

THE MODERATELY SCEPTICAL THEIST AND THE PROBLEM OF (THE SHEER QUANTITY OF) EVIL

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Abstract

One way to rebut the standard evidential problem of evil is to develop a sceptical form of theism. The resulting position – sceptical theism – is a sophisticated philosophical elaboration on the traditional claim that God works in mysterious ways. Yet sceptical theism is contentious because it has a quite natural tendency to entail a degree of scepticism in other areas of discourse that is normally taken to be unacceptable. To curb this tendency a *moderately* sceptical theism can be developed that nevertheless retains the benefit of rebutting the standard evidential problem of evil – the moderately sceptical theist attempts to steer a middle course between the Charybdis of mysticism and the Scylla of evil. However, a new evidential problem can be developed and reworked in a formal Bayesian framework. There are various ways to mitigate the new evidential problem and my reworked version, but none of these ways is open to the moderately sceptical theist – her particular ship, I argue, sails too close to Scylla. The moral is quite intuitive: if evil matters at all, then the sheer quantity of evil ensures that it matters a lot.

I

Among contemporary philosophers of religion there is general consensus that *if* there is a problem presented for theism by the facts of evil, it is an evidential one, not a logical one. However, even granted that there is an evidential problem at all, there is no such consensus as to how serious it is, nor even as to what *kind* it is. What Plantinga (1996a:69) calls the ‘*pastoral, or religious, or existential* problem of evil’ – a problem that arises in the believer’s *life*, for example when she comes to mistrust God due to the particularly emotive evidence of personal bereavement – we might call a pre-philosophical or non-epistemic problem for the theist. And among the more straightforwardly philosophical evidential problems – problems that bring into doubt what we might call the positive epistemic status¹ of theism – there are at least two kinds we might distinguish: inductive and abductive.² Here I will focus exclusively on the inductive problem.

In **II** I will outline this kind of evidential problem in one form. However, not only does this form of the problem have some difficult commitments, there is available a sophisticated if contentious resolution: *sceptical* theism. Therefore in **III** I will present, in a formal Bayesian framework and in more detail, a second form of the inductive evidential problem of evil. This second form avoids the difficult commitments of the first form, but I will also need to introduce my own alterations in order to overcome a different objection. Finally in **IV** I will argue that this altered second form of the inductive evidential problem of evil is indelible given a particular manifestation of the sceptical resolution offered by some theists to the first form; namely, the *moderately* sceptical resolution.

II.i

I will call the following the *Old Argument*:

- (1) Gratuitous evils exists
- (2) If God exists, gratuitous evils do not
- (3) God does not exist

1 Cf. Chisholm (1989).

2 This distinction is from Russell (1996:193-4). By ‘abductive’ is meant inference to the best explanation. The term ‘inductive’ is being used broadly to name non-deductive inference that is not inference to the best explanation. The form of evidential problem that utilizes abductive reasoning has been reinvigorated by Draper (1996a), who finds it in Hume (1998); his direct respondents are Van Inwagen (1996) and Plantinga (1996b).

An evil is *gratuitous* iff there is no sufficient reason for God to permit it.³ God is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being. Rowe (1996a) thinks it probable that the theist will accept (2). As both Alston (1996) and Hasker (1992) point out, this is far from uncontroversial. However, this debate gives rise to issues similar to those of the so-called logical problem of evil, and I will not enter it here. Since the argument is valid by *modus tollens*, then, I will focus on (1).

We might think it reasonable to accept (1) on the grounds that we think it *seems to us* that some evils are gratuitous. Assume we do think this. Then to justify our belief in (1) we would need to invoke something like the following principle of credulity: inferences from seeming-so to being-so have prior but defeatable epistemic justification. Other philosophers, however, have not attempted to defend this principle in so *general* a form. The principle that Chisholm (1957:83) endorses (in a different context) applies only to perceptual evidence about sensible characteristics, and even the derestricted form that Swinburne (1991:254-60) argues for applies only to positive evidence. But for it to seem to us that some evils are gratuitous is just for it to seem to us that there is no sufficient reason for God to permit various extant evils. This is *negative* evidence about *non-sensible* characteristics of experience.⁴ So if we are to accept (1) on these grounds, as Rowe suggests, then we are committed to the *general* principle of credulity.⁵

