**EYEBALLING EVIL: SOME EPISTEMIC PRINCIPLES**

**1. Two principles relevant to non-deductive arguments from evil.**

In his 1979 article, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,' William Rowe offers an argument for the claim

(1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse

The argument involved taking a specific example, the suffering and death of a fawn burned in a forest fire, and declaring that 'it does not appear reasonable to believe' that God could not have prevented that event without losing some greater good or permitting some other event equally bad or worse; Rowe added that even if this claim should somehow turn out to be false, it appears quite unlikely that God would be in this position for all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world.

Stephen Wykstra construes the foregoing argument as having the form

(2) It appears that p

(3) Therefore it is reasonable to believe that p,

where Rowe substitutes for 'p' the sentence 'God could not have prevented the suffering and death of the fawn without losing some greater good or permitting some other event equally bad or worse'. In schema (2) 'appears' has a so-called epistemic sense. That is, Wykstra intends us to understand 'It appears that p' in such a way as to imply that (i) I am inclined to believe that p, (ii) it is my present cognized situation that leads me to have this inclination to belief, and (iii) I take there to be an evidential connection between what I am inclined to believe and the cognized situation that inclines me to believe it. Wykstra says that, so understood, the inference from (2) to (3) is licensed by the Principle of Credulity advanced by Richard Swinburne. However Wykstra concentrates, not on the inference but the premise.

Addressing (2), Wykstra advances the following Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA):

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

According to Wykstra, CORNEA reveals that Rowe's argument for his specific instance of schema (2) fails.

In post-1979 publications, Rowe modified his presentation of his ideas, in order to avoid complications and misunderstandings that arose in connection with the words 'seem' and 'appear'. He argued:

(4) 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 the evil involved in the fawn case

(5) Therefore no good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting the evil involved in the fawn case

Wykstra declares that this inference 'works' only if it is reasonable for Rowe to believe that if (5) were false then his situation would likely be different than (4) says it is. He does not offer a generalised version of this claim, but I think it is safe to ascribe to him the following doctrine, which I shall call 'IRIS':

Human H is entitled to infer 'There is no X' from 'I do not perceive any X' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that if there were an X then he or she would probably perceive an X.

Of course the argument-schema, like the specific argument from (4) to (5), is enthymematic: a vital role is played by background information. The role is made explicit in formulations below.

In the rest of this paper I consider whether CORNEA and IRIS -- or closely related principles -- are true. Even if they are, it is another matter whether they can be used successfully by theists to undermine evidential arguments from evil against the existence of God.

**2. Unsuccessful objections to CORNEA**

CORNEA has been criticised by Bruce Russell and by Daniel Howard-Snyder. Let us begin with Russell's criticisms. In his 1989 he writes:

Against CORNEA, I am entitled to 'It appears that I am not a brain in a vat' on the basis of perceiving myself sitting in a chair even if it is not reasonable to believe that, given my cognitive capacities and the use I have made of them, if I were a brain in a vat, my perceptions of myself sitting in the chair would likely be different in some discernible way.

But surely, assuming that I am indeed entitled to 'It appears that I am not a brain in a vat', what it is that so entitles me is not (merely) my perceptions of myself sitting in the chair. The objection fails for this reason.

Russell's second criticism of CORNEA is as follows. Surely (it is reasonable for me to believe that) if I were a brain in a vat, or if there were a demon deceiving me, then my sensory data would not be different in any way discernible by me. So, it follows via CORNEA that my sensory data do not entitle me to claim that there is no demon deceiving me. Now I know that 'There is a table in front of me' entails 'There is no demon deceiving me into falsely believing that there is a table in front of me'. So it follows via CORNEA that my present sensory data do not entitle me to claim that there is a table in front of me. Since this result is unacceptable, we should reject CORNEA.

The foregoing argument is fallacious. For 'x entitles me to claim that p' and 'I know that p entails q' do not jointly entail 'x entitles me to claim that q'. For example, the contents of the atlas entitle me to claim that Kiev is in the Ukraine, and I know that 'Kiev is in the Ukraine' entails that pi equals approximately 3.1416, but it is not the contents of the atlas that entitles me to claim that pi equals approximately 3.1416. Thus CORNEA does not commit us to saying that my present sensory data do not entitle me to claim that there is a table in front of me.

