

## 1 What Is the Problem of Evidential Ambiguity?

Something that is ambiguous is difficult to make out. Difficult, but perhaps not impossible. When it comes to what many of us think of as the deepest questions of existence, the answers can seem difficult to make out. Difficult, but perhaps not impossible. The difficulty that we seem to have in figuring out what reality is all about, the ambiguity that seems to confront us when we ponder the deep questions of existence, is the topic of this Element.

*Evidential ambiguity* is the term I shall use to refer to difficulty in working out whether a particular proposition is true or false, given a particular set of evidence. When it comes to propositions concerning the nature of ultimate reality, in what does the difficulty consist? Is it something about the way the world is, or something about us, or some combination of the two that gives rise to a sense of ambiguity? Given this situation that we find ourselves in, what might be the best way to try to investigate questions concerning whether there's a God, an afterlife, whether the mind is just the brain, and so on? And might the existence of ambiguity *itself* be a piece of evidence that points in a particular direction? The importance of questions like these is obvious to most people, regardless of whether someone has formally studied philosophy. And whilst there has undoubtedly been considerable philosophical work done on some aspects of these issues, these questions seem to me to form an interrelated cluster or family of epistemological issues that are worthy of being addressed as a single topic, to which I suggest we give the name *the problem of evidential ambiguity*. The aim of this Element, then, is to begin to map out the contours of the problem of evidential ambiguity and to suggest possible avenues that we might pursue in seeking to gain a better grasp of it.

### 1.1 Ultimate Reality and Worldview

Before we go any further, it is important for us to get clearer on a pair of terms that will be used frequently throughout this Element, namely *ultimate reality* and *worldview*. Robert Nozick offers a particularly helpful discussion of what might be meant by the former term. He writes that

The notion of ultimate reality can refer to different things . . . : the ground-floor stuff out of which everything is composed; the fundamental explanatory level which explains all current happenings; the factor out of which everything else originated; the goal toward which everything develops . . . These different modes of ultimacy do share a common feature, though. Ultimacy always marks the extreme end of an ordering. This ordering can be based upon a chain of explanation, a chain of origination, a chain of further and further goals, etc. In each case, what is ultimate comes at the extreme end of

an ordering, an important and extremely lengthy, perhaps even infinite, ordering – its position there is what makes it ultimate. (1989: 200)

J. L. Schellenberg (2016: 168) helpfully labels the four kinds of ultimacy highlighted in the first sentence of the passage just quoted as follows: (1) *compositional* ultimacy ('the ground-floor stuff out of which everything is composed'); (2) *explanatory* ultimacy ('the fundamental explanatory level which explains all current happenings'); (3) *generative* ultimacy ('the factor out of which everything else originated'); (4) *teleological* ultimacy ('the goal toward which everything develops').

The foregoing list isn't exhaustive of all the kinds of ultimacy that there could be, however. Schellenberg himself discusses three kinds of ultimacy: metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological. Metaphysical ultimacy is close to Nozick's explanatory ultimacy. But the other two kinds seem not to be equivalent to anything in Nozick's list. Thus we have (5) *axiological* ultimacy, which is a matter of something's being 'ultimate in inherent value – the greatest possible reality' (Schellenberg, 2016: 169), and (6) *soteriological* ultimacy, which is a matter of something's being (or, perhaps, being the source of) the greatest good that is attainable in the lives of creatures. Following Nozick and Schellenberg, then, I suggest that the term 'ultimate reality' is polyvalent but that its various meanings are nevertheless interrelated.

