (c) a theodicy for each apparently-gratuitous evil (29). He defends (c) in the remainder of *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

<sup>51</sup> I take it that this might be Peter van Inwagen’s position, given the following claims (made in his related discussion of the problem of evil):

... our modal intuitions, while they are no doubt to be trusted when they tell us that the table could have been placed on the other side of the room, are not to be trusted on such matters as whether there could be transparent iron or whether there could be a “regular” universe in

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which there were higher sentient creatures that did not suffer. And if this is true, it is not surprising. Assuming that there are “modal facts of the matter,” why should we assume that God or evolution or social training has given us access to modal facts knowledge of which is of no interest to anyone but the metaphysician? God or evolution has provided us with a capacity for making judgments about size and distance which is very useful in hunting mammoths and driving cars, but which is no use at all in astronomy. It seems that an analogous restriction applies to our capacity for making modal judgments (“The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, the Problem of Silence”, 162).

<sup>52</sup> Alternatively, one might hold that, on reflection, the apparent *prima facie* plausibility conferred here by the Principle of Credulity turns out to be illusory. (Thanks to Mike Bergmann for suggesting this.)

<sup>53</sup> Sennett, for example, explicitly concedes that there is *prima facie* support for the crucial inductive inference in Rowe’s argument, while rejecting the inference by means of defeaters (“The Inscrutable Evil Defense”, 224).

<sup>54</sup> “The Argument from Evil”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion* (1991): 113-116, 125-127.

<sup>55</sup> This might be construed as tantamount to saying that the goods we know are a representative sample of the goods there are. At any rate, Rowe (“A Second Look”, 267, note 17) and Howard-Snyder (“The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 296) take it in this way. For some reservations concerning this interpretation of Tooley’s intent, see Bergmann (“Skeptical Theism”, 286-288).

<sup>56</sup> “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 296-297.

<sup>57</sup> According to Bergmann, Tooley’s argument for (2) “...tells us only that the goods we currently know of are representative of the goods likely to be discovered by us. But no reason is given for thinking that the goods likely to be discovered by us are representative of the goods there are” (“Skeptical Theism”, 288).

<sup>58</sup> “The Argument from Evil”, 113-114.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>60</sup> In fairness, I should note that Tooley says that he “cannot attempt to argue the matter here” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>61</sup> “The Empirical Argument from Evil”, 244.

<sup>62</sup> “The Argument from Evil”, 113. Rowe quotes this passage approvingly (“William Alston on the Problem of Evil”, 92).

<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that many theists endorse the view that God’s reasons for permitting evil cannot exclude those who suffer. See, for example, Marilyn Adams (*Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999], 31); Alston, (“The Inductive Argument from Evil”, 111); Hasker, (“The Sceptical Solution to the Problem of Evil”, 49-50); Eleonore Stump, (“Providence and the Problem of Evil” (in Flint, T. [Ed.] *Christian Philosophy*, [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990]), 66). But for doubts about this restriction from a theist, see van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy,” *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 161-187, and for a more general restriction, see Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 235.

<sup>64</sup> In this passage, Tooley refers to *goods* beyond our ken, but it is more precise to speak of *theodicies* beyond our ken (since, as explained in Section 1, an unknown theodicy might involve a known good).

<sup>65</sup> “The Argument from Evil”, 127. Note that Tooley’s examples are more general than his patient-centred restriction would suggest: his examples concern *humans* surviving death, or having free will, but, strictly speaking, the patient-centred restriction should be indexed to a particular sufferer. I take it, though, that Tooley means to say *all* humans in this passage, in which case this problem vanishes.

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<sup>66</sup> Although Tooley does not explicitly say so, I take it that condition *C* may be a conjunction of two or more patient-centred restrictions. (Thanks to Bill Hasker for pointing this out.) The burden of describing these restrictions in detail, of course, rests with the defender of the argument from evil.

<sup>67</sup> As I have expressed it, this argument is an abstract claim about some patient-centred condition *C*. Rowe offers an argument about a specific example of a patient-centred restriction: he claims that any adequate theodicy for E2 would involve the *conscious experiences* of the patient (“The Empirical Argument from Evil”, 244). Howard-Snyder replies to Rowe (in “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 295-296), as does Bergmann (in “Skeptical Theism”, 283-284). These replies are similar in spirit to my argument about condition *C*.