Moreover even if it did, this would not be much of an objection to CORNEA. For surely the commonsense view is that what entitles me to claim that there is a table before me is not merely my present sensory data but rather these together with various other premises, such as that I am not drunk and am not being massively deceived by a demon.

Let us now turn to Daniel Howard-Snyder's objections to CORNEA. His first objection is that, in circumstances in which I have a clear view of a mountain, I am entitled to move from 'So far as I can tell, there is a mountain before me' to 'There is a mountain before me', even though, unknown to me, I am the victim of some medical condition which renders me unable to grasp the relevant subjunctive conditional. But CORNEA does not require that I be able to grasp the relevant subjunctive conditional. What it requires is that if I were to believe the subjunctive conditional, then I would be reasonable in so doing.

Howard-Snyder's second argument against the truth of CORNEA is as follows. CORNEA stands or falls with the Discernible Difference Principle:

(DDP) It is reasonable for H to assume that there is an evidential connection between p and what she has to go on in claiming 'So far as I can tell, p' only if it it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were false, what she has to go on would likely be discernibly different to her in some way.

Now the only motivation for DDP is that DDP specifies, at least in part, what the evidential connection between p and what H has to go on consists in. Hence DDP is true only if the following principle is true:

(6) There is an evidential connection between p and what H has to go on in claiming 'So far as I can tell, p' only if the subjunctive conditional 'Given given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were false, what H has to go on would likely be discernibly different to her in some way' is true.

Howard-Snyder gives two counter-examples to (6). In the first, you are standing in front of the zoo's zebra enclosure, looking at a four-legged animal with black and white stripes; you conclude that it is a zebra, though in fact it is a mule that has been cleverly painted. Surely you have good evidence that there is zebra before you. Howard-Snyder continues:

It is, nevertheless, manifestly false that were a zebra not before you, what you have to go on would probably be discernible different to you. For the closest world at which a zebra is not before you is the actual world; and you discern no such difference.

The second second counter-example: Surely there is an evidential connection between your present conscious experience and the proposition that you exist, even though you would not discern a difference in your present mental life if you did not exist.

However the foregoing objection to CORNEA fails. In the first place, there is no reason to think that DDP is true only if (6) is. In the second place, the alleged counter-examples to (6) are spurious.

Why suppose that DDP is true only if (6) is? Let us suppose that there is an evidential connection of type T between statements A and B if and only if type T specifies the circumstances in which, if it is reasonable for person H to believe A then it is reasonable for H to believe B. It does not follow that we can make the move:

(7) It is reasonable for person H to believe that there is an evidential connection of type T between A and B only if it is reasonable for H to believe that condition K is fulfilled

(8) Therefore there is an evidential connection of type T between A and B only if condition K is fulfilled.

Indeed, there are lots of cases in which this move is illegitimate. For example, in a discussion of the problem of other minds, one cannot move from 'It is reasonable for me to believe that pain behaviour in other human bodies is good evidence of pain other than my own only if it is reasonable for me to believe that there is pain other than my own' to 'Pain behaviour in other human bodies is good evidence of pain other than my own only if there is pain other than my own.' There is no reason to think that Howard-Snyder's move from DDP to (6) is any better.

Consider now Howard-Snyder's first proposed counter-example to (6), the zebra example. Let us concede that, in the imagined circumstances, 'If there were no zebra before you, then what you have to go on would be discernibly different to you' is false. However the subjunctive conditionals involved in CORNEA, and so in (6), should be interpreted in such a way that the declaration 'If A were the case then probably B would be the case' is not a tentative assertion of 'If A were the case then B would be the case' but rather the assertion that there if A had been the case then there would have existed a strong tendency for B to be the case. This use is fairly common in ordinary discourse, where even if Mary defeats Kasparov, the statement 'If Mary were to play Kasparov, she would probably lose' is retrospectively still counted as true.

Hence even though no zebra is present and what you have to go on is not discernible different to you, the statement 'If there were no zebra before you, then what you have to go on would probably be discernibly different to you' is true. This is so even though the statement 'If there were before you a mule cleverly painted with black and white stripes so as to look like a zebra, then what you have to go on would probably be discernibly different to you' is false.

