

The University of Calgary

GOD, EVIDENCE AND AMBIGUITY

by

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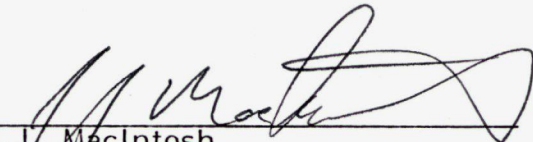
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "God, Evidence and Ambiguity", submitted by Lloyd John Schellenberg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

This essay is a study in the epistemology of religion. Its focus is a view I call nonevidentialism – the view according to which one may believe in God on the basis of pragmatic or prudential (i.e., nonevidential) considerations when the relevant evidence is inconclusive. I look at a particular version of the claim that the relevant evidence *is* inconclusive – a version I call 'the ambiguity view' – and argue in favor of its plausibility. Sections I, II and III may in fact be looked upon as an extended plausibility argument in favor of this view. In Section I I introduce the ambiguity view through an examination of arguments offered by John Hick and Terence Penelhum. I conclude here that while the initial plausibility of the ambiguity view has been demonstrated by Hick and Penelhum, a number of important questions – questions concerning the nature and criteria of relevant evidence and concerning probabilistic arguments for theism and atheism – are left undiscussed by them. In Section II I attempt to remedy this apparent deficiency and in Section III I argue that the ambiguity view remains plausible when the conclusions of Section II are applied to it.

In Section IV I examine the implications of holding that ambiguity *in fact* obtains for the nonevidentialist enterprise. Given ambiguity, it *looks* as though one of the major conditions for the applicability of nonevidentialism to our situation has been satisfied. I argue, however, that the view that this condition has been satisfied rests on the mistaken assumption that ambiguity is *itself* evidentially *irrelevant*. I attempt to show, in the last section, that a strong *prima facie* case can be made for the claim that ambiguity is evidence for atheism and

examine the options that remain for nonevidentialists, given the success of my argument. As it seems to me, nonevidentialists may either attempt to show that ambiguity does not obtain after all or that a theological counterinterpretation of it can be given. Both of these options are, however, somewhat unhappy ones – the first because, as this essay shows, the ambiguity view *is* a plausible one, and the second because the argument in favor of ambiguity as evidence is apparently a strong one. So whatever course the nonevidentialist may take, it is clear that the fact of ambiguity does not facilitate, but rather *hinders*, the advancement of his view.

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To Wendy, Matthew and Justin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
Section	
I The Ambiguity View Introduced	6
II Relevant Evidence: Some Clarifications	38
III The Ambiguity View: Exposition and Defence	56
IV Ambiguity as Evidence	79
CONCLUSION	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92

Introduction

One of the more remarkable turns in recent philosophy of religion has been the revival of a view originally and most famously endorsed by Pascal, viz., that in certain circumstances it is rationally appropriate to believe that there is a God on the basis of pragmatic or prudential considerations.¹ On this view, which I call 'nonevidentialism',² one is pragmatically (as opposed to evidentially) justified in believing that there is a God if one has legitimate ends the pursuit of which is facilitated by such belief, and if the question of God's existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds.³

A considerable number of contemporary philosophers accept nonevidentialism. Of those who do, many consider it to have application to our situation.⁴ There is, in particular, a growing acceptance of the claim that God's existence cannot be proven or disproven, rendered probable or improbable, on the basis of evidence. An interesting (and elusive) version of this claim runs as follows:

- 1) The phenomena of human experience are "religiously ambiguous",⁵ i.e., "open to both a theistic and an atheistic interpretation."⁶

I call the view expressed by 1) 'the ambiguity view'. The state of affairs which obtains if proponents of the ambiguity view are correct I call 'ambiguity'. In this essay I attempt to give a clear shape to the ambiguity view and to demonstrate its plausibility. I also ask whether nonevidentialist arguments are applicable if ambiguity obtains and conclude that it is not at all obvious that they are. If I am right, ambiguity is *itself* prima facie evidence for

atheism and thus poses a serious problem for those who are non-evidentially inclined. Indeed, the evidential implications of an ambiguous situation (as of *every* possible situation in which the question of God's existence does not yield to evidence) are such that the very tenability of nonevidentialism is cast into question.

It will be useful at this point to clarify some of the terms and procedures used in this essay. By 'God' I understand 'a personal being who is present everywhere, eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good and the creator and sustainer of the universe'. I will not enter into the details of this description except to say that as it is understood in this essay, the perfect goodness of God involves a concern on God's part for the spiritual development and fulfillment of human beings. This restriction is, I think, consonant with the understanding of God's goodness assumed by most adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as by others who address my topic and related topics in the philosophy of religion.⁷

My understanding of 'God' of course affects my understanding of 'theism'. 'Theism', in this essay, signifies the belief that there is a God – that a personal being who satisfies the description given above exists. Individuals who hold this belief I call 'theists'.

Several things should be said about my use of the word 'atheism'. First, and most importantly, I give to it a narrower sense than it is sometimes given and than it can be given. 'Atheism', as I use it, signifies *naturalistic* atheism, i.e., the belief that there is no being who satisfies the description given above and that reality is exhausted by the physical universe and its natural processes –

processes which are explicable, at least in principle, in scientific terms.

It is also possible to use 'atheism' to signify simply the denial of the claim that God exists. (Buddhists, it might be said, are surely also atheists.) If this broader sense *is* given to 'atheism', then it may seem that theism and atheism are mere contradictories and *not* the contraries I make them out to be.

This is an important point, but I think that the conclusion to draw is that *various* uses of 'atheism' may be legitimate. *My* usage gains its legitimacy from the fact that it is possible to make sense of the question whether the phenomena of experience are open to both theistic and atheistic (naturalistic) interpretations - this question is a meaningful one. The *existence* of such interpretations and of conflict between them would appear to be well attested by common discourse as well as by more sophisticated discussions in the philosophical literature that bears on these topics.

I make what may seem a large assumption in this essay, especially in the latter part of it. This is that if theism and naturalistic atheism *are* at epistemic parity, then the question of God's existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds. It is however possible that some interpretation of the world *other* than theism or naturalistic atheism is rationally superior to *both* of them. If this were to be the case, then the question of God's existence would be open to an evidential resolution after all. Because of various constraints, I assume that this is not a likely possibility. Anyone who thinks that this *is* a likely possibility will need to scale down my conclusions accordingly.

I will from time to time be employing some of the symbols of probability theory.⁸ To facilitate this I let T stand for the proposition 'God exists' and I let $\neg T$ stand for the proposition 'God does not exist'. (T and $\neg T$ represent 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' as these propositions are understood in the context of the theistic and atheistic interpretations discussed in this essay.) The formulae I use include, most importantly, $P(T/e \ \& \ k)$, which represents the probability that God exists given evidence e and k , and $P(\neg T/e \ \& \ k)$, which represents the probability that God does *not* exist given e and k . e and k represent, respectively, new evidence and background knowledge (or evidence). Background knowledge, as Richard Swinburne points out, "is the knowledge we take for granted before new evidence turns up".⁹

The structure of this essay is as follows. In the first section I introduce the ambiguity view and consider explications of it offered by John Hick and Terence Penelhum. This discussion shows up the need for a more careful analysis of the concept of evidence for T and $\neg T$; I offer such an analysis in Section II. In Section III I argue that the ambiguity view remains a plausible view when the conclusions of Section II are applied to it. In the fourth and final section I consider the possibility that ambiguity may constitute evidence for atheism and examine the implications of this for the nonevidentialist enterprise. If my arguments here are correct, then - contrary to what some would have us think - nonevidentialism is *not* straightforwardly applicable to an ambiguous situation and may, indeed, have internal problems that render it untenable.

Notes

¹I am of course referring to Pascal's famous 'Wager' argument. See his *Pensees*, A.J. Krailsheimer (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), fragment 418. William James, while disagreeing with Pascal on specifics, reaches similar conclusions. See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956). For more recent restatements of this view see Stephen T. Davis, *Faith, Skepticism and Evidence* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1978); Robert M. Adams, 'Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief', in C.F. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), esp. pp.128-129; and Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

²I call this view 'nonevidentialism' to contrast it with a view popularly called 'evidentialism' - "the view that, unless one has adequate evidence for one's theistic beliefs, it is rationally improper to hold them". Kenneth Konyndyk, 'Faith and Evidentialism', in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.83. The Audi/Wainwright volume has a number of interesting articles on questions concerning evidentialism.

³See Rescher, II, 'The Epistemology of Pragmatic Beliefs'.

⁴For example, see Davis, pp.181-182.

⁵John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p.187.

⁶Terence Penelhum, *Butler* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.193.

⁷See, for example, Terence Penelhum, 'Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil', in *Religious Studies* 2, 1967.

⁸My usage of these symbols conforms to that of Richard Swinburne; my discussion of probability and evidence, such as it is, owes much to his perceptive treatment of these topics in, for example, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979).

⁹Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p.16.

Section I

The Ambiguity View Introduced

As I stated in the Introduction, the ambiguity view is the view that the world is religiously ambiguous, i.e., open to both a theistic and an atheistic interpretation. The phrase 'religiously ambiguous' is John Hick's. The view suggested by it is implicit or explicit in almost every one of his writings. Another writer who has contributed to the articulation and discussion of the ambiguity view is Terence Penelhum. Penelhum's account parallels Hick's at many points; but some aspects of it are distinctively his own and not all of Hick's ideas are endorsed by him.

In this section I introduce the ambiguity view via an examination of the contributions of Hick and Penelhum. A consideration of what they have written in this regard will lead to significant clues concerning the proper articulation of the ambiguity view as well as to problems which must be resolved before it can be given a clear shape.

I

One of the earliest expressions of Hick's view on ambiguity is in *Faith and Knowledge* - his first book.¹ Having passed over the possibility of a *proof* of God's existence quite quickly, with the standard reference to the apparently devastating critiques of Kant and Hume,² Hick dispenses also, in chapter seven, with the notion that *probability* arguments may help to determine the relative merits

of theism and atheism. These beliefs, he tells us, constitute "total interpretations", and "in the case of a proposition stating a total interpretation, there can, by definition, be no data outside the interpretation, no corpus of prior propositions through relation to which it could receive a probability-value."³ If one is interpreting the *universe*, all that can be required of one's interpretation is that account be taken of all the known data. Hick writes:

No *way* of accounting for the data can be said to be, in any objectively ascertainable sense, more probable than another. Hence if theism and naturalism are alike permissible interpretations of the phenomena of human experience, they must in the eyes of logic stand on an equal footing.⁴

Thus we arrive at ambiguity via the failure of proofs and the failure of probability arguments where total interpretations, equally comprehensive, are concerned. Of course, Hick qualifies his conclusion in this regard - "...*if* theism and naturalism are alike permissible interpretations..." (emphasis added). But his conclusion constitutes, at the very least, a statement of opinion as to how the claim that the world is ambiguous ought to be understood.

That Hick *does* think that theism and atheism are "alike permissible interpretations" of human experience is evident from the following quotation:

Looked at in a completely neutral light... the face of the world would present a checkerboard of alternative black and white. It can be seen either as white diversified by black - a divinely ruled world containing accidental pockets of evil; or as black diversified by white - a godless world containing the incongruous factor of moral goodness. When the theist and atheist

argue together, each is trying, by emphasizing this at the expense of that and by drawing this into the center and relegating that to the perimeter, to bring the other to see the universe as he himself sees it. The difference between them is not due to any variation in logical acumen or calculating capacity, but to the difference between two radically different ways of viewing and engaging in the experiences of human life. And their respective arguments are but elaborate afterthoughts, excogitated to support and justify convictions already arrived at by another path.⁵

We have here the notion, developed by other writers, that different 'patterns' in the data can be detected and that one's view will depend on which pattern one finds illuminating.⁶ (The non-rational basis of one's choice of pattern is also suggested.)

"But", asks Hick (moving on to a justification of the view so far merely asserted)," is it in fact the case that a complete and consistent theism and a complete and consistent naturalism are alike possible?"⁷ There are of course those on both sides of the dispute who view the interpretation put forward by members of the opposing side with some suspicion. To allay such suspicion, Hick refers to "key items which have generally been felt to weigh most heavily both for and against theistic belief" and attempts to show "that in each case the evidence is ambiguous and is capable of being accommodated both in a theistic and in an atheistic world view".⁸

Beginning with the antitheistic evidence, Hick considers the problem of evil and argues that the reasoning of atheists goes beyond what is warranted by the data. Atheists assume that the best possible world must be such that it cannot be improved; but whether

this is so "must depend upon the purpose if any, for which the world exists".⁹ The purpose, according to Hick, which *theists* think the world exists to fulfill is the purpose of God in bringing about a "process through which moral personality is gradually being created by free response to environmental challenges and opportunities".¹⁰ Therefore

...it is possible that our own at present imperfect and untidy universe is after all the best of conceivable universes, not in the sense that none of its individual items is at present incapable of improvement, but in the sense that taken as a whole and throughout its entire history the universe is such that to remove its present finite evils would be to preclude an infinite future good.¹¹

Hick's conclusion, in consequence of this, is that "in spite of the antitheistic evidence the religious claim *may* nevertheless be true".¹²

Turning to the theistic evidence, Hick refers in particular to moral experience, religious experience and alleged miracles. With respect to the first of these he argues that either a theistic or a naturalistic explanation is possible and that one's choice will be determined by one's antecedent conviction as to the fundamental character of the universe.¹³ With respect to religious experience, he suggests that a theistic interpretation can always be questioned.¹⁴ And as for alleged miracles and apparent answers to prayer, the atheist, according to Hick, can reasonably cite the working of "parapsychological mechanisms".¹⁵ Hick's conclusion here is that

a consistent naturalistic theory, covering all the special phenomena of religious experience and history as well as the general facts of nature, is possible, at least in

principle. Consequently the religious interpretation of life cannot be accepted merely in default of an alternative. This is all that a survey of the evidence entitles one to say - that the observed facts are systematically ambiguous, constituting permissive evidence both for theism and for naturalism.¹⁶

Some further comments concerning ambiguity are found in Hick's discussion of "eschatological verification".¹⁷ Having shown, to his own satisfaction, that both a complete and consistent theism and a complete and consistent naturalism are possible, he is, reasonably enough, concerned to show that the choice between theism and atheism is "a real and not a merely empty or verbal choice".¹⁸ The universe of the theist differs "as a *totality*" (my emphasis) from the universe of the atheist because "the theist does, and the atheist does not, expect that when history is completed it will be seen to have... fulfilled a specific purpose, namely that of creating "children of God"."¹⁹

But this fact does not alter the *present* state of affairs; it remains ambiguous. Our present situation, says Hick, is one which

seems in some ways to confirm and in other ways to contradict the truth of theism. Some events around us suggest the presence of an unseen benevolent intelligence and others suggest that no such intelligence is at work.²⁰

Certain questions about Hick's account of ambiguity in *Faith and Knowledge* suggest themselves. Is the fact that both theism and atheism offer explanations of the putative evidential phenomena a sufficient condition for the truth of 'the putative evidential phenomena are systematically ambiguous'? Is there no stronger evidence than

that referred to by Hick? Is the existence of stronger evidence incompatible with ambiguity? Do Hick's comments concerning probability arguments provide for an adequate response to relevant contemporary discussions, e.g., Swinburne's? And finally, how much of the blame for ambiguity should go to the nature of the facts themselves and how much to the limitations of human faculties?

