

An Evolutionary Objection to the Argument from Evil  
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“The argument from evil,” let us say, is any argument that concludes to the non-existence of God from premises citing facts about the existence, distribution or amount of evils contained in our world, where ‘God’, let us say, is shorthand for ‘the extremely powerful, extremely wise, wholly good creator of all things’. In this paper, I shall put a very general objection against the argument from evil. I shall conclude with some brief remarks about the bearing of my objection on other atheological arguments (other arguments that conclude to the non-existence of God). My objection is inspired by Plantinga’s widely discussed evolutionary argument against naturalism,<sup>1</sup> though as will become clear, the premises I shall require are considerably weaker than those deployed by Plantinga.<sup>2</sup>

The argument from evil, we learned at mother’s knee, comes in two main varieties. There are so-called *logical* arguments from evil, purporting to show the existence of God logically or perhaps broadly logically incompatible with the existence of evil. And there are so-called *evidential* arguments from evil, purporting to show that the existence, distribution or amount of evil contained in our world renders it improbable that God exists. I shall focus on the latter sort of argument, though it’ll be clear by the end of the paper that my objection applies to the former sort as well.

The evidential arguments from evil one finds in the literature rest on certain key premises, premises like those found in (1):

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and James K. Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> My argument has affinities with an unpublished paper by Richard Otte (“Science, Naturalism, and Self-Defeat”), which came into my possession as I was finishing this paper. There Otte argues, as I’ll argue here, that the cognitive faculties responsible for belief in abstract scientific and philosophical matters are not likely to be reliable given that they were produced by naturalistic evolutionary processes. The conclusions he draws from this are similar to mine, but our arguments differ in several important respects. Argument in the same basic family may also be found in Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

- (1a) Probably, no reason would justify an extremely powerful, extremely wise, wholly good creator of all things in permitting the existence of evils of the sort contained in our world.<sup>3</sup>
- (1b) The probability, given that God exists, that there should be the distribution of evils we observe is much lower than that probability given naturalism.<sup>4,5</sup>

Below I shall put a very general objection against claims of the sort found in (1). It'll be handy to have a name for such claims. I shall group them together under the label 'the Key Premise' (since claims like those in (1) are key premises in the various versions of the evidential argument from evil) and use that label as a loose way of talking about the claims in (1) and close cousins of those claims.

## 1. Objection to the Key Premise

### 1.1 Setup

My objection rests on four theses, which I shall now explain and briefly defend.

*First Thesis:* The question whether the Key Premise is true is a recondite philosophical question.

That is to say, the question whether the Key Premise is true is deep and difficult. Claims like those in (1) have been the subject of perennial philosophical dispute stretching back through the history of philosophy. On one side, you find *inter alia* the Stoics, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Leibniz rejecting claims like those in (1), holding that God has good reasons for permitting evil and offering suggestions as to what they are; on the other, you find, for example, Epicurus, Hume, Voltaire and Russell endorsing claims like those in (1). Much like the questions *What is causation?*, *What is freedom of the will?*, *What is it for an object to persist through time?*, the question whether the Key Premise is true is a perennially disputed and deeply difficult philosophical question. As we'll put it, it's a recondite philosophical question.

Next, there's this

*Evolutionary Thesis:* If God doesn't exist—if *atheism* is true—then it is highly likely that we humans and our cognitive faculties are the product of evolutionary processes of the sorts described by contemporary evolutionary theory,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-41.

<sup>4</sup> Naturalism: roughly, the view that there is no God or being like God.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paul, Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 331-350.

where I'll think of likelihood here à la Keynes,<sup>6</sup> Carnap,<sup>7</sup> and Swinburne:<sup>8</sup> as an objective, quasi-logical relation of probability between propositions which conforms to the probability calculus. (There is much debate, of course, on whether this is the right way to think about probability. Not much turns on it for our purposes. The arguments to follow are easily recast in terms of other theories of probability.) Consider, then, the proposition that we and our cognitive faculties are the product of evolutionary processes of the sort investigated by contemporary evolutionary theory (call it 'E'), our evidence for contemporary evolutionary theory ('K'), and the proposition that God does not exist ('A'). Letting 'P(p/q)' be short for 'the logical probability of p given q', my claim comes to this: P(E/A&K) is high.

Why think so? Why think P(E/A&K) high? Because, if God doesn't exist, it's extremely difficult to see how we could have got here if not by the processes described by contemporary evolutionary theory. Given that there is no God, evolution is by far the most plausible explanation how we arrived on the scene. (Say many: given that there is a God, evolution is by far the most plausible explanation how we arrived on the scene. That's as may be. For present purposes, all that matters is that, given atheism, evolution is plausible.)

Next, there's this

*Thesis of Unreliability:* The probability that we humans have much by way of reliable insight into recondite philosophical matters, given atheism and that we and our faculties are the product of evolutionary processes of the sort described by contemporary evolutionary theory, is either low or such that we have no way of knowing its value. That is, letting 'R<sub>R</sub>' stand for the proposition that our cognitive faculties are reliable with respect to recondite philosophical matters, P(R<sub>R</sub>/A&E) is low or inscrutable.

Why think this thesis true? There are two possibilities to consider here. First, there's the possibility that A&E holds and that the evolutionary processes that gave rise to humans and their cognitive faculties were *unguided*: not orchestrated or superintended by any intelligent agent—*blind*, to use Dawkins' term.<sup>9</sup> Second, there's the possibility that A&E holds and that the evolutionary processes that gave rise to us were *guided* by some sort of non-theistic intelligence.

Consider each in turn. What's the probability of R<sub>R</sub> on the first option, *unguided A&E*, let us call it? Well, consider this question: Is there some reason, given that atheism holds and that we and our cognitive faculties arose via

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<sup>6</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921).

