

## DOES THE THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER THE ATHEIST? PLANTINGA AND DESCARTES ON THEISM, ATHEISM, AND SKEPTICISM

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**ABSTRACT:** Recent iterations of Alvin Plantinga’s “evolutionary argument against naturalism” bear a surprising resemblance to a famous argument in Descartes’s Third Meditation. Both arguments conclude that theists have an epistemic advantage over atheists/naturalists vis-à-vis the question whether or not our cognitive faculties are reliable. In this paper, I show how these arguments bear an even deeper resemblance to each other. After bringing the problem of evil to bear negatively on Descartes’s argument, I argue that, given these similarities, atheists can wield a recent solution to the problem of evil against theism in much the way Plantinga wields the details of evolutionary theory against naturalism. I conclude that Plantinga and Descartes give us insufficient reason for thinking theists are in a better epistemic position than atheists and naturalists vis-à-vis the question whether or not our cognitive faculties are reliable.

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famous argument in Descartes’s *Meditations* concludes that theists have an epistemic advantage over atheists. God’s existence insures the reliability of human cognitive faculties, argues Descartes, so knowledge of God’s existence blocks doubts raised by the possibility that one is being deceived by an evil demon.<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga has recently forwarded an argument that bears a surprising resemblance to Descartes’s argument.<sup>2</sup> According to Plantinga, naturalism (which entails atheism) results in skepticism. When conjoined with evolutionary theory, naturalism gives its proponent an undercutting defeater for the belief that her cognitive faculties are reliable. This, in turn, gives her an undercutting defeater for everything

she believes, including naturalism. Plantinga and Descartes both ground their arguments in the idea that ignorance of one's origins (and, hence, ignorance of the origins of one's cognitive faculties) gives one an undercutting defeater for the belief that one's cognitive faculties are reliable. Both authors also argue that theists are significantly less ignorant of their origins than naturalists/atheists and, thus, that theists are less vulnerable to skeptical hypotheses than naturalists/atheists. In this paper, I outline the arguments Plantinga and Descartes level against naturalism and atheism, respectively. After bringing the problem of evil to bear negatively on Descartes's conclusion that the reliability of his cognitive faculties follows from God's existence, I raise the possibility of a *tu quoque* response to Plantinga's argument wherein naturalists wield a recent response to the problem of evil against theism in roughly the way Plantinga wields the details of evolutionary theory against naturalism. I conclude that Descartes's argument fails and that Plantinga's argument succeeds only at the cost of opening the door to an argument against the rationality of theism that seems just as strong as Plantinga's argument against the rationality of naturalism. If I am correct, it follows that Plantinga and Descartes have given us insufficient reason for thinking that theists have an epistemic advantage over naturalists and atheists—at least vis-à-vis skepticism and the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable.

## I. PLANTINGA AND DESCARTES ON THE EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGES OF THEISM

### A. PLANTINGA'S EVOLUTIONARY ARGUMENT AGAINST NATURALISM

Plantinga starts his evolutionary argument against naturalism (hereafter "EAAN") by reminding us that, according to the claims of contemporary evolutionary theory, human cognitive faculties have arisen by way of natural selection and random genetic mutation. The claims of contemporary evolutionary theory are relevant to the question whether or not our cognitive faculties are reliable, notes Plantinga, because natural selection selects for *adaptive behavior*, not *true belief*.<sup>3</sup> Plantinga approvingly quotes Patricia Churchland on the subject:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing. The principle chore of the nervous system is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive . . . Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances of survival* [Churchland's emphasis]. Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes a hindmost.<sup>4</sup>

Where 'R' is the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable, 'N' is the proposition that naturalism is true, and 'E' is the proposition that we have evolved

according to the claims of contemporary evolutionary theory, Plantinga interprets Churchland as arguing that the probability of R on N&E is low—that  $P(R/N\&E)$  is low.<sup>5</sup> Is Churchland right about  $P(R/N\&E)$ ? Sort of, thinks Plantinga.

The probability of R on N&E turns on the relationship between belief and behavior, and there are four possibilities here: (i) beliefs are causally inefficacious with respect to behavior; (ii) beliefs have causal efficacy with respect to behavior, but not in virtue of their *content*; (iii) beliefs have causal efficacy with respect to behavior in virtue of their content, but this content gives rise to maladaptive behavior, and (iv) beliefs have causal efficacy with respect to behavior in virtue of their content, and this content gives rise to *adaptive* behavior.<sup>6</sup>  $P(R/N\&E)$  comes out high only if the connection between belief and behavior is such that, in selecting for adaptive behavior, natural selection weeds out false belief. But on none of the possible connections between belief and behavior is that result probable, thinks Plantinga. For starters, possibility (iii) is almost certainly false. If our beliefs had given rise to maladaptive behavior, we wouldn't be here to talk about it, so (iii)'s contribution to  $P(R/N\&E)$  can be safely ignored.<sup>7</sup> Possibilities (i) and (ii) both deny that the *content* of our beliefs determines our behavior. But beliefs are *true* (or not) in virtue of their content. So, on both (i) and (ii), massively false belief might subtend adaptive behavior. This means  $P(R/N\&E)$  comes out high for neither of them.<sup>8</sup> Possibility (iv) is the only option left, but the naturalist runs into trouble here as well. First, where 'C' is the proposition that describes scenario (iv)—namely, the commonsense proposition that our beliefs have causal efficacy with respect to our behavior in virtue of their content—it is extremely difficult to see how C could be true, given N&E. This, however, means that  $P(C/N\&E)$  should be given a very low estimate and, conversely, that  $P(\sim C/N\&E)$  should be given a very high estimate.<sup>9</sup> But  $P(R/N\&E)$  will be the weighted average of the probabilities of R on  $N\&E\&C$  and  $N\&E\&\sim C$ —weighted on the probabilities of C and  $\sim C$  on N&E.<sup>10</sup> Since  $P(\sim C/N\&E)$  is high and  $P(R/N\&E\&\sim C)$  is low,  $P(R/N\&E)$  comes out lower than .5 even on the assumption that  $P(R/N\&E\&C)$  is *high*.<sup>11</sup>

But things are even worse than this for the naturalist, thinks Plantinga. The problem is, false belief often leads to *adaptive* behavior, and this is possibly true even of false belief *systems*. Suppose a primitive tribe believes everything is a witch and holds only beliefs of the form, “this witch is good to eat,” “that witch will eat me if I give it a chance,” and so on.<sup>12</sup> Members of this tribe would hold few true beliefs, yet their behavior could be perfectly adaptive. So, even on the assumption that the *content* of our beliefs leads to adaptive behavior, massively false belief might subtend adaptive behavior.  $P(R/N\&E)$  doesn't come out high even in scenario (iv), then.<sup>13</sup> But since either (i), (ii) or (iv) is the case, and since  $P(R/N\&E)$  comes out high in *none of them*, it follows that  $P(R/N\&E)$  *isn't* high.

