PAUL DRAPER

PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

I. A SHIFT IN THE DEBATE

Many philosophers have held that traditional theism can be conclusively disproved because it can be shown to be logically inconsistent with some known fact about evil. By ‘traditional theism’ I mean the statement that

G. There exists an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect person who created the universe.

Usually, it is claimed that G is inconsistent with the following fact or true statement:

E1. Evil exists.

But any of the following or countless other statements reporting the existence of evils of certain kinds or in certain amounts or distributed in a certain way might be thought to be better suited for the job:

E2. The world contains instances of suffering and immorality.
E3. The world contains instances of suffering that do not result from human immorality.
E4. Many animals suffer intensely for prolonged periods of time.
E5. Human suffering is not distributed according to merit.
E6. Innocent children have been tortured to death.

Attempts to defend such claims of inconsistency are less common than the claims themselves. However, where they do occur, they usually consist of little more than asserting that, by definition, an omnipotent being would have the power to prevent all evil and, again by definition, a morally perfect being would prevent any evil that it had the power to prevent. This implies that, by definition, an omnipotent and morally perfect being would prevent all evil and hence that G is inconsistent with E1.¹

As Nelson Pike points out, this argument fails because it is not true by definition that a morally perfect being would prevent any evil that it had the power to prevent. What is true by definition is that a morally perfect being would prevent any evil that it had no morally sufficient reason to permit.²

a successful disproof of traditional theism if one could prove that the following
statement is necessarily false or at least that it is false:

M1. An omnipotent and omniscient being would have a morally sufficient
reason for allowing evil to exist.

If one could prove that this statement is necessarily false, then G would be
disproved by virtue of its inconsistency with E1. If one could prove that it
is false, then G would be disproved by virtue of its inconsistency with (E1 \&
\sim M1).

But there are well-known obstacles to showing that M1 is false. One such
obstacle is that even an omnipotent being’s power would have logical limi-
tations, and hence such a being could produce goods that logically entail
the existence of evil only by allowing evil. So for all we know, even an omnipotent
and omniscient being might be forced to allow evil for the sake of obtaining
some important good. Our knowledge of goods and evils and the logical
relations they bear to each other is much too limited to prove that this could
not be the case. Thus, a proof of the falsity of M1 is beyond our capabilities.

Nor does it make much difference if we replace E1 with some other
statement about evil that is known to be true, say E6. A successful disproof
of G based on E6 could be constructed if one could prove that the following
statement is false:

M6. An omnipotent and omniscient being would have a morally sufficient
reason for allowing innocent children to be tortured to death.

But once again, the prospects for such a proof are dim. One might (in the
spirit of Ivan in the *Brothers Karamazov*) reject M6 on the grounds that no
greater good could justify allowing an evil like E6. But our knowledge of the
ultimate nature of morality is too limited to make a proof of such a strongly
deontological moral view possible. (Moreover, such a view seems false, for it
implies that allowing such an evil for the sake of the victim’s own greater
good is immoral.)

Considerations like these have led to perhaps the most significant shift ever
in the philosophical debate about the epistemic problem of evil. This shift is
twofold. First, the issue is no longer whether our knowledge about suffering
and other evils can be used conclusively to disprove G. Now the issue is
whether this knowledge can be used to provide at least a prima facie good
reason to reject G – a reason that is sufficient for rejecting G unless over-
ridden by other reasons for not rejecting G. Second, the discussion is no
longer restricted to questions about logical consistency. Of course, such
questions are not obsolete. An argument from evil not purporting conclus-
ively to disprove G might attempt to show that G is probably false by
attempting to show that it is probably inconsistent with a statement like E6.
But there are many other negative evidential relations that evil might bear
to traditional theism as well.
II. PLANTINGA'S CHALLENGE