<sup>7</sup> Rudolph Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: WW Norton, 1986).

unguided evolutionary processes of the sort described by contemporary evolutionary theory, to *expect* those processes to have endowed us with much by way of reliable insight into recondite philosophical matters—matters quite beyond the exigencies of normal human life? Surely the answer here is ‘no’. Given unguided A&E, the main explanation why our evolutionary ancestors evolved cognitive faculties of the sort they did was that those faculties were adaptive: useful for feeding, flying, fighting, reproducing and so forth. But why would cognitive faculties selected for their success at those tasks have required reliability with respect to abstruse philosophical matters, matters quite unconnected to the concerns of everyday life? From a fitness point of view, such cognitive capability seems wholly unnecessary. Given unguided A&E, the probability of  $R_R$ , one thinks, is low. (Though there’s this possibility to consider: perhaps reliability on recondite philosophical matters far removed from the everyday concerns of life is a “spandrel”—a non-adaptive byproduct of some adaptively selected trait, in the way that, for example, abstract mathematical abilities could be non-adaptive byproducts of the adaptive ability to do simple arithmetic and geometry. Perhaps; it’s hard to say. Since at this point anyway, no one has been able to produce a convincing argument that we should *expect* reliability on recondite philosophical matters as a byproduct of adaptively selected cognitive traits, perhaps the best thing to say about the probability of  $R_R$  on A&E is that it is inscrutable—such that we simply don’t know what it is. )

What about the second option, *guided A&E*? The idea here is that the evolutionary processes that produced us were somehow guided by a non-theistic intelligence, by a being or beings that were not extremely powerful, extremely wise and wholly good. What’s the probability that evolutionary processes superintended by such beings—beings of middling or minimal power, knowledge or goodness—should have produced creatures capable of commanding much by way of reliable insight into recondite philosophical matters? Hard to say. If these beings weren’t terribly powerful, perhaps they lacked the means to create creatures capable of recondite philosophical speculation. If they weren’t terribly knowledgeable, perhaps they lacked the know-how. If they weren’t terribly good, perhaps they wanted to deceive us about deep and important matters. Perhaps. I should think we have no way of knowing, no way of sensibly deciding the probabilities here. The probability of  $R_R$  given guided A&E, I should think, is inscrutable.

Supposing all this right, we still have this question: What’s the probability of  $R_R$  given A&E? Letting ‘U’ stand for the proposition that evolution was unguided by any intelligent being and ‘G’ for the proposition that it was guided by some intelligent being, it follows from the probability calculus and the fact that U is true iff G is false that

$$P(R_R/A\&E) = P(R_R/A\&E\&U)\times P(U/A\&E) + P(R_R/A\&E\&G)\times P(G/A\&E).$$

If I’m right to think that the values of ‘ $P(R_R/A\&E\&U)$ ’ and ‘ $P(R_R/A\&E\&G)$ ’ on the right side of the equation are each inscrutable, we may conclude, then, that the value of ‘ $P(R_R/A\&E)$ ’ on the left side of the equation is likewise inscrutable, and thus that our Thesis of Unreliability holds.

So far, then, some considerations in favor of the Thesis of Unreliability. Note well: I am not arguing, Plantinga-style, that, given A&E, the probability that our cognitive faculties are *generally* reliable is low or inscrutable. I am not claiming that, given A&E, we've reason to suspect global cognitive unreliability. I am arguing for something much weaker, and, I think, much more easily defended. Objectors to Plantinga's argument have claimed that, *pace* Plantinga, given A&E, we should *expect* our faculties to be generally reliable, generally truth-conducive, especially with respect to matters that would have been necessary for the evolutionary success of our ancestors.<sup>10</sup> For present purposes, I needn't dispute that. I claim only that, given A&E, the probability that we'd have got faculties reliable with respect to abstruse philosophical matters is low or inscrutable. And that might well be, even if, given A&E, we should expect some sort of general cognitive reliability.

The crucial point, then: my objection relies on a premise considerably weaker than the crucial premise of Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, there's this

*Principle of Defeat:* If for some cognitive faculty F, you have good reason<sup>12</sup> for belief<sup>13</sup> that F is in state S, and if you have good reason to withhold or deny the proposition that P(F is

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Evan Fales, "Darwin's Doubt, Calvin's Calvary," in James K. Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 43-60; Brandon Fitelson and Elliot Sober, "Plantinga's Probability Arguments Against Evolutionary Naturalism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79:2 (1998): 115-129; Jerry Fodor, "Is Science Biologically Possible?" in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 30-42; William Ramsey, "Naturalism Defended," in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 15-29.

<sup>11</sup> My Thesis of Unreliability and supporting argument is closely connected to Michael Rea's claim in *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) that the probability that human *intuition* is reliable, given A&E, is not high, where intuition, for Rea, is the faculty whose outputs are "conscious episodes, not involving memory, sense perception, or inference, in which a proposition seems to be [necessarily] true" (174). Note that my Thesis is stronger than Rea's claim: the faculties subtending recondite philosophical speculation include intuition, but more besides. Also, my argument relies on a different (and, I think, more defensible) principle of defeat than Rea's.

<sup>12</sup> You have good reason to believe (invest considerable confidence in, withhold, deny, etc.) p, for present purposes, iff accepting (investing considerable confidence in, withholding, denying, etc.) p is a rational response to your total evidence.

