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Religious experience and the evidential argument from evil

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Abstract: **This paper examines Alvin Plantinga's defence of theistic belief in the light of Paul Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. Draper argues (a) that the facts concerning the distribution of pain and pleasure in the world are better explained by a hypothesis which does not include the existence of God than by a hypothesis which does; and (b) that this provides an epistemic challenge to theists. Plantinga counters that a theist could accept (a) yet still rationally maintain a belief in God. His defence of theism depends on the epistemic value of religious experience. I argue, however, that Plantinga's defence of theism is not successful.**

Plantinga's project

In *Warranted Christian Belief* Alvin Plantinga argues that one can be a modern intellectually sophisticated person and rationally maintain a belief in God, i.e. the omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect creator of the universe.[1] In order for this to be the case he takes it that one must examine certain alleged sources of defeat for theistic belief and show why they are not *actual* sources of defeat (366). One of the most important of these alleged sources is the problem of evil. After careful consideration of this problem, though, Plantinga concludes that it does *not* provide a defeater for a certain kind of intellectually sophisticated theist.

The theist that he has in mind – let us call her the *experiential theist* – holds that her theistic belief gains epistemic warrant because it results from the proper functioning of her *sensus divinitatis*. A *sensus divinitatis*, if it exists, is a faculty that God created human beings with for the purpose of detecting divine truths such as the existence of God.

Plantinga maintains that the problem of evil does not present the experiential theist with a defeater for her belief in God even if she accepts one of the more challenging formulations of the problem of evil. The particular formulation I am referring to is the evidential version of the problem posed by Paul Draper. As we

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shall see, Plantinga is not convinced that we ought to accept all aspects of this formulation; however, I shall argue that if the experiential theist does accept Draper's formulation of the problem, *and she is apprised of the arguments in this paper*, then she is threatened by a defeater for her theistic belief; that is, in the absence of further evidence for the existence of God the problem of evil makes it irrational for her to continue to be a theist.

We shall proceed as follows. First, we will examine Draper's formulation of the evidential problem of evil. Next, we will see why Plantinga thinks that an experiential theist who accepts Draper's presentation of the problem does not thereby face a defeater for her belief in God. Then, I shall argue that the experiential theist who accepts Draper's formulation of the problem of evil, and is aware of the scope of the problem, really is threatened with defeat for her belief in God; moreover, this is so even if that theistic belief derives from the proper functioning of her *sensus divinitatis*. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks concerning the relative importance of this result.

Draper's formulation of the problem of evil

Draper has argued that the facts of evil provide a serious challenge to theism. He begins his case with the following stipulation:

> **[L]et 'O' stand for a statement reporting both the observations one has made of humans and animals experiencing pain or pleasure and the testimony one has encountered concerning the observations others have made of sentient beings experiencing pain and pleasure. By 'pain' I mean physical or mental suffering of any sort.** (13–14)[2]

Are the facts of O better explained by a hypothesis that refers to God's existence, or by some other hypothesis that is incompatible with the existence of God? Draper contends that they are better explained by the following hypothesis that is incompatible with the truth of theism:

> **The *Hypothesis of Indifference* (HI): '… neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons'.** (13)

HI is consistent with the truth of naturalism – that there are no supernatural beings whatsoever. It is also consistent with the thesis that there are supernatural beings. What it is inconsistent with is the thesis that that there are one or several supernatural beings who are motivated by a direct concern for human wellbeing, and thus it is inconsistent with theism proper.

Draper's contention is that the facts of O are better explained by HI than on the hypothesis that God exists.[3] Let us call this proposition C. Suppose that a modern, intellectually sophisticated person agrees with Draper that C is true.[4] What would follow from this fact?

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Although one might fear that this makes theistic belief irrational for her, Plantinga argues that an experiential theist might accept C (although he himself does not) and continue to believe in God with perfect rationality.[5] Let us see why he believes this.