Howard-Snyder's second example, concerning the evidential connection between your present conscious experience and the proposition that you exist, draws our attention to the difference between the following:

(9) There is an evidential connection between p and what H has to go on in claiming 'So far as I can tell, p' only if: if p were false then what H had to go on would probably be in some state D instead of its actual state C, such that H would be able to discern which of C and D obtained

(10) There is an evidential connection between p and what H has to go on in claiming 'So far as I can tell, p' only if: if p were false then what H had to go on would probably be in some state D instead of its actual state C, such that H can in her present actual circumstances discern which of C and D obtain.

Howard-Snyder's second example shows that (9) is false, but leaves (10) intact. However surely it is (10) to which Wykstra, in advancing CORNEA, is committed. It is H's actual powers of discrimination that determine the evidential value of what she currently has to go on.

Thus CORNEA survives the main objections which have so far been proposed in the literature.

**3. Successful objections to CORNEA and IRIS**

Nevertheless, CORNEA is false. Suppose that Harriet has received only an incomplete message about the examination timetable recently posted on the noticeboard. She knows that next week there will be examinations in Mathematics and Physics, and that Mathematics will be the day before Physics. She now overhears someone saying that Mathematics will be next Monday. Surely she is entitled, on the basis of this new information, to claim 'It appears that Physics will be next Tuesday.' But it is not reasonable for Harriet to believe that if Physics were not on next Tuesday then Mathematics would not be on next Monday. Hence we have a counter-example to CORNEA.

IRIS is also false. Suppose that Hannah is visiting a biology laboratory. She is looking through a glass window into an enclosed room containing some cats and various other animals. She is assured by her host -- and she believes him -- that she sees every animal in the room. After Hannah has looked carefully for some time, it occurs to her that she does not see any mosquito in the room. Surely Hannah is entitled to infer that there is no mosquito in the room. But it is not reasonable for Hannah to believe that if there were a mosquito in the room then she would see it. She knows that while she is often able to spot mosquitoes, they often elude her sight; and she reasons that if there were, contrary to fact, a mosquito in the room then it might well, contrary to fact, turn out to be false that she sees every animal in the room. Here is a counter-example to IRIS.

**4. Introducing RETINA AND PUPIL**

The falsity of CORNEA and IRIS is not fatal to Wykstra's strategy for dealing with the evidential problem of evil. For there are other principles which may well be both true and suited to Wykstra's purposes. Here is a another candidate, which I will call RETINA (the name stands for 'Revamping the Theist's Investigation of Noseeum Arguments'):

If human H has backgound knowledge k, and H is not entitled on the basis of k alone to claim 'It appears that p,' then then H is entitled, on the basis of evidence s, to claim 'It appears that p' only if the epistemic probability of s, given both k and not-p, is both low and lower than the epistemic probability of s, given k.

And here is RETINA's companion, PUPIL:

If human H has background knowledge k, and H is not entitled to infer 'There is no X' from k alone, then H is entitled to infer 'There is no X' from the conjunction of k and 'I do not perceive any X' only if it the epistemic probability of 'I do not perceive any X,' given both k and 'There is an X' is both low and lower than the epistemic probability of 'I do not perceive an X' given k alone.

I do not know of decisive arguments in favour of RETINA and PUPIL. But I think a strong non-decisive argument can be based on the fact that they explain the judgments we intuitively make about several quite diverse sorts of case.

The first type of example has already been drawn to our attention by Wykstra, and discussed by Howard-Snyder, in connection with CORNEA. Suppose that a ship has sunk, and that air-sea rescue aircraft have been searching for survivors in the water. So far no survivors have been found. Surely the degree to which one is entitled to assert 'It appears that there are no survivors' -- the degree to which one is entitled to infer that there are no survivors from one's total evidence -- varies with what one knows about the number of aircraft deployed, the length of time that they have been searching, how good the visibility is in the search area, and so on. In short, it varies with the epistemic probability of s relative to the conjunction of k and p, where s is 'So far no survivors have been found,' and k is one's background information about the shipwreck, the nature and circumstances of the search, etc, and p is 'There are no survivors.' RETINA and PUPIL fit in well here. Admittedly, CORNEA and IRIS do so too; but, as I have argued, CORNEA and IRIS are falsified by the cases involving Harriet and Hannah respectively.