<sup>13</sup> I shall understand talk of "belief" here and in the sequel in such a way that S believes that p if either (a) S accepts p, full stop, or (b) S invests a high degree of confidence in p.

reliable/F is in S) is high, and if there is no state S\* such that you have good reason for belief that (a) F is in both S and S\*, and (b) P(F is reliable/F is in both S and S\*) is high, then you have a defeater for any proposition p such that you have good reason for belief that F is your only source of information about p,<sup>14</sup>

where, for present purposes, you have a defeater for a proposition p iff you have good reason to withhold or deny p. Why accept this principle? I have no argument from first principles. I argue from cases.<sup>15</sup> Suppose you have good reason to think your pool thermometer unreliable. Then, one thinks, you should not believe what the thermometer says about the water's temperature unless you have some other source of information to go on. Or: Suppose I think it likely that my perceptual faculties are unreliable if I'm plugged into the Matrix and have good reason to think I'm plugged into the Matrix. I'm not aware of any mitigating factors: I'm not aware of anything about me or my faculties that would offset the perceptual impairment caused by being thus connected to the Matrix. Then, one thinks, I should doubt any proposition p such that I have good reason for believing my perceptual faculties my only source of information about p. Reflection on these and like cases, I suggest, lends strong support to our Principle of Defeat.

There are a couple responses to Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism in the large literature that has grown up around that argument that might be thought to make trouble for my Principle. Let us look briefly into those.

A central suggestion of Plantinga's argument is that one who believes one's faculties the product of naturalistic evolutionary processes and comes to believe that P(one's faculties are reliable/they were thus produced) is low or inscrutable thereby acquires a defeater for the belief that one's faculties are reliable and for any belief emanating from those faculties. Trenton Merricks<sup>16</sup> thinks this suggestion unobvious and that Plantinga's arguments for it fail. In the process of arguing the latter, Merricks gives various cases in which one has reason to think, with respect to someone other than oneself, that that person's faculties F are in a state S such that P(F is reliable/F is in S) is low or inscrutable. But, he argues, one has no reason in these cases to doubt the beliefs emanating from F.

For example:<sup>17</sup> suppose you come to believe of a hypothetical population of humans that their cognitive faculties are reliable, owing to the fact that you have lived among them, interacted with them, and thereby acquired powerful

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<sup>14</sup> For a related but interestingly different principle of defeat, see Rea, *World Without Design*, 186.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted here to Plantinga's discussion of like cases (e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 237ff, and Alvin Plantinga, "Introduction," in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 251).

<sup>16</sup> Trenton Merricks, "Conditional Probability and Defeat," in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 165-175.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-173.

observational evidence of their cognitive reliability. You then come to believe (a) that their cognitive faculties are the product of naturalistic evolution and (b) that the probability that their faculties are reliable given that they are thus produced is low or inscrutable. It is not obvious, says Merricks, that you've thereby acquired reason to doubt their reliability. Seems like the rational thing to think here is that their faculties are indeed reliable and that they beat the odds. Here's a case, then, in which you have good reason to think of the members of this hypothetical population that their faculties F are in a state S such that  $P(F \text{ is reliable}/F \text{ is in } S)$  is low or inscrutable but get no defeater for the deliverances of F.

I agree with all of this. But it's perfectly compatible with my Principle of Defeat. For though it's true in this case that you have good reason to believe the faculties of the imagined population in a state S such that  $P(\text{their faculties are reliable}/\text{they are in } S)$  is low or inscrutable, it's *not* true that there is no state S\* such that you have good reason for belief that (a) their faculties are in both S and S\*, and (b)  $P(\text{their faculties are reliable}/\text{they are in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high. For in the imagined case, you have good reason to think their faculties are in the state S\* of having been observed by you to display a long history of reliability, and you've good reason to think  $P(\text{their faculties are reliable}/\text{they are in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high. Merricks's case is interesting, but does no damage to my Principle of Defeat. Analogously with the other cases he presents. (Note well: I'm not here objecting to anything Merricks says. He nowhere claims to be objecting to a principle like my Principle of Defeat. I am merely pointing out that his cases make no trouble for my Principle.)

Erik Wielenberg<sup>18</sup> likewise takes a dim view of Plantinga's suggestion that one who believes one's faculties the product of naturalistic evolutionary processes and comes to believe that  $P(\text{one's faculties are reliable}/\text{they were thus produced})$  is low or inscrutable thereby acquires a defeater for the belief that one's faculties are reliable (and for beliefs emanating from those faculties). Wielenberg presents several cases in which one comes to believe of oneself that one's faculties are in a state S such that  $P(\text{one's faculties are reliable}/\text{they're in } S)$  is low or inscrutable. But in none of these cases, he argues, does one thereby acquire reason to doubt the reliability of one's faculties or the beliefs emanating therefrom.

For example, the "Unknown Process Scenario":<sup>19</sup> I come to believe that my faculties were created by some process or other and that I have no idea what that process was. Thus I have good reason to think my faculties in the state S one's faculties are in iff one is in the dark about their provenance and good reason to think  $P(\text{they're reliable}/\text{they're in } S)$  is inscrutable. Does this give me a defeater for my belief that my faculties are reliable? Obviously not, thinks Wielenberg. To suppose it does is to suppose that all the evidence I have for the reliability of my faculties is somehow undercut by the realization that I don't know where my faculties came from, and Wielenberg thinks this implausible.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Erik J. Wielenberg, "How to be an Alethically Rational Naturalist," *Synthese* 131 (2002): 81-98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

I'm not so sure it's implausible. I should think my evidence for the reliability of my faculties *would* be undercut by my realization that I don't know where my faculties came from. But suppose not. Suppose I've evidence E for the reliability of my faculties and, as per Wielenberg's suggestion, my realization that I don't know where my faculties came from leaves E intact. Then I'm in this situation: I have good reason to think my faculties in a state S such that P(they're reliable/they're in S) is inscrutable, where S is the state one's faculties are in iff one is in the dark about their provenance, and I have good reason to think they're also in a state S\* such that P(they're reliable/they're in S and S\*) is high, where S\* is the state one's faculties are in iff E is true of them. The upshot: If the case works the way Wielenberg says it does, it gives no counterexample to the Principle of Defeat.