Answers to some of these questions are suggested in another of Hick's writings - the Introduction to his selection of readings, *The Existence of God*.²¹ After making similar points about proof and probability to those already mentioned, he writes:

The situation seems to be this. Of the immense number and variety of apparently relevant considerations some, taken by themselves, seem to point in one direction and some in the other. One group can fairly be said to count as at least *prima facie* evidence for the existence of God. For not only do believers urge these particular considerations as supporting their own position, but disbelievers concurringly treat them as points requiring special explanation. And likewise there are other considerations which taken by themselves constitute at least *prima facie* antitheistic evidence. These are matters which nonbelievers emphasize but in which the believer on the other hand sees a challenge to his faith which he must try to meet.²²

Examples of *prima facie* theistic evidence, according to Hick, are "religious experience and reports of miracles".²³ On the other hand, the fact of evil is *prima facie* evidence for atheism.²⁴

Hick's discussion of evidence here is a little more detailed and subtle. He makes a distinction between the *prima facie* evidences and other factors which, while not "manifestly evidential" are nevertheless

more "immediately assimilable" into one world view than into the other.²⁵ As examples of these he mentions moral experience and the insignificant place of humanity in the universe.²⁶ But none of these factors, Hick insists, "points so unequivocally in one particular direction as to admit of only one possible explanation. Although in isolation they each suggest a conclusion, nevertheless each is capable of being fitted into either a religious or a naturalistic context".²⁷

Because of what he takes our situation to be like, Hick suggest that "any fruitful comparison must treat the two alternative interpretations as comprehensive wholes, each with its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses".²⁸ Taking this approach then, is there any way of deciding whether acceptance of one is more reasonable than acceptance of the other? Hick says no. There is no agreed way of weighing individual pieces of evidence on one side against pieces of evidence on the other or, for that matter, of weighing the *total* evidence one side can muster against the total evidence of the other.²⁹ The category of probability has no objective meaning here, says Hick: "Judgments on such matters are intuitive and personal..."³⁰

Even if we apply the criteria sometimes mentioned in this regard, viz., "the internal logical consistency of each system... their explanatory comprehensiveness... and the "adequacy" with which they illuminate and explain what they profess to explain",³¹ we will not be able, rationally, to declare theism superior to atheism or vice versa. Hick assumes that there are forms both of theism and of atheism which meet these criteria:

The issue is once again not between explanation and no explanation but between two radically different kinds of

explanation... there is no objective sense in which one consistent and comprehensive world-view can be described as inherently more probable than another... the issue between them is not one that can be settled by appeal to any agreed procedure or by reference to any objectively ascertainable probabilities.³²

Again, questions suggest themselves. What are the criteria on the basis of which Hick judges that some phenomena are *prima facie* evidence for theism or atheism and others are not? Is it only if some factor points "unequivocally in one particular direction" and admits of "only one possible explanation" that we may be sure of its status as actual evidence? What is the proper theistic response to the criterion of simplicity which atheists often mention, but which Hick seems to ignore? We will have occasion to return to some of these (and earlier) questions at the end of the section.

I move on now to the third and last of Hick's writings which I will consider in this connection - a quite recent collection of essays called *Problems of Religious Pluralism*.³³ As the title suggests, Hick's attention has in recent years been given to problems associated with the presence in our world of religious traditions other than Christianity. Accordingly, many of his more famous views, e.g., on evil, life after death, eschatological verification, experiencing - as and, most importantly for our purposes, ambiguity, have been revised and adjusted to fit new needs. Instead of the terms 'theistically' and 'atheistically', Hick now more commonly uses 'religiously' and 'non-religiously'. And so we find ambiguity described as the fact that "It is possible for different people (as also for the same person at different times) to experience [the world] both religiously and 'non-

religiously; and to hold beliefs which arise from and feed into each of these ways of experiencing."³⁴

The implications of Hick's global concerns for our discussion are, however, in most cases insignificant. While he now suggests not only that the world can be experienced as complete in itself (i.e., naturalistically) or "as God's handiwork",³⁵ but also that it can be experienced as "the battlefield of good and evil, or as the cosmic dance of Shiva, or as the beginningless and endless interdependent process of *pratitya samutpada* within which we may experience *nirvana*,³⁶ it is still the case that the world is open to theistic and atheistic interpretations. That is, Hick's later revision involves only an *extension* of the notion of ambiguity.

The one new feature I *do* wish to highlight and which I *do* think is important is a brief discussion of the notion of 'interpretation' (as Hick uses it) and of its relation to experience and to Hick's notion of 'experiencing-as'. (This discussion occurs in the volume's second essay, 'Seeing-as and Religious Experience'.³⁷)

Hick's concept of experiencing-as is an enlarged version of Wittgenstein's concept of 'seeing-as'. According to Wittgenstein, seeing-as is an interpretive activity in which thought is mixed with pure seeing - seeing, that is, in the sense of seeing "what is physically present".³⁸ Seeing-as is particularly evident when what is being looked at is a puzzle picture, e.g., a duck-rabbit picture which can be seen as a duck *or* as a rabbit.³⁹

Hick enlarges this notion to apply to "all our conscious experience of our environment, including the religious ways of experiencing it".⁴⁰ Human beings, he suggests, have "apparently always dis-

played a tendency to experience individuals, places and situations as having religious meaning".⁴¹ Jesus, for example, was not only interpreted as a rabbi or prophet, he was also interpreted, by his disciples, as the Christ.⁴²

It is in this connection that Hick offers some comments concerning the notion which figures so prominently in his writings - the notion of interpretation.

"The word 'interpret' can function in two senses or on two levels; and we should now distinguish them. There is the second-order sense in which an historian interprets the data, or a detective the clues, or a lawyer the evidence, or indeed in which a metaphysician may interpret the universe. This is a matter of conscious theory-construction... this second order kind of interpretation presupposes the more basic, or first-order, interpretive activity which enters into virtually all conscious experience of our environment. In this first-order sense we are interpreting what is before us when we experience this as a fork, that as a house, and the other as a cow, or again, when we experience our present situation as one of participating in a session of philosophical discussion; or again, when some of us might, in a moment of reflection, be conscious in and through this same situation of being at the same time in the presence of God. Interpreting in this sense is normally an unconscious and habitual process resulting from negotiations with our environment in terms of the set of concepts constituting our operative world of meaning."⁴³

On the basis of this distinction we may say that Hick's notions of experiencing-as and first-order interpretation are, for all practical purposes, identical. The passage quoted also suggests that in order

to accept the view that the world is ambiguous - open to more than one interpretation - *we need not accept* Hick's notion of experiencing-as (first-order interpretation). What the distinction serves to draw attention to is the fact that the world may be said to be open to more than one interpretation in *another* sense of that word.

We may derive from this that the notion of ambiguity is not essentially connected to the notion of experiencing-as. The world *could* be ambiguous because there are theistic and atheistic interpretations of it (second-order) which the world and our present state of knowledge conspire to render equally plausible. The notion of experiencing-as might conceivably help to explain why ambiguity obtains, if it does, but an explication of the concept of ambiguity per se can get along well enough without it.

Terence Penelhum is one writer who considers the world to be ambiguous but who, at least apparently, does not affirm Hick's notion of experiencing-as. I turn now to his contribution.

II

A fairly detailed account of ambiguity is found in Penelhum's first book, *Religion and Rationality*.⁴⁴ After considering various alleged proofs of God's existence as well as the inductive version of the argument to design, he, like Hick, concludes that "religious belief cannot be said to be rational in the strong sense of being demonstrable or scientifically probable".⁴⁵ Natural theology - at least so far⁴⁶ - can only lay claim to a succession of failures.

But Penelhum is equally convinced of the failure of what we

might, in the spirit of Alvin Plantinga, call 'natural atheology',⁴⁷ i.e., the various attempts to show that theistic belief is irrational. "Religious belief", writes Penelhum, "does not, or need not, conflict with scientific knowledge, be involved in self-contradiction, or be devoid of clear content".⁴⁸

It is at least in part because of these facts, or apparent facts, that Penelhum is inclined to suggest that the world is open to *both* a theistic and an atheistic interpretation.⁴⁹ I say 'in part' because there seem to be other factors which, when taken *together* with the failure of natural theology and of natural atheology, are sufficient, on Penelhum's view, to bring about a distinctively ambiguous situation. Although Penelhum does not say this, simply the failure of attempts to show theism to be coercively rational or positively irrational seems to be compatible with (and indeed, necessarily involved in) *other* possible situations in which the issue of God's existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds, e.g., a situation in which an evidential *balance* obtains⁵⁰ or (perhaps) a situation in which there is *no* relevant evidence. The other factors which seem necessary for an *ambiguous* situation and which Penelhum emphasizes in this connection are various aspects of what we might call the *resourcefulness* of theism and atheism.

And so the world is open to an atheistic interpretation because the existence of God cannot be proven *and* because secular explanations of phenomena dear to the hearts of theists abound. As long as this is the case, the atheist cannot, according to Penelhum, be faulted for staying 'close to the ground', for refusing to add a religious interpretation to the facts of experience.⁵¹ Penelhum implies

that a weakness in atheism could only be shown to exist if a secular explanation of some relevant phenomenon were *not* available.

Referring to the putative evidence advanced by theists he writes:

It is... clear that there is no need for the skeptic to let it count as evidence, since it can be accounted for without any reference to the doctrinal scheme in question.⁵²

And again, with respect to religious experience:

There could only be... a natural theology [based on religious experience] if it could be shown that no nonreligious explanation of the occurrence of a given type of religious experience could be had...⁵³

And so it seems that on Penelhum's view, just the bare fact that there *are* secular explanations suffices to show that such a weakness in atheism does not exist, or at least, that it cannot be *shown* to exist.

Secular explanations are readily available because the facts and events important to theists, such as alleged revelations, religious experiences, etc., all have *historical* antecedents and effects – they are natural events in the world, whatever else they may be.⁵⁴ But theological interpretations of these events are possible as well. And the resources of theism are such that these interpretations can be offered without actually contradicting (and indeed, by subsuming) the interpretations of atheists:

[The believer's doctrinal] scheme subsumes secular knowledge within it, a fundamental step the believer is able to take by rejecting as inessential those details of the doctrinal scheme that clash with secular knowledge (such as the doctrine of literal interpretation of the

Scriptures). Natural facts are what believer and unbeliever alike understand them to be and yet more.⁵⁵

Natural events are therefore susceptible to both theistic and atheistic interpretations:

The very fact that [the believer's] interpretation can subsume the secular one within it (and must do so) shows that the skeptic's refusal to proceed beyond the secular is not irrational. Each natural event, then, can carry, but does not require, a theistic interpretation... Natural events, then, are religiously ambiguous.⁵⁶

Further aspects of the resourcefulness of theism and atheism which help to make ours a distinctively ambiguous situation include the facts that 1) the standards to which theists and atheists *do* appeal (given that more *general* standards of rationality fail to decide the question at issue) grow out of their respective world views and so cannot adjudicate *between* them and that 2) both theist and atheist can draw on the resources of their position to explain the fact of the other's even though they cannot demonstrate its rational inadequacy.

Penelhum emphasizes these two points. First, with respect to standards, he notes that the atheist can rationally emphasize simplicity or economy and refuse to add a religious interpretation to the facts he can explain scientifically:

...the skeptic can argue very plausibly that his own world-view is able to explain any natural event that the believer's world-view is able to explain and is able to do so more economically. The principle of economy is an established principle of procedure in scientific investigations, and therefore (the argument can run) it

is irrational to accept a world-view that runs counter to it when adequate explanations of all events can be had in the sciences if we wait long enough.⁵⁷

And the theist may point to the explanatory depth his interpretation allows him to achieve:

The believer's response has to be that although scientific explanations are indeed available for all natural events and although he too accepts them, they are, at least in some cases, inadequate or incomplete.⁵⁸

Yet each argues *from* his own position and not *to* it. The standards of science are only obvious ones to endorse if the adequacy of scientific explanations for all phenomena is assumed. And the theist finds things to explain over and above what the atheist has already explained only by bringing in *theological* considerations:

Is an explanation adequate if all the causes it mentions are sufficient to account for all the phenomena requiring explanation? If one says yes, then the only way in which a believer can argue that a secular explanation is inadequate is by claiming to discern in the phenomena aspects that secular explanations cannot in principle cover. But to make this particular argument work, these elements will have to be theological.⁵⁹

Of course, if the atheist is right in thinking that God does not exist, then the standards he espouses are indeed appropriate, and the same holds for the theist if God exists. But neither can show to the other on the basis of standards she accepts that the interpretation in question is preferable. And neither can appeal to her *own* standards (as *against* the standards of the other) without begging critical questions.⁶⁰

Returning to Penelhum's second emphasis, we see that each side has

seductive and plausible devices for explaining the fact of the other's position... To the believer, the natural world and the world of man are full of signs or evidences of God which it is inadequate to leave out and which it is theologically significant that believers ignore. Unbelief therefore becomes itself a phenomenon which the believer explains in his own terms. To the unbeliever, on the other hand, the believer's scheme is unnecessarily complex and therefore false, and he is not without his own resources in thinking up psychological explanations of the believer's supposed insights.⁶¹

Both believer and unbeliever can therefore explain not only the various relevant natural phenomena, but also the fact of the other's position.

