

IS ROWE COMMITTED TO AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THEISM?

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I argue in this paper two theses. First, I argue that the internal consistency of the argument from evil demands that it take into account some form of EST. Thus, there is no ground for the atheist to chide the theist when the theist appeals to an expanded version of theism. Second, I show that it is prima facie probable that RST does in fact entail EST. I show this by capitalizing on the distinction between what is contained in a concept and what is entailed by a concept. What a term or concept means is different from what it may entail. What a concept or term entails is conceptually more robust than what it simply means. I call this the "containment objection" and if it is true, then the restricted conjunction rule cannot apply since a version of theism sufficient to deflate the evidential argument would not be logically independent from RST, pace Rowe.

In contemporary treatments on the argument from evil, theists have objected to the argument by appealing to a more robust version of theism. Eleonore Stump, for instance, writes:

My point is simple and commonsensical: That the appearance of inconsistency in a set of beliefs may arise from our interpretation of those beliefs, and our reinterpretation of them in light of a larger system of beliefs to which they belong may dispel the appearance of inconsistency.¹

William Alston explicitly states that he is making an appeal to a more robust version of theism. He writes: 'The main advantage is that the total system of beliefs in a religion gives us much more to go on in considering what reasons God might possibly have in permitting E [intense evil].'² The reason these theists have made open appeals to an expanded version of theism has not only to do with their own personal religious convictions, but because any grounding for our being agnostic of God's reasons for allowing evil *seem* to rest on specifically religious claims, claims that belong to an expanded version of theism.³

On the other side of the debate, however, one of the chief proponents of the evidential argument from evil, William Rowe, draws the distinction

between RST (restricted standard theism) and EST (expanded standard theism).⁴ RST is simply the proposition that an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists. EST is RST conjoined with other logically independent religious claims.⁵ In response to theists like Stump and Alston, Rowe claims that they have surreptitiously made appeal to a more robust version of theism. Rowe complains in his own words:

... since EST entails RST, EST is just as improbable, given E [evil], as is RST. The reason this can be so, even though EST's probability is not lowered by E, is that the probability of EST, given E, is a function not only of the tendency of E to disconfirm it, but also of the prior probability of EST, the probability of EST alone. Thus, even though E does not disconfirm EST, **since EST commits us to much more than does RST**, the probability of EST alone may be much lower than the probability of RST alone. In fact, given that EST accounts for E and entails RST, its prior probability must be much lower than RST's⁶

The gist of Rowe's argument here is that any expanded version of theism, Christianity for example, suffers from the malady of having an apriori probability that is much lower than a more streamlined version of theism. The reason seems to be that if the restricted conjunction rule is taken seriously enough, then an expanded version of theism – which contains more propositions – will have a low apriori probability. The restricted conjunction rule then is the key premise. It states that for any two logically independent propositions, the conjunction of the two cannot be more probable than either of the conjuncts alone. For example, 'it will rain tomorrow' and 'Jack will propose to Mary' cannot be more probable than it raining tomorrow (alone) or Jack proposing to Mary (alone). The reason is that for a conjunction to be true, both conjuncts have to be true. The more one conjoins propositions together, the more improbable the resulting whole will be.⁷ The argument in clearer form seems to be the following:

- (1) The theist's response to the argument from evil appeals to EST.
- (2) The conjunction of logically independent propositions will result in a lower apriori probability than the conjuncts alone.
- (3) EST is RST conjoined with other logically independent propositions.
- (C1) ∴ EST has a lower apriori probability than RST (from 2 and 3).
- (C2) ∴ The theists response to the argument from evil suffers from a lower apriori probability than RST (from 1 and C1).

What I argue for in this paper is twofold. First, I argue that the internal consistency of the argument from evil demands that it take into account some form of EST. Thus, there is no ground for the atheist to chide the theist when the theist appeals to an expanded version of theism. Second, I show that it is *prima facie* probable that RST does in fact entail EST. I show this by capitalizing on the distinction between what is contained in a concept and what is entailed by a concept. What a term or concept means is different from what it may entail. What a concept or term entails is conceptually more robust than what it simply means. I call this the “containment objection” and if it is true, then the restricted conjunction rule cannot apply since a version of theism sufficient to deflate the evidential argument would not be logically independent from RST, *pace* Rowe. I shall return to this argument later in the paper.

The necessity that attaches to attacking this key premise in Rowe’s argument (i.e., the distinction between RST and EST and the implications claimed to follow from that) is that most every justification for the theist’s claims rest on assumptions concerning a fuller version of theism. If any theodicy or defense is to stand, the arguments in support of those claims rest on a fuller version of theism. The quoted passages in the beginning of this paper are indicative of the strategy taken by most analytical theists when responding to the argument from evil. So, to keep those strategies alive the claim by Rowe i.e., any form of EST suffers from an apriori improbability, must be dealt with.