Likewise with the other cases he considers. In his "Less Mysterious Machine Scenario",

I believe I was created by a certain machine. I believe that the machine operates according to certain principles, and I understand the most fundamental of these principles. Still, I believe that there are many unknown factors that affect what sort of output the machine will provide in a given case.<sup>21</sup>

Here, says Wielenberg, P(my faculties are reliable/I was created by the machine in question) is low or inscrutable.<sup>22</sup> But realization of this fact gives no defeater for my belief that my faculties are reliable, since

I have all sorts of evidence for the reliability of my faculties. For example, most of my perceptual beliefs about medium-sized physical objects turn out to be true; such beliefs are deliverances of perception, so perception seems to be reliable. I know all sorts of things, and I wouldn't know these things if I weren't reliable.<sup>23</sup>

The suggestion here again then: I have all sorts of evidence E for the reliability of my faculties, and the realization that P(my faculties are reliable/I was created by the machine in question) is low or inscrutable does not undercut E. But if so, I've good reason to think my faculties in a state S such that P(they're reliable/they're in S) is low or inscrutable, where S is the state one's faculties are in iff they were created by the machine in question, and I have good reason to think they're also in a state S\* such that P(they're reliable/they're in S and S\*) is high, where S\* is the state one's faculties are in iff E is true of them. The upshot here again: If the case works the way Wielenberg says it does, it gives no counterexample to the Principle of Defeat.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

As best I can tell, then, Merricks's and Wielenberg's objections to Plantinga, interesting as they are, give no reason to doubt our Principle of Defeat.

## 1.2 The upshot

I take the upshot of our three theses and Principle of Defeat to be this: if you are a reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated atheist,<sup>24</sup> you have a defeater for the Key Premise. This because (a) you have good reason to accept the First and Evolutionary Theses and the Thesis of Unreliability, and (b), if so, then given the Principle of Defeat, you have a defeater for the Key Premise.

With respect to (a): I take the arguments of the above section to have shown that the First and Evolutionary Theses and the Thesis of Unreliability are plausible on some widely known facts about perennially difficult philosophical questions, evolutionary theory, and probability. These facts, I take it, are known by the reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated among us, suggesting that, if you're a reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated atheist (for short, a *sophisticated* atheist), you have good reason to accept the First and Evolutionary Theses and the Thesis of Unreliability.

With respect to (b): Call those of your cognitive faculties responsible for forming and maintaining belief in recondite philosophical matters your *philosophical* faculties and suppose you are a sophisticated atheist. Then since you are among the sophisticated and have good reason for accepting the Evolutionary Thesis and Thesis of Unreliability, you have good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are in the state S of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes, and good reason to withhold or deny that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in state S) is high.

More, so far as I can see, there is no state S\* such that you have good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are in both S and S\* and P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high. For what would such a state be?

### 1.21 A track-record argument?

Maybe you'll reply, "Well, my faculties are in the state one's faculties are in if one has enjoyed a considerable track-record of success at answering recondite philosophical questions. I have observed in myself a long history of successful philosophical inquiry and thus have good reason to think my faculties in a state S\* such that P(my philosophical are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high."

But if you're a sophisticated atheist, there's this problem with your suggestion. Consider the first bit B<sub>1</sub> of philosophizing on some recondite philosophical question you performed which is such that, by your lights, it was a success—by your lights, it delivered up recondite philosophical truth. Since you

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Philip L Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 468-486. An "atheist", for present purposes, is someone who fully believes the proposition that there is no God or invests a high degree of confidence in that proposition.

have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties in the state S of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes, and thus good reason to withhold or deny that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in state S) is high, by the Principle of Defeat you have good reason to doubt the deliverances of B<sub>1</sub> unless there is some state S\* such that you have good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are in both S and S\* and P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high. We're presently exploring the suggestion that your reason for thinking your faculties in the relevant state S\* is a track-record argument; wherefore, you have good reason to doubt the deliverances of B<sub>1</sub>—your first bit of putatively successful philosophical theorizing—unless you have evidence that, subsequent to B<sub>1</sub>, you produced a track-record of philosophical successes. Well, consider your second bit B<sub>2</sub> of putatively successful philosophical theorizing. You have good reason to doubt *its* deliverances unless you've evidence of a track-record of success either prior to B<sub>2</sub> or subsequent to B<sub>2</sub>. Since B<sub>1</sub> is in doubt unless you have evidence of philosophical success later than it, all depends here on whether you've evidence of successful philosophical theorizing after B<sub>2</sub>. Likewise with your third bit B<sub>3</sub> of putatively successful philosophical theorizing: you have good reason to doubt *its* deliverances unless you can point to a considerable number of successes after B<sub>3</sub>. Likewise with your fourth bit, and your fifth, and so on, until you get to your most recent philosophical theorizing, which you have reason to doubt and no later successes to point to.

The upshot, I propose, is this: if you have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties in the state S of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes and thus good reason to withhold or deny that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in state S) is high, and your *only* reason for thinking your philosophical faculties in a state S\* such that P(they're reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high is that you have noticed in yourself a track-record of philosophical aptitude, then, pretty clearly, you *don't* have good reason to think yourself in the relevant S\*.

Is there some other S\* such that you have good reason for belief that (a) your philosophical faculties are in both S (the state of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes) and S\*, and (b) P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high? Perhaps.