While the explanatory devices and standards mentioned above do not allow for a rational arbitration of the dispute, the fact that these resources *are* available provides a certain support for each view.⁶² I think it is possible to say, on Penelhum's view, that these resources make epistemic parity between the two views and, in particular, a parity to be understood in terms of *ambiguity*, all the more obvious.

Before leaving *Religion and Rationality* we must look more specifically at what Penelhum has to say concerning evidence:

In this situation there is in one obvious way an abundance of evidence of God's existence and purposes – an abundance, that is, of facts that count as evidence to the believer and may come to count as evidence to others. It is also clear that there is no need for the

skeptic to let it count as evidence, since it can be accounted for without any reference to the doctrinal scheme in question.⁶³

And a few pages further:

...religious belief... is able not only to point to myriad evidences of its alleged truth but to absorb apparent counterevidence... the skeptic, in refusing to accord theistic significance to the common phenomena of nature and human life, commits no error of logic...⁶⁴

Penelhum's view appears to be that the allegedly evidential phenomena are ambiguous in the sense that one side may rationally consider them to be evidence while the other may rationally consider them *not* to be evidence.

The second of Penelhum's writings which I will consider is his Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture, 'Is a Religious Epistemology Possible?'⁶⁵ In this lecture, Penelhum argues that it is possible to imagine circumstances in which it would be irrational to insist that God's existence (and certain religious claims that depend on it) had not been proven or had not been verified; and that believers and skeptics should be able to agree on this. But he also argues that such circumstances do not presently obtain.⁶⁶

Since this is so, Penelhum suggests, if any knowledge of God is available it must be *direct* knowledge, i.e., "direct religious awareness or insight".⁶⁷ Since the believer claims to *have* such knowledge (and accordingly, interprets the world theistically) and since the skeptic "lacks and suspects it",⁶⁸ and since, in addition, no community of standards exists which would serve to arbitrate the dispute - an epistemological impasse is created.⁶⁹ Penelhum describes

the impasse as follows:

...attempts to convince believers that their alleged insights are illusory, even if they work, seem bound to commit the genetic fallacy and to depend on applying to beliefs standards which those who hold them can quite rationally insist do not apply to them... No amount of psychological knowledge of the genesis of [religious] experience can (or should) show to someone who considers himself to know of God's presence that such experience cannot be revelatory, yet no insistence that it is a form of cognition can (or should) convince someone who does not think he knows of God's presence that it really is.⁷⁰

Penelhum argues that unless some transformation (of the world) does occur which would prove indirectly that God exists, the deadlock between believer and skeptic must continue.⁷¹ If the believer *has* direct knowledge of God's existence, he is no doubt correct in interpreting the world theistically. (The fact that he *thinks* he has, and cannot be proven wrong, presumably provides *warrant* for his interpretation). But the one who does *not* think he has such knowledge is rational in reasoning from *nonreligious* experiences to *skeptical* conclusions.⁷²

The argument in this lecture serves to push some matters discussed by Penelhum in *Religion and Rationality* a little further. Specifically, the notion of a deadlock between believer and skeptic on the question of direct religious insight, as developed by Penelhum in the lecture, illuminates the more general notion of a deadlock between believer and skeptic which we find in *Religion and Rationality*. If the believer may rationally claim to have experienced direct religious insight, then his claim that certain aspects of the facts of experience

are not covered by secular explanations as well as his religious interpretation of them are made more intelligible and plausible. In *Religion and Rationality* the fact that the believer may rationally claim direct religious insight is not explicitly discussed in connection with the dispute over when an explanation is adequate. Consequently, the believer's theological interpretation of events already accounted for by secular explanations is made to appear less than intelligible, idiosyncratic, unaccountably dogmatic. Given, however, that no amount of skeptical argument "should show to someone who considers himself to know of God's presence that such experience cannot be revelatory", the believer's claim that secular explanations are, "at least in some cases, inadequate or incomplete" does not "cry out for further elucidation" with quite the same urgency as before.⁷³ If this is so, then again, the ambiguity view has been strengthened. I therefore consider the argument of the lecture as supplementary to the arguments in *Religion and Rationality*.

Penelhum's account gives rise to a number of questions. Is it the case that if a secular explanation of *e* is possible, then *e* cannot be evidence for *T*? Given ambiguity, are all the phenomena that *are* put forward as evidence of exactly the same epistemic status, i.e., is each of the pieces of apparent evidence (and all of them taken together) exactly *neutral* with respect to the truth of *T* and *-T*? Is the atheistic interpretation of the facts of experience exhausted by the sum of secular *explanations* believed by the atheist to be applicable to them (explanations which the theist agrees are appropriate, so far as they go) or does the atheistic interpretation involve, in addition, the viewing of certain facts (e.g., instances of evil) as

evidence for the atheistic interpretation? Penelhum's account seems to suggest the first half of this disjunction. If he is right, then the atheist is in the privileged position of not needing to advance evidence in favor of his view and may restrict his attention to impugning the evidence of theists. And finally, with respect to 'Is a Religious Epistemology Possible?', does our world have no facts which show any of the characteristics of facts which would serve to prove or probabilify God's existence, i.e., is there as stark an epistemic contrast between imaginable experiences and experiences the world actually offers as Penelhum suggests there is? Again, we will have occasion to return to some of these questions at the end of the section as well as later on in the essay.

The third and last of Penelhum's discussions of ambiguity which I will consider appears in his more recent book, *God and Skepticism*.⁷⁴ Many of the same things are said, but some aspects of the view are clarified and updated in light of an argument Penelhum attributes to Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga, and which he calls "the permissive Parity Argument".⁷⁵ This argument suggests that

[since] each of us must make some intellectual commitments that cannot be justified without circularity, in order to have standards of justification to use in assessing any beliefs whatever,... someone who holds a religious commitment such as belief in God as one of those fundamental intellectual commitments cannot be convicted of irrationality merely because belief in God could not be justified by evidence to someone who did *not* have it as one of his own fundamental commitments.⁷⁶

Penelhum accepts this argument, with two provisos. The first is that "an assemblage of beliefs should be classified as an irrational one

if two or more of the fundamental beliefs which constitute it should turn out on examination to contradict one another".⁷⁷ And the second proviso is that

...although religious commitment may not be undertaken on the basis of evidence, it still yields interpretations and explanations of facts which, though an unbeliever cannot so interpret them, reinforce the basic commitment the believer has made, and can therefore be offered in support of his commitment... We might call this kind of support *internal* support.⁷⁸

Although Penelhum does not refer to it as such, his account seems to contain a *third* proviso as well. It is suggested in the following passage:

...if there were some independent and universal criterion of rationality, in addition to that specified in my first proviso, which secular intellectual commitments satisfy but religious commitment does not, the permissive Parity Argument would collapse.⁷⁹

In other words, the permissive Parity Argument is only successful if there is no such "independent and universal criterion of rationality".

Penelhum suggests that the Parity Argument *simpliciter* - which accuses the "secular unbeliever of inconsistency in not espousing faith along with his secular intellectual commitments"⁸⁰ - is, unlike the permissive version of it, an unsuccessful argument. This is because the unbeliever can offer a special reason for treating religious and intellectual commitment differently. It consists in pointing out the benefits which result from applying to our beliefs "a standard of *simplicity*"⁸¹ and the relevance of this to the case of religious belief:

To say that all the phenomena of our world have to be viewed as ordered by a divine mind is to add a dimension which clearly violates the standard of simplicity. The success and importance of this standard is a reason for refraining from adding the religious commitment to our secular ones.⁸²

Penelhum asks how good such a response would be and suggests that it would do for unbelief what Plantinga and Malcolm have done for religious belief, viz., it would "fend off the charge of irrationality".⁸³ Thus its result is essentially permissive as well.⁸⁴

But what can be said in response to those who claim that the principle of simplicity is a "basis for accusing believers of irrationality" - those who claim that the principle has "more than defensive use"?⁸⁵ Penelhum suggests that

...it is easy to see how a believer might augment what he says to deal with this... he could point out that the fruitfulness and importance of the principle of simplicity can be matched by the fruitfulness of theism as a source of religious understandings of our world. More importantly, he could insist that we must adapt the standards of human enquiry to the themes into which we enquire, and that although the principle of simplicity is necessary and fruitful in the scientific investigation of nature, it is a hindrance when supernatural themes are introduced, since it prevents our considering them at all. Thirdly, against the austere virtue of simplicity, he could set the appeal of explanatory depth, and say that although belief in God does not undercut the scientific understanding of phenomena, but leaves it as it is, it adds another dimension to it.⁸⁶

The responses Penelhum suggests in this passage are an important

contribution to our discussion. They, again, demonstrate the resourcefulness of theism and provide support for the view that ambiguity obtains.

Penelhum's own identification of the situation revealed by the permissive Parity Argument as an ambiguous one occurs in the following passage, in which the absence of neutral standards is again the predominant consideration:

To say that a person's beliefs are irrational is of course to claim that they fail to meet a standard. The accusation of irrationality may be successful if the standard against which these beliefs are measured is one which they indeed fail to satisfy, and is shared by accuser and accused alike. If... the standard they fail to meet is not shared by the accused, or is overridden or modified within the accused's system of beliefs by another standard to which he subscribes, the accusation will fail... The standards themselves cannot be justified in a manner that is neutral between systems of thought, but each side can nevertheless support or defend the standards he accepts by making clear the intellectual benefits derivable from them within his system; and his being in a position to do this is itself a reason for saying that he, or the system he has, is a rational one. In such a situation, neither side is in a position to accuse the other of irrationality, even though each can give reasons (though not neutral reasons) for its difference from the other... in a situation of deadlock such as this, our world is *intellectually ambiguous*...⁸⁷

Penelhum's arguments in favor of an ambiguity view in *God and Skepticism* are formidable ones; nevertheless, certain questions again suggest themselves. Is it the case, in all circumstances, that only

internal support is given to the believer's religious commitment by the interpretations of facts it yields? Can *none* of those facts be shown to *challenge* atheism? And where, again, is there mention of the fact that an atheistic (as opposed to theistic) interpretation of the phenomena of experience may involve not only the offering of secular explanations but also the viewing of certain facts as evidence for atheism? As these and earlier questions indicate, Penelhum's articulation of the ambiguity view, like Hick's, raises problems which it does not resolve.

III

I turn now to a brief discussion of some of the problems represented by questions I have asked of Hick and Penelhum. I wish to concentrate, in particular, on problems which may be resolved by running their two accounts together. (I discuss problems which arise within *both* of their accounts at the end of Section II.)

Penelhum's view is the more nuanced of the two; it captures more of the complexities of the debate between theists and atheists and provides some of the careful detail that Hick's view lacks. For example, it involves a much more careful discussion of the problem of non-neutral standards than does Hick's. Hick merely says that theist and atheist judge "from importantly different standpoints and with different criteria and presuppositions".⁸⁸ Penelhum puts flesh on such claims.

Penelhum's view also confirms that 'ambiguity' can be explicated solely in terms of 'second-order' interpretation. That is, Penelhum

gives a perfectly plausible account of a situation in which both theistic and atheistic interpretations seem applicable without recourse to the notion of 'experiencing-as'. A way of distinguishing ambiguity from the notion of experiencing-as is to be desired because many find the latter notion inadequate in one respect or another⁸⁹ and because it raises complexities which obscure the most important relevant fact, viz., that it seems impossible to decide between the interpretations of theists and atheists on intellectual grounds – interpretations which are quite explicitly and consciously articulated and discussed.

Penelhum's account also contains a useful discussion of both theistic and atheistic perspectives on the principle of simplicity as it relates to matters religious. Hick's account lacks such a discussion. Since Hick wishes to dispense with claims to the effect that atheism has a higher intrinsic probability,⁹⁰ and since the principle of simplicity is most often employed by atheists who make such claims, some discussion such as Penelhum offers would appear to be needed.

Are there aspects of Hick's view which would serve to strengthen Penelhum's, if added to it? I think there are. While both Hick and Penelhum say less than some might wish on the topic of probability, Hick does say more. If Penelhum thinks, as he seems to, that there are no arguments based on probability which given atheism the edge over theism or theism the edge over atheism, it would be helpful if he would give us some reasons for his opinion. As it is, the conclusion one comes to when reading Penelhum is most often 'proofs or nothing', and this conclusion does seem to require more support than it is given.

A more important possible contribution of Hick's, however, is on

the matter of the relative evidential status of various groups of phenomena. He emphasizes that some pieces of apparent evidence give more support to theism and pose more of a problem for atheism than do others. And he makes a similar distinction with respect to atheism.

Penelhum's account, on the other hand, suggests somewhat implausibly that, given ambiguity, all the phenomena that are advanced as evidence for theism are of the same epistemic status - that no one of them challenges atheism more than any other. The view here seems to be that, in the absence of proofs or verifications, no distinction can be made between the evidential value of one phenomenon and that of another.

Basil Mitchell expresses a similar dissatisfaction, albeit with reference to another of Penelhum's writings. Mitchell considers Penelhum's view to be that "rational conviction must come through proof or not at all".⁹¹ But, says Mitchell,

[The fact that phenomena such as conspicuous sanctity exist] must be acknowledged to give some rational support to theism even in the eyes of those who claim no independent knowledge that God exists; stronger support than is provided, for example, by some individual's transient sense of his own finitude, although this too is not entirely without weight. And both of these are to be contrasted with some apparently pointless disaster which, left unexplained, must tend to undermine theism.⁹²

It should be said, in all fairness, that Penelhum *does* sometimes seem to express sympathy for the view Mitchell is advocating, particularly when discussing Pascal.⁹³ And in the Introduction to a

selection of his essays reprinted in a recent volume he describes ambiguity as the fact that the world seems "to manifest God, and at times to preclude him".⁹⁴ This would seem to be a fairly clear reference to the existence of *prima facie* evidence for theism and atheism. Nevertheless, this opinion is not reflected in the more extended (and presumably representative) reflections on ambiguity I have discussed.

The final problems to which I wish to draw attention in this section concern the absence (or apparent absence) in Penelhum's account of any reference to atheistic evidence.

