Evidential arguments from evil

RICHARD OTTE
University of California at Santa Cruz, USA

Introduction

Recent discussion of the problem of evil has centered around what is known as the probabilistic or evidential argument from evil. According to this argument the evil in our world is evidence against the existence of God, even though evil is logically consistent with God's existing. Based on this it is claimed it is irrational to believe one of the traditional theistic religions, unless there is overwhelming positive evidence to counter this negative evidence. One of the most important and widely discussed versions of this argument is due to Paul Draper.[1] In this paper I will look at Draper's argument and argue that he has made a simple fundamental error; as a result his argument is irrelevant to most theists. After discussing this error in Draper's argument, I will discuss probabilistic arguments from evil from the perspective of confirmation theory. The error in Draper's argument is easily made and could occur in any probabilistic argument from evil; looking at confirmation theory and probabilistic arguments from evil will provide insight into reasoning about evil and belief in God.

Draper's argument

Draper's argument is intended to show that the pain and pleasure in the world that we are aware of gives us a prima facie reason to reject theism. By theism, Draper means there "exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect person who created the universe" (p. 331). Whereas ordinary probabilistic arguments from evil look only at how likely it is that God exists given the evil in the world, Draper approaches the problem differently. Draper claims that previous discussions of the evidential argument from evil are deficient because they fail to take into account alternative explanations of the pain and pleasure in the world. Draper's strategy is to compare theism with an alternative, the hypothesis of indifference, and to see which best explains the

evil in the world. According to the hypothesis of indifference, "neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons" (p. 332). It is clear that theism and the hypothesis of indifference are inconsistent with each other. Draper compares theism (T) and the hypothesis of indifference (HI) by looking at how well they explain the observed human and animal pain and pleasure in our world (O), which he interprets as how likely O is on T and HI. He argues that O is a problem for theism by arguing for principle C:

  C: independent of the observations and testimony O reports, O is much more probable on the assumption that HI is true than on the assumption that theism is true (p. 333).

Draper then introduces some nonstandard probability notation: P(x/y) will be the probability of x, "independent of the observations and testimony O reports", on the assumption that y (p. 333). Given this notation, Draper rewrites C as follows:

  C: P(O/HI) is much greater than P(O/theism) (p. 333).

Draper claims that C is a prima facie reason to reject theism. He then devotes most of his article to arguing for the truth of C.

Although I am skeptical of the whole structure of Draper's argument, I will not focus on my worries about the epistemological framework he assumes. With the exception of some remarks in the conclusion, I will grant that framework for the purposes of discussion and will focus on his argument within that framework. The main problem with Draper's argument is that even if principle C were true, it would have no consequences for the rationality of most theist's religious beliefs. Most theists are not mere theists, but instead are Christians, Muslims, or Jews. So unless principle C gives one a reason to not be a Christian, Muslim, or a Jew, it will not be a successful argument. Since it is clear that Draper does not intend his argument to be restricted to mere theists, we must investigate if his argument applies to Christians, Muslims, and Jews, as well as to mere theists.

To support Draper's position one might appeal to what looks like an obvious argument. Christians, Muslims, and Jews are also theists, simply because they believe that an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being created the universe; Christianity, Islam, and Judaism logically imply theism. Thus one might argue that if we have a reason to not be a theist, we also have a reason to not be a Christian, Muslim, or Jew. However this argument is not persuasive. It might be persuasive if the reason to not be a theist was because theism was logically inconsistent. If so, then Christianity, Islam, and Judaism would be committed to the same logical inconsistency, which would provide an argument that they are irrational. But the problem Draper finds in theism is not that it is logically inconsistent. Rather, he finds

theism problematic because there is a better alternative, the hypothesis of indifference. Draper's reason to reject theism is not because of anything internal to theism, but is because of something external to theism: there is a better alternative that is inconsistent with theism. To conclude from this that we have a reason to reject Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Draper would need to rely on some principle such as the following:

> If hypothesis H implies hypothesis K, and we have a reason to reject K because there is a better alternative hypothesis AH that is inconsistent with K, then we have a reason to reject H because of this alternative hypothesis that is inconsistent with H.

