WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE GOD OF HISTORY

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I argue that our expectations for particular evil events, conditional on theism, ought to be informed by our empirical knowledge of history—that is, the history of what God, if God exists, has already allowed to happen. This point is under-appreciated in the literature. And yet if I'm right, this entails that most particular evil events are not evidence against theism. This is a limited but interesting consequence in debates over the evidential impact of evil.

1. Introduction

Bayesian versions of the evidential problem of evil trade on a difference in likelihoods or expectations.[1] How likely was evil (or some particular instance of evil), conditional on God's existing + background knowledge? How likely was evil (or some particular instance of evil), conditional on God's not existing + background knowledge? If and only if the second answer is higher, evil (or some particular instance of evil) is evidence against God.

This formal apparatus can bring much-needed, useful structure to our reasoning about the evidential impact of various evils. And yet, our formal reasoning has an important limitation—our abilities to access the relevant, relative likelihoods. How do we tell how likely some fact about evil is, conditional on (some version of) theism? Or conditional on nontheism?[2] Some answers may seem easy. (E.g., is it more or less likely, conditional on Abrahamic theism vs. nontheism, that the world would experience a(nother) global, universally destructive flood?) But other likelihoods seem obscure; "plausible" judgments can seem lost in the

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[1]My argument does not rely on the specifics of a Bayesian approach and will also apply to some non-Bayesian conceptions of evidence.

[2]I use "nontheism" rather than "atheism" because, strictly speaking, what matters is whether theism or its *negation* better predicts the evidence. And the negation of theism is not the same as "atheism" in popular discourse. It's helpful to remember, too, that what really matters are not the predictions of all possible theistic and nontheistic religions and world-views, but rather only the predictions of *versions in which the agent (reasonably) has non-zero credence.* And the predictions of these versions matter in proportion to the agent's credences in those versions. (Cf. Draper's "weighted average principle" discussed in Draper, "Pain and Pleasure.")

realm of "difficulty, darkness, and despair."[3] (E.g., is it more or less likely, conditional on theism vs. nontheism, that humans would grieve?) Where these comparisons are beyond our ken, formal reasoning will not advance our understanding of the problem of evil. Some aspects of the debate over skeptical theism turn on whether likelihoods for global evil, conditional on theism vs. nontheism, are inscrutable.

But inscrutability is only one threat to the usefulness of the Bayesian apparatus; faulty reasoning about what the relative likelihoods are—even when these are in principle scrutable—is another.[4]

I will suggest that a particular kind of insidiously misleading reasoning infects some influential versions of the evidential argument from evil. The versions I have in mind point to particular evil events or particular types of evil events that are, tragically, historically routine—not *uniquely* horrific events. And these arguments claim—or they tacitly rely on the claim— that these particular events are less to-be-expected, conditional on theism vs. nontheism. That is, each occurrence of violence, or abuse, or injustice, is supposed to make things *worse* for (reasonable) theism.

I deny this. In a nutshell, my argument is that reasonable expectations for various evils, conditional on theism, will be informed by our *empirical knowledge of history*—that is, the history of what God, if God exists, has already allowed to happen. Hence, I argue, most particular evil events are not evidence against theism, in the Bayesian's sense.

This may perhaps sound more ambitious than the paper really is. The point that expectations for evil should be informed by history is not exactly new; Draper, for example, acknowledges it explicitly in the course of defending his particular Bayesian argument from evil.[5] But here I make and defend the point in some detail because the relevance and significance of empirical knowledge of history seems to be often overlooked or under-appreciated in the literature.

Despite being under-appreciated, the claim that most particular evil events are not evidence against theism in the Bayesian's sense is still importantly limited. It is certainly *not* the claim that all versions of the problem of evil fail—or that all evidential versions fail, or all Bayesian versions. My claim is compatible with thinking that *some* evil events, or evil in general, or the total amounts and kinds of evil we find in the world *are* evidence against theism (in a Bayesian sense). It may also be compatible with seeing most evil events as evidence against theism in some other, non-Bayesian sense. And yet my thesis importantly bears on recent, influential discussions of the problem of evil; I'll argue for this in section 8, once I've argued for the thesis itself.

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[3]Plantinga, "Probabilistic Argument from Evil," 10. Also quoted in Anderson and Russell, "Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence"; cf. their discussion, esp. pp. 2–3.
[4]See also Callahan, "On the Problem of Paradise."
[5]Draper, "Meet the New Skeptical Theism," 167–68.

I'll begin in the next section (2) by reviewing the Bayesian apparatus. Section 3 presents a case that illustrates the basic mistake that, I'm alleging, is sometimes tacitly made in thinking about reasonable expectations for particular evils. Sections 4–7 defend my view of reasonable expectations in that case from pressing objections, and Section 8, as mentioned, considers the upshot of my argument for broader theorizing about the problem of evil.

2. Bayesian Evidence and Reasonable Expectations

To review: in a Bayesian framework, whether a piece of evidence counts as evidence for or against a hypothesis depends on a ratio of conditional likelihoods. Conditional on the hypothesis being true, how likely was it that we would get this evidence? Conditional on the hypothesis being false, how likely was it that we would get this evidence? If and only if the answer to the second question is higher than the answer to the first question, the evidence disconfirms the hypothesis, or makes it less likely than it would be otherwise.

Here's an example. Say I ask my partner to water our houseplants while I'm gone on a trip. On my return, the houseplants look droopy (D). Is D evidence that my partner has not watered the plants (~W)?

Well, how likely is it that the plants would look droopy if he didn't water them? What is $Pr(D \,/\, {\sim}W \,\&\, k)$?[6] Say they need regular water and D is likely, conditional on ~W: 0.75. Now, how likely is it that the plants would look droopy even if he did water them? What is $Pr(D \,/\, W \,\&\, k)$? Say they are hardy plants so long as they get enough water, and $Pr(D \,/\, W \,\&\, k)$ is very low: 0.05. I've gotten evidence that my partner did not water the plants, and this is reflected in the fact that $Pr(D \,/\, {\sim}W \,\&\, k) > Pr(D \,/\, W \,\&\, k)$.

Many who press the evidential problem of evil encourage us to think of it along similar lines:

> I will argue that the pain and pleasure in our world create an epistemic problem for theists by arguing that . . . P ([all observations and testimony about pain and pleasure]/[the Hypothesis of Indifference]) is much greater than P([all observations and testimony about pain and pleasure]/[Theism]).[7]

> [W]hy should one think that evil is evidence against the existence of God? For the same reason anything is evidence against anything—the ratio of likelihood ratios. Intuitively, the probability of there being evil given atheism is higher than the probability of there being evil given theism.[8]

Following this literature, I will accept the basic Bayesian framework; I'll accept that whether some fact about evil is evidence against the existence of God depends on whether the likelihood of that fact is higher, conditional on nontheism than on theism.