Perhaps there are reasons for this. Perhaps Penelhum thinks that the atheistic evidence is accounted for if we assume (as he assumes) that the theistic doctrinal scheme is internally consistent. He would think this if he considered evil to be the predominant putative atheistic evidence and if he considered the discussion of evil to properly belong to the context in which the internal consistency of theistic beliefs is discussed.⁹⁵ Whatever the reason for it, the absence of an emphasis on atheistic evidence leads one to suppose that the atheistic interpretation of the world is exhausted by the sum of secular explanations atheists can give of the phenomena it contains. And surely it is not.

Now of course it is true that even the facts which might be considered to be the most likely to constitute atheistic evidence are facts which the atheist explains in secular terms. And so it is open to Penelhum to suggest that in offering a set of secular explanations, the atheist *is* referring (however indirectly) to the phenomena which he considers to be evidence for his position. I think however that

this reference ought, both on the part of the atheist and on the part of Penelhum who is describing his position, to be made *explicit*. That is, it ought to be made clear that what is being explained is sometimes held by the atheist to be evidence for his position.

It is true that the atheistic interpretation necessarily involves a set of secular explanations; but whether as *part* of this or beyond this, it involves as well a reference to facts which seem to the atheist to indicate that there is no God and thus, to indicate that his explanations are complete. The *theistic* interpretation, on the other hand, involves reference to both natural and supernatural factors as well as to phenomena which seem to the theist to show that in referring to supernatural factors, he is not deludedly introducing an unnecessary complication, but recognizing the most basic and important aspect of reality. It is only when we note that *each* side's interpretation involves reference to putative evidential phenomena that the *contrast* between them becomes apparent. It is only when we note this that we can avoid the potential confusion involved in saying, as Penelhum does, that the theistic interpretation can "subsume the secular one within it".⁹⁶ The theistic interpretation may subsume secular *explanations* put forward by the atheist – or better yet, it may subsume various references to *natural causes* – but it does not subsume his interpretation, since that interpretation entails a denial of the claim that God exists.

Notes

- ¹John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, chs.7 and 8.
- ²*Ibid.*, p.4.
- ³*Ibid.*, p.154
- ⁴*Ibid.*
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p.156.
- ⁶See, for example, John Macquarrie, *Thinking about God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1975) esp. pp.116, 119-120.
- ⁷Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, p.157.
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹*Ibid.*, p.158.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*
- ¹¹*Ibid.*
- ¹²*Ibid.*
- ¹³*Ibid.*, p.159.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.160.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p.161
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p.161-162.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p.176.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.178.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, p.187.
- ²¹John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).
- ²²*Ibid.*, p.9. Basil Mitchell makes similar points to these in his *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), pp.44-45.
- ²³*Ibid.*
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p.10.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*
- ²⁶*Ibid.*
- ²⁷*Ibid.*
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, p.11.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, p.11-12.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, p.12.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Pres, 1985).

³⁴Ibid., p.110.

³⁵Ibid., p.27.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Specifically, on pp.23-24 of *Problems of Religious Pluralism*.

³⁸Ibid., p.18.

³⁹Ibid., p.18-19.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.27.

⁴¹Ibid., p.22.

⁴²Ibid., p.23.

⁴³Ibid., p.23-24.

⁴⁴Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House, 1971.)

⁴⁵Ibid., p.58.

⁴⁶Penelhum is careful to emphasize that even though natural theologians have failed in the past, they may succeed in the future. Ibid., p.57.

⁴⁷Alvin Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Rational', in C.F. Delaney (ed.), pp.7-8.

⁴⁸Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p.355.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.205.

⁵⁰It might be thought, and has been thought by some (e.g., Davis) that to say that an evidential balance obtains is the same as to say that *ambiguity* obtains. But that this is in fact not so can be seen when we recognize that, on the balance-view, half of the relevant evidence points *unambiguously* to theism and half points unambiguously to atheism. On the ambiguity view, *all* of the relevant evidence is ambiguous in some sense. For an argument against the tenability of the notion that an evidential balance obtains, see Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, pp.11-12.

⁵¹Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p.206.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p.166.

- 54Ibid., p.205-206.
- 55Ibid., p.205.
- 56Ibid., p.206.
- 57Ibid., p.207.
- 58Ibid.
- 59Ibid.
- 60Ibid., p.210-211.
- 61Ibid., p.206-208.
- 62Ibid., p.206.
- 63Ibid.
- 64Ibid., p.210.
- 65Terence Penelhum, 'Is a Religious Epistemology Possible?', in G.N.A. Vesey (ed.), *Knowledge and Necessity*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Volume Three 1968-69 (London: Macmillan, 1970).
- 66Ibid., p.276-278.
- 67Ibid., p.263.
- 68Ibid.
- 69Ibid., p.278.
- 70Ibid.
- 71Ibid., p.278-279.
- 72Ibid., p.278.
- 73See Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p.207.
- 74Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publ. Co., 1983).
- 75Ibid., p.152.
- 76Ibid.
- 77Ibid., p.151.
- 78Ibid., p.152.
- 79Ibid.
- 80Ibid., p.153.
- 81Ibid., p.154.
- 82Ibid.
- 83Ibid.
- 84Ibid.
- 85Ibid., p.154-155.

⁸⁶Ibid., p.155.

⁸⁷Ibid., p.155-156.

⁸⁸Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, p.12.

⁸⁹See, for example, L. Bryant Keeling and Mario F. Morelli, 'Beyond Wittgensteinian Fideism: An Examination of John Hick's Analysis of Religious Faith', in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol.VIII, no.4, 1977. pp.250-262.

⁹⁰Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, p.12.

⁹¹Mitchell, p.111.

⁹²Ibid., p.111-112.

⁹³See Penelhum, *God and Skepticism*, pp.62-75, 90.

⁹⁴Mostafa Faghfoury (ed.), *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p.3.

⁹⁵Some aspects of the discussion in *Religion and Rationality* suggest that this is the case.

⁹⁶Ibid., p.206.

Section II

Relevant Evidence: Some Clarifications

The contributions of Hick and Penelhum to the development of a plausible ambiguity view are significant ones. Many of the relevant issues are illuminated by their accounts. The helpfulness of their contributions is however limited by the absence of a specific discussion of evidence for God's existence or nonexistence and the criteria of such evidence. While it is clear that ambiguity has *something* to do with evidence and, in particular, with a *lack* of it, this relation is left somewhat unclear.

In this section I attempt to do what in my estimation has been left undone. I develop, *inter alia*, a probabilistic criterion of evidence for T or -T (i.e., for 'God exists' or 'God does not exist') and examine various argumentative possibilities open to theists and atheists in the face of apparently opposing evidential considerations. My explication of the probabilistic notion of evidence is based on recent work both inside and outside the boundaries of philosophy of religion. I lean especially on the recent work of Richard Swinburne who applies a similar notion to similar questions in his *The Existence of God*.¹

In my estimation, a specific discussion of evidence relevant to the question of God's existence and, in particular, a discussion which takes probabilistic considerations seriously, may help us to develop tools which can be applied to the ambiguity view and which may lead to a more accurate estimate of its strength. In Section III I offer a version of the ambiguity view which takes these developments into

account.

I

I begin with the notion of *actual evidence* for T or -T. I offer an explication of this notion in stages.

- A. e is actual evidence for T or -T iff 1) e obtains and 2) effects an increase in the probability of T or -T. Alternatively, e is actual evidence for T or -T iff e obtains and $P(T/e \ \& \ k) > P(T/k)$ or $P(-T/e \ \& \ k) > P(-T/k)$.
- B. e effects an increase in the probability of T or -T iff e is more to be expected given T or given -T than otherwise. That is, $P(T/e \ \& \ k) > P(T/k)$ iff $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > P(e/k)$ and $P(-T/e \ \& \ k) > P(-T/k)$ iff $P(e/-T \ \& \ k) > P(e/k)$.³
- C. It logically follows (from B.) that e effects an increase in the probability of T or -T iff e is more to be expected given T than given -T or more to be expected given -T than given T.⁴ More formally, it follows that $P(T/e \ \& \ k) > P(T/k)$ iff $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > P(e/-T \ \& \ k)$ and $P(-T/e \ \& \ k) > P(-T/k)$ iff $P(e/-T \ \& \ k) > P(e/T \ \& \ k)$.

The results of A., B., and C. and the full explication of 'actual evidence for T or -T' can be stated as

- D. e is actual evidence for T or -T iff 1) e obtains and 2a) e is more to be expected given T than given -T and thus effects an increase in the probability of T or 2b) e is more to be expected given -T than given T and thus effects an increase in the probability of -T.

As my discussion so far suggests, I explicate 'actual evidence for T or -T' in terms of facts or events or states of affairs - very generally, the phenomena of experience - and avoid explicit mention of propositions. I do so not because I think that propositions *reporting* facts, events, etc. cannot constitute actual evidence (for assuming some event e to be actual evidence for T or -T, the occurrence of e and the true proposition 'e occurred' are evidentially equivalent), but because I find it more natural to do so. When the atheist names the various things which she takes to be actual evidence for -T, she is more likely to say 'evil' than 'the true proposition 'evil exists''. Nonetheless, it is convenient to treat propositions as actual evidence when working with formally stated deductive or inductive arguments. The premisses of such arguments (so long as they report facts, events, etc.) may legitimately be held to constitute actual evidence for the conclusions. Therefore, in some cases, the explication of 'actual evidence for T or -T' may need to be expanded as follows:

D' e is actual evidence for T or -T iff 1) e obtains (or is true) and 2a) e (or the truth of e) is more to be expected given T than given -T and thus effects an increase in the probability of T or 2b) e (or the truth of e) is more to be expected given -T than given T and thus effects an increase in the probability of -T.

To some, D' may seem to be a more complete explication than D; but for my purposes, D will suffice.

Something should be said about the notion of 'more to be expectedness' which figures prominently in my explication. e is more to be

expected given T than given $\neg T$ if it is very unlikely that e would obtain except through God's action in causing or allowing it to obtain⁵ (i.e., $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ if $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very low); or if e is, as Swinburne puts it, "the kind of state which God could be expected to bring about or allow others to bring about, more than other states"⁶ (i.e., $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very high); or, finally, if $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very low *and* $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very high.⁷ The first of these alternatives obtains if there is no good scientific explanation of e and a 'no explanation necessary' response is for some reason to be rejected.⁸ The second obtains if e , although "no less to be expected than other states if natural processes are at work", is "more to be expected than other states if a God is at work".⁹ And the third obtains if e is to be expected if a God is at work *and* there is no good scientific explanation of e and a 'no explanation necessary' response is to be rejected.

The *opposite* situation (viz., one in which e is more to be expected given $\neg T$ than given T) obtains if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very low and $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is not commensurately low; or if $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very high and $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is not commensurately high; or if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very low *and* $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very high. The first of these alternatives obtains if the likelihood that God would bring about or allow e is very small and the likelihood that e would come about as a result of natural processes is not also small; the second obtains if the likelihood that e would come about as a result of natural processes is very high and the likelihood that God would bring about or allow e is not also high; and the third obtains if the likelihood that God would bring about or allow e is very small *and* the likelihood that e would

come about as a result of natural processes is very high.

Some comments are also in order with respect to the various degrees to which e may raise the antecedent probability of T or $\neg T$. It will be useful to distinguish three possible situations in this regard, viz., S_1 , in which the evidential value of e is such that (where T is concerned) $P(T/e \ \& \ k) > P(T/k)$, S_2 , in which e is such that $P(T/e \ \& \ k) > \frac{1}{2}$ and S_3 , in which $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = 1$.¹⁰ In S_1 , e provides T with partial support, rendering T more probable than it would otherwise be but not necessarily rendering it more probable than not. In S_2 , e provides T with substantial support, rendering it more probable than not. In S_3 , e makes T certain (maximally likely). S_3 may obtain, for example, if e figures in the premiss of a successful deductive argument from some fact of experience to the existence of God. Some might be disinclined to call e actual evidence in S_3 ; but I will assume that if e is actual evidence in S_1 and S_2 , then it is actual evidence in S_3 .

II

I think that my explication of 'actual evidence for T or $\neg T$ ' lays bare some of the more important things that people have dimly or clearly perceived themselves to be saying when they have claimed knowledge of evidence for theism or atheism. But there is an important sense in which *all* the phenomena of experience might plausibly be considered to be relevant to the question of God's existence. If God exists, all phenomena are directly or indirectly due to his creative activity. They may therefore be expected to at least potentially

show his activity to a greater or lesser degree. If God does *not* exist, then we may expect phenomena to at least potentially betray their ontological independence to a greater or lesser degree.

This line of reasoning is plausible; but I do not think it is proper to claim on the basis of it that all the phenomena of experience are *actual* evidence for T or -T. I would suggest, however, that all the phenomena of experience are *potential* evidence for T or -T. e, therefore, is a piece of potential evidence for T or -T if e is a phenomenon of experience - a fact, event or state of affairs. The notion of potential evidence is closely related to, but must be distinguished from the notion of actual evidence: Something is potential evidence if it may turn out to be actual evidence, whether or not anyone considers it to be actual evidence now.¹¹

I distinguish actual and potential evidence for T or -T from *putative* evidence for T or -T. e is a piece of putative evidence for T or -T if e is commonly *regarded* as actual evidence but may or may not be actual evidence. Of those things which are potential evidence - i.e., things which may turn out to be actual evidence whether or not anyone thinks so now - some *are* commonly regarded to be actual evidence. Some of these *may* be actual evidence; but to say that they are putative evidence is, of course, not to commit oneself to such a claim.

I make a further and final distinction between the concepts of evidence so far distinguished and the concept of *prima facie* evidence for T or -T. e is prima facie evidence for T or -T if e is actual evidence for T or -T unless refuted (i.e., unless the claim that it *is* actual evidence can be shown to be false). Prima facie evidence is

evidence which *suggests* the truth of T or -T, which seems to point in the direction of T or -T,¹² which, more precisely, looks very much as though it is more to be expected given T than given -T or given -T than given T. Prima facie evidence is not the same as putative evidence (although any e which is a piece of prima facie evidence will also be a piece of putative evidence) because it implies a finer judgment. Very strange things have been *thought* to be actual evidence for T or -T: prima facie evidence is that evidence which someone regards as actual evidence and which gives initial support to the claim made in its favor.