As the field of philosophy of religion has begun to broaden beyond just discussing theism and naturalism, it has become useful to have a term that refers to any suitably comprehensive system of claims about the nature of ultimate reality, and the term 'worldview' has seemed to various contemporary authors to fit the bill (e.g., Oppy, 2017). A worldview is a theory about what is ultimate in any of the senses just outlined. A worldview can, of course, be much more than a theory, but for something to count as a worldview it does have to be *at least* a theory, one which has certain aspirations in terms of explanatory scope and depth. I would hesitate to suggest that to count as a worldview a theory must offer answers to the question of what is ultimate in all six aforementioned senses, but a worldview will typically have something to say about most of these various forms of ultimacy – even if the answer it offers is that *nothing* is ultimate in a given sense. It is worth noting that most of the major worldviews offer answers to the question of the postmortem fate of human beings and the relationship between the mind and the body. Rather than see these as additional facets beyond the six forms of ultimacy outlined, I would suggest that such claims can be seen to comprise answers to the questions of what is ultimate in senses (1) and (4).

A worldview need not be religious, hence why the term *worldview* is useful for discussing a wide variety of views about the nature of ultimate reality. There have been innumerable attempts to specify what makes some worldviews religious and others non-religious. Whilst I don't have space to enter into that particular discussion here, I would note a particularly compelling recent proposal from [Sam Lebens \(2022\)](#). According to Lebens, a worldview is religious just in case it calls for *religiosity*, where that involves (i) the fostering of a community built around shared commitments; (ii) the having of propositional faith in some key claims about the nature of ultimate reality; and (iii) participation in practices that draw the practitioner into an imaginative engagement with some of these claims.

There are, of course, innumerable worldviews on offer in the present day, but it can be helpful to group them into families. A fairly natural way of grouping them is into the following three families: theistic worldviews, naturalistic worldviews, and impersonal non-naturalistic worldviews.

Theistic worldviews are those worldviews that have at their core the claim that the fundamental explanation of the world we observe is an uncreated personal being to whom the title 'God' (or a non-English equivalent term) is usually given, and who possesses very large or unlimited degrees of great-making properties such as power, knowledge, goodness, and so on. More specific versions of theism claim that God has additional attributes over and above those just mentioned and also that specific events or persons in human history are vehicles of revelation concerning the nature and purposes of God. Theistic worldviews typically, though not invariably, claim that the goal of human life is union with God, and that some kind of conscious existence awaits us beyond the grave.

Naturalistic worldviews are those that have at their core the claim that that which is most fundamental explanatorily is both impersonal and physical, in the sense that it consists entirely of the sorts of substances and properties that could in principle feature in a scientific account of the world. According to such worldviews, consciousness is either generated out of wholly physical substances and properties or is simply identical with wholly physical substances and properties. Naturalistic worldviews typically hold that there are no purposes inherent in the universe, although human beings are perhaps free to generate purposes of their own, and that conscious experience ceases permanently at death.

Impersonal non-naturalistic worldviews are those that have at their core the claim that that which is most fundamental explanatorily is impersonal and yet is neither identical to nor is generated by physical entities. Some, though not by any means all, forms of pantheism belong in this grouping. Some forms of

pantheism are metaphysically naturalistic in that they claim that God is simply identical with the physical universe – probably Baruch Spinoza’s pantheism was of this kind (see [Leftow, 2016: 64–5](#)). Other forms of pantheism, however, do seem to claim that the fundamental explanatory layer of reality is non-physical. An example of this might be the Advaita Vedānta tradition of Indian philosophy (see [Dalal, 2021](#)), which claims, very roughly, that ultimate reality is an impersonal absolute consciousness that underlies finite consciousnesses and will eventually reabsorb them all. Other worldviews that belong in this category might include John Leslie’s axiarchism ([2016](#)), on which an impersonal ultimate goodness is in some sense responsible for generating physical reality, and Schellenberg’s ultimism ([2016](#)), according to which there is some impersonal but non-physical X, which is ultimate axiologically, metaphysically, and soteriologically.

I don’t claim that these three groupings are exhaustive of all the possible worldviews that there could be, but they do account for the vast majority of worldviews actually held by human beings. Nor am I claiming to have identified necessary and sufficient conditions for a worldview to belong to one or other category. Rather, the preceding groupings reflect a family resemblance approach in which we note features that are typically (if not strictly necessarily) found among the members of a given family.