In an important paper, Alvin Plantinga defends the position that traditional theists face no epistemic problem of evil at all. He divides arguments from evil into two classes: what are sometimes called 'logical' arguments from evil and what he calls 'probabilistic' arguments from evil. He characterizes the former as attempts to show that traditional theism is inconsistent with some known fact about evil. He characterizes the latter as attempts to show that traditional theism is improbable on some known fact about evil — i.e. for some En, $P(G/En) < 1/2$. ('$P(G/En) < 1/2$' should be read as 'the probability of G given (or conditional on) En is less than 1/2.') Since Plantinga contrasts the judgement that G is improbable on En with the judgement that G is improbable on one's total evidence, it is clear that he wants to interpret the former judgement as involving an abstraction from one's background knowledge. In other words, he is interested in attempts to show that, for some En, our knowledge of En makes G prima facie improbable. Whether, given the success of such an attempt, G would also be improbable all things considered would depend on what evidence in support of G is available.

Plantinga’s division of arguments from evil into logical and probabilistic arguments is not exhaustive for two reasons. First, there are negative evidential relations besides the relations of being inconsistent with something else or being improbable with respect to something else. An argument from evil might attempt to show that evil bears one of these other relations to traditional theism. Second, if one construes the possible replacements for En as being limited to statements like E1–E6, then Plantinga’s division leaves out arguments for the conclusion that G is improbable on (or inconsistent with) some En conjoined with one or more other statements, statements that do not simply report what we know about the amount, kinds, or distribution of evil in the world. Such arguments should also be counted as arguments from evil (so long as the statement about evil in the argument does some of the work). However, Plantinga certainly did not intend to exclude this last sort of argument, and all of the arguments from evil I will discuss in this paper are of this sort. Accordingly, I will construe Plantinga’s term ‘probabilistic argument from evil’ broadly, so that it refers to attempts to establish the prima facie improbability of G that rely, either in whole or in part, on known facts about evil. Of course, given my first point above, this still leaves

---


4 For example, an argument from evil might attempt to show that some known fact about evil makes traditional theism less probable (all things considered) than it would otherwise be. If we let B stand for one’s background information, and employ the idealization that epistemic probability can be represented as probability conditional on a statement representing one’s total evidence, then the above claim can be represented as follows: $P(G/En & B) < P(G/B)$. This claim does not entail nor is it entailed by the claim that $P(G/En) < 1/2$. 
open the possibility that there may be other sorts of non-logical arguments from evil (even ones that are ‘probabilistic’ in some sense).

Plantinga offers more than one reason for doubting that a successful probabilistic argument from evil can be constructed. I will discuss only one of these reasons here. Most of his paper is devoted to criticizing contemporary probability theory and thereby showing that it does not provide the resources for establishing that \( P(G/\text{En}) < 1/2 \). This leads Plantinga to consider the objection that ‘you simply exploit the difficulties inherent in the current analyses of probability to urge a sort of skepticism about probability claims’. He replies that he ‘wouldn’t dream of denying that there are cases where a proposition A is quite clearly improbable with respect to another proposition B... But the present discussion is not about one of these cases. It isn’t initially in the least obvious that \( P(G/E) \) is low... So this objection misses the mark.’

I have two worries about these remarks by Plantinga. First, they seem to presuppose that the only way to defend a non-obvious probability claim would be to develop a correct philosophical theory of probability and then apply it to the claim. Surely there are many other possibilities here, just as there are many ways of defending non-obvious causal or ethical claims that do not require a correct philosophical theory of causality or morality. Second, Plantinga has not shown that the present discussion is not about an obvious probability claim. As I pointed out above, he does not consider the possibility that, even if G is not improbable with respect to some En, it is improbable with respect to some En conjoined with some other statement that is known or can be shown to be true.

