

On Stone's Evidential Atheism*

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Abstract: The newest evidential argument from evil contends that the evidence we have from the goods we know about strongly confirms the thesis that some significant suffering does not result in an outweighing good. The argument concludes that theism is therefore improbable. Included in the argument is the assumption that the probability that we do not observe the outweighing goods for *some* actual evils – given that there are such goods – is extremely low. But since there are billions and billions of instances of evil the chances on the contrary approximate certainty that we do not observe outweighing goods for some of them. We therefore have good reason to believe the newest evidential argument is unsound and so provides no interesting objection to theism.

Keywords: evidential, evil, theism, atheism, religion

1. Introduction

THE NEWEST evidential argument for atheism is simple and intriguing. The argument is based on the claim that the evidence we have from the goods we know about makes the thesis in MT *improbable*.¹

MT. Every significant suffering that makes up the widespread and terrible suffering we see about us results in an outweighing positive or negative utility.

An instance of significant suffering *results in* an outweighing positive or negative utility, according to MT, just in case the outweighing positive or negative utility would not have happened had the suffering not happened.

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¹ Cf. Jim Stone, 'Evidential Atheism', *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003) 253–277. The initials 'MT' stand for "The Mirror Image of T". Thesis T states that every pleasant experience results in an outweighing positive or negative utility. Further with respect to MT, since each utility resulting from evil that justifies that evil must outweigh that evil, no result having zero-utility can justify any evil. See p. 256 ff.

² Note that Stone places no restrictions on *when* temporally justifying goods must occur. The justifying goods can occur before the evil they justify or much after the evil they justify. It is also notable that, on Stone's account, a good G might outweigh and justify evil E even if E does not entail G. He requires only that G depend counterfactually on E.

So the outweighing utility depends counterfactually on the occurrence of the evil. Positive utility is an intrinsic good such as pleasure or justice and negative utility is the prevention of an intrinsic evil such as pain or injustice.²

The evidential argument contends that the evidence we have makes MT *improbable* in the sense that a fully rational person would be moved to affirm \sim MT on the basis of that evidence. Indeed there is alleged to be sufficient evidence against MT to make the probability of MT as low as .1 and no higher than .2! The chances that there is an outweighing good or utility for the evil we observe is therefore negligible. And so no rational person could believe MT.

But suppose it is true – as the latest evidential argument proposes – that a fully rational person would also believe that theism entails MT. A fully rational person would believe that theism entails that there is some outweighing utility for every existing evil. If theism entails MT, then the probability of theism on the observable evidence cannot be any higher than the probability of MT on the observable evidence. Since no rational person could believe MT – the probability of MT is as low as .1 and no higher than .2 – we know that no rational person could believe that theism is true. The newest evidential argument therefore arrives at the powerful conclusion that theism has almost no chance of being true.

The proposition that MT has a probability as low as .1 should raise some suspicion among theists and friendly atheists.³ The proposition entails the strong position that the appearance of unjustified evil renders theism completely incredible. Contemporary theists must be either ill-informed or badly muddled.⁴ In section (2) I provide a formal version of the evidential argument. I show that the evidence we have from the goods

³ As an example of friendly atheism, note David Lewis' observation "... I wish the freewill theodicy success, or at least some modicum of success. I don't want to have a proof that all the Christians I know are either muddle-heads or devil-worshippers. That conclusion would be as incredible as it is unfriendly. But I won't mind concluding that a Christian must believe one or another of various things that I myself find unbelievable. For of course I knew that all along." See his 'Evil for Freedom's Sake?' in *David Lewis: Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The notion of friendly atheism was introduced in William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 335: 341

⁴ Stone does note that if some compelling argument for God's existence is forthcoming then theism might be rational to believe. But as the probability of theism increases so does the probability that MT is true. MT cannot be any less probable on the evidence than theism.

we know about strongly disconfirms MT only if it is *very* probable that we should observe outweighing goods for *every* actual evil or every significant suffering. But the newest evidential argument offers us no reason to believe that we should observe outweighing goods for every actual evil. In section (4) I show that the probability of observing outweighing goods for every actual evil is quite low even on the assumption that we are nearly certain to observe outweighing goods for each instance of evil. I conclude that even those prepared to concede that that we should observe outweighing goods for each evil have no reason to concede that we should observe outweighing goods for every evil.

In addition the newest evidential argument fails to mention the prior probability of theism. The argument therefore offers no way to determine whether the observation of no outweighing goods for some evils disconfirms theism at all. In section (4) I assume that the evidential argument is correct about the posterior probability of theism. I argue that if the posterior probability of theism is no greater than .2 – as the newest evidential argument contends – then the prior probability of theism is less than .4. I conclude that the observation of no outweighing goods for some evils does not strongly disconfirm theism.