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[6]Here k symbolizes background knowledge, on which much more below.

[7]Draper, "Pain and Pleasure," 332–33.

[8]Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence," 5.

Now, in the plant watering case "k" symbolizes background knowledge. Most hypotheses on their own do not generate many expectations. I can't make the conditional probability assessments above *simply* on the assumptions of the hypotheses that my partner did/didn't water the plants. Other assumptions matter—the drought-tolerance of the plants, their otherwise-hardiness, etc. Pr(D/W & k) and Pr(D/~W & k) are meant to capture reasonable expectations for us to have when we are ignorant of whether D, but when we *still know* everything else we know that is compatible with that ignorance.[9] Similarly, (non)theism *alone* will not generate reasonable expectations for various facts about evil. In thinking about reasonable expectations for various evils or facts about evil, we should abstract away from knowledge of those evils but hold fixed other assumptions, other knowledge compatible with this ignorance. I'll return to this question of what is included in k; as will become clear, this is important to my argument.

First, one more preliminary: there are different ways of thinking about the probabilities (or likelihoods, priors, expectations, or credences[10]) involved in determining whether something is a piece of evidence. You might think what matters are an agent's *actual* credences. Whether something is evidence for us depends entirely on *our* expectations, whatever those happen to be. The issue with understanding evidence in this way, at least in the context of theorizing about the problem of evil, is that it limits our ability to ask certain normative questions.[11] How *ought* evil to influence our views on religion? It's all well and good to point out that someone might possibly have an expectation structure such that failing to find donuts in stock at the bakery would reduce their credence in theism. But many of us come to the problem of evil wondering whether our actual reactions to evil are what they ought to be, whether these really make sense.

Such reflections prompt a more objective understanding of evidential relations. But thankfully, I needn't be committed to the strongest objective picture, according to which whether some fact about evil is evidence against God is determined by the one "golden credence function in the sky," if you will. Rather, I'll say that *reasonable* priors or credences are what

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[9]This way of thinking about k is not uncontroversial, but it is a standard view in the literature. Cf. especially Howson, "Bayesianism and Support by Novel Facts"; Howson, "Some Recent Objections to the Bayesian Theory of Support." The abstraction process here (*K*–{E}) is admittedly fraught, as comes up in discussions of the problem of old evidence. (Cf. Easwaran, "Bayesianism II," 325; Earman *Bayes or Bust?*, 244n19). But to say it is problematic is not to say it is not standard, and my argument will not require this *specific* conception of k in order to work—merely one according to which the relevant k is fairly robust, or non-minimal.

[10]I don't mean to suggest these are equivalent. But the differences won't be important here. Cf. Easwaran "Bayesianism II," 322.

[11]One can still ask some normative questions, of course. Even on this view, people can fail to update according to their own expectations and can therefore be criticized as irrational/incoherent. My claim is that, at least in thinking about the problem of evil, we are interested in normativity beyond coherence.

matters, in determining whether facts about evil are evidence against God. As I'm thinking about things, the set of reasonable priors is objectively determined; it's not up to me or you whether some particular expectations count as reasonable. And yet I don't assume there is only one reasonable prior; there may be multiple, and they may sometimes disagree (despite converging on a wide swath of questions).

The claim I'll defend in the remainder of the paper is that, for anyone who has reasonable credences and some positive credence in theism, expectations for most particular instances of evil conditional on theism will be roughly equal to expectations for those instances of evil conditional on nontheism.

3. The Central Case

Now, as this is a paper about the problem of evil, in turning to a case we necessarily turn to something sad and upsetting. I've taken care to include no graphic details, but still—it seems fitting to warn the reader that we turn now from droopy plants and Bayesian mechanics to disturbing realities.

Suppose Meredith has a non-zero credence in theism. When she learns that her sister Isabel has been the victim of a violent crime, she is shocked and dismayed. (Despite the fact that, let's suppose, Meredith knows the relevant crime stats: 20% of people like Isabel are victims of violent crimes.) How could God—if God exists—let this happen to Isabel? Why? *Could* God even exist—shouldn't she at least be *somewhat* more doubtful, taking this experience into account?[12]

One might think, letting C = Isabel's being the victim of a violent crime,[13] T = theism, and k = background knowledge, that reasonable probability distributions for Meredith will be such that: $\Pr(C/\ T\ \&\ k) < 0.2 = \Pr(C/\ \sim T\ \&\ k)$.[14] For one might think Meredith should reason as follows: were there a God in heaven who hated suffering and sometimes

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[12]This paper does not address questions about what would be *understandable* for Meredith or Isabel, nor the question of how anyone ought to try to comfort or reason with either of them. Those other questions are *very* important, but they cannot be addressed here.

[13]One might think that, in order to represent a particular evil event, C would need to specify (at least) the time and place of Isabel's attack. I do not dispute that there is a good sense of "particular event" according to which this is required. However, there are a few reasons for focusing on what might more properly be called a "particular event type." First, the probability of Isabel's being attacked at any particular time and place is so whoppingly low as to be very difficult to think about, and we don't want to muddy the imaginative exercise that is crucial to evaluating Bayesian expectability arguments. Second, the *evilness* of the attack on Isabel is in no way dependent on its particular time and place, so specifying those details may distract from the questions at hand. Thanks to an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy* for raising this issue.

[14]I focus on reasonable credences for Meredith and not Isabel because—though it is already a stretch to speculate about how an ideally reasonable *Meredith* should adjust her credences (see footnote 12)—it may strain the imagination to a breaking point to try to prescribe reasonable responses for victims themselves.

worked miracles, there would be at least *some* chance said God would miraculously intervene to prevent C. So—despite the acknowledged crime statistics—a reasonable Pr(C/T & k) should be lower than 0.2 (which would be the reasonable Pr(C/~T & k), assuming that the versions of nontheism Meredith reasonably considers possible are, roughly, a-religious materialism or physicalism.)[15] Hence C is definitely evidence against God's existence.

But this reasoning is flawed. If God exists, God has been around for all those other crimes that grounded the statistics too. Although in assessing Pr(C/T & k) we set aside our knowledge of C, I suggest we should be understood to retain our background information, including knowledge of the relevant statistics.[16] Meredith should instead reason:

> Statistics suggest that 20% of people like Isabel are victims of violent crimes. Therefore, if God exists, God frequently allows people just like Isabel to undergo these horrible experiences. Maybe, invisibly to us, God is intervening in a large number of cases, preventing those crime statistics from being *even higher.* But, clearly, there are many, many cases in which God, if God exists, does not prevent violent crimes, and I have no reason to believe Isabel relevantly dissimilar to others who have been victims. The rational expectation for Pr(C/T & k) $\approx$ 0.2.