To begin, Rowe claims that it is RST that is disconfirmed by evil. Now, RST is disconfirmed by evil only on the supposition that God would be expected to do something about evil; either preventing it or actualizing a greater good requisitely connected to it. So, RST is disconfirmed by evil only because it implies that God must be relating to the world in such a way so as to eliminate ultimately gratuitous evils. So far then, we can formulate the following argument:

- (4) If a hypothesis is disconfirmed by a piece of evidence, there must be some specific proposition entailed by that hypothesis that is unlikely on the disconfirming evidence.
- (5) RST is a hypothesis disconfirmed by the evidence of evil.
- (6) Therefore, there is some specific proposition entailed by RST that is improbable on evil.

Rowe does not leave his interlocutor hanging. He does offer a specific proposition that is entailed by RST and is disconfirmed by evil. This is premise two of his argument which states, ‘An omniscient, wholly good being would

prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting an evil equally bad or worse.⁸ The specific claim that Rowe takes to be disconfirmed by apparently gratuitous evil and is entailed by RST is the following: *all* evils that occur are necessary for a greater good.

Agreed, but here is the key to my response, this still leaves RST unspecific as to *how* God attains those greater goods. And knowing how God attains those greater goods may make consistent our experiences of evil and the existence of God. To stipulate how God attains such greater goods is to build an expanded version of theism. To see this more clearly, take the following schema:

(7) knowing that RST is disconfirmed by evil x

entails

(8) knowing that evil x is not necessary for a greater good.

Now, to know (8), requires knowing how God would go about attaining such greater goods. There may be ways in which God attains such goods that are (i) necessary and (ii) the connection between x and the greater good is opaque to humans. To put the point another way, in order to know that x is unnecessary for a greater good requires knowing *how* God would attain such a greater good. There may be ways in which *for* God, the necessary connection is opaque to humans. That is, in order for God to attain such greater goods, the means used may be opaque to humans. The general point to center on is that there are two moves in the evidential argument. The first is to stipulate that God would not allow gratuitous evil. The second is to claim that this X is an unnecessary evil. But in order for x to disconfirm theism, it must be known how God would go about attaining such greater goods.

Now, if (8) entails an EST (a theism which stipulates how God attains greater goods) and (7) entails (8), then (7) entails EST. *Some form* of EST elucidates how God interacts with the world and thus, must be included into the evidential argument from evil. So, the evidential arguer is not entitled to make an assessment of the probability of RST (alone) given suffering. The reason: If RST is disconfirmed, it is disconfirmed because (a) it specifies how God would relate to the world and then (b) argues that such a God-world relation does not obtain. But to make the specification described in (a) is just to start with an EST, contrary to hypothesis. Thus, Rowe cannot separate the two in the context of constructing the argument from evil.

One may object to the argument on the grounds that the move from (7) to (8) is ambiguous. The atheist can say that trouble looms for the theist not because of some narrow assumption about how God would (or would not) interact with the world, but because the theist claims God to be all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good. From such a claim, God would not be expected to permit (much) suffering. So the atheist can agree that (7) entails (8) but (8) itself is equivocal. It can mean,

(9) knowing how God would relate to the world simply in virtue of being all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing.

Or, it could mean,

(10) knowing how God would relate to the world that sufficiently fills out a conception of EST.

My argument that EST must be taken into account in assessing the incisiveness of the evidential argument requires reading (8) as the much stronger (10). But why should one accept (10) over the much weaker (9)?

Let me begin my answer with the following logical point.⁹ Let 'I' stand for the Doctrine of the Incarnation and RST and EST remain as defined above. Now let's grant,

$$\text{RST} \rightarrow [(\text{RST} \ \& \ \text{I}) \vee (\text{RST} \ \& \ \sim\text{I})]^{10}$$

Let's also grant that RST & I is a form of EST, I'll call this EST₁. And the same can be said for RST & ~I, since the denial of the Incarnation is a logically independent religious claim. I call (RST & ~I) EST₂. So, (A) tells us that RST entails either EST₁ or EST₂. But then, RST entails some form of EST. Presumably, one can replace 'I' with any other logically independent religious claim, and get the same result. Now, since (I ∨ ~I) form an exclusive disjunction, one must be true. Therefore, there must be an EST_n such that RST entails it. Consequently, one must take the stronger (10) into account. But notice, the conclusion of the argument here is that some form of EST follows from RST. So, it does not matter whether one must know how God would relate to the world – a way which fills out a conception of EST. The evidential arguer is stuck with some form of EST logically.