### 1.22 Reid to the rescue?

Michael Bergmann has offered an objection to Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism inspired by Thomas Reid.<sup>25</sup> To borrow an example of Plantinga's,<sup>26</sup> suppose there is powerful circumstantial evidence that you stole a certain letter yesterday from the office of one of your colleagues, but that you

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Bergmann, "Commonsense Naturalism," in Beilby, *Naturalism Defeated?*, 61-90.

<sup>26</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Problem of Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 69-96.

clearly remember being alone for a walk in the woods at the time the letter was stolen. Your colleagues doubt your claim to have been alone in the woods at the relevant time (call that claim ‘W’) on grounds that  $P(W/k)$  is low, where  $k$ , say, is the conjunction of the propositional evidence against you. We can suppose that you have basically the same propositional evidence  $k$  as do your colleagues and that you agree that  $P(W/k)$  is low. But you have a source of *non-propositional* evidence not available to your colleagues: your memorial experience of its seeming clearly to you that you were out for a walk at the time the letter was stolen. And this experience, if sufficiently vivid, can make it rational for you to continue believing  $W$ , even if fully aware that the probability of  $W$  on your total propositional evidence  $k$  is low. The lesson, Plantinga concludes, is that it can be perfectly rational to believe something improbable on your total propositional evidence if you have sufficiently strong non-propositional evidence for the belief in question.

Bergmann agrees but thinks this makes trouble for Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument.<sup>27</sup> For as Reid pointed out,<sup>28</sup> our belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties is not plausibly thought of as inferential, as based on other beliefs we hold. On Reid’s view,<sup>29</sup> belief in the reliability of our faculties is grounded, rather, in a certain sort of *non-propositional* evidence, viz. an experience of the emotion of *ridicule*. He thought of belief in the axioms of logic and mathematics, the reliability of our faculties, and other truths of “common sense” as grounded in this emotion, as follows: when one considers the contrary of one of these truths—when one entertains the possibility that, for example, modus ponens is *not* a valid rule of inference, that  $2+2$  is *not* equal to 4, or that I am massively deceived about the world around me—an emotion of ridicule naturally arises in one, prompting in one a thought like ‘that’s crazy, ridiculous!’. Such experience, then, grounds belief in the common sense truth whose contrary presents itself to one as thus ridiculous.

Reid’s point, says Bergmann, suggests this reply to Plantinga:<sup>30</sup> Even if the naturalist came to believe that  $P(\text{her faculties are reliable}/\text{they were produced by naturalistic evolutionary processes})$  is low or inscrutable, she needn’t thereby acquire a defeater for her belief that her faculties are reliable. For her belief might be backed by sufficiently strong non-propositional evidence of the sort Reid described, evidence strong enough to make it perfectly rational to continue holding that belief, even if her total relevant propositional evidence  $k$  was such that  $P(\text{her faculties are reliable}/k)$  was low or inscrutable.

It also suggests an answer to my question whether the sophisticated atheist has good reason for belief that her faculties are in a state  $S^*$  such that  $P(\text{her philosophical faculties are reliable}/\text{they’re in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high (where  $S$ , recall, is the state one’s faculties are in iff they were produced by atheistic

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<sup>27</sup> Bergmann, “Commonsense Naturalism,” 66-68.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 593 and 630.

<sup>29</sup> I’m following Bergmann’s exposition of Reid (Bergmann, “Commonsense Naturalism,” 66-68) pretty closely here.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

evolutionary processes). For suppose her belief that her philosophical faculties are reliable is grounded in powerful non-propositional evidence of the sort Reid described. Then, it would seem, she has good reason to think her philosophical faculties in a state  $S^*$  such that  $P(\text{her philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high, where the  $S^*$  in question is the state one's faculties are in iff they are *reliable*.

Accordingly: if you are a sophisticated atheist and have strong non-propositional evidence of the sort Reid described for your belief that your philosophical faculties are reliable, then the answer to my above question whether there is some  $S^*$  such that you've good reason for belief that (a) your philosophical faculties are in both  $S$  (the state of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes) and  $S^*$ , and (b)  $P(\text{your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high, is *yes*.

By way of reply, I wonder this. Why don't *I* have such non-propositional evidence for my belief that *my* philosophical faculties are reliable. I don't experience any emotion of ridicule when I entertain the possibility that my cognitive faculties are unreliable with respect to abstruse philosophical matters far removed from the everyday concerns of life. That possibility doesn't strike me as crazy or ridiculous. I don't notice any powerful seeming or seeing to be true when I consider the proposition that my philosophical faculties are reliable; it doesn't strike me as just *obvious* that they are. In fact, when I consider the multitude of crazy views philosophers have defended over the centuries and the rampant disagreement among philosophers over almost of everything of substance, I find it wholly *unobvious* that we humans, myself included, have reliable philosophical faculties. More, my attitude seems *appropriate* to the foregoing evidence. Given that evidence, it *shouldn't* strike us as just obvious that our philosophical faculties are reliable—the possibility that those faculties are unreliable *shouldn't* strike us crazy or ridiculous. My worry then: If you are a sophisticated atheist and have Reidian non-propositional evidence for the reliability of your philosophical faculties—find it just *obvious* that your philosophical faculties are reliable—then I suspect you are not being appropriately responsive to the evidence. I suspect that your total evidence undercuts your Reidian non-propositional evidence—that given your awareness of widespread philosophical disagreement on almost all matters of substance and the variety of crazy views defended by philosophers over the centuries, a Reidian emotion of ridicule at the thought that perhaps your philosophical faculties aren't reliable is an unreasonable response to your evidence. But if so, then if your only evidence for belief in the reliability of your philosophical faculties is Reidian non-propositional evidence, you *don't* have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties in a state  $S^*$  such that  $P(\text{your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both } S \text{ and } S^*)$  is high.

