On the A Priori Rejection of Evidential Arguments from Evil

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Recent work on the evidential argument from evil offers us sundry considerations which are intended to weigh against this form of atheological arguments.[1] By far the most provocative is that on a priori grounds alone, evil can be shown to be evidentially impotent. This astonishing thesis has been given a vigorous defense by Keith Yandell. In this paper, we shall measure the prospects for an a priori dismissal of evidential arguments from evil. Yandell's argument is a natural place to begin. In section 1, then, we shall discuss whether we can claim on a priori grounds that evil is no evidence against theism, paying special attention to Yandell's argument. The claim, made by some theist, that atheological arguments from evil can be dismissed on an priori basis need not, of course, be interpreted as the claim that it can be shown on a priori grounds that evil cannot provide evidence for theism. The next three sections briefly consider three other readings of that claim. In section 2, we consider whether, on a priori grounds, we could have a good reason to think that no one could be justified in believing in gratuitous evil (evil for which there is no morally sufficient reason). In section 3, we consider whether one can show a priori that no one could reasonably believe atheism on the grounds of the facts about evil. In section 4, we consider whether the theist could show a priori that atheological arguments have no normative force against his own position (and hence that such arguments will, from his point of view, be devoid of epistemic interest). Working through these issues will, we hope, bring a measure of illumination to the whole debate.

Before we begin in earnest, we offer three preliminary remarks.

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[1] It is common these days to distinguish "logical" from "evidential" arguments from evil. Let's say that a 'logical argument from evil' is one that has a premise that says that theism and some known fact about evil are strictly incompatible (where 'known' is being used here in a rather strong sense) and that an "evidential argument from evil" is one that lacks such a premise. Evidential arguments will either lack the premise that

First, let us provide the following working definition of 'a priori': a proposition is a priori if it is a truth that (a) is utterly platitudinous or else (b) would appear self evident to human cognizers were they to entertain it or else (c) can be readily deduced from truths that satisfy (a) or (b). This definition would be hopelessly imprecise if the nature of a priori knowledge were our main focus. But we hope it will suffice for our purposes.

Second, we shall proceed as if there are no good a priori arguments for the existence of God. If we are wrong, then we shall have overlooked one way to dismiss evidential arguments from evil a priori. (But we aren't wrong.)

Third, let us concede that some arguments from evil can be dismissed a priori. A good case in point may well be J.L. Mackie's famous version of the logical argument from evil.[2] It has often been pointed out that his argument seems to violate the utterly platitudinous proposition that a wholly good person might have a morally justifying reason to permit preventable evil, relying as it does on the putatively analytic premise that a wholly good being always eliminates evil as far as it can. Moreover, it is clear that logical space contains plenty of evidential arguments that can be dismissed a priori. We are interested here in the idea that evidential arguments can, in general, be dismissed on a priori grounds.

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In a fashion faintly similar to that just used to dismiss Mackie's argument, Keith Yandell has argued that it can be shown on a priori grounds alone that evil cannot provide evidence for atheism. Yandell begins by noting that any argument for atheism based on evil requires something like the following as a premise:

> (N)   Necessarily, if God exists, then He has a morally sufficient reason for allowing evil.[3]

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theism is strictly incompatible with some fact about evil, or, if they have such a premise, the putative fact about evil will not be known but claimed to be probable or reasonably believed to some significant degree.

[2] "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (1955), reprinted in *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), ed. Nelson Pike, and in *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), eds. Marilyn and Robert Adams.

[3] Actually, it is false that any argument from evil will make use of something like (N). And this oversight is not peculiar to Yandell, a theist. Michael Tooley makes the same mistake in "The Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* (Northridge, CA: Ridgeview, 1991). See Hume's *Dialogues,* Part IX, Paul Draper, "Probabilistic Arguments from Evil," *Religious Studies* (1992) and "The Skeptical Theist," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1996), ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder.

From this apparently innocuous observation, Yandell argues that evil does not provide evidence for atheism. He writes:

> If (N) is true, then both any particular evil, and [the class of all evils] itself, has the following property: *if God exists, then He has morally sufficient reason for allowing this evil.* Call this property *P*. It seems clear that any evil that has P is not an evil whose existence provides evidence against God's existence. An evil that has P is useless for the critic's purposes. If (N) is true, then any evil, and all evil together, has P. So neither any, nor all, evil is useful for the critic's purposes, provided (N) is true. One might put this summarily as follows: if (N) is true, then every evil, and all evil together, is *critically cancelled.*[4]

That this argument smacks of sophistry will likely not have escaped the reader. Yandell asserts that

(E)   "[A]ny evil that has P is not an evil whose existence provides evidence against God's existence".