Plantinga argues for the position that it is not only non-obvious but implausible to claim that G is improbable on some statement (En) that simply reports the existence of evils of certain kinds or in certain amounts or distributed in a certain way. (In a later article, he calls his argument for this position his ‘lowroad reply’ to probabilistic arguments from evil.) The truth of this position seems to me to be fairly obvious. E6, for example, does not assert anything that by itself – that is, abstracting from all background knowledge – makes G prima facie improbable. But that still leaves open the strategy of claiming that G is improbable with respect to some En conjoined with one or more other statements that are known or can be shown to be true. Plantinga is not entitled to assume that no such claim will turn out to be obviously true. And even if no such claim is obviously true, his criticisms

---

5 This involves ignoring his interesting suggestion that probabilistic arguments from evil fail because belief in God can be included in the foundations of a rational belief system. I have criticized this suggestion at length in ‘Evil and the Proper Basicity of Belief in God’, *Faith and Philosophy*, viii (1991), 133-47.
6 Plantinga, p. 49. 7 Plantinga, p. 49. 8 ‘Reason and Belief in God’. In Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 22.
of probability theory do not entitle him to assume that no such claim will turn out to be defensible.

So perhaps we should interpret Plantinga as offering a sort of challenge. It isn’t obvious that G is improbable on any true statement about evil or any true statement about evil conjoined with other true statements. In fact, it is fairly obvious that it is not improbable on many such statements. So until someone shows that G is improbable on some such statements, traditional theists face no probabilistic problem of evil – the evil in the world gives them no reason to believe that traditional theism is probably false. In the remainder of this paper, I will critically discuss two different strategies for attempting to meet this challenge, one used (at least implicitly) by most contemporary proponents of arguments from evil and one used by David Hume in Part XI of Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. I will defend the position that Hume’s strategy is the more promising of the two.

III. A CONTEMPORARY STRATEGY

One natural strategy for attempting to meet Plantinga’s challenge, a strategy implicitly employed by both Michael Martin and William L. Rowe, is to try to show that G is prima facie improbable by trying to show that it is prima facie improbable that an omnipotent and omniscient being would have a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evils we find in our world. More precisely, one might try to show that, for some statement about evil En and for some other statement or statements X, all of which are known or can be shown to be true, Mn (or some claim that Mn entails) is improbable on (En & X). If one could show this, then the following argument would establish that G is improbable on (En & X):

1. \( P(Mn/En & X) < 1/2 \). (premise)
2. \( G & En \) entails Mn. (premise)
3. \( P(G & En/En & X) < 1/2 \). (from 1 and 2)
4. \( P(G/En & X) < 1/2 \). (from 3)

The second premise of this argument is clearly true. And the two inferences in this argument are sanctioned by the probability calculus. (3) follows from (1) and (2) by virtue of the following theorem of the probability calculus: if \( A \) entails \( B \) then \( P(A/C) \leq P(B/C) \). And (4) follows from (3) by virtue of the following two theorems: \( P(A & B/C) = P(A/C) \times P(B/A & C) \); if \( A \) entails \( B \), then \( P(B/A) = 1 \).9 Also, as I noted parenthetically above, \( Mn \) can

9 Some of the theorems of the probability calculus presuppose logical omniscience, and hence are not true for epistemic probability relative to the epistemic situations of human beings. However, since all of the entailment relations that are asserted in this argument (and the rest of this paper) are ones that humans do have knowledge of, the assumption of logical omniscience may be regarded in this context as a harmless idealization. In contrast, Plantinga points out that it follows from the probability calculus that, to show that \( P(G/E) < 1/2 \), one would need to show that \( G \) is not a necessary truth (Plantinga, ‘The Probabilistic Argument from Evil’, pp. 4–5). If this were offered as a reason for doubting that a successful probabilistic argument from evil could be constructed, then it would be a very weak reason indeed. For here the idealization in question is obviously not harmless – it leads to a plainly false claim.
be replaced by any statement $M_n$ entails, since, if $(G \& En)$ entails $M_n$, then it entails any statement that $M_n$ entails.