Plantinga's reply to Draper's formulation of the problem of evil

Plantinga begins his argument by noting that if a theist accepts C, her theistic belief is 'evidentially challenged'. By this he means the following:

> **Proposition P is *evidentially challenged* for a person S if and only if S believes P and there are propositions Q and R such that S believes Q, R is a serious hypothesis incompatible with P, and Q is much more probable with respect to R than with respect to P.** (474)

Let us also say that when proposition P is evidentially challenged in this way, proposition Q is the *evidence base* of the challenge.

Given these definitions, we see that a belief in C provides an evidential challenge to a theist's belief in God where the facts of statement O are the evidence base of the challenge. This provides an evidential challenge because the theist believes the facts associated with statement O, and also thinks that these facts are more probable with respect to the serious hypothesis HI than with the incompatible (but also serious) hypothesis that theism is true.[6]

What does the fact that a belief is evidentially challenged tell us about its epistemic status? As Plantinga rightly points out, it does not mean that it is irrational to hold. To show that this is so, Plantinga offers examples like the following:

> **... my friend has a cat named Maynard; I believe that Maynard is a cat and also (as my friend reports) that Maynard likes cooked green beans; the latter, however, is much more likely on the serious (in Draper's sense) alternative hypothesis that Maynard is a Frisian, or possibly a Frenchman; so the belief that Maynard is a cat is evidentially challenged for me.** (475–476)

So, Plantinga's belief that Maynard is a cat is evidentially challenged; however, he notes that even though he is fully aware of this fact he is: 'undeterred, continuing in full rationality to believe that he [i.e. Maynard] is indeed a cat. The belief is rational for me in these circumstances because it has warrant for me quite independent of its relationship to the proposition that Maynard likes cooked green beans'. (479) The independent warrant for Plantinga's belief that Maynard is a cat derives, presumably, from the fact that he has seen Maynard and that he looks very much like a cat, and not at all like a Frisian or a Frenchman. So even though Plantinga's belief that Maynard is a cat is subject to an evidential challenge, his belief is entirely rational given that it has significant warrant from perception.

What we learn from this example (and others like it) is that it can be perfectly rational to hold on to a belief that is evidentially challenged so long as one possesses some additional epistemic basis (i.e. additional in relation to the evidence

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base for the challenge) for its truth (see 480–481). This additional basis may come in the form of either *evidence*, which is propositional in nature, or (as in the Maynard example) in the form of *grounds*, which are non-propositional in nature.

So, we might ask, does the experiential theist have any additional epistemic basis beyond that included in the facts of O for thinking that God exists? If she in fact possesses a *sensus divinitatis* then she does indeed possess such grounds for believing in God's existence. The religious experiences that are formed as a result of the proper functioning of her *sensus divinitatis* would provide these grounds.

But do these grounds help the intellectually sophisticated theist who believes C avoid the defeater that the problem of evil allegedly presents? I shall argue not. As I will presently demonstrate, in order for the intellectually sophisticated theist to avoid this defeater, it is not sufficient for her to have additional grounds for her belief in God; more importantly, she must *rationally believe* that she possesses such grounds.

So, can the intellectually sophisticated experiential theist who accepts C *rationally* believe that she has a *sensus divinitatis* that has informed her of the existence of God? I shall argue that while it might be rational for some experiential theists, it is not rational for what we might call the *sufficiently informed pure experiential theist* (SIPE theist). The pure experiential theist thinks that her belief in God is warranted *solely* because it was formed as a result of the proper functioning of her *sensus divinitatis*. And she counts as sufficiently informed (for present purposes) only if she is aware of the arguments that are presented in this paper.

My argument is that the SIPE theist who accepts C cannot rationally believe that she has a *sensus divinitatis* that has informed her of the existence of God – and thus cannot rationally believe in the existence of God – unless she has further grounds or evidence for the existence of God that is suitably evidentially independent of theistic belief itself. We shall see shortly what kind of independence is at issue here. But let me provide an example here of the kind of evidence which would make theistic belief rational for the SIPE theist who accepts C: she might believe that when the facts reported in O are combined with various facts concerning the order and beauty of the universe it turns out that this larger set of beliefs is better explained by theism than by competing hypotheses such as HI. In this case a SIPE theist who believes C can rationally believe in the existence of God.