I should say that any e which is *actual* evidence for T or -T will also be a piece of potential evidence for T or -T as well as a piece of putative evidence for T or -T. It may or *may not* have been a piece of prima facie evidence at some time in its history, for actual evidence might turn up which could not possibly be refuted.

III

Recent arguments concerning God's existence have commonly centered upon some or all of the following pieces of putative evidence:

- 1) The existence of a physical universe.
- 2) The order (seeming design) of the universe.
- 3) The existence of evil.
- 4) The existence of conscious (specifically human) life.
- 5) Conspicuously moral (saintly) behavior.
- 6) The possible occurrence of religiously significant violations

of the laws of nature.

- 7) Religious experience.
- 8) Conceptual difficulties vis a vis the concept of God.
- 9) Conceptual points in *favor* of God.¹³
- 10) The plurality of religious traditions.

Of 1) - 10), 1), 2), 4), 5), 6), 7) and 9) have been adduced as evidence for T and 3), 8) and 10) have been adduced as evidence for -T. It may seem that theists have a monopoly on the evidence, but as Swinburne points out, atheistic arguments have often been designed to show that theistic evidence is inadequate, does not make theism probable, and not always to show that atheistic evidence makes it *im*probable.¹⁴

What sorts of responses are open to theists and atheists in the face of opposing evidence? I do not have the space to outline *specific* responses, but I will outline certain *types* of responses which can be made. Before doing so, however, it will be useful to look at a basic theorem of probability theory, called Baye's theorem, which helps to make explicit some of the more important theistic and atheistic argumentative alternatives. It runs as follows:

$$P(h/e \ \& \ k) = \frac{P(e/h \ \& \ k)}{P(e/k)} \times P(h/k)^{15}$$

I see no reason to reject Baye's theorem and so, like many writers on this and related topics, I assume it is true. Some of what I have said to this point finds expression in the theorem; for example, B. above follows directly from it. What I will now say will be based on it as well. This is not only because the concepts I wish to discuss are illuminated by it, but also because many of the theistic

and atheistic responses to opposing evidence I have in mind are based on one or another of the factors it emphasizes and, often as not, betray an implicit confidence in it, or in the intuitions which make it plausible.

In the context of this discussion, T or -T may be substituted for h in Baye's theorem, depending on whether it is 'God exists' or 'God does not exist' that is being tested for probability. And it follows from C. above that we may write $(P(e/-T \ \& \ k)$ or $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ instead of $P(e/k)$, again, depending on which proposition is at issue. If, for example, we are concerned to know the probability of T, we will write Baye's theorem as follows:

$$P(T/e \ \& \ k) = \frac{P(e/T \ \& \ k)}{P(e/-T \ \& \ k)} \times P(T/k)^{15}$$

Our criterion of evidence, the criterion of 'more to be expected-ness', is represented in Baye's theorem by $\frac{P(e/T \ \& \ k)}{P(e/-T \ \& \ k)}$ (assuming T

is at issue). $\frac{P(e/T \ \& \ k)}{P(e/-T \ \& \ k)}$ measures the *extent* (if any) to which T

makes e more to be expected, more probable, than it would be given -T. One aspect of a theistic or atheistic response to opposing evidence may be the suggestion that T or -T *does* make e more to be expected than it would otherwise be.

Theists or atheists responding to or interpreting opposing evidence may also emphasize *other* factors, viz., $P(T/k)$ and $P(-T/k)$. These are factors not previously emphasized in this discussion, but which Baye's theorem brings to our attention. They represent the *antecedent probability* of T and of -T. A theistic or atheistic response is a *better* response if it can cite *both* the 'more to be

expectedness' of e *and* the high antecedent probability of the hypothesis it represents. Put another way, the merit of a response depends on the probability of the hypothesis it represents - $P(h/e \ \& \ k)$ - and this, as Baye's theorem tells us, is a function not only of $\frac{P(e/h \ \& \ k)}{P(e/k)}$, but also of $P(h/k)$.

I assume therefore that a response is a superior response relative to a rival if, relative to the evidence being interpreted, the hypothesis (T or $-T$) it represents has superior probability. Among the interesting implications of this is the fact that an interpretation offered of some e by proponents of, say, $-T$ may in some cases be the *better* interpretation even if $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > P(e/-T \ \& \ k)$, and thus, even if e is actual evidence for T . It would be so, for example, if $P(T/k)$ relative to $P(-T/k)$ were very low and if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ did not exceed $P(e/-T \ \& \ k)$ by too much.

A word should be added about the proper interpretation of $P(T/k)$ and $P(-T/k)$, as they appear in this discussion. The antecedent probability of T or $-T$ is normally considered to be a function of its fit with "our general background knowledge of the world",¹⁶ contained in k , and of its *intrinsic* probability. Depending on whether the putative evidence being considered is *all* the evidence advanced in favor of T or $-T$ or only a single consideration, k may contain no empirical data whatever (and consist only of what is called "tautological evidence", i.e., "all our other irrelevant knowledge")¹⁷ or it may contain a great deal of empirical information, including information concerning other e considered in the past and accepted as actual evidence for T or $-T$. In the former case, $P(T/k)$, for

example, would depend almost entirely on T's intrinsic probability (the criteria of intrinsic probability are controversial, but a popular candidate is simplicity), whereas in the latter case, $P(T/k)$ would depend on T's intrinsic probability *as well as* on its fit with a great deal of information about things in the world.

Having clarified some of the relevant factors, I will now outline various responses open to theists and atheists in the face of apparently contrary evidence. To facilitate exposition, I will assume that the responses are being made by proponents of $\neg T$ in the face of putative evidence for T. All of the responses I mention are, however, available, at least *in principle*, to proponents of T as well.

I *e is actual evidence for T but.....*

- A. e is considerably more to be expected given T than given $\neg T$ and is therefore actual evidence for T but its evidential force is cancelled by $\neg T$'s much greater antecedent probability. T and $\neg T$ are therefore equally probable on e and interpretations of e representing T and $\neg T$ are equally good.
- B. e is more to be expected given T than given $\neg T$ but not much more to be expected; and the antecedent probability of $\neg T$ is much greater than the antecedent probability of T. Therefore $\neg T$ is the more probable and the interpretation representing it is superior.

II. *e is not, or is not known to be, actual evidence for T*

- A. It is not possible to tell whether e is more to be expected given T than given $\neg T$ and thus, not possible to tell whether e is

actual evidence for T . So e does not raise the antecedent probability of T , leaving T and $\neg T$ equally probable on e . (This response assumes equal antecedent probability for T and $\neg T$.)

- B. e is at least as much to be expected given $\neg T$ as given T . Thus e is not actual evidence for either T or $\neg T$ leaving T and $\neg T$ equally probable on e and the interpretations representing T and $\neg T$ equally good. (This response also assumes equal antecedent probability.)
- C. It is not possible to tell whether e is more to be expected given T than given $\neg T$ and thus, not possible to tell whether e is actual evidence for T . But the antecedent probability of $\neg T$ is greater than that of T and therefore $\neg T$ is more probable on e than T .
- D. e is at least as much to be expected given $\neg T$ as given T and thus e is not actual evidence for T or $\neg T$. But the antecedent probability of $\neg T$ is greater than that of T . Therefore $\neg T$ is more probable on e than T and the interpretation representing $\neg T$ is superior to the interpretation representing T .
- E. It is incoherent to suppose that e has an explanation of any kind. Therefore e is irrelevant to T 's defense and any suggestion that it is actual evidence for T is false.

III *e is actual evidence for $\neg T$*

- A. e is more to be expected given $\neg T$ than given T and thus actual evidence for $\neg T$. $\neg T$ is therefore more probable on e than T and the interpretation of e representing $\neg T$ is the better one. (This

response, again, assumes equal antecedent probability.)

- B. e is more to be expected given -T than given T and thus, actual evidence for -T. -T is also more antecedently probable than T. -T is therefore very much more probable on e than T and the interpretation representing -T is very much superior.
- C. e *entails* -T and thus renders -T maximally probable and T maximally improbable.

All of these responses, with the exception of II E and III C are plausible as responses where e is a single piece of putative evidence *or* where e represents the *total* evidence advanced by the opposing side. (The total response of proponents of -T to the putative evidence advanced by proponents of T and of proponents of T to the putative evidence advanced by proponents of -T will, however, likely involve different *individual* responses (like the ones I have mentioned) to *individual* pieces of putative evidence).

All of these responses, as I have said, are available, at least in principle, to proponents of T. Some of them, however, may appear more plausible as -T responses. It might be said, for example, that an emphasis on the low antecedent probability of the rival view would be more appropriate to an atheistic than to a theistic defense. But this, I think, is not necessarily so. Swinburne, for example, in his *The Existence of God*, makes much of the relative antecedent probability (specifically simplicity) of T where the explanation of certain e is concerned - e.g., the existence of a complex physical universe.¹⁸ And so this response is clearly available not only to atheists, but also to theists.

IV

As I suggested in Section I, there are problems which Hick and Penelhum do not resolve between them – problems which arise within *both* of their accounts. We are now in a position to understand these more clearly.

There is, for example, the assumption that (in my terms) *e* is not actual evidence for *T* if it can be explained by proponents of *-T* and not actual evidence for *-T* if it can be explained by proponents of *T*. Hick writes concerning certain apparent pieces of evidence that none "points so unequivocally in one particular direction as to admit of only one possible explanation... each is capable of being fitted into either a religious or a naturalistic context".¹⁹ And Penelhum, commenting on the putative evidence for theism, writes that "It is... clear that there is no need for the skeptic to let it count as evidence, since it can be accounted for without any reference to the doctrinal scheme in questions".²⁰

It follows from this assumption that the truth of '*e* cannot be explained by proponents of *-T*' is a necessary condition for the truth of '*e* is actual evidence for *T*' and that the truth of '*e* cannot be explained by proponents of *T*' is a necessary condition for the truth of '*e* is actual evidence for *-T*'. And it follows from *this* (assuming, as both Hick and Penelhum seem to do, that ambiguity obtains only if both theistic and atheistic explanations can be given of all explainable phenomena) that the existence of actual evidence for *T* or *-T* is incompatible with ambiguity. (Of course, as Hick notes, there could still be *prima facie* evidence for *T* or *-T*.)

I think that the assumptions and implications of assumptions I

have mentioned are unacceptable. In the absence of specific criteria which can be assessed and accepted or rejected (and a specific discussion of the criteria of evidence and of explanation does seem to be absent from the accounts of Hick and Penelhum) they rest only on vague and, in my opinion, incorrect intuitions.

That I should be of this opinion, given my conclusions in this section is perhaps not surprising. What *is* logically impossible, given the criterion of 'more to be expectedness', is that *e* be actual evidence for *both* *T* and *-T*. (For *e* logically could not be more to be expected given *T* than given *-T* *and* more to be expected given *-T* than given *T*.) But of course, proponents of (for example) *T* may give an explanation of *e* without ipso facto claiming it as *evidence* for *T*. If *e* is an instance of seemingly pointless evil, theists will certainly not claim it as evidence, but they are very likely to offer an explanation of it. For their explanation to be a plausible one it need only be the case that $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is high. It need *not* be the case that $P(e/T \ \& \ k) > (P(e/-T \ \& \ k))$. And if this is so, then it is perfectly possible that *e* might be actual evidence for *-T* (possible, that is, that $P(e/-T \ \& \ k) > P(e/T \ \& \ k)$) while at the same time being explained by proponents of *T*.

My opinion, therefore, is that Hick and Penelhum have reached ambiguity too easily if they have done so by noting that all of the putative evidential phenomena can be explained by both sides. Given the criterion of 'more to be expectedness', this fact is perfectly compatible with there being a great deal of actual evidence for either side.

I hasten to add, however, that even were this to be the case, it

would not immediately follow, as Hick and Penelhum seem committed to thinking it *does* follow, that ambiguity does not obtain. As I have suggested, an explanation offered, for example, by proponents of -T may be the better one *even if* e is actual evidence for T. T may have a lower antecedent probability relative to -T. If this *were* to be the case, the explanation *citing* T might not be the best one, for an explanation suffers if the hypothesis it cites has a low antecedent probability. Therefore some e might be more to be expected given T than given -T without increasing the probability of T relative to -T. This clearly implies, I think, that a situation in which there *was* evidence for T or -T might well remain an ambiguous one - one in which evidence failed to settle the question of God's existence.

Even if this argument is correct, it is still the case that more work must be done before the ambiguity view is adequately defended. For it is open to objectors to claim, for example, that *despite* the fact that both sides can interpret the putative evidence, one side does so *better* than the other. The accounts of ambiguity given by Hick and Penelhum do not, as it seems to me, suggest a way of meeting such a claim.

Notes

- ¹My thinking about evidence has benefitted from Peter Achinstein (ed.), *The Concept of Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); N.M.L. Nathan, *Evidence and Assurance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); William Ladd Sessions, 'Religious Faith and Rational Justification', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol.13, pp.143-156; M. Bar-Hillel and A. Margalit, 'In Defence of the Classical Notion of Evidence', *Mind*, vol.LXXXVIII, pp.576-583; and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.
- ²I assume without argument that *e* is only *actual* evidence if it actually obtains.
- ³B. follows directly from Baye's theorem, a theorem which is discussed later in the section.
- ⁴Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p.67.
- ⁵*Ibid.* p.111.
- ⁶*Ibid.*
- ⁷This third possibility is one which Swinburne does not explicitly consider.
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰Similar distinctions are made by Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp.468-478 and by Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, pp.6-7, 17.
- ¹¹My usage of 'potential evidence' is of course not the only possible one.
- ¹²This is the way John Hick describes *prima facie* evidence in his Introduction to John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*.
- ¹³I am referring here to ontological arguments, especially more recent ones expressed in terms of modal logic. Since I am not competent in this field and since the success of such arguments is hardly uncontroversial, I assume in this essay that they do not pose an obvious threat to my thesis in this section, viz., that probabilistic arguments are relevant. For a vigorous argument against the view

that some of the more controversial premisses of these arguments are true, see J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp.55-63.

¹⁴Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p.10.

¹⁵Ibid., p.64.

¹⁶Ibid., p.65.

¹⁷Ibid., p.16.