**A. Martin’s argument**

Martin’s argument from evil proceeds as follows:10

1. The existence of evil in great abundance falsifies $G$ unless one assumes that

   R. God has a sufficient reason for allowing the existence of evil in great abundance or evil in great abundance is logically necessary.

2. Repeated attempts to establish R have failed.

3. There is no positive evidence for $G$.

4. Therefore, $G$ is false.

Martin asserts that (4) “is made probable relative to (1), (2), and (3)”11

Now the role of (3) is clearly to strengthen Martin’s conclusion from the claim that $G$ is prima facie improbable to the claim that it is improbable all things considered. However, Martin offers no defence of (3), so I will set it aside. (1) states that

E7. Evil exists in great abundance conjoined with the denial of R entails that G is false. This claim can be stated better, and all doubts about its truth can be removed, by replacing R with $M_7$. An omnipotent and omniscient being would have a morally sufficient reason to permit the existence of evil in great abundance.

This does not substantially change (1), despite the fact that R is a disjunction while $M_7$ is not. For all that the two disjuncts of R serve to do is to distinguish two different sorts of morally sufficient reasons, ones that involve a person’s permitting (for some good moral reason) an evil that she has the power to prevent, and ones that consist in a person’s simply lacking the power to prevent an evil. The only way that an omnipotent being could have the latter sort of morally sufficient reason for allowing the existence of evil in great abundance would be if the second disjunct of R were true – if the existence of evil in great abundance were logically necessary. So $M_7$ encompasses both disjuncts of R. This leaves premise (2), which we can now restate as the claim that repeated attempts to establish $M_7$ have failed.

There is little doubt that (2) is true. Theodicies are attempts to specify a morally sufficient reason for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit evil, and many of them purport to account, not just for the existence of evil, but also for its great abundance. Further, it is widely recognized that, while some theodicies may show that it is possible for $M_7$ to be true, none shows that it is in fact true. Indeed, even as committed a theist as Alvin Plantinga admits that extant theodicies are all ‘tepid, shallow and ultimately frivol-


11 Martin, p. 431.
ous', 12 (Anyone who still doubts the truth of (2) should simply replace E7 and M7 in the argument with E6 and M6. The truth of (2) would then be unquestionable.) Since both (1) and (2) are true, only one questions remains. Why suppose that (1) and (2) provide the resources for showing that (4), which is the denial of G, is prima facie probable? Martin's answer, though not explicit, is fairly clear: he must hold that M7 (R) is improbable with respect to (2) – to the claim that repeated attempts to establish its truth have failed. If Martin were correct about this, then M7 would also be improbable on (E7 & 2) (for the same reason that, if 'Feike the Frisian can swim' is improbable on 'most Frisians cannot swim', then it is also improbable on 'Kennedy is a senator, and most Frisians cannot swim'). But if M7 were improbable on (E7 & 2), then, as I showed earlier, Martin could use the following argument to meet Plantinga's challenge:

(A) P(M7/E7 & 2) < 1/2. (premise)
(B) (G & E7) entails M7. (premise)
(C) P(G & E7/E7 & 2) < 1/2. (from A and B)
(D) P(G/E7 & 2) < 1/2. (from C)

Unfortunately for Martin, M7 is not improbable on (2) or on (E7 & 2) – premise (A) of this argument is false. The failure of repeated attempts to establish M7 (despite centuries of trying by some of the greatest minds ever) does not by itself make M7 prima facie improbable any more than the failure of repeated attempts by mathematicians to establish Goldbach's conjecture makes it prima facie improbable. (And even if M7 were improbable on (2), this would be of no significance since this evidence against M7 would be offset by equally strong evidence for M7: the failure of repeated attempts by philosophers like J. L. Mackie to establish ~ M7 would make ~ M7 prima facie improbable!)

