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Degenerate Evidence and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil

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I. The Argument Stated

Ever since 1979[1] William Rowe has been contributing to our understanding of the 'inductive', or 'probabilistic' or (his term) "evidential" antitheistic argument from evil by refining his favorite version and defending it against objections.[2] To state that version, we must consider some specific evils, such as a five year old girl's being murdered in a horrifying way (E_1) and a fawn's dying a lingering and painful death due to a forest fire (E_2). The argument then goes as follows:

P: No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being (a perfect being) in permitting E_1 and E_2;

therefore, probably

Q: No good at all justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2;

therefore probably

not-G: There is no perfect being.

Rowe's claim, then, is that P makes Q probable, i.e. (Q is more probable than not on P and our background information k); Q entails not-G; so not-G is more probable than not on our background information.[3]

Partly under the pressure of objections by Stephen Wykstra,[4] William Alston[5] and others, however, Rowe has come to take rather a dim view of this argument.[6] He therefore proposes to drop it in favor of one whose prospects he thinks are brighter: "...I propose to abandon this argument altogether and give what I believe is a better argument for thinking that P makes Q more likely than not" (267). After giving that argument, Rowe goes on to say that "we can simplify the argument considerably by bypassing Q altogether and proceeding directly from P to -G" (270). It is this new simplified argument that I wish to consider. This new argument, I believe, is if anything weaker than the old; that is because an analysis of purely formal features of the argument shows that it is counterbalanced by other arguments of the same structure and strength for a conclusion inconsistent with Rowe's conclusion, and hence for the denial of Rowe's conclusion.

An initial caveat with respect to P, the premise of the argument: Rowe takes this proposition in such a way that it is entailed by -G:

> ...we should note that the nonexistence of God is also a sufficient condition of the truth of P. For the realization of a known good justifies God in permitting E_1 or E_2 only if God exists. To see this, consider the *negation* of P. The negation of P asserts that God exists and that some good known to us justifies him in permitting E_1 and E_2 (264–65).

P, therefore, is to be taken as

P: It is false that there is a known good and a perfect being such that the former justifies the latter in permitting E_1 and E_2;

-G, accordingly, entails P; so that the premise of Rowe's new argument is a consequence of the conclusion he proposes to support.

Simplifying and restating the new argument, we may put it as follows. By a form of Bayes' Theorem, we have

$$(1)\ \ P(G/P\&k) = \frac{P(G/k) \times P(P/G\&k)}{P(P/k)},$$

where k is the relevant background information and P(G/k) the relevant initial probability. What information does k include? "I take it as important here that k be restricted almost entirely to information that is shared by most theists and nontheists who have given some thought to the issues raised by the problem of evil" (265). Roughly speaking, then, k contains the intersection of what reflective theists and nontheists know or believe. Now Rowe proposes that P(G/k) is equal to 1/2. I can't see the slightest reason to think this is the right value, or any way, really, to determine what the right value might be; but suppose we go along with this suggestion in order to consider the argument. He also proposes that P(P/G) = 1/2, but points out that his argument really depends only on this number's being less than 1. From (1), therefore, we have

$$(2)\ \ P(G/P\&k) = \frac{1/4}{P(P/k)}.$$

To determine P(P/k), Rowe employs a weighted average principle:

(3) $P(P/k) = P(P/G\&k) \times P(G/k) + P(P/\text{-}G\&k) \times P(\text{-}G/k)$

(according to which the probability of P is the average of its probabilities on G&k and -G&k, those probabilities weighted by the probabilities of G and -G on k). We are given by hypothesis that the two terms in the first product are each equal to 1/2. As for the second product, the first term is equal to 1 (that is a consequence of the fact (as we noted) that P is entailed by -G); the second term equals 1/2, so that

(4) $P(P/k) = 3/4$.

Substituting this value into (2), we have

(5) $P(G/P\&k) = 1/3$.

P(G/P&k), therefore, is considerably less than P(G/k); hence P rather substantially lowers the initial probability of G and in that sense disconfirms it. The argument for this specific value of P(G/P&k) depends upon taking P(P/G&k) to be equal to 1/2; but inspection of the argument shows that P(G/P&k) will be less than 1/2 (and hence less than P(G/k)) as long as the value of P(P/G&k) is less than 1. So P disconfirms G; furthermore, given that P(G/k) = 1/2, (and given that P(P/G&k) is 1/2), it is rather more likely than not, on P&k, that there is no perfect being.