In section (5) I consider the probability that we should observe outweighing goods for many or most actual evils. On assumptions that are fair to theism and atheism I argue that it is not reasonable to expect that we should observe outweighing goods for many or most actual evils. I conclude that the observation of no outweighing goods for large numbers of actual evils does not strongly disconfirm theism.⁵ I offer some concluding remarks in section (6).

2. The Evidential Argument for Atheism

The initial premise of the newest evidential argument states that the observation of no outweighing utilities for some existing evil makes the thesis

⁵ 'Strong (dis)confirmation' is vague. But I assume that strong disconfirmation is one that exceeds three points. Of course a good case could be made for making this condition stronger.

⁶ Stone urges that the absolute number of evils for which we observe no outweighing good might be quite high (cf. 'Evidential Atheism', 259 ff.). But the *percentage* of evils for which

in MT improbable. Suppose that P is the evidence forthcoming from the observation of no outweighing utilities for at least some existing evil.

P. We observe no outweighing positive or negative utilities resulting from some instances of existing suffering and evil.⁶

If we let k be the information we possess apart from P relevant to the truth of MT, then the initial premise states the following.

1. $\Pr(\sim\text{MT} / P \ \& \ k) \!> \Pr(\sim\text{MT} / k)$.

The information in k includes all of the arguments and evidence for and against MT that we already possess. Premise (1) states that the evidence in P strongly confirms $\sim\text{MT}$. The evidential argument fails to specify the prior probability of $\sim\text{MT}$ but it does assert that the probability of $\sim\text{MT}$ given P is greater than or equal to .8.⁷

1a. $\Pr(\sim\text{MT} / P \ \& \ k) \geq .8$

The second premise in the newest evidential argument states that we are justified in believing that theism entails MT. More formally the argument asserts that we are justified in believing premise (2).

2. $\square(\text{Theism} \supset \text{MT})$

we observe no outweighing goods is not clear in Stone's discussion. In sections (4) and (5) I consider the evidence forthcoming against theism from observing outweighing goods for at least 33% and at least 50% of actual evil.

⁷ Since we are not given the prior probability of theism, the assertion in (1a) is especially controversial. There are, for instance, many theists that argue that the prior probability of theism is 1 (or certainty), since it is among the basic beliefs that God exists. But if the prior probability of theism is 1, and theism entails MT, then the prior probability of MT is also 1. And so (contrary to (1a)) it is false that the $\Pr(\text{MT} / P \ \& \ k) \leq .2$. If the prior probability of MT is 1, then P cannot disconfirm MT. That is if $\Pr(\text{MT} / k) = 1$, then $\Pr(\text{MT} / P \ \& \ k) = 1$. Of course, the belief that God exists might not be a basic belief after all. Still it would be nice to have an argument.

⁸ The principle that is actually assumed in the newest evidential argument is not the consequence principle. It is rather the following (false) principle.

For any propositions p and q, if what we see makes q improbable, and we have the justified belief that p entails q, then what we see makes p unlikely – unless p is already unlikely on other grounds. (Stone, p. 261)

At most the principle licenses the inference to 'then we are justified in believing that what we see makes p unlikely – unless p is already unlikely'. But even that is mistaken. What we see makes p unlikely only if the prior probability of p is higher than the posterior probability of q. And that might be true even if p is already unlikely. Note that the terms 'unlikely' and 'improbable' are used interchangeably in this principle. Each term means "improbable".

If premises (1), (1a) and (2) are true, then the case against theism seems effectively closed. Premise (3) expresses the Consequence Principle (CP). CP is a theorem in the logic of probability.⁸

$$3. \quad \square(A \supset B) \supset (\Pr(A/C) \leq \Pr(B/C))$$

In English, CP states that if A entails B, then the probability of A given the evidence in C cannot be any higher than the probability of B given the evidence in C. It is important to note that the consequence principle does *not* state that if A entails B and C disconfirms B then C also disconfirms A. Since evidence is not in general closed under logical consequence, it is perfectly possible that A entails B, C confirms A and C disconfirms B.⁹ Therefore the fact that our evidence strongly disconfirms MT and the fact that theism entails MT do not together entail that our evidence strongly disconfirms theism. Whether the observation of no outweighing goods for some evils disconfirms theism at all depends crucially on the prior probability of theism.

In fact the observation in P disconfirms theism in the new evidential argument only if the prior probability of theism is greater than the posterior probability of MT.¹⁰ We know from premise (1a) that the posterior probability of MT is about .2. Since Stone's evidential argument is designed to show that P *makes* theism very improbable, the argument must assume that the prior probability of theism is much higher than .2.

⁹ Here is a counterexample to the principle that if A entails B, then if C disconfirms B, then C disconfirms A. Suppose there are four jars A, B, C, D, each of which has a .5 chance of containing a coin. Let H be the proposition that all of the jars contains a coin.