If we let H be Christianity, K be theism and AH be the hypothesis of indifference, then this principle would claim that we have a reason to reject Christianity because the hypothesis of indifference is a better alternative to theism. When stated like this the problems with this principle are evident. The alternative hypothesis may be better than hypothesis K but not better than some hypothesis H that implies K. Similarly, just because the hypothesis of indifference is a better alternative to mere theism does not mean that the hypothesis of indifference is a better alternative to Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. On the contrary, we can easily argue that Christianity, Islam, or Judaism is a better alternative to the hypothesis of indifference.

Draper used principle C to compare theism and the hypothesis of indifference by looking at the probability of the observed evil in our world conditional on each of them. We can follow his reasoning and compare the hypothesis of indifference and Christianity (CH) by looking at the probability of evil conditional on HI and on Christianity. I propose principle C* to be true:

C*: independent of the observations and testimony O reports, O is much more probable on the assumption that Christianity is true then on the assumption that HI is true.

Using Draper's notation, we can rewrite this is follows:

C*: $P(O/CH)$ is much greater than $P(O/HI)$.

Since we are working within Draper's framework, we could reason similarly to Draper and conclude that the truth of C* gives us a prima facie reason to reject the hypothesis of indifference.

Draper spent most of his article arguing for the truth of principle C. Since principles C and C* are logically consistent with each other, we do not need to refute his arguments and argue that C is false in order to argue that C* is true. Fortunately, our argument for the truth of C* can be quite brief. I'm not sure what Draper intends O to include, but it is important to realize that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism logically imply that there is evil in this world, and even imply much about the specific evils that occur. Of course mere

theism itself does not imply this, which is one reason principle C may appear plausible, but Christianity, Islam and Judaism make many claims about evil, pain, and pleasure in the world. Some of these are general claims about the types of evil we find in the world, and others are claims about specific evils. If Draper's O is simply a broad description of the types of pain and pleasure we observe, then Christianity logically implies O. In that case, $P(O/CH) = 1$, which is much greater than $P(O/HI)$. Under this interpretation of O, CH is obviously preferable to HI. If instead we take O to include the specific instances of pain and pleasure that we've actually observed, then of course Christianity doesn't imply O. But since Christianity implies the type of pain and suffering that occur in the world, O will still be much more probable on Christianity than on the hypothesis of indifference. Under this interpretation of O, CH is also preferable to HI, and following Draper's reasoning we conclude that CH is preferable to HI.

We now have two principles, C and C*. For the purposes of argument we will grant that both are true. We can do this because it is logically consistent that CH logically implies T, $P(O/T)$ is low, and that $P(O/CH) = 1$. We can summarize these two principles by: $P(O/CH) > P(O/HI) > P(O/T)$. We also have two arguments: one uses principle C to argue against theism, and the other uses principle C* to argue against the hypothesis of indifference. The question that arises is which one is to be accepted by a theist. If the person is only a theist and is not a Christian, Muslim, or Jew, then principle C would be applicable to his or her beliefs. Draper's argument would then be relevant and worthy of consideration. But consider a theist who is not a mere theist, but instead is a Christian, Muslim, or Jew. Such a person will know that when the hypothesis of indifference is compared with a small part of his or her religious beliefs (simple theism), that the hypothesis of indifference is the better alternative. But when the hypothesis of indifference is compared with his or her complete religious beliefs, the complete religious beliefs are the better alternative. It is clear in this case that the agent has no reason to give up the religious beliefs. Simply because there is better alternative to part of what one believes does not give one a reason to give up one's beliefs; one's total beliefs may be better than the alternative.

