III. Theism and Theory of Knowledge

I can best approach my second example by indirection. Many philosophers have claimed to find a serious problem for theism in the existence of evil, or of the amount and kinds of evil we do in fact find. Many who claim to find a problem here for theists have urged the deductive argument from evil: they have claimed that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God is logically incompatible with the presence of evil in the world-a presence conceded and indeed insisted upon by Christian theists. For their part, theists have argued that there is no inconsistency here. I think the present consensus, even among those who urge some form of the argument from evil, is that the deductive form of the argument from evil is unsuccessful.

More recently, philosophers have claimed that the existence of God, while perhaps not actually inconsistent with the existence of the amount and kinds of evil we do in fact find, is at any rate unlikely or improbable with respect to it; that is, the probability of the existence of God with respect to the evil we find, is less than the probability, with respect to that same evidence, that there is no God-no omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good Creator. Hence the existence of God is improbable with respect to what we know. But if theistic belief is improbable with respect to what we know, then, so goes the claim, it is irrational or in any event intellectually second rate to accept it.

Now suppose we briefly examine this claim. The objector holds that

1. God is the omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good creator of the world is improbable or unlikely with respect to

2. There are 10E+13 turps of evil (where the turp is the basic unit of evil).

I've argued elsewhere that enormous difficulties beset the claim that (1) is unlikely or improbable given (2). Call that response "the low road reply." Here I want to pursue what I shall call the high road reply.

Suppose we stipulate, for purposes of argument, that (1) is, in fact, improbable on (2). Let's agree that it is unlikely, given the existence of 10E+13 turps of evil, that the world has been created by a God who is perfect in power, knowledge and goodness. What is supposed to follow from that? How is that to be construed as an objection to theistic belief? How does the objector's argument go from there? It doesn't follow, of course, that theism is false. Nor does it follow that one who accepts both (1) and (2) [and let's add, recognizes that (1) is improbable with respect to (2)] has an irrational system of beliefs or is in any way guilty of noetic impropriety; obviously there might be pairs of propositions A and B, such that we know both A and B, despite the fact that A is improbable on B.

 I might know, for example, both that Feike is a Frisian and 9 out of 10 Frisians can't swim, and also that Feike can swim; then I am obviously within my intellectual rights in accepting both these propositions, even though the latter is improbable with respect to the former. So even if it were a fact that (1) is improbable with respect to (2), that fact, so far, wouldn't be of much consequence. How, therefore, can this objection be developed?

Presumably what the objector means to hold is that (1) is improbable, not just on (2) but on some appropriate body of total evidence- perhaps all the evidence the theist has, or perhaps the body of evidence he is rationally obliged to have. The objector must be supposing that the theist has a relevant body of total evidence here, a body of evidence that includes (2); and his claim is that (1) is improbable with respect to this relevant body of total evidence. Suppose we say that T is the relevant body of total evidence for a given theist T; and suppose we agree that a brief is rationally acceptable for him only if it is not improbable with respect to T. Now what sorts of propositions are to be found in T?

Perhaps the propositions he knows to be true, or perhaps the largest subset of his beliefs that he can rationally accept without evidence from other propositions, or perhaps the propositions he knows immediately-knows, but does not know on the basis of other propositions. However exactly we characterize this set T, the question I mean to press is this: why can't belief in God be itself a member of T? Perhaps for the theist-for many theists, at any rate-belief in God is a member of T. Perhaps the theist has a right to start from belief in God, taking that proposition to be one of the ones probability with respect to which determines the rational propriety of other beliefs he holds. But if so, then the Christian philosopher is entirely within his rights in starting from belief in God to his philosophizing. He has a right to take the existence of God for granted and go on from there in his philosophical work-just as other philosophers take for granted the existence of the past, say, or of other persons, or the basic claims of contemporary physics.

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