The larger point, however, is this: if, relative to all of her beliefs which are suitably independent of theistic belief itself, it turns out that the existence of God is less likely than the non-existence of God, then the SIPE theist cannot rationally maintain a belief in God even if her belief in God was formed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.

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Epistemic defeaters and evidential challenges

Evidential challenges and rational belief

In this part of the paper I will argue that in order for the intellectually sophisticated theist to avoid the defeater that the evidential problem of evil allegedly presents, it is not sufficient for her to have additional grounds for her belief in God; more importantly, she must *rationally believe* that she possesses such grounds. To prove this point we will explore (in this section) the relationship between evidential challenges and rational belief, and (in the next section) the relationship between evidential challenges and epistemic defeaters.

Let us start by examining the relationship between evidential challenges and rational belief. In the last part of the paper we saw how the Maynard example (among others) made it plausible to believe in the following relationship: an evidentially challenged belief can be rational to hold *if* one has further evidence or grounds for that belief. Further reflection on such examples leads me to propose the following principle:

> EC A belief that is evidentially challenged can be rational to hold *only if* one has some further grounds or evidence for that belief.

Although EC has a fair degree of intuitive plausibility, it has been objected to on at least two grounds. After considering these objections, however, we shall see that they leave EC unscathed.

The first objection comes from Draper (via correspondence) who claims that an evidentially challenged belief might be rational to hold absent further grounds or evidence so long as the belief in question has a very high intrinsic probability, i.e. a high probability independent of any grounds or evidence for that belief. Let's look at the specific counter-example he offers:

> **Consider my belief that there is no ghost in my closet. For some unknown reason objects frequently fall off the shelves in the closet. This fact is much more probable if there is a ghost in my closet than if there isn't, so my belief that there's no ghost there is evidentially challenged, and I am aware of this. I also have no evidence for that belief. Yet it is rational for me to continue to hold that belief because it starts with a very high probability and so ends (after considering the evidence in question) with a sufficiently high probability to warrant belief.**

I agree that it is rational for me to continue to believe that there is no ghost in the closet despite my recognition that this belief is evidentially challenged; however, does this really constitute a counter-example to EC?

I don't think so. This is because we can plausibly explain why it is rational for me to continue to believe that there is no ghost in the closet without supposing that that belief has a high *intrinsic* probability; rather, it is plausible to suppose that that belief has a high probability precisely because of its relation to the rest of my empirical beliefs. Indeed, relative to *all* of my empirical beliefs it is highly

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improbable that there are any ghosts at all and a fortiori that there is a ghost in my closet.

We find, then, that there is indeed further evidence (beyond that included in the evidential challenge) that I have for the belief that there is no ghost in the closet which makes holding this belief rational. This further evidence is the totality of my empirical beliefs. Given that such further evidence is available, the ghost case does not represent a counter-example to EC.

We can now turn to the second objection that has been raised against EC.[7] It has been objected that it can be rational for one to hold an evidentially challenged belief P without further evidence or grounds for P if one has reason to believe that evidence for P will be *forthcoming*.

The obvious rejoinder here is that if one has a reason to believe that evidence for P is forthcoming then one thereby has evidence for P. For example, if an expert mathematician assures you, an amateur, that he is about to provide you with a successful proof of Fermat's Last Theorem (a theorem that you've long had doubts about), then the expert's assurances provide you with evidence that Fermat's Last Theorem is true, even before you have seen the proof.

But, the objection continues, we can provide an example where one has reason to believe that evidence for P is forthcoming, but one does not currently have evidence for P insofar as one does not even know what P is. Consider the following:

> Let P be a mathematical theorem an eminent mathematician proves before me in a symbolism I cannot understand. I know that he will explain the proof to me shortly. So I now have reason to believe that I will have reason to believe that P. But I do not now have reason to believe that P. I do not even know what P is yet.