¹⁸Ibid., pp.283-284.

¹⁹Hick, (ed.) *The Existence of God*, p.10.

²⁰Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p.206.

Section III

The Ambiguity View: Exposition and Defence

In this section I attempt to give a clear shape to the ambiguity view in light of the discussion of Section II and to show that despite the introduction of probabilistic arguments and criteria, its plausibility remains strong. I begin with the notion of a theistic or an atheistic interpretation of the world.

I

By 'a theistic or an atheistic interpretation of the world' I understand 'a set of interconnected interpretations of the phenomena of experience which represents either T or -T'.

My double use of the word 'interpretation' is deliberate. It is the function of both the set and its individual members to make sense of data (in this case, data of experience) and to do so in ways that are (minimally) consonant with a basic claim about the nature of reality.¹ It is the set as a whole, however, which constitutes an interpretation of the *world*, for it serves to bring all the data of human experience under one head, viz., 'God exists' or 'God does not exist'. I call such a set a 'large-scale' interpretation.

We may speak not only of large-scale but also of 'small-scale' interpretations. The latter are the individual responses to phenomena which go to make up a large-scale interpretation. Since, as my earlier classification of evidence suggests, not all phenomena are likely to have the same degree of relevance or of evidential import, and since some phenomena may seem to require a different *type* of

response than others, these interpretations may be expected to differ one from another in their immediate implications. For example, the interpretation of one phenomenon may involve a secular explanation of it which only indirectly suggests the nonexistence of God, while the interpretation of another may involve the explicit claim that it is atheistic evidence. And, perhaps more importantly, the interpretation of one phenomenon may involve an explanation of it while that of another may involve the claim that it *does not admit* of explanation. The more *general* function of each small-scale interpretation is, however, the same, viz., to represent either 'God exists' or 'God does not exist'. For example, an explanation which cites strictly secular causes and the claim that some phenomenon is atheistic evidence may fulfill the same general function, viz., that of assimilating data to the claim that God does not exist.

I have suggested that not every interpretation need involve the claim that the phenomenon interpreted is evidence for the perspective in question. I should emphasize here that certainly some of them will. Although the atheistic large-scale interpretation has pressed into service a host of scientific explanations which are not on each occasion of their use explicitly connected with the claim that God does not exist, it is only when such explanations of phenomena are viewed as members of a set which also contains atheistic evidence claims that we have (in this case) a large-scale atheistic interpretation, i.e., an atheistic interpretation of the world.

It may be helpful to emphasize the particular fact that not every *theistic* interpretation will involve the claim that the phenomenon interpreted is evidence for theism. Some theistic explanations, for

example, may do their part by simply showing the *compatibility* of phenomena with theism. In the theistic case of course, the individual small-scale interpretations are perhaps more likely to be explicitly theistic. As Penelhum notes, a theistic interpretation arises by definition when some phenomenon is seen not only as secular, but also as participating in the divine. The distinctive feature of a theistic interpretation *is* its reference to God.

I refer to the individual small-scale interpretations as *inter-connected* interpretations because each in its own way represents the claim that there is or that there is not a God - this claim unifies them. They may also - if the large-scale interpretation is a good one - be connected in the manner typical of the elements of a good scientific theory or cumulative argument, which cohere well with one another, support one another, are mutually illuminative, etc.

Finally, the large-scale interpretations I have in mind here - theistic and atheistic interpretations of the world - are not to be identified with the interpretation of any *particular* theist or atheist. People may, as it were, 'buy into' one or the other of these interpretations on the basis of their own limited experience and, perhaps, on the basis of authority. The large-scale interpretations *themselves*, however, have been built up over a period of centuries and continue to develop as new data emerge. For example, the events at Auschwitz in this century provide new data which many consider to support an atheistic interpretation.²

II

It seems to me that some explication such as I have given of the notion of a theistic or atheistic interpretation of the world is required to adequately take account of the complexities of the world views in question and the diversity of phenomena they subsume. Having given it, we are in a better position to explicate the view that the world is open to *both* a theistic *and* an atheistic interpretation.

I would suggest, at first approximation, that to hold this view is to affirm that for every theistic small-scale interpretation one can mention there is an atheistic small-scale interpretation of the same phenomenon (or phenomena) which is equally likely to be correct (and vice versa).

Accepting this explication for the moment, we can see how it serves to clarify the relation between certain seemingly disparate claims which might be (and sometimes are) made by proponents of the ambiguity view. I am thinking in particular of 'The world is ambiguous' and 'The evidence is ambiguous'; but the latter, given my classification of evidence, is actually representative of a number of possible claims, e.g., 'The *prima facie* evidence is ambiguous' or '*This piece* of prima facie evidence is ambiguous'. The first of these claims - 'The world is ambiguous' - must of course be understood to mean that the world is open to both a large-scale theistic and a large-scale atheistic interpretation. (Note in this regard that if the claim in question is 'The potential evidence is ambiguous', the same meaning applies; the notions of 'potential evidence' and 'world' here may be used interchangeably.) We may determine as well, on the basis of my explication, that corresponding to the set of evidential

phenomena referred to in each of the other cases ('The evidence is ambiguous', 'The prima facie evidence is ambiguous', etc.), whether it has one member or many, is a set of theistic small-scale interpretations as well as a set of atheistic small-scale interpretations, each of which is as likely to be correct as its counterpart. In each case, both a small-scale theistic and a small-scale atheistic interpretation seem applicable to each of the phenomena in question.

As my discussion so far already suggests, it is possible for individual facts or events or groups of facts or events to be ambiguous in a variety of ways. They may, for example, seem both to be actual evidence for T and *not* actual evidence for T; actual evidence for -T and *not* actual evidence for -T; prima facie evidence for T and *not* prima facie evidence for T; prima facie evidence for T *and* prima facie evidence for -T. The list goes on, and of course includes as well cases in which no evidence claims are made, but in which the phenomena in question seem simply to be equally compatible with theism and atheism. In each case it is appropriate to say that certain facts or events are ambiguous because they are open to both a (small-scale) theistic and atheistic interpretation.

Although it seems prima facie impossible, even a phenomenon known to be *actual* evidence for T or -T might, under certain circumstances, be ambiguous. It could *not* be ambiguous in the sense of seeming to be evidence not only for one side but also for the other since, given the nature of the ascription of 'more to be expectedness' (which is of course entailed by the ascription of actual evidential status), this is logically impossible (cf p.62). But it *would* be dual-interpretable if, for example, proponents of T (assuming the pheno-

menon is actual evidence for T) reasonably considered it to significantly increase the probability of T relative to $\neg T$ while proponents of $\neg T$, complaining of the low antecedent probability of T, reasonably considered its evidential impact to be negligible.

It may seem that if a situation in which *all* phenomena are ambiguous in one or another of these ways were to obtain, then we could rationally characterize the *world* as ambiguous. But I think an additional condition must be mentioned. This is because when it is said that the world is *open* to a theistic and an atheistic interpretation, something is being said not only about the existence of two large-scale interpretations which are at epistemic parity, but also about the capability of each interpretation to *illuminate* the phenomena of experience, that is, to be convincing and persuasive in the way it responds to phenomena and points out relations between them etc. Thus we must amend our earlier explication as follows: The world is open to both a theistic and an atheistic interpretation if 1) for every theistic small-scale interpretation one can mention there is an atheistic small-scale interpretation of the same phenomenon (or phenomena) which is equally likely to be correct (and vice versa) and if 2) the large-scale interpretations which the small-scale interpretations compose illuminate the phenomena to which they are applied.

III

Does the situation I have described actually obtain? I think the view that it does is a plausible one.

What is of course presupposed by someone who suggests that

ambiguity, as I have described it, obtains is the failure of traditional natural theology and natural atheology. If there were to be a successful proof of God's existence or nonexistence, or a demonstration of the incoherence of certain central theistic or atheistic tenets, ambiguity would not obtain.

Quite a substantial literature in philosophy of religion supports the view that, at least so far, natural theology and natural atheology *are* failures. Because it has been abundantly argued (with apparent success) and since I do not have space here to argue it myself, I will assume that this is in fact the case.³

It is of course still open to persons on both sides of the question to advance more subtle *probability* arguments (such as that offered by Swinburne in *The Existence of God*), I have already expressed dissatisfaction with the little attention given to such possibilities by Hick and Penelhum. While I cannot engage in debate here with everyone who has advanced such arguments, I do hope that by recognizing especially the criterion of what I have called 'more to be expectedness' (a criterion which Mackie has called the 'relevance criterion'⁴) and by arguing that its application fails to yield definite results, I will carry the debate a little further and increase the attractiveness of the ambiguity view. (If my arguments in this regard are correct, then a certain additional support has also been given to the view that natural theology and natural atheology are failures.)

I begin in what may seem an unpromising fashion - by arguing that there *is* prima facie evidence for T and -T. My view, however, like Hick's, is that the existence of such evidence must be admitted

and that ambiguity may obtain *despite* this fact.

An ambiguity view which suggests that some phenomena seem to count for theism and that others seem to count for atheism obviously meshes with the thinking of many people. Certain human experiences are universal - experiences of evil and of good, of chaos and of order or seeming design are examples of these. It is natural to consider evil as tending to support the view that God does not exist and (for example) religious experience as tending to support the contrary view. As Penelhum puts it, and as many would agree, the world seems both to manifest God and to preclude him.

I would concur in this and argue that various kinds and instances of evil constitute *prima facie* evidence for atheism and that certain kinds of religious experience constitute *prima facie* evidence for theism. What follows from this is that the actual world is such that at least *for some phenomena*, one possible way of being ambiguous (argued for earlier) is excluded, viz., the possibility of being reasonably held by *each* side to be *prima facie* evidence for its position (cf p.73).

Although the range of ambiguity-possibilities is in this sense narrowed by the existence of the *prima facie* evidence I have mentioned, I would claim that the likelihood of ambiguity more generally (the likelihood that the world is open to both a theistic and an atheistic interpretation) is, perhaps paradoxically, increased by it. If it is possible for proponents of each interpretation to point out *prima facie* evidence in its favor, their powers to persuade will be increased; and ambiguity, as I have noted, requires that the two interpretations be persuasive. (It is important, of course, that the

prima facie evidence which proponents of both sides can point out not be *too* strong and certainly that not much if any of it turn out to be actual evidence. If this *were* to occur, something approaching a balance view might well be superior to an ambiguity view. That is, given such circumstances, the plausibility of responses on each side to certain phenomena would be reduced and it might be desirable to say that an evidential balance obtained, and that the two interpretations were at epistemic parity on *that* account, instead of on account of ambiguity.)

I think that the criterion of 'more to be expectedness' (or the relevance criterion) supports my judgment concerning the existence of prima facie evidence. Surely certain kinds and degrees of evil which actually obtain at least *seem* more to be expected given -T than given T. And surely certain kinds of religious experience at least *seem*, on the face of it, more to be expected given T than given -T.⁵ It is a strong sense of 'seem' I am using here; I am suggesting that unless the evidential status of these phenomena can be rebutted, they constitute actual evidence for the views in question. The onus that is, is on the theist to show that evil is *not* more to be expected given -T than given T and on the atheist to show that religious experience is *not* more to be expected given T than given -T. (It may be that other phenomena are also prima facie evidence; I think, however that these are the phenomena which most clearly give initial support to the claims made in their favor.)

Now, as it seems to me, none of the attempted rebuttals has been so successful as to render probable the conclusion that the phenomena in question do *not* constitute actual evidence; nor is it the

case that any of the attempted rebuttals has been so patently *unsuccessful* as to render probable the conclusion that they *do* constitute actual evidence. Part of the reason for this is the fact that both theists and atheists have managed to come up with very sophisticated rebuttal-attempts as well as very sophisticated *responses* to such attempts. (Of late, some of the more sophisticated rebuttal-attempts have come from the theistic side.⁶) That the arguments are deadlocked shows, I think, both that the phenomena in question do not clearly *entail* T or -T (and thus that the ascription of prima facie evidential status is not obviously too *weak* an ascription) and that they constitute *at least* prima facie evidence. As Hick suggests, the fact that each side sees in the relevant phenomena (and I would add, in the relevant arguments) certain difficulties which must be met, clearly indicates the initial plausibility of the claims made in their favor.

IV

The final phase of my argument has three parts: I first show, with respect to specific examples, that the more obviously relevant and evidential phenomena can be given both theistic and atheistic small-scale interpretations. I then point out connections between various of the interpretations and argue that the large-scale interpretations which they help to compose (and of which they are, arguably, among the most critical members) are illuminating ones. Lastly, I attempt to show that there is at least some good reason to believe that none of the small-scale interpretations mentioned are

rationally superior to their theistic or atheistic counterparts.

The phenomena I use as examples are among those mentioned toward the end of Section I (cf. p.25). I will renumber them here as follows:

- 1) Religious experience.
- 2) The existence of evil.
- 3) The existence of a physical universe.
- 4) The order (seeming design) of the universe.

1) Beginning with religious experience (e) we see that the theist can argue as follows: The many occasions of e are more to be expected if there is a God than if there is not a God and thus constitute actual evidence for T. A God who is perfectly good and knows that the ultimate fulfillment of human beings lies in a relationship with himself has a reason to reveal himself to them. Therefore even if e might conceivably occur given -T, it is more *likely* to occur given T. T is therefore more probable on e than -T. (This interpretation of religious experience assumes the equal or indeterminate antecedent probabilities of T and -T.)

Religious experience can, however, also be interpreted atheistically: e is at least as much to be expected given -T as given T. This is because the contents of religious experiences seem contradictory (we would not expect a perfectly good God to deliver contradictory messages to human beings) and because naturalistic explanations of e seem also to be possible. Thus e is not evidence for T or -T. But the antecedent probability of -T is higher than that of T (specifically, the simplicity of the hypothesis it represents is greater than

that of T). Therefore $\neg T$ is more probable on e than T .

2) Turning to the problem of evil we find that a similar situation obtains, although this time the *theistic* interpretation is the defensive one. The atheist is likely to argue that evil (e) is more to be expected given $\neg T$ than given T and thus actual evidence for $\neg T$. Especially certain *kinds* and *degrees* of evil, he may say, fall into this category, given the nature of the God theists believe in. The atheist may also argue that $\neg T$ is more antecedently probable than T and conclude that $\neg T$ is very much more probable on e than T .