Let us rehearse the logic of the situation. I argued above that, if you are a sophisticated atheist, you have good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are in the state  $S$  of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes, and good reason to withhold or deny that  $P(\text{your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in state } S)$  is high. More, I said, as best I can tell, there's no state  $S^*$  such that you have good reason for belief that (a) your

philosophical faculties are in both S and S\* and (b) P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high. We considered and rejected the possibility that you have a good track-record argument for thinking your philosophical faculties in a state S\* such that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high. We then considered and rejected the possibility that you have good non-propositional reason, of the sort Reid described, for thinking your philosophical faculties in a state S\* such that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high.

That leaves us, then, with the question whether there is some *other* S\* such that you have good reason for belief that (a) your philosophical faculties are in both S (the state of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes) and S\*, and (b) P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in both S and S\*) is high. It's hard indeed to see what state S\* could do the job. I think there is no such state. If I'm right, then it follows from our Principle of Defeat that you have a defeater for any proposition p such that you have good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are your only source of information on p. But, you *have* good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are your only source of information on the Key Premise. This because you have good reason for accepting the First Thesis, the claim that the Key Premise is a *recondite* philosophical matter, and your philosophical faculties are, by definition, the faculties whereby you form and maintain belief about *recondite* philosophical matters. Wherefore, you have a defeater for the Key Premise; belief in the Key Premise is unjustified for you.

Our reasoning has led us to this conclusion: If you are a sophisticated atheist, belief in the Key Premise is unjustified for you. For the sophisticated anyway, the evidential argument from evil is *not* a good argument for atheism: it's not an argument one could rationally hold atheistic belief on the basis of. For as we've seen, if you are among the sophisticated and you accept the conclusion of the evidential argument (that there is no God), belief in the argument's key premise is unjustified for you.

Such is my objection to the evidential argument from evil; in short: if you're a reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated denizen of the contemporary scene, you can't rationally accept the conclusion of the evidential argument on the basis of its premises. The argument gives you no good grounds for being an atheist.

## 2. Three Objections

First objection:<sup>31</sup> "Consider

(\*) No reason would justify an extremely powerful, extremely wise, wholly good creator of all things in permitting the existence of evils of the sort contained in our world.

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<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Mike Rea for helpful correspondence on this and the next objection.

If (\*) is true, then, plausibly, it's a *conceptual truth*: a sentence S *a priori* knowable by anyone with an adequate understanding of the concepts expressed by the constituent terms of S. So take 'no married male is a bachelor'. It is a conceptual truth in our sense: anyone with an adequate grasp on the concepts *bachelor*, *married*, and *male* can see *a priori* that it's true. Likewise, plausibly, with (\*): mastery of the concepts 'good', 'justification', and so forth, should enable one to see *a priori* that it's true (if it's true).

Suppose so. Then even if it's right that the probability given atheistic evolution that we should command reliable insight into fundamental metaphysical truths—truths about the fundamental structure of the world—isn't high, there's good reason to think that the probability given atheistic evolution that we'd be reliable on *conceptual* matters—that we'd be good at discerning conceptual truths—is high. Reliability of the latter sort, one thinks, is a matter of having reliable *a priori* access to the conditions of satisfaction of our concepts and to the logical relations holding among them. Plausibly, reliability of this sort would have been fitness enhancing for our ancestors. A creature with the concepts of, say, *danger* or *food*, who lacks a reliable grip on the conditions under which such concepts are satisfied or on the logical relations holding among related concepts will fare poorly in the evolutionary game. Faculties capable of reliable belief about the satisfaction conditions of our concepts and the logical relationships holding among them are not at all surprising on the evolutionary story. Wherefore, reliability in the domain of conceptual truths is not at all surprising on the evolutionary story. But if so, the probability given atheistic evolution that we'd be reliable on the Key Premise and like claims isn't low, since these are quite plausibly thought of as conceptual truths. But if so, your above argument fails."

Such is our first objection. A couple points in reply. First, is it right that reliability with respect to conceptual truths is not at all surprising on the evolutionary story? Here the distinction between, on the one hand, having beliefs about a rule, and on the other, having *internalized* the rule—having a set of behavioral dispositions keyed to the content of the rule—is relevant.<sup>32</sup> Think about rules you might learn from your golf teacher about how to swing a club. You start by forming beliefs to the effect that the rule for thus-and-such situation is thus-and-so. You then consciously apply rules learned thus to your swing. Eventually, if things are going well, you *internalize* the rules: encode them in a set of dispositions and bodily habits sensitive to the content of the rule so that your bodily behavior conforms to the rule without your having to consciously attend to it. Given enough time, you may even forget the rules in the sense that you no longer possess propositional representations of them.

The distinction between having beliefs about a rule and having internalized a rule in hand, return to the concept of *danger*. Our objector suggests that a creature who possesses the concept of danger but lacks a reliable

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<sup>32</sup> For insightful discussion of the difference between propositional knowledge of rules and internalized rules, see John R. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 150ff, and John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 140ff.

grip on its conditions of satisfaction will fare poorly in the evolutionary game. Much depends, though, on what's meant by talk of having a "reliable grip" on the conditions of satisfaction of the concept of danger. One way of understanding such talk: to have a reliable grip on the conditions of satisfaction of the concept of danger is to have internalized the concept: to have encoded a set of dispositions and bodily habits sensitive to the satisfaction conditions of the concept in such a way that one can reliably avoid those conditions in which the concept is satisfied. Another way of understanding such talk: to have a reliable grip on the conditions of satisfaction of the concept of danger is to be able to form true beliefs of the form 'the concept danger is satisfied under thus-and-such conditions'.

