

## CHAPTER SIX

# Is Evil Evidence against Belief in God?

In his essay, William Rowe claims that the existence of pervasive and horrendous evil provides strong evidence that God does not exist. He argues that we have good reason to think that at least some of the evils in our world are such that God would have no justifying reason for permitting them. Since God would only permit evils if he had a justifying reason for doing so, it follows that we have good reason for thinking that God does not exist. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann argue that this is not so. They agree that God would only permit evils if he had a justifying reason for doing so, but they contend that our failure to see God's reasons does not constitute evidence for us that there are none.

### **Evil is Evidence against God's Existence**

*William L. Rowe*

#### **I. The Issue**

The specific question assigned to us for discussion is this: "Grounds for belief in God aside, do the evils in our world make atheistic belief more reasonable than theistic belief?" The initial clause in this question is important. For it is one thing to argue that the evils in our world provide such compelling reasons for atheism that the reasons for the existence of God are insufficient to swing the pendulum back in favor of the existence of God, and another thing to argue that, *putting aside* whatever reasons there may be for believing that God exists, the evils that occur in our world make belief in atheism more reasonable than belief in theism. If we put aside grounds for belief in the existence of God, the likelihood that God exists cannot reasonably be assigned any probability beyond 0.5 – where 1 represents God's existence as certain, and 0 represents certainty

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that God does not exist. So, if we start from an initial point of God's existence having a likelihood of 0.5 or less, and *restrict* ourselves to the evidence generated by the enormous amount of horrendous evil that occurs daily in our world, it should strike anyone that the likelihood of God's existence can only go downward from 0.5.<sup>1</sup> To reach such a judgment is perfectly consistent with holding that once the reasons supportive of the existence of God are brought into the equation, the likelihood of God's existence is in fact positive, somewhere between 0.5 and 1. So, we should not confuse arguing that the negative evidence of evil shows God's existence to be unlikely, *even taking into account* the positive reasons there are to think that God exists, with arguing that *putting aside* the positive reasons there are to think that God exists, the evils that occur in our world make atheistic belief more reasonable than theistic belief. The issue in this discussion is only the latter: Apart from taking into account the positive reasons there are to think that God exists, do the evils that occur in our world make atheistic belief more reasonable than theistic belief? I shall argue that they do.

Before proceeding to argue that point, however, it is important to be clear on what theism is. Theism is the view that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being (God). We can call this view *restricted theism*. It is *restricted* in that it does not include any claim that is not entailed by it.<sup>2</sup> So, theism itself does not include any of the following claims: God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, Jesus was the incarnation of God, Muhammad ascended into heaven. These are claims made in specific theistic religions; thus they are a part of an *expanded* form of theism: Judaic theism, Christian theism, or Islamic theism. The importance of not taking theism to include the claims held by only one particular religion among the three major theistic religions of the West is that the inclusion would make theism less likely; for if we identify theism with a particular one among the great theistic religions, then the truth of theism itself is made to depend on all the essential beliefs of that particular theistic religion. The other side of this coin is that philosophers who wish to defend theism ought not to suppose that the assumption of theism entitles them to assume any of the special claims associated with their own particular theistic religion. Since most of the philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition who defend theism are adherents of some version of Christian theism, they should beware of confusing the assumption that theism is true with the altogether different and less likely assumption that Christian theism is true.

## II. The Argument

Do the evils that occur in our world significantly lower the likelihood of God's existence?<sup>3</sup> Let's begin thinking about this problem by considering a simple argument from the existence of some of the evils in our world to the nonexistence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> At best it can but remain the same. For no reasonable person would argue that all the horrendous evils that occur daily in our world are to be counted as *evidence* for the existence of God.

<sup>2</sup> Theism itself does not include the claim that God created a world. For theists hold that God was free not to create a world. They hold that there is a possible world in which God exists but creates nothing at all. What theism may be taken to include is the claim that any contingent things that exist depend for their existence on God's creative act.

<sup>3</sup> Portions of the following are drawn from my essay: Rowe, W. (1997–1998). God and Evil. *The Annual Proceedings of the Center for Philosophic Exchange* 28: 4–15.

1. There exist horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit.
2. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it.

therefore,

3. God does not exist.

If theists reject this argument for the nonexistence of God, they must either reject the first premise or the second premise. Most theists accept the second premise, as do non-theists. So, most theists must reject the first premise, holding instead that God has a justifying reason for permitting each and every horrendous evil that occurs. But what would be a justifying reason for God to permit some terrible evil he could prevent? Since an evil is something that by its very nature is bad, God's justifying reason for permitting it would have to include something else – either some outweighing good that, all things considered, he wishes to realize and cannot realize without permitting that evil,<sup>4</sup> or some equal or worse evil that, all things considered, he wishes to prevent and cannot prevent without permitting that evil. And the question we must ask ourselves is whether it is rational for us to believe that all the terrible evils that occur daily in our world are like that. Is it rational to believe that each evil is such that were an all-powerful, all-knowing being to prevent it, he would have to forfeit some outweighing good?<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it will make the issue before us a bit more concrete if we focus on some examples of terrible evils, rather than just terrible evils in the abstract. Here are two examples.

A fawn is horribly burned in a forest fire caused by lightning. It lies on the forest floor suffering terribly for five days before death relieves its suffering.

A five-year-old girl is brutally beaten, raped and strangled in Flint, Michigan on New Year's day a few years ago.

The theist must believe that for each of these evils there is some greater good to which it leads, a good that an all-powerful being simply could not realize without permitting that evil. But is what the theist believes about these two evils really so? Is there really some great good that an all-powerful being could bring about only by permitting that fawn to be badly burned and to suffer intensely for five long days before death relieves its torment? And is there really some great good that an all-powerful being could bring about only if he permits that little five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan to be savagely beaten, raped, and strangled? And even if it should somehow be so in these two cases, is it true that *all* the instances of intense human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world lead to greater goods in such a way that even an *all-powerful, all-knowing* being could not have achieved *any* of those goods without permitting the instances of

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<sup>4</sup>It could be that the outweighing good cannot be realized by God without his permitting *that* evil or *some other* evil just as bad. But for ease of understanding the fundamental issue, I will ignore this complication.

<sup>5</sup>To avoid needless complexity, I will not mention the other possibility: that God permits the evil in question so as to prevent some equal or greater evil.

suffering that supposedly lead to them? In light of our knowledge of the scale of human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world, the idea that none of those instances of suffering could have been prevented by an all-powerful being without the loss of a greater good must strike us as an extraordinary idea, quite beyond our belief. And if it does strike us in this way, the first premise of the argument we are considering – that there exist evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit – is bound to strike us as plausible, something quite likely to be true. But since the second premise is generally agreed to be true, we should then conclude that it is likely that our conclusion is true, that God does not exist.

It is important here to understand two points about the argument just presented. First, the argument is not, nor is it meant to be, a *proof* that God does not exist. To be a *proof* of its conclusion an argument must be such that its conclusion logically follows from its premises and its premises are known with certainty to be true. The argument we are considering meets the first condition, but not the second. The conclusion deductively follows from the two premises, but its first premise is not known with certainty to be true. The claim is only that the first premise is one we are rationally justified in believing to be true. And since our confidence in the truth of the conclusion should not exceed our confidence in the premises from which it follows, the claim is only that the premises provide sufficient rational support for that conclusion. Second, the truth of the first premise does not logically depend on any claim about the two examples of the fawn and the five-year-old girl. The examples are meant to *illustrate* the profound difficulty in really believing that an all-powerful, all-knowing being is incapable of achieving his noble ends without having to permit such horrendous, undeserved suffering. But if there were only a few such examples as these, perhaps it would not be unreasonable to believe that somehow even an infinitely intelligent, all-powerful being could not achieve his good ends without permitting them. But, of course, our world is not like that. It is the *enormous amount* of apparently pointless, horrendous suffering occurring daily in our world that grounds the claim in the first premise that there are pointless evils in our world, evils that an all-powerful being could have prevented without forfeiting some outweighing good. But, again, it is not being asserted that the existence of pointless evils is known with certainty, only that it is quite likely that pointless evils occur.