As it turns out, this principle is false. To see why, consider that it is true only if

(Y)   If an evil has P, then it is not evidence that there are evils that lack a morally sufficient reason for God to permit them.

If (Y) were false, then an evil that had P could be evidence that there are evils that lack a morally sufficient reason for God to allow them. Of course, if that were the case, then contrary to what (E) says, an evil could be evidence against the existence of God, given (N). So (E) is true only if (Y) is. Now it goes without saying that the reason why each evil has P is that if there is a God, He is perfectly good, omniscient and is able to prevent it, and therefore has a morally sufficient reason to permit it.[5] Thus, (Y) is true only if this general principle is too:

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[4] "The Problem of Evil and the Content of Morality," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 17 (1985), pp. 140-41.

[5] Some have argued that God does not need a morally sufficient reason to permit each particular instance of evil. Even if they are right, we can happily reformulate the issue in terms of a certain type of evil: innocent people suffering especially destructive harm. Call this *horrific evil.* If a being's purposes in permitting evil could have been achieved by permitting, say, a half-dozen instances of horrific evil rather than billions upon billions of instances and the being knows this, then words are unfit to describe how reprehensible that being is. Even if God need not have a reason to permit some particular evils, surely He must have a reason for permitting so much horrific evil rather than a lot less.

(Y*)   If an evil h has P*—the property of being an x such that if an agent y is perfectly good, omniscient and able to prevent x, y has a morally sufficient reason to permit x—h can't be evidence that there are evils that lack a morally sufficient reason for y to permit them.

Why should we believe (Y*)? Yandell's line of thought seems to draw on the following form of argument: "Necessarily, if there is a being x that is F and G and H, x will stand in relation R to event e of type T. So, each T-event e is such that if there is a being x that is FGH, xRe. It should be clear that no T-event that has this property can provide evidence that there does not exist a being that is FGH that stands in R to e and hence no T-event can provide evidence that there is no being that is FGH."

But consider the following case. It is necessarily true that if an agent is the Lord Mayor of London (F), despises flag burning more than anything else (G), and acts upon his desires (H), then he will be innocent of (R) any flag burning (T), (where someone is innocent of a flag burning so long as he does not knowingly bring it about). So every flag burning is such that if there is a being that is Lord Mayor of London, despises flag burning more than anything else and acts on his desires, he will be innocent of it. If what seems to be Yandell's form of argument is to be acceptable, we should conclude that no flag burning can be evidence against the hypothesis that the Lord Mayor of London both despises flag burning more than anything else and is acting on his desires. But it is quite easy to imagine a flag burning that would provide evidence against this proposition. Suppose we see what looks, for all the world, like the Lord Mayor knowingly and willingly burning a flag. This fact, coupled with the hypothesis that someone has FGH above entails the improbable proposition that our eyes are deceiving us. This makes the fact that it looks for all the world as if the Lord Mayor is knowingly and willingly burning a flag evidence against the claim that someone has FGH above.

In general it is worth bearing in mind here that some fact F about some evil h makes h good evidence for atheism if theism coupled with F entails some proposition Q that is improbable. But h will nonetheless have the property that if theism is true, Q is true. Hence, even if h is such that if theism is true, Q is true, that does not prelude arguing from F to atheism on the grounds that (i) Q is probably false and (ii) since theism and F entail Q, theism is probably false too. Thus if it turned out that some obvious fact F

about some evil, coupled with theism, entailed some claim that was improbable, that would give F evidential weight against theism.

Perhaps we have missed something. Perhaps Yandell does not think that the argument form we have attributed to him is, in general, acceptable but rather that there is something special about his property P that precludes the possibility of some obvious fact about some evil, coupled with theism, entailing a proposition that is improbable. If that is what Yandell thinks, it is puzzling that he doesn't provide any reason which might support P's being special in this way. Let us concede, generously, that what we have said so far is not decisive: not every instance of an invalid argument form is itself invalid.

To complete our case against Yandell, let us reflect a little on the concept of an evil's being evidence for atheism. Clearly, we cannot here do justice to the wealth of literature on the nature of evidence here. An account of the nature of the evidence relation is a difficult and demanding project. So we need to proceed carefully. To begin, here are a few terminological stipulations: We shall call an evil 'inscrutable' if and only if, for any state of affairs S we are aware of, either we can see that S is not a morally sufficient reason for an agent to have freely and knowingly permitted it, or we can't see how S is a morally sufficient reason for an agent to have freely and knowingly permitted it. We shall call an evil 'gratuitous' if and only if it has the following property: If any being freely and knowingly permitted that evil, then that being had no morally sufficient reason to permit that evil. We shall now list some hypotheses that can't be ruled out a priori but which are potentially relevant to the question at hand.