<sup>68</sup> This is not a claim about patient-centred *theodicies*: in the passage quoted, Tooley makes only weaker claim that suffering must (or, must *likely*) benefit the individual, not the stronger claim that the good for the sake of which the suffering is permitted must *primarily* involve the patient.

<sup>69</sup> “Skeptical Theism”, 282. Strictly speaking, Rowe’s conclusion in this passage is not that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high. But Bergmann’s intention here is not to explicate Rowe precisely; instead, his goal is to harness Rowe’s considerations in an argument for this conclusion.

<sup>70</sup> “A Second Look”, 276.

<sup>71</sup> This should not be taken to suggest that God exists and is silent. Rather, S is shorthand for Rowe’s claim that “enormous numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of any such divine presence, concern, and explanations” (“A Second Look”, 276).

<sup>72</sup> In the passage quoted, Rowe speaks only of *goods* beyond our ken, but, again, it is more precise to speak of *theodicies* beyond our ken (since, as explained in Section 1, an unknown theodicy might nevertheless feature a known good).

<sup>73</sup> “Skeptical Theism”, 283.

<sup>74</sup> “Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann”, 300-2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 302. Here is Rowe’s defence of this claim in full:

To suppose that God exists and *divine silence* is what occurs in response to the seemingly countless instances of horrendous suffering in our world is to suppose all of the following:

1. A being of infinite wisdom and power is *unable* to prevent any of those instances of horrendous suffering without thereby forfeiting a good<sub>1</sub> so great that the world would be worse without good<sub>1</sub>, even given the instance of horrendous suffering that must be permitted by the infinitely powerful being if that being is to realize good<sub>1</sub>.
2. A being of infinite wisdom and power is *unable* to enable those who undergo such horrendous suffering to understand just what the good<sub>1</sub> is for which this infinitely powerful being is required to permit that horrendous suffering without this being thereby forfeiting a good<sub>2</sub> so great that the world would be worse without good<sub>2</sub>, even given the additional suffering occasioned by the sufferers being unable to understand what the good<sub>1</sub> is for which an infinitely powerful being permits them to undergo their horrendous suffering.
3. A being of infinite wisdom and power is *unable* to be consciously present to those who suffer horrendously, expressing his love and concern during their period of suffering for a good<sub>1</sub> that is beyond their ken, without thereby forfeiting still another good, good<sub>3</sub>,

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such that the world would be worse without good<sub>3</sub>, even given the despair and loneliness of those who undergo seemingly pointless horrendous suffering without any conscious sense of God's being present, expressing his love and concern during their period of seemingly pointless suffering for a good<sub>1</sub> that is beyond their ken.

4. A being of infinite wisdom and power is *unable* to enable those who undergo horrendous suffering without any sense of God being consciously present expressing his love for them to have any understanding of just what the good<sub>3</sub> is for which this being is required to permit them to suffer without any conscious awareness of his love and concern without thereby forfeiting still another good, good<sub>4</sub>, such that the world would be worse without good<sub>4</sub>, even given the additional suffering occasioned by the sufferers and their loves ones being unable to understand what the good<sub>3</sub> is for which an infinitely powerful being permits them to undergo their horrendous suffering.

Now my position is that anyone who seriously reflects on (1)-(4) will see the *inherent implausibility* in the idea that (1)-(4) is the way things are ... The skeptical theist, however, may agree with me about the implausibility of this idea. But she will say that its implausibility is derivative, not inherent. And she will argue that we take the idea to be implausible only because we are [objectionably] *assuming* that the way the goods we know of are related to the evils we know of is representative of the way the goods there are related to the evils there are ... My reply is that the idea that (1)-(4) is the way things are is an *inherently* implausible idea, not dependent for its implausibility on a *prior rejection* of one or more skeptical theses.

<sup>77</sup> Moreover, as Plantinga argues, if theism is true, it may not be fully rational to “just see” this alleged inherent implausibility (*Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 485ff).

<sup>78</sup> “Sceptical Theism”, 504.