Then $\Pr(H/k) = .0625$. Now suppose we know that if jar D contains no coin, then it is much more probable that jars A, B, & C do contain coins. Let H1 be the proposition that jar C contains a coin. And let E be the proposition that we observed no coin in jar C. It is clear that E disconfirms H1, lowering its probability from .5 to (say) .3. But it is also clear that E raises the probability that there are coins in the other jars. Suppose it raises that probability from .5 to .7 for each. It follows that $\Pr(H/E \& k) = .102$. And so we can conclude that E confirms H, H entails H1, and E disconfirms H1.

¹⁰ The argument employs the following principle of disconfirmation.

$\{[\square(A \supset B) \& (\Pr(B/C \& k) < \Pr(B/k))] \supset (\Pr(A/C \& k) < \Pr(A/k))\} \supset (\Pr(A/k) > \Pr(B/C \& k))$ The principle is much less complicated than it appears. The principle states that if A entails B and C disconfirms B, then C disconfirms A (too) only if the prior probability of A is higher than the posterior probability of B. In the case under discussion, P disconfirms theism as well as MT only if the prior probability of theism is higher than the posterior probability of MT.

3a. $\Pr(\text{Theism}/k) !> .2$

The argument next substitutes for the variables in premise (3) and derives premise (4).

4. $\square(\text{Theism} \supset \text{MT}) \supset (\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \ \& \ k) \leq \Pr(\text{MT}/P \ \& \ k))$

From (2) and (4) we arrive at premise (5).

5. $\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \ \& \ k) \leq \Pr(\text{MT}/P \ \& \ k)$

But since (1a) states that $\Pr(\sim\text{MT}/P \ \& \ k) \geq .8$, we can make the immediate inference to $\Pr(\text{MT}/P \ \& \ k) \leq .2$. And so we reach the conclusion of Stone's evidential argument.

6. $\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \ \& \ k) \leq .2$

The conclusion of Stone's evidential argument is that the observation of no outweighing goods for some actual evils makes theism very improbable. If the argument is sound then it offers a compelling case that the observed evidence makes theism untenable.

But the initial problem is that we are given no reason to believe either premise (1) or premise (1a). In order to establish (1) we need to know the prior probability of $\sim\text{MT}$ and the argument offers no help here. So, suppose we simply add to the newest evidential argument the assumption (1b) that gives us the prior probability of $\sim\text{MT}$.

1b. $\Pr(\sim\text{MT}/k) \leq .4$

In English (1b) states that, on our background information alone, it is improbable that some instance of suffering did not result in an outweighing utility. It is not obvious to me that the assignment in (1b) is correct. But perhaps the evidence for theism in our background information k is supposed to make it expectable that every actual evil results in an outweighing good. In any case if (1a) and (1b) are true, then premise (1) is also true.

But what is the basis for premise (1a)? We cannot establish (1a) unless we can show that P provides significant evidence for $\sim\text{MT}$. Consider, then, the following simple proposal designed to establish that the probability of $\sim\text{MT}$ given P is at least as high as .8. The simple proposal urges us to believe that anyone who fully appreciates the evidence in P – anyone who appreciates the evidence in P impartially or fair-mindedly – will reach the conclusion that it is quite probable that some instances of evil do

not result in outweighing goods. The proposal contends, therefore, that an unbiased examination of the evidence alone makes it reasonable to conclude that the probability of \sim MT given P is approximately .8.¹¹

The difference in value between (1a) and (1b) in the simple proposal is attributed to the striking examples we have of actual evil that result in no observable and outweighing goods. Contributing to the well-known examples of Bruce Russell and William Rowe, Jim Stone adds the following incidents to the evidence in P.

[A] twelve-year-old enters a hospital for cancer treatment, insisting that it is only for a short while; soon she will return to school and her friends. She maintains this steadfastly until the last day of her life, when she begins to weep inconsolably. Her parents' desperate efforts to comfort her are useless. She weeps inconsolably until she dies.

... [C]heetahs usually suffocate their prey, but occasionally they disable an antelope and eat her alive.¹²

There are of course additional cases of actual suffering that do not result in any obvious outweighing goods. And there is no question that such examples have a powerful psychological impact. It is just these sorts of examples that move many reasonable people to atheism. Still, the simple proposal discussed above is mistaken. An unbiased appreciation of the actual evils for which we observe no outweighing goods cannot alone yield the conclusion that P strongly confirms \sim MT. We cannot reach that important conclusion without additional assumptions.