If it were legitimate to argue against a Christian, Muslin, or Jew by taking a subset of their beliefs (theism) and showing that the evil in our world is less likely on that subset than on some other hypothesis, a mere theist should be able to reason similarly against someone who accepts the hypothesis of indifference. Someone who believes the hypothesis of indifference believes many other things, and undoubtedly there is a subset of those beliefs that are such that the probability of the evil in our world conditional on it is not as high as it is conditional on mere theism. For example, most people, including

those who accept HI, are not logically omniscient and believe something that is necessarily false. For someone who accepts HI, pick some necessarily false proposition R that they believe. Since this person believes R, this person will also believe or be willing to believe R or not-O. But $P(O/R$ or not-O$) = 0$, and thus we see that there is a subset of what the person who accepts HI believes or is willing to believe that renders O very improbable, even more improbable than O is on mere theism. So unless the believer in HI is logically omniscient, there is a subset of his or her beliefs that makes O very unlikely. If we were to compare this subset of beliefs with mere theism, it is clear that theism would come out ahead and be the better alternative. But surely no believer in HI will see this as a reason to reject HI. For similar reasons no Christian, Muslim, or Jew should accept Draper's argument. The pattern of reasoning Draper uses can be used to support any position; it is completely unconvincing.

So we see that Draper's argument fails because it looks only at a narrow subset of a religious person's beliefs. By focusing on mere theism instead of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, Draper's argument loses all relevance. Even if Draper is correct and principle C is true, this has no implications for the rationality of being a Christian, Muslim, or Jew. They can easily admit that O is unlikely on T, that their religious beliefs logically imply T, and yet they can also consistently hold that O is very likely, even certain, on their religious beliefs. Furthermore, Christians, Muslims, and Jews can appeal to principle C* to support their religious belief and to claim that we have a prima facie reason to reject the hypothesis of indifference.

General probabilistic arguments from evil

We've seen the problem that arose for Draper by looking at simple theism and not Christianity (or Islam or Judaism). Instead of limiting myself to Draper's formulation of the argument, I will now look at this error from the perspective of confirmation theory. Suppose one claims that the evil in the world disconfirms theism, and thus disconfirms Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Confirmation can mean at least two things. It can be taken in the incremental sense, which is that evidence confirms a hypothesis if it raises the probability of the hypothesis, and evidence disconfirms a hypothesis if it lowers the probability of the hypothesis. Or it can be taken in the absolute sense, which is that the probability of the hypothesis on the evidence is high. These two concepts of confirmation are very different, but a strong case can be made that when we claim that some evidence confirms a hypothesis we are normally using the incremental concept of confirmation. For example, it would be odd to say that evil disconfirms theism and yet also claim that evil raises the probability of theism. For this reason I will discuss the probabilistic

argument from evil with respect to incremental confirmation.[2] The same error that Draper made can arise in this framework, and discussing incremental confirmation will provide insight into this type of error.

One basic idea of probabilistic arguments from evil is that theism would be more likely to be true if there were no evil in the world. These arguments claim that the evil in the world lowers the probability of theism: $P(T/O) < P(T)$. But from this it is not legitimate to infer that O also lowers the probability of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. The reason for this is that evidence e may disconfirm a hypothesis H, may even disconfirm hypothesis K, and yet confirm the conjunction H&K. To see this consider the following example due to Carnap.[3]

Suppose ten players participate in a chess tournament. Some of the players are local players, some are from out of town, some are junior players, some are senior players, some are men (M), and some are women (W). Their distribution is given as follows:

	Local players	Strangers
Juniors	M, W, W	M, M
Senior	M, M	W, W, W

Let hypothesis H be that a local player wins, hypothesis K be that a junior wins, and evidence e be that a woman wins. The probability of H on our background information is 1/2, since half of the players are local. The probability of K on our background information is also 1/2, since half of the players are junior. The probability of H&K on the background information is 3/10, because there are three local juniors. Furthermore the probability of H given e is 2/5, since there are five women and only two them are local. Thus e disconfirms H because it lowers the probability of H. Similarly, the probability of K given e is also 2/5, because two of the women are juniors. So e also disconfirms K because it lowers the probability of K. But the probability of H&K given e is 2/5, because two of the women are local juniors; hence e confirms H&K, since the probability of H&K given e is greater than the probability of H&K.

