Rowe’s Argument from Evil

Grounds for belief in God aside, do the evils in our world make atheistic belief more reasonable than theistic belief? … I shall argue that they do. (Rowe, p. 3–4)

Do the evils that occur in our world significantly lower the likelihood of God’s existence? (p. 5)

Some Notes on Probability

Scaled Venn Diagrams—the Chocolate Bar Model

• The probability of P-and-Q can’t be more than the probability of P.
• If P is contradictory, then it has probability zero.
• The probability of P and the probability of not-P add up to one.
• If P and Q are logically equivalent, then they have the same probability.

Conditionalization

“Proportion your belief to the evidence.” If you get a proposition E as evidence, then ...

• You should rescale your probabilities so the probability of E is one.
• You should have probability one in any proposition that logically follows from E.
• You should have probability zero in any proposition that is inconsistent with E.
• For any propositions P and Q, your new proportion between P-and-E and Q-and-E should be the same as your old proportion between P and Q.

Confirmation and Disconfirmation

• E confirms P iff adding E as evidence makes your new probability for P higher than your old probability for P.
• E disconfirms P iff adding E as evidence makes your new probability for P lower than your old probability for P.
• E is independent of P iff E neither confirms nor disconfirms P.
• For any E and P
  – Exactly one of these is true: (i) E confirms P, (ii) E disconfirms P, (iii) E is independent of P.
  – E disconfirms P iff E confirms the proposition that it’s not the case that P.
Some Pitfalls

• It can be that $E_1$ confirms $P$, but $E_1$-and-$E_2$ disconfirms $P$

  Example. “Jeff lives in Oxford” confirms “Jeff is English”. But “Jeff is an American who lives in Oxford” disconfirms “Jeff is English.”

  Now if a proposition $p$ confirms a proposition $q$, then it confirms every proposition $q$ entails. But then it follows that if $p$ disconfirms $q$, $p$ disconfirms every proposition that entails $q$. (Plantinga, p. 194)

• It can be that $E$ confirms $P$, and $P$ implies $Q$, but $E$ disconfirms $Q$.

  Example. “Jeff is not from California”
  Confirms “Jeff is from Washington State”
  Disconfirms “Jeff is from the West Coast”

Prior Probabilities

• Your prior probabilities (or “ur-priors”) are the probabilities you should have if you don’t have any evidence at all.

• What is the prior probability of the existence of God? What is the prior probability of a stronger view like Christianity?

Rowe’s Main Argument

1. There exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason in allowing. [For short, there are pointless evils.]

2. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it.

Therefore,

3. God does not exist (p. 5)

In light of our knowledge of the scale of human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world, the idea that none of those instances of suffering could have been prevented by an all-powerful being without the loss of a greater good must strike us as an extraordinary idea, quite beyond our belief. And if it does strike us in this way, the first premise of the argument we are considering – that there exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit – is bound to strike us as plausible, as something quite likely to be true.

... It is the enormous amount of apparently pointless, horrendous suffering occurring daily in our world that grounds the claim in the first premise that there are pointless evils in our world, evils that an all-powerful being could have prevented without forfeit-ing some outweighing good. But, again, it is not being asserted that the existence of pointless evils is known with certainty, only that it is quite likely that pointless evils occur. (p. 6)