Moreover, even with this principle and our assumption that some evils at least seem gratuitous, we must still show that in the particular case with which we are concerned – our inference to (1) – there are no defeaters. With this catalogue of difficult commitments, it is unsurprising that the bulk of theistic response to the Old Argument has been directed

3 We might attempt to specify further the sufficient reasons God – qua omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being – might have for permitting an evil, *e*, and so flesh-out the necessary and sufficient conditions for *e*'s gratuitousness, like so: God might permit *e* if *e* is necessary for the attainment of some greater good or the avoidance of some evil or conjunction of evils equally bad or worse (where the necessity here is such that God too is bound by it) – God might permit *e* if *e* is *instrumentally justified*. Alston (1996:100-1) notes several problems with this account, but he thinks they could be overcome. I leave my definition unspecific for brevity.

4 Cf. Wykstra (1990:154): 'in appealing to the fawn's suffering he [Rowe] is, after all, appealing not to a 'sensory experience', but to a 'cognized situation'; and Alston (1996:102): '[Rowe attempts] to provide support for a certain very ambitious negative existential claim, viz., that there is (can be) no sufficient divine reason permitting a certain case of suffering.'

5 Rowe (1988:123-4) invokes what can be thought of as a special instance of this: prior but defeatable epistemic justification is granted to inferences from 'All observed A's are B's' to 'All A's are B's'. But this principle of induction, as we might call it, is still ambitiously general.

at (1) and the way in which it is to be supported.

II.ii

Indeed, responses to the Old Argument have proceeded both by undermining the principle outlined above with arguments for a general counter-principle (e.g. Wykstra (1990)) and by citing defeaters for the prior justification of the relevant inferences in the relevant cases (e.g. Fitzpatrick (1981)). Both of these methods are derived from what has become known as *sceptical* theism. All sceptical theists have in common the following *theistic* thesis:

(T) God, who is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being, exists

More importantly the various kinds of sceptical theists invoke additional *sceptical* theses that perform variations on the theme of human cognitive limitation. I will focus on what I will call the *moderately* sceptical theses identified and endorsed by Bergmann (2001:279):

(MS1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are

(MS2) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are

These theses, if true, defeat the prior epistemic justification for our inference from its seeming to us that God has no sufficient reason for permitting an evil, *e*, to its being the case that God has no sufficient reason for so doing. For if the possible goods and evils we know of constitute merely an insignificant proper subset of the possible goods and evils there are, then surely we cannot justifiably infer any important ontological conclusions from the mere fact that no goods or evils we know of give God sufficient reason to permit *e*. Furthermore, the moderately sceptical theist might also maintain:

(MS3) We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils

This thesis entails that *even if* we knew of all the possible goods and evils, and so were perhaps justified in inferring from ‘There is no good *we know of*’ to ‘There is no good *simpliciter*’, it might still be the case that we lack crucial knowledge about the sufficient reasons God might have for permitting *e*. Given (MS3) we might well know of the greater good, *g*, that, as it happens, is a sufficient reason for God to permit *e* – *e* being a necessary condition of *g* – and yet we might still not know *that g plays this role* in God’s sufficient

reasons. Together the three moderately sceptical theses block *any* important inference from the observance that ‘No good we know is known by us to justify e ’ (and, incidentally, they do so whilst remaining at least compatible with the dubiously general principle of credulity, since in a sense all they do is posit type-specific defeaters).

Intuitions may differ over the initial plausibility of (MS1)-(MS3). I, for instance, find them appealing. Indeed, sceptical theses like these are just what convinced Rowe (1996b:267) to say of the Old Argument (specifically of his support for (1)): ‘I now think this argument is, at best, a weak argument. To shore it up we would need some reason to think it likely that the goods we know of (the A s we’ve observed) are representative of the goods there are... I now propose to abandon this argument altogether.’ Having sketched the background of this debate I can now look at the argument Rowe replaces the Old Argument with – an argument I will then modify so that Bergmann’s subsequent objections are ineffective and so that its own effectiveness does not rely on rejecting one or more of (MS1)-(MS3).