We said Plantinga *sort of* agrees with Churchland's claim that  $P(R/N\&E)$  is low. This is because Plantinga concedes the objection that “the [above] argument for the low estimate of  $P(R/N\&E)$  is by no means irresistible” and that “the right course here is simple agnosticism,” since “one just doesn't know what  $P(R/N\&E)$

is.”<sup>14</sup> So Plantinga forwards a subtly weaker claim than the claim he attributes to Churchland. On Plantinga’s final analysis,  $P(R/N\&E)$  might not be *low*, but it’s at least *inscrutable*.<sup>15</sup> And this, thinks Plantinga, is a serious problem for naturalists. If  $P(R/N\&E)$  is inscrutable, he argues, the naturalist has an undercutting defeater for  $R$ . And since all of her beliefs come to her via her cognitive faculties, the naturalist has an undercutting defeater for everything she believes. Moreover, says Plantinga, because the naturalist can’t produce an argument for the reliability of her cognitive faculties without (tacitly or explicitly) assuming the very thing in question—namely, that her cognitive faculties are reliable—this defeater is undefeatable.<sup>16</sup> The naturalist therefore has an undefeatable defeater for naturalism itself. Thus, concludes Plantinga, naturalism “cannot be rationally accepted—at any rate, by someone who is apprised of [EAAN or a similar argument] and sees the connections between  $N\&E$  and  $R$ .”<sup>17</sup>

We might think criticisms can be leveled at this argument from multiple angles.<sup>18</sup> The purposes of this paper will be best served, however, by checking these criticisms and, instead, noting the overall structure of Plantinga’s argument. Plantinga builds his argument against the rationality of naturalism on the foundation that  $P(R/N\&E)$  is merely *inscrutable*. As we shall see, the success of Plantinga’s argument opens the door to an interesting argument against the rationality of *theism*.

## B. DESCARTES’S ARGUMENT FOR THE EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGES OF THEISM

The infamous Cartesian Circle arises for Descartes in an oft-cited comment at the end of the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation.<sup>19</sup> After positing the existence of a “malicious demon of utmost power and cunning,”<sup>20</sup> Descartes sets out to “find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakable.”<sup>21</sup> Descartes arrives at the *cogito* and, reflecting on it, concludes that he has arrived at a criterion of truth—clear and distinct perceptions.<sup>22</sup> But only a paragraph later, he apparently contradicts himself as follows:

[W]henever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye [e.g., that  $2+3=5$ ] . . . [I]n order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises, I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be certain about anything else.<sup>23</sup>

Does Descartes think that knowledge of some proposition  $p$  requires certainty that  $p$ , and that certainty that  $p$  requires not just clear and distinct perception that  $p$ , but certainty that clear and distinct perceptions are always true? If not, then why does Descartes raise the possibility of an evil demon misleading us even with respect to clear and distinct perceptions? On the other hand, if Descartes *does* think that knowledge of  $p$  requires certainty that clear and distinct perceptions are always

true, then the concluding comment in the quotation above seems to commit him to both of the following propositions:

- (1) I can know (be certain) that (CD) *whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true* only if I first know (am certain) that (G) *God exists and is not a deceiver*.
- (2) I can know (be certain) that (G) *God exists and is not a deceiver* only if I first know (am certain) that (CD) *whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true*.<sup>24</sup>

But if (1) and (2) are both true, neither (CD) nor (G) could ever be known, and Descartes's project fails miserably. Yet Descartes claims knowledge of (CD) and (G). How, then, is Descartes's argument supposed to work?

James Van Cleve has forwarded an interpretation of Descartes that vindicates him from the charge of circular reasoning.<sup>25</sup> According to Van Cleve, distinguishing between the following is the key to understanding Descartes's argument:

- (A) For all  $p$ , if I clearly and distinctly perceive that  $p$ , then I am certain that  $p$ .
- (B) I am certain that, "for all  $p$ , if I clearly and distinctly perceive that  $p$ , then  $p$ ."

(A) is a universal generalization. It says that, given any particular proposition, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that proposition, then I am certain of *that proposition*. (B) is *not* a universal generalization, though it contains one. It says that I am certain of *a general rule* according to which every clear and distinct perception is *true*. According to Van Cleve, at the controversial point at the end of the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation, (A) is true of Descartes, but (B) is not.<sup>26</sup> This is important because, if (B) is not yet true of Descartes, then it makes little sense for Descartes to affirm (2)—here, or at any point in the Meditations. On Van Cleve's view, Descartes starts by arguing for (A) and (1).<sup>27</sup> After using clear and distinct perceptions as premises in an argument for the existence and veracity of God, Descartes concludes that God exists and is not a deceiver. This puts Descartes in a position to believe (CD), that clear and distinct perceptions are reliable. *At this point*, (B) becomes true of Descartes.<sup>28</sup> But if (B) is not required to be true of Descartes *before* this point, then we need not attribute (2) to Descartes, and the circle is broken. So Van Cleve vindicates Descartes by interpreting him as espousing (B) only *after* he argued for (A) and (1).

This, however, only frees us up to ask about the role of God's existence in Descartes's argument. Crucial to understanding Descartes is making sense of the advantage he claims theists have over atheists, even with respect to, e.g., clear and distinct perceptions of mathematical truths:

The fact that an atheist can be "clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of

awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge. Now, since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So, he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists.<sup>29</sup>

Again, Van Cleve offers an interpretation. According to Van Cleve, Descartes would agree that both the theist and the atheist could affirm (A). But after the theist has clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and is not a deceiver, the theist can affirm (B) as well. And once this is the case, it will not be possible to render the theist's clear and distinct perceptions doubtful. But the atheist will be in a different boat. He might have knowledge that the angles of a triangle equal two right angles when he is clearly and distinctly perceiving them, but he will lose this knowledge every time he considers the possibility that he is a victim of an evil demon that is deceiving him about even the most obvious things. The theist and the atheist have the same knowledge of  $p$  when they clearly and distinctly perceive that  $p$ ; it is just that the theist's knowledge of  $p$  can't be defeated by skeptical hypotheses as the atheist's can. According to Van Cleve's Descartes, then, the atheist and theist both have knowledge—it's just that the theist's knowledge is more stable, since it is protected from skeptical hypotheses. *This* is the epistemic advantage Descartes claims theists have over atheists.

### C. PLANTINGA'S EAAN AND HUMEAN RATIONALITY DEFEAT

At the conclusion of section I.C, we noted Plantinga's view that naturalism leads to skepticism. Responding to critics of the EAAN, Plantinga has backed off of this claim by adding an important nuance to his notion of defeat. In doing so, he has moved to a position that bears obvious similarities to Van Cleve's Descartes, as outlined above.