Four initial comments.

(a) Presumably Rowe hopes that the theist will accept his proposition P, and presumably the goods of which he speaks are states of affairs, such as *Sam's being happy for two months straight*. But of course a theist will believe that *some* good *does* indeed justify a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. For if G is true, then α, the actual world, is itself a good state of affairs, a known state of affairs, and one that justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. You might complain that α may be known, but is not known to be *good* unless it is known that G is true; and perhaps Rowe is thinking of a *known* good as a state of affairs that is known to be good.

Fair enough. But note that Rowe proposes to allow for *conjunctive* goods: "Since we are talking about a good that justifies God in permitting E_1 and E_2, we should allow, if not expect, that the good in question would be a *conjunctive* good" (264). Very well, consider Γ, the conjunction of all the goods, g_1, g_2,..., α includes or contains. Γ, I take it, is a known good; and if G is true, then Γ justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. Hence a theist is committed to denying that no known good justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. Given P as a premise, Rowe's probabilistic argument is quite unnecessary; there is available instead a knockdown, dragout deductive argument for -G. The argument would go as follows:

P.
(Γ) Γ is a known good.
Necessarily, if there is a perfect being, Γ justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2.
Therefore, -G.

In the presence of (Γ), therefore, P, Rowe's premise, is equivalent to -G, his conclusion. Furthermore, anyone who thought that G and -G were equally probable with respect to her evidence would be committed to thinking it is as likely as not that some state of affairs she knows of—i.e., Γ—is a good state of affairs that justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2; she too, therefore, should not accept Rowe's P.

Still further, there may be more limited goods we know of that justify a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. When Rowe speaks of goods, he isn't thinking just of *actual* goods, actual states of affairs (although a good must be actual in order to justify a perfect being in permitting some evil); he is thinking of *possible* goods as well (264). And clearly it could be that some possible good we know of is also actual and justifies such a perfect being in permitting those evils, even if we don't *know* that it does. For example, the good of enjoying God's gratitude in eternal felicity[7] may in fact be actual and may justify a perfect being in permitting E_1; we certainly do not know that it does not. What the theist may be willing to concede, therefore, is not that no good we know of justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2, but that no good we know of is such that *we know* that it does. I hope Rowe will be willing to accept this emendation; if he isn't, neither the theist nor the person who is neutral as between G and -G should accept his premise, or even think it more likely than its denial.

(b) Rowe's argument is successful, of course, only if k, the intersection of what theist and nontheist know, does not include P. (If k *does* include P, then in (1) the denominator and the right term of the numerator both equal 1 and $P(G/k) = P(G/P\&k)$: that is, P is probabilistically irrelevant to G.) Rowe apparently believes, therefore, that at least some reflective theists or nontheists do not believe P. I don't know whether he is right about that, but presumably he would hold that if he is wrong and k *does* include P, then $P(G/k\text{-}P) = 1/2$, where k-P is the result of deleting P from k.[8] Apparently, then, we are to imagine a person whose total evidence is just k; this person then learns or comes to believe P, after which the probability of G on her total evidence goes down to 1/3. Alternatively, we imagine someone whose total evidence includes k and also P (but nothing else); what *she* presumably learns is that the probability of G on her total evidence is 1/3.

(c) Most reflective theists (or at any rate most classical theists) hold that God is a necessary being, taking this to imply that it is a necessary truth that there is an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good being. If we are speaking of *objective* probability, such a theist could not then concur in Rowe's suggestion that P(G/k) = 1/2. For according to the probability calculus, which of course Rowe is employing, P(A/B) = 1 where A is necessary and B is any proposition at all. Furthermore (still supposing we are thinking of some kind of objective probability), there is little reason to assign P(P/G&k) a value of 1/2. How could we possibly tell how likely it is, given k and given that there is a perfect being, that there is no known good state of affairs known to justify such a being in permitting E_1 and E_2? I haven't the faintest idea how we could do a thing like that. Perhaps, therefore, Rowe is thinking of some kind of epistemic probability;[9] in any event for purposes of considering Rowe's argument I ignore these complications.

