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## Comparative Confirmation and the Problem of Evil

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### I. Introduction

One of the most enduring problems for religious belief has been the problem of evil. The problem of evil can take many forms; it can be a spiritual or psychological problem, and has often been construed as a philosophical problem that calls the rationality of religious belief into question. Philosophical problems of evil usually deal with whether the existence of evil in the world makes it irrational to believe in an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God. These philosophical arguments can generally be classified as either deductive arguments from evil or as inductive arguments from evil. The deductive argument purported to show that it was irrational to believe in God because evil was logically inconsistent with the existence of God. More recent discussion of the philosophical problem of evil has moved away from the deductive argument from evil and has focused on whether evil is evidence against the existence of God. Much of this discussion centres around whether our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is evidence that there is no such reason, and thus is evidence against the existence of God. In the following I will look at whether our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil provides a problem for the theist in virtue of being evidence against the religious beliefs of a typical theist. Many theists have admitted that evil is evidence against the existence of God, but respond that belief in God is not irrational because there is enough other evidence that supports the existence of God and religious belief. I will take a different approach and will instead argue that theists should not believe evil, or our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil, is evidence against religious belief or the existence of God, at all. Philosophers do not agree about the nature of evidence, but I will look at two leading views of evidence and argue that on these views, theists should hold either that our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is irrelevant to typical religious belief or that it confirms these religious beliefs. This surprising result follows from our most popular views about using evidence to compare theories.

It will be instructive to begin with a quick look at the deductive argument from evil. The main point of an argument from evil is to demonstrate that typical Christians, Muslims, and Jews should consider evil to provide a serious problem for the rationality of their beliefs. According to the deductive argument from evil, the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God, who is an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being. Such a being would know about the evil in the world, would want to eliminate it, and would be able to do what he wants. It is now generally recognized that the deductive argument from evil failed because the existence of evil is not logically inconsistent with the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> The deductive argument from evil assumes that God would want to eliminate all evil in the world, but theists respond that some evil in the world may bring about a greater good; thus a totally good being may have a good reason for permitting certain evils. Given this, the most that can be concluded from the deductive argument from evil is that God would eliminate all evil that he could eliminate, without eliminating a greater good (Plantinga 1977). More generally, a totally good God could permit any evil which he has a good reason for permitting. Thus the conclusion of the deductive argument from evil must be modified to claim that the existence of God is inconsistent with evils that God does not have a good reason to permit. From this it is clear that evil which God has a good reason to permit does not provide a problem for religious belief; only evil that God has no good reason to permit is relevant to the deductive problem of evil. So we can see that the deductive argument from evil revolves around the issue of whether God could have a good reason to permit the evil in the world.

We can view the inductive or evidential argument from evil as taking up the argument from evil at this point. A widely discussed version of the evidential argument from evil, due to William Rowe, attempts to show that there are some evils that God does not have a good reason to permit. Rowe argued that we do not know of any good reason for God to permit certain evils, and this is reason to think that God has no reason to permit those evils. Rowe's argument begins with the premise:

No good state of affairs that we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient being in permitting certain specific horrible evils.

From this he concludes

No good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting these specific evils. (Rowe 1986: 263)

<sup>1</sup> This assessment is primarily due to Alvin Plantinga's (1974) free will defense. William Alston writes: 'Plantinga ... has established the possibility that God could not actualize a world containing free creatures that always do the right thing' (1991: 49); Robert Adams says 'it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem. That is, he has argued convincingly for the consistency of [God and evil]' (1985: 226). See also William Rowe (1986). For a recent discussion, see Otte (2009).

This inductive inference is at the core of Rowe's evidential argument from evil. What is important is whether our evidence supports there being no good reason for God to permit evil.

Much of the work on the nature of evidence involves the use of probability, and not surprisingly, the 'evidential argument from evil' and the 'probabilistic argument from evil' are often used interchangeably. The basic idea is that if evil is evidence against religious beliefs, there will be some probabilistic relation between evil and those religious beliefs. Although most philosophers writing on the evidential argument from evil assume some sort of logical or epistemic interpretation of probability, in this chapter I need not commit to any specific interpretation. The arguments that follow are compatible with viewing probability as an objective logical relation, but they are also compatible with viewing it as the logic of rational belief. We make many probabilistic judgements, and for the purposes of this chapter it will not matter whether we take these to be subjective probabilities or to be estimates of objective probabilities.