To take a different route to the conclusion that one needs to accept (10) rather than (9), let's consider the following argument.

- (11) The specifics within a theism (whether RST or EST) determine the content of the corresponding denial of that theism.¹¹
- (12) The evidential argument aims to establish atheism.
- (13) Therefore, the evidential argument must take into account the specifics of the theism which it is denying.

Premise (11) needs more clarification. It says that for any kind of theism there is a corresponding denial of that theism. And also, the *content* of that particular atheism is determined solely by its corresponding theism. In a sense, atheism is parasitic on the going theism. Which concept and theory of God one accepts can drastically effect the incisiveness of the evidential argument from evil. (For example, evil is not pernicious to a process theism.¹²) The rest of the argument flows from there. Taking (11) – (13) a step further, we can add the following conditional,

- (14) If it is the case that God interacts with the world in a way that makes consistent God's omni-attributes and the existence of evil, then the denial of this theism is unwarranted on the evidence of evil.

Knowing whether atheism is warranted, then, entails knowing the truth-value of the antecedent of (14). But to know whether the antecedent of (14) is satisfied entails (10) – knowing how God would (or would not) relate to the world that sufficiently fills out a conception of EST. So, if the evidential argument is to succeed at all, then one needs to interpret (8) as (10) instead of the weaker (9). Furthermore, one cannot explicate God's inner decision process and plan for creation simply by analyzing the omni-properties of God in isolation from any other possible entailments of those properties (a point I shall get to shortly). The important point for now is that the logical possibilities of how such a being can interact with the world and yet be consistent with the existence of suffering are several. But just which of those possibilities are actual is what is at stake, and thus the stronger (10) must be taken into account instead of the weaker (9).

The atheist may obviate this criticism by employing the restricted conjunction rule again. The atheist may agree with the entailment claimed in (14) but say that the antecedent is improbable, since it would employ concepts logically independent of RST. Thus the move from (14) to (10) would be stymied. In response, the only point I am making here is that the evidential argument, nonetheless, must take EST into account. Granted, the antecedent of (14) may require an appeal to a version of EST, but that is exactly what the evidential arguer must take into account.

I turn now to defend my second thesis mentioned above, i.e., it is probable that RST does in fact entail an EST (at least a theism which sufficiently deflates the force of the evidential argument). My argument is what I call the 'containment objection'. The containment objection aims to deny the truth of (1) which states that the theist appeals to propositions logically independent from the proposition 'God exists' when responding to the argument from evil. Now, when the theist makes an appeal to so-called logically independent religious claims, just what is the criterion to judge what is logically independent? The easy answer is whatever is not *entailed* by the proposition 'God exists'. But what has not been argued on Rowe's part is that the specific appeals made by the above mentioned theists have **not** been shown to be logically independent. Rowe is certainly right to say that EST is not *contained* in RST and he is certainly right to say that the Incarnation is logically independent of RST. But neither of these concessions show much. To take an example from Brand Blanshard, 'what is red all over is not green all over' is not what we would consider to be contained in the concept of being red. *Not being green* is not what is meant by *being red*. (It might be useful to interpret the 'contained in' relation as simply denoting what is meant by the term in question.) Granted, RST means 'God exists' but it does not mean 'the Atonement is true' or 'All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God'. Certainly these last two are not what Rowe or anybody else means by a restricted standard version of theism. In the same way, one does not mean by 'red' that it is 'not the South Pole' or 'not the Ninth Symphony'. Blanshard states the situation this way:

No doubt every pair of characters are related internally, if only by a relation of difference, so that they would not be what they are if this relation were removed, but this is not the same as saying that all these differences are *contained* in what we mean when we speak of red.¹³

But what has not been shown is that there is no *entailment* from RST to EST, and this is what is necessary to establish (1). Certainly 'being red all over' does in fact entail 'not being green all over'. So the extension of a concept may not be what we would consider **being** contained in the concept, but it would be what we think to be entailed by the concept. In the same way, the proposition that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God exists may not mean much beyond that, but the entailment and extension of each of those concepts is fairly robust. I think this latter claim is plausible on its own, I think it gains plausibility when one considers the different theological systems propounded by Aquinas, Averroes, and Avicenna. Though these authors represent different religious traditions, they all thought (though not in these terms) that bare theism entails something about *how* God would interact

with the world. Though there were differences between them on specific topics like whether God knows particulars, the only point I want to make is that there may be much more to theism than what RST suggests. And this ‘more’ is relevant to determine whether evil disconfirms theism. It is not my purpose in this paper to show the entailment between RST and some version of EST, but only to claim that Rowe has not shown that there is not such an entailment and further, in light of theological works across the different monotheisms, there is a high probability for a success. All that I am saying, then, is that there may be concepts and ideas that are in fact entailed by RST that have not yet been discovered. Indeed much of our beliefs and thinking is done in a synthetic/apriori way. We think about things that we thought were not entailed by this or that concept. Philosophical knowledge, in particular, grows in this way, i.e., we trace out the logical connections or plausible entailments between concepts and categories, elucidating what is not merely contained in the definition of a term or concept, but what is entailed by it.¹⁴