### **III. Evaluating Two Responses**

#### **A. First Response**

Having looked at a particular argument from evil against theistic belief, we can now consider and critically evaluate two theistic responses to this argument. The first response the theist may put forth goes something like this:

The first point I want to make is that thus far we have been given no reason at all to think that premise (1) is true. For all you have pointed out is that we do not know what the good is that justifies God in permitting any of these horrendous evils, like the fawn's suffering or the little girl's suffering. But to argue from the fact that we do not know what the good is that justifies God in permitting a certain evil to the conclusion that there is no such good is to engage in a fallacious argument from ignorance: we do not know of any justifying good,

therefore there is not any. So, you have not really given any good reason at all to think that there are terrible evils for which there are no God-justifying goods. All that you have shown, if you have shown anything, is that if these evils do serve some God-justifying goods, we do not know what they are. And the interesting question to ask about our ignorance of these justifying goods is this: Given that God's mind *infinitely transcends* ours, is it really at all likely that the goods for the sake of which he permits much horrendous suffering will be goods we comprehend? After all, is not God in relation to us like good, loving parents in relation to their small child? Such parents may permit their very young child to suffer a painful surgical procedure for a good the child simply cannot comprehend. So too, we should expect that if God exists he may permit many instances of human or animal suffering so as to realize goods our minds simply cannot comprehend. And if that is so, the fact that we do not know the goods that justify God in permitting much horrendous suffering cannot really be a reason for thinking he does not exist. For it is just what we should expect to be true if he does exist.<sup>6</sup>

What are we to make of this response by the theist? Are we really just arguing from ignorance? Perhaps we can come to see that we are not by first distinguishing between goods we know about (goods within our ken) and goods beyond our ken. Consider the suffering of the five-year-old girl as she was brutally beaten, raped, and strangled on New Year's eve a few years ago in Flint, Michigan. I believe that no good we know about justifies God in permitting that suffering. By "goods we know about" I *mean* goods that we have some cognitive grasp of, even though we may have no knowledge at all that they have occurred or ever will occur. For example, consider the good of the little girl experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God. Theists consider this an enormous personal good, perhaps the greatest personal good possible for the little girl. So, even though we do not have a very clear grasp of what this great good involves, and even though we do not know that such a good will ever be actualized, I include the good of her experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God among *the goods we know about*. Of course, if some good we know about does justify God in permitting her suffering, that good must have already been actualized or be actualized at some point in the future. But the notion of a good we know about extends to many future goods and to goods that never have and never will occur. And what we have good reason to believe is that none of the goods we know about justifies God in permitting the horrendous suffering of that little girl. For with respect to each such good we consider, we have reason to believe either that it is not good enough to justify God in permitting that evil, or that it could likely be actualized by God without his having to permit the horrendous suffering of that little girl, or that some equal or better good could likely be actualized by God without his having to permit the horrendous suffering of that little girl.

Of course, even granting that we know of many great goods and have reason to think that none of these goods justifies God in permitting the little girl's suffering, there still remains the possibility that some good we cannot even conceive does so. And it is here that the theist may appeal to the analogy between the good parent and God. For we cannot deny that some good the child's mind cannot even conceive may justify the

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<sup>6</sup>This response has been elegantly developed in Wykstra, S. (1984). The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the 'Evils of Appearance'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16: 73–93. Also see Rowe, W.L. (1984). Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16: 95–100.

parents in permitting the child to suffer. And by analogy will the same not be true of God in relation to us as his children? Indeed, since the disparity between his mind and ours may greatly exceed that of the good parents' minds to the mind of their child, is it not likely that the goods that justify him in permitting us to suffer will often be beyond our comprehension? But against this argument from analogy, two points need to be made.

First, although arguments from analogy are rather weak, the analogy in question has some merit if drawn between a good parent and a good deity of considerable but nevertheless *finite* power and knowledge. For, like the good parent, a deity with great but *finite* powers may reasonably believe that he cannot realize some important future good for some of his creatures without permitting a present evil to befall them. And there may be occasions when, like the good parent, the finite deity is simply unable to prevent a dreadful evil befalling his creatures even though there is no good at all served by it. But the theistic God has unlimited power and knowledge. A good parent may be unable to prevent some suffering her child undergoes, or even the child's death from some painful disease. Can we seriously think that an *infinitely* powerful, all-knowing deity was powerless to prevent the horror of Auschwitz? A good parent may see that she cannot realize some important future good for her child without permitting some present evil to befall the child. Can we seriously think that there is some far off future good for the victims of Auschwitz, a good that a deity of *infinite* power and knowledge judged to be worth the horror of Auschwitz, and was powerless to achieve without permitting that horror? Perhaps we can if we turn from reason to faith. But the infinite distance between the God of traditional theism and the good mother with the sick child does not, in my judgment, provide human reason with good grounds for thinking that such a being would be powerless to prevent many of the countless, seemingly pointless horrors in our world without losing some goods so distant from us that even the mere conception of them must elude our grasp.

But suppose we do reason from the good-parent analogy to the behavior of an all-powerful, all-knowing, infinitely good deity. I think we shall see that the good-parent analogy leads in a different direction from what its proposers desire. We know that when a good, loving parent permits her child to suffer severely in the present for some outweighing good the child *cannot comprehend*, the loving parent then makes every effort to be consciously present to the child during its period of suffering, giving special assurances of her love, concern, and care. For the child may believe that the parent could prevent her present suffering. So, of course, the parent will be particularly careful to give her child special assurances of her love and concern during this period of permitted suffering for a distant good the child does not understand. And indeed, what we know about good, loving parents, especially when they permit their children to suffer intensely for goods the children cannot comprehend, is that the parents are almost always consciously present to their children during the period of their suffering, giving special assurances of their love and care. So, on the basis of the good parent analogy, we should infer that it is likely that God too will almost always be consciously present to humans, if not other animals, when he permits them to suffer for goods they cannot comprehend, giving special assurances of his love for them. But since countless numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of God's presence or any special assurances of his love and comfort, we can

reasonably infer either that God does not exist or that the good parent analogy is unable to help us understand why God permits all the horrendous suffering that occurs daily in our world.

Our conclusion about the theist's first response is this. The argument in support of premise (1) is not an argument from ignorance. It is an argument from our knowledge of many goods and our reasonable judgment that none of them justifies God in permitting instances of horrendous evil. It is also an argument from our knowledge of what a being of infinite power, intelligence, and goodness would be disposed to do and would be capable of doing. Of course, there remains the logical possibility both that some goods incomprehensible to us justify God in permitting all these horrendous evils that occur daily in our world and that some further goods incomprehensible to us justify God in not being consciously present to so many who endure these horrendous evils. So, we cannot *prove* that premise (1) is true. Nevertheless, the first response of the theist should, I believe, be judged insufficient to defeat our reasons for thinking that premise (1) is probably true.

Before turning to the theist's second response, we should note that some theists will protest the conclusion we have come to about the first response. Here is what such a theist may say:

"Your distinction between goods we know about and goods beyond our ken is well-taken. Moreover, you are right to insist that your argument is not a flagrant example of an argument from ignorance. But there is one quite important point you have failed to establish. It is crucial to your argument that we should expect to know the goods for the sake of which God permits much terrible suffering or, failing such knowledge, be particularly aware of God's presence and his love for us during the period of intense suffering for goods we cannot comprehend. For if we have no good reason to expect to know these goods, or to experience God's presence and love during our suffering, then the fact that we do not know them and do not experience God's presence and love will not really count against the existence of God. And my point is that God may have good reasons (unknown to us) for not revealing these goods to us. And he also may have good reasons (unknown to us) for not disclosing himself and his love during the period when many suffer terribly for goods they cannot comprehend. How are you able to show that this point of mine is just a mere *logical possibility* and not the way things really are? I think you need to treat more seriously than you do the distinct possibility that God's reasons for permitting so much horrendous suffering, and his reasons for not being consciously present to us during our suffering, involve goods that are presently incomprehensible to us."