Most discussions of the problem of evil look at the relation between evil and some designated core or essential part of theistic belief, such as that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being. The basic idea is that any problem that evil raises for this core is supposed to transfer to a typical theist's religious beliefs. With regard to the problem of evil, the idea is that if evil is a problem for these core beliefs, then evil is also a problem for traditional religious beliefs. For example, if the deductive argument from evil were correct, the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent being would be logically inconsistent with the existence of evil. This logical inconsistency would transfer to any set of religious beliefs that include evil and an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being. However this methodology will not work when we leave the deductive argument from evil and focus on the evidential argument from evil. Evidence against an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being need not be evidence against typical religious beliefs, even though those religious beliefs include belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being. As Rudolf Carnap and others have noted, some evidence might lower the probability of  $H_1$  and lower the probability of  $H_2$ , but raise the probability of  $H_1 \& H_2$ .<sup>2</sup> Evidence that disconfirms the core of a set of beliefs may not disconfirm the larger set of beliefs. Because of this, in discussing the evidential argument from evil we cannot abstract a core from typical religious beliefs and look at whether evil is evidence against that core. We need to look at whether evil is evidence against the religious beliefs as a whole, and whether evil is evidence against the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent being is irrelevant. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism say more that is relevant to evil than that an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent being exists. We need to include these other beliefs when investigating whether evil and related facts are evidence against those religions.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Carnap (1950); W. C. Salmon (1975); and R. Otte (2000).

One doctrine that has a long history in theistic religions is that we should not expect to know or understand God's reasons for acting, including his reason to permit evil. Various explanations are given for this epistemic distance between God and humans, but the basic idea is that God's knowledge and understanding is far beyond ours and we should not expect to understand his thoughts. This is illustrated in the story of Job, in which the problem of evil plays the central role. After several chapters of discussion of possible explanations for what befell Job, we get to God's response in Chapter 38. At this point we might expect God to give Job some sort of theodicy or explanation of the evils he suffered, but we find no such thing. Instead, we get a lengthy statement about how God's ways are beyond our ways, and how his knowledge far surpasses ours. The idea that we are unable to understand God's reasons is widespread, and this scepticism about our ability to understand God's reasons is also at the heart of what has recently become known as 'sceptical theism'. According to sceptical theism we should not infer there is no good reason for God to permit evil from our ignorance of any such reason.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I will focus on the views of a typical theist who believes we are unable to understand God's reason for permitting evil. Although some theists have presented theodicies that purport to explain God's reasons for permitting evil, the argument of this chapter is not directed towards them; instead I will focus on theists who do not think any known theodicy is adequate. I will call these theists 'sceptical theists' and will use 'UNKNOWABLE GOOD' to abbreviate their views:

**UNKNOWABLE GOOD:** Evil exists, and God has a good reason to permit it that we are not capable of understanding.

Certainly there is more relevant to theists' beliefs than what is contained in UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and UNKNOWABLE GOOD indicates a bare minimum of what the theistic views I am discussing hold that is relevant to our argument. In this paper I will focus on what Peter van Inwagen (2006) calls the global argument from evil, and thus I formulated UNKNOWABLE GOOD to not imply any particular evils. My argument is also applicable to the local argument from evil, and we could easily have construed UNKNOWABLE GOOD to contain a description of some evils that exist or a description of types of evils that exist.

In managing our beliefs we need to look not only at the evidence and hypothesis we are interested in, but also at the competing hypotheses. Elliot Sober says:

When scientists wish to assess the credentials of an explanatory hypothesis, a fundamental question will be: What are the alternative hypotheses that compete with the one in which you are really interested? This is the idea that theory testing is a contrastive activity. To test a theory T is to test it against at least one competing theory T'. (Sober 1994: 120)

<sup>3</sup> There are numerous articles on sceptical theism, but see S. J. Wykstra (1984), M. Bergmann (2001), and W. Rowe (2001).

