

A theistic inductive argument from evil?

MICHAEL MARTIN

*Department of Philosophy, Boston University, 745 Commonwealth Avenue,
Boston, MA 02215*

Atheists have attempted to argue that the existence of evil provides inductive evidence for the non existence of God. But could theists turn the tables on the atheists? Could there be an argument for the existence of God on the basis of evil in the world? Michael Peterson argues this thesis in *Evil and the Christian God*.¹ In this paper I will show that Peterson's argument is unsuccessful.

The argument

Peterson accepts the following pattern of inference as providing some inductive support for a hypothesis:²

- (1) If (H) is true, then, assuming (A) is true, (T) will be true.
- (2) (T) appears to be true.

-
- (3) Therefore, (H) is probably true,

where (H) is the hypothesis under test, (T) is the evidential test, (A) is additional assumptions used in testing (H).

According to Peterson, on a correct understanding of Christianity gratuitous evil is compatible with the existence of the Christian God. Since it is probable that some evil is gratuitous, it is probable that God exists. In order to state his argument more formally, let (PG) be the principle of gratuitous evil:

- (PG) An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God could allow gratuitous or pointless evil.

And let

- (G) = An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God exists.
 (E₃) = Gratuitous evil exists.

Peterson, then, presents the following inductive argument:³

- (1) If (G) is true, then, assuming that (PG) is true, (E₃) could be true.
- (2) It is probable that (E₃) is true.

- (3) Therefore, it is probable that (G) is true.

Evaluation of the argument

There are a number of problems with Peterson's argument.

(a) Peterson uncritically relies on Plantinga's argument for the free will defense⁴ and other standard theodicies to support (PG). Peterson makes no attempt, for example, to refute any possible objections to Plantinga's defense.

(b) More importantly, the inductive argument given by Peterson is not strong even if one grants (PG). As Ronald Giere has shown, confirming the logical consequence of a hypothesis and its auxiliary assumptions does not constitute a good test of the hypothesis unless the correctness of the prediction would have been unlikely had the hypothesis under test been false.⁵ If one could expect the logical consequences of a hypothesis and its auxiliary assumptions to be true if either the hypothesis were false or the hypothesis and auxiliary assumptions were false, then confirming the logical consequences of the hypothesis and the auxiliary assumptions would not raise the probability of the hypothesis. For this reason Giere maintains that in cases where there is no independent support of the auxiliary assumptions, a condition for a good test is:

If $\sim [(H) \text{ and } (A)]$, then probably ($\sim T$)

In cases where there is independent support for (A) a condition for a good test is:

If $(\sim H)$ and (A) , then probably $(\sim T)$

Peterson's argument does not meet either of these conditions. There does not seem to be any reason to suppose that either of the following is true:

If $\sim [(G) \text{ and } (PG)]$, then probably $(\sim E_3)$

If $(\sim G)$ and (PG) , then probably $(\sim E_3)$

(c) Peterson departs in a significant way from the standard pattern of inductive arguments that is endorsed by philosophers of science and inductive logicians.⁶ Recall that, according to Peterson, the logical consequence of (G) and (PG) is not (E_3) *per se*. He states the logical consequence as " (E_3) could be true". Thus the logical consequence of (G) and (PG) seems to be the modal version of what is affirmed, probabilistically, in the second premise of the argument. If we let P stand for the modal operator of possibility, the pattern of inductive inference actually used by Peterson is:

(1') If (H) is true, then, assuming (A) is true, $P(T)$ is true.

(2) (T) appears to be true.

(3) Therefore, (H) is probably true.

It is extremely doubtful that this pattern of inference would be acceptable to the inductive logicians. If $P(T)$ is the derived logical consequence, $P(\sim T)$ may be as well. This seems to be the case with the premises actually used by Peterson. (PG) says only that God could allow for gratuitous evil but this is compatible with God not allowing for such evil and, consequently, the possibility of there being no gratuitous evil. Thus, if

(1) If (G) is true, then, assuming that (PG) is true, (E_3) could be true,

is true it seems to be the case that

(1') If (G) is true, then, assuming that (PG) is true, $(\sim E_3)$ could be true,

is true as well. But, given only these modal consequences, no inductive conclusion can be drawn. For if it could be drawn, one piece of evidence could support both a hypothesis and its negation. For example, it could be argued that if Jones was the murderer, it is possible that the murder weapon was a knife. Since it is probable that the murder weapon was a knife, the hypothesis that Jones is the murderer is confirmed. On the other hand, one could argue that if Jones is not the murderer, it is possible that the murder weapon was a knife. Since it is probable that the murder weapon was a knife, the hypothesis that Jones is not the murderer is confirmed.