Since Pr(C/T & k) $\approx$ 0.2 = Pr(C/~T & k), C is not clearly evidence against theism.

The reason Pr(C/T & k) $\approx$ 0.2 is largely the same reason Pr(C/~T & k) = 0.2. Hold fixed the crime statistics along with other background knowledge. Now assume that in fact there is no God—assume nontheism. Induction works, so Pr(C/~T & k) = 0.2. Start the process over. Again, hold fixed the crime statistics and other background knowledge. But assume theism this time—in fact there is a God, *and always has been*, in our actual world with these same crime statistics. Again, I claim, induction works—with a caveat to be explored in greater detail shortly, which mandates the use of "$\approx$" rather than "="—so Pr(C/T & k) $\approx$ 0.2. While I don't claim that

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[15]Recall that what matters is not the predictions of all possible versions of nontheism, but rather only the predictions of *versions in which the agent (reasonably) has non-zero credence.* See footnote 2.

[16]I must assume here that the background information one has is compatible with theism. (One can't consider the probability of C conditional on the conjunction of theism with facts incompatible with theism.) So, I must assume all the other crimes that grounded the crime statistics are compatible with theism. This is certainly a questionable assumption! You might think that this rotten world of frequent violent crime *already totally rules out* God's existence. (I discuss related versions of the problem of the *total* evil in the world in section 8.) But here I am considering a certain proponent of the problem of evil who does not think this; she thinks that Meredith can have *some* credence in theism before Isabel's attack (despite knowing about the crime statistics), but that this credence should decrease as a result of Isabel's attack. So I am following in the footsteps of my interlocutor in assuming that theism is strictly compatible with the crime statistics and the other evils that grounded them.

Pr(C/T & k) must be identical to Pr(C/~T & k), for any reasonable version of Meredith, I do claim these will be roughly equivalent, and in particular I deny any principled reason to think Pr(C/T & k) is *lower.* (I return to this in section 6.) Hence—C is not evidence against T.

I will here briefly attempt to clarify two details in the reasoning I'm recommending for Meredith before addressing the main objections to its propriety.

First, I portrayed Meredith as thinking that if theism is true, God may be intervening to prevent crime statistics being even higher. This is not essential to my argument, but it's a natural thing for Meredith to think. And one might worry this actually commits Meredith to assessing Pr(C/~T & k) as *higher* than 0.2. But this thought occurs when Meredith is reasoning about what would be the case, conditional on theism. Meredith should not think that, conditional on theism, the probability of C conditional on nontheism is higher than 0.2, because it is not clear she should (or could) have credences ranging over the possibility, "If theism is true, then if nontheism is true . . ." Conditional on theism, Pr(~T) is 0. Instead, Meredith should think that, conditional on theism *and God's (counterfactually) not intervening in relevant ways*, the probability of C would be higher than 0.2; this does not mandate anything about Meredith's Pr(C/~T & k).

Second clarification—I've portrayed Meredith as thinking, "I have no reason to believe Isabel relevantly dissimilar to others who have been victims." This clause acknowledges a possibility I'd like to leave open. One might reasonably think that if theism were true, then *some* people—perhaps, for example, those who are on church prayer lists—should be less likely to suffer certain evils than other people are. Hence for *some* people, certain evils are less likely to occur, conditional on theism vs. nontheism—while for others (those not being prayed for), evils must be *more* likely to occur, conditional on theism, so that we get the middling crime statistics we actually see. I'm leaving it open that a reasonable Meredith might have expectations like this—and hence, that evils befalling *some* people, in certain circumstances, would indeed be evidence for/against theism. (I return to this theme again in section 8—I think the general allowance for some evils being evidence is a welcome result.)

But here I'm writing it into the case that Meredith doesn't know whether Isabel is in the more- or less-likely-to-be-protected-by-God segment of the population. So even if she does have differential expectations for certain sorts of people, conditional on theism, these differential expectations won't matter to what she should expect for Isabel. Compare: there's a certain overall risk of jaundice for babies born in the United States. But this risk is higher for babies whose blood type doesn't match their mother's, and it's lower for babies whose blood type matches. If you didn't know anything about your or your baby's blood type, it would be reasonable to set your expectations for jaundice in line with the overall, population-level US risk

and ignore the more fine-grained risk levels. That's essentially what Meredith does with Isabel.[17]

In the hope that the reasoning I have recommended for Meredith is now tolerably clear, I turn to the four main objections to this reasoning I have encountered, which I'll address over the next four sections (4–7). Afterward, in section 8, I'll turn to perhaps the most pressing question I've encountered: how much does this prove? Or how does my claim about many particular, ordinary evils not being evidence against God bear on our broader thinking about the problem of evil?

4. Background Knowledge

Importantly, my argument presupposes that it is appropriate to "hold fixed" the crime statistics—i.e., to include these in the background knowledge. I claim that when we reason about what is likely, conditional on (non)theism, there is no reason to restrict ourselves to reflection on theology or God's supposed character. We ought also to take into account the (putative) history of God's creation and God's relationship with that creation. But one might worry that this is the wrong way of thinking about background knowledge, or perhaps that it is simply one among many possible ways—and that other ways will not have the result that $\Pr(C/T \& k) \approx 0.2 = \Pr(C/\sim T \& k)$.

I freely admit that confirmation is relative to background knowledge or information—indeed, it is famously so.[18] Borrowing an example from Christensen, there may be *some* sense in which the proposition that there are four trees in Jocko's back yard is evidence for the hypothesis that there are at least five trees in the world.[19] That is—if one had extraordinarily paltry or strange background knowledge about trees, learning this fact about Jocko's yard should increase one's credence in the hypothesis. But this proposition is not evidence for you or me. And that's because what

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[17]Two possible worries about this: you might worry that this rather narrows my argument, for I will be addressing only those evils occurring to people we don't expect to be especially (dis)advantaged, conditional on theism. However, it seems to me that *reasonable* expectations conditional on theism will be extremely limited and vague in any such differential expectations, or at least vague in how they can be applied to particular cases. Famously, "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt 5:45, KJV). Since we are rarely in a position to have expectations for whether particular people/groups would/wouldn't be more likely protected by God, my argument will still address a very broad swath of particular evils. The second worry is related—you might worry that no reasonable theism will license these sorts of differential expectations in the first place, since there are empirical and theological reasons for wariness in predicting those on whom God's favor would fall. I am sympathetic. As I say, I'm leaving it *open* that one could reasonably have such differential expectations—even *if* Meredith did, this needn't spoil my case once we stipulate that Meredith doesn't have ideas about whether Isabel is more/less likely to be protected.

[18]Cf. Elles and Fitelson, "Measuring Confirmation and Evidence."