So in order to know whether our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is evidence for God having no good reason to permit evil, we must look at the alternative hypotheses or possibilities. For our purposes we can take the major competitor to UNKNOWABLE GOOD to be NO GOOD:

**NO GOOD:** Evil exists and there is no good reason for God to permit it (and thus God does not exist).

Another competitor to UNKNOWABLE GOOD is KNOWABLE GOOD, which is held by those who accept some theodicy:

**KNOWABLE GOOD:** Evil exists, and God has a good reason to permit it that we are able to understand.

These three positions are pairwise inconsistent; any two of them are inconsistent with each other.

In the following I will make use of contemporary discussions of evidence and confirmation to discuss whether our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil favours one of the above hypotheses over the others. I am interested in whether our ignorance of a good reason should give a typical theist who holds UNKNOWABLE GOOD a reason to think that theism is disconfirmed compared to NO GOOD. In other words, I am interested in whether our evidence supports or favours NO GOOD or UNKNOWABLE GOOD. I will argue that a typical sceptical theist should not regard ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil to be evidence that God does not have a good reason to permit evil. On the contrary, a theist should hold that our ignorance is either irrelevant to there being a good reason, or is evidence for God having a good reason to permit evil. A related argument would show that the evil in the world is not evidence that God does not exist; at best, the theist should refrain from judgement about whether evil is evidence against the existence of God. Our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil does not generate a philosophical problem of evil for typical Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

The philosophical literature on probability and evidence contains two main views about using probability to compare the effect of evidence on competing hypotheses: Likelihoodism and Bayesianism. I will begin my discussion by looking at this issue from the perspective of Likelihoodism, and I will then discuss whether some Bayesian accounts of confirmation give the same results. We will see that neither supports the view that our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil is evidence that there is no good reason. As a result, neither Likelihoodism nor Bayesian accounts of evidence provide the basis for a probabilistic argument from evil.

## II. Likelihoodism

Likelihoodism is a theory of comparative or contrastive confirmation; the notion that confirmation involves comparing hypotheses is built into Likelihoodism. A central

idea of Likelihoodism is that in using evidence to compare theories we look at the likelihoods, the probability of the evidence on the hypotheses. An advantage of Likelihoodism is that prior probabilities play no role in comparing evidential strength; this makes Likelihoodism especially useful in discussions in which there is widespread disagreement about prior probabilities, such as in philosophy of religion. Likelihoodists generally accept what has come to be known as the 'Law of Likelihood':

**L:** Evidence  $E$  favours hypothesis  $H_1$  over  $H_2$  iff  $P(E/H_1) > P(E/H_2)$ <sup>4</sup>

Although some Likelihoodists endorse a quantitative measure of evidence favouring one hypothesis over another, in this paper we will work only with the qualitative concept. An immediate corollary of the Law of Likelihood is the following:

**C:** If  $P(E/H_1) = P(E/H_2)$ , then  $E$  does not favour  $H_1$  over  $H_2$ .

According to Likelihoodism, if we have two hypotheses and some evidence, the hypothesis upon which the evidence is most likely is the one that is favoured by the evidence, and if the evidence is equally likely on both hypotheses, the evidence does not support one hypothesis over the other.

The hypotheses we are comparing are UNKNOWABLE GOOD and NO GOOD. Since we are focusing on a version of the global argument from evil, for our evidence, consider:

**NO KNOWN:** Evil exists and we do not know of a good reason for God to permit it.

We are interested in how likely NO KNOWN is on these hypotheses. Even though NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD are competing hypotheses, both imply that we do not know of a good reason for God to permit evil. NO GOOD implies NO KNOWN because we cannot know of a good reason if there is none. UNKNOWABLE GOOD implies NO KNOWN because we do not know a good reason for God to permit evil if we are not capable of understanding it. From this it follows that  $P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  are both equal to 1. Given this, corollary C implies that NO KNOWN does not support NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD. In the introduction to this chapter I pointed out that the problem of evil comes down to whether or not God has a good reason to permit evil. We see that on the Likelihoodist conception of evidential support, our not knowing of a good reason for God to permit evil does not support God not having a good reason to permit evil over typical theism; we need to look elsewhere for evidence against the existence of God.

However NO KNOWN is evidence against KNOWABLE GOOD as compared to NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD.  $P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{KNOWABLE GOOD})$  is certainly less than 1, and thus  $P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{KNOWABLE GOOD}) < P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{KNOWABLE GOOD}) < P(\text{NO KNOWN}/\text{NO GOOD})$ .