Does this case constitute a counter-example to EC? Again, I don't think so. To see that this is so, let us suppose that the theorem the mathematician proved was that some widely accepted result, say Euler's Formula, is false. I, like most people who have an opinion on the matter, think that Euler's Formula is true, and before seeing the mathematician's strange symbolism it is certainly irrational for me to think that it is false. Does anything change, though, once I have seen the mathematician's unexplained proof? I can't see how. Without knowing that the conclusion of the proof is that Euler's Formula is false, it is still irrational for me to believe that it is false. This is so even though I have reason to believe in some *de re* sense that evidence for that result is forthcoming.

Having found these counter-examples lacking we shall accept EC as true. In the next section we will investigate what the truth of EC tells us about the relationship between evidential challenges and epistemic defeaters.

Evidential challenges and epistemic defeaters

With principle EC in hand we can now investigate the relationship between evidential challenges and epistemic defeaters. Let us start by looking at the dis-

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tinction between *potential* and *actual* defeaters as shown in the following example from Plantinga:

> **[Y]ou and I both believe that the University of Aberdeen was founded in 1495; you but not I know that the current guidebook to Aberdeen contains an egregious error on this very matter. We both win a copy of the guidebook in the Scottish national lottery; we both read it; sadly enough it contains the wholly mistaken affirmation that the university was founded in 1595.** (360)

In this example the guidebook provides me (*qua* speaker) with a defeater for my belief that the university was founded in 1495. I cannot rationally hold that belief given what I have read in the guidebook along with my other beliefs. The same does not hold for you. You may continue rationally to hold your belief that the university was founded in 1495. This is because you 'already know that the current guidebook contains an error on the matter of the date of the university's foundation; this neutralizes in advance (as we might put it) the defeating potential of the newly acquired bit of knowledge' (360–361).

Following Plantinga's lead here, let us say that your belief about what the guidebook says is a *potential defeater* (or has 'defeating potential'); but, this potential defeater is 'neutralized in advance' by the belief that the guidebook is in error on this matter. Let us say that this is a *neutralizing belief*, or a *neutralizer* for short. The potential defeater becomes actualized for me; but, since you have a neutralizer available it does not become actualized for you.

With this distinction in place let us now ask about the relationship between a belief's being evidentially challenged and its having a potential or actual defeater. As noted before a belief that is evidentially challenged can be rational to hold only if one has some further grounds or evidence for that belief, i.e. EC is true. But is there a plausible principle of defeat that accounts for the truth of EC?

One might be tempted to account for the truth of EC with the following proposed principle of defeat:

> (1) If agent S has a belief P that faces an evidential challenge then this provides a *potential defeater* of P for S.

There is a major problem, however, with accepting this principle. This is because it leads to a global form of scepticism. To see that this is so we can fruitfully look at the argument that Plantinga offers for the self-defeat of evolutionary naturalism.

The point of this argument is to show that the evolutionary naturalist, i.e. the person who believes that human beings are the product of an undirected evolutionary process, cannot rationally believe in evolutionary naturalism *once informed of Plantinga's argument*. (NB that the argument I offer in this paper against Plantinga's defence of theism has the same form – it concerns the rationality only of someone who is informed about matters of a fair degree of philosophical sophistication.) The key to the argument concerns what the evolutionary naturalist can believe in relation to R, the proposition that human cognitive faculties are reliable. Plantinga alleges that the probability of R with

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respect to evolutionary naturalism is either low or inscrutable; and, once the evolutionary naturalist is apprised of this fact, Plantinga takes it that she thereby faces a potential defeater for R.[8]

This potential defeater for R is what makes things epistemically difficult for the evolutionary naturalist. I shall not rehearse Plantinga's argument here (although it shares important features with the main argument I give later in the paper), but his conclusion is that insofar as the evolutionary naturalist faces a potential defeater for R, she thereby has an *actual* defeater for *all* of her beliefs including, of course, her belief in evolutionary naturalism.[9]