Something else must be added to E7 and (2) in order for the argument to get off the ground. Perhaps one of the following two claims would help:

(5) The best explanation of the failure of repeated attempts to discover any morally sufficient reasons for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit evil in great abundance is that there are no such reasons.

(6) If there were a morally sufficient reason for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit evil in great abundance, then repeated attempts to discover it would probably pay off.

It is at least plausible to claim that M7 is improbable both with respect to (E7 & 2 & 5) and with respect to (E7 & 2 & 6). But now the problem would be to show that (5) or (6) is true. In response to (5), the theist can offer a different explanation of the failure of repeated attempts to discover the relevant morally sufficient reason: there is such a reason but it is beyond

12 'Self-Profile'. In James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds., Alvin Plantinga (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 35.
our ken. Now such an explanation might at first glance seem ad hoc – we
certainly would not accept such an explanation if it were offered in defence
of the moral goodness of another human being who had allowed some evil
for which we could find, despite great effort, no morally sufficient reason.
But what makes such an explanation ad hoc in the case of human beings is
that the sorts of morally sufficient reasons that human beings have for
permitting evil are fairly well known. If some human being has a good reason
to allow some evil, it is likely we would be able to find out what it is if we
try hard enough. But the cognitive distance between human knowledge and
the knowledge of an omniscient being is vast to say the least. It would not
be surprising at all if such a being had reasons for doing things that are
beyond our ken. So the theist’s alternative explanation is not ad hoc. Further,
other than first showing on independent grounds that G is probable or
improbable, I can think of no way to show that one explanation is better
than the other. So (5) cannot, so far as I can see, be used to salvage Martin’s
argument. For similar reasons, any attempt to establish (6) seems doomed to
failure. Given the vast difference between human knowledge and omni-
sience, it is hard to imagine what grounds one could have for thinking that,
if an omnipotent and omniscient being had a morally sufficient reason for
allowing evil in great abundance, then we would probably be able to discover
it. So Martin’s argument fails to provide the necessary resources for answer-
ing Plantinga’s challenge.

B. Rowe’s argument

Rowe’s argument from evil, as most recently formulated,\textsuperscript{13} appeals to two
specific cases of evil. Nothing turns on the difference between the two, so I
will focus on only one of them: the beating, rape, and killing of a five-year-
old child that occurred on New Year’s Day, 1986, in Flint, Michigan. Let
‘E8’ stand for a statement reporting this horrifying incident. Now consider
the following statement:

P. No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent,

omniscient being’s obtaining it would morally justify that being’s

permitting E8.

Rowe holds that P provides us with a prima facie good reason to believe that

Q. No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being’s

obtaining it would morally justify that being’s permitting E8.

Rowe concludes that P (together with E8) provides us with a prima facie
good reason to believe that G is false. Rowe seems to believe that Q entails

\(~ \text M8\). \text (~ M8 is the statement that an omnipotent and omniscient being

\textsuperscript{13} ‘Evil and Theodicy’, \textit{Philosophical Topics}, xvi (1988), 119–32. Earlier versions of Rowe’s argument

can be found in \textit{Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction} (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1978), Ch. 6; ‘The Problem

of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism’, \textit{American Philosophical Quarterly}, xvi (1979), 335–41; and ‘The

Empirical Argument from Evil’. In Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds., \textit{Rationality, Religious

would have no morally sufficient reason to allow E8.) If he is right about that, then \((Q & E8)\) entails \(~G\), in which case his conclusion that the conjunction of \(P\) and E7 provides a good reason to reject \(G\) follows from his premise that \(P\) provides a good reason to believe \(Q\).