The theist here raises an important point. Using the theist's own good parent analogy, I argued that there is reason to think that when we do not know the goods for the sake of which God permits some horrendous suffering, it is probable that, like the good parent, he would provide us, his children, with special assurances of his love and concern. Since many endure horrendous suffering without any such special assurances, I suggested that we have further reason to doubt God's existence. And the theist's only reply can be that there are still further unknown goods that justify God in not being consciously present to us when we endure terrible suffering for goods beyond our ken. And I have allowed that we cannot *prove* that this is not so. It remains a logical possibility. I have said, however, that we can conclude that premise (1) is probably true. But the theist says that I'm not justified in concluding that premise (1) is probably

true unless I give a reason to think it likely that there are no unknown goods that justify God in permitting much horrendous suffering or no unknown goods that justify God in not being present to us when we endure suffering for unknown goods. The theist may grant me that no goods we know of play this justifying role. But before allowing me to conclude that it is probable that premise (1) is true and, therefore, probable that God does not exist, the theist says I must also provide some grounds for thinking that no unknown goods play that justifying role.

Suppose we are unsure whether Smith will be in town this evening. It is just as likely, say, that he will be out of town this evening as that he will be in town. Suppose, however, that we do know that *if* Smith is in town it is just as likely that he will be at the concert this evening as that he will not be. Later we discover that he is not at the concert. I conclude that, given this further information (that he is not at the concert), it is now less likely that he is in town than that he is out of town, that given our information that he is not at the concert, it is more likely that he is out of town than that he is in town. I do admit, however, that I have not done anything to show that he is not actually somewhere else in town. All I have established is that he is not at the concert. I acknowledge that it is logically possible that he is somewhere else in town. Nor do I know for certain that he is not somewhere else in town. All I claim is that it is *probable* that he is not in town, that it is *more likely* that he is not in town than that he is in town. Those who want to believe that Smith is in town may say that I'm not justified in concluding that it is *probable* that he is out of town *unless* I give some reason to think that he is not somewhere else in town. For, they may say, all I have done is exclude one of the places he will be if he is in town. Similarly, the theist says that if God exists then either all the horrendous evils we consider serve unknown goods or some of them serve goods we know of. We might even agree that if God exists it is equally likely that some of the justifying goods will be known to us as that all of the justifying goods will be beyond our ken. After all, when we understand why God may be permitting some terrible evils to occur, those evils will be easier to bear than if we do not have a clue as to why God is permitting them to occur. Suppose we then consider the goods we know of and reasonably conclude that none of them justifies God in permitting any of these horrendous evils that abound in our world. The theist may even agree that this is true. I then say that it is *probable* God does not exist. The theist says I'm not justified in drawing this conclusion *unless* I give some reason to think that no unknown goods justify God in permitting all these terrible evils. For, he says, all I have done is exclude one sort of good (goods known by us) as God's justification for permitting any of these terrible evils. Who is right here?

Let us go back to the claim that it is *probable* that Smith is not in town this evening. How can we be justified in making that claim if we have learned only that he is not at the concert? The reason is this. We originally knew that it was equally likely that he would be out of town as in town. We also agreed that *if* he is in town it is equally likely that he will be at the concert as that he will not be. Once we learn he is not at the concert, the likelihood that he is out of town must increase, as does the likelihood that he is somewhere else in town. But since it was equally likely that he is out of town as in town, if the likelihood that he is out of town goes up, it then becomes greater than 0.5, with the result that it is *probable* that he is not in town.

Turn now to the existence of God and the occurrence of horrendous evils. Either God exists or he does not. Suppose for the moment that, like the case of Smith being or not being in town, each of these (God exists, God does not exist) is equally likely on the

information we have prior to considering the problem of evil.<sup>7</sup> Consider again the many horrendous evils that we know to occur in our world. Before we examine these evils and consider what sort of goods (known or unknown) might justify God (if he exists) in permitting them, suppose it is as likely that the justifying goods for *some* of these evils are known to us as that the justifying goods for *all* of these evils are unknown to us. We then examine the known goods and those horrendous evils and come to the conclusion that no known good justifies God in permitting *any* of those horrendous evils. That discovery parallels our discovery that Smith is not at the concert. And the result is just the same: it is then more probable than not that God does not exist.

## B. Second Response

The second response the theist can give to the challenge of the problem of evil is the following:

“It is a mistake to think that the goods for which God permits these horrendous evils are totally beyond our ken. For religious thinkers have developed very plausible *theodicies* that suggest a variety of goods that may well constitute God’s reasons for permitting many of the horrendous evils that affect human and animal existence. When we seriously consider these theodicies we can see that we have good reason to think that premise (1) is false. For these theodicies provide us with plausible accounts of what may be God’s justifying reasons for permitting the evils that occur in our world.”

The theist’s first response was to argue both that we have given no reason at all for thinking that premise (1) is true and that our ignorance of many goods that God’s mind can comprehend prevents us from being able to establish that premise (1) is probably true. In the second response, the theist proposes to give a good reason for thinking that premise (1) is false. And, of course, to the extent that theodicies do provide a good reason for rejecting premise (1), to that extent the theist will have pointed the way to reconciling the existence of God with the fact that our world contains the horrendous evils that it does. But do these theodicies really succeed in providing a good reason for rejecting premise (1)? I believe they do not. But to demonstrate this we would have to show that these theodicies, taken together, are really unsuccessful in providing what could be God’s reasons for permitting the horrendous evils in the world. Although I believe this can be done, I propose here to take just one of these theodicies, the one most commonly appealed to, and show how it fails to provide a good reason for rejecting premise (1). I refer to the *free will theodicy*, a theodicy that has played a central role in defense of theism in the theistic religions of the West.

Developed extensively by St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430), the free will theodicy proposes to explain all the evils in the world as either directly due to evil acts of human free will or to divine punishment for evil acts of human free will. The basic idea is that rather than create humans so that they behave like automatons, acting rightly of necessity, God created beings who have the power to act well or ill, free either to pursue

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<sup>7</sup> As we noted earlier, given that we are putting aside reasons for the existence of God, the existence of God is, at best, no more likely than is the nonexistence of God.

the good and thereby enjoy God's eternal blessing or to pursue the bad and thereby experience God's punishment. As things turned out, many humans used their free will to turn away from God, freely choosing to do ill rather than good, rejecting God's purpose for their lives. Thus, the evils in the world that are not bad acts of human free will, or their causal effects, are due to God's own acts of punishment for wrongful exercises of human free will.

The cornerstone of this theodicy is that human free will is a good of such enormous value that God is justified in creating humans with free will even if, as Augustine held, God knew in advance of creating them that certain human beings would use their freedom to do ill rather than good, while knowing that others would use their freedom to do only (or mostly) what is good. So, all the horrendous evils occurring daily in our world are either evil acts of free human beings and their causal effects or divine punishments for those acts. And the implication of this theodicy is that the good of human free will justifies God in permitting all these horrendous acts of evil and their causal effects, as well as the other evils resulting from plagues, floods, hurricanes, etc. that are God's ways of punishing us for our evil acts.