<sup>4</sup> See B. Fitelson (2007) ; R. Royall (1997); E. Sober (1994); and I. Hacking (1976).

GOOD) < P(NO KNOWN/NO GOOD). From this it follows from Likelihoodism that NO KNOWN supports UNKNOWABLE GOOD and NO GOOD over KNOWABLE GOOD. Although NO KNOWN is irrelevant to the choice between UNKNOWABLE GOOD and NO GOOD, it is not irrelevant when considering KNOWABLE GOOD. And if we let GOOD be the disjunction of UNKNOWABLE GOOD and KNOWABLE GOOD, it also follows that NO KNOWN favours NO GOOD over GOOD.

Many attempts at formulating a global problem of evil differ from the above and take our evidence to be only that evil exists, or perhaps rely on a description of some particularly bad evils. However one might argue that if our evidence were simply the existence of evil instead of NO KNOWN, then according to Likelihoodism this evidence would support traditional theistic religions over naturalism. The major theistic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, all imply that evil exists; certainly these religions would be false if there were no evil, because they make historical claims about specific evils. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to define naturalism, but it is plausible to think naturalism does not imply that evil exists. If so, the existence of evil is more likely given theistic religions than given naturalism, and by Likelihoodism evil confirms theism over naturalism. It is important to look at all of our relevant evidence, which goes beyond the existence of evil, and to look at actual competing beliefs instead of core ideas implied by them. If we were focusing on the local problem of evil and had taken our evidence to be the specific evils we know of instead of the existence of evil, then neither UNKNOWABLE GOOD nor NO GOOD would imply our evidence. However, it is difficult to see why this evidence should be more likely on naturalism than on one of the theistic religions. The theistic religions all have accounts of evil in the world, and there is no reason to think that any particular evil or the distribution of evils in the world is less likely on the theistic religions than on naturalism. Although much more could be said about the local problem of evil, in this paper I will not focus on how likely specific evils are given UNKNOWABLE GOOD and NO GOOD. Instead I focus on the global problem of evil and will look at our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil.

At this point one might object that our evidence is not that we do not know of a good reason for God to permit evil, but rather that we are unaware of a good reason. This can be expressed by:

**UNAWARE:** Evil exists and we are not aware of a good reason for God to permit it.

With UNAWARE we are saying that we do not believe we know of a good reason for God to permit evil, or we do not think we see a good reason for God to permit evil; this is consistent with us believing we are ignorant of any good reason God may have to permit evil. UNAWARE is different than NO KNOWN, because UNAWARE says we do not accept any theodicy as being adequate, but NO KNOWN does not imply this. UNAWARE is stronger than NO KNOWN; although UNAWARE implies NO KNOWN, NO KNOWN does not imply UNAWARE. It could be the case that we

think we know of a good reason even though we do not know a good reason; if so, NO KNOWN would be true but UNAWARE would be false. For example, one might accept a theodicy as adequate, but be mistaken in that the theodicy is not successful. Our above argument relied on the fact that NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD both implied NO KNOWN, but neither NO GOOD nor UNKNOWABLE GOOD imply UNAWARE; it is possible that we could believe we are aware of a good reason for God to permit evil, even if NO GOOD or UNKNOWABLE GOOD were true. Thus we cannot reason as we did above if our evidence is UNAWARE instead of NO KNOWN; whether UNAWARE is evidence for NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD depends on the values of  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ . These probabilities are not equal to 1, because we need to assign some positive probability to (NO GOOD and not-UNAWARE) as well as (UNKNOWABLE GOOD and not-UNAWARE). Even if we think we know of a good reason for God to permit evil, it is possible that we could be mistaken about that reason because either there is no good reason or there is a good reason that we cannot comprehend. Unfortunately, even though these probabilities are crucial to the problem of evil there is almost no discussion of them in the literature.<sup>5</sup>

According to Likelihoodism, the relevance of these probabilities to the evidential argument from evil is clear. If we think  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is equal to  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ , then the corollary to the Law of Likelihood tells us that UNAWARE does not favour one over the other. If we think  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ , then the likelihood principle L tells us that our evidence UNAWARE supports NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD. And if we think  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ , then the likelihood principle L tells us that UNAWARE supports UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD.