This example shows that even if evidence is negatively relevant to two hypotheses individually, it may be positively relevant to their conjunction. Applying this to the problem of evil, it is possible that evil could disconfirm theism, could even disconfirm all the doctrines you add to theism to get Christianity, and yet confirm Christianity. Since we are interested in whether evil disconfirms Christianity, whether evil disconfirms theism and whether evil disconfirms certain specific doctrines of Christianity is irrelevant. Evil might disconfirm theism, and it might also disconfirm all of the theodicies

put forth, but that implies nothing about whether evil confirms or disconfirms Christianity. From this we see that if we are interested in whether evil disconfirms Christianity, Islam, or Judaism we should focus on them and not upon mere theism. We thus see that the error found in Draper's account is equally problematic in an incremental account of confirmation.

A related error is to look at only part of the evidence, or to look at pieces of evidence individually instead of collectively. When deciding if some evidence disconfirms a hypothesis, one cannot begin by looking at the effect of the individual pieces of evidence upon the hypothesis and make a judgement based upon whether they all confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis or upon how much they individually confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. It might be the case that evidence e disconfirms H, evidence i disconfirms H, any yet evidence e&i confirms H. This is illustrated by the following example from Carnap:

> Suppose, in the framework of the previous example, that hypothesis H is that a woman wins, evidence i is that a local player wins and that evidence j is that a junior wins. The probability of H on the background information is 1/2. The probability of H given i is 2/5, because two of the local players are women. Thus evidence i disconfirms hypothesis H. The probability of H given j is 2/5, because two of the five junior players are women; thus evidence j also disconfirms H. But the probability of H given i&j confirms H, even though i disconfirms H and j disconfirms H. (p. 383)

This example illustrates that pieces of evidence may individually disconfirm a hypothesis even though the conjunction of the evidence confirms it. Because of this, when we have a collection of evidence it is a mistake to look at the effect of pieces of evidence on a hypothesis individually. Although Draper does not describe his epistemological views in detail, this example also shows that it is a mistake to view part of the evidence as giving a prima facie reason to reject something. It is mistaken to think some evidence is evidence against a hypothesis H, and thus we should reject H unless we have some stronger positive evidence; additional negative evidence combined with the original negative evidence may be positive evidence for H. Each piece of evidence could disconfirm a hypothesis, but this does not give a prima facie reason to reject the hypothesis, because the evidence taken together may confirm the hypothesis. With respect to evil and belief in God, as Plantinga has noted, evil is only part of the evidence we have that is relevant to the existence of God.[4] So suppose that evil lowers the probability of God existing, and even suppose that all of the other evidence lowers the probability of God existing. This has absolutely no implications about whether the total evidence lowers the probability of God existing; it might be that the total evidence actually

increases the probability of God existing. To focus only on the affect the existence of evil has on the probability of God existing may be of interest in itself, but it is completely irrelevant to whether evil and the rest of our evidence raises or lowers the probability of God existing.

We thus see that confirmation theory teaches us of two related mistakes that can easily be made in discussing probabilistic arguments from evil. One mistake is to not look at the total hypothesis in question; in this case the mistake would be to look at mere theism instead of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Since most theists are not mere theists, to formulate a successful probabilistic argument from evil one must look at the complete religious beliefs and not limit oneself to discussing mere theism. Another mistake is to not look at the total evidence available, but to focus only on the evil in the world. Even if the existence of evil were to lower the probability of God existing, this would have no implications for whether the existence of God was confirmed or disconfirmed. Even if ALL the evidence taken individually lowered the probability of God existing, this would not be relevant to whether the evidence confirms or disconfirms the existence of God. We need to look at all of the evidence together and see the effect it has on the probability of one's religious beliefs. Since there may be other evidence that is relevant to a person's religious beliefs, any argument that limits itself to looking at evil will be unsuccessful. These two mistakes can easily be committed together, and the resulting argument lacks any persuasive power. As an analogy, suppose I argue that for some arbitrary function $f(x + y) < f(w + z)$ by pointing out that $f(x) < f(w)$. Of course, this would be completely unpersuasive. It would not help to later look at $f(y)$ and $f(z)$, because they will not help us determine $f(x + y)$ and $f(w + z)$; in general, $f(x + y)$ cannot be determined from $f(x)$ and $f(y)$. Analogously, we can't look only at evil and mere theism; we need to look at the total evidence and one's total religious beliefs.