While this theodicy may explain some of the evil in our world, it cannot account for the massive amount of human suffering that is not due to human acts of free will. Natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.) bring about enormous amounts of human and animal suffering. But it is obvious that such suffering is not proportionate to the abuses of free will by humans. So, we cannot reasonably think that such disasters are God's way of punishing human free choices to do evil. Second, while being free to do evil may be essential to genuine freedom, no responsible person thinks that the good of human freedom is so great as to require that no steps be taken to prevent some of the more flagrant abuses of free choice that result in massive, undeserved suffering by human and animals. Any moral person who had power to do so would have intervened to prevent the evil free choices that resulted in the torture and death of six million Jews in the Holocaust. We commonly act to restrict egregious abuses of human freedom that result in massive, undeserved human and animal suffering. Any moral being, including God, if he exists, would likely do the same. And since the free will theodicy is representative of the other attempts to justify God's permission of the horrendous evils in our world, it is reasonably clear that these evils cannot be explained away by appeal to theodicies.

In this essay I have argued that, putting aside whatever reasons there may be to think that the theistic God exists, the facts about evil in our world provide good reason to think that God does not exist. While the argument is only one of probability, it provides a sound basis for an affirmative answer to the question that is the focus of this exchange.

## **Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism**

*Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann*

Many people deny that evil makes belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism. After all, they say, the grounds for belief in God are much better than the evidence for atheism, including the evidence provided by evil. We will not join their ranks on this occasion. Rather, we wish to consider the proposition that, setting aside

grounds for belief in God and relying only on the background knowledge shared in common by nontheists and theists, evil makes belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism. Our aim is to argue against this proposition. We recognize that in doing so, we face a formidable challenge. It is one thing to say that evil presents a reason for atheism that is, ultimately, overridden by arguments for theism. It is another to say that it does not so much as provide us with a reason for atheism in the first place. In order to make this latter claim seem initially more plausible, consider the apparent design of the mammalian eye or the apparent fine-tuning of the universe to support life. These are often proposed as reasons to believe in theism. Critics commonly argue *not* merely that these supposed reasons for theism are overridden by arguments for atheism but *rather* that they are not good reasons for theism in the first place. Our parallel proposal with respect to evil and atheism is, initially at least, no less plausible than this proposal with respect to apparent design and theism.

We begin by laying out what we will refer to as “the basic argument” for the conclusion that *grounds for belief in God aside, evil does not make belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism*:

1. Grounds for belief in God aside, evil makes belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism only if somebody has a good argument that displays how evil makes atheism more likely than theism.
2. Nobody has a good argument that displays how evil makes atheism more likely than theism.
3. So, grounds for belief in God aside, evil does not make belief in atheism more reasonable for us than belief in theism. (from 1 and 2)

Before we get down to work, we need to address several preliminary questions.

## I. Preliminary Questions

What do we mean by “a good argument” here? We have nothing out of the ordinary in mind. A good argument conforms to the rules of logic, none of its premise is obviously false, and there are other standards as well. But for our purposes, it is important to single out one more *minimal standard*, namely:

- Every premise, inference, and assumption on which the argument depends must be more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming.

The proponent of the basic argument says that nobody has a good argument that displays how evil makes atheism more likely than theism because this minimal standard has not been satisfied.

Now, how can we tell that nobody has a good argument of the sort in question? While some have argued that there *could not* be such an argument, we think that a more promising strategy is to consider one by one each argument from evil, laboriously checking whether every premise, assumption, and inference is more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming. If every argument written by recognized authorities on the topic were to have a premise, inference, or assumption that failed to

pass the test, then we'd have pretty good reason to think that nobody has an argument of the sort in question. Unfortunately, to complete the work this strategy requires would take a book. So we must rest content in this chapter with only a start at undertaking it.

But which arguments should we focus on here? It would be uncharitable to focus on lousy arguments. We will focus on two, both of which are recognizably identified with our late friend and esteemed colleague – who also was the most frequently anthologized proponent of an affirmative answer to our title question – William Rowe.

## II. Noseeum Arguments

We begin with an analogy introduced to show how our minimal standard for a good argument works and to develop an important principle for assessing a certain popular kind of argument from evil.

Suppose we asked a friend who claimed that there is no extraterrestrial life why he thought that, and he responded like this: “I don't have any way to *prove* that there is none. I am in no position to do that. But it is reasonable to think there is none. After all, so far as we can tell, there isn't any. We have never detected any other life forms, nor have we received any signals or codes from distant galaxies – and we have been searching pretty hard. While this does not add up to proof, surely it makes it *more* likely that there is no extraterrestrial life than that there is, even *significantly* more likely.” What should we make of our friend's reasoning?

### A. Noseeum Arguments in General

Well, notice first of all that he argued for his claim like this:

(a) So far as we can tell (detect), there is no extraterrestrial life.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

(b) There is no extraterrestrial life.

This argument follows a general pattern:

So far as we can tell (detect), there is no *x*.

So, it is more likely than not (perhaps significantly so) that

There is no *x*.

Let us call this general pattern a *no-see-um* argument: we do not see 'um, so they ain't there!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The “noseeum” lingo is from Stephen Wykstra. See Wykstra, S. (1996). Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Notice that our friend did not claim that (a) *guarantees* the truth of (b). He merely claimed that it makes it *more likely than its denial*, perhaps quite a bit more. So we cannot just retort that there *could be* extraterrestrial life even if we do not detect any. That is true, but it is irrelevant. What is relevant, however, is that his noseem argument relies on a certain assumption. To see it, consider some other noseem arguments.

Suppose that, after rummaging around carefully in your fridge, you cannot find a carton of milk. Naturally enough, you infer that there is not one there. Or suppose that, on viewing a chess match between two novices, Kasparov says to himself, “So far as I can tell, there is no way for John to get out of check,” and then infers that there is no way. These are clear cases in which the noseem premise makes the conclusion more likely than its denial – significantly more likely.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, suppose that, looking at a distant garden, so far as we can see, there are no slugs there. Should we infer that it is more likely that there are no slugs in the garden than that there are? Or imagine listening to the best physicists in the world discussing the mathematics used to describe quantum phenomena; so far as we can tell, they do not make any sense at all. Should we infer from this that it is more likely that they do not make any sense than that they do? Clearly not. So what accounts for the difference between these two pairs of cases?

Notice that it is more likely than not that you would see a milk jug in the fridge if one were there, and it is more likely than not that Kasparov would see a way out of check if there were one. That is because you and Kasparov have what it takes to discern the sorts of things in question. On the other hand, it is not more likely than not that we would see a slug in a distant garden if there were one there; and it is not more likely than not that we’d be able to understand quantum mathematics if it were understandable. That is because we do not have what it takes to discern the sorts of things in question, in those circumstances with the cognitive equipment we possess. A general principle about noseem arguments is lurking here, namely:

- A noseem premise makes its conclusion more likely than not only if *more likely than not we’d detect (see, discern) the item in question if it existed*.

Call the italicized portion *The Noseem Assumption*. Anybody who uses a noseem argument makes a noseem assumption of this form. Let us return to our friend, the antiextraterrestrialist.

## B. The Antiextraterrestrialist’s Noseem Assumption

He gave a noseem argument and thereby made a noseem assumption, namely this one:

- More likely than not we’d detect extraterrestrial life forms if there were any.

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<sup>9</sup> Another case of legitimate reliance on a noseem premise is in the strategy recommended in the second to last paragraph of section I.

Our minimal standard for a good argument implies that his noseem argument is a good argument only if it is more reasonable to *affirm* his noseem assumption than to *refrain* from affirming it. Is it more reasonable to do that?

Clearly not. After all, if there were extraterrestrial life forms, how likely is it that some of them would be intelligent enough to attempt contact? And of those who are intelligent enough, how likely is it that any would care about it? And of those who are intelligent enough and care about it, how likely is it that they would have the means at their disposal to try? And of those with the intelligence, the desire, and the means, how likely is it that they would succeed? Nobody has a very good idea how to answer these questions. We cannot begin to say with even the most minimal degree of confidence that the probabilities are low, or that they are middling, or that they are high. We just do not have enough to go on. For this reason we should be *in doubt* about whether *more likely than not we'd detect extraterrestrial life forms if there were any*. So it is *not* more reasonable to affirm our friend's noseem assumption than to refrain from affirming it.