(1)   Some evils are inscrutable.[6]

(2)   Inscrutability is a reliable indicator of gratuitousness.

(3)   The fact that some evils are inscrutable is best explained, at least in part, by the fact that many evils are gratuitous.

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[6] The most popular arguments from evil these days include something like this premise. A fair sampling will include William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism" and "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," both in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*; Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, as well as "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* (1989) and "The 'Inductive' Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," *Philosophical Topics* (1988), the latter co-authored with Stephen Wykstra; Michael Tooley, "The Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives 5*; Michael Martin, chapter 14, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990); David Conway, "The philosophical problem of evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1988); Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*.

(4)   Many people's distributions of subjective probabilities are such that the discovery of certain facts about evil (e.g. the magnitude of evil, or the inscrutability of certain evils) enjoins them, by the normal calculus of probabilistic belief revision, to lower the probability they assign to theism.

(5)   The following counterfactual is true of many, even most, of those inscrutable evils from which people infer gratuitousness: Were the evil not gratuitous, what those people would have to go on would likely be different in such a way that they would not be inclined to infer gratuitousness.

Without prejudging the details of a proper account of the evidence relation, we still feel rather well placed to say this: out of some or all of the five conditions above can be constructed a sufficient condition for an evil's being evidence for atheism. Of course, we cannot prove that this is so. But it seems to us that to concede (1) to (5) but to deny that evil ever counts as evidence for atheism is to set the standards of the evidence relation objectionably high—so high, in fact, that it seems to us that one will then be forced to take seriously skepticism of a very general sort about whether we can ever have evidence for facts about the external world. Assuming that such skepticism cannot be vindicated (as we must assume in a short paper like this one), we should take care not to set the standards for evidence so high.

We haven't claimed, of course, that (1) to (5) are all true. But we have said that if they are true, then some facts about evil are evidence for atheism. It is clear enough where we are going from here. We cannot show a priori that any of (1) to (5) are false. (Or at least we can't see how this can be done a priori.) So we can't show a priori that no facts about evil are evidence for atheism. Note that this result extends equally to any other a priori argument for our conclusion.

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Perhaps we should not interpret the claim 'Evidential arguments from evil can be dismissed a priori' as the claim that evil can be rejected as evidence for theism on a priori grounds alone. Suppose we interpret it as the claim that it can be shown a priori that no one could be justified in believing that any horror is gratuitous. This claim can quickly be dismissed. Sure enough, the considerations of the last section do not render this issue

otiose. It is possible to have evidence for a proposition and yet fail to be justified in believing it. Yet the following considerations seem decisive.

First, any particular claim may be made in many different epistemic contexts. We might argue that there are many assassinations these days in the context of ordinary life, but we might instead argue for that claim in the context of serious metaphysics, where the ontological status of events is in question. It seems at least plausible to suggest that the standards of justification are different in each of these contexts. One might usefully think of justification here in terms of being able to meet certain contextually salient challenges; and so while the content of the claim 'There are many assassinations these days' might not vary from epistemic context to context, the standards of justification might.[7] The same goes for gratuitous evil. In the context of philosophical debate about the problem of evil, the standards of justification for "If any agent deliberately allowed that evil, then that agent certainly had no morally justifying reason for doing so' or 'Nothing could justify that evil' may be rather different from the standards that apply in ordinary life. If the reader finds this way of viewing justification plausible, she ought quickly to concede that it is asking too much to suppose that we can show a priori that in no context can anyone's belief in gratuitous evil be reckoned justified.

Second, suppose someone was independently justified in believing that there was no well-intentioned agent that oversaw the course of history. Then that person would be well-placed to justify a belief in gratuitous evil. For, after all, it would be quite remarkable were there to be no gratuitous evil in a world where there was no such being orchestrating the distribution of value. Thus, to show that a priori that no one could be justified in believing that some evils are gratuitous would require that we show a priori that no one could be justified on any grounds in believing that there was no well-intentioned being overseeing the course of history. It goes without saying that the latter demand constitutes a tall order indeed.

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[7] The suggestion that the standards of justification might be context-dependent in this way has been independently made to one or both of us by William Alston, Michaelis Michael and David Lewis. This idea can be put to work in a relevant alternatives account of justification: the relevant alternatives that need ruling out for justification to be enjoyed might vary from context to context.