(d) It isn't entirely clear to me what further conclusion Rowe wishes to draw from the fact that P(G/P&k), given his assumptions, is 1/3: is this an argument for the truth of atheism? Or for the conclusion that theism is not rationally acceptable? Or for the conclusion that theism isn't rationally acceptable for anyone whose evidence is in fact k, and who then comes to believe P, or for anyone whose total evidence is P&k? Or for the claim that for anyone whose evidence was k and then comes to believe P (or whose total evidence is P&k), atheism is rationally justifiable? Rowe doesn't say. What he does say is

> Using some concepts employed by Chisholm, so long as we had only k to go on we might say that believing theism was not more reasonable than believing atheism and believing atheism was not more reasonable than believing theism. Adding P to k, however, shifts things in favor of atheism. It is now more reasonable to believe atheism than it is to believe theism (272).

Now the most interesting issues in the neighborhood, it seems to me, have to do with questions like the following. (1) The argument shows that for someone whose total evidence k is the intersection of what theist and atheist know, and who then comes to believe P (and nothing stronger), the probability of G on her total evidence is 1/3; is that a *prima facie* reason for supposing that theistic belief is irrational for those who do in fact accept it? Not obviously. Quantum mechanics might perhaps be quite improbable on the intersection of what I and Stephen Hawking know; if so, this wouldn't be much of a *prima facie* reason for thinking belief in quantum mechanics irrational for those who accept it. No doubt these cases differ; but exploring the differences (and similarities) is one locus of interesting issues. (2) Is it even a reason for supposing that theistic belief is irrational for the person whose total evidence is k? Suppose theism is improbable on the rest of what I know—call it 'k-G': does it follow that my belief that G is irrational? Again, not at all obviously. I am playing poker; it is improbable on the rest of what I know or believe that I have just drawn to an inside straight, but it doesn't follow that there is something irrational about my belief that I have just drawn to an inside straight. The reason, of course, is that this belief doesn't have to depend, for any warrant it might have, on its being appropriately probable on the rest of what I believe; it has a different source of warrant (i.e., perception). Similarly for theism: everything turns, here, on the question whether theism has some other source of warrant, for human beings (William Alston's perception of God,[10] or Calvin's *Sensus Divinitatis*, or Aquinas' invitation or instigation of the Holy Spirit), in addition to any it might have by way of its probability on k-G. Here I shall set these questions aside,[11] and (falsely, in my judgment) assume just for purposes of argument that the rationality of theistic belief depends upon the probability of theism with respect to the intersection of what theist and atheist know. I shall argue that even given that assumption, Rowe is mistaken in thinking this argument "shifts things in favor of atheism", making it "now more reasonable to believe atheism than it is to believe theism" (272).

II. The Argument Examined

Note first that there seem to be *theistic* arguments relevantly like Rowe's; if Rowe's argument "shifts things in favor of atheism", these shift things in favor of theism. For consider

P*: Neither E_1 nor E_2 is such that we know that no known good justifies a perfect being in permitting it.

(Alternatively, we could consider

P**: No evil we know of is such that we know that no perfect being is justified by some known good in permitting it,

or, to strike a slightly different note,

P***: No evil we know of is such that we know that no perfect being would permit it.)

P* is entailed by G (just as Rowe's P is entailed by -G). I take it P* is not in k; some nontheists, I believe, reject it. As in Rowe's argument, say that P(G/k) = 1/2, and add that P(P*/-G&k) = 1/2. This assignment is highly speculative, of course, as is Rowe's assignment to P(P/G&k). We can quibble about the precise value of P(P*/-G&k), but it seems as reasonable to make this assignment as to follow Rowe in assigning P(P/G&k) a value of 1/2 (and, as in Rowe's argument, it doesn't much matter just what probability we assign to this term, as long as it is less than 1.) From Bayes' Theorem, then, we have

$$(6)\ \ P(\text{-}G/P^*\&k) = \frac{P(\text{-}G/k) \times P(P^*/\text{-}G\&k)}{P(P^*/k)}.$$

P(-G/k) is of course 1/2, as is the second term in the numerator. So

$$(7)\ \ P(\text{-}G/P^{*}\&k) = \frac{1/4}{(P^{*}/k)}.$$

To determine P(P*/k), we turn again to

$$(8)\ \ P(P^{*}/k) = P(P^{*}/G\&k) \times P(G/k) + P(P^{*}/\text{-}G\&k) \times P(\text{-}G/k).$$