It is important to see that we are not saying that it is highly likely that we would *not* discern any extraterrestrial life forms; nor are we saying that it is more likely that we would not detect extraterrestrial life forms than that we would. Rather, our point is that it is not reasonable for us to make any judgment about the probability of our detecting extraterrestrial life forms if there were any. That is all it takes for it *not* to be more reasonable for us to affirm than to refrain from affirming this noseem assumption.

### **III. Noseem Arguments From Evil**

In this section, we will apply the main points of section II to some popular noseem arguments from evil.

#### **A. Standard Noseem Arguments From Evil**

Here is a standard argument from evil:

1. There is no reason that would justify God in permitting certain instances of intense suffering.
2. If God exists, then there is a reason that would justify God in permitting every instance of intense suffering.
3. So, God does not exist.

From the vantage of the title question, our main concern is whether noseem arguments in defense of premise 1 make it more reasonable for us to believe it than to refrain from believing it. Let us look into the matter closely.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The noseem arguments we mention in this section are simplified versions of arguments in Rowe's work, especially his classic essay, Rowe, W.L. (1996). The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Consider the case of a fawn, trapped in a forest fire occasioned by lightning, who suffers for several days before dying (call this case “E1”). Or consider the case of the five-year-old girl from Flint, Michigan who, on January 1, 1986, was raped, severely beaten, and strangled to death by her mother’s boyfriend (call this case “E2”). How could a God who loved this fawn and this child and who had the power to prevent their suffering permit them to suffer so horribly? Of course, God might permit E1 and E2 if doing so is necessary to achieve for the fawn and the child (or, perhaps, someone else) some benefit whose goodness outweighs the badness of their suffering. But what could the benefit be? When we try to answer that question, we draw a blank. We just cannot think of a benefit that is both sufficiently great to outweigh the badness of their suffering and such that God cannot obtain it without permitting E1 and E2. So far as we can tell, there is not one. While this does not *prove* that there is no reason, surely, says the atheistic objector, it makes it more likely than not that there is none, perhaps even a good deal more likely.

In short, the noseum argument here goes like this:

- 1a. So far as we can tell, there is no reason that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2.

So it is more likely than not that

- 1b. There is no reason that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2.

So it is more likely than not that

1. There is no reason that would justify God in permitting certain instances of intense suffering.

Other noseum arguments from evil are just like this except that they focus on the *amount* of suffering rather than on particular instances of intense suffering or horrific evil. What should we make of these noseum arguments? Many people think that we *do* see how God would be justified in permitting E1 and E2, that we *do* see how he would be justified in permitting so much rather than a lot less intense suffering. While this strategy is not wholly without merit, we will not pursue it here.<sup>11</sup> Rather, we begin by noting that each of these noseum arguments from evil makes a noseum assumption, specifically:

- More likely than not we’d detect a reason that would justify God in permitting ... if there were one,

where the ellipsis is filled in with either “E1 and E2” or “so much intense suffering rather than a lot less” or “so much intense suffering rather than just a little less.”

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<sup>11</sup>This strategy, often called “giving a *theodicy*,” has a venerable history. For literature on the topic, as well as other relevant issues, see Whitney, B. (1998). *Theodicy: An Annotated Bibliography, 1960–1991*, 2e. Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center; as well as the bibliographies in Peterson, M. (ed.) (1992). *The Problem of Evil*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; and Howard-Snyder, D. (ed.) (1996). *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Nothing we have to say hangs on the difference, so we will focus on the first. Call it the *Atheist's Noseum Assumption*. Is it more reasonable to affirm it than to refrain from affirming it?

## B. Considerations Against the Atheist's Noseum Assumption

Several considerations suggest that it is *not* more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming the Atheist's Noseum Assumption.<sup>12</sup>

1. Two aspects of the atheist's noseum inference should make us wary. First, they take "the insights attainable by finite, fallible human beings as an adequate indication of what is available in the way of reasons to an omniscient, omnipotent being." But this is like supposing that when you are confronted with the activity or productions of a master in a field in which you have little expertise, it is reasonable for you to draw inferences about the quality of her work just because you "do not get it." You have taken a year of high school physics. You are faced with some theory about quantum phenomena and you cannot make head or tail of it. Certainly it is unreasonable for you to assume that more likely than not you'd be able to make sense of it. Similarly for other areas of expertise: painting, architectural design, chess, music, and so on. Second, the atheist's noseum inference "involves trying to determine whether there is a so-and-so in a territory the extent and composition of which is largely unknown to us." It is like someone who is culturally and geographically isolated supposing that if there were something on earth beyond her forest, more likely than not she'd discern it. It is like a physicist supposing that if there were something beyond the temporal bounds of the universe, more likely than not she'd know about it (where those bounds are the big bang and the final crunch).

All these analogies and others like them point in the same direction: we should be of two minds about affirming the claim that more likely than not we'd be aware of some reason that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2, if there were one.

2. Knowledge has progressed in a variety of fields of enquiry, especially the physical sciences. The periodic discovery of previously unknown aspects of reality strongly suggests that there will be further progress of a similar sort. Since future progress implies present ignorance, it would not be surprising if there is much we are currently ignorant of. Now, what we have to go on in charting the progress of the discovery of fundamental goods (like freedom, love, and justice) by our ancestors is meager to say the least. Indeed, given the scant archeological evidence we have, and given paleontological evidence regarding the evolutionary development of the human brain, it would not be surprising at all that humans discovered various fundamental goods over tens of thousands of years dotted by several

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<sup>12</sup>The considerations we mention here are developed by William Alston. The first is in Alston, W. (1996). Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 316–319. The second is in Alston, W. (1996). The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 109.

millenia-long gaps in which nothing was discovered. Hence, given what we have to go on, it would not be surprising if there has been the sort of periodic progress that strongly suggests that there remain goods to be discovered. Thus it would not be surprising if there are goods of which we are ignorant, goods of which God – in his omniscience – would not be ignorant.

### C. Considerations in Favor of the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption

So there is good reason to be in doubt about the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption. In addition, there are good reasons to reject the considerations that have been offered in its favor.

Consider, for example, the supposed fact that for thousands of years we have not discovered any new fundamental goods in addition to the old standbys – friendship, pleasure, freedom, knowledge, etc. One might think that the best explanation of this fact is that there are no new fundamental goods to be discovered. Hence, the argument goes, our inability to think of a reason that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2 makes it likely that there is no such reason.<sup>13</sup> But this ignores the live possibility that, due to our cognitive limitations, we are (permanently or at least currently) unable to discover certain of the fundamental goods there are. And we have no reason to think this “cognitive limitation” hypothesis is a worse explanation of our lack of discovery than the hypothesis that there are no new goods to be discovered.

Others claim that if we confess skepticism about the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption, then we will have to do the same thing in other areas as well, resulting in excessive and unpalatable skepticism in those other areas. They ask us to consider claims like these:

- (1) The earth is more than 100 years old.
- (2) You are not constantly dreaming.
- (3) There is no reason that justified Hitler in conducting the Holocaust.

They say that since doubts about (1)–(3) are unreasonable, excessive, and unpalatable, so is doubt about the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption.<sup>14</sup> What should we make of this argument?