From this it is clear that a defender of the evidential argument from evil is committed to showing  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD}) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ , because a theist who holds this will be committed to evil being evidence against God existing. However, I am not aware of any plausible argument for this claim in the literature. On the contrary it appears rational for a theist to hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ , that the probabilities are equal, or even to withhold judgement on which probability is greater.

Sceptical theists who do not believe they have a theodicy and accept UNKNOWABLE GOOD, generally believe the reason they are unaware of an acceptable theodicy is because their minds are working well and they would be in error if they were to accept a theodicy when there was no acceptable one that we can understand. In other

<sup>5</sup> But see R. Otte (2002) and W. Rowe (1998: 550) for a discussion of some related probabilities.



words, these theists believe their minds are fairly reliable when reasoning about matters of theodicy, and since there is no acceptable theodicy that we can understand, we would be mistaken to accept one. These theists who accept UNKNOWABLE GOOD may naturally think it unlikely that they would wrongly accept a theodicy, and thus they hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is high.

These sceptical theists may also think that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is low, or at least lower than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ . Plantinga (1993) argued that on the assumption of naturalism and evolutionary theory, the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable was either low or inscrutable. In response many philosophers questioned whether we could really survive if many of our basic cognitive faculties were not reliable. For our purposes we can ignore most of that debate, because we are here only interested in our being unaware of a good reason for God to permit evil. UNAWARE is clearly different from the types of beliefs that many think are necessary for survival, such as perceptual beliefs, and it is more akin to abstract scientific or philosophical beliefs. Even if we were to grant that one's survival would be in danger if one did not form reliable beliefs about predators when they were present, this reasoning does not automatically carry over to UNAWARE. The truth of our abstract scientific, philosophical, or theological beliefs is basically irrelevant to survival by natural selection. Natural selection only operates on the actions resulting from our beliefs, and our abstract beliefs could be false, and yet easily give rise to actions that have survival value. For example, suppose we have two qualitatively identical worlds,  $W_1$  and  $W_2$ , in which we hold the same abstract scientific, philosophical, and theological beliefs. Let most of these abstract beliefs be true in  $W_1$  but false in  $W_2$ . That is, the worlds  $W_1$  and  $W_2$  appear identical, but our abstract beliefs are mostly true in one but not the other. Our ability to survive would be the same in these two worlds; the truth or falsity of our abstract beliefs would have no effect on our survival. Naturalists even hold that humans have a widespread tendency to form religious and supernatural beliefs, even though these beliefs are all false. Given this, it is difficult to see why humans would not mistakenly hold theodicies if naturalism were correct; naturalism gives no reason to think our minds would be reliable on topics such as UNAWARE, and one can reasonably hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is not high. Thus sceptical theists can hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is high and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is not high, which has the consequence that UNAWARE favours UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. Theists can rationally hold that our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil supports the existence of God having a reason we can't comprehend over there being no such reason (and God not existing). In other words, many theists' beliefs are such that UNAWARE creates a problem of evil for naturalism, not for traditional theism.

However, the above reasoning is not uncontroversial, and a rational theist may reject it and think  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is high. Since  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is also high, corollary C to the Likelihood principle tells us that UNAWARE supports NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD

equally. Or a theist may think  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is as low as  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ . Theists who hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is about the same as  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  will hold that UNAWARE is neutral evidence for NO GOOD and their own beliefs.

Although I have argued that a theist may rationally believe  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is at least as high as  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ , puzzlement about these probabilities is completely understandable. Perhaps one reason these probabilities have seen such little discussion in the literature is that most people simply aren't sure about them; it is very difficult to come up with any obvious estimates of their values. For both of these probabilities, one can think of arguments that the value is high and arguments that the value is low. Because of this we may want to withhold judgement on the probabilities and on whether  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ .<sup>6</sup> If so, we should also withhold judgement on whether UNAWARE supports NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD. I am here appealing to the following general principle:

If we know that C is contingent and is a necessary condition of some belief B, and it is rational to withhold belief in C, then it is rational to withhold belief in B.<sup>7</sup>

Since we know (assuming Likelihoodism) that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  being greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is a necessary condition of UNAWARE favouring NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and since it is rational to withhold judgement on whether  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ , the above principle tells us it is also rational to withhold judgement on whether UNAWARE supports NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD. If theists are unsure about the relation of  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  they are not obligated to hold that UNAWARE supports NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD; for all they know, UNAWARE may support UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. UNAWARE does not provide the basis for an evidential problem of evil for these theists.