[19]Christensen, "Measuring Confirmation," 459.

counts as evidence, what confirms/disconfirms our views, depends on what is already background knowledge—what is already known.

So in determining whether some particular evil is evidence against theism, we must make a choice as to what the relevant background knowledge is. Consider Meredith. One *might* think that what matters is whether Meredith should assess C as more likely with or without a God in heaven, *abstracting* from her empirical knowledge of crime statistics and other patterns of evil in the world. That is, we might think what matters is whether an epistemically impoverished Meredith, with paltry or strange background information, would take C as evidence against the existence of God.

Apart from concerns about our imaginative abilities to assess reasonable expectations for such an epistemically impoverished Meredith[20]—this just does not seem a pertinent way of thinking about the evidential impact of C. I am interested in the question whether Meredith *now*—not hypothetical, ur-prior, *tabula rasa* Meredith—should decrease her confidence in God's existence upon learning of C. Given my interest, it is irrelevant to hypothesize about some radically counterfactual Meredith. What matters is whether Meredith, immediately prior to learning of C, should have a lower estimation of C's likelihood, conditional on theism relative to nontheism. And I maintain that she shouldn't, for the reason given in the previous section.

5. Psychological Salience

Something might still seem wrong, however, about the evidential impotence I'm claiming for C. After all, C involves Meredith's *sister*, and the crime statistics are impersonal generalizations. Perhaps learning C could "bring home" to Meredith what was already, in some sense anyway, part of her background knowledge. And perhaps this is how C demands Meredith lower her credence in theism.[21]

I am very sympathetic to the idea that people do and—sometimes, in some sense—are reasonable to respond to events that "bring home" what they already knew, including by adjusting their credences. Compare: nearly everyone knows, in theory, that they will die. But an experience that shoves mortality in one's face may shake up one's views about, e.g., the afterlife or the riskiness of different activities.

Still, the sense in which this is reasonable is a broader and more permissive sense than is easily captured in a formal, Bayesian framework. From a Bayesian perspective, either the crime statistics (or one's mortality) are in one's background knowledge or they aren't. And if, prior to learning C, Meredith failed to pay attention to those crime statistics or suitably adjust her thinking about theism, then her failure was already irrational, regardless

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[20]More on which in section 8.

[21]Thanks to Nick Oschman for raising this objection.

of the occurrence of C. (Though see fn. 12—this may have been highly *under-standable* for Meredith.) On this Bayesian way of thinking, *C* can't demand a revision to Meredith's credences; the revision was already called for.

Now, one might be tempted to respond: so much the worse for formal, Bayesian ways of thinking about evidence! Again, I am sympathetic. One theme of this paper is that Bayesian reasoning about evil can only take us so far. But it's also important not to lose sight of the value and explanatory power of formal theories of rationality. We shouldn't be quick to dismiss formal reasoning as irrelevant. And even if we do ultimately dismiss the Bayesian framework as inadequate for reasoning about evil, my claim that many particular evil events are not evidence against theism in a Bayesian sense is interesting, given the influence Bayesian reasoning has had in recent literature on the problem of evil.

6. Theism and Induction

Thirdly, one might object to my claim that theism does not spoil the relevant induction on the basis of past evils (as represented in the crime statistics). One might worry that, were God to exist, God—as perfectly free and transcendent—would not be bound to act consistently with God's behavior in the past. Hence one might worry that evidence about what God, if God exists, has allowed to happen in the past is *less* of a good guide to what we should expect of the future, given theism. After all, whereas inductive extrapolation on the past may be a perfect guide to the predictions of nontheism, *theism* posits a powerful agent who might conceivably surprise us at any time.

I want to give a less concessive and then a more concessive response; either way, I reject the implication that the relevant induction on the basis of past evils is spoiled.

Less concessive response: although theism does posit a free and transcendent agent who might *conceivably* surprise us by beginning to behave differently, God would never do this according to the theological traditions that exhaust theistic possibility for many of us. God is "unchanging" in some sense: trustworthy, reliable, constant. And whatever complication in prediction may be introduced by God's freedom and transcendence may be offset by this constancy. Certain kinds of induction seem positively encouraged or made possible, conditional on the existence of an unchanging God. Moreover, on many theological traditions, believers are specifically *supposed* to learn what to expect of God by reflection on God's past actions in the world. In the Bible, God repeatedly exhorts God's people to form expectations of God, on the basis of God's past actions and relationship with them.[22] We can think of history as part of the "book of the world," or "general revelation" (as opposed to "special revelation")—as

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[22]E.g., "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt" is a frequent refrain in Abrahamic scripture; it is often paired with promises of further, future provision.

such, it constitutes theologically legitimate evidence for the kinds of evil events that God, if God exists, allows.

More generally, any principle forbidding the use of induction to assess the likelihood of freely performed actions—even the freely performed actions of a transcendent being—would be implausible. Compare: while I accept that my partner is a free agent whose reasons are partly beyond my ken, I have a firm expectation that he will want coffee in the morning. And this expectation of mine is based on his own past, communicated commitments and choices.

I don't deny there are puzzles here,[23] which prompts my more concessive response. Perhaps God's constancy does not *quite* offset the doubt that God's transcendence casts over our predictions of the future. Then there may be some special cause for higher-order humility about theistic induction.[24] Those who are fans of imprecise credences may suggest that this makes it reasonable for Meredith to have an imprecise or ranged credence, centered on 0.2, for $Pr(C/T \& k)$. This is why I use "≈" rather than "=" to formulate my claim. In this sense of requiring greater higher-order humility, the past may perhaps be *less of a good guide* to the future, conditional on theism relative to nontheism.

But, crucially, considerations of transcendence and freedom do not favor any weighting of our expectations of God toward a lower range. That is, 0.25 should look just as appealing as 0.15, if we are moved to imprecise modeling by reflection on God's transcendence. In order to maintain that C really is evidence against theism, an objector would need to claim not only that $Pr(C/T \& k)$ is *different* than $Pr(C/{\sim}T \& k)$, but that $Pr(C/T \& k)$ is *lower.* Transcendence doesn't support this. The claim that *would* support this—namely, that God's loving character may be taken into account in assessing $Pr(C/T \& k)$, *in addition to* God's past actions in the world—is what I am arguing is unmotivated. We learn about—and are in many traditions encouraged to learn about—God's character *through* reflection on God's actions in history. On the versions of theism commonly taken seriously, God is not becoming *more* loving or planning to intervene more obviously lovingly over time in the present age.

While I can see a reason for tentativeness in our estimation of $Pr(C/T \& k)$, I cannot see a reason for thinking that probability lower, based on the supposedly greater admissibility of "pure," ahistorical theological speculation. This is why, despite admitting that $Pr(C/T \& k)$ and $Pr(C/{\sim}T \& k)$ are only roughly equal, I maintain that C is not evidence—not even a little bit of evidence—against T.