In the final chapter of *Naturalism Defeated?* Plantinga refers to a passage in *Warranted Christian Belief* that draws a distinction between "ordinary rationality defeat" and "purely epistemic defeat."<sup>30</sup> Ordinary rationality defeat goes as follows:

(ORD)  $D$  is [an ordinary rationality] defeater of  $B$  for  $S$  at  $t$  iff  $S$  comes to believe  $D$  at  $t$  and  $S$ 's noetic structure  $N$  at  $t$  includes  $B$  and is such that any human being (i) whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly in the relevant respects, (ii) whose noetic structure is  $N$  and (iii) who comes to believe  $D$  but nothing else independent of or stronger than  $D$  would withhold  $B$  (or believe it less strongly).<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to ordinary rationality defeat, we have purely epistemic defeat:

(PED)  $D$  is a purely epistemic defeater of  $B$  for  $S$  at  $t$  if and only if (i)  $S$ 's noetic structure  $N$  at  $t$  includes  $B$  and  $S$  comes to believe  $D$  at  $t$ , and (ii)

## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 311

any person  $S^*$  (a) whose cognitive faculties are functioning properly in the relevant respects, (b) who is such that the bit of the design plan governing the sustaining of  $B$  in her noetic structure is successfully aimed at truth (i.e., at the maximization of true belief and minimization of false belief) and nothing more, (c) whose noetic structure is  $N$  and includes  $B$ , and (d) who comes to believe  $D$  but nothing else independent of or stronger than  $D$ , would withhold  $B$  (or believe it less strongly).<sup>32</sup>

Purely epistemic defeat is important to the EAAN because, as critics of the argument have pointed out, properly functioning cognitive faculties would not (in any ordinary circumstances, or for any extended period of time) prevent anyone from believing or assuming  $R$ , and this suggests that  $R$  is ultimately undefeatable.<sup>33</sup> In response to the EAAN, the naturalist ( $N$ ) could claim that her belief in  $R$  is the product of properly functioning cognitive faculties, and she would be right. But since the EAAN argues that  $N$  has a defeater for all of her beliefs in virtue of the defeater she has for  $R$ , if  $R$  is ultimately undefeatable, the EAAN fails.

Plantinga responds to this objection by conceding that properly functioning cognitive faculties *would not*—in ordinary circumstances, at least—prevent anyone from believing or assuming  $R$ . He notes, however, that this is only because believing  $R$  is necessary for us to “carry on our cognitive life.”<sup>34</sup> While  $R$  *would* be sustained in  $N$  by properly functioning cognitive faculties, it would *not* be sustained in her by cognitive faculties that were “successfully aimed at truth and nothing more.”<sup>35</sup> So, naturalism does not provide  $N$  an *ordinary rationality* defeater for  $R$ . Nevertheless, naturalism *does* provide  $N$  a purely epistemic defeater for  $R$ .

Moreover, having a purely epistemic defeater for a belief gives one a “certain sort of ordinary proper-function rationality defeater” for that belief.<sup>36</sup> Once  $N$  comes to see that naturalism gives her a purely epistemic defeater for  $R$ , says Plantinga, she also comes to see that her belief in  $R$  is not the product of truth-aimed cognitive faculties. And as long as she is reflecting on the fact that her belief in  $R$  is not the product of truth-aimed faculties, the rational response is to withhold belief in  $R$ .  $N$  will be in the following situation, says Plantinga:

[S]he won't be able to help believing or at least assuming  $R$ ; but (if she reflects on the matter) she will also think, sadly enough, that what she can't help believing is unlikely to be true. She will have a purely alethic [that is, purely *epistemic*] defeater for  $R$ , but at those reflective moments when she thinks about her cognitive situation she will also have a proper-function rationality defeater for  $R$ .<sup>37</sup>

Plantinga calls this kind of defeater a “Humean rationality defeater.”<sup>38</sup>

Here we can see similarities between Plantinga's final stance and that of Van Cleve's Descartes. According to Plantinga, while naturalism doesn't give  $N$  an undercutting ordinary rationality defeater for  $R$ , it gives her an undercutting purely epistemic defeater for  $R$ , and, when she is reflecting on the inscrutability of  $P(R/N\&E)$ , it also gives her an undercutting Humean rationality defeater for

R. When *N* is in a reflective state, she thereby has an undercutting defeater for everything she believes. According to Van Cleve's Descartes, the theist and the atheist have the same kind of knowledge. The difference is, the atheist's knowledge isn't stable. Whenever the atheist reflects on her cognitive situation vis-à-vis her doubts about God, she will see that she "cannot be certain that [she] is not being deceived on matters which seem to [her] to be very evident."<sup>39</sup> She will thereby acquire an undercutting defeater for everything she believes. According to both Plantinga and Van Cleve's Descartes, then, naturalists/atheists can't reflect on their cognitive situation without acquiring undercutting defeaters for everything they believe.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

### A. DEDUCTIVE VERSUS PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

The problem of evil arises in connection with God's properties and the existence of evil. As an *argument*, it can be articulated as follows:

- (3) If God exists in possible world *W*, then an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being exists in *W*.
- (4) If an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being exists in *W*, then evil does not exist in *W*.
- ∴ (5) If God exists in *W*, then evil does not exist in *W*. [from (3) and (4)]
- ∴ (6) If evil exists in *W*, then God does not exist in *W*. [from (5)]
- (7) Evil exists in the actual world.
- ∴ (8) God does not exist in the actual world. [from (6) and (7)]

Theists have traditionally responded to arguments like this with *theodicies*, which attempt to provide the atheologian a defeater for (4) by saying *why* an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being would allow evil. Recently, in light of the limitations of theodicies, theists have moved to *defenses*, which make little or no attempt to *justify* God's allowing evil. Rather, defenses typically argue that, even if we can't *explain* why a being like God would allow evil, it doesn't follow that a being like God *would not* allow it. Defenses typically argue for the more modest conclusion that God's existence is logically compossible with evil.

Philosophers of religion have reached general agreement that well-formulated defenses—Plantinga's Free Will Defense is the paradigm example<sup>40</sup>—are able to defeat the claim that there is straightforward *logical* tension between God's existence and the existence of evil, both in general and in its particular instances.<sup>41</sup> As Michael Martin observes, "[b]ecause of the failure of deductive arguments from evil, atheologians have developed inductive or probabilistic arguments from evil for the nonexistence of God."<sup>42</sup> The gist of these arguments is that, given the existence



## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 313

of the apparently pointless particular evils that fill the world, God's existence is *improbable*. Probabilistic arguments do not argue for a de facto conclusion so much as they argue for a de jure conclusion: regardless of whether or not God exists, in light of the particular evils we are aware of, belief in God is irrational.

Perhaps the best known probabilistic argument is William Rowe's, which has us consider a natural forest fire in which a fawn is badly burned and lies in terrible pain for days before it finally dies.<sup>43</sup> Rowe asks whether or not an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented the fawn's apparently pointless suffering. The answer seems obvious. Even most theists would admit that he could have.<sup>44</sup> Given this admission, however, theists are faced with the following argument:

- (9) 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.
- (10) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

∴ (11) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>45</sup>

This argument is clearly valid, and (9) and (10) do seem true. Nevertheless, says Rowe, "it must be acknowledged that the case of the fawn's apparently pointless suffering does not *prove* [*italics* Rowe's] that (11) is true. For even though we cannot see how the fawn's suffering is required to obtain some great good (or prevent some equally bad or worse evil), it hardly follows that it is not so required."<sup>46</sup> But *proof* was not what Rowe is after. He presents (9)–(11) as part of a probabilistic argument from evil. (9) and (10) are not indubitable; nevertheless, says Rowe, they are probably true, and they entail (11). So, even though evils such as the fawn's suffering do not give us grounds for a straightforward deductive proof of God's non-existence, Rowe concludes that they *do* give us reason to think that God does not exist.<sup>47</sup>

### B. THE INSCRUTABILITY MAXIM

As Rowe admits, those disinclined to embrace the proposition that we know what an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being could and/or would do will also be disinclined to embrace (9) and/or (10).<sup>48</sup> Yet, as Plantinga and others make clear, the proposition that we know what an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being could and/or would do withstands very little by way of critical scrutiny.<sup>49</sup>

Let 'E' stand for an instance of apparently pointless evil—the fawn's suffering in Rowe's example, or any other instance of evil you find disconcerting—and consider the question, *how would X treat the possibility of E; would X try to actualize E, would X prevent E, or what?* Clearly, this is not the sort of question one could answer without knowing quite a bit about X—not just who or what X is, but what X is like, how X has responded to situations like E in the past, and so on. But now

consider the question, *how would God treat the possibility of E; would he prevent E, would he allow E, or what?* This question poses a similar problem. Without knowing quite a bit about God—what he’s like, how he’s responded to situations like *E* in the past, and so on—one is in no position to say how God would treat *E*. How, then, would one acquire the knowledge requisite for answering this question?