We have already stipulated that the value of $\text{Pr}(\sim\text{MT}/k) = .4$. The proposition in P states that there are some actual evils for which we observe no outweighing goods. To determine the probability of \sim MT given the observation in P we need a plausible assignment of values in the following instance of Bayes' theorem.

$$\text{Pr}(\sim\text{MT}/P \ \& \ k) = \text{Pr}(\sim\text{MT}/k) \times \frac{\text{Pr}(P/\sim\text{MT} \ \& \ k)}{\text{Pr}(P/k)}$$

By stipulation in premise (1b) the value of $\text{Pr}(\sim\text{MT}/k)$ is .4. Now consider the value of $\text{Pr}(P/\sim\text{MT} \ \& \ k)$. What is the probability that we observe

¹¹ I am using 'unbiased' in this context in the sense of not being prejudiced by *theistic beliefs*. The theistic belief, for instance, that such evils play some important role in some divine providential plan might make those evils appear less severe than they are.

¹² See 'Evidential Atheism' *op. cit.* p. 259. But compare William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' *op. cit.*, and Bruce Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil', *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 121-139.

no outweighing goods for some instances of existing evil given that there are no outweighing goods for some instances of existing evil? If those outweighing goods do not exist then clearly we are certain not to observe them. It is helpful to compare the probability of its negation $\Pr(\sim P/\sim MT \ \& \ k)$. How probable is it that we observe outweighing goods for every actual evil given that there are no outweighing goods for some actual evils? Since the value of $\Pr(\sim P/\sim MT \ \& \ k) = 0$ it follows directly that the value of the proposition $\Pr(P/\sim MT \ \& \ k) = 1$.

But then the probability of $\sim MT$ given P depends on the value we assign to $\Pr(P/k)$. And we can determine the value of $\Pr(P/k)$ using the elimination rule.

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(P/k) &= [\Pr(\sim MT/k) \times \Pr(P/\sim MT \ \& \ k)] + \\ &\quad [\Pr(MT/k) \times \Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k)] \\ &= [.4 \times 1] + [.6 \times n] \\ &= .4 + [.6 \times n] \end{aligned}$$

And so we can see that the degree of confirmation that P provides for $\sim MT$ depends on the value of $\Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k) = n$.

$$\frac{.4}{\Pr(\sim MT/P \ \& \ k)} = .4 + [.6 \times n]$$

The proposition $\Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k)$ is the probability that we observe no outweighing goods resulting from some actual evils given that there are outweighing goods for every evil. It tells us the probability that the outweighing goods for actual evil are observable goods or goods we should know about. If that probability is low then we should expect to see the goods that outweigh every actual evil. But if that probability is high then we should expect not to see the goods that outweigh every actual evil. And it is evident that P strongly confirms $\sim MT$ only if n is low. In fact as the value of n gets closer to 0, the probability of $\sim MT$ given P gets closer to 1. So P strongly confirms $\sim MT$ only if it is very improbable that we should fail to observe the goods that outweigh *some* actual evils. Indeed premise (1a) is true only if the $\Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k)$ is approximately .16.

So enumerating the evil and suffering for which we observe no outweighing goods is not alone strong evidence for $\sim MT$. Stone's evidential argument for atheism must include proposition (1c).

$$1c. \quad \Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k) \leq .16$$

In English the proposition in (1c) states that it is very improbable that we fail to observe the goods that outweigh some actual evils given that there are outweighing goods for every actual evil.

If the newest evidential argument provides good reason to believe (1c), then we have good reason to believe (1a). In fact the proposition in (1c) together with our assumption in (1b) entails (1a). And (1a) and (1b) together entail (1). Once it is shown that premises (1) and (1a) are true we quickly arrive at the conclusion that the probability of theism is extremely low. But what evidence do we have that (1c) is true?

3. The Probability of Premise (1c)

The conclusion of Stone's evidential argument is that the posterior probability of theism is no greater than .2 or that $\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \ \& \ k) \leq .2$. We found in section (2) that premise (1) and (1a) of the evidential argument are true only if it is very probable that we observe outweighing goods for every actual evil given that there are such goods for every evil or $\Pr(P/MT \ \& \ k) \leq .16$. So the evidential argument must provide us with good reasons to believe that (1c) is true.

But among the central theses in contemporary defenses of theism is that the goods for which God permits evil and suffering in the world are goods that are *unobservable* to us.¹³ Compare, for instance, Stephen Wykstra on the possibility of observing God-purposed goods.