III.i

I will call the following the *New Argument*:

- (4) e_1 is inscrutable
(therefore it is epistemically more probable than otherwise that)
- (3) God does not exist

An evil is *inscrutable* iff it seems on reflection gratuitous, and e_1 is just some particular evil we know to occur. Unlike the Old Argument, the New Argument is not deductively valid. Rather the relationship between its premise and its conclusion is one of (loosely) inductive support. The truth of the premise is meant to add to the positive epistemic status of the conclusion. I will postpone the many issues regarding the seriousness of this argument, which will include Bergmann’s objection and my response to it, until we have seen, using the probability calculus and some very plausible assumptions, how it works.

Let ‘ G ’ be the proposition ‘God exists’, so that its negation, $\neg G$, is our conclusion (3). Let ‘ P ’ be the proposition ‘ e_1 is inscrutable’, which is our premise (4). Let ‘ k ’ be our background knowledge, which is here defined loosely as the intersection of theist and non-theist belief. As such k will include our tautological evidence. It will also include some common beliefs reached by reflection on the argument of evil and knowledge of the occurrence of evils *including* the relevant ones. It will not include question-begging beliefs regarding P or G . If k were to include G , for example, then the prior probability of G would be 1. And finally,

we are concerned with *epistemic* probability.⁶ The New Argument, then, amounts to the claim that P is some kind of evidence against G – it reduces the positive epistemic status of G . This is just to say that the probability of G on P and k is less than that of G on k alone, symbolized thus: $\Pr(G|P \wedge k) < \Pr(G|k)$.

The relevant manipulation of Bayes's theorem is this:

$$\Pr(G|P \wedge k) / \Pr(G|k) = \Pr(P|G \wedge k) / \Pr(P|k)$$

The New Argument needs to show that the division on the left of the equality sign yields a fraction (i.e. that $\Pr(G|P \wedge k) < \Pr(G|k)$), and it can do this by showing that the division on the right does so. This, it turns out, is quite straightforward. First we must invoke the following elimination rule:⁷

$$\Pr(P|k) = (\Pr(G|k) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + (\Pr(\neg G|k) \times \Pr(P|\neg G \wedge k))$$

Then we must determine the value of some of the variables. Trivially, note that $1 - \Pr(G|k) = \Pr(\neg G|k)$.⁸ More substantively, note that $\neg G$ and k together entail P . As noted above, by stipulation k includes the occurrence of e_1 , although also by stipulation it does not include anything about e_1 's inscrutability or otherwise. But e_1 's inscrutability is entailed by $\neg G$. If God does not exist ($\neg G$) then it is not the case that there is sufficient reason for Him to permit e_1 . And if it is not the case that there is sufficient reason for Him to permit e_1 , and we know this, then it will not reasonably seem to us that there is.⁹ If God does not exist and our background knowledge is as it has been stipulated, then, it will seem to us both as though there is no sufficient reason for God to permit e_1 and as though e_1 occurs, which

6 A detailed account of epistemic probability is given by Swinburne (1973), who relies heavily on Carnap (1950). Epistemic probability is that based on evidence – it is quantitative, not classificatory or comparative. As Plantinga points out (1996a), the notion of an epistemically probable proposition is also a normative one, similar to that of warranted belief or positive epistemic status. He is critical of the viability of the whole project of epistemic probability, especially its use here, and I will take account of this in **iv.i**. For now, as with most of the literature on the topic, when I speak of probability it will be of epistemic probability.

7 This rule, a version of which Plantinga and Draper call a 'Weighted Average Principle', follows from the probability calculus. For more, cf. Draper (1996b:181). And for more on the crucial axioms – of addition (or disjunction) and multiplication (or conjunction) – cf. Carnap (1950:316-7), Swinburne (1973:66-82), and Plantinga (1979:11).