<sup>79</sup> An argument in this vein was earlier advanced by Russell (“Defenseless”, 197-198) and replied to by Alston (“Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts”, 321), Howard-Snyder (“The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 292-293), and Bergmann (“Skeptical Theism”, 291-293). Bergmann (289-291) also considers related arguments concerning inappropriate skepticism due to Russell (“Defenseless”, 196-197) and Gale (“Some Difficulties”, 208-209). Finally, Swinburne offers an argument of this sort in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (27-28), and Hasker defends Swinburne in “The Sceptical Solution to the Problem of Evil”, 50-54. Space does not permit detailed consideration of these moves. My view, however, is that my response to the Almeida/Oppy argument can be deployed, *mutatis mutandis*, against these variants of the claim that skeptical defences of theism spell trouble for our ordinary moral reasoning.

<sup>80</sup> “Sceptical Theism”, 515-516.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 507. This suggests that Almeida and Oppy intend to opt for the *second* horn of the dilemma that Bergmann claims is faced by Russell's similar argument (“Skeptical Theism”, 293).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 506-7. Almeida and Oppy refer only to goods beyond our ken, but this locution is shorthand: they intend it also to cover theodicies beyond our ken which involve known goods. (See 505, note 18.)

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 509.

<sup>84</sup> Alston (“Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts” 321) and Howard-Snyder (“The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”, 292-3) offer a reply in this vein to a similar argument advanced by Russell (in “Defenseless”).

<sup>85</sup> I take it that this move would be consistent with the spirit of Bergmann's remarks (“Skeptical Theism”, 292-293). In terms of the inference from (P\*) to (Q\*), the argument could be developed in the following manner: Given that Almeida and Oppy intend this inference perfectly to mimic the move from (P') to (Q), and given that they agree that the latter move succeeds only if it is reasonable to believe that Pr(P'/G&k) is *not* high, we can construct a similar necessary condition for the (P\*)-(Q\*) inference: it must be reasonable to

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believe that  $\Pr(P^*/\sim Q^*\&k)$  is not high. But, someone might say, it is just not reasonable to believe that this probability is not high. Hence it is not reasonable to infer  $(Q^*)$  from  $(P^*)$ . Hence our ordinary moral reasoning (still presumed here to be generally successful) does not require such an inference.

Relatedly: in personal correspondence, Hasker suggests a defeater on the inference from  $(P^*)$  to  $(Q^*)$ . He imagines that "... a very wise and good person, one whom I have come to respect as a moral authority, tells me that I *should not* intervene to prevent the evil in question. I would then have good reason to think that *there is* some outweighing good that justifies me in permitting the evil, but I would still have no idea *what* the good is. (To make this more compelling, suppose that "I" am only ten years old at the time.)" In short, Hasker offers a scenario on which, although it is reasonable to believe  $(P^*)$ , it may not be reasonable to infer  $(Q^*)$ . In my revised model of moral reasoning, below, I add a premise, (S), to cover cases of the sort Hasker imagines.

<sup>86</sup> One could consistently advance both arguments.

<sup>87</sup> Another model would replace "entitled" in (U) and (V) with "obliged". Many more models may readily be imagined.

<sup>88</sup> The motivation for this premise is explained in note 85.

<sup>89</sup> Two replies to this argument may be envisioned. The first suggests that the argument for (V) damages the skeptical theist's case, since it may be retooled, in the following manner, to show that we are entitled to believe that *God* is not justified in permitting E1 or E2:

- (P') We know of no good state of affairs' *being such* that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.
- (S') We have no good reason to believe *that* there is a good state of affairs such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting E1 or E2.
- (T') We have fulfilled our relevant epistemic and moral duties in considering whether there might be a good such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.
- (U') If (P') and (S') and (T'), then we are entitled to believe that no good state of affairs' is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.

Therefore,

- (V') We are entitled to believe that no good state of affairs' is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting E1 or E2.

The problem with this argument, however, is that (U') is false, or at the very least, unavailable to Almeida and Oppy: they intend to offer indirect support for the claim that  $\Pr(P'/G\&k)$  is not high *precisely because* they recognize that our entitlement to believe that God has no good reason for permitting E1 and E2 requires *more than* our not knowing any such reason, our not knowing *that* there is any such reason, and our having looked carefully for such a reason. A more promising reply, I suppose, would be to claim that the argument for (V) is unsound, because (U) is false. For example, Almeida and Oppy might urge that one cannot *justifiedly* conclude (V) without first inferring  $(Q^*)$  from  $(P^*)$ . Alternatively, they might argue that (V) is inadequate to the task of underwriting the relevant sort of moral reasoning. I doubt, however, that such arguments can succeed.