What of polytheism? The empirical evidence suggests that the majority of what are typically viewed as polytheistic worldviews are not such a far cry from monotheism, in that they often involve belief in a ‘high god’ who is the supreme creator of all else, including all other deities ([Braddock, 2023](#)). Some polytheistic worldviews, however, may turn out on close inspection to be forms of impersonal non-naturalism if what they claim is that all deities are dependent for their existence on some explanatorily more fundamental principle or force that is non-physical but impersonal.

A final word of clarification is needed before we go further. Throughout the Element I will speak of ‘the question concerning the nature of ultimate reality’ or equivalently of ‘the worldview question’. What I mean by these phrases is the question of *which* set of claims about the nature of ultimate reality – which worldview – is true. I acknowledged that the three families of worldviews I just outlined do not exhaust all of the logically possible options. It is of course logically possible that none of the worldviews actually believed by humans is true. For that reason, I mean for the question of which worldview is true to be understood as ranging over all the logically possible worldviews, which is to say, all the logically coherent sets of statements about what is ultimate in the various senses outlined previously, including all those that no human being has ever thought of.

## 1.2 A Cluster of Problems

The issues that I wish to broach in this Element are undoubtedly related to the problem of divine hiddenness in contemporary philosophy of religion. The problem of divine hiddenness as it has been developed by [J. L. Schellenberg \(1993, 2007, 2015\)](#) is fundamentally a problem of violated expectations in relation to theistic worldviews. That is, it appears plausible to suppose that there are some human beings in our world who find themselves doubting the existence of God through no fault of their own – non-resistant non-believers, as they are termed in the literature – and this situation is not what one would expect to find if a perfectly loving God exists, or so the argument goes.

The hiddenness problem is a fascinating topic and one that has attracted a large amount of attention in the philosophy of religion literature over the past three decades. Much of it has taken the form of investigating whether there might be good reasons for a perfectly loving God to permit some people to be in a state of non-resistant non-belief for a time, or in other words, to permit there to be evidential ambiguity with regards to the existence of God (see, e.g., [Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002](#); [Stump & Green, 2015](#); [Weidner, 2021](#)).

Divine hiddenness, then, is a problem for theism specifically. In this Element, however, my aim is to attempt to chart some of the less well-explored ways in which issues of evidential ambiguity might bear upon worldviews of all kinds, not just theistic ones. Many deeply committed adherents of a variety of worldviews acknowledge that the truth of their favoured worldview is not just overwhelmingly obvious, even though they will usually think that their worldview is reasonable on the overall balance of the evidence. Theist philosopher T. J. Mawson, for example, notes that whilst he takes various philosophical arguments for theism to have some real force, he considers that ‘It’s not that atheists are simply missing something obvious’ (2013: 25). On the other side of the aisle, as it were, Graham Oppy thinks that there is a good cumulative case for the truth of naturalism and yet he writes that, ‘I am also pretty firmly of the belief that, even by quite strict standards, those who believe in the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods need not thereby manifest some kind of failure of rationality’ (2006: xviii–xix). Statements like these are an implicit acknowledgement of the existence of some degree of ambiguity in the evidence concerning the nature of ultimate reality. Many more such statements from adherents of a variety of worldviews could be cited at this point.

All of this raises what I take to be an interesting cluster of questions:

- (a) How exactly should we characterise this sense many people have (including many serious and committed adherents of a variety of worldviews who think that their worldview is reasonable on the total evidence) that the

nature of ultimate reality is not completely obvious to us, or at any rate, that grasping it is not totally straightforward?