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[23]Cf. Marušić, "Belief and Difficult Action," for a fascinating defense of the claim that actions can be free—can be "up to" the agent—even when everyone, including the agent herself, has strong evidence that they will ultimately act in some particular way.

[24]Buchak suggests that a nonstandard updating procedure may be called for in cases where we are more deeply committed to God's existence than to particular expectations of God's actions in the world; see Buchak, "Learning not to be Naïve."

7. Conspiracy Theory

Still, one might suspect me of committing a mistake that is, allegedly, frequently made in defending theism against the problem of evil (as well as the problem of divine hiddenness).[25] Here's one example of this sort of mistake:

> Proponent of Problem: Evil is evidence against God!
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> Skeptical Theist: No! Evil is not evidence against *my* form of theism; *I* subscribe to a version of theism that predicts evil at least as strongly as nontheism does (i.e., skeptical theism).
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> Proponent of Problem: Um, okay—but evil is still evidence against theism *in general.* After all, when we compare the prior probability of some-form-of-theism-or-other to the prior probability of your particular version of theism, the latter is lower. So if you were forced to your particular version of theism *by evil*, then evil ought to have reduced your credence in theism overall.[26]

"Proponent of Problem" certainly gets something right. We can't always avoid disconfirmation of our views simply by adopting ad hoc extensions or modifications of them. Compare: flat-earthers don't avoid disconfirmation of their geographical view by adding conspiracy theories about governmental cover-ups. But have I really relied on reasoning similar to the conspiracy theorist or skeptical theist? One *might* think my argument goes like this:

> Proponent of Problem: C is evidence against God!
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> Me: No! C isn't evidence against the forms of theism *Meredith* considers possible. *Meredith* is only interested in versions of theism on which God frequently allows violent crimes like C to occur—indeed, on which violent crimes like C are no more surprising, conditional on theism vs. nontheism.
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> Proponent of Problem: Um, okay—but C is still evidence against theism *in general.* So if Meredith was forced to her particular version(s) of theism theory *by C*, then C ought to have reduced her credence in theism overall.

My response is that Meredith was not forced to her particular version(s) of theism by C.

I haven't said too much about the forms of theism that Meredith considers possible. All I'm committed to is that, on the forms of theism that are live for Meredith, (a) God has existed in the past, and (b) God's past behavior is an important clue in predicting God's future behavior. This is

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[25]Cf. Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence"; Perrine and Wykstra, "Skeptical Theism, Abductive Atheology, and Theory Versioning"; Draper, "Meet the New Skeptical Theism"; Buchak, "Learning not to be Naïve"; Anderson and Russell, "Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence."

[26]See Anderson and Russell, "Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence," 26–29, and Buchak, "Learning not to be Naïve," for different reasons to think this is not quite right; unfortunately I don't have the space here to echo their concerns, though I do share them.

what secures the expectation, together with background knowledge about what the past has actually been like, that $Pr(C/T \& k) \approx 0.2$. But crucially, Meredith did not get talked into excluding other forms of theism *by* reflecting on C, or indeed any kind of evil; (a) and (b) are just independently motivated features of the going, arguably reasonable versions of theism.

On the fairly plausible assumption that *all* forms of theism it is reasonable to take seriously satisfy (a) and (b), I can dismiss the "proponent's" complaint. Sure, there are *some forms* of theism that Meredith could have (unreasonably) taken seriously that would have been disconfirmed by C—e.g., the theory that God sprang into existence five minutes ago and from here on out intends to protect all people from violent crimes. But all plausible forms of theism, arguably, have to be consistent with God's having existed for the history of the actual world and being, in some sense, consistent with Godself. Of course, one might think there just are no remotely plausible forms of theism. One might even think this *because* of the evils that have already occurred in the world. But those are reasons for Meredith to "come in" to the present situation with low or even zero credence in theism in the first place, not reasons for her credence to further diminish on learning of Isabel's attack.

Notice that the skeptical theist and the flat-earther may not have similar moves available. Skeptical theism *is* typically motivated by reflection on evil. That is, it is evil that causes the skeptical theist to cease to take versions of theism seriously according to which God has reasons which we can understand for allowing what goes on the world.[27] Similarly, the flat-earther is typically motivated to add conspiratorial details *by* encounters with, e.g., photographs taken from space. When evidence disconfirms one version of a theory we had reasonably taken seriously, that evidence is typically evidence against the theory overall.[28] But this is just not what's happening in Meredith's case. C doesn't force Meredith to give up or reduce credence in any previously-reasonable version of theism.

Having addressed some of the most pressing objections to my claim that C is not evidence against theism—and, by extension, that most particular evil events (which are, tragically, historically routine) are not evidence against theism either—I now turn to the pressing matter of how this bears on broader theorizing about the problem of evil.

8. Import for the Problem of Evil

First, to repeat caveats made in the introduction, my claim that particular, "routine" evil events are not (Bayesian) evidence against theism is pretty limited. It is compatible with thinking that the fact that evil *is* routine is evidence against theism; or that the bare fact that there *is* evil is evidence

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[27]See Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, for dissent; see Anderson and Russell, "Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence," for discussion.

[28]Cf. fn. 24, which explains my use of "typically."

against theism. And indeed, some evil events are not "routine." Even those with knowledge of history could be surprised at new depths of human depravity and suffering, and distinctively surprised, conditional on theism vs. nontheism.

But being explicit about these limitations raises the worry that my conclusion is not very interesting. Maybe no one seriously thinks that C *should* be evidence against theism for Meredith, in the sense of prompting her to revise her credence in theism downward; this is not the way proponents of the problem of evil press that problem.

In this section, I will respond by arguing, first, that some *do* press the problem of evil by pointing to particular, tragically common evils like C. Or at least their arguments are tacitly committed to the idea that such evils "add up" to make trouble for theism.

Second, in the latter part of this section (8.2) I will consider versions of the problem of evil that do not rely in this way on particular, routine evil events being evidence against God, and I will suggest that my argument still has an indirect bearing on one of them.

8.1. Particular Evil Events as Evidence in the Literature

Rowe's famous fawn, who is horribly burned in a forest fire and "lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering," features in multiple, highly influential versions of the problem of evil that Rowe developed in different papers.[29] While some of these versions do not rely on particular, routine evil events being evidence against God, other versions do—or at least *seem* to do so. And whether Rowe himself would construe his arguments in exactly this way, it is interesting and important to note that some versions of his arguments—which, again, have been hugely influential in the philosophical literature about the problem of evil—appear to rely on the claim I've targeted.