Here is a quite different sort of example:

(1a) If White died while the game was still in progress then White did not win the game (premise)

(1b) This morning's newspaper reported that White won (premise)

(1c) White won (from 1b)

(1d) Therefore White did not die while the game was in progress (from 1c, 1a)

(2a) If White died while the game was still in progress then White did not win the game (premise)

(2b) White was a grandmaster and Black merely a good club player (premise)

(2c) White won (from 2b)

(2d) Therefore White did not die while the game was in progress (from 2c, 2a)

Intuitively we are entitled to infer (1c) from (1b), and then infer (1d) from the conjunction of (1c) and (1a). But we are not entitled to infer (2c) from (2b), and then infer (2d) from the conjunction of (2c and (2a). Why not? Why can we properly declare 'It appears that White did not die while the game was in progress' in the one case but not the other?

Here is why: the probability of (1b) relative to the conjunction of not-(1d) with our background information -- including both (1a) and data about the general reliability of the newspaper -- is both low and a lot lower than the probability of (1b) relative to our background information alone; whereas the probability of (2b) relative to the conjunction of not-(2d) with our background information is not both low and a lot lower than the probability of (2b) relative to our background information alone. This is just what RETINA and PUPIL imply.

Surely it counts strongly for the correctness of RETINA and PUPIL that they explain and rationalise our intuitive judgments in the foregoing two quite different sorts of case. Of course this argument for the two principles is not decisive. For one thing, there may be alternatives to RETINA and PUPIL which also account for our intuitions in the shipwreck and chess examples, and which are unrefuted by the Harriet and Hannah counter-examples. It remains true that there are good reasons for affirming the truth of RETINA and PUPIL.

Let me complete this introduction to RETINA and PUPIL by showing how they handle the Harriet and Hannah examples. In neither case does the background information by itself license the conclusion. It is reasonable for Harriet to believe that the probability that Mathematics will be next Monday, given that both Mathematics will be the day before Physics and Physics will be next Tuesday, is low, and lower than the probability that Mathematics will be next Monday, given merely that Mathematics will be the day before Physics. It is reasonable for Hannah to believe that the probability that Hannah does not see a mosquito in the room, given that she sees every animal in the room, that she is frequently able to spot mosquitoes, that mosquitoes are animals and also that there is in fact a mosquito in the room is low, and lower than the probability that Hannah does not see a mosquito in the room, given merely that she sees every animal in the room, that she is frequently able to spot mosquitoes, and that mosquitoes are animals.

Thus in both cases the necessary condition for entitlement to the conclusion is fulfilled. That is, RETINA and PUPIL, unlike CORNEA and IRIS, deliver acceptable results.

**NOTES**

1. William L. Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,' American Philosophical Quarterly 16 (1979), 335-341.

2. Stephen J. Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering,' International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion 16 (1984), 73-93.

3. Wykstra, op. cit., pp.85-85.

4. Wykstra, op, cit., p.85,

5. For example, William L. Rowe, 'The Evidential Argument From Evil: A Second Look,' forthcoming in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument From Evil.*

6. Stephen J. Wykstra, 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil,' forthcoming in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, p.2.

7. Bruce Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil,' Faith and Philosophy 6 (1989), 132f.

8. Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra, 'The "Inductive" Argument from Evil: A Dialogue,' Philosophical Topics 16 (1988), 133-160. The dialogue character Athea mostly expresses the views of Russell.

9. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Seeing Through CORNEA,' International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion, 32 (1992), p.34.

10. Howard-Snyder, op. cit., p.35.

11. Howard-Snyder, op. cit., pp.35f.

12. The foregoing counter-example also refutes CORNEA\*\*, a principle which Howard-Snyder offers to Wykstra as a way of defending theism if CORNEA itself succumbs to Howard-Snyder's criticisms. CORNEA\*\* says: *On the basis of what one has to go on, one is entitled to infer p from 'So far as I can tell, p' only if (i) given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, what she has to go on would probably be different in such a way that a reasonable person would not infer p in those relevant alternative situations in which p is false, and (ii) she has no good reason to believe that condition (i) is not satisfied.*

13. The foregoing sentences correct an error in my article, 'Can God Replace the Actual World By a Better One?' *Philosophical Papers* 20 (1991), 183-192.