We must note here, first, that the outweighing good at issue is of a special sort:

one purposed by the Creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are therefore somewhat greater than ours... [I]f the outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in con-

¹³ The forthcoming defense of theism, it should be noted, seems to assume what William Rowe has called *expanded theism*. Expanded theisms entail much more than the restricted theistic proposition that there necessarily exists and essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being. Example of expanded theism include such diversified positions Christianity, Islam and Judaism in their various forms. See William Rowe, 'The Evidential Argument: A Second Look' in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 262–285. Stephen Wykstra argues to the contrary in 'Rowe's Noseum Arguments from Evil', also in the D. Howard-Snyder collection, pp. 126–150. For an interesting discussion of how expanded theisms might avoid evidential arguments from evil see Ric Otte, 'Evidential Arguments from Evil', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 48 (2000) 1–10.

nection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer – which is to say, it is not likely at all. So for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to it.¹⁴

Wykstra's conclusion is that it is improbable that we observe a God-purposed good outweighing *each* instance of actual evil given that there is a God-purposed good for every evil.¹⁵ But then how probable is it that we fail to observe a God-purposed good for some actual evil given that there is a God-purposed good for every evil?

Suppose that the number of actual evils is finite and that we enumerate them $e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$. And suppose for a moment that Wykstra is right and that the goods that justify actual evils are God-purposed goods. According to Wykstra it is improbable that we observe an outweighing good for each actual evil given that there is an outweighing good for each evil. Suppose then that the probability of observing an outweighing good for each evil e_i given that there is an outweighing good for each evil is no greater than .3, or that $\Pr(Oe_i/MT \ \& \ k) \leq .3$. Now consider the value of the proposition (1d).

$$1d. \ \Pr(Oe_1 \ \& \ Oe_2 \ \& \ Oe_3 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ Oe_n/MT \ \& \ k) = n$$

In English the proposition in (1d) states that the probability that we

¹⁴ See Stephen J. Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984), 73–93. For a more detailed development of this position see Stephen J. Wykstra and Bruce Russell, 'The "Inductive" Argument from Evil: A Dialogue', *Philosophical Topics* XVI, (1988) 133–160. But the view that God-purposed goods would not (likely) be observable is shared by many other theists. See for instance William Alston, 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition' *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991) 29–67 and Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil' *Nous* 35:2 (2001) 278–296.

¹⁵ A more detailed theistic defense is sometimes advanced that appeals to a principle of epistemic access called Cornea. The principle is best viewed as a condition on strong confirmation where k is our background information, H is our hypothesis, and P is our observational evidence.

$$C. \ [\Pr(H / P \ \& \ k) \!> \Pr(H / k)] \supset \Pr(\sim H \ \& \ \sim P) > .5$$

The principle is first advanced in Stephen J. Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984), 73–93. But the principle is modified in 'Rowe's Nosecum Arguments from Evil' in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloom-

observe an outweighing good for *every* actual evil given that there are outweighing goods for every actual evil is equal to n . Since there are billions and billions of actual evils the value of (1d) must approximate 0.¹⁶ But then the value of (1c) must approximate certainty.

$$1c. \Pr(\sim(Oe_1 \& Oe_2 \& Oe_3 \& \dots \& Oe_n) / MT \& k) = 1$$

The proposition in (1c) gives us the probability that we do not observe outweighing goods for some actual evils. But then (1c) gives us the probability of P. So contrary to Stone's evidential argument we have good reason to believe that the value of $\Pr(P / MT \& k)$ is high. And it follows that P does not strongly disconfirm MT.

Of course, there is an immediate problem in the foregoing argument that (1c) is not improbable. All we have shown is that *if* Wykstra is right and the goods that justify actual evils are God-purposed goods, then it is very probable that we observe no outweighing goods for some actual evils. But then it is very reasonable to object that we simply don't know that Wykstra is right.

But then let's assume that Wykstra is mistaken about the probability of observing outweighing goods. Let's suppose instead that it is very prob-

ington: Indiana University Press, 1996). There are good reasons to believe that (C) is false, but Stone offers the following problematic counterexample. Let F1 be our factual assumption. F1. There is no force field that bends light so that the earth looks spherical from space. He assumes (I think correctly) that it is not reasonable to believe the counterfactual assumption in C1.

C1. Were there a force field that bends light so that the earth looks spherical from space *and* the earth is flat then we would observe that the earth looks spherical from space.

But now consider the following hypothesis and observation.

H = The earth is not flat *or* it is not the case that there is a force field that bends light so that the earth looks spherical from space.

P = The earth looks spherical from space.

Stone argues that $\Pr(H / P \& k) \gg \Pr(H / k)$ because P raises the probability of the first disjunct of H. Still, given C1, we know it is true that $\Pr(\sim H \& \sim P)$ is quite low. So we allegedly have a counterexample to C. But this is a puzzling example. Even if we grant that P increases the probability of the first disjunct of H, why should we believe that P confirms H? Since we know that the second disjunct describes a fact (it is simply an astronomical fact that there is no such force field) it has a probability of 1. So the probability of H is 1 no matter what the probability of the first disjunct. But then – contrary to Stone's conclusion – P does not confirm H at all and we have no counterexample to (C).