3

The preceding considerations lead quite naturally to a reformulation of the idea that we can dismiss arguments from evil on a priori grounds. Perhaps we can argue, a priori, that no one could be justified in atheism on the basis of facts about evil. This suggestion is immune to the two points made in the preceding section. The point that perhaps one can be justified in claiming 'Nothing could justify evil' in a non-theological context where various supernatural possibilities do not figure among the range of possibilities being considered hardly cuts ice here, since the atheist is in a dialectical context where those supernatural possibilities are very much to the point. Similarly, if belief that an evil has no morally justifying reason is only justified in a context where theism is not seriously being considered by the epistemic parties concerned, then such a belief can hardly be a stepping stone to justified atheistic belief. Meanwhile, the observation that someone might be justified in believing in gratuitous evil because she is independently justified in rejected the hypothesis of a well-intentioned overseer does nothing to show that facts about evil might form the rational basis for atheism.

And, once again, the results of section 1 are relevant but not decisive. There is, in principle, some room for claiming that we cannot justifiably believe atheism on the basis of facts about evil even though evil is not, altogether, evidentially impotent.

Suppose someone is not antecedently justified in assigning theism a low probability. How will she be justified in believing in gratuitous evil? At bottom, by being justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism. By 'theodical story' we mean a story that is compatible with theism and which, if true, would lead us to expect that there would be the sort of distribution and amount of suffering that we find in our world. Here is a smattering of such stories:

- The precise distribution of particles in this cosmos is aesthetically more pleasing *sub specie aeternitatis* than any other possible distribution, and aesthetic value is the ultimate test of the moral worth of any possible cosmos.

- If God permitted significantly less suffering, that would either require large-scale intervention in the world on God's behalf or the absence of certain important goods that actually obtain. But those goods are worth having; and the disvalue of the massive irregularity produced by large-scale intervention would outweigh the value gained by the diminution of suffering.

- There are good-making properties that we are wholly ignorant of and for the sake of which God justifiably permits the actual distribution and amount of suffering.

The reader may well find some or all of these stories fairly implausible, even if she is a theist. No matter. We use them merely to illustrate what we mean by 'theodical story'. The atheist who deploys facts about evil to justify his atheistic belief will, clearly, want to be justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism.

In the final analysis, there are two ways that, in the context of philosophical discussion about arguments from evil, someone might be justified in believing in gratuitous evil: she is independently justified in assigning a low probability to the claim that there is a well-intentioned agent that oversees the course of history or she is justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism. If her atheism is based on facts about evil, then the second disjunct will be operative.

Can the atheist be justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism? This question is absolutely central to current philosophical debate over the argument from evil. Our topic, however, is slightly more restricted that. We want to know whether one can, on a priori grounds alone, answer that question in the negative. Any attempt to combat the atheist by appealing to empirical evaluations of the human being's cognitive capacities or tendentious assumptions about whether the atheist's cognitive mechanisms are working properly or appeals to purported divine revelation are wholly irrelevant here. Do any utterly platitudinous or self-evident propositions combine to defeat the atheologian who assigns a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism?

If there is an a priori argument against the atheist's justifiably assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism, it will likely stem from the following concessions. (i) We are finite beings. (ii) For any finite being, there will be many theodical stories that such a being has never examined carefully. (iii) Finite beings can never be sure that they have a complete list of all the values that could figure in God's reasons for permitting the amount and distribution of suffering. (iv) These are all platitudes. Even granting this much, we see no argument a priori for concluding that the atheist is not justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism. An analogy would be useful here.

Let 'the Data' be what physicists would cite in support of special and general relativity. Let 'a Euclidean story' be a story that, when combined with Euclidean geometry, renders that Data likely. Poincare, in effect, once suggested the outlines of such a story: we live in a Euclidean sphere with a universal deforming force in operation. That force operates in such a way that, as a material being moves from the center to the edge, it shrinks.[8] (Poincare observed that, were the beings to be unaware of the deforming force, they would be led to construct a non-Euclidean geometry.)

This much seems true: physicists become justified in believing that space in non-Euclidean when confronted with the Data either because they already justifiedly assigned a low probability to the hypothesis that space is Euclidean (hereafter 'Euclideanism') or because they justifiedly assigned a low probability to 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism. Of course, they did not have any reason to assign a low probability to Euclideanism independently of the data. Thus, if physicists become justified in believing non-Euclideanism when confronted with the Data, they justifiedly assigned a low probability to 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism.