The most common approach draws on our moral knowledge in combination with a priori considerations about the properties of God—namely, his omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. The problem for this approach is that, when we analyze these concepts—especially, when we do so with an eye toward our own finitude—God’s transcendence becomes salient, and this only serves to *undermine* confidence in our ability to know whether or not God would allow *E*. Let’s assume that, given our moral knowledge, we are justified in believing an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being would actualize the best world possible. Are we thereby justified in believing that this being would prevent *E*? Well, do we have sufficient reason to think that we know what greater goods an omniscient, omnipotent being could actualize via *E*, or what greater evils an omniscient, omnipotent being could prevent via *E*? Not obviously. Being morally *imperfect*, do we even have sufficient reason for thinking that our idea of the best possible world approximates a morally perfect being’s idea of the best possible world? Again, not obviously. But then we seem to lack sufficient reason for thinking that we know whether or not an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being would allow *E*.

The second obvious option involves revelation—for example, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. But, for most of the apparently pointless evils *E* might represent (Rowe’s suffering fawn, many of the deaths in the tsunami of 2004, etc.), the Scriptures give us no reason to think God would prevent the actualization of *E*, for it is either completely silent on the issue or it presents a picture of the world in which things like *E* happen somewhat regularly. In fact, given what the Scriptures *do* tell us—for instance, that God commanded Israel to kill every man, woman, child and animal in Amalek,<sup>50</sup> that God allowed Satan to torture Job, the most righteous man on earth,<sup>51</sup> that God became incarnate as Jesus Christ and allowed himself to suffer a humiliating death at the hands of low-ranking Roman soldiers<sup>52</sup>—it seems that, for many of the evils or apparent evils *E* might represent, God’s allowing *E* would be considerably less surprising than many of the things Scripture tells us God *has* allowed (or even actualized himself). Rather than depicting God as a predictable being, the Scriptures present a view of God in which his behavior is often completely inexplicable, and this only serves to undermine our confidence that God would prevent *E*.

The question whether or not God would allow *E* is further complicated by limits in our understanding of *good and evil*. Is *E* necessary for actualizing a good that outweighs *E*? Is it necessary for *preventing* an evil *worse* than *E*? Without extensive knowledge, not only of the possible evils there are, but of the relationships between these evils and *E*, how are we to know? For that matter, is *E* really even an *evil*? How can we be sure, given our benighted moral condition? Even supposing

## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 315

we can be justifiedly confident that God actualizes only evils that result in greater goods or prevent greater evils, and even supposing we know evil when we see it, we still lack the knowledge requisite for answering the question whether or not God would allow *E*. As Plantinga has recently argued, God's reasons for allowing or preventing *E* would almost certainly be beyond our ken.<sup>53</sup> But if this is true, then, so long as God has not *told* us what he will do with respect to *E*, we seem to have no way of knowing.

The problem for probabilistic arguments from evil, then, is this. Reflecting on God's properties, his apparent interaction with the natural world, the depiction we find of him in the Scriptures, and so on; and reflecting on our limited understanding of good and evil, the kinds of evils there are, and how different evils relate not just to each other but to the actualization of different goods; rather than gaining confidence in our ability to diagnose an instance of evil as incompatible with, or improbable on, the existence of God, we are led to embrace something like the following maxim:

The Inscrutability Maxim:

For every possible world *W* and possible evil *E*—where the actualization of *E* isn't ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures—the occurrence of *E* in *W* does not give us reason to think that God probably does not exist in *W*. Similarly, God's existence in *W* does not give us reason to think that *E* probably does not occur in *W*.<sup>54</sup>

This is just to say that the occurrence of *E* would not give us evidence for the non-existence of God and, similarly, that God's existence would not give us reason to expect the nonoccurrence of *E*. So, if we are justifiedly confident that God doesn't exist in *W*, we must be justified in virtue of something other than our awareness that *E* occurs in *W*. Likewise, if we are justifiedly confident that *E* does not occur in *W*, we must be justified in virtue of something other than our awareness of God's existence in *W*. Yet probabilistic arguments from evil succeed only on the assumption that certain evils (e.g., a fawn's apparently pointless suffering) *do* give us reason to doubt that God exists in the worlds where they occur.<sup>55</sup>

### III. THEISM, ATHEISM, AND SKEPTICISM

#### A. DESCARTES AND THE INSCRUTABILITY MAXIM

As we have noted several times, Descartes and Plantinga agree that theists have an epistemic advantage over atheists/naturalists. For Descartes, this advantage comes via knowledge that (a) God exists and (b) God's existence insures the veracity of clear and distinct perceptions. For Plantinga, this advantage comes via the undercutting defeater evolutionary naturalism provides the naturalist for her belief that her cognitive faculties are reliable. According to Van Cleve's Descartes, the theist's knowledge is more stable than the atheist's, since the atheist loses all of her knowledge every time she considers the possibility that she is being deceived by an

evil demon. According to Plantinga, the naturalist acquires a Humean rationality defeater for R (and thereby for all of her beliefs) whenever she thinks about her cognitive situation vis-à-vis evolutionary naturalism.

Descartes's arguments for (a) are widely regarded as inconclusive, so an obvious strategy for denying that theists have an epistemic advantage over atheists would involve critiquing these arguments.<sup>56</sup> But here, even if these critiques succeed, the reformed epistemologist can follow Plantinga and respond that belief in God is properly basic and, thus, not in need of argumentative support.<sup>57</sup> Let us therefore confine ourselves to Descartes's argument for (b). Compared to Descartes's arguments for the existence of God, this argument is short:

[First], it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God. . . . [Second], since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly.<sup>58</sup>

Here, the inscrutability maxim becomes salient, and, reflecting on the various evils that involve or result in unreliable cognitive faculties, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the inscrutability maxim cuts both ways. For starters, it's not entirely clear that God would deceive Descartes only if God possessed some imperfection. Consider the possibility that God can actualize some great good by deceiving Descartes, and let '*E*' be God's deceiving Descartes in order to actualize this good. As the inscrutability maxim tells us, God's existence gives us insufficient reason to think that *E* would not occur. Indeed, only three paragraphs after he argues that God would not deceive him, Descartes *himself* concedes as much: "[Since] God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite," it is "no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions."<sup>59</sup> Given this admission, though, how can Descartes be sure that God lacks good reason to deceive him? And if Descartes cannot be sure, then how does God's existence give Descartes sufficient reason for thinking his cognitive faculties are reliable?