In response to this version of the empirical problem of evil the theist may suggest that since the nature of God must always remain to some degree enigmatic and since we can see only the faint outlines of his policies, and since, also, we have only a limited experience of the possible worlds in which matters may be rectified or rendered theologically intelligible, we must say that e is not more to be expected given $\neg T$ than given T and thus, not actual evidence for $\neg T$. So e does not raise the antecedent probability of $\neg T$, leaving T and $\neg T$ equally probable on e . (This interpretation, again, assumes the equal or indeterminate antecedent probabilities of T and $\neg T$.)

3) The existence of a physical universe (e) can also be interpreted both theistically and atheistically. In this case, as I suggested in Section I, the theist may claim that T has a higher antecedent probability than any rival hypothesis. If the physical universe is to be explained, the explanation citing the action of the God of theism is to be preferred. Theists may also claim that e is more to be expected given T than $\neg T$. Although science can explain how various states of the universe are related to one another, it

cannot explain why there is a universe at all.⁷ Also, the 'no explanation necessary' response will not do, for we expect all things to have explanations - especially things which are "inert, diverse, complex and yet show manifold correlations".⁸

The atheist will of course suggest that *e* requires no explanation. The notion that all things must have explanations, he will say, rests on the principle of sufficient reason, which may or may not be true. He may add that accepting God as the terminus of explanation is somewhat arbitrary. As Penelhum writes, "The atheist refuses even to start [on the quest for an ultimate explanation], and argues that since somewhere there is a point at which we must admit to a being that simply is, we may as well economize and say this being is the world".⁹ As for 'more to be expectedness', the atheist may claim that 'We just have no idea how or why a disembodied divine agent is supposed to create a universe at all'¹⁰ and that *e* is therefore not more to be expected given *T* than *-T*. In consequence of this, the atheist can conclude that *e* does not raise the antecedent probability of *T*, leaving *T* and *-T* equally probable on *e*. If he assumes, in addition, that the antecedent probability of *-T* is greater than that of *T*, he will conclude that *-T* is *more* probable on *e* than *T*.

4) Finally, the order and seeming design of the universe also admits of both theistic and atheistic interpretations. Here again, the theist is likely to claim that order (*e*) is more to be expected given the action of a God than given natural forces alone. *T*, she will therefore say, is more probable on *e* than *-T*. (This interpretation, again, assumes equal or indeterminate antecedent probabilities).

The atheist's interpretation of order in the universe will likely also be similar to that given of 3) above: *e* is at least as much to be expected given $-T$ as given T (for given sufficient time and perhaps many universes, a world such as ours, with order which we do not *know* to be all-pervasive, is bound to exist. And what, after all, do we know of the inclinations of a God?). Given that the antecedent probability of $-T$, according to the atheist, is greater than the antecedent probability of T , he will, despite not being able to claim *e* as evidence *for* $-T$, be allowed to conclude that $-T$ is more probable on *e* than T .

If nothing else, my brief discussion of 1) - 4) above has, I think, shown that neither atheist nor theist is at a loss where giving interpretations of religious experience, evil, order in the universe and the universe itself is concerned. Of course, various versions of these interpretations may and have been given, including more nuanced versions. But it seems to me that the salient points have been mentioned and that the more subtle and sophisticated exchanges between theist and atheist which recent years have witnessed have, if anything, caused the deadlock between them to stand out in even sharper relief.¹¹

That the elements of theistic and atheistic interpretations of the world can be internally coherent and that the interpretations as a whole may constitute illuminating world views is, I think, well known. I will, however, spend a little time pointing out some of the ways in which the interpretations I have mentioned confirm this view. I begin with the theistic interpretation.

The small-scale theistic interpretations I have mentioned are

interconnected in a number of interesting ways. If one thinks that there is some probability, however small, that in (at least some) religious experiences a God is revealed who wishes to promote the spiritual development of human beings, one will be more likely to look upon evil and suffering as useful to that end or as necessary conditions thereof. Given that the God one believes in is also held to be the creator of the universe, there is enough likelihood of inscrutability to allow for the plausibility of such a connection: The theist can claim that God may accomplish his purposes in ways that we cannot now understand. This sort of a connection between theistic interpretations is reflected in the notion of 'redemptive suffering', which forms a central motif in a number of theistic traditions.¹²

Those who interpret the universe as evidence for the existence of a God who creates and who consider the order of the universe to be his handiwork are also given a reason to *worship* God - for a creator and designer of the sort God must be is worthy of worship. And there is of course an important connection between worship and religious experience.

I would claim on the basis of these points that the theistic interpretation of the world, which is given its focus by the small-scale interpretations I have mentioned, is potentially an internally coherent and illuminating one. If the whole world is viewed as the creation of God and if God is considered to be revealed in religious experiences as one who is concerned for the spiritual development and fulfillment of human beings, it is natural to view all of the experiences of one's life as experiences which in one way or another mediate God and through which spiritual development of the sort God

desires may be facilitated. The theistic interpretation provides a context in which one's whole experience can be rendered intelligible.

The atheist, unlike the theist, will not interpret religious experiences as revelatory of God. This judgment is interconnected with each of the other small-scale atheistic interpretations I have mentioned; it both supports them and is supported by them. It both supports and is supported by his view that the universe requires no explanation. It both supports and is supported by his experience of evil and consequent interpretation of it as very likely revelatory of the absence of God. It both supports and is supported by his view that whatever order the universe manifests can be accounted for by reference to the operation of natural processes over millenia.

Given that on account of these interpretations, the atheist considers himself to have reason not to believe in the existence of God, he may focus on science and on the view of the world it yields. If he does so, he will find additional support for his interpretation of religious experience, viz., the secular explanations of it which science can produce and the principle of simplicity, which may lead him to prefer his economical explanations to the more complicated explanations of theists.

There are other connections, but these serve to show that the world view which the atheist's interpretations affords is also, at least potentially, internally coherent and illuminating; it also provides a context within which one's whole experience can be rendered intelligible.

I think a plausible case can be made for the view that none of the small-scale interpretations I have mentioned are rationally superior

to their theistic or atheistic counterparts. In each case this is a function of a) indecisive evidence and/or b) non-neutral standards and/or c) human intellectual limitations more generally.

Let us look again at the phenomena which are at issue:

- 1) Religious experience.
- 2) The existence of evil.
- 3) The existence of a physical universe.
- 4) The order (seeming design) of the universe.

Is the theistic interpretation of 1) rationally superior to its atheistic counterpart (or vice versa)? It seems not. First of all, it seems impossible to tell whether religious experience is more to be expected given T than given -T or not. The evidence is relatively weak and so open to atheistic counterinterpretation. It is weak, that is, relative to imaginable situations in which religious experience is much more obviously more to be expected given T than -T. We can, for example, imagine situations in which religious experience is uniform, all-pervasive and restricted to theistic traditions. If any one of these changes were to occur, the evidence would be stronger and lend itself to the application of the relevance criterion.

The theist, however, may argue that although the evidence in question is not so strong as to positively support a 'more to be expectedness' judgment, it is also not so weak as to positively support the view that such a judgment would be *incorrect*. There is, as we have seen, some reason to suppose that religious experience is at least *prima facie* evidence for T.

If religious experience is *prima facie* evidence for T it is of course actual evidence unless rebutted. And at this point someone

might claim that it has *not* been rebutted. A plausible response, however, is that things are not as clear as this. Religious experience would be actual evidence if the atheistic rebuttal-attempt failed. But it is not clear that it *has* failed. This is because, as already mentioned, the relative weakness and strength of the evidence is such that we cannot *tell* whether it possesses the property of 'more to be expectedness' or not. Given this fact the atheist might be right (in which case the evidence would *not* be actual evidence and the theistic interpretation would be inferior) and the theist might be right (in which case the evidence *would* be actual evidence and the atheistic claim concerning it would be wrong). But, the argument might run, we do not know who *is* right and so we must conclude that their claims are equally likely to be true.

Of course the atheistic interpretation might still be the superior one if the standard of simplicity cited in it were to be the proper measure of antecedent probability where T and -T are concerned. But, as Penelhum points out, there is no neutral way of resolving the dispute between atheists and theists on this question. Either position would seem to be a possible one and neither side can accuse the other of irrationality without begging critical questions.

I would argue that a similar situation obtains with respect to 2) - the fact of evil. Although evil is clearly *prima facie* evidence for -T, any judgement here as to whether it is *actual* evidence (*actually* more to be expected given -T than given T) will be hindered by the fact that one's *own* personal standards of goodness are bound to enter the picture. 'More to be expectedness' judgments consequently have an air of subjectivity about them. Since rational theists may

differ, perhaps because *their* standards of goodness differ from those of atheists, a deadlock obtains again. It is not clear whether the atheistic claim in this regard has been rebutted by the theist or not, and consequently it is not clear whether the evidence is *actual* evidence or not.

A judgment here is also hindered by our limited knowledge of what the nature of God – if God exists – is like; and of course theists may emphasize this. The evidence could also be stronger. (Imagine a situation in which persons suffered forever and in which evil was not interspersed with good.) As it is, it seems possible for the theist to accommodate it, especially if he applies insights he thinks he has received through religious experience (and who is to prevent him?) Since the appeal to a standard of simplicity fails to be decisive here as before, we must once again conclude that theistic and atheistic interpretations of (in this case) evil seem equally likely to be correct.

What about the existence of the physical universe? Here our limited knowledge would seem to be an obvious hindrance – both with respect to the nature of God and with respect to the origins of universes. While the theist may claim that the God-hypothesis is here simpler than any other, the atheist may reasonably respond that to avoid mentioning any hypothesis at all is simpler still.

Cumulative possibilities complicate matters here as well. The theist may claim that his is a rational position on account of what he knows as a result of religious experience. As a consequence of these factors and since, again, the standard of simplicity does not allow for a rational arbitration of the dispute, theistic and atheistic interpre-

tations of the existence of a physical universe would appear to be equally likely to be correct.

We come at last to order - and seeming design. Here the problem of weak evidence appears again. Even what we know of the universe suggests strongly that design could have been made more evident by a God - for instance, by removing the chaos of evil. What we do *not* know presents a problem as well. Is the order we *do* see all-pervasive of the universe? Or is our corner of the universe an exception to the rule?

Cumulative possibilities, however, exist for the theist. He may apply what he thinks he knows as a result of religious experience and see the order in the universe as well as the evil it contains as part of a larger and theologically significant pattern. Religious experience lends itself to various assessments, as we have seen, and thus may be considered to be relevant *or* irrelevant when it comes to the assessment of *other* putative evidential phenomena.

As my discussion of 1) - 4) reveals, the dual-interpretability of phenomena is a function of one combination or another of a) indecisive evidence, b) non-neutral standards and c) human intellectual limitations. Factors both internal *and* external to the evidence play a role. (Of course if my conclusions in Section II are correct, then the relevance criterion may constitute a neutral standard; but it is apparently rendered impotent by *other* factors.)

In some cases, if the evidence were stronger, a judgment one way or another would be *required* of either theist or atheist even given the standards which he or she accepts. If for example, various atheistic objections to religious experience as actual evidence

were to be removed (e.g., if religious experience were to become uniform and pervasive), then atheists might very well be required to render a favorable judgment with respect to it. In other cases, stronger *standards* might require judgments even given existing *evidence*. If, for example, we were somehow to learn that the world (everything that exists) *does* conform to the principle of simplicity, certain judgments which favored atheism might be required of theists. Finally, it is clear that certain increases in human knowledge would have a similar effect. Objective 'more to be expectedness' judgments would definitely be facilitated if, for example, an understanding of certain prior probabilities were to be refined or if we were to encounter even more obvious indications of design in all the far reaches of the universe. Any of these changes (and others like them), were they to occur, might constitute *disambiguating* factors.

In the situation which actually obtains, however, both theists and atheists can draw on the evidence and weave an apparently strong case. This situation seems analogous to one in which a literary passage remains ambiguous, open to several interpretations, because there are no neutral standards for determining the author's intent and because no helpful clarifications have been given by the author himself. In such a situation it might be, as Basil Mitchell and others suggest, that a cumulative case could be developed, differing depending on where one started, what were taken to be vital clues, what was considered peripheral or irrelevant, and which standards were accepted as relevant standards of assessment. While a decision on the basis of available evidence might be reasonable in such a situation, *permissively* reasonable, it could not be *coercively* reason-

able because of the ambiguity of the passage. The passage - as (apparently) our evidence - would remain ambiguous.

It seems to me that if none of the theistic and atheistic small-scale interpretations of the more obviously *evidential* phenomena (viz., 1) - 4) above) are rationally superior to their theistic or atheistic counterparts, and if, as I argued earlier, the large-scale interpretations they help to compose are illuminating ones, then the world may well be ambiguous. This is because our conclusions with respect to the interpretations given of 1) - 4) above can be extended to include the *less* obviously evidential phenomena the world contains. The interpretations given of 1) - 4) above would appear to be among the most *critical* of theistic and atheistic small-scale interpretations. Proponents of the ambiguity view may therefore argue that if *these* interpretations fail to show the superiority of either of the views in question, then no *other* interpretation will; and that if *they* serve to illuminate human experience, then the lesser interpretations with which they are interconnected may be expected to do the same.

The ambiguity view, then, retains its plausibility - and this despite the variety of ways in which one explanation might be thought to be superior to another, the variety of argumentative possibilities, the variety of ways in which evidence may be held to figure and despite the application of a specific criterion of evidence.

Notes

- ¹Both of the notions of interpretation used here are versions of what Hick would call 'second-order' interpretation.
- ²See for example, Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Essays in Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).
- ³Penelhum and Hick are of course examples of persons who have argued this; I am in basic agreement with most of their contentions.
- ⁴See J.L. Mackie, 'The Relevance Criterion of Confirmation', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 1969, 20, pp.27-40.
- ⁵Possible developments of these claims are indicated later on in this section.
- ⁶See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, 'The Probabilistic Argument from Evil', *Philosophical Studies*, 1979, 35, pp.1-53.
- ⁷Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p.286.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, pp.287-288.
- ⁹Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p.44.
- ¹⁰Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.119.
- ¹¹See, for example, Wesley C. Salmon, 'Religion and Science, A New Look at Hume's *Dialogues*', *Philosophical Studies*, 1978, 33, pp.143-176; Nancy Cartwright, 'Comments on Wesley Salmon's 'Science and Religion...', *Philosophical Studies*, 1978, 33, pp.177-184; and Wesley C. Salmon, 'Experimental Atheism', *Philosophical Studies*, 1979, 35, pp.101-104.
- ¹²See Marilyn M. Adams, 'Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Approach to the Problem of Evil', in Audi and Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, for a philosophical examination of this notion.