8 This follows from what is usually taken to be the first axiom of the probability calculus: $0 \leq \Pr(A|k) \leq 1$.

9 Note that this is not to beg the question against the sceptical theist by covertly assuming the contrapositive of the general principle of credulity in **ii.i**, which is part of what the New Argument was meant to avoid. Rather this is an inference from *knowing-not* to *seeming-not*, not one from *not-being-so* to *not-seeming-so*.

is just to say that P . So $\neg G$ and k together entail P . This means that $\Pr(P | \neg G \wedge k) = 1$. Substituting these two values into the elimination rule we get:

$$\Pr(P|k) = (\Pr(G|k) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + ((1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times 1)$$

Although it looks messy, the following arithmetic is simple and uncontentious:¹⁰

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(P|k) &= (\Pr(G|k) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + ((1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times 1) \\ &= (\Pr(G|k) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + ((1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times (\Pr(P|G \wedge k) + 1 - \Pr(P|G \wedge k))) \\ &= (\Pr(G|k) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + ((1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) \times (1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times \\ &\quad (1 - \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) \\ &= ((\Pr(G|k) + 1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) + (1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times (1 - \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) \\ &= \Pr(P|G \wedge k) + (1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times (1 - \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) \end{aligned}$$

Regarding the final line, if the multiplication on the right of the addition sign yields a number greater than 0, then $\Pr(P|k)$ will be greater than $\Pr(P|G \wedge k)$ (by precisely however much that number is greater than 0). And, due to the manipulation of Bayes's theorem above, this is just the conclusion the New Argument needs in order to show that $\Pr(G|k)$ is greater than $\Pr(G|P \wedge k)$, and thus to show that the inscrutability of e_1 is *to some degree* evidence against the existence of God. The multiplication on the right of the addition sign will indeed yield a positive number given two assumptions, both of which are eminently plausible. First assume that $\Pr(G|k) < 1$, and second assume that $\Pr(P|G \wedge k) < 1$. In this way, both of the values to be multiplied will be greater than 0, which ensures that their product will be greater than 0. All that remains at this stage, then, is to support these two assumptions.

I take it that most theists entering into the debate about evil would accept that the existence of God is somewhat less than absolutely certain (i.e. $\Pr(G|k) < 1$). Even those who endorse an ontological argument can accept this, for the probability we are concerned with is epistemic, and surely it is only reasonable to allow *some* degree of uncertainty in any one of our beliefs. And even if some theists wish to deny this defeasibility in the special case of their beliefs about God's existence, those who rely on teleological arguments for example, or on any Swinburne-type balance of probabilities, will surely not follow suit.

The second assumption, that the inscrutability of e_1 given the existence of God and our background knowledge is less than absolutely certain (i.e. $\Pr(P|G \wedge k) < 1$), is equally

10 Cf. Bergmann (2001:280).

plausible, although more apparent objections arise. First note that what is at stake is the probability of e_1 *specifically* being inscrutable, not simply that of the inscrutability of some evil or other. Some theists maintain that God's existence entails the existence of evil, but this would not be enough to cause trouble for the assumption. They would also have to maintain that God's existence entails the existence of inscrutable evil, perhaps by way of some doctrine of divine silence. This may indeed be plausible, but again it would not be enough to cause trouble for the assumption. The theist who wanted to reject this assumption must further maintain that God's existence entails the existence and inscrutability of e_1 *specifically*, and to do so would surely prove highly problematic, particularly given that they would also have to show that a similar entailment relation obtained for every possible substitution instance of e_1 . It is reasonable to conclude that the two assumptions are justified. So P is, at least to some degree, evidence against G .

III.ii

Crucially, Bergmann (2001:280-1) agrees: 'it looks as if Rowe is right, that P lowers the probability of G and that P is, therefore, a reason for $\neg G$.' However, he goes on to add that 'the problem with Rowe's argument is that he doesn't properly address the concern that P fails to provide *significant* support for $\neg G$.' This is to say that the New Argument, although sound, does not constitute a *serious* evidential problem of evil for theism. And for all I have said above, this seems correct. The closer that $\Pr(G|k)$ and $\Pr(P|G \wedge k)$ are to 1, the closer $\Pr(P|G \wedge k)$ will be to $\Pr(P|k)$, so the closer $\Pr(G|P \wedge k)$ will be to $\Pr(G|k)$. But the closer $\Pr(G|P \wedge k)$ is to $\Pr(G|k)$, the weaker the evidence P provides for $\neg G$.