Now, this much seems right: It's not at all surprising that evolution should have crafted creatures with a reliable grip on the conditions of satisfaction of the concept of danger, in the first sense of that notion. So it's not at all surprising that evolution should have crafted creatures who had internalized the concept of danger: who had encoded a set of dispositions and bodily habits sensitive to the satisfaction conditions of the concept in such a way that they could reliably avoid dangerous situations. But is it likewise unsurprising that evolution should have crafted creatures with the ability to form true *beliefs* about that concept, its application conditions, its logical relations to other concepts, and so forth? That part isn't as obvious. So long as the concept is internalized, whether or not one has faculties capable of reliability on the relevant metalevel beliefs about the concept would seem to be irrelevant from the perspective of evolution. But if so, contrary to our objector, faculties capable of reliable belief about the satisfaction conditions of our concepts and the logical relationships holding among them is surprising given the evolutionary story.

Second, it's not very plausible, I think, that (\*) is the sort of claim *a priori* knowable by anyone with an adequate understanding of the concept of *goodness*, *justifying reason* and the like. There is considerable disagreement in the history of philosophy about (\*). Leibniz thought it false; Russell thought it true. Was this because one or the other didn't understand the concept *goodness* or *justifying reason* well enough? That strikes me as dubious. I should think Russell and Leibniz understood the concepts in play in (\*) perfectly well, but that understanding of those concepts isn't sufficient for ascertaining the truth of (\*). Ascertaining the truth of (\*) requires a grip on those concepts, to be sure, but more besides: for example, a grip on the space of evil-justifying reasons available to a being like God. While we've a perfectly good grip on the concepts *goodness*, *justifying reasons*, and so forth, we have a lousy grasp on the space of evil-justifying reasons available to a being like God. That strikes me as a much more plausible explanation of our perennial disagreement about (\*) than does the suggestion that (\*) is a conceptual truth whose component concepts are unclear to us. My central suggestion here, then: (\*) isn't plausibly thought of as a conceptual truth in the sense relevant to the objection.

Thus far our first objection and some reply. Here's a second objection: "Even if you're right that an atheist couldn't sensibly base atheistic belief on the evidential argument, it's consistent with what you say that for many (maybe even most), the evidential argument constitutes good reason for *agnosticism* with respect to theistic belief. Consider the Key Premise. As was suggested earlier, the

question whether the Key Premise is true is perennially difficult—philosophers have disputed about it for centuries. The fact of the matter is, it's not obvious what to think about it.

Imagine someone, then, with no other evidence for or against theism who considers the Key Premise and the various arguments for and against it, finds herself unsure what to think and adopts an attitude of agnosticism toward the Key Premise—in Chisholm's terminology, she withholds the Key Premise. Seeing the implications of the Key Premise for theism (if the Key Premise is true, likely theism isn't), she likewise withholds the proposition that God exists. Arriving at agnosticism thus on the basis of the evidential argument would seem to be perfectly rational. The evidence for the Key Premise is ambiguous; it's hard to know *what* to think about it. Withholding the Key Premise seems a reasonable response to the evidence. For one with no other evidence for or against theism who withholds the Key Premise and sees the connection between it and theism, withholding theism seems reasonable as well.

So we get this: even if your above arguments are on target and the evidential argument isn't a good basis for atheistic *belief*, it's perfectly consistent with what you've said that, for many people, the evidential argument constitutes excellent grounds for agnosticism with respect to the theism/atheism debate."

Such is our second objection. Note by way of reply that even if this objection is right—even if all my above arguments shows is that the evidential argument does not constitute good grounds for atheistic belief—we still have an interesting result. In my experience, quite a few atheists report holding atheistic belief on just these grounds.

What to say about the objection, then? Is it right? Yes, I think it is. It's consistent with what I've said that, for many people, the evidential argument constitutes excellent grounds for agnosticism with respect to the theism/atheism debate. I would point out, though, that for the sophisticated among us, there is a steep epistemic cost associated with agnosticism toward the Key Premise. For as was pointed out by our objector, the reasonable response to agnosticism about the Key Premise is agnosticism about theism. But if you are agnostic on theism, you are, we may suppose, agnostic on the question whether your cognitive faculties are the product of atheistic evolutionary processes. And if you are agnostic about *that*, then by a principle similar to our above Principle of Defeat, you have a defeater for any proposition *p* such that you've good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties your only source of information on *p*.

Here I have in mind this

*Revised Principle of Defeat:* If for some cognitive faculty *F*, you are agnostic on whether *F* is in state *S*, and if you have good reason to withhold or deny the proposition that *P*(*F* is reliable/*F* is in *S*) is high, and if there is no state *S\** such that you have good reason for belief that (a) *F* is in both *S* and *S\**, and (b) *P*(*F* is reliable/*F* is in both *S* and *S\**) is high, then you have a defeater for any proposition *p* such that you have good reason for believing *F* your only source of information about *p*.

Why accept this revised principle? Here again, I have no argument from first principles. Cases like those mentioned above make the principle plausible. Suppose you are agnostic about whether your pool thermometer is reliable. Then, one thinks, you should not believe what the thermometer says about the water's temperature unless you have some other source of information to go on. Or: Suppose I think it likely that my perceptual faculties are unreliable if I'm plugged into the Matrix and am agnostic about whether I've been plugged into the Matrix. I'm not aware of any mitigating factors: I'm not aware anything about me or my faculties that would offset the perceptual impairment caused by being thus connected to the Matrix. Then, one thinks, I should withhold any proposition p such that I have good reason for believing my perceptual faculties my only source of information on p. Reflection on these and like cases, I suggest, lends strong support to our Revised Principle of Defeat.