It seems eminently sensible insofar as it recommends that we be consistent in our skepticism rather than apply it only when doing so serves our agenda. And we agree that doubts about (1)–(3) are unreasonable. But our main concern is whether the comparison is apt. Most of us think that doubts about (1)–(3) are unreasonable because we are pretty sure that we have what it takes to believe these things reasonably even if we cannot say exactly how and even though we do not have a knockdown argument for them. Do any of us, however, have even a modicum of assurance that we have got what it takes to believe reasonably that there is no reason outside our ken that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2? Think of it like this: To be in doubt about the Atheist's

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<sup>13</sup> See Tooley, M. (1991). *The Argument from Evil. Philosophical Perspectives*, pp. 111–116.

<sup>14</sup> Gale, R. (1996). Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 208–209; Russell, B. (1996). Defenseless. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 196–198; Drange, T. (1998). *Nonbelief and Evil*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, p. 207.

Noseeum Assumption involves being in doubt about whether there is a reason outside our ken that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2. Is being in doubt about whether there is such a reason like being in doubt about (1)–(3) unreasonable, excessive, unpalatable, a bit wacky, over the top? Or is it more like being in doubt about these three claims, claims none of us is in a position to make reasonably?

- (4) There is no extraterrestrial life.
- (5) There will be no further developments in science as radical as quantum mechanics.
- (6) There is no atheistic explanation outside our ken for the apparent fine-tuning of the universe to support life.

In light of the considerations mentioned in section IIIB (and others like them), we submit that doubts about whether there is a God-justifying reason outside our ken are more like doubts about (4)–(6) than like doubts about (1)–(3). We suggest, therefore, that since doubts about (4)–(6) are sensible, sane, fitting, reasonable, and otherwise in accordance with good mental hygiene, so are doubts about the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption.

It might seem that if we are going to be skeptical about the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption, then we are going to have to be skeptical about reasoning about God altogether. By our lights, that would be an unhappy consequence of our argument. Fortunately, however, we do not need to go that far. Our arguments support agnosticism only about what reasons there are that would justify God in permitting E1 and E2, or more generally the horrific, undeserved suffering in our world. Such limited skepticism need not extend to every argument for theism or to all reflection on the nature of God.

#### D. Summing Up

The Atheist's Noseeum Assumption says that more likely than not we'd see a God-justifying reason if there were one. We have argued that it is not reasonable to accept it. We are not saying that it is highly likely that we would *not* see a reason; nor are we saying that our not seeing a reason is more likely than our seeing a reason. Rather, given the considerations mentioned in sections IIIB and IIIC, we are saying that it is not more reasonable to affirm than to refrain from affirming the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption. In light of the minimal standard for a good argument mentioned in section I, this is enough to show that arguments from evil depending on the Atheist's Noseeum Assumption are not good arguments.

### IV. Rowe's New Bayesian Argument

Rowe has come to recognize that noseeum arguments have some of the weaknesses discussed above. And, presumably because of this recognition, he has recently abandoned them in favor of another argument relying on Bayes's Theorem, a fundamental principle used in probabilistic reasoning.<sup>15</sup> In this new Bayesian argument, he aims to show that

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<sup>15</sup>Rowe, W.L. (1996). *The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look*. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

P. No good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2

provides us with a good reason for atheism – i.e. for not-G (where “G” is theism). We will note some flaws in this argument which, despite Rowe’s efforts, include its dependence on noseum assumptions.

The argument goes like this. Let “k” be the background knowledge shared in common by nontheists and theists alike and let “Pr(x/y)” refer to the probability of x given the assumption that y is true. (This probability will be a number greater than or equal to 0 and less than or equal to 1.) According to Bayes’s Theorem:

$$\frac{\Pr(G/P \& k)}{\Pr(G/k)} = \frac{\Pr(P/G \& k)}{\Pr(P/k)}.$$

(The rough idea is that P makes G less likely than it would otherwise be – i.e.  $\Pr(G/P \& k) < \Pr(G/k)$  – only if G makes P less likely than it would otherwise be.) A quick perusal of this equation shows us that if  $\Pr(P/G \& k) < \Pr(P/k)$ , then  $\Pr(G/P \& k) < \Pr(G/k)$ . And if  $\Pr(G/P \& k) < \Pr(G/k)$ , then, as I said, P makes G less likely than it would otherwise be, i.e. P gives us a reason for atheism. Thus, if Rowe can show that  $\Pr(P/G \& k) < \Pr(P/k)$ , it looks like he will have established his conclusion.

Rowe thinks he can show that  $\Pr(P/G \& k) < \Pr(P/k)$ . We do not have the space to lay out his argument in any detail. But, as he acknowledges, his argument assumes that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is less than 1. For if  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  were equal to 1, it would be impossible for  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  to be less than  $\Pr(P/k)$  (since 1 is as high as probabilities go). Furthermore, if  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  were only very slightly less than 1, then the right hand side of the above equation would be equal to some number very slightly less than 1, such as 0.95. And of course the left hand side will be equal to exactly the same number, which means that  $\Pr(G/P \& k)$  could be only slightly less than  $\Pr(G/k)$ . But that would mean that P provides us with only a very negligible reason for atheism instead of a moderate or good reason for atheism. So an important question arises: why should we suppose that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is not extremely high, perhaps even as high as 1?

As it turns out, Rowe does not answer this question. Instead, he argues that we have no good reason for thinking that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is high.<sup>16</sup> But this is not enough. Even if we have no good reason for thinking it is high, that does not mean we have good reason for thinking that it is *not* extremely high. So our question remains.

The truth is that our question is enormously difficult to answer. In fact, by our lights, we presently have no good reason to think that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is not extremely high, perhaps even as high as 1. We just are not in a good position to judge that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is low, or that it is middling or that it is high. We should shrug our shoulders and admit that we do not have enough to go on here. So Rowe’s new Bayesian argument is (at best) incomplete because he has not given us a reason for thinking that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is not high.

There are two *further* troubles with his argument. The first additional trouble is that in order to give us a reason for thinking that  $\Pr(P/G \& k)$  is not high, Rowe must explain

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<sup>16</sup>Rowe, W.L. (1996). The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 274–276.

why it is not highly *unlikely*, given *G* and *k*, that we would be aware of the goods that justify the permission of E1 and E2. Unfortunately, many of the candidate reasons that come to mind here depend on illegitimate noseem assumptions. For example, Rowe argues that if we were *not* aware of the goods that justify the permission of E1 and E2, it is likely that we would be given comforting words from God telling us that he has reasons for such permission – reasons that are beyond our ken. But *k* includes the knowledge that very often we lack such comforting communication – that we experience divine silence instead. Thus, given *G* and *k*, Rowe thinks it is likely that we *would* know of the goods justifying permission of E1 and E2.<sup>17</sup>

But notice that this argument depends on the assumption that:

- If God exists and the goods that justify permission of E1 and E2 are beyond our ken, then it is unlikely that we would experience divine silence.

The problem with this assumption is that it takes for granted that it is unlikely that there is a good that justifies divine silence in the face of evils like E1 and E2. But what reason do we have for thinking *that* unlikely? We cannot rely on our inability to discern such a good. To do so would be to depend on a noseem assumption – one that is illegitimate in ways analogous to those described in sections IIIB and IIIC.