In order to obviate this problem with the New Argument, Rowe suggests that the probability of God's existence prior to the evidence of the inscrutability of e_1 is something like 0.5 (i.e. $\Pr(G|k) \approx 0.5$). Plantinga (1998:532) 'can't see the slightest reason to think this is the right value,' but even granted that Rowe can give good reason, Bergmann correctly points out that, in order to make the New Argument present a *serious* problem, Rowe must go further and give good reason for the *low* probability of e_1 's inscrutability given God's existence and our background knowledge (perhaps something like $\Pr(P|G \wedge k) \approx 0.2$). Rowe's (1996b:276) argument for this – effectively an argument against the probability of divine silence – tries to use the theist's popular parent analogy¹¹ against him: 'when God permits horrendous suffering for the sake of some good, if that good is *beyond our ken*,

11 Cf. Wykstra (1990:155-6), and (1996:139-45).

God will make every effort to be consciously present to us during our period of suffering.’

But such a claim is useless when separated from a rejection of at least one of (MS1)-(MS3). For without such a rejection it may very well be the case, for all we know about goods and their various entailment relations, that God *does* make every effort but that his efforts are thwarted by his silence being a necessary condition for attaining some greater good than that of our reassurance. And to counter this objection by inferring anything from the fact that we cannot think of any cases where this thwarting might occur is merely to lapse back into the controversial step of the Old Argument – the support for (1). Moreover, arguing in this way, Rowe might very well become entrenched in a debate over what precise values bound positive epistemic status.¹² And so it seems that Rowe’s defence of the New Argument, in order to be effective at all, must reject one or more of (MS1)-(MS3). There is, however, a way to make the New Argument a *serious* problem without rejecting (MS1)-(MS3). Only then can the evidential facts of evil amount to a serious problem for the theist who accepts these theses.

III.iii

By exploiting the specificity of (4), that e_1 is inscrutable (seemingly gratuitous), my forthcoming alteration to the New Argument respects the common intuition that the sheer amount of evil in the world is somehow relevant in this debate. First, unlike Rowe, I allow that both $\Pr(G|k)$ and $\Pr(P|G \wedge k)$ might be extremely high. For purely illustrative purposes I will assign some precise numerical values. Let $\Pr(G|k) = 0.99$, which most theists will grant is generous (or at least unobjectionable). And let us for the sake of argument put much faith in both the doctrine of divine silence and the idea that God’s existence necessitates the existence of some evil, so that $\Pr(P|G \wedge k) = 0.98$. Using the methods of III.i we can determine the prior probability of e_1 ’s inscrutability like so:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(P|k) &= \Pr(P|G \wedge k) + (1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times (1 - \Pr(P|G \wedge k)) \\ &= 0.98 + (1 - 0.99) \times (1 - 0.98) \\ &= 0.9802 \end{aligned}$$

Then we have the values of enough variables to go back to Bayes’s theorem and do some more arithmetic:

12 This is highlighted by Wykstra (1996:130-2) and responded to by Rowe (1996b:272-4). This kind of debate surely contributes to the motivation for Plantinga’s (1996a) fundamental objection to utilizing epistemic probability calculus here. My altered argument can avoid entering into or endorsing any such debate.

$$\Pr(G|P \wedge k) / \Pr(G|k) = \Pr(P|G \wedge k) / \Pr(P|k)$$

$$\Pr(G|P \wedge k) / 0.99 = 0.98 / 0.9802$$

$$\Pr(G|P \wedge k) = 0.98 / 0.9802 \times 0.99$$

$$\Pr(G|P \wedge k) = 0.9897980004$$

We can see that the probability of God's existence given e_1 's inscrutability is less than the probability of God's existence otherwise, so e_1 's inscrutability is to some degree evidence against the existence of God. However, it is apparently not very significant evidence, for the existence of God is left looking extremely probable. Herein lies the force of Bergmann's objection and the burdens it puts on Rowe. But now suppose there are more inscrutable evils, in which case we can construct more propositions similar to P but independent of P , like so:

$$P_1 \quad e_2 \text{ is inscrutable}$$

$$P_2 \quad e_3 \text{ is inscrutable}$$

$$P_3 \quad e_4 \text{ is inscrutable}$$

$$P_n \quad e_{n+1} \text{ is inscrutable}$$

We might then construct an argument by iterating the method of the New Argument. Call this the *Quantity Argument*. In the Quantity Argument each P -type premise is considered, its effect on the probability of God's existence is determined in the above fashion, before it is incorporated into k . For example, and again I must stress that the precise numerical values are purely for illustrative purposes, having considered P and incorporated it into k so that $\Pr(G|k) = 0.9897980004$, we might consider P_1 like so

$$\Pr(P_1|k) = \Pr(P_1|G \wedge k) + (1 - \Pr(G|k)) \times (1 - \Pr(P_1|G \wedge k))$$

$$= 0.98 + (1 - 0.9897980004) \times (1 - 0.98)$$

$$= 0.98020404$$

Going back to Bayes's theorem again, having divided out in advance:

$$\Pr(G|P_1 \wedge k) = \Pr(P_1|G \wedge k) / \Pr(P_1|k) \times \Pr(G|k)$$

$$= 0.98 / 0.98020404 \times 0.9897980004$$

$$= 0.9895919633$$

Thus the probability of God's existence given P_1 when our background knowledge includes P is ever so slightly less than the probability of God's existence given merely P and our unexpanded background knowledge. But in the Quantity Argument this could be the first of many iterations of the method of the New Argument. Let us, for example,

assume that there are 500 seemingly gratuitous evils. By the end of the Quantity Argument the probability of God's existence given P_{499} , when our background knowledge has been gradually but considerably expanded to include P and P_1-P_{498} , comes out as 0.004127156. It seems that there *is* a *serious* evidential problem of evil – it can be given voice by the Quantity Argument:¹³

- (5) e_1 and e_2 and e_3 and ... e_n are inscrutable
(therefore it is highly epistemically probable that)
- (3) God does not exist

IV.i

However, some theists are unconcerned by the New Argument because they do not accept its premise, and those theists will not be worried by the Quantity Argument either, for (5) is very similar *in kind* to (4). According to those we might call *less* sceptical theists, like Swinburne (1998), who argue for the complete success of some theodicy or coherent conjunction thereof, it is just not the case that some evils, on reflection, seem gratuitous. And for those we might call *more* sceptical theists, like Wykstra (1990), who reject the Old Argument because of a very general epistemological principle that conditions beliefs about appearances, it is just not the case that we can rationally assert a P -type proposition (or any conjunction thereof, like (5)).

Nor will the Quantity Argument worry those theists who failed to be impressed by either the Old Argument or the New Argument because they think that the whole project of assigning and balancing epistemic probabilities is completely misguided, at least when it comes to theism. Plantinga (1996a:70) has argued on the one hand that 'contemporary accounts of probability don't provide the resources for a proper discussion of this objection,' and on the other hand that in any case, 'the most important question here does not concern the *propositional* warrant or lack thereof displayed by belief in God; the real question here concerns the *nonpropositional* warrant, if any, enjoyed by this belief.'

Of course these theists might be wrong, and there is certainly still much room for debate as to the correctness or otherwise of the various and often competing theodicies, theistic

13 I assume in the above that incorporating the evidence of the inscrutability of one evil into our background knowledge does not positively affect the probability of the inscrutability of another evil becoming evidence given this new and slightly expanded background knowledge. This assumption is probably false, but it would be easy enough to jettison, except that the illustrative numbers would get even more unwieldy.

doctrines, and epistemological principles, but I would not presume to decide on all this here – I do not claim that the Quantity Argument gives voice to a serious evidential problem of evil for theism *per se*. It only does so for the theist who cannot reject its premise, as, I will now argue, the moderately sceptical theist cannot.