Rowe’s argument can very naturally be presented as a probabilistic argument – as an attempt to meet Plantinga’s challenge. Notice first of all that the conclusion of the argument would not be that \(G\) is improbable on E8. Again, as Plantinga emphasizes, this is implausible. Rather, the conclusion would be that \(G\) is improbable on E8 conjoined with something else we know, namely, \(P\). Rowe believes that \(P\) makes \(Q\) prima facie probable. If he is right about that, then \(Q\) is also probable on \((E8 & P)\) (recall Feike and Senator Kennedy). And this in turn implies that \(~Q\) is improbable on \((E8 & P)\). Starting, then, from this claim, the argument would proceed as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad P(\sim Q/E8 & P) < 1/2. \text{ (premise)} \\
(2) & \quad (G & E8) \text{ entails } \sim Q. \text{ (premise)} \\
(3) & \quad P(G & E8/E8 & P) < 1/2. \text{ (from 1 and 2)} \\
(4) & \quad P(G/E8 & P) < 1/2. \text{ (from 3)}
\end{align*}
\]

Once again, we have an instance of the argument form described earlier. The only difference here is that M8 is replaced with \(~Q\). But as I pointed out earlier, this will not weaken the argument if M8 entails \(~Q\). (Specifically, premise (2) will still be true because \((G & E8)\) entails M8 and hence entails any statement that M8 entails.) And it is at least plausible to think that M8 does entail \(~Q\). It’s hard to see how an omnipotent and omniscient being could have a morally sufficient reason to permit E8 if no good state of affairs is such that obtaining it would provide that reason. But even if M8 does not entail \(~Q\), the argument could easily be revised to remedy this flaw. Simply replace \(Q\) with M8 and replace \(P\) with the statement that none of the morally sufficient reasons for permitting E8 that we know of (e.g. being unaware that the child was in danger) would be a morally sufficient reason for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit E8. So like Martin’s argument, the success of Rowe’s argument turns on its first premise.

I believe that this premise is false. \((E8 & P)\) does not make \(Q\) prima facie probable and hence does not make \(~Q\) prima facie improbable. In other words, Rowe’s inference from \(P\) to \(Q\) is not even prima facie justified. It would be justified only if the following statement were true:

S. We have good reason to believe that the sample of goods referred to by \(P\) is representative of all goods.\(^{14}\)

But S is false. To put the point another way, \(Q\) is not probable on \(P\) but rather only on \((P & S)\). Thus, all Rowe can show is that \(G\) is improbable on \((E8 & P & S)\). But this is no objection to traditional theism because S is false.

\(^{14}\) In ‘The Inscrutable Evil Defense Against the Inductive Argument from Evil’ (unpublished), James F. Sennett makes a claim very similar to my claim that Rowe’s inference is justified only if S is true. However, he defends his claim in a very different way than I defend mine.
Why is S false? In the first place we have heard one bull be killed of
ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

Here and we wants uniformity how and no bulls... population of one's about another. I believe to be a more promising approach to answering Plantinga's challenge. Consider the following speech by the character Philo, who I assume speaks for Hume:

Here the Manichaean system occurs as a proper hypothesis to solve the difficulty: And no doubt, in some respects, it is very specious, and has more probability than the common hypothesis, by giving a plausible account of the strange mixture of good and ill which appears in life. But if we consider, on the other hand, the perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe, we shall not discover in it any marks of the combat of a malevolent with a benevolent Being. There is indeed an
opposition of pains and pleasures in the feelings of sensible creatures: But are not all
the operations of nature carried on by an opposition of principles, of hot and cold,
moist and dry, light and heavy? The true conclusion is, that the original source of
all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to
good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light
above heavy.

There may four hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe:
that they are endowed with perfect goodness, that they have perfect malice, that they
are opposite and have both goodness and malice, that they have neither goodness nor
malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And
the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth,
therefore, seems by far the most probable.\footnote{Hume, pp. 211–12.}

Notice that Hume first contrasts theism, which he calls the ‘common hypothesis’, with the ‘Manichaean system’, which is the hypothesis that the
universe was jointly produced by two beings, one benevolent and one malevolent. Hume asserts that this view gives a more ‘plausible account of’ the
pattern of pain and pleasure we observe in the world than theism does. Hume
does not conclude from this, however, that Manichaeism is more probable
than theism all things considered. Rather, he only concludes that it ‘has more
probability than’ theism ‘in some respects’. In other words, he thinks that
the fact that Manichaeism explains the observed pattern of pain and pleasure
in the world much better than theism gives one a prima facie good reason
to believe that Manichaeism is more probable than theism. And since theism
accounts for ‘the uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe’
better than Manichaeism, Hume concludes that we also have a prima facie
good reason to think that theism is more probable than Manichaeism.