Moreover, even if we grant that only an imperfect being would deceive Descartes, and even if we grant that God did not give Descartes the kind of faculty that would go wrong while he was using it correctly, how can Descartes be sure he has the faculties that God originally gave him? Perhaps Descartes was involved in an accident that destroyed his original faculties, and perhaps the faculties Descartes has *now* are systematically unreliable—which is why Descartes doesn't *remember* being involved in any such accident. The proposition that Descartes *has* reliable faculties does not follow from the proposition that God *gave* Descartes reliable faculties. Furthermore, even if Descartes *does* have the faculties God originally gave him—faculties that wouldn't go wrong while being used correctly—how can Descartes be sure that he *is* using these faculties correctly? Let '*E*' be Descartes's misusing his faculties such that, as a result of this misuse, (a) Descartes is completely unable

to tell that he is misusing his faculties and (b) Descartes's beliefs are systematically false such that Descartes is unable to *tell* that his beliefs are systematically false. As the inscrutability maxim tells us, God's existence gives us no reason to think that *E* wouldn't occur. But if *E* is actual, then Descartes's cognitive faculties are not reliable. Again, it is hard to see how God's existence gives Descartes sufficient reason for thinking his cognitive faculties are reliable. It seems clear that, to the extent that the atheist "cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident,"<sup>60</sup> Descartes cannot be certain that he is not misusing his faculties such that (a) and (b) are the case.

The inscrutability maxim blocks evidential arguments from evil by showing that they depend on unjustified confidence in our ability to determine whether or not God would allow the actualization of a given evil. But the inscrutability maxim can be wielded by atheists to show that Descartes's argument *also* depends on unjustified confidence—in this case, unjustified confidence in his ability to determine whether or not God would allow the actualization of an evil involving the unreliability of his cognitive faculties. Atheists would be right to ask Descartes for an argument showing why God would allow innocent people to drown in tsunamis, die in gas chambers, suffer severe mental illnesses, live desperately lonely lives, and . . . [fill in the blank with evils you find difficult to reconcile with God's existence], yet *not* allow Descartes to be mistaken about the way things stand. If anything like the inscrutability maxim is correct, then reflecting on the properties and character of God gives us insufficient reason to think that God would prevent us from falling into error about the way things stand. But responding to the problem of evil requires the theist to reflect on God's transcendence, his interaction with the natural world, his description in the Bible, etc., and reflecting on these things makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that something like the inscrutability maxim is true.

## B. A *TU QUOQUE* RESPONSE TO PLANTINGA'S EAAN

At this point, the possibility of a successful *tu quoque* response to Plantinga's EAAN should also be clear.<sup>61</sup> If P(R/N&E) is inscrutable, then, says Plantinga, reflecting on evolutionary naturalism renders us unjustified in any confidence we might have that natural selection would ensure that our cognitive faculties are reliable. But responding to EAAN requires the atheist to reflect on the fact that natural selection selects only for adaptive behavior, the fact that adaptive behavior does not require true belief, etc., and reflecting on these things makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that P(R/N&E) is, at best, inscrutable. But how is the probability of R on *theism* any better than inscrutable? More specifically, since the reflective theist needs an answer to probabilistic arguments from evil such as Rowe's, how is P(R/T&I)—i.e., the probability of R on the conjunction of theism and the inscrutability maxim—any better than inscrutable?

According to the inscrutability maxim, where the actualization of some evil *E* isn't ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures, God's existence does not give us

sufficient reason to think that *E* probably won't occur. But there are lots of evils (both possible and actual) that involve people who lack reliable cognitive faculties *and* the ability to *tell* that their cognitive faculties are unreliable. There are brain-in-a-vat scenarios like those portrayed in the 1999 movie, *The Matrix*. There are scenarios involving powerful hallucinogenic drugs and other chemicals that render our cognitive faculties unreliable such that we are unable to tell that they are unreliable. Strange things sometimes result from massive head trauma, and there are severe cognitive disorders of the variety studied and described by Oliver Sacks.<sup>62</sup> In many of these *actual* cases people lack reliable cognitive faculties but can't tell that they do. There are even evil demon scenarios of the variety that worried Descartes. For example, suppose God allows a repeat of the story of Job, but, this time, instead of allowing Satan to *actually* take everything from someone, God only allows Satan to put this person through the *experience* (perhaps via an incredibly vivid dream) of losing various things.

That neither God's existence nor the truth of the Scriptures gives us sufficient reason to think scenarios like these aren't actual (or, in the case of those scenarios that *are* actual, that we aren't in an analogous one) raises interesting questions about the probability of R on theism. To make things more concrete, then, let us focus on the following scenario:

**Terrorist Activity:**

A group of eco-terrorists pours a powerful chemical (call it "XX") into the water cooler at a lab where cosmetics are tested on animals. The XX produces some unexpected results, however. Instead of killing its victims, as the terrorists intended it to, it causes them to slip into a coma-like state where they dream the most vivid dreams. These dreams are so vivid, in fact, that the people having them have absolutely no idea that they are actually lying immobile, hooked up to ventilators and feeding tubes in hospital beds. Instead, they think that they are spending their days involved in normal human activities. Some of them even think they are university philosophy professors. Of course, while none of this is the case and the vast majority of the beliefs they now hold are false, they have no means of discovering any of this.

Plantinga has responded to *tu quoque* objections to his EAAN in the past by noting that, according to Christian doctrine, we humans bear the image of God, we have been created for the sake of *knowing* God, and so on.<sup>63</sup> And at first blush, this response seems promising. If we have been created in the image of God, then *of course* we have reliable cognitive faculties. But the people in Terrorist Activity were *also* created in the image of God. The people in Terrorist Activity therefore have unreliable cognitive faculties in spite of the fact that they were created in God's image. But as the inscrutability maxim tells us, God's existence does not give us sufficient reason to think that a scenario like Terrorist Activity wouldn't happen. How, then, are theists in a better position vis-à-vis skepticism and R than naturalists?

## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 319

Recall Plantinga's arguments for the inscrutability  $P(R/N\&E)$ . According to Plantinga, there are four possible connections between belief and behavior, and  $P(R/N\&E)$  comes out high on none of them.<sup>64</sup> But note Plantinga's argument for the conclusion that that  $P(R/N\&E)$  isn't high even on the commonsense view that the content of our beliefs leads to adaptive behavior:

Perhaps a primitive tribe thinks everything is really alive, or is a witch or a demon of some sort; and perhaps all or nearly all of their beliefs are of the form *this witch is F* or *that demon is G*; *this witch is good to eat*, or *that demon is likely to eat me if I give it a chance*. If they ascribe the right properties to the right witches, their beliefs could be adaptive while . . . nonetheless false. . . . The fact that my behavior (or that of my ancestors) has been adaptive, therefore, is at best a third-rate reason for thinking my beliefs mostly true and my cognitive faculties reliable—and that is true even given the commonsense view of the relation between belief and behavior. So we can't sensibly argue from the fact that our behavior (or that of our ancestors) has been adaptive, to the conclusion that our beliefs are mostly true and our cognitive faculties reliable.<sup>65</sup>