We are given by hypothesis that the two terms in the second product are each equal to 1/2. As for the first product, the first term is equal to 1 (since G entails P*) and the second term equals 1/2; hence

$$(9)\ \ P(P^{*}/k) = 3/4.$$

Substituting this value into (7), we have

$$(10)\ \ P(\text{-}G/P^{*}\&k) = 1/3.$$

Someone whose total evidence is k, therefore, and who comes to know or believe P* but nothing else will then be such that the probability of G on her total evidence is 2/3. This argument seems relevantly similar to Rowe's and just as strong; shouldn't we therefore regard it as counterbalancing Rowe's argument?[12]

Let's look a little further into the structure of these arguments. Return to the fact that Rowe's proposition P is a necessary condition of -G, the proposition Rowe intends to support; and the support he sees it as offering is that it confirms -G. The counterbalancing argument I proposed above employs a proposition P* to play a role just like the role played by P in Rowe's argument: P* is a necessary condition of G; and P* confirms G in just the way that P confirms -G.

Now the first thing to see here is that if a contingent proposition P entails a contingent proposition Q (here take 'contingent' to mean one whose absolute probability is less than 1), then Q confirms P. We can see this as follows. By the probability calculus,

$$P(P/Q) = \frac{P(P\&Q)}{P(Q)}.$$

Clearly

$$\frac{P(P\&Q)}{P(Q)} > P(P\&Q)$$

just if P(Q) is less than 1. Now P entails Q; hence P(P&Q) = P(P); hence

$$\frac{P(P\&Q)}{P(Q)} > P(P)$$

just if P(Q) is less than one; hence P(P/Q) > P(P) just if P(Q) is less than 1. So P(P/Q) will range between P(P) and 1. Furthermore, it is easy to see that the degree to which Q confirms P depends upon P(Q/-P): the greater this quantity the less Q confirms P (i.e., the closer P(P) is to P(P/Q)); the limiting case is where P(Q/-P) = 1, as when -P entails Q, in which case both P and -P entail Q, so that Q is necessarily true. On the other hand, the smaller P(Q/-P) is, the greater the confirmation of P by Q; P(P/Q) approaches 1 as P(Q/-P) approaches 0. To sum up, if P entails Q, then Q confirms P, and the degree to which it confirms P varies inversely with P(Q/-P).

Returning to Rowe's argument, we note that his proposition P is a contingent consequence of -G; hence P confirms -G, and given that P(P/G&k) = 1/2, P(-G/P&k) = 2/3. The structure of the counterbalancing argument is precisely similar: P* is a contingent consequence of G,[13] the proposition the argument allegedly supports; given that P(P/-G&k) = 1/2, P(G/P*) = 2/3. It follows from the more general conditions just advanced that every contingent necessary condition C of -G that is not contained in k (e. g., *Thomas Aquinas did not succeed in proving the existence of God*) confirms -G with respect to k; but also of course every contingent necessary condition of G that is not contained in k (e.g., *Quentin Smith did not succeed in proving the nonexistence of God*) confirms G with respect to k.

So far, then, it looks as if Rowe's atheistic argument from P is counterbalanced by the theistic argument from P*. Perhaps a more important problem with Rowe's argument, however, lies in a slightly different direction. Note that we can apparently construct many other arguments for and against theism—arguments with a peculiar feature. For arguments on the con side, consider any proposition A you know that is entailed by -G where P(A/G&k) is about 1/2: it looks as if A will yield an argument relevantly like Rowe's. So suppose the fact is you are now barefoot (B), and that the probability that you are barefoot, given G&k, is 1/2. Then take P (i.e., the analogue of Rowe's P) for this argument to be

P: -GvB.

A little arithmetic shows that P(G/P&k) = 1/3, just as in Rowe's argument. Indeed, can't we get much stronger arguments against G by selecting a proposition P that we know is true, but is very improbable on G&k? Suppose you are running a modest lottery of 100 tickets and Martha (who is administering the lobby) wins (M). Setting aside doubts about Martha, we will take P(M/G&k) to be .01. So consider

P: -GvM.

It is easy to see that P(-G/P&k) is very high. Again, by Bayes',

$$P(G/P\&k) = \frac{P(G/k) \times P(P/G\&k)}{P(P/k)}.$$

P(G/k) is .5. What about P(P/G&k), i.e., P(-GvM/G&k)? Well, P(-G/G&k), of course is 0; hence P(-GvM/G&k) = P(M/G&k), which is .01. So the numerator is equal to .005. Now compute the denominator in the way in which by now we have come to know and love:

$$P(P/k) = P(P/G\&k) \times P(G/k) + P(P/\text{-}G\&k) \times P(\text{-}G/k).$$

P(P/-G&k) = 1, so the right-hand product = .5; P(P/G&k) = .01; so the left-hand product equals .005; the sum of these is .505. P(G/P&k), therefore, is the quotient of .005 by .505, which, my handy pocket calculator tells me, is just under .01. P(-G/P&k), therefore, is just over .99.