Indeed, it is this result which shows how (1) quickly leads to universal scepticism. This is because R can like any other belief easily be shown to face an evidential challenge (476). Consider, for example, our belief that human beings have a tendency to make certain specific cognitive errors. This fact is much more likely on the hypothesis that human cognitive faculties are generally unreliable than on the hypothesis that R is true. Given this fact, R faces an evidential challenge. If (1) were valid it would then follow that everyone would face a potential defeater for R. But then, following the logic in Plantinga's argument against evolutionary naturalism, every belief would be *actually* defeated.

Given this result we would indeed be fortunate if we discovered some less epistemically disastrous way to account for the truth of EC. With this in mind let me propose the following principle: it is not every evidential challenge to belief P that provides a potential defeater for P; rather, it is only those evidential challenges where the evidence base for the challenge to P is what we might call P's *independent evidence base*. The independent evidence base for belief P includes *all* of an agent's beliefs excluding the following:

(a) P itself, and
(b) Any belief which is *evidentially dependent* on P, i.e. any belief whose warrant derives, in part, from the agent's believing P.[10]

Let us call an evidential challenge that is relative to an independent evidence base a *maximal evidential challenge*. My proposal, then, is this:

(2) If agent S has a belief P that faces a maximal evidential challenge then this provides a *potential defeater* of P for S.

Note that this principle accounts for the truth of EC. To see that this is so suppose that belief P of agent S faces an evidential challenge. If S has no further independent evidence in favour of P beyond that included in the evidence base of the challenge, then P will be facing a *maximal* evidential challenge. In that case principle (2) shows that S would possess a potential defeater for P and without some additional grounds to neutralize that potential defeater it would turn into an actual defeater.

We see then that principle (2) plausibly accounts for the truth of EC. Moreover,

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it does so in a way that does not raise the same sceptical worries as does principle (1). This is because while it is easy to show that belief R faces an evidential challenge, it is far from obvious that it faces a *maximal* evidential challenge, and thus far from obvious that there is a potential defeater for R.[11]

Given these benefits I will suppose that principle (2) is valid. I will also accept the following general principle:

(3) If agent S thinks both that condition X obtains and that when condition X obtains there is a potential defeater for her belief P, then S has a potential defeater for P. This potential defeater can be neutralized only if S can *rationally believe* that she has additional evidence or grounds for P.

To see the plausibility of this principle, let us consider two examples where one is mistaken about whether condition X obtains, or whether the fact that condition X obtains shows that there is a potential defeater for belief P. In the first example an agent believes that his informant is unreliable even though she is in fact quite reliable. In this case the agent has a potential defeater for any belief derived from the informant's testimony even though he is mistaken about the informant's reliability (cf. Plantinga, 364–365).

The second example is a bit more fanciful. Suppose that someone believed that any belief formed during the night of a full moon is highly unreliable and thus believed that any belief so formed faced a potential defeater. Of course, such a belief is quite mistaken; but, anyone who had such a belief would have a potential defeater for any belief formed during the night of a full moon, and principle (3) accounts for this fact.

We shall thus accept principle (3). It thus follows that:

(4) If agent S thinks both that P faces a maximal evidential challenge and that beliefs which face a maximal evidential challenge are potentially defeated then this provides a potential defeater of P for S. This potential defeater can be neutralized only if S can rationally believe that she has additional grounds for P.

With this principle in hand we can now return to the case of the SIPE theist who accepts C. By definition, the SIPE theist is someone who is informed of the considerations presented in this paper. My claim is that such a theist, if sufficiently motivated to find the truth, will come to accept principle (2). Moreover, if she holds that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge then principle (4) shows us that her belief in God faces a potential defeater that can be neutralized only if she can rationally believe that she has additional grounds for the existence of God.