Concluding remarks

One lesson to be learned from this is that in philosophy of religion it is a mistake to focus on mere theism. Since most arguments from evil are intended to show the irrationality of being a Christian, Muslim, or Jew, as well as a mere theist, in order to be effective these arguments need to focus on these religions instead of on mere theism. We saw this problem arise in Draper's argument as well as in any general argument that evil incrementally disconfirms theism. Another lesson is that it is a mistake to look only at the evidence of evil in the world. To do so ignores other evidence we have, which shows that arguments from evil are misguided.

For the sake of discussion throughout this paper I worked within Draper's epistemological framework, even though I have serious reservations about it. However, there are many basic problems that arise when discussing a probabilistic argument from evil; among them are the following:

- Background information and evidence. The probability of a hypothesis is very sensitive to the information conditionalized on, but we have no adequate account of what this should be. Draper glossed over this problem when he introduced his principle C and nonstandard probability notation, and Plantinga has even proposed letting the existence of heaven and eternal life be admitted as evidence.[5] We need an account of what is to be taken as background information and what is to be taken as evidence. As Plantinga noted, simplistic solutions such as conditional- izing on information that everyone agrees on are plainly inadequate.[6] But clearly the probabilistic argument from evil cannot even get off the ground without a solution to this problem.

- The problem of old evidence. Since we are already aware of evil in our world, this evidence has presumably already been incorporated into our other beliefs. But then evil will not change the probabilities of our other beliefs. There is currently no accepted solution to this well-known problem.

- Prior probabilities. Bayesian critiques have taught us the importance of prior probabilities, but these are ignored in Draper's argument.

- Reasons. According to Draper the probability relations give us a prima facie reason to reject theism, but no account of this reasoning is provided. I argued it is a mistake to look at evil independently of our other evidence. Furthermore, experience is relevant to the beliefs we hold, and an account of the relation between experience, probability, and belief is needed.

- Objective probability. Draper assumes the existence of epistemic probabilities, and he admits there is no adequate analysis of these (p. 349). More generally, there are problems with all accounts of objective probability, and it is not clear that any objective probabilities suitable for his argument exist.

These problems are basic foundational problems that have a direct bearing on the probabilistic argument from evil. Any argument, such as Draper's, that makes controversial assumptions about the above problems will not be successful until those assumptions are supported. As of now, there is no reason to believe these probabilistic arguments from evil will be successful.

Notes

1. Paul Draper, 'Pain and pleasure: An evidential problem for theists', *Noûs* 23 (1989): 331–350. Reprinted in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 12–29. Future references to the original article will be denoted in the text by page numbers.

2. A very influential probabilistic argument from evil based on absolute confirmation has been given by William Rowe in his 'The evidential argument from evil: A second look', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, op. cit., pp. 262–285. Although Rowe discusses both an incremental and absolute version of the evidential argument from evil, his main argument appears to be that the probability of God existing given certain evil is less than 0.5. Discussing mere theism instead of one's complete religious beliefs is not a problem when using absolute confirmation, because if the probability of theism given the evil in the world is less than 0.5, then the probability of Christianity given the evil in the world is also less than 0.5. Although I hope to address this argument in the future, in this article I will not discuss absolute confirmation and the problem of evil.

3. Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), pp. 382, 395. Future references to this work will be denoted in the text by page number.

4. Alvin Plantinga, 'On being evidentially challenged', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, op. cit., pp. 244–261.

5. Op. cit., p. 257.

6. Alvin Plantinga, 'Degenerate evidence and Rowe's new evidential argument from evil', *Noûs* 32 (1998): 531–544.

Address for correspondence: Professor Richard Otte, Cowell College, University of California at Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA
E-mail: otte@cats.ucsc.edu