¹⁶ Since we have no reason to believe that observing an outweighing good for one evil will decrease/increase the probability of observing the outweighing good for another, I assume that these observations are stochastically independent.

able that we observe an outweighing good for each evil e_i given that there is an outweighing good for each evil. Suppose the value of $\Pr(Oe_i/MT \& k)$ is as high as .95. What then is the probability that we observe an outweighing good for every actual evil given that there are outweighing goods for every actual evil? We find again that the probability is low. Supposing there are no more than twenty actual evils, for instance, the probability that we do not observe outweighing goods for some evils in the small sequence $e_1 - e_{20}$ is about .65. But as we have noted the actual world contains billions of instances of evil. So the probability that we do not observe outweighing goods for many actual evils will approximate certainty. There is therefore no need to assume that there are God-purposed goods for every actual evil to find good reason to believe that the proposition in (1c) is not improbable.

Stone's evidential argument gives no reason to believe that the probability of the proposition in (1c) is anywhere near .16. But we know from the argument in section (2) that if (1c) does not approximate .16, then Stone cannot reach the conclusion that the posterior probability of theism is at least as low as .2. I consider next the consequences of simply granting that the posterior probability of theism is no higher than .2. I show in section (4) that the posterior probability of theism is no higher than .2 only if P does not strongly disconfirm theism.

4. The Prior Probability of Theism

The conclusion of Stone's evidential argument is that the probability of theism on the observation in P is at least as low as .2. Suppose we assume for a moment that the assertion is right and that $\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \& k) \leq .2$. To determine the prior probability of theism consider the following version of Bayes' Theorem.

$$\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \& k) = \Pr(\text{Theism}/k) \times \frac{\Pr(P/\text{Theism} \& k)}{\Pr(P/k)}$$

Since we have $\Pr(\text{Theism}/P \& k) \leq .2$ we can simply substitute in the theorem as follows.

$$.2 = \Pr(\text{Theism}/k) \times \frac{\Pr(P/\text{Theism} \& k)}{\Pr(P/k)}$$

But then what is the probability that we do not observe outweighing goods for some actual evils given that theism is true? William Rowe has urged that the probability that we observe an outweighing good for a specific evil given theism is reasonably put at about .5. But suppose theism makes the chances about even that we observe an outweighing good for some arbitrarily chosen evil. The probability that we do not observe outweighing goods for *some* actual evil given theism should be much higher. For instance if the probability that we observe an outweighing good for e_1 given theism is n and the probability that we observe an outweighing good for e_2 given theism is n then of course the probability that we do not observe an outweighing good for one of these evils given theism is $(1 - n^2)$. Unless the probability of observing outweighing goods for each individual evil is extremely high – around .8 or higher even in this very small two-actual-evils model – then the chances that we do not observe an outweighing good for some actual evil will be quite high. And even assuming that the chances of observing goods for each evil are extremely high, there are billions and billions of actual evils. So again the chances that we do not observe an outweighing good for some actual evil will be high.

Of course many reasonable theists are much less conservative than Rowe about the chances of observing God-purposed goods for each actual evil. Among the reasons that we should expect God-purposed goods to be beyond our grasp we find arguments from both the intelligence and goodness of a perfect being.

If theism is true, then the universe is the product of God's design, much as the life situation of a child is the product of her parent's design. Suppose then we are considering an incident of suffering in the life of a child, and the question is raised whether, if there is a good justifying the allowing of this suffering, this good is likely to lie in the considerable future?¹⁷

If intelligent, good and able parents are indeed governing the life of the child then at least some of the suffering that the child undergoes is a product of parental design.¹⁸ And at least some of the goods for which

¹⁷ Cf. Stephen J. Wykstra, 'Rowe's Noseum Argument from Evil', *op. cit.* p. 142 ff.

¹⁸ As children, for instance, we must endure a series of painful inoculations against various diseases. We should expect good parents to allow that suffering for the greater good of avoiding these diseases. Visits to the dentist, orthodontist, etc., though painful are all for the greater good. To foster independence we should expect good parents to allow their children time to play freely. But that inevitably leads to injury – scrapes, cuts, bruises, etc. But these again are

this suffering is permitted are likely to be both beyond the child's ken and in the considerable future. If a perfectly intelligent, good and able being is governing the lives of all rational (and perhaps all sentient) beings – the theistic argument continues – we should *a fortiori* expect that at least some of the goods for which suffering is permitted to be beyond our ken.