Of course we can construct theistic arguments of the very same structure. For the analogue of the barefoot argument, take P* as

P*: GvB;

this argument, obviously, will yield the result that P(G/P*&k) = 2/3. For the analogue of the lottery argument take P* as

P*: GvM;

this argument will yield the result that P(G/P*&k) = .99. The atheistic barefoot argument, therefore, is counterbalanced by a theistic barefoot argument; and the atheistic lottery argument is counterbalanced in the same way by a theistic lottery argument. Presumably we can find as many arguments of these sorts as we like, both atheistic and theistic, each atheistic argument being counterbalanced by its theistic counterpart and *vice versa*.

But isn't this conclusion paradoxical? It looks initially as if we can find as many arguments of this sort as we like, both for and against theistic belief. It looks as if it is trivially easy to find probabilistic arguments both for and against theism. It also looks initially as if the evidential argument from evil, as Rowe construes it, is no better than these barefoot and lottery arguments; it too can be trivially counterbalanced by an argument for the denial of its conclusion. But can that really be right? And is the evidential argument from evil this easily counterbalanced? What (if anything) has gone wrong?

To see what, we must return first to Rowe's original argument and inquire a bit further into the way in which it works. First, if this argument is to work, k clearly can't entail any of G, -G, P, and -P. Similarly for the argument I proposed as counterbalancing Rowe's: if this argument is to work, k can't entail P* or -P* (or

G or -G). So let's suppose that k contains none of G, P, P* or their negations. Then it looks as if we could run both these arguments (in either order), thus winding up with P(G/k&P&P*) as 1/2, i.e., as equal to P(G/k). Someone whose total evidence included just what theist and atheist both know and didn't include either P or P* would be in this position; the probability of G on *his* evidence after adding these two propositions would leave the probability of G with respect to his total evidence unchanged. So here it is easy to see why we wind up with these arguments counterbalancing one another: (1) k doesn't contain either P or P*; (2) P and P* are symmetrically related to k in such a way that adding either (without the other) yields an argument for G (-G) of the same strength as the argument yielded for -G (G) by adding the other.

But things go a bit differently with the barefoot and lottery arguments.[14] Take the lottery case. The way we told the story, we were to suppose that we already know M; then for our P and P* premises, we disjoin M respectively with -G and G. In this case, therefore, k includes what theist and nontheist both know; it also includes M, and hence both MvG and Mv-G. But that means that to make these arguments work, we must back off from our total evidence. For our total evidence k includes M and hence entails GvM; k&(GvM), therefore, is equivalent to k, so that P(G/k&(GvM)) will just be P(G/k), in which case GvM is probabilistically irrelevant to G. To make the argument work, therefore, we must cut back from k to k-M: call it 'k*'. What the theistic lottery argument then shows is that P(G/k*&(MvG)) = .99; what the atheistic lottery argument shows, correspondingly, is that P(G/k*&(Mv-G)) = .01. So the theistic argument takes some proper part of total evidence and shows that the probability of G is very high on that proper part; the atheistic argument takes a *different* proper part of total evidence and shows that the probability of G is very low on *it*. But this is at best mildly surprising and not a real paradox at all. We may perhaps wonder how it could be that on my evidence a proposition A could have a probability of 1/2, while there are also proper parts of my evidence such that A is very probable on one and very improbable on the other; but the argument shows us how.

The lottery and barefoot arguments are what we might call 'arguments from degenerate evidence': to give an argument from degenerate evidence, you propose to support a proposition A by showing that A is probable with respect to a part of your evidence which is such that there is an isomorphic part of your evidence with respect to which -A is at least equally probable. Clearly no argument from degenerate evidence will be of much use to anyone: clearly I don't advance the discussion by pointing to some proper part of my total evidence with respect to which G is probable, if there is a structurally isomorphic proper part of my total evidence with respect to which -G is probable.