As mentioned before, a SIPE theist need not hold that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge – she might think, for example, that when the facts reported in O are combined with various facts concerning the order and beauty of

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the universe it turns out that this larger set of beliefs is better explained by theism than by competing hypotheses such as HI. In this case the SIPE theist's belief in God is *not* maximally evidentially challenged.

However, my larger point concerns the SIPE theist who holds that her belief in God is maximally evidentially challenged:

(5) The SIPE theist who holds that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge has a potential defeater for her belief in God. This potential defeater can be neutralized only if she can rationally believe that she has additional grounds for her belief in God.

Can the SIPE theist who holds that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge rationally believe that she has additional grounds for her belief in God? One might think that this is obviously the case: she can rationally believe that she has additional grounds for her belief in God since she believes that her *sensus divinitatis* has informed her of the existence of God. So long as she is not rationally culpable in holding this belief she has a neutralizer available for the above potential defeater. This is so even if it turned out that she did not in fact possess a *sensus divinitatis* (cf. 453–454). But can the SIPE theist who takes her belief in God to face a maximal evidential challenge rationally believe that she has been informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* of the existence of God?

I shall argue not.

How Plantinga's reply is illegitimately circular

In this section I shall show that even if God exists and even if God created human beings with a fully functioning *sensus divinitatis*, the SIPE theist who holds that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge has a defeater for her belief in God. My case rests on the sense that there is something inappropriately circular about the way that the SIPE theist holds that her belief in God is warranted due to its being produced by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.

This circularity derives, in part, because of the reason that the SIPE theist believes that she possesses a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. The only reason that Plantinga offers the experiential theist to think this is derived from the belief that God exists. Consider, for example, the following passage:

> **[If theistic belief is true] then there is, indeed, such a person as God, a person who … loves us, who desires that we know and love him, and who is such that it is our end and good to know and love him. But if these things are so, then he would of course intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and to know something about him. And if that is so, the natural thing to think is that he created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that there is a such a person as God. … And if *that* is so, then the natural thing to think is that the cognitive processes that *do* produce belief in God are aimed by their designer at producing that belief.** (188–189)

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Let us suppose that Plantinga can offer the SIPE theist no other reason for thinking that she possesses a *sensus divinitatis* or other similar faculty; indeed, it is difficult to think of any other plausible reason for thinking this. If this is the case then her belief that she possesses a *sensus divinitatis* is evidentially dependent on her belief that God exists, and thus will not be part of her independent evidence base for her belief in God.

We thus find that the SIPE theist bases her belief in God on the belief that she has been so informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, and at the same time bases her belief that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* on her supposition that God exists. This kind of circularity is not obviously illegitimate. In the remainder of the paper, however, I shall make the case that it is.

This is due to a principle (which is explicitly endorsed by Plantinga) that I call the *independence constraint on neutralizers*:

(6) Z cannot neutralize X as a potential defeater for Y if Z is evidentially dependent on Y.[12, 13]

Let's illustrate this principle with the case of someone (let's call him Jay) who maintains that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens. He takes himself to be warranted in this belief because he thinks that it is produced by what we might call a *vain-alien* faculty. A vain-alien faculty, if it exists, is a faculty placed in a humanoid agent by his (very vain) alien creators for the purpose of making him aware of various things about his creators. In addition, Jay thinks that he is warranted in his belief that he has a vain-alien faculty because it reasonably follows from his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens. After all, such beings would want their creatures to know all sorts of things about them.

In addition to all the above, Jay acknowledges that his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens faces a maximal evidential challenge. This is because he bases this belief on one that is evidentially dependent upon it, viz. his belief that he possesses a vain-alien faculty. In virtue of this fact principle (4) shows that he possesses a potential defeater for his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens which can only be neutralized if he can rationally believe that he has further grounds for that belief.

Jay maintains, however, that it is rational for him to believe that he has further grounds for that belief. This is because he maintains that it is rational for him to believe that he possesses a vain-alien faculty. And, he continues, since he is not rationally culpable in believing this he thereby has a neutralizer available for the potential defeater for his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens.