Take "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," and specifically consider Rowe's argument that P—the apparent gratuitousness of the fawn's suffering[30]—makes theism less likely than it would be otherwise.[31] Rowe claims that our inability to see justification for the fawn's suffering directly constitutes evidence against the existence of God. In other words, the apparent gratuitousness of the fawn's suffering—the "particular evil" of this instance of apparent gratuitousness, if you will[32]—should be distinctively surprising, conditional on theism as compared with nontheism.

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[29]Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism," 337.

[30]Rowe actually pairs this with one additional case of human suffering, "E2," as mentioned in the quote below. For more on how exactly to understand P, see fn. 33.

[31]Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look." Cf. pp. 266–70.

[32]It is, admittedly, slightly odd to talk about particular instances of apparent gratuitousness as themselves particular evil events. It might be clearer to consider the evidential impact of evil events simpliciter. (Cf. Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence.") But *Rowe* focused here on the apparently gratuitous aspect of particular evil events, and it seems

Now Rowe himself puts the claim slightly differently, but I believe this to be a faithful summary of his conclusion.[33] I choose this example not at all because it's one of consistently, flagrantly ignoring the relevance of previous, other evils in the background knowledge. Far from it—Rowe explicitly (if rather briefly) acknowledges the importance of *including* past evils in the background knowledge k.[34] He writes:

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fair to cast him as focused on (this aspect of) particular occurrences of evil rather than (this aspect of) evil in general or categories or broad categories of evils.

[33]In Rowe's formulation, P = "No good we know of justifies God in permitting El and E2" (where E1 is the fawn case and E2 is a violent child abuse case). And G, for Rowe, is the existence of God. Rowe ("The Evidential Argument from Evil, 266") explicitly takes up the question: "Does P make G less likely than it would otherwise be? That is, is Pr(G/P&k) > (sic) Pr(G/k)?"

This particular way of setting things up, however, is somewhat irresponsible. In answering in the affirmative, Rowe relies crucially on the following claims: P is *bound* to be true, with probability 1, if theism is false; and yet P is *not* bound to be true if theism is true—it should have a probability of less than 1.

But notice Rowe's formulation of P, "no good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2," amounts to a negated conjunction, as he makes clear: "To see this, consider the *negation* of P. The negation of P asserts that God exists and that some good known to us justifies him in permitting El and E2" (pp. 264–65). So, for Rowe, P = ~(G & JR), where G = God exists, and JR = some good we know of justifies E1 and E2, or alternatively—we can see a justifying reason for E1 and E2.

The problem is that ~(G & JR) is just not what we learn when we observe E1 and E2. What we learn is, simply, ~JR—that there's no good we know of that justifies E1 or E2. And while it's true that ~JR is sufficient for the truth of the conjunction ~(G & JR), it would be irresponsible to characterize the evidence in this way. To see why, let C = Oatmilk contains calcium. When one observes E1 and E2, one learns ~JR, and from ~JR one can deduce ~(C & JR). But it would be grossly misleading to characterize the evidence one gets as ~(C & JR). After all, this would count as evidence against oatmilk's having calcium. (On the theory that oatmilk does *not* contain calcium, Pr(~(C & JR)) is 1, whereas on the theory that oatmilk *does* contain calcium Pr(~(C & JR)) is presumably less than 1.)

What's going on here is that in restricting our attention to the evidential impact of learning ~(G & JR), Rowe ignores part of the impact of learning the stronger proposition, ~JR. When we observe the fawn's suffering and our own inability to see a justifying reason for it, we learn not only ~(G & JR) but *also* ~(~G & JR). That is, we learn that we are not in a *nontheistic* world in which some possibly justifying reason for the fawn's suffering is apparent. And this latter proposition in isolation would be (some) evidence against nontheism.

In the main text, I proceed as though Rowe had more responsibly asked, "is Pr(G/~JR & k) < Pr(G/k)?" For his comments about reasonable values for Pr(P/G & k) being rather low (around 0.5, he conjectures on p. 268) suggest that he would *still* have answered in the affirmative, had he set things up this way. This is where the point I make in the main text is relevant: I don't think reasonable values for Pr(~JR/G & k) *are* low, given what ought (even by Rowe's own lights) to be included in k.

Suppose that no good we know of would justify God (if God existed) in permitting E_1, . . . E_n, where these list prior evil events. Then the probability that we would similarly see no justifying reason for E1 and E2 conditional on theism will be *extremely high*, and indeed *just* as high as the probability that we would see no justifying reason for permitting E1 and E2, conditional on nontheism.

[34]Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil."

What will k include? . . . [W]e will want to include in k our common knowl-
edge of the occurrence of various evils in our world, including E1 (Rowe's
fawn case) and E2 (Rowe's graphic moral evil case), as well as our knowl-
edge 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.[35]

So Rowe clearly *acknowledges* that historical patterns of evil should be part
of the background knowledge, in thinking about reasonable expectations,
conditional on theism vs. nontheism. And yet it seems to me he fails to ap-
preciate the implications for reasonable expectations and for his argument.

If background knowledge really includes the fawn's suffering, as well
as the long parade of similar evils for which we lack specific knowledge
of God's justification, why should theism give us any distinctive reason
to expect we should see a justification for evil in this particular case of
the fawn? Given this background knowledge, if God (really) exists, God
clearly must have reasons for not allowing us to see the point of *many*
similar evils in the world. Shouldn't this background knowledge instead
make us virtually certain, conditional on theism, that we will not see
God's specific justification for the fawn's suffering? Indeed, won't theism
predict the apparent gratuitousness of the fawn's suffering just as well as
nontheism does?

To reiterate, Rowe gave multiple different versions of the problem of
evil, and there are different views as to the appropriate way to understand
them.[36] But my general claim is that people do sometimes point to specific
instances of tragically routine evil as though they should be especially
surprising on theism, and Rowe seems to me an important example.[37]

Other examples include those that rely more tacitly on the distinctive
surprisingness of particular evil events, conditional on theism. Consider
the common framing of the problem of evil, that the "total amount and
kinds of evils we find in the world" should be distinctively surprising,
conditional on theism. This may not sound like an appeal to individual
instances. But there are importantly different ways of arguing that the
totality of evil is evidence against theism, and some such ways rely on
the problem's being *cumulative.* That is, some evidential arguments from
total evil rely on the idea that the difficulties for theism *add up* with each
instance of (unexplained, or apparently pointless) evil. Isolated instances
of suffering that were difficult to square with the existence of God would

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[35]Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," 265.
[36]Oliveira ("Sceptical Theism and the Paradox of Evil"), e.g., denies that Rowe's seminal
argument (from "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism") should be seen as
relying on inductive justification appealing to the distinctive surprisingness of particular evil
events, but see, e.g., Russell, "Defenseless," and Wielenberg, "The Parent-Child Analogy,"
for dissenting views.
[37]Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil."