IV.ii

Suppose that a theist is *moderately* sceptical if she accepts (T), (MS1), and (MS2) – she thinks that God exists and that we have no good reason to think that the goods and evils we know of are representative of the goods and evils there are.¹⁴ Recall that a *P*-type proposition is one that says of some evil we know to occur that it is inscrutable, where to be inscrutable is to seem on reflection gratuitous, and to be gratuitous is to lack a sufficient reason for the divine permission of. Two more terms of art will be useful.

First let us say that to have *epistemic access* to a good or evil is just to be in a cognitive situation such that it is possible to know of that good or evil. Second in what follows I use the term ‘likely’ (and its cognates) to signify a more objective probability than epistemic probability. I make this distinction because I take it that the sizes and proportions of the various sets of goods or evils determines the likelihood of *P*-type propositions coming out true or false regardless of what we think or can know about these sizes and propositions (i.e. regardless of (MS1) and (MS2)). If there are in fact numerically many gratuitous evils, all of which are epistemically accessible, then, other things being equal, it is objectively more *likely* that it will seem to us that some evil is gratuitous. This is not a normative point and bears no simple relationship to epistemic probability.

Consider, then, two parallel but opposing scenarios:¹⁵

Scenario A The set of goods there are is roughly equal in size to the set of evils there are, and the set of goods to which we have epistemic access is miniscule in comparison to the set of goods there are whilst the set of evils to which we have epistemic access is relatively close in size to the set of evils there are, so it is more likely that there will be evils

14 She might also hold (MS3). This would complicate the scenarios that follow, although it could certainly be accounted for. As so often happens in the literature, I leave out this additional issue for the sake of brevity.

15 I assume here that all goods are equally good and all evils equally bad. This sounds wrong at first but there is no established norm as to how we are to *count* goods and evils. This is not meant to be a substantial assumption.

that seem to us to lack a sufficient reason for God to permit – it is more likely that many *P*-type propositions will be true.

Scenario B The set of goods there are is roughly equal in size to the set of evils there are, and the set of evils to which we have epistemic access is miniscule in comparison to the set of evils there are whilst the set of goods to which we have epistemic access is relatively close in size to the set of goods there are, so it is more likely that there will not be evils that seem to us to lack a sufficient reason for God to permit – it is more likely that no or very few *P*-type propositions will be true.

Each of the above scenarios, although inconsistent with each other, is consistent with the conjunction of (T), (MS1), and (MS2). The moderately sceptical theist, then, might consistently hold either that Scenario A represents reality truly or that Scenario B represents reality truly, but not both. And there are several other similar pairs of scenarios. The point I want to make is that the moderately sceptical theist, for all that has been said, has no reason to choose between any of these scenarios. Let the moderately sceptical theist's background knowledge consist of (T), (MS1), (MS2), and tautological knowledge. Then the prior probability of each scenario will be equal.

It might be objected at this point that (T), the existence of God, entails that the set of goods there are will be greater in magnitude than the set of evils there are (although some theists would deny either that the relationship here is one of entailment or that there is any relationship at all). But even in this case, given (MS1) and (MS2), it might turn out that it is more likely that many *P*-type propositions will be true. To see this consider the following scenario:

Scenario C The set of goods there are is twice the size of the set of evils there are, and yet the set of goods to which we have epistemic access is merely one-tenth the size of the set of goods there are whilst the set of evils to which we have access is nine-tenths the size of the set of evils there are, so it is still more likely that there will be many evils that seem to lack a sufficient reason for God to permit.

So, there are scenarios where it turns out more likely that many *P*-type propositions will be true that are consistent with (T) entailing there being (substantially) more goods than

evils, and the moderately sceptical theist has no other resources to rule-out this kind of scenario. So she has at least as much reason as not to accept that one or more evils are inscrutable – she cannot actively reject (4) or (5). Therefore the moderately sceptical theist does not have the resources to properly defuse the Quantity argument. For although she may have other ways to obviate the seriousness of the New Argument, as we have seen Bergmann does, these do not, we have also seen, apply to the Quantity Argument. Evil, in particular the sheer quantity of it, presents a very serious evidential problem for the moderately sceptical theist.

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