This line of reasoning, of course, is hardly acceptable. The reason, I submit, is that it runs foul of the independence constraint. To see that this is so, consider that the only evidence that Jay has to offer in favour of his having a vain-alien

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faculty is ultimately based on his belief that it is true that he was constructed by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens. It thereby follows that Jay's belief that he has a vain-alien faculty is evidentially dependent on this belief; but, we then see that his reasoning violates the independence constraint since an evidentially dependent belief cannot provide a neutralizer for any belief on which it depends.

The independence constraint on neutralizers, I submit, plausibly explains why Jay's defence of his belief that he was constructed by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens is illegitimate. And, if we accept the independence constraint generally it will likewise show why the SIPE theist who believes that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge cannot rationally maintain a belief in God. This is because the following is true:

(a) Her acknowledgement that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge, along with her acceptance of principle (2), shows that she has a potential defeater for her belief in God. This potential defeater can be neutralized only if she can rationally believe that she has additional grounds for her belief in God. (See principle (5).)
(b) As a pure experiential theist the only reason that she thinks she has additional grounds for her belief in God depends on her believing that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.
(c) But her belief that she has a *sensus divinitatis* is evidentially dependent on her belief that God exists, and thus so is her belief that she has additional grounds for her belief in God.
(d) The independence constraint thus shows that her belief that she possesses additional grounds for her belief in God cannot provide the desired neutralizer. (See principle (6).)

From these points it follows that it is irrational for the SIPE theist who maintains that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge to think that she has additional grounds for her belief in God; thus, the potential defeater cited in (a) cannot be neutralized and she thereby faces an actual defeater for her belief in God.

Given these facts, we see that the SIPE theist who holds that her belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge is in as precarious an epistemic situation as Jay is in his belief that he was constructed by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens.

We find then that the SIPE theist who believes she faces a maximal evidential challenge for her belief in God might be right that God exists; however, her belief in God cannot be rational if the only reason she offers to think that her belief in God is warranted is evidentially dependent on that very belief. But it is exactly this kind of illegitimate circularity that Plantinga's response to Draper's formulation of

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the evidential problem of evil involves. Thus, if she relies on experiential theism *alone*, the intellectually sophisticated theist will face an *actual* defeater for her belief in God, and it will be irrational for her to maintain her theistic belief. Of course, nothing I have said here supports the claim that a belief in C is rationally required, or that there is no other way to defend the rationality of a SIPE theist who believes C. However, the argument that I have given here demonstrates that *if* the facts of evil provide us with a maximal evidential challenge to our belief in God (or with any other potential defeater for theistic belief), it is illegitimate to appeal solely to (non-perceptual) religious experience to show that belief in God is nonetheless rational.

Concluding remarks

In this final section I will address the matter of the importance of the argument offered here. Indeed, it might seem that it is of rather limited importance since it concerns the rationality only of an extremely small (perhaps even empty) set of pure experiential theists who both accept that their belief in God faces a maximal evidential challenge, and who are aware of the arguments presented in this paper.

Indeed, one might think that a pure experiential theist can avoid any of the difficulties I raise in this paper simply by avoiding epistemology classes or – better yet – any beliefs whatsoever about her own cognitive faculties. After all, the problems I raise here are problems only for someone with fairly developed epistemological convictions.[14]

By way of reply let me concede that the arguments I present here in no way show that the vast majority of pure experiential theists is irrational. But this does not diminish the importance of the arguments. This is because there are higher forms of epistemic praise than to be called 'rational'.

Indeed, as philosophers, we seek to have beliefs that are not only rational, but also rational in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection. This is what makes Plantinga's extended defence of theism, and Christian doctrine in particular, so important and interesting. His goal is to show that one can be a modern, intellectually sophisticated person – a person who aims to form beliefs in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection – and believe in God and in Christian doctrine.