We therefore have good reason to believe that in worlds where a perfect being is the source of all value we will observe no outweighing goods for at least some instances of suffering and evil. Still, let's make the conservative assumption that theism makes the chances about even that we observe the outweighing goods for *some* evils. We therefore put the value of $\Pr(P/\text{Theism} \ \& \ k)$ at the estimate of .5.

$$.2 = \Pr(\text{Theism}/k) \times \frac{.5}{\Pr(P/k)}$$

But even on this conservative estimate we can show that the prior probability of theism is lower than .4. Suppose for *reductio* that $\Pr(\text{Theism}/k) = .4$. It follows that $\Pr(P/k) = 1$. But $\Pr(P/k)$ is equivalent to $[\Pr(\text{Theism}/k) \times \Pr(P/\text{Theism} \ \& \ k)] + [\Pr(\sim\text{Theism}/k) \times \Pr(P/\sim\text{Theism} \ \& \ k)]$. Distributing the probabilities we have been given results in the following.

$$\begin{aligned} & [\Pr(\text{Theism}/k) \times \Pr(P/\text{Theism} \ \& \ k)] \\ & + [\Pr(\sim\text{Theism}/k) \times \Pr(P/\sim\text{Theism} \ \& \ k)] = 1 \\ & [.4 \times .5] + [.6 \times m] = 1 \end{aligned}$$

So we are forced to the impossible conclusion that $m = 1.33$. And so the prior probability of theism must be lower than .4. But if the prior probability of theism is lower than .4, then P does not strongly disconfirm theism.

It is reasonable to wonder under what conditions the prior probability of theism approaches .4. $\Pr(\text{Theism}/k) = .4$ only if theism makes the probability of *not* observing God-purposed goods for some evils approximately .3 or $\Pr(P/\text{Theism} \ \& \ k) \approx .3$.

Stone's evidential argument offers no reason to believe that the probability of not observing God-purposed goods for some evils is anywhere

unavoidable consequences of gaining independence. Of course the child will come to know in most cases that the suffering she has endured was not pointless. On the other hand, for all we know, we will never see the point of the suffering we are permitted to endure. This observation is due to a referee for *Theoria*.

near .3. But suppose for a moment that there were an argument forthcoming that establishes that $\Pr(P / \text{Theism} \ \& \ k) \approx .3$. If so then the evidential argument would still not have much relevance to theists and agnostics. The argument would then show that the observation in P moves your probability for theism to .2, if your prior probability for theism is as low as .4. But no theist or agnostic puts the probability for theism as low as .4. So even if there were an argument establishing that $\Pr(P / \text{Theism} \ \& \ k) \approx .3$ the evidential argument would have nothing to say to anyone who is not already an atheist.¹⁹

5. Observing Outweighing Goods for Most Evils

There are billions and billions of instances of evil. Perhaps theism makes the probability high that we do not observe outweighing goods for *every* evil. But how probable is it that we do not observe outweighing goods for a large number of evils?

Suppose we assume that for each instance of evil e_n , theism makes the chances about even that we do not observe an outweighing good for e_n . Theists will no doubt insist that theism makes the probability of not observing an outweighing good for e_n much higher. Atheists will no doubt insist that theism makes probability of not observing an outweighing good

¹⁹ But is it also true that my objections to the evidential argument have nothing to say to anyone who is not already a theist? First, note that Stone *directs* his evidential argument to theists. He is not merely trying to convince atheists of atheism. It is therefore a problem for him that his argument has nothing to say to theists. But Stone and I are speaking to the same audience. So my critical comments on Stone are also intended for theists. So it is no objection that my criticisms do not speak to non-theists. They are not directed at non-theists.

Still, is it true that my objections to the evidential argument have nothing to say to anyone who is not already a theist? I don't think so. Taking Stone's argument uncritically we find him claiming that the evidence in P will move the probability of theism from about .7 to about .1 or .2. If that argument is sound it will also move weaker commitments to theism to (at least) .2. So if that argument is taken at face value then it might well move many agnostics to a strong atheistic position. A critical look shows that the argument is unsound. So the objections to the evidential argument have something to say to agnostics as well as theists. But we also find that a critical look at Stone's argument might well prevent many atheists – those atheists whose probability for theism is around .4 – from an unwarranted move to a stronger atheism. So the objections have something to say to atheists as well. I think a referee for *Theoria* for raising this question.

for e_n much lower. So the assumption does not especially favor either theism or atheism.

Consider a simple model including no more than six actual evils e_1-e_6 and suppose theism makes the chances even that we do not observe outweighing goods for each e_1-e_6 . Of course as we approximate the true number of evils in the world it becomes more and more probable that we should fail to observe outweighing goods for large numbers of evils.

Assuming that there are six actual evils we find that the chances that we do not observe an outweighing good for *some* actual evil is about .98. But what are the chances that we do not observe outweighing goods for at least 33% of actual evil? The chances of not observing outweighing goods for at least a third of actual evil is .85.²⁰ And the chances that we do not observe outweighing goods for at least 50% of existing evil is about .65. Since there are in fact billions of instances of evil it is very reasonable to expect that we will not observe outweighing goods for large numbers of them.