If the possibility of a tribe that manifests adaptive behavior while thinking that everything is a witch undermines any justified confidence we might have that  $P(R/N\&E)$  is high, then how can theists maintain that scenarios like Terrorist Activity *do not* undermine any justified confidence we might have that  $P(R/T\&I)$  comes out high? The scenario described in Terrorist Activity is undoubtedly far-fetched. What grounds do we have, however, for thinking that it is more far-fetched than a tribe that manifests adaptive behavior while literally believing that everything is a witch? It seems that theists should take Terrorist Activity seriously if naturalists should take Plantinga's primitive tribe scenario seriously. And just as the tribespeople in Plantinga's argument would have unreliable cognitive faculties in spite of the fact that they manifest adaptive behavior, the victims in Terrorist Activity would have unreliable cognitive faculties in spite of the fact that they were created in God's image, for the sake of knowing God. The fact that *we* have been created in God's image for the sake of knowing him, then, seems to be no more a reason for thinking that our cognitive faculties are reliable than the fact that our behavior (or that of our ancestors) has been adaptive. But according to Plantinga, the fact that our behavior (or that of our ancestors) has been adaptive is at best a "third-rate" reason for thinking that our cognitive faculties are reliable, and third-rate reasons aren't sufficient. If naturalists can't sensibly argue from the fact that our behavior has been adaptive to the conclusion that  $P(R/N\&E)$  is high, then it seems that theists cannot sensibly argue from the fact that God exists and we bear his image to the conclusion that  $P(R/T\&I)$  is high. It is unclear, then, how  $P(R/T\&I)$  comes out any higher than  $P(R/N\&E)$ , or how the theist is in a stronger position vis-à-vis skepticism and R than the naturalist. In this case, however, theists and naturalists seem to be in the same boat with respect to R: either both groups have an undercutting defeater for R, or neither group does.

## IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

### A. THE IAAT BEGS THE QUESTION AGAINST PLANTINGA'S VIEWS IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Suppose we call the *tu quoque* response to Plantinga's EAAN outlined above the "inscrutability argument against theism," or the "IAAT" for short. One objection to the IAAT goes as follows.

According to the views developed at length in Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, God has endowed us with cognitive faculties (e.g., the *sensus divinitatis*) that can, when functioning properly in the right environment, give us properly basic beliefs in the things attested to in the Bible.<sup>66</sup> According to the Bible, moreover, God has endowed us with reliable cognitive faculties. Since theism (at least in its Jewish and Christian varieties) includes the things attested to in the Bible, the probability of R on theism is 1, and theists can have warrant for the belief that P(R/T) is 1 even while they reflect on the inscrutability maxim. Since this conclusion follows from Plantinga's view that Christians can have properly basic beliefs in the things attested to in the Bible, the IAAT begs the question against Plantinga's views in epistemology.

Reply: There are several problems with this objection. The first, and most obvious, is that the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable appears nowhere in the Bible. While the Bible might say certain things (directly or indirectly) about the cognitive faculties of certain individuals in biblical history, and while it might present a picture wherein human cognitive faculties are reliable *on average*, it takes no stand one way or the other on the reliability of *our* cognitive faculties. You and I appear nowhere in the Bible, and even if the Bible does depict normal people as possessing reliable cognitive faculties, the Bible still leaves it an open question whether or not you and I are normal. So, even if theists *can* have properly basic belief in the things attested to in the Bible, we have no reason to think that theists can gain properly basic belief that our cognitive faculties are reliable by reading the Bible, and the above argument fails.

Perhaps, however, a related argument can be made for the conclusion that P(R/T&I) is higher than P(R/N&E). The Bible *does* tell us that God created us for the sake of knowing him, so, if Plantinga is correct, the theist can have properly basic belief that we were created for a certain kind of knowledge. Given the fact that *knowing* entails possessing reliable cognitive faculties, however, it follows that our cognitive faculties *are* reliable. Since the reliability of our faculties follows from God's creating us to know him, the theist who sees this connection can therefore have warrant for the belief that P(R/T&I) is high. So the IAAT begs the question against Plantinga's views in epistemology by neglecting the possibility of properly basic belief in the proposition that God created us to know him.

The problem with this objection—hinted at in §III.B—is that R clearly *does not* follow from God's creating us to know him. First, where 'C' is the proposition that God created us to know him, and 'W' is the proposition that something went



## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 321

wrong after creation, and, as a result, we *do not* know him, R follows from C only if R follows from the conjunction of C and W. But R *does not* seem to follow from the conjunction of C and W. After all, even in the Bible we find people who fail to know God, in spite of the fact that they were created to know him.<sup>67</sup> Second, even on the doubtful assumption that our knowing God *does* follow from C (in which case C and W are logically inconsistent, and R trivially follows from their conjunction), R *still* does not seem to follow from C. Consider the victims in Terrorist Activity, and suppose that, in spite of their benighted circumstances, they are somehow able to enter into intimate relationship with God. In this case, the victims in Terrorist Activity *know* God (at least, in the biblical sense of “know”), yet they still have mostly false beliefs, and their cognitive faculties are still, on the whole, unreliable. Or suppose that, for some reason, the XX caused the victims in Terrorist Activity to lose their grip on every portion of reality *except* God, so that, in addition to enjoying a relationship with God, they also retained extensive propositional knowledge *about* God. Once again, in spite of the fact that the victims in Terrorist Activity have this knowledge, the vast majority of their beliefs are false. So, even on the questionable assumption that God’s creating us to know him entails that we *do* know him, R does not seem to follow from C.

But isn’t R at least *probable* on C? And if so, since C is one of the central claims of theism, appearing in various forms throughout the Bible, can’t the theist still have warrant for the conclusion that the probability of R on theism is high? Apparently not, for it is hard to see how  $P(R/C)$  comes out any higher than  $P(R/N\&E)$ . Again, given our limited understanding of God, the kinds of evils there are, the relationships between these evils and the actualization of different goods, and so on, how can we be justifiedly confident that God wouldn’t actualize some great good through circumstances in which our cognitive faculties are not reliable? More specifically, how can we be more confident that God wouldn’t actualize some great good through circumstances in which our cognitive faculties are not reliable than we are that massively false belief wouldn’t subtend adaptive behavior in a primitive tribe that thinks everything is a witch? Let ‘K’ stand for some state of affairs in which we know God. Just as massively false belief might subtend adaptive behavior, God might actualize K without actualizing R. In fact, for some reason no less beyond our ken than God’s reason for letting fawns suffer in forest fires, God might actualize *neither* K *nor* R. After all, the argument we are presently considering proceeds inferentially from C to R via K, but what theist would deny that the world is full of people for whom K is not actualized?<sup>68</sup> Are we not committed, then, to the conclusion that  $P(R/C)$  is at best inscrutable? At least, aren’t we committed to the conclusion that  $P(R/C)$  is inscrutable if  $P(R/N\&E)$  is? And aren’t we committed to this conclusion even if we agree with Plantinga that theists can have properly basic beliefs in the things attested to in the Bible?

The proper basicity of belief in God and the things attested to in the Scriptures does not seem sufficient to render theism and naturalism disanalogous in any way relevant to the question whether or not theists have an epistemic advantage over

naturalists vis-à-vis skepticism and R. Plantinga's views in epistemology, then, cannot be employed to pluck theists out of whatever epistemic boat naturalists are in, and the IAAT does not beg the question against his views.

## B. THE INSCRUTABILITY MAXIM IS FALSE

The IAAT relies heavily on the inscrutability maxim, according to which, for every possible world  $W$  and possible evil  $E$ —where the actualization of  $E$  isn't ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures—the occurrence of  $E$  in  $W$  does not give us reason to think that God probably does not exist in  $W$ ; similarly, the existence of God in  $W$  does not give us reason to think that  $E$  probably does not occur in  $W$ . One might suggest, then, that the IAAT can be dismantled by attacking the inscrutability maxim.