My claim, then: if you are agnostic on the question whether your cognitive faculties are the product of atheistic evolutionary processes, then by the Revised Principle of Defeat, you have a defeater for any proposition p such that you have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties your only source of information on p. This is because, if you are agnostic on the question whether your cognitive faculties are the product of atheistic evolutionary processes, then you are agnostic on the question whether your philosophical faculties are in the state S of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes. Since, by hypothesis, you are among the sophisticated and thus have good reason for accepting the Thesis of Unreliability (or, at any rate, no good reason for rejecting it—more on this below), it follows that you have good reason to withhold or deny that P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in S) is high. Since, as best I can tell, there is no state S\* such that you have good reason to think (a) your philosophical faculties are in both S and S\*, and (b) P(your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in S and S\*) is high, we get, by the Revised Principle of Defeat, that you have a defeater for any proposition p such that you have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties your only source of information on p. For most any recondite philosophical claim you accept, then, you aren't justified in accepting it.<sup>33</sup>

In summary: if you are agnostic on the Key Premise and among the sophisticated, you should be agnostic on pretty much any recondite philosophical claim. This is the steep epistemic cost I referred to earlier when I suggested that, for the sophisticated among us, there is a steep epistemic cost associated with agnosticism toward the Key Premise.

Perhaps you'll reject my claim that the cost here is steep. Perhaps you think this sort of philosophical skepticism (philosophical skepticism: skepticism about recondite philosophical matters) attractive. If so, I would point out that consistency on this point would seem to require a disciplined program of agnosticism on more than just matters in the far reaches of abstruse metaphysics, philosophy of mathematics and the like, but also on most of the deliverances of

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<sup>33</sup> For related argument on the epistemic costs of agnosticism about the origins of our cognitive faculties, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 218-227.

the theoretical parts of the natural sciences (the parts working on quantum theory, relativity and the like).

Perhaps you're okay with this; you think agnosticism the appropriate attitude toward all such theoretical endeavor. If so, you are rare—among the sophisticated anyway. Most of the reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated folks I meet hold firm views, and lots of them, on abstruse issues in philosophy and the sciences and take themselves to be reasonable in doing so.

If you are in the latter camp—you are reasonably well-informed and intellectually sophisticated, hold various beliefs on abstruse matters in philosophy and the sciences, and think you're reasonable in doing so—then, I want to suggest, you have a powerful reason for denying the Key Premise.<sup>34</sup> For if my earlier arguments are on target and you are among the sophisticated, you can't rationally *accept* the Key Premise. And if my more recent arguments are on target and you are among the sophisticated who reject philosophical skepticism, you can't rationally withhold the Key Premise either. The thing for you to do, I suggest, is to deny it.

I conclude, then, that, for the sophisticated who reject philosophical skepticism anyway, the evidential argument does not constitute good grounds for agnosticism with respect to the theism/atheism debate.

And finally, here's a third objection.<sup>35</sup> "Your Thesis of Unreliability looks an awful lot like a recondite philosophical claim. If it is, then by your own reasoning, the sophisticated atheist/agnostic can't rationally accept it—she has no good reason for accepting it. But if she has no good reason for accepting it, then she has no good reason for withholding or denying that P(her philosophical faculties are reliable/A&E) is high, and your argument collapses."

By way of reply, it's unclear whether the Thesis of Unreliability counts as a recondite philosophical claim, owing to the looseness with which I characterized that notion at the start of the paper. Suppose it is, though. Nothing very interesting follows. If it is a recondite philosophical claim, my argument gets us that if you are a sophisticated atheist, you can't rationally believe it. But of course it doesn't follow that, therefore, if you are a sophisticated atheist, you can rationally *deny* it—that you can rationally accept its negation. I think it's clear that, given our evidence, there's no good reason to accept its negation—its negation is not *a priori* obvious, nor, so far as I can tell, are there any good arguments for it. If my Thesis of Unreliability is a recondite philosophical claim, then, it looks like the rational attitude for the sophisticated atheist toward it is *agnosticism*.

But if you are a sophisticated atheist and are agnostic on the Thesis of Unreliability, then by our Principle of Defeat, you still get a defeater for any proposition *p* such that you have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties your only source of information on *p*. You have, let us suppose, good reason for belief that your philosophical faculties are in the state *S* of having been produced by atheistic evolutionary processes. As we've just seen, you likewise

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 214-215.

<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne for helpful correspondence here.

have good reason for agnosticism on the question whether  $P$ (your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in state  $S$ ) is high. Since, presumably, there is no state  $S^*$  such that you have good reason to think (a) your philosophical faculties are in both  $S$  and  $S^*$ , and (b)  $P$ (your philosophical faculties are reliable/they're in  $S$  and  $S^*$ ) is high, we get that, by the Principle of Defeat, you have a defeater for any proposition  $p$  such that you have good reason for thinking your philosophical faculties your only source of information on  $p$ , and the argument goes on just as before.

The upshot: even if the Thesis of Unreliability counts as a recondite philosophical thesis, the argument goes through as before: you still get a defeater for most any abstruse philosophical claim, including the Key Premise.

## 2. Conclusion

I have argued that the evidential argument gives you no good grounds for atheistic belief if you are a reasonably well-informed, intellectually sophisticated denizen of the contemporary scene. Nor does it give you good grounds for agnosticism about theism (if you're thus sophisticated and reject philosophical skepticism).

My reasoning, of course, has application to arguments beyond just the evidential argument from evil. Any atheological argument (argument to the non-existence of God) resting on recondite philosophical premises will be subject to the same objection, suggesting that if you are a sophisticated atheist or agnostic and your only grounds for this are philosophical—your only grounds are arguments resting on recondite philosophical premises—then your atheism (agnosticism) is poorly grounded.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For helpful comments and conversation on earlier drafts of this paper, kind thanks to Nathan Ballantyne, Richard Otte, Michael Rea, Donald Smith, Gregg Ten Elshof, and Erik Wielenberg.