On the reasonable assumption that theism makes the chances about even of observing outweighing goods for each instance of evil – the very assumption that William Rowe makes concerning the probability of observing outweighing goods for some of the worst evils – it seems fair to conclude that theism makes it quite probable that we observe no outweighing goods for many evils.²¹ The probability that we observe no outweighing goods for some actual evil is about .98. So theism makes the probability of P quite high.

P. We observe no outweighing positive or negative utilities resulting from some existing suffering and evil.

²⁰ How do we determine the probability assignments in the simple six-evil model? The model assumes theism, since we are trying to determine the probability of not observing outweighing goods given theism. I make the simplifying assumption that an outweighing good for each evil is either observable or not. There are no vaguely observable outweighing goods. Further we take William Rowe's assumption that the probability of observing outweighing goods for *each* evil is about .5.

To determine the probability of not observing (say) at least 33% of the outweighing goods in this model, construct a quasi-truth table containing 2^6 rows. These rows exhaust the possible combinations of observable and unobservable goods for these six evils. Each row has $.5^6$ chance of being the actual distribution of observable and unobservable goods for these evils. Sum up the probabilities of each row on which 1/3 or more goods are unobservable and you have the probability of not observing at least 33% of the outweighing goods.

²¹ See William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' *op. cit.*

But we also found that theism makes the chances about .85 that we observe no outweighing goods for at least 33% of actual evil. Therefore theism makes P* very probable.

P* We observe no outweighing positive or negative utilities resulting from at least a third of existing suffering and evil.

And the probability that we observe no outweighing goods for half of actual evil is about .65.

P** We observe no outweighing positive or negative utilities resulting from at least half of existing suffering and evil.

Suppose we fail to observe outweighing goods for a third or more of existing evil. Even weak theists will not find the evidence in P* a serious concern. Let a weak theist put the prior probability of theism at about .6. Weak theists find theism slightly more credible than atheism. The probability of P* given theism is about .85. We can then determine the range of posterior probabilities for theism.

$$\Pr(\text{Theism}/P^* \ \& \ k) = \frac{.51}{[.51] + [.4 \times \Pr(P^*/\text{Atheism} \ \& \ k)]}$$

The posterior probability of theism depends entirely on the probability that we observe no outweighing goods for at least a third of actual evil given atheism. The posterior probability of theism is therefore between 1 and .56. So the worst news a weak theist might receive is that the observation in P* has moved his probability for theism less than half a point from .6 to .56.

But consider the stronger evidence in P**. Let's suppose that we do not observe outweighing goods for at least half of actual evil. We found that the probability of P** is about .65. The range of posterior probabilities for the weak theist are then determined in the usual way.

$$\Pr(\text{Theism}/P^{**} \ \& \ k) = \frac{.39}{[.39] + [.4 \times \Pr(P^{**}/\text{Atheism} \ \& \ k)]}$$

The posterior probability of theism is therefore between 1 and about .5. The worst news a weak theist might receive is that the observation in P** has moved his probability for theism about a point from .6 to around .5. So the observation of no outweighing goods for at least half of actual evil does not strongly disconfirm theism.

It is very difficult to determine whether we in fact fail to observe outweighing goods for some actual evil or at least 33% or at least 50%. But we do have good reason to believe that theism makes the probability of each P, P* and P** quite high. So the observation of no outweighing goods for even a considerable percentage of actual evil does not constitute much evidence against theism.

4. Concluding Remarks.

The newest evidential argument cannot show that the observation in P strongly disconfirms MT unless it is very probable that we should observe the goods that outweigh every actual evil. But no argument is offered in defense of this proposition. In section (3) I argued on assumptions very generous to atheism that the probability that we do not observe the outweighing goods for some evils is high.

The newest evidential argument cannot show that the observation in P strongly disconfirms theism unless the prior probability of theism is much higher than its posterior probability. But in section (4) I argued on assumptions generous to atheism that the posterior probability of theism is .2 only if the prior probability of theism is less than .4. So even if we had good reason to believe that the posterior probability of theism is quite low we would not have good reason to believe that P strongly disconfirms theism.

In section (5) I considered whether theism makes it probable that we observe outweighing goods for many or most actual evils. We found that theism makes the chances about .98 that we observe no outweighing goods for some actual evil. The chances of observing no outweighing goods at least 33% of actual evil is around .85. And the chances are about .65 of not observing outweighing goods for at least half of existing evil. We concluded that theism makes quite probable the observation of no outweighing goods for large numbers of evils. And so even the observations in P* and P** do not strongly disconfirm theism.

It seems fair to conclude that Stone's evidential argument from evil does not provide good reason to believe that the observation of no outweighing goods for large numbers of actual evil strongly disconfirms theism.