- (b) Just *how* evidentially ambiguous is our situation as regards the nature of ultimate reality? And is there some way to characterise this that is world-view-neutral (in the sense that the characterisation we offer doesn't presuppose or privilege any particular worldview or family of worldviews)?
- (c) How ought someone to go about investigating the nature of ultimate reality, given the difficulties that exist in working out how much weight to accord various kinds of evidence?
- (d) To what extent is the phenomenon of evidential ambiguity itself evidence for or against various worldviews? Or, put another way, to what extent is evidential ambiguity to be expected conditional upon various different worldviews?

These are the questions that the remainder of this Element will seek to address. The remaining four sections will consider each of the four questions in turn.

**Section 2** contends that the best way to make sense of the commonly voiced idea that the universe we inhabit is in some way ambiguous as regards the worldview question is to suppose that there is an important shared frame of reference, which I term *the public evidence*, that is comprised of the body of facts that are in principle knowable by way of non-inferential cognitive abilities that virtually all humans would recognise as real, and that it is relative to this body of truths that it is less than wholly obvious which worldview is true. I go on to offer a general account of what gives rise to evidential ambiguity in terms of the interrelation of three factors: one's cognitive abilities; one's vantage point; and the facts of the matter in question, including the sorts of traces and indicators that are generated by those facts.

**Section 3** turns to the question of what exactly it could mean to describe that body of publicly accessible facts – the public evidence – as being evidentially ambiguous with respect to the worldview question. There are a number of accounts on offer in the contemporary philosophy of religion literature. I survey five such accounts, with a view to finding a way of characterising the evidential ambiguity of the public evidence that doesn't presuppose or privilege any particular worldview (or family of worldviews) and is genuinely interesting, which is to say, it is a characterisation that doesn't also apply to a large swathe of our other beliefs.

**Section 4** takes on the question of how we ought to go about investigating the nature of ultimate reality, and compares two families of views on the issue, namely, *involved* and *detached* approaches, as I term them. The former approach counsels us to step inside a particular worldview and inhabit its way

of life and thereby allegedly open ourselves to gaining insights that would otherwise be inaccessible. The question of how to decide *which* worldview to step inside is an enduring challenge for such an approach. The latter approach strives to utilise a quasi-scientific methodology for assembling the total relevant evidence and trying to ascertain its overall significance in as impartial a manner as possible. The biggest question for this kind of approach is whether the attempt to take stock of all the many bits of evidence and add them all up can really avoid being coloured by prior commitments and emotionally infused judgements. I propose an approach that is something of a hybrid of these two approaches.

Section 5 considers the way in which a situation that is evidentially ambiguous can itself be evidence for or against certain hypotheses, to the degree that an evidentially ambiguous situation is more what we would expect to find on some hypotheses than on others. An interesting question, then, is whether the evidential ambiguity pertaining to the worldview question is itself evidence that supports some worldviews over others. I explain how we should try to isolate the evidential contribution that evidential ambiguity itself makes from the contribution made by all the usual evidences that are standardly cited for and against various worldviews (fine-tuning, consciousness, reports of religious experiences, evil and suffering, and so on), and I offer some reasons for doubting that evidential ambiguity itself makes a substantial evidential contribution in its own right to the worldview question.

## 2 The Nature and Sources of Evidential Ambiguity

This section begins to address the question of what it might mean for a situation to be evidentially ambiguous and what are the factors in general that give rise to evidential ambiguity, thus paving the way for us to consider what it might mean to say that the nature of ultimate reality is evidentially ambiguous in some important sense.

### 2.1 Two Conceptions of Evidence

Before we go further, we need to say a bit about the concept of evidence, or indeed, the *concepts* of evidence – it is arguable that we employ more than one in everyday discourse. In a careful survey of the philosophical literature on the nature of evidence, Thomas Kelly notes that

Of course, ‘evidence’ is hardly a philosopher’s term of art: it is not only, or even primarily, philosophers who routinely speak of evidence, but also lawyers and judges, historians and scientists, investigative journalists and reporters, as well as the members of numerous other professions and ordinary