Instead of trying to weigh these competing considerations against each
other, Hume suggests a different alternative hypothesis to theism, which I
will call the ‘Indifference Hypothesis’:

The first causes of the universe are neither benevolent nor malevolent.
Hume holds that, like Manichaeism, the Indifference Hypothesis explains
the pattern of pain and pleasure that we observe in the world much better
than theism does, and that this is a prima facie good reason to believe that
the Indifference Hypothesis is more probable than theism and hence that
theism is less probable than not. He also holds that we have no equally good
reason to think that theism is more probable than the Indifference Hypoth-
esis. For one thing, unlike Manichaeism, the Indifference Hypothesis can
explain the uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe just as well
as theism.

Hume’s central claim, then, is that the fact that the Indifference Hypoth-
esis explains the pattern of pain and pleasure we find in the world much
better than theism makes theism prima facie improbable. This claim suggests
a strategy for meeting Plantinga’s challenge that is quite different than the
one used by Martin and Rowe. For starters, instead of appealing to facts only about evil, Hume appeals to facts about both evil and good. This is an important insight on Hume's part. He recognizes that it would be of little significance to show that the suffering in the world is evidence against theism if the theist could plausibly reply that this evidence is offset by the evidence for theism provided by the pleasure in the world. Proponents of logical arguments from evil can ignore the good in the world. Proponents of probabilistic arguments from evil do not have the same luxury.

Another important difference between Rowe and Martin's strategy and Hume's is that Hume appeals to an alternative hypothesis to theism. Thus, he does not face the burden of showing that some Mn is prima facie improbable. Nor does he need to specify exactly how well or poorly theism explains the pattern of pain and pleasure in the world. All he needs to show is that his alternative hypothesis explains it much better. And notice that he need not show that this alternative hypothesis is true or probable or even prima facie probable. He need only show that it is prima facie more probable than theism. For if A and B are (known to be) logically inconsistent and A is more probable than B, then B is less probable than not no matter how probable or improbable A is.

We can summarize Hume's strategy in the following way. Let 'Hm' stand for some alternative hypothesis to G - that is, some hypothesis that entails \( \sim G \). Let 'Fn' stand for some statement reporting known facts about both evil and good. Let 'Umn' stand for the following statement:

\( \text{Umn: Hm is a serious alternative hypothesis to G that explains the facts Fn reports much better than G does.} \)

If one could show that Umn is true for some Hm and Fn, then one could use the following argument successfully to meet Plantinga's challenge:

1. \( P(Hm/Fn \lor Umn) > P(G/Fn \lor Umn) \) (premise)
2. \( Hm \) entails \( \sim G \) (premise)
3. \( P(\sim G/Fn \lor Umn) \geq P(Hm/Fn \lor Umn) \) (from 2)
4. \( P(\sim G/Fn \lor Umn) > P(G/Fn \lor Umn) \) (from 1 and 3)
5. \( P(G/Fn \lor Umn) < 1/2 \) (from 4)