I, like Plantinga, aspire to this higher epistemic standard. I might even go so far as to say that those who meet this higher standard attain a higher degree of rationality than those who do not. So, I can conclude as follows: those who avoid epistemology classes, and those who refrain from beliefs about their own cognitive faculties, may be able to keep a rational belief in God that further information or further reflection would destroy. However, this rational belief in God comes at the

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expense of a something even more epistemically valuable: rational belief concerning God in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection.[15]

Notes

1. More generally he argues that one can be a modern, intellectually sophisticated person and rationally hold on to classical Christian belief which includes a belief in the traditionally conceived God. This argument appears in Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All Plantinga references will be from this volume unless otherwise noted.
2. Paul Draper 'Pain and pleasure: an evidential problem for theists', *Nous*, **23** (1989), 331–350. Reprinted in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12–29. Page references are from the reprinted version.
3. Draper now states the argument using naturalism – that there are no supernatural beings whatsoever – as the hypothesis that is inconsistent with theism but which better explains the facts of O. See his 'Evolution and the problem of evil', in Louis Pojman (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1997), 219–230.
4. Peter van Inwagen argues that we are in no position to judge this. See his 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', in James E. Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 5, *Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 135–165. Reprinted as ch. 8 of Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Draper responds to Van Inwagen's line of argument in 'The skeptical theist' which is ch. 9 of the same volume.
5. Plantinga argues against C in 'On being evidentially challenged', ch. 13 of Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (see 250ff.).
6. For a discussion of this point see William Alston's 'Some (temporarily) final thoughts on evidential arguments from evil', which is ch. 16 of Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (see 328–330).
7. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.
8. See my 'Evolutionary naturalism and the reliability of our cognitive faculties', *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming) for a discussion of this part of the argument.
9. For details see Plantinga, 227–240.
10. In my 'Religious experience and the facts of religious pluralism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **49** (2001), 1–17, I used 'evidentially dependent on P' to refer to a belief where it is *rational* for S to believe that the warrant of the belief is derivative of the warrant for P. I now prefer this latter understanding of the phrase.
11. Note that the independent evidence base for R may include beliefs that are warranted only if R turns out to be true. We might say that such beliefs are *suppositionally dependent* on R; however, so long as these beliefs are not *evidentially* dependent on R then they are to be included in R's independent evidence base.
12. Plantinga relies on something like this principle in nn. 57 and 58 on 238 and 239, as well as ch. 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). In addition, the principle is explicitly defended in Plantinga's unpublished manuscript 'Naturalism defeated': 'If D is a defeater of B for S, then for any belief B* of S, if S rationally believes that the warrant B* has for her is derivative (wholly or partly) from the warrant B has for her, then B* is not a defeater-defeater, for S, of D' (50).
13. One might worry that if we accept the independence constraint on neutralizers then we are led directly into unacceptable forms of scepticism. I do not think, however, that this worry is well founded. To see why this is so consider the case where you become convinced that your cognitive faculties are in systematic and serious error. In this case there is no independent evidence whatsoever to which you might appeal to neutralize the potential defeater that this belief brings about. But, this sort of scepticism is not overly troubling. The kind of scepticism that would be troubling would be a scepticism that is brought about merely by your acknowledging the *possibility*, however remote, that your cognitive faculties are in systematic and serious error. If the recognition of such a possibility brought about a potential defeater for your belief that your cognitive faculties are reliable then any minimally reflective person would thereby come to possess a potential defeater for all of his beliefs

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and would be debarred from appealing to any beliefs to provide the desired neutralizer. This would lead to a kind of scepticism that would indeed be troubling; however, I see no reason to think that the mere acknowledgement of the *possibility* that your cognitive faculties are in systematic and serious error provides you with a potential defeater for your belief that they are reliable. For a discussion of this matter see my 'Evolutionary naturalism and the reliability of our cognitive faculties'.

14. I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.
15. I would like to thank the following people for reading earlier versions of this paper and providing me with helpful comments: Paul Draper, Jeff Jordan, Mike Rea, Doug Stalker, and an anonymous referee for this journal. I would also like to thank Joel Pust for encouraging me to pursue this topic.

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