The second additional problem with Rowe's new Bayesian argument is that he presumes (as he does in his noseem argument) that we reasonably believe that

P. No good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2.

But is that right? Let us focus on E2. Consider the good of both the little girl and her murderer living together completely reconciled (which involves genuine and deep repentance on the part of the murderer, and genuine and deep forgiveness on the part of the little girl) and enjoying eternal felicity in the presence of God. That is a possible good we know of (which is not to say we know it will obtain). Is it reasonable for us to affirm that *that* good does not justify God in permitting E2? No. We are not in a position to judge that its goodness does not outweigh the evil of E2. Nor are we in a position to determine that it (or something like it) does not require the permission of E2 (or something as bad or worse). For it is not only our knowledge of what possible goods there are that may be limited. Our knowledge of the logical (i.e. omnipotence-constraining) connections between the obtaining of certain goods and the permission of evils like E2 might also be limited (it would not be the least bit surprising if it were). Just as we are in the dark about whether known goods are representative of the goods there are, so also we are in the dark about whether the omnipotence-constraining connections we know of are representative of the omnipotence-constraining connections there are. Consequently, our inability to discern such a connection does not give us a good reason to think there is none. Likewise, the fact that we cannot intelligently compare the magnitude of the good mentioned above with the magnitude of E2 does not give us a good

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<sup>17</sup> See Rowe, W.L. (1996). The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 276. Rowe himself does *not* try to use this argument to show that  $\Pr(P/G\&k)$  is not high.

reason for thinking the former does not outweigh the latter. Thus, even the acceptance of *P* seems to depend on our making certain questionable noseem assumptions.<sup>18</sup>

## V. Conclusion

We have raised some serious questions about explicit noseem arguments from evil. And we have pointed out that Rowe's new Bayesian argument is incomplete, and that certain obvious attempts to complete it (as well as the acceptance of *P* itself) seem to depend, implicitly, on questionable noseem assumptions. But we have not shown that nobody has a good argument from evil. To show that we would have to consider other arguments in the literature and other ways to complete Rowe's Bayesian argument or to support *P*. In closing, we will mention briefly two arguments that seem to refrain from depending on noseem assumptions and which deserve serious reflection.

First, Paul Draper argues that atheism explains the actual pattern of pain and pleasure in the world better than theism does. The focus here is not on our inability to see a justifying reason but on our supposed ability to see that an atheistic explanation is superior to a theistic one.<sup>19</sup> Second, Michael Tooley argues that since

1. Permission of suffering is justified only if it is, in some way, for the sake of the sufferer; and
2. Animal suffering in cases like E1 cannot benefit the sufferer

there is suffering whose permission is unjustified and, hence, there is no God.<sup>20</sup> Notice that this argument does not depend on an inference from known goods to unknown goods. Instead, it takes for granted that we know a general moral principle (i.e. premise 1) which, together with certain information we supposedly have about animal capacities, enables us to make a generalization about *all* the goods there are (i.e. that none of them – even the ones we do not know of – could justify the permission of E1).

Draper's argument has received considerable discussion in the literature (much of which suggests that it does not satisfy the minimal standard for a good argument identified in section I).<sup>21</sup> Tooley's has received virtually none. So let us ask ourselves, briefly: Are there any considerations that would lead us to think *Tooley's* argument fails to satisfy our minimal standard? That is hard to say. But here are some pertinent questions. First,

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<sup>18</sup>For more on the points of this section, see Bergmann, M. (2001). Skeptical Theism. *Noûs* 35: 278–296; and Rowe, W.L. (2001). New Evidential Argument from Evil. *Noûs* 35: 278–296.

<sup>19</sup>See Draper, P. (1996). Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

<sup>20</sup>See Tooley (1991). *op. cit.*, pp. 110–111.

<sup>21</sup>See both essays by Peter van Inwagen, both essays by Draper, the second contribution by Alvin Plantinga and Alston's concluding paper in Howard-Snyder, D. (ed.) (1996). *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. See also Howard-Snyder, D. (1994). Theism, the Hypothesis of Indifference, and the Biological Role of Pain and Pleasure. *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (3):452–466.

regarding premise 1: Is this a true general moral principle?<sup>22</sup> Can the state be justified in confiscating the land and home of one of its citizens against her will in order to construct an irrigation canal required for the survival of many of its other citizens *provided it supplies compensation*? For that matter, is compensation even necessary? What if the state lacks the resources to supply compensation? Are these considerations about a state and its citizens relevant to our present worries about God and his suffering creatures? That is, could *God* be constrained (by the limits of logical possibility) in achieving his purposes in ways analogous to those in which the state is constrained? Regarding premise 2 (according to which dying fawns *cannot* benefit from their final moments of suffering): Must the sufferer be able to appreciate fully (or even partially) the sense in which he or she benefits from the suffering?<sup>23</sup> People take seriously the idea that humans (even the severely mentally handicapped) can experience post-mortem goods – are we right not to take this possibility seriously with respect to animals?

Other arguments from evil deserve serious consideration before anyone can claim that the strategy recommended at the outset of this chapter is successful. We have only pointed the way toward a more extensive defense of it.<sup>24</sup>

## Reply to Howard-Snyder and Bergmann

*William L. Rowe*

My friends Dan Howard-Snyder and Mike Bergmann think that the enormous amount of seemingly pointless, horrendous evil occurring daily in our world gives us no good reason at all to think it unlikely that God exists. For, on the assumption that God exists, they believe we have no good reason to think it probable either that there would be any less horrendous evil or that God would help us understand what some of the justifying goods are that he is powerless to bring about without permitting all this horrendous evil. In support of their view, they liken my argument for the probable nonexistence of God to the reasoning of someone who concludes that there is probably no extraterrestrial life because we do not detect any communications from extraterrestrials. I believe they are right to reject the inference to the likely nonexistence of extraterrestrials from our failure to detect communications from them. For, as they point out, we have no good reason to think that extraterrestrials would know that we exist, or would care about us enough to want to communicate with us, or would have anything like sufficient power and knowledge to devise a way to communicate with us. So, given these considerations, we cannot reasonably infer the nonexistence of extraterrestrials from our not having detected any communications from them. As opposed to what we do not know about extraterrestrials,

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<sup>22</sup>For more on this question, see van Inwagen, P. (1995). *The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy*. In *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 121–122; and Alston, W. (1996). *The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition*. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 111–112.

<sup>23</sup>See Alston, W. (1996). *The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition*. In D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup>Thanks to William Alston, Andrew Cortens, Del Kiernan-Lewis, Michael Murray and Timothy O'Connor for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

however, we do know that God, if he exists, most certainly knows that we exist, most certainly loves us and cares for us, and, being infinitely powerful, is able to prevent any of the horrendous evils that befall us. Furthermore, given his infinite knowledge, God would know how to achieve the very best lives possible for us with the minimum of horrible suffering. My friends, however, believe that we have no sufficient reason at all to think it *even likely* that God could achieve the very best for us (humans and animals) were he to have prevented the Holocaust, the terrible suffering of the fawn, the horrible suffering of the little girl, or any of the other countless evils that abound in this world. Why on earth do they believe this? The basic reason is this: *God's knowledge of goods and the conditions of their realization extends far beyond our own*. Because God's knowledge extends far beyond our own they think it just may be that God would know that even he, with his infinite power, cannot achieve the best for us without permitting all the horrendous evils that occur daily in our world. And they also think it just may be that God can achieve the best for us only if he keeps us in the dark as to what the good is that justifies him in permitting any of these horrendous evils. But what their view comes to is this. Because we cannot rule out God's knowing goods we do not know, we cannot rule out there being goods that justify God in permitting *any amount of evil whatever* that might occur in our world. If human and animal life on earth were *nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death*, my friends' position would still require them to say that we cannot reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist. For, since we do not know that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we cannot know that it is likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting human and animal life on earth to be nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death. But surely such a view is unreasonable, if not absurd. Surely there must be some point at which the appalling agony of human and animal existence on earth would render it unlikely that God exists. And this must be so even though we all agree that God's knowledge would far exceed our own. I believe my theistic friends have gone considerably beyond that point when in light of the enormous proliferation of horrendous evil in this world they continue to insist that we are unjustified in concluding that it is unlikely that God exists.