We have seen that sceptical theists can hold either that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  is greater than  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ , or that the probabilities are equal, or they can withhold judgement about the relation between those probabilities. In each of these cases we saw that UNAWARE does not favour NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD. Thus the evidential argument from evil fails from a Likelihoodist perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Standard Bayesian accounts require probability be precise values, although vague belief can be modelled in various ways. See P. Walley (1991); B. van Fraassen (1990) and (1995).

<sup>7</sup> The requirement that C be contingent is important. Logical truths are necessary conditions of everything and it is also rational to withhold judgement on whether certain sentences are logical truths. If we did not require C to be contingent, then the principle would require us to withhold judgement on everything.

### III. Bayesianism

The above argument shows that Likelihoodism does not provide a foundation for a successful evidential argument from evil. In response, the defender of the evidential argument from evil may appeal to a fundamentally different approach to comparative confirmation based on Bayesian confirmation theory. For the Likelihoodist, confirmation is fundamentally a comparative notion. In contrast to this, Bayesian accounts of comparative confirmation are defined in terms of a more fundamental degree of confirmation relation that holds between evidence and hypothesis. There are many different Bayesian measures of confirmation. Fitelson (2007) proposes the following principle which defines contrastive confirmation in terms of degree of confirmation:

†: E favours  $H_1$  over  $H_2$  iff E confirms  $H_1$  more strongly than E confirms  $H_2$ .

The general strategy Fitelson proposes is that in order to determine whether some evidence E supports  $H_1$  over  $H_2$ , we should first look at how strongly E confirms  $H_1$  and E confirms  $H_2$ , and then compare those values.<sup>8</sup> There are several Bayesian proposals for measuring degree of confirmation, and each of these will generate a different account of the comparative favouring relation. The three most popular Bayesian accounts of the degree of confirmation of H by E are:

- a. The degree of confirmation of H by E is given by the difference between  $P(H/E)$  and  $P(H)$ :  $P(H/E) - P(H)$ .
- b. The degree of confirmation of H by E is given by the ratio of  $P(H/E)$  to  $P(H)$ :  $P(H/E)/P(H)$ .<sup>9</sup>
- c. The degree of confirmation of H by E is given by the likelihood ratio of  $P(E/H)$  to  $P(E/\text{not-H})$ :  $P(E/H)/P(E/\text{not-H})$ . (See Fitelson 2007)

A discussion of the details of these Bayesian accounts would take us too far afield from our goal of looking at whether Bayesian measures of confirmation lend support to an evidential argument from evil. In what follows I will not argue for one of these accounts of confirmation over another, but will only consider whether they give a sceptical theist reason to think that UNAWARE supports NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD.

To begin, it is worth noting that each of the above measures of confirmation implies the following sufficient condition for E supporting  $H_1$  over  $H_2$ , which Fitelson calls the ‘Weak Law of Likelihood’:

<sup>8</sup> Principle † is not uncontroversial. See J. Chandler (2010) for an interesting discussion of † and a defence of the Law of Likelihood, and B. Fitelson (forthcoming) for a response.

<sup>9</sup> Using this measure of confirmation with † generates a favouring relation that is equivalent to the Law of Likelihood L.

**WLL:** Evidence  $E$  favours hypothesis  $H_1$  more than hypothesis  $H_2$  if  $P(E/H_1) > P(E/H_2)$  and  $P(E/\text{not-}H_1) \leq P(E/\text{not-}H_2)$ . (See Fitelson 2007)<sup>10</sup>

According to Fitelson, '[d]ozens of relevance measures... have been proposed and defended in the literature... [a]nd all of these are such that [the measures of non-relational confirmation based on them] entails (WLL)' (2007: 479). Applied to the problem of evil, this tells us that UNAWARE will favour UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD if  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$ .