(3) follows from (2) by virtue of the following theorem of the probability calculus: if A entails B, then \( P(B/C) \geq P(A/C) \). (4) obviously follows from (1) and (3). And (5) follows from (4) by virtue of the following theorem of the probability calculus: \( P(\sim A/B) + P(A/B) = 1 \). So the soundness of this argument rests on the truth of its premises. The second premise is unproblematic, since we are assuming that H is an alternative hypothesis to G. And the first premise follows from the principle that, if one knows of a serious alternative hypothesis to j that explains certain facts much better than j, then that is a prima facie good reason to believe that j is less probable than this alternative. The truth of this principle is, I believe, obvious, so long as the terms 'serious' and 'explains' are understood in the correct way. Specifically,
one hypothesis is a ‘serious’ alternative to another only if (i) it is not *ad hoc* – the facts to be explained are not arbitrarily built into it – and (ii) it is at least as plausible initially as the other hypothesis. And one hypothesis ‘explains’ certain facts much better than another if those facts are much more to be expected or much less surprising (in the epistemic sense) on the one hypothesis than on the other. So Hume’s strategy yields a sound argument for the conclusion that G is improbable on (Fn & Umn).

The trick, of course, is to find some statement Fn about good and evil and some alternative hypothesis Hm which are such that Umn – the statement that Hm is a serious alternative hypothesis to G that explains the facts reported by Fn much better than G does – can be shown to be true. If this could be done, then Plantinga’s challenge would be successfully met. Does Hume himself succeed in doing this? We have seen that he chooses the Indifference Hypothesis (call it ‘H1’) as his alternative hypothesis, and he appeals to a statement (call it ‘F1’) reporting the pattern of pain and pleasure we find in the world. So in his argument, ‘Umn’ is the following statement:

U11. The Indifference Hypothesis (H1) is a serious alternative hypothesis to G that explains the facts reported by F1 much better than G does.

Is this statement true? The Indifference Hypothesis is clearly an alternative hypothesis to G. It is obviously not *ad hoc*. And it is at least as plausible initially as G. After all, G is a very specific supernaturalist hypothesis with strong ontological commitments. If, on the other hand, we take the Indifference Hypothesis to be the hypothesis that the first causes of the universe, *if there are any*, are neither benevolent nor malevolent, then the Indifference Hypothesis is consistent with naturalism as well as with many supernaturalist hypotheses and its ontological commitments are much weaker than G’s. But what about the claim that the Indifference Hypothesis explains the facts F1 reports much better than G does? This claim needs to be defended. The traditional theist might plausibly hold that, although the facts reported by F1 about pain are on the whole more surprising on G than on the Indifference Hypothesis, the facts F1 reports about pleasure are on the whole more to be expected on G than on the Indifference Hypothesis. So Hume needs an argument here, and I do not think he provides a convincing one. He suggests in the passage quoted above that on the Indifference Hypothesis, but not on G, one would expect both pain and pleasure to play a role similar to the role that other ‘opposites’ play in nature – a role that is not, so far as we can tell, fundamentally moral. But this at best promises an argument. Thus, Hume fails successfully to meet Plantinga’s challenge.

Of course, this still leaves open the question of whether the necessary argument could be provided. It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer this question. But it is worth noting that what is needed is some way of
making use of one's background knowledge to provide an explanation of the facts $F_1$ reports that is 'sufficiently indifferent' – it works if the Indifference Hypothesis is true – but not morally sufficient – it fails if $G$ is true. I believe that Hume himself points us in the right direction when he points out that pain and pleasure play the same biological role that other parts of organic systems play – they systematically contribute to the biological goals of survival and reproduction. Given our background knowledge about the role played by other parts of organic systems, this is exactly what we would expect on the Indifference Hypothesis. But this is not what we would expect on $G$. For pain and pleasure, unlike other parts of organic systems, have moral value. So I think that Hume's strategy for meeting Plantinga's challenge, as well as his particular attempt to carry out that strategy, is very promising, much more promising than the strategy and arguments used by Rowe and Martin.

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Florida International University, Miami, Florida 33199

17 Hume, p. 205.
18 Although I was not trying to meet Plantinga's challenge at the time, I implicitly employed Hume's strategy in 'Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists', Nous, xxiii (1989), 331–50.