But the fact is Rowe's argument itself, I believe, is an argument from degenerate evidence. For what do we come to see, when we reflect on E_1 and E_2, their relation to the goods we know of, and the question whether there is a perfect being? And under what conditions will a perfect being be justified in permitting an evil E? A perfect being is justified in permitting E if and only if there is some good G that stands in a certain relationship to E. Of course this relation—call it 'J', the 'justifying relation'—doesn't involve a reference to any particular perfect being, and holds or fails to hold between any G and E whether or not there is such a being. J is not easy to characterize,[15] but as a zeroeth approximation, I suggest the following: a good G justifies an evil E iff (1) G is actual and (2) G outweighs E, i.e., the conjunction of G with E is a good, (3) a perfect being could not have achieved G without permitting E, and (4) a perfect being could not have achieved a better world by permitting neither G nor E.[16]

It is very difficult to give a correct account of what it is for a good to justify an evil, and I am not sure the above is correct. But for present purposes we don't need such an account. For of course it is equally difficult to give a correct account of what it is for a good *to justify a perfect being* in permitting an evil. This latter notion is essential to Rowe's argument; so let us suppose we have a grasp of it. Given that grasp, we can explain what it is for a good to justify an evil as follows:

(Justification) A good g justifies an evil e iff if there were a perfect being b, and g and e were actual, then b would be justified by g in permitting e.

Now the thing to see here is that what we learn, when we reflect on E_1 and E_2 and the various goods we know of, is that none of these goods is such that we know or can see that it justifies E_1 or E_2. And of course it follows that no good we know of is such that we can see that it justifies some perfect being in permitting those evils.

Return now to Rowe's P:

P: It is false that there is a perfect being x and there is a known good y such that y is known to justify x in permitting E_1 and E_2.

What I shall argue is that P is equivalent in the broadly logical sense to

P′: Either -G or -J

(where -J is the proposition that there is no known good that is known to justify E_1 and E_2).

We can see this as follows. (I shall assume that the standard semantics for counterfactuals is correct as an account of the truth conditions of counterfactuals; for the sake of simplicity, I shall also assume that a counterfactual A→B is true just if B is true in the A world that is most similar to the actual world; the argument will go just as well if we instead take it that A→B is true just if there is an AB world more similar to the actual world than any world in which A is true and B is false.)

First, P′ entails P. As we know, -G entails P. But so does the right disjunct -J of P′. For suppose -J is true. Now G is either true or false. If it is false, then once more P is true; so suppose it is true, i.e., suppose -J and G. Consider any known good g, and consider the closest world W in which G is true and E_1, E_2, and g are actual. By -J, g is not known to justify E_1 and E_2, i.e., it isn't known that in W, g justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2. By G, that world W is the actual world. So g is not in fact (in the actual world) known to justify a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2; but g was just any known good; hence P is true. Both disjuncts of P′, therefore, entail P, so that P′ itself entails P.

But second, P entails P′. For suppose P is true but P′ is false; that is, suppose P, G and J are all true. This supposition is easily seen to be necessarily false. For by J, there is a known good g that justifies E_1 and E_2. Now consider the closest world W in which G is true and g, E_1, and E_2 are actual: by J, it is known that g justifies a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2 in W. But by G, W is the actual world. So in fact g is known to justify a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2; so there is a known good that is known to justify a perfect being in permitting E_1 and E_2; but this contradicts P. Hence P entails P′.

So Rowe's premise P is equivalent to P′. But then Rowe's argument, at least for most of us, is one from degenerate evidence. As we saw above, what we really learn here, when we reflect on E_1 and E_2 and whether a perfect being would or could permit them, is -J, the right disjunct of P: that no goods we know of are such that we know they justify those evils. Rowe's premise P, of course, is weaker than -J; to get Rowe's P we must disjoin -J with -G, the proposition Rowe means to support. This is precisely as with the barefoot and lottery arguments: you learn a proposition A, but take as your evidence a weaker proposition: the disjunction of A with the proposition C you mean to support. As we saw there, the problem with an argument from degenerate evidence is that there will be a precisely similar argument for a conclusion inconsistent with C; this argument will counterbalance your argument. In this case the counterbalancing argument takes as its premise

P*: Either G or no known good is known to justify E_1 and E_2.