Let's consider the skeptical suggestion that physicist did not become justified in believing non-Euclideanism on the basis of the Data. The right diagnosis of the history of skepticism is standardly taken to be this: skeptics set the standards for justification too high. Their a prioristic arguments worked well against opponents who shared incredibly high standards for justification but who did not realize the skeptical consequences of those standards. Yet we can stably resist skepticism by embracing rather lower standards for justification. Certainly, it is no a priori truth that we ought to strive to give up on beliefs that fail to meet the standards that the skeptic sets. The price for avoiding skepticism is that we must not set our normative standards for belief too high. But that is a price we are happy to pay; certainly, it doesn't contravene anything utterly platitudinous or self-evident. We assume that our readers will agree that one cannot show a priori that no finite being can justifiably believe in non-Euclidean geometry.

That brings us to the conclusion that physicists were justified in assigning low probability to 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism. This conclusion provides

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[8] H. Poincare, *Science and Hypothesis* (New York: Dover, 1952), chapter 4. While we find the example useful, we wish to distance ourselves from the conventionalism about geometry that Poincare was in the business of endorsing.

us with some useful points of comparison with the atheological case. Physicists certainly didn't entertain or work through all the possible Euclidean stories. Nor did they feel sure that they had thought of all the possible sorts of physical quantities, nor even that their list of the quantities and forces that actually obtain was complete. Yet they were justified in believing non-Euclideanism and in rejecting 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism. By parity of reasoning, then, it is not necessary for the atheist to evaluate all the theodical stories in order to be justified in assigning a low probability to "Some theodical story is true' on theism. Nor is it necessary for him to be sure that his list of the kinds of value be complete.

Of course, the Data that physicists had to go on in affirming non-Euclideanism was a rich body of evidence. One might object that the analogy of the last paragraph is apt only if there is an analogously rich body of evidence available to the atheist, claiming that the analogy breaks down at this point. But is there *good a priori reason* to think that the atheist's body of information about the distribution and kinds of evil, about the inscrutability of various evils does not constitute an analogously rich body of evidence? We don't see that there is.

In light of all this, we offer the following argument:

1. There is no a priori argument to the effect that the physicist   is not justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism.

2. There is no a priori argument to show that the atheist's probabilistic evaluation of 'Some theodical story is true' on theism is not on an epistemic par with the physicist's evaluation of 'Some Euclidean story is true' on Euclideanism.

Therefore,

3. There is no a priori argument to show that the atheist is not justified in assigning a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism.

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Perhaps the idea that evidential arguments from evil can be dismissed a priori can be interpreted as the theist thinking to herself: "I can readily convince myself that no atheological argument will *show me* that I am not justified in believing in God. So such

arguments will not be of epistemic interest to me." How could the theist try to convince herself of this? She could think the following: "Well, come what may, I can cling onto the belief that I am justified in theism. Whenever I am presented with an argument whose conclusion conflicts with that belief, I will simply reject one of the premises. I will, in effect, view the argument as a reductio of the disjunction formed by premises. If the atheist thinks he can convince me that I am not justified in my theism, I can see, without even conducting any empirical investigation or without even attending to the details of his argument, that he cannot convince me. Perhaps he is justified in believing atheism on the basis of the premises. I don't care about that. As van Fraassen notes in a different context: "What sort of criticism is it to note that I could, without flaunting the bounds of rationality, have taken a different stand? How much pause should that give me?"[9] What is important is that I will continue to take myself to be justified in believing theism and I can see well enough that nothing can convince me otherwise. To this end, I shall refuse to assign a low probability to 'Some theodical story is true' on theism. And so long as I am steadfast in this refusal, the dialectical force of atheological arguments will be nullified. In this way, I can dismiss atheological arguments from evil."

Would a theist who was committed to defending the justificatory status of her theism in this "come hell or high water" fashion rightly infer that evidential arguments from evil were of no interest to her? Hardly. For even if such arguments did not suffice to convince her that she was not justified in believing theism, they might suffice to convince her to abandon some other belief. How? Well the premises of the atheological argument might be propositions she believes herself and the form of inference one she finds compelling. If confronted with such an argument, it is clear that our theist will not jettison theism. But, if she is reasonable, she will jettison one of the beliefs she previously held. In short, the argument will make it clear to the theist that theism has a certain cost, namely giving up something or other that she previously believed. She would be quite wrong, then, to think that evidential arguments from evil were of no interest to her. On the contrary, such arguments might well reveal certain costs of theism—costs by the theist's own lights.

So are there arguments from evil that will reveal to us theists various costs of our theism, costs by our own lights? For theists, the whole point of the philosophical debate

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[9] *Laws and Symmetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 179.

concerning the problem of evil, properly conceived, is to work out the answer to this question.