Two things are worth noting in response to this suggestion. First, if the reflective theist is to be rational in her theism, she needs an answer to probabilistic arguments from evil such as Rowe's, yet it's hard to see how the reflective theist could reject the inscrutability maxim without opening the door to such arguments. If the inscrutability maxim is false, then there *are* possible evils (not ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures) that give us reason to think that God does not exist. But in this case, why think fawns suffering in forest fires, children drowning in tsunamis, mothers dying in gas chambers, et cetera, are not among them? Surely, in order to have sufficient reason for thinking that this is so, we would need a possible evil ( $E$ ) and a theological principle ( $P$ ) such that (i)  $E$  is not ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures, (ii) we have reason for thinking that  $P$  is *correct*, (iii)  $P$  gives us reason to think that the actualization of  $E$  would constitute evidence for God's nonexistence, yet (iv)  $P$  *does not* give us reason to think the horrible evils that actually fill our world constitute evidence for God's nonexistence. But such a combination is not at all easy to imagine.

Second, and much more important, even if we *can* imagine a principle and a possible evil that, in conjunction, satisfy conditions (i)–(iv), above, the IAAT is easily repaired. All the atheist needs is a skeptical scenario ( $S$ ) and an *actual* evil ( $A$ ) such that we have insufficient reason for thinking that the probability of  $S$  on God's existence is lower than the probability of  $A$  on God's existence. So, for example, compare the Holocaust to Terrorist Activity, as it's described in §III.A, above. What reason do we have for thinking that Terrorist Activity is less probable on God's existence than atrocities like the Holocaust? It's hard to maintain that Terrorist Activity is more *horrifying* than such atrocities. After all, not only does no one die in Terrorist Activity, no one has an experience significantly less pleasant than most of us have in our day-to-day lives. So, it's hard to see how one could argue from the amount of evil perpetrated in Terrorist Activity to the conclusion that Terrorist Activity is less probable on God's existence than atrocities like the Holocaust. Moreover, the Bible says nothing one way or the other about Terrorist Activity. After all, it concerns a small population of anonymous people living sometime around 2008. So, one cannot appeal to revelation. But then why think

Terrorist Activity is any less probable on God's existence than some of the actual evils we are all aware of? And if Terrorist Activity *is not* less probable on God's existence than some of the actual evils we are aware of, it is hard to see how the mere possibility of a tribe that manifests adaptive behavior while thinking that everything is a witch constitutes a problem for naturalism in a way that Terrorist Activity *does not* constitute a problem for theism. So, while the inscrutability maxim seems true, and while it (or something similar to it) seems necessary for defending theism against evidential arguments from evil, the IAAT does not *depend* on the truth of the inscrutability maxim.<sup>69</sup> Again, it is hard to see how theists possess any epistemic advantage vis-à-vis skepticism and R over naturalists, and we seem forced to conclude that reflective theists have a defeater for R if reflective naturalists do.

### C. THE IAAT ASSUMES THE COMMONSENSE VIEW OF BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR

Throughout this paper we have assumed C—the commonsense view according to which beliefs are causally efficacious with respect to our behavior in virtue of their content. What we have really seen, then, *isn't* that  $P(R/T \& I)$  is inscrutable if  $P(R/N \& E)$  is. Rather, we've seen that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is inscrutable if  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is. This, however, might be good news for the EAAN.

Suppose the theist rejects the conclusion that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is inscrutable and maintains, instead, that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is obviously high. (After all, what could be crazier than the suggestion that our cognitive faculties aren't reliable?) What the IAAT shows us is that, if this move is open to the theist, then it is also open to the naturalist; thus, if the theist has no defeater for R, it looks like the naturalist *also* has no defeater for R. But recall the details of Plantinga's argument, as it was outlined in §I.A. In addition to arguing that  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is inscrutable, Plantinga also argues that  $P(R/N \& E)$  would be inscrutable even if  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  were *high*.<sup>70</sup> The theist can respond to the IAAT, then, by maintaining that  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  and  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  are both high, and arguing that, because  $P(C/N \& E)$  would be *low*, and because  $P(R/N \& E)$  would be the weighted average of the probabilities of R on  $N \& E \& C$  and  $N \& E \& \sim C$ —weighted on the probabilities of C and  $\sim C$  on  $N \& E$ , that is— $P(R/N \& E)$  would be lower than 0.5.<sup>71</sup> This would put the theist in position to maintain (against the IAAT) that the naturalist has a defeater for R that the theist lacks. So the theist has an epistemic advantage over the naturalist after all.

Reply: All this talk about the reliability of our cognitive faculties would pique the interest of the skeptic, and if the theist asserted that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  was high after all, the skeptic would surely want to know what justified him in making this assertion. We all know how the ensuing debate would go. In light of scenarios like Terrorist Activity, the skeptic would claim that the theist needs an *argument* for thinking that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high. But then the skeptic would point out that an argument couldn't do much good, for such an argument couldn't even get off the ground without assuming the very thing in question—namely, R. Once the skeptic has pointed this out to the theist, however, the theist has two options: he can either

forward an argument for the conclusion that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high that assumes that the probability of  $R$  is 1, or he can retract his argument and simply *assert* that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high. Since an argument that only works on the assumption that the probability of  $R$  is 1 could clearly provide the theist no additional reason for thinking that his cognitive faculties are reliable, the theist might as well just *assert* that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high, perhaps pointing out in addition that the notion that our cognitive faculties aren't reliable just seems crazy. The skeptic will be deeply dissatisfied with this response, of course, but at this point the skeptic and the theist will have reached an impasse.

Now, those sympathetic to Thomas Reid and the commonsense tradition might think that this response would be perfectly appropriate.<sup>72</sup> There is a problem for the EAAN here, however. If the theist can turn his attention to scenarios like Terrorist Activity and simply assert to the skeptic that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high, what would prevent the naturalist from simply asserting that  $P(C/N \& E)$  is high? The notion that the content of our beliefs is causally inefficacious with respect to our behavior is no less absurd than the notion that our cognitive faculties are unreliable. But it's the *prima facie* absurdity of the notion that our cognitive faculties are unreliable that would ultimately license the theist in claiming that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high. (At least, it's this absurdity that would license him in claiming that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high if anything would.) So it's hard to see how the theist could claim that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high without opening the door to the claim that  $P(C/N \& E)$  is also high. If theists can deny that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is low or inscrutable, then it seems that naturalists should also be able to deny that  $P(C/N \& E)$  is low or inscrutable.

But now things look bad for the EAAN. Claiming that  $P(R/T \& I \& C)$  is high wouldn't only open the door to the claim that  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is high, it would open the door to the claim that  $P(C/N \& E)$  is high. But if  $P(C/N \& E)$  is high, then  $P(\sim C/N \& E)$  is low. Since  $P(R/N \& E)$  is the weighted average of the probabilities of  $R$  on  $N \& E \& C$  and  $R$  on  $N \& E \& \sim C$ ,<sup>73</sup> and since  $P(\sim C/N \& E)$  is low,  $P(C/N \& E)$  is high, and  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is high,  $P(R/N \& E)$  *does not* come out low or inscrutable. The naturalist loses her purported defeater for  $R$  and, once again, naturalists and theists wind up in the same epistemic boat vis-à-vis the reliability of their cognitive faculties and skepticism.<sup>74</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), marginal pages 35–62.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap.12; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218–240; Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," in *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James Beilby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1–14; and Alvin

## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 325

Plantinga's unpublished but widely circulated "Naturalism Defeated," available at [www.homestead.com/philofreligion/files/alspaper.htm](http://www.homestead.com/philofreligion/files/alspaper.htm).

3. Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 2–4.
4. See Patricia Churchland, "Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 544–553, quoted in *ibid.*, 3–4); and Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 218.
5. Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 5–10.
7. *Ibid.*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*
11. For the sake of offering examples, Plantinga assigns a value of 0.9 to  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$ , 0.2 to  $P(R/N \& E \& \sim C)$ , 0.7 to  $P(\sim C/N \& E)$  and 0.3 to  $P(C/N \& E)$ . Given these values,  $P(R/N \& E)$  will be 0.45 at best. See *ibid.*, and §IV.C below for more on this argument.
12. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 234–235 for the long version of this story.
13. That Plantinga thinks  $P(R/N \& E)$  isn't high even in scenario (iv) comes out most explicitly in his response to Jerry Fodor's "Is Science Biologically Possible?" in *Naturalism Defeated? After spending pages 252–253 of his "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts,"* (in *Naturalism Defeated?*) arguing that  $P(C/N \& E)$  is low, Plantinga spends the next three pages arguing that, even if Fodor is right that "there is no serious chance that the content of our beliefs does not enter into the causal chain leading to behavior," Fodor has still failed to "indentify serious problems for EAAN, or even for the proposition that  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is low or inscrutable." This is because, regardless of whether or not  $P(C/N \& E)$  is low,  $P(R/N \& E \& C)$  is inscrutable at best.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. *Ibid.*
16. See Plantinga's comments on this throughout *Warrant and Proper*, chap.12 and his "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts."
17. Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 12.
18. See, for example, the essays compiled in James Beilby (2002).
19. See marginal page 36 of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1996).
20. *Ibid.*, marginal page 23.
21. *Ibid.*, marginal page 24.
22. *Ibid.*, marginal pages 25–35. Descartes's actual words are, "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true."
23. *Ibid.*, marginal page 36.
24. See James Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle," *The Philosophical Review* 88, No. 1 (1979): 55–91.

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 67–68.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 72.
29. See marginal page 141 of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1996).
30. Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts," 208. Note that, in *Naturalism Defeated?* Plantinga calls purely epistemic defeat "purely alethic defeat."
31. Ibid.; and *Warranted Christian Belief*, 362.
32. "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts," 209; and *Warranted Christian Belief*, 363.
33. "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts," 206.
34. Ibid., 208.
35. Ibid., 209; and *Warranted Christian*, 363.
36. "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts."
37. Ibid., 211. The pronouns in this quotation have been changed from male to female.
38. Ibid.
39. See marginal page 141 of Descartes's "Second Set of Objections and Replies" in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1996).
40. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 164–193; and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 7–64.
41. See, for example, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 462; William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16.4 (1979): 335–341; and Micheal Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), chap. 14.
42. See Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 335.
43. See Rowe "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–341, reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 242–251.
44. Ibid. 245.
45. Ibid., 243.
46. Ibid. 245.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 250.
49. See *Warranted Christian Belief*, 465–467; and, for example, William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29–67; and Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–94.
50. 1 Samuel 15:1–4.

## DOES THEIST HAVE AN EPISTEMIC ADVANTAGE OVER ATHEIST? 327

51. Job 1:1–22.

52. See, for example, John 1:1–52 and 19:16–37.

53. *Warranted Christian Belief*, 465–467.

54. In connection with the qualification that the actualization of *E* can't be ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures, consider the following evils:

(i) Jones suffers a severe head injury in a car accident tomorrow.

(ii) Satan ultimately triumphs over God.

(i) is an example of a possible evil that is *not* ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures, whereas (ii) is an example of a possible evil that *is* ruled out by the truth of the Scriptures.

55. In response to probabilistic arguments from evil, William Alston, Michael Bergmann, Stephen Evans, Peter Van Inwagen, Alvin Plantinga, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Stephen Wykstra and still others have recently embraced principles similar to the inscrutability maxim. See, for example, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 465–467; and, for example, Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition”; and Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering.”

56. See marginal pages 45–52 and 66–71 of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1996).

57. See, for example, *Warranted Christian*.

58. See marginal page 54 of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1996).

59. *Ibid.*, marginal pages 55 and 56.

60. *Ibid.*, marginal page 141.

61. Evan Fales hints at this response (see “Darwin's Doubt, Calvin's Calvary,” in *Naturalism Defeated?* 56), but ultimately forwards a *tu quoque* response that focuses more on the relationship between R and Christian doctrine. For Plantinga's reply, see his “Reply to Beilby's Cohorts,” 265–267, where Plantinga does not directly address Fales's comments about the bearing of the problem of evil on EAAN.

62. See, for example, Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Touchstone, 1985).

63. See, for example, “Reply to Beilby's Cohorts,” 265–567.

64. See Plantinga, “Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism,” 5–10.

65. *Warranted Christian Belief*, 234–235. Note that, while Plantinga thinks P(R/N&E) comes out low even if we assume that R is highly probable on the conjunction of N&E and the commonsense view—see 235–236 of *Warranted Christian Belief*—Plantinga argues in response to Fodor that R is *not*, as it turns out, probable on the conjunction of N&E and the commonsense view. See, specifically, “Reply to Beilby's Cohorts,” 253–256.

66. *Warranted Christian Belief*, 258–266 in particular.

67. Indeed, according to the biblical picture, entire populations of people fail to know God, in spite of the fact that each member was created to know him.

68. After all, the world is full of people who don't even believe that God exists.

69. For exactly the same reasons, the IAAT does not depend on the *rational acceptability* of the inscrutability maxim.

70. Very briefly, Plantinga argues as follows: Because it is extremely difficult to see how, on N&E, the *content* of our beliefs could be causally efficacious with respect to our behavior,  $P(C/N\&E)$  would be low and, conversely,  $P(\sim C/N\&E)$  would be high.  $P(R/N\&E)$ , however, would be the weighted average of the probabilities of R on  $N\&E\&C$  and  $N\&E\&\sim C$ -weighted on the probabilities of C and  $\sim C$  on N&E. Since  $P(\sim C/N\&E)$  would be high and  $P(R/N\&E\&\sim C)$  would be low,  $P(R/N\&E)$  would come out lower than .5 even on the assumption that  $P(R/N\&E\&C)$  is *high*. See "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 10.

71. Ibid.

72. See, for example, Thomas Reid, *Inquiries and Essays*, ed. Ronald Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 275.

73. Weighted on the probabilities of C and  $\sim C$  on N&E, recall. See Plantinga, "Introduction: The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," 10.

74. Or, at least, *commonsense* naturalists and theists wind up in the same epistemic boat. It must be noted, though, that if  $P(R/N\&E)$  doesn't come out low, it is not immediately obvious that naturalists who accept  $\sim C$  would have a defeater for R.

Thanks to Ray VanArragon, William Tolhurst, Jeff Snapper, Bill Demsar and, especially, Baron Reed for helpful comments on this paper.