be far less troubling than the relentless parade we actually encounter—so the thought goes.[38]

Rowe's original argument seems to have relied on this thought.[39] He writes:

> [E]ven if it should somehow be reasonable to believe [that the permission of the fawn's suffering is necessary for some greater good or to prevent a greater evil], we must then ask whether it is reasonable to believe either of these things of *all* the instances of seemingly pointless human and animal suffering that occur daily in our world. And surely the answer to this more general question must be no.[40]

Now one could, in theory, argue that the totality of evil events is evidence against God *without* relying on the idea that particular evil events are likewise evidence—I'll illustrate in the next section how this might be possible, in the abstract. However, as Oliveira also notes,[41] the problematic nature of total evil is often thought to be "inductively" justified, in a cumulative way:[42]

> According to the inductive justification, then, even though [the evidential argument from evil appeals only to] the cumulative evidential support of many instances of apparently pointless suffering, [the argument] nonetheless depends on the fact that each particular instance carries some evidential weight of its own.[43]

Oliveira takes these cumulative forms of the problem of evil to be highly influential and worth critiquing; they are a natural way of characterizing much of the Rowe-inspired discussion of the evidential problem of evil over the last fifty years. And cumulative characterizations of the argument extend beyond Rowe. We seem to see a form of cumulative justification, for example, in Dougherty and Pruss.[44] Dougherty and Pruss deny that *each* particular instance of evil carries (significant) evidential weight; they suggest we consider individual cases of apparently unjustified evil as only potentially counting against theism, much as anomalies in the natural world only potentially count against scientific theories.[45] But the basic structure they suggest for thinking about the evidential problem of evil is

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[38]I note briefly in "On the Problem of Paradise" that this way of thinking about the problem of evil has some counterintuitive consequences.

[39]Rowe, "The Problem of Evil." To reiterate, Rowe made multiple arguments, and there are multiple ways of understanding them. I intend only the weak claim in the text: Rowe's original argument (from "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism") *seems* to have relied on this thought.

[40]Rowe, "The Problem of Evil," 337, emphasis in original.

[41]Oliveira, "Sceptical Theism and the Paradox of Evil," 321–22.

[42]See fn. 36, concerning Oliveira ("Sceptical Theism and the Paradox of Evil") on Rowe ("The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism") in particular.

[43]Oliveira, "Sceptical Theism," 321.

[44]Dougherty and Pruss, "Evil and the Problem of Anomaly."

[45]Dougherty and Pruss, "Evil and the Problem of Anomaly," 67–68.

to consider individual instances of suffering we see—the "anomalies" for the theory of theism—and to ask whether these add up to a real problem for the theory that God exists, on the model of the natural sciences.

The cumulative approach to thinking about the problem of total evil is also, it seems to me, in the background of some philosophers' reasoning even where this is not explicit in print. Shouldn't particular evil events too—shouldn't *C*—be just a *bit* of evidence against theism? A bit that could accumulate together with other bits? My argument questions precisely this reasoning. I've argued that individual instances of routine evil *shouldn't* "add up" for us—not once we know the relevant basic, evil facts of history and only consider forms of theism consistent with that history. If particular, routine evil events are not evidence against the existence of God, then appeals to the *amount* of accumulated evil in the world are misguided.

So far, I've argued that some philosophers do point to particular, routine evil events as evidence against the existence of God,[46] and others seem to rely on a cumulative justification for the problem of total evil. Finally, note that my argument against particular evil events being evidence against theism is actually sufficient to establish a slightly broader claim. Whenever we are considering the evidential impact of a sufficiently "local" or narrow type of evil,[47] a great deal of empirical knowledge of other types of evil will be intact in the background. That is, a great deal of knowledge about what God, if God exists, allows. And this, my argument suggests, should lead us to estimate not only the probability of particular evil events, but also the probability of some *types* of evil events, conditional on theism, as roughly equal to their probability conditional on atheism.

To take just one example, consider Crummett's argument that the suffering of "creeping things"—insects and arthropods—provides evidence against theism.[48] To assess whether this is so within a Bayesian framework, we should try to abstract from our knowledge of the suffering of creeping things and consider how likely that suffering is, conditional on theism vs. nontheism together with remaining background knowledge. Given that background knowledge about *human* and *higher animal* suffering, as well as general knowledge of biology, is left intact in this process, it seems to me the suffering of creeping things is no more surprising conditional on theism vs. nontheism. For nature's being "red in tooth and claw"[49] will be part of the common background; if God exists, God allows a staggering amount of suffering simply in the maintenance of biological systems.

Sufficiently local versions of the problem of evil, then (or versions that rely on the accumulation of local problems)—versions appealing to the suffering of a single fawn, or the suffering of a specific kind of animal, or

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[46]Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil."
[47]See van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, on global vs. local versions of the problem of evil.
[48]Crummett, "The Problem of Evil and the Suffering of Creeping Things."
[49]Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H."

the accumulation of specific instances of suffering—founder when we allow empirical background evidence and induction to inform our expectations of what God, if God exists, allows. And these versions of the problem of evil have indeed been important and influential in the literature.

8.2. Other Versions of the Problem of Evil

That said, there are certainly other ways one could argue that (some fact about) evil is evidence against God. I have already noted that one could argue that the totality of evil is evidence against God without relying on the idea that each individual instance of evil counts against theism—or indeed, that *any* individual instance does. Oliveira proffers a non-cumulative, "collective" case for the problematic nature of total evil.[50] But to illustrate here, I will borrow a highly abstract example from Michael Titelbaum, to show the general possibility of a conjunction of facts that are evidence against a hypothesis, despite none of the conjuncts being evidence:

> Consider the twenty-four shapes in Figure 9.1. Each is either large or small, black or white, a circle or a square. Suppose I tell you that I have selected one of them at random, with each shape having an equal chance of being selected. I then provide you with the following facts:
>
> My shape is large.
>
> My shape is a square.
>
> My shape is white.
>
> I ask you to consider whether my shape is to the left or the right of the dividing line. . . . Given the background information about how I selected my shape, each shape should clearly start with a probability of 1/24. Since there are twelve shapes to the left of the line, the left conclusion has a default confidence of 1/2. Now take any of the three facts above and add it to your evidence. Your confidence in left should remain at 1/2. (For example, twelve of the shapes are squares, and six squares lie left of the line.) None of
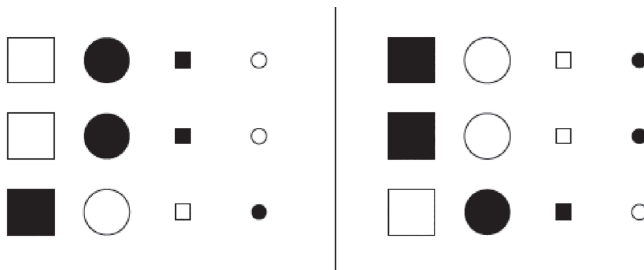

Figure 9.1

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the three facts increases the probability of left above its initial value. So on a probability-raising theory of reasons, none of those facts is a reason for the conclusion. In fact, to make matters worse, no conjunction of two of the facts raises the probability of left above 1/2; put another way, assuming one of the facts doesn't make another of them a probability-raiser. (For example, the number of large squares is the same on each side of the line.) The probability that my shape is left of the line goes up to 2/3 only once all three facts are incorporated.[51]

Point taken. My argument establishes that many particular evils are not evidence against theism, and this bears on many actual arguments according to which the totality of evil's strength as evidence against God grows with each bit of evil. But my argument would not touch an argument that drew on the totality of evil *merely* holistically.