Section IV

Ambiguity as Evidence

I have argued that the phenomena of human experience - including both more and less obviously evidential phenomena - may well be open to both theistic and atheistic interpretation, i.e., ambiguous. In this section I will, for the sake of argument, assume that this is in fact the case. Therefore, where e is all the evidence we have considered, whether potential, putative or prima facie, $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$.

From the fact that $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$ it would seem to follow that the question of God's existence cannot be settled on evidential grounds. But this only *does* follow if e is not only all the evidence we have considered, but also all the evidence *available*. I think, however, that this is not the case. As I shall argue in this section, ambiguity is *itself* prima facie more to be expected given $-T$ than given T (because it entails the truth of ' $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$ ') and thus prima facie evidence for atheism. If this is so, then the question of God's existence may be open to an evidential resolution after all. (It may be useful to note that a similar conclusion would be required if an evidential balance were to obtain instead of ambiguity; for in both situations $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$.)

I

I begin by referring again to the notion of 'world' implied by the proposition 'The world is ambiguous'. I suggested earlier that this notion is the functional equivalent of the notion of potential evidence developed in Section I. The 'world' consists of all the phenomena of human experience - facts, events, states of affairs, etc.

It is important to note that this 'world' is not static - it is dynamic and ever-changing. There are always *new* facts, *new* events, *new* states of affairs. This gives sense to Penelhum's view that, even though the world is *now* ambiguous, it might be *disambiguated* at some future time if we should encounter a "probative revelatory phenomenon".¹

It is important to note also that people's *views* of the world may change - and rationally so. Someone may discover at T2 a phenomenon which already obtained at T1 but which, prior to T2, went undetected. Such a phenomenon might under certain circumstances *also* have a disambiguating effect, viz., if it had evidential value and was a phenomenon not included in the set of phenomena with respect to which the ambiguity-judgment was passed.

My claim is that such a detection may occur in the act of passing the ambiguity-judgment. Those who conclude that the world is ambiguous will find that they have more phenomena to contend with than they did before. They will consider the world to consist of all the phenomena which were relevant to that judgment *plus* (at least) *one*, viz., ambiguity itself.

If this is true, then ambiguity is a distinct phenomenon and thus a piece of potential evidence. But if it is potential evidence, then it

may also be prima facie or actual evidence. I think that ambiguity is in fact at least prima facie evidence for $\neg T$. If this is so, then it becomes critical that the theist be able to give a convincing interpretation of it. If such an interpretation cannot be given, or if it is given but fails to rebut the claim that ambiguity is evidence for $\neg T$, then ambiguity *is* actual evidence for $\neg T$. If ambiguity is actual evidence for $\neg T$, then the 'new' world (i.e., the set of phenomena with respect to which the ambiguity judgment was passed *plus* the fact of ambiguity itself) is *not* ambiguous. Unless it can be theologically assimilated, therefore, we must conclude that ambiguity is *self-stultifying*: if the world is ambiguous at T_1 , then it is ipso facto *not* ambiguous at T_2 , all things (including ambiguity) considered.

II

I suggested in Section II that a situation in which e is more to be expected given $\neg T$ than given T obtains if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very low and $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is not also low; if $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very high and $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is not also high; or if $P(e/T \ \& \ k)$ is very low *and* $P(e/\neg T \ \& \ k)$ is very high. In what follows I emphasize the first of these possibilities. In fact, I argue that a good prima facie case can be made for the claim that $P(e/T \ \& \ k) = 0$. If this claim were to turn out to be *true* and not only apparently true and if ambiguity were to actually obtain, then it would follow that there is no God, i.e., that $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = 0$.

As I have suggested at various points earlier on in the essay, theists are committed to believing that God values the spiritual development and fulfillment of human beings. I will take it that these values can be subsumed under a larger heading, viz., 'God values the salvation of human beings'. It seems clear that $P(e/T \ \& \ k) = 0$ if ambiguity contravenes the ascription of this value to God. That is, if ambiguity is such as to contravene the ascription of this value (which I shall hereafter refer to as Vs) to God, then it is certain that a God who cannot be adequately described without reference to Vs would not bring about or allow ambiguity. I will argue that ambiguity *is* a state of affairs which, at least *prima facie*, contravenes the ascription of Vs to God. As a preface to my main argument I will outline conditions the satisfying of which would be sufficient to show that some state of affairs contravenes the ascription of Vs to God. Following this I will argue that there is at least some reason to suppose that these conditions are satisfied in the case of ambiguity.

III

How could we come to know (or reasonably believe) that a state of affairs which contravenes the ascription of Vs to God obtains? I think the answer lies in the fact that having values commits God to certain courses of action. By virtue of Vs, God is committed to producing states of affairs which simply a clearer understanding of Vs may help us to identify.

When we recognize which states of affairs God is committed to producing (not that we will in many or any cases be able to identify

them all), we will ascribe to him certain corresponding *intentions*, viz., the intentions to produce those states of affairs. If there are intentions which God *must* have if it is to be truly said of him that he values the salvation of human beings and if we could justifiably claim to know which these are, then we could justifiably consider some state of affairs to contravene the ascription of Vs to God if it contravened the ascription of one or more of these *intentions* to God.

But how could we know or have reason to believe that one or more of these *intentions* could not be ascribed to God? How could a state of affairs show this?

The beginning of an answer to these questions is suggested by the fact that if God exists and intends to bring about some particular state of affairs (call it SA1), he must inevitably be successful. (While *we* may often be deterred from fulfilling our intentions, God is not deterred by anything but the logically impossible; and we may assume that an omniscient Deity will never intend to bring about a logically impossible state of affairs.) What follows is that the ascription to God of the intention to bring about SA1 is contravened by an *actual* state of affairs (SA2) if 1) the period of time over which SA1 is to obtain and the period of time over which SA2 actually obtains coincide; and 2) if SA2 is the contradictory of SA1. It might be said that SA2 need not be the contradictory of SA1 to contravene the ascription to God of the intention to produce SA1. But it seems to me that if it *is* the contradictory of SA1, we have the best reason possible for supposing that SA1 did not obtain at the time in question. The satisfying of a contradiction condition here (along with the concurrence condition) would quite obviously be *sufficient* to

show that the ascription to God of the intention to produce SA1 had been contravened.

Assuming, as I will, both here and hereafter, that the description of a state of affairs entails reference to the period of time over which it obtained, or was to obtain etc., we can derive the following: The ascription of some intention to God is contravened by a state of affairs if the conjunction of the propositions which describe that state of affairs and the state of affairs which God allegedly intends to bring about either is or entails a contradiction.

The following, then, are conditions the satisfying of which would be sufficient to show that some state of affairs contravenes the ascription of Vs to God: 1) A tight set of inferences (including inferences concerning God's intentions to produce states of affairs) which *follow* from the ascription of Vs to God. 2) A clear case for the belief that the conjunction of the propositions which describe any one of these states of affairs and the state of affairs in question is or entails a contradiction.

Are these conditions satisfied in the case of ambiguity? In the following argument I will attempt to show that there is at least some reason to suppose that they are:

- 1) God, if he exists, values the salvation of human beings.
- 2) When properly explicated, 1) implies that God wishes ~~all~~ human beings to achieve salvation, i.e., that the salvation of all human beings would be the ultimate realization of Vs in the Divine case. This expansion of 1) has a broad basis of support in theistic scriptures and in the writings of later members of theistic

traditions. It follows as well from our common moral intuitions concerning the relation of impartiality/fairness and moral goodness.

- 3) If God exists, it is by relating oneself to God that salvation is achieved. The manner of 'relating' may differ from place to place and person to person but it is a necessary condition of salvation that it occur.
- 4) If God wishes all human beings to achieve salvation we can infer, from 3), that he wishes all human beings to relate themselves to him.
- 5) From the fact that God, if he exists, wishes all human beings to achieve salvation (and, given the value of salvation, considers the *loss* of salvation to be a great loss) we can infer that he will do everything in his power (everything logically possible) to cause human beings to relate themselves to him. Assuming that freedom is a logically necessary condition of salvation, he will not be coercive. (Given freedom it is possible that not all *will* achieve salvation; this is why I say that God *wishes* all human beings to achieve salvation and not that he *intends* it.) But everything that God *can* do to dispose us to relate ourselves to him will be done.
- 6) There are at least some human beings (e.g., those for whom the only 'live' religious option is Christianity) who cannot be related to God in the manner necessary for salvation without belief in God's existence. Of these, some (namely those who honestly hold that belief must be proportioned to evidence) will believe in God's existence only if relevant evidence is presently available

which indicates that God's existence is more probable than not. (I will hereafter refer to such evidence as evidence which indicates the *probability* of God's existence.) It follows that at least some human beings will through no fault of their own fail to be related to God (and ipso facto, fail to achieve salvation) if relevant evidence is not presently available which indicates the probability of God's existence.

- 7) It is not impossible for God to make evidence which indicates the probability of his existence available to human beings.
- 8) From 5), 6), and 7) we must infer that God intends that the relevant evidence which is presently available shall indicate the probability of his existence.
- 9) The state of affairs which must obtain if there is a God who has this intention can be described as follows: Relevant evidence is presently available which indicates the probability of God's existence.
- 10) But such evidence is not presently available, i.e., ambiguity obtains.
- 11) The conjunction of the propositions which describe the states of affairs referred to in 9) and 10), viz., 'Relevant evidence is presently available which indicates the probability of God's existence and ambiguity obtains' entails a contradiction, viz., 'relevant evidence is presently available which indicates the probability of God's existence and no relevant evidence presently available indicates the probability of God's existence'.
- 12) Therefore the intention referred to in 8) cannot be ascribed to God; it is contravened by ambiguity.

- 13) Since we have reason to suggest that the intention in question is justifiably inferred from the ascription of Vs to God, we have, minimally, some reason to suggest that ambiguity contravenes the ascription of Vs to God.

7) above is, I think, my argument's central premise. Some might object to its forthrightness; but I think that, at the very least, there are no good reasons for *presupposing* the applicability of a notion of impossibility here. If it *were* obvious that God cannot make evidence which indicates the probability of his existence available to human beings, it would indeed be surprising that so many have considered the apparent absence of such evidence to be a *difficulty*. What follows, I think, is that the onus is on the theist in this case to *show* that some notion of impossibility (logical, theological, or other) is appropriate.

We can say then that ambiguity, at least *prima facie*, contravenes the ascription of Vs to God. What follows from this is that, unless there is an adequate theistic counterinterpretation, $P(e/T \ \& \ k) = 0$. If $P(e/T \ \& \ k) = 0$, then, from Baye's theorem $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = 0$ and $P(-T/e \ \& \ k) = 1$.

IV

The success of my arguments would not bode well for nonevidentialism. The nonevidentialist position involves the assumption that a situation in which $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$ is itself evidentially irrelevant and that, given such a situation, one may rationally move

on to consider nonevidential reasons for believing in the existence of God. If my argument is right, however, ambiguity (a situation in which $P(T/e \ \& \ k) = P(-T/e \ \& \ k)$) actually *proves* God's nonexistence unless theists can theologically assimilate it (i.e., offer a convincing interpretation of it which involves the claim that, where e is ambiguity, $P(e/T \ \& \ k) \geq P(e/-T \ \& \ k)$). Therefore, instead of being allowed to consider ambiguity to be evidentially innocuous, the nonevidentialist theist is forced to show that it is *not* actual evidence, or else to admit that a judgment *is* possible on evidential grounds and, indeed, a judgment which favors atheism.

The same basic problem exists for nonevidentialism whether ambiguity (or any relevantly similar situation) obtains or not. The position of nonevidentialists, as I stated in the Introduction, is that it is rationally appropriate to believe in God on the basis of pragmatic or prudential considerations when relevant considerations of evidence are inconclusive. If my arguments are correct, then any situation in which all the evidence considered (and apparently available) is inconclusive can ipso facto be turned into a situation in which the evidence *is* conclusive. (That the view which the balance of evidence would favor in such a situation is atheism does not, needless to say, make things any easier for the nonevidentialist.) Even if his claim is a hypothetical one, the nonevidentialist must either show that none of these things *would* follow *if* ambiguity (or an evidential balance) *were* to obtain or else admit the untenability of his position.

Notes

¹Penelhum, *God and Skepticism*, p.157.

Conclusion

One of the major conclusions of this essay can be expressed by saying that *Ambiguity A* - i.e., the state of affairs which, for example, Hick and Penelhum believe to obtain - may *very well* obtain. A plausible case can be made for the view that it does.

Another major conclusion can be expressed by saying that *Ambiguity B* - the state of affairs which obtains if the world, *including* the fact of *Ambiguity A*, is ambiguous - may very well *not* obtain. A plausible case can be made for the view that it does not.

Where does all this leave the nonevidentialist? The third major conclusion of this essay is that the nonevidentialist must either show that *Ambiguity A* is theologically assimilable (and ipso facto, that *Ambiguity B* obtains) *or* that *Ambiguity A* does *not* in fact obtain. These options are, however, not likely to be happy ones for the nonevidentialist. The first one may be quite difficult because a convincing theological counterinterpretation would appear to be hard to come by. This is at least in part a function of the fact that the *prima facie* case for saying that *Ambiguity A* *is* actual evidence is a strong one. (One may hope, as I do, that such a counterinterpretation will appear, but there would seem to be only a small prospect of this actually occurring.)

Accepting the second option would not be pleasant for the nonevidentialist because it would involve giving up nonevidentialism (i.e., if *Ambiguity A* has the implication it seems to have, nonevidentialism is an untenable position). It would also appear to be *difficult*, for as we have seen, the view that *Ambiguity A* *does* obtain is quite a plausible one. Thus our final conclusion must be that the non-

evidentialist is faced with hard (and perhaps irresolvable) problems however he may choose to respond to arguments such as those presented in this essay.

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