They characterize my argument as a “noseum” argument. But this is not quite correct. There are lots of things we can conceive of occurring in our world which we do not *see* occurring. My argument is basically a “noconceiveum” argument, not a “noseum” argument. We cannot even *conceive* of goods that may occur and would justify God in permitting the terrible evils that afflict our world. Of course, being finite beings we cannot expect to know all the goods God would know, any more than an amateur at chess should expect to know all the reasons for a particular move that Kasparov makes in a game. But, unlike Kasparov who in a chess match has a good reason not to tell us how a particular move fits into his plan to win the game, God, if he exists, is not playing chess with our lives. In fact, since understanding the goods for the sake of which he permits terrible evils to befall us would itself enable us to better bear our suffering, God has a strong reason to help us understand those goods and how they require his permission of the terrible evils that befall us. My friends, however, do seem to think we can conceive of goods that may require God to permit at least some of these awful evils. They suggest that for all we know the following complex good may occur: the little five-year-old girl meets up with her rapist-killer somewhere in the next life, and he then repents and begs her forgiveness for savagely beating, raping, and strangling her, and she then forgives him with the result that both of them live happily ever after in the presence of God.

What are we to make of this suggestion as to why God permitted the little girl to be brutally beaten, raped, and strangled? Well, they are right in holding that even God cannot bring about this complex good without permitting that individual to brutally beat, rape, and strangle the little girl. But that alone will not justify God in permitting that to happen to her. For it is eminently reasonable to believe that God could win the soul of the little girl's rapist-killer without having to permit him to do what he did to her. And even if he cannot, is it right for any being to permit the little girl to be robbed of her life in that way just so her killer could have something bad enough on his conscience to ultimately seek forgiveness? It is one thing to knowingly and freely give up one's life for the sake of another and quite another thing to have it ripped away, against one's will, just so someone else can later be led to repentance. If this is the best that can be done to find a good we know of that may justify God in permitting the little girl to be brutally beaten, raped, and strangled, the evidential argument from evil will surely remain a thorn in the side of theism for some time to come.

## Reply to Rowe

*Michael Bergmann and Daniel Howard-Snyder*

We will limit our replies to Rowe's chapter to the following three points.<sup>25</sup>

1. Throughout Rowe's chapter, one finds "the theist" rejecting his argument, *and nobody else*. No atheist objects; no agnostic. Just "the theist." This gives the misleading impression that you have to be a theist to reject it, or that only theists reject it, or that nontheists cannot reject it, or must not, or in fact do not. None of this is true, however. Many intelligent nontheists do not find Rowe's argument persuasive. For example, many agnostics – those who neither believe there is a God nor believe there is not – reject it for the kinds of reasons we laid out in our chapter. In fact, everything we said there could be said by an agnostic or an atheist.

2. Rowe insists that his atheistic arguments from evil are not arguments from ignorance. Thus, he denies that his arguments depend on noseum assumptions. We beg to differ. Here are two examples of his depending on a noseum assumption.

First, at one point he says: "the idea that none of those instances of suffering could have been prevented by an all-powerful being without loss of a greater

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<sup>25</sup> An additional point that we do not have the space to develop is this. Rowe makes it clear, in the paragraph following his introduction of premise 2, that that premise should be understood as follows:

- An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would prevent the occurrence of any terrible evil he could, unless he could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

But this implies that there is a minimum amount of terrible evil that God must permit in order for the greater goods involved in his purposes to be secured. For a persuasive objection to that implication, see van Inwagen, P. (1991). The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence. *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 135–165, especially 64n11; and van Inwagen, P. (1988). The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy. *Philosophical Topics* 16 (2): 67–68.

good must strike us as an extraordinary idea, quite beyond belief.” But if we are in the dark about what goods there are and what omnipotence-constraining connections there are between such goods and the permissions of such evils, how could that idea seem “extraordinary ... quite beyond belief”? Only if we assume that there probably are not any such goods or omnipotence-constraining connections if we do not detect any.

Second, Rowe says that each good we know of is such that “we have reason to believe either that it is not good enough to justify God in permitting that evil, or that it could likely be actualized by God without his having to permit the horrendous suffering [in question]”. But how could we have a reason to believe “God could obtain the goods we know of without permitting the evils we see” if we are in the dark about what omnipotence-constraining connections there are between such goods and the permission of such evils? Here too Rowe seems to be assuming that there probably are no such connections if we do not detect any.

3. Rowe also considers one last attempt to defend what he calls “the first response” to his argument from evil. In his reply to this last attempt, he uses the example of Smith and the concert. Let T signify “Smith is in town this evening” and let C signify “Smith is at the concert this evening”. We can then state Rowe’s example as follows:

- $\Pr(T/k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(\text{not-}T/k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(C/T\&k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(\text{not-}C/T\&k) = 0.5$ .<sup>26</sup>

He sensibly concludes that if we know these things and then learn that not-C, we may conclude that T is less likely than not-T. So far, so good.<sup>27</sup> Next, Rowe tries to draw the parallel with the case of theism and evil. Let G signify “God exists” and let A signify “Some good we know of justifies God in permitting all the horrendous evils we see.” We can, says Rowe, state the parallel case like this:

- $\Pr(G/k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(\text{not-}G/k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(A/G\&k) = 0.5$
- $\Pr(\text{not-}A/G\&k) = 0.5$

Again, he sensibly concludes that if we know these things and then learn that not-A, we may conclude that G is less likely than not-G.<sup>28</sup>

What we have been given here is an easily digestible version of Rowe’s new Bayesian argument from evil, the one we discussed in section IV of our chapter. Our response is essentially the same as the response we gave there.

<sup>26</sup>In section IV of our chapter we explain our use of the symbol “k” and the notation “Pr(x/y)”.

<sup>27</sup>The idea here seems to be that since not-T entails not-C, we know that  $\Pr(\text{not-}C/\text{not-}T\&k) = 1$  and that  $\Pr(C/\text{not-}T\&k) = 0$ . So we know that  $\Pr(\text{not-}C/\text{not-}T\&k) > \Pr(\text{not-}C/T\&k)$ . This, we take it, is why Rowe concludes that learning not-C makes T less likely than not-T.

<sup>28</sup>Rowe is assuming that just as not-T entails not-C, so also not-G entails not-A.

The first thing to notice is that Rowe's argument about Smith's whereabouts could not get off the ground unless  $\Pr(\text{not-C}/T\&k)$  is not high. For if it is extremely high, then not-C will not significantly lower the likelihood of T. (If  $\Pr(\text{not-C}/T\&k)$  is as high as 1, not-C will not lower the likelihood of T at all!) In other words, if not-C is just what you would expect if T were true, then learning not-C will not make T less likely than it would otherwise be.

For similar reasons, Rowe's parallel argument about God and evil does not have a chance unless  $\Pr(\text{not-A}/G\&k)$  is not high. Rowe tries to avoid this problem by simply *asserting* that this latter probability is equal to 0.5. But why think that? In fact, why think  $\Pr(\text{not-A}/G\&k)$  is not extremely high, perhaps as high as 1? These questions will be familiar to those who have read our chapter. For not-A (i.e. no good we know of justifies God in permitting all the horrendous evils we see) is a lot like P from our paper (i.e. no good we know of justifies God in permitting E1 and E2). And just as we are in no position to tell that  $\Pr(P/G\&k)$  is high or that it is low or that it is middling, so also we are in no position to tell that  $\Pr(\text{not-A}/G\&k)$  is high or that it is low or that it is middling. Rowe's argument simply takes for granted that we are in a position to assign a value of 0.5 here when in fact we are in the dark about what probability to assign.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

There are a number of helpful anthologies on the problem of evil, including some with essays cited in this chapter. These include *The Problem of Evil* (1990) edited by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (which contains the famous exchange between Stephen Wykstra and William Rowe); *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (1996) edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder; and the second edition of Michael Peterson's *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings* (2017). Another anthology, *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (2014), by Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, includes essays that explore further the view defended here by Bergmann and Howard-Snyder. Other important books include John Hick's classic *Evil and the God of Love* (1966, reprinted 2010), Marilyn McCord Adams's novel approach to the problem in *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (1999), and Peter van Inwagen's *The Problem of Evil* (2008).