Neither would my argument challenge appeals to *non-routine* evil events. This is because, while history gives us a wealth of background knowledge relevant to what God, if God exists, would likely allow, it does not exhaust our background knowledge; we also have theology or "special revelation." Nor can history give us grounds for firm expectations of genuinely historically novel events. For example, we may have strong revelatory reasons to believe that if God exists there will never be a universally destructive global flood in the future. Even though such a flood is also unlikely conditional on nontheism, it may be totally unthinkable on the versions of theism we (reasonably) take seriously. Hence, if a new, universally destructive global flood occurred, this would be strong evidence against theism.

Let me be clear that I welcome this possibility; we *should*, it seems to me, be dubious of any response to the problem of evil that would prevent absolutely any instance of evil from counting against God's existence. It is an empirical and theological question whether any actual, observed evils should be distinctively surprising, according to the theological traditions we take seriously.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my argument has no direct bearing on how we should think about the evidential impact of evil in general—the sheer existence of (routine) evil, or the "first," expectation-setting instances of evil we encounter. I have argued that C is not evidence against theism because, essentially, "routine evil" ought already to be part of the background evidence. Compatibly, it may be that routine evil itself is evidence against theism.

However, *skepticism* about whether the sheer existence of evil or "first" evils are evidence against theism is also compatible with my argument and, indeed, somewhat consonant with it. Although this is officially a concession—my argument doesn't bear directly on this version of the problem of evil—I will briefly discuss how my argument might indirectly suggest a response to such versions.

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[51]Titelbaum, "Reason without Reasons For," 204–5.

One theme of this paper is that the Bayesian apparatus is useful insofar as we can evaluate relative reasonable expectations. Evaluating reasonable expectations for agents with roughly normal background knowledge can be tricky enough; as I've been at pains to argue, it's common to make mistakes here. But if we are to use the Bayesian apparatus to evaluate reasonable expectations for evil in general or "first" evils, we must abstract away from huge swaths of background knowledge, and this muddies the waters of the imaginative project of assessing reasonable expectations.

Recall that evil, in this literature, includes "physical or mental suffering of any sort."[52] It includes menstrual pain, anger in personal relationships, and arguably all death. To know nothing of evil, Meredith, e.g., would need to have very little empirical knowledge at all. She could know nothing of history, almost nothing of biology, nothing of personal experience with relationships, and hardly anything of theology. For what people have theorized about God or putatively received from God is shot through with explanations (and possibly instances!) of the infliction of pain and suffering. Even God's supposed goodness may be best appreciated via relief from suffering. By the time we abstract from all evil-entailing knowledge, Meredith will be basically back at an ur-prior.

What expectations are reasonable for radically epistemically impoverished Meredith, for there-being-evil, or for all-the-evil-we-find-in-the-world, conditional on theism vs. nontheism?

I won't try to argue that the *only* good answer to this question is a shrug. But a shrug is one plausible answer. Recall that the mixture of evils and goods in the world is messy; many are inextricably enmeshed. The first betrayal may have a tragic beauty, or be part of the first love story, or the first redemption story. Radically impoverished Meredith would have a lot to process on encountering evil for the first time. Moreover, with hardly any theology available to impoverished Meredith, it's very unclear what she should expect of God. After all, the going versions of theism—the versions some of us find plausible—predict a great deal of evil (e.g., Christianity and the crucifixion). But Meredith is in no position to think about what God would/could do according to real theological traditions; she has abstracted too far even to understand those.[53]

In sum, my argument is consistent with—though it certainly does not imply—a limited skepticism about the evidential impact of global or first evils. Notice that such limited skepticism is not full-blown "skeptical

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[52]Draper, "Pain and Pleasure," 332–33.

[53]An important objection to this sort of skeptical view, which a proper defense would need to address: perhaps young children approximate something like the ur-prior I'm ascribing to "radically epistemically impoverished" Meredith. And perhaps there are cases in which young children unfortunately learn rather quickly about (something approximating) the "total amount and kinds of evil in the world," and perhaps in these cases it seems natural for them to lower confidence in theism. Addressing this possibility properly would take us too far afield, but I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this as an important worry for the skepticism I sketch.

theism." I have suggested no limits on our abilities to make inferences from how things seem to how they are; I've made no claims about the (non)representativeness of the goods and evils we know about. Moreover, humility about our abilities to imagine reasonable expectations for radically impoverished agents does not require similar humility about our abilities to assess reasonable expectations for actual, normal agents *with* a lot of background knowledge; it does not invite the skeptical theist's bugbear, the too-much-skepticism objection.

9. Conclusion

Take some fact about evil. If the fact is sufficiently local and (tragically) ordinary, then any plausible version of theism will predict it just as well as nontheism does. For any plausible version of theism must be consistent with the relentless empirical evidence of tragic, ordinary suffering. Now, this may seem a highly depressing defense of theism. But it's true: if God really exists, God allows many and various instances of terrible suffering.

This argument may seem too neat; one may suspect some sleight of hand. Isn't it just obvious that evil events challenge God's existence?

I have argued that many particular evils do not constitute (Bayesian) *evidence* against God's existence. But there are other ways in which one might think even particular evils "challenge" theism. For example, I have not at all engaged with the big, pressing question of *why* God, if God exists, might possibly allow violent crimes, famine, genocide, torture, etc., to occur in God's creation. In fact, I am convinced that is the more interesting question, though it intersects with formal epistemology in a different way. Questions of theodicy should, it seems to me, affect the intrinsic plausibility of various specific versions of theism. In formal epistemology, affecting intrinsic plausibility would not get cashed out as "evidence"; rather, questions of theodicy should arguably affect absolute credences in particular versions of theism; they should inform our priors. And while I've argued particular evils don't constitute evidence against theism, it's a *very* interesting question whether particular versions of theism can offer plausible-enough theodicies to be live options in the first place.[54]

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