This argument then follows the form with which by now we are familiar, yielding the result that $P(G/P^*\&k) = 2/3$.[17]

I say Rowe's argument is one from degenerate evidence "at least for most of us"; it is of course *possible* that someone should initially come to know, not the right conjunct of P, but P itself (just as it is possible that someone should initially come to know, not the right conjunct of P*, but P* itself); an oracle might tell her, refusing to tell her which of the disjuncts of P is true. But this isn't the way any actual person comes to know either of these propositions. So for any real person Rowe's argument is an argument from degenerate evidence. As such it has no tendency at all "to shift things in favor of atheism".

In conclusion then: Rowe's new evidential argument suffers from serious problems. First, there seem to be other arguments that counterbalance *his* argument: for example, the argument from the proposition that neither E_1 nor E_2 is such that we know that no good justifies a perfect being in permitting it. But second, Rowe's argument is really an argument from degenerate evidence. Therefore it has no tendency at all to show that theistic belief is either mistaken or irrational, or that it is more rational to accept atheism than to accept theism. It gives the believer no reason at all to stop believing, or to believe less strongly. It also gives the person on the fence, someone for whom, with respect to what she believes, the probability of G is 1/2, no reason at all to come down on the atheistic side. Further, the argument doesn't at all represent the strength of the argument from evil, which really does give the believer (some believers, anyway) something to worry about. The moral, I think, is that the argument from evil can't be represented merely in terms of probabilities; we have to turn instead to the notions of warrant and defeaters. I shall argue this in more detail in *Warranted Christian Belief.*[18]

Notes

[1]See Rowe (1979), pp. 335–41.

[2]See Rowe (1984), pp. 95–100; (1986); (1988), pp. 119–32; (1991), pp. 69–88; (1994).

[3]This formulation is from Rowe (1996), p. 263.

[4]See Wykstra (1984), pp. 73–94; (1988), pp. 133–60; (1983).

[5]See Alston (1991a), pp. 29–67.

[6]See Rowe (1996), p. 267: "I now think this argument is, at best, a weak argument."

[7]As in Julian of Norwich's suggestion: see her *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 14.

[8]Of course that's not exactly right: we must also delete any propositions that entail P, as well as members of any subsets of k that entail P. Perhaps we could think of k-P as a body of propositions maximally similar to k that does not entail P.

[9]See my 1993, pp. 137 ff.

[10]See his 1991b.

[11]I deal with them in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 1999).

[12]Suppose Rowe doesn't accept my proposed emendation for P and insists on his original version, i.e.,

P: There is no known good and perfect being such that the former justifies the latter in permitting E_1 and E_2.

As we saw above, this proposition is equivalent in the presence of (Γ) to -G. The appropriate theistic counterbalancing argument, therefore, would take as a premise

There is a known good and a perfect being such that the former justifies the latter in permitting E_1 and E_2

which is equivalent in the presence of (Γ) to G, and from which it immediately follows that there is a perfect being.

[13]Assuming for purposes of argument that G is, if true, contingently true.

[14]In what follows I am heavily indebted to conversation, both e-mail and otherwise, with Steve Wykstra.

[15]Here I am very seriously indebted to William Rowe and his comments on an ancestor of this paper.

[16]"A zeroeth approximation": say that a *good* world is any world W such that God could have actualized W and such that W is at least as good as α, the actual world; suppose there are as many good worlds as real numbers; and suppose that the good worlds can be ordered like the real numbers in terms of the amount of evil they contain. Then it is possible, for all we know, that (a) every good world

contains nearly as much suffering and evil as α, (b) no particular evil is included in every good world, but (c) there is no minimum amount of evil among the good worlds; i.e., for every good world, there is another good world with less evil. (These conditions would be met if some amount of evil not contained in any good world was the greatest lower bound for the amounts of evil contained in good worlds (in the way in which the number 1 is the greatest lower bound of the series of real numbers greater than 1)). If so, then it could be that some good G justifies a perfect being in permitting an evil E, even though a perfect being could have achieved a better world by permitting neither G nor E.

[17]The claim that Rowe's argument is from degenerate evidence does not depend upon moving from Rowe's original P to my suggested emendation. If we stick with Rowe's original P (and for the moment ignore the fact that together with (Γ) it entails the falsehood of G), the premise of the counterbalancing argument here will be

P*: Either G or no known good justifies E_1 and E_2.

[18]My thanks to Michael Bergmann, Kevin Corcoran, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Del Ratzsch, Michael Rea, David VanderLaan, Stephen Wykstra, and especially William Rowe.

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