Recall that a goal of the evidential argument from evil is to show that a theist should hold that evil or some related evidence is evidence against the theist's beliefs. In response, for the reason given above, I argued that sceptical theists may hold that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ . But unlike Likelihoodism, not all Bayesian positions imply that this is sufficient for UNAWARE to support UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. In applying WLL to this situation, we need to also look at  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ . It will be easiest to compare these probabilities if we become clearer about what NO GOOD, not-NO GOOD, UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD are claiming. This can be more easily seen if we break NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD down to more basic components. Since both NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD imply that evil exists, for heuristic reasons we will move the existence of evil into our background knowledge and will not explicitly state it when discussing NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD. This makes the formal argument easier to follow, although the results are unaffected if we retain the existence of evil in the two hypotheses.<sup>11</sup> Let us use the following abbreviations:

G: God exists

R: there is a good reason for God to permit evil

RC: there is a good reason for God to permit evil that is comprehensible by humans.

Using these abbreviations we can see that NO GOOD is equivalent to not-R and UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to (G & R & not-RC). Conversely, not-NO GOOD is equivalent to R, and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to (not-G or not-R or RC).

Now consider the following chart which lists the possible combinations of these three propositions:

<sup>10</sup> See J. Joyce (2008) for further discussion of this principle.

<sup>11</sup> See the next note for details.

	G	R	RC
a)	T	T	T
b)	T	T	F
c)	T	F	T
d)	T	F	F
e)	F	T	T
f)	F	T	F
g)	F	F	T
h)	F	F	F

Lines c and g are not possible because RC implies R; there being a good reason that we can understand implies that there is a good reason. Assuming God does not exist if he does not have a good reason to permit evil, line d is also not possible. We are left with 5 mutually exclusive possibilities: a, b, e, f, and h.

Since NO GOOD is equivalent to not-R, given our abbreviations it is easy to see that NO GOOD is equivalent to line h; h is the only possibility in which not-R is true. UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to (G & R & not-RC); given our abbreviations we see this holds only in line b. Since the possibilities are exhausted by lines a, b, e, f, and h, not-NO GOOD is equivalent to the disjunction of lines a, b, e, and f (a or b or e or f) and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to the disjunction of lines a, e, f, and h (a or e or f or h). Thus we have  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD}) = P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or b or e or f})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) = P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or e or f or h})$ . Notice that not-NO GOOD and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD have the disjunction (a or e or f) in common; they differ only on b and h. It is clear that the relation between  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or e or f or h})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or b or e or f})$  depends on how likely UNAWARE is given b and given h. From this it follows that the relation between  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$  depends on  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{b})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{h})$ .<sup>12</sup> If  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{h}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{b})$ , then  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or e or f or h}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a or b or e or f})$ , which immediately implies that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$ .

<sup>12</sup> This same argument goes through if we keep the existence of evil in NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD instead of putting it in our background knowledge. Let E be that evil exists; in this case UNKNOWABLE GOOD is represented by (G & R & not-RC & E), and NO GOOD is represented by (not-R & E). We also know not-NO GOOD is equivalent to (R v not-E), and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to (not-G v not-R v RC v not-E). We now have 16 possibilities instead of 8; let possibilities a-h include E, and let possibilities i-p include not-E. Excluding impossible situations, we have the real possibilities are: a, b, e, f, h, i, j, m, n, p. As before, NO GOOD is equivalent to h and UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to b. And not-NO GOOD is equivalent to the disjunction (a v b v e v f v i v j v m v n v p) and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD is equivalent to the disjunction (a v e v f v h v i v j v m v n v p).  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD}) = P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a v b v e v f v i v j v m v n v p})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) = P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{a v e v f v h v i v j v m v n v p})$ . As before, the only difference in what is conditionalized on is b and h, and thus the same result follows.

So let us reconsider the case of a sceptical theist who holds that God's reason for permitting evil is incomprehensible to us, sees no reason to doubt the reliability of our faculties that produce UNAWARE given theism, but has doubts about the reliability of these faculties given naturalism. This theist holds that  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ , which is the first condition in WLL for UNAWARE to support UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. This is equivalent to  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/b) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/h)$ , which implies  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/h) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/b)$ . We saw above that this implies  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$ , which is the second condition in WLL for UNAWARE to favour UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD.<sup>13</sup> Since this sceptical theist holds both  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) > P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$  and  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$  both conditions of WLL are met, and WLL tells us that UNAWARE supports UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD.