(d) Given the mode of inductive reasoning endorsed by Peterson, he could obtain inductive support for much more than he bargained for. This can be seen easily if one considers other examples in which the same mode of reasoning is used. Let:

(F) = Fairies exist.

(A) = Normal human beings fail to see fairies dancing on moonbeams.

Now let us introduce the principle of fairy deception (FD)

(FD) Fairies could prevent normal human beings from seeing them.

Then by parody of the reasoning used by Peterson one can argue:

(1) If (F) is true, then, assuming that (FD) is true, (A) could be true.

(2) It is probable that (A) is true.

(3) Therefore, it is probable that (F) is true.

There is surely nothing incoherent in assuming that (FD) is true, or at least nothing more incoherent than in assuming that (PG) is true. Thus if fairies exist, it could be true that they prevent humans from seeing them. It should be obvious that using this same mode of argument one could argue that it is probable that hypotheses postulating all sorts of strange creatures are true. Moreover,

some of these hypotheses would be incompatible with one another. For example, one can use the above mode of argument to inductively infer:

(FK) = Fairy killers exist.

Suppose that fairy killers are tiny woodland creatures that have a strong motivation to kill fairies as well as the magical power to find and destroy them instantly. If (FK) is true, then (F) is false. Yet using the above mode of argument, one can infer that (FK) is probable and that (F) is probable.

(e) It would not help Peterson's cause very much if he did not depart from the standard pattern of inductive inference mentioned in (c) above. Let us see why.

First let us modify (PG) to be:

(PG') = An omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God allows gratuitous or pointless evil.

Then let us restate his inductive argument as follows:

- (1) If (G) is true, then, assuming that (PG) is true, (E₃) is true.
 - (2) It is probable that (E₃) is true.
-
- (3) Therefore, it is probable that (G) is true.

This modification would eliminate only one of the problems raised above, that is the problem mentioned in (c). The other problems would remain. Indeed, problem (a) would intensify for Peterson would have to justify not only the assumption that *possibly* God allows gratuitous evil but the stronger assumption that God *actually* allows it. The problem raised by Giere's condition of adequacy specified in (b) would also remain. And the problem specified in (d) would also remain although it would be slightly modified. The principle of fairy deception (FD) would be modified to read:

(FD') = Fairies prevent normal human beings from seeing them.

And the inductive argument would be restated to read:

- (1) If (F) is true, then, assuming that (FD) is true, (A) is true.
 - (2) It is probable that (A) is true.
-
- (3) Therefore, it is probable that (F) is true.

To be sure, the advocate of this argument would have more trouble justifying (FD'). As we have seen, Peterson would have more trouble justifying (PG').

(f) Even if Peterson were successful in showing that gratuitous evil confirms the existence of the Christian God, this would not show that Christian Theism was confirmed more by the existence of such evil than Naturalism is. It would certainly not show that Christian Theism was better confirmed by our total evidence than Naturalism. Clearly other evidence must be appealed to or a different argument must be used to show that Theism is better confirmed than Naturalism.⁷

I conclude that Peterson's theistic inductive argument from evil is unsuccessful.

Notes

1. Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1982), Ch. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 65.
3. Ibid., p. 132.
4. Ibid., p. 104. The critical reaction to Plantinga's defense has been extensive. See, for example, J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), Ch. 9; Frederick W. Kroon, "Plantinga on God, Freedom and Evil," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 12 (1981):75-96; Wesley Morriston, "Is Plantinga's God Omnipotent?," *Sophia*, 23 (1984):45-57; Michael Tooley, "Alvin Plantinga and the Argument from Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980):360-376; Robert Burch, "Plantinga and Leibnitz's Lapse," *Analysis* 39 (1979):24-29.
5. Ronald N. Giere, *Understanding Scientific Reasoning* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), pp. 91-94.
6. Peterson cites in particular Peter T. Manicas and Arthur N. Kruger, *Logic: The Essentials* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1976) and Carl Hem-

- pel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). See Peterson, *Evil and The Christian God*, p. 62 n. 7.
7. Peterson may be aware of this problem. In a footnote he says that although Naturalism gives an explanation of evil this explanation does "not capture the precise nature of good and evil in human experience. Naturalism typically cannot account for the ultimate and absolute character which we ascribe to values." See Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God*, p. 130 n. 19. He gives *no* evidence or argument to support this claim. It is certainly not clear that naturalists cannot give a plausible account of absolute values or that theists can give a plausible account. For one recent account see Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986):163–209. See Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973), Ch. 1.