Let me briefly turn to a possible objection before concluding. One may query me on my use of EST at this point. It seems I am not using EST as RST *cum* some logically independent religious claims, but rather as RST *cum* claims describing the relationship between God and humans – the latter possibly entailed by RST and the former (by definition) not possibly entailed by RST. Here I am using EST in the latter sense because it is unclear to me that the theist is in fact appealing to logically independent religious claims in order to mount her defense of theism. Alston’s appeal to the good of complete felicity before God as a ‘live possibility’ does not make any reference to a specifically religious claim like, say, the Incarnation. (I refer the reader to William Alston’s piece referenced in note 2.) The point is, it is one thing to appeal to claims concerning what God-justifying goods there are, and claims about human cognitive limits, and quite another to appeal to specific religious claims which are logically independent of RST. The theist need only appeal to the former claims in order to run her defense. Thus, it is unclear that the theist is committed to a robust version of EST in order to deflate the evidential argument from evil.

I have argued in this paper that Rowe must take into account some form of EST when constructing the evidential argument from evil. In addition I have argued that Rowe is not justified in implicitly accepting the non-entailment between RST and EST – at least not an EST which is sufficient to deflate the evidential argument. What is crucial to this latter argument is the notion of the synthetic apriori. In an article by C.H. Langford entitled ‘A Proof that Synthetic A Priori Propositions Exist’¹⁵ he argues that we begin with a conception of what a thing or concept means. From there we can,

through thinking, trace out what is entailed by the concept in question. Langford uses the example of a cube and the property of 'having twelve edges'. In order to be really sure that a cube in fact has twelve edges is to pick one up and count the edges. But the only way to know that it is a cube that you are counting the edges of, there must be other properties contained in the concept of a cube that enable you to identify the object as a cube. So, though the concept of cube does not contain or mean 'having twelve edges' it is nevertheless entailed by the concept of being a cube since every cube does have twelve edges. The same scenario may be the case with RST and EST. The properties of God, though not contained in what we mean by 'God', are nevertheless entailed by the streamlined or restricted properties¹⁶ of God.¹⁷

Endnotes

- 1 Stump, Eleonore, "The Problem of Evil." *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): p.298
- 2 Alston, William P., "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p.100.
- 3 A caveat is in order here. I know of no-one who appeals to the doctrine of the Incarnation or of Original Sin to defend theism against evil – at least not among the contemporary analytical theists.
- 4 Rowe, William L., "The Empirical Argument from Evil." In *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986, p.240 n16.
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 240.
- 6 *Ibid.* p. 240 (emphasis in bold is mine).
- 7 This is the case only if the propositions conjoined do not have a probability of one. For a proposition with a probability of one will not effect the probability outcome since any number times one is itself.
- 8 Rowe, William L., "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p.3.
- 9 I owe this point to Thomas Flint.
- 10 '→' I take to symbolize logical entailment.
- 11 I owe this point to Michael Buckley from the introduction of his book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- 12 Someone may say that a process theism is not a version of RST and thus neither a version of any EST. But I raise this example only for pedagogical purposes and is not a central thread of my argument.
- 13 Blanshard, Brand, *Reason and Analysis*. LaSalle: Open Court Publishing, 1969, p.289.
- 14 A possible response to the line of argument here is that since Aquinas and others have different versions of EST, then it is quite implausible to think that we can show that *one* is entailed by RST. My response is that all I need to show is that it is plausible to think there is an entailment to something more than RST.

RST may entail some propositions about how God attains certain goods and which goods there are – and these entailments must be taken into account in order to run an argument against RST. My defense here does not commit me to specify an EST of any sort. (I owe the objection to Thomas Flint.)

- 15 Langford, C.H., “A Proof that Synthetic A Priori Propositions Exist.” *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 46 (1949), p.21.
- 16 Strictly speaking, properties do not entail anything. Propositions predicating properties of subject do entail other propositions.
- 17 I would like to thank Thomas Flint and an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.