Bayesian approaches to comparative or contrastive confirmation have the result that these sceptical theists should not think that our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil supports there actually being no good reason over God having a good reason we cannot understand. As a result, according to Bayesian accounts of contrastive confirmation the standard evidential argument from evil does not arise for these typical theists. On the contrary, Likelihoodism and Bayesian accounts of comparative confirmation have the result that some sceptical theists are entitled to hold that the evidential argument from evil is a problem for naturalists.

#### IV. Objection

In this chapter I have examined the problem of evil from the perspective of someone who believes that humans are incapable of understanding God's reason for permitting evil. This view is in fact widely held by theists. Nevertheless one might object to an argument based on this perspective on methodological grounds. I focused on whether these typical theists were susceptible to a problem of evil by looking at whether UNAWARE supported NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD; I did not discuss whether UNAWARE supported NO GOOD over GOOD, where GOOD is the disjunction of UNKNOWABLE GOOD and KNOWABLE GOOD. One might object that I should have looked at whether evil and UNAWARE favour GOOD over NO GOOD, instead of looking at NO GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD.

<sup>13</sup> The same argument will go through if we let UNKNOWABLE GOOD not imply that God exists and instead be equivalent to  $R \ \& \ \text{not-RC}$ , in which case UNKNOWABLE GOOD does not imply that God exists. UNKNOWABLE GOOD will then be equivalent to  $(b \vee f)$  and not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD will be  $(a \vee e \vee h)$ . In this case  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{not-NO GOOD})$  iff  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/b \vee f) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/h)$ . But this is equivalent to  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \leq P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{NO GOOD})$ .

It might be claimed that although UNAWARE may not be evidence for NO GOOD over UNKNOWABLE GOOD, it is evidence for NO GOOD over GOOD, and this does generate a problem of evil for the rationality of typical theists' beliefs.

This objection assumes that UNAWARE favours NO GOOD over GOOD, but this assumption may be rejected by sceptical theists. GOOD is equivalent to the disjunction of KNOWABLE GOOD and UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and thus the probability of UNAWARE given GOOD will be:

$$\begin{aligned} P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{GOOD}) &= P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) \\ &P(\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD}) + P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{KNOWABLE GOOD}) \\ &P(\text{KNOWABLE GOOD}) \end{aligned}$$

Sceptical theists hold UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and thus assign KNOWABLE GOOD a very low probability. This implies  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{GOOD})$  is very close to  $P(\text{UNAWARE}/\text{UNKNOWABLE GOOD})$ . Because of this, looking at GOOD instead of UNKNOWABLE GOOD does not make a significant difference to the argument. The basic assumption of this objection is false, according to sceptical theists.

But even if we did grant the assumption this objection would still fail. In the introduction I mentioned that it is common in philosophy of religion to discuss the rationality of religious beliefs not by looking at those beliefs themselves, but at a 'core' of beliefs entailed by those beliefs. Elsewhere, I discussed this methodology in detail and argued this methodological assumption is problematic (see Otte (2011)). The reason I did not discuss the relation between UNAWARE and GOOD here is because it is irrelevant to the rationality of typical theistic belief, since most theists hold UNKNOWABLE GOOD. Even though UNKNOWABLE GOOD implies GOOD, evidence that favours NO GOOD over GOOD may also favour UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. We cannot infer anything about whether some evidence favours NO GOOD or UNKNOWABLE GOOD by looking at some 'core' implied by UNKNOWABLE GOOD, and arguing that the evidence supports NO GOOD over the core implied by UNKNOWABLE GOOD. UNAWARE can favour NO GOOD over GOOD, and yet also favour UNKNOWABLE GOOD over NO GOOD. Comparing GOOD and NO GOOD is not useful if we are interested in the rationality of theists who hold UNKNOWABLE GOOD.

## V. Conclusion

We have been investigating whether a typical theist should think that the probabilistic argument from evil actually poses a problem for religious belief. We saw that neither Likelihoodism nor Bayesian accounts of contrastive confirmation give a typical theist reason to think that our ignorance of a good reason for God to permit evil supports there being no good reason over the reason being incomprehensible by us. But if theists are rational in holding that there is a good reason for God to permit evil, then evil is not problematic for belief in God. On the contrary, theists may reasonably hold that

our ignorance of a good reason actually supports their religious beliefs over naturalism. From this we see just how difficult it is to formulate any problem of evil that should be convincing to most theists.<sup>14</sup>

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