Horrific Suffering, Divine Hiddenness, and Hell: The Place of Freedom in a World Governed by God

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1. A Brief Look at Where We’re Going: The Problem of Horrific Evils, Two Other Forms of the Problem of Evil, and the Place of Human Free Will in a World Governed by a Wholly Good God

Asked in a public forum by a fellow philosopher1 to give examples (“without getting into details”) of one argument for and another argument against the existence of God that I thought a reasonable person could find plausible, I didn’t even have to think about which argument to use on the negative side:

I’m going to have to be conventional here and go with the usual suspect: the argument from evil. Without getting into any details, you can feel the force of the argument by choosing a suitably horrific example (the Holocaust, children dying of cancer) that leads you to say, “There’s no way a perfectly good God would have allowed that!” There is a huge, often fascinating, discussion that tries to refute such arguments. But I find this intuitively powerful case does stand up to scrutiny, at the very least to the extent that someone could reasonably accept it at the end of the day. I suspect that even God thinks there is something wrong with you if you are not at least tempted by such an argument from evil.

That argument from horrific suffering, and the problem it gives rise to for standard theism (belief in a God that is wholly good, as well as all-powerful and all-knowing), is the main focus of this book, though our wrestling with this problem with involve us in two further problems for standard theism: the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of hell. Though I hope to uncover what relief there is to be found from these problems, I certainly won’t be finally settling any of them. But at least there will be three, and not just one, problems that we will be failing to solve here.

“Free will defenses” have constituted perhaps the main type of theistic response to problems like these. It turns out that I accept, in about the strongest way possible, the account of freedom that fuels such responses, and I am convinced that human freedom must play a huge role in God’s relation to the horrors of our world. Yet I still think that standard free will defenses fail, and quite miserably, at least when directed at the most gripping forms of our problems. So a main concern will be explaining why such accounts fail, and then what role I think human free will might play in a credible account of God’s relation to evils.

“The problem of evil” is the problem of squaring the existence of the (wholly good) God of standard theism with the occurrence of evils, where “evil” is used broadly to designate anything bad, including instances of suffering, whether or not those “evils” are connected with any immoral actions anyone might be performing. “The” problem of evil is best viewed as a family of related problems (or as a problem that comes in several different forms) that vary from each other in terms of which evils are being considered. Our three problems—hiddenness, hell, and horrors—are then forms of the problem of evil. Indeed, three of its toughest forms.

2. The Problem of Horrific Evils

But the greatest of these is horrors.

Well, I don’t mean that the problem of horrific suffering is straightforwardly tougher to solve than is the problem of hell. The difficulty of the latter varies greatly with how it is construed. As some readers were no doubt thinking when I threw hell into the mix, it has an importantly different character from the other problems, as it is not based on something bad that we have observed in the world, but is rather a theological commitment that some theists take on. And of course, how tough it is to square that commitment with God’s goodness depends on just what kind of hell is in question. Some unspeakably brutal (and sometimes literally inconceivably brutal), yet quite common and traditional, doctrines of hell explicitly include that hell is chalk full of horrific suffering that somehow manages to be far worse than anything ever suffered in any earthly life. (As the joke goes, that’s why they call it “hell”!) If that’s the version of theism that constitutes one’s live theistic options, the problem of hell includes an extreme form of the problem of horrific suffering. (Though henceforth, we will construe the “problem of horrific suffering/evil” so that it encompasses only the horrors of this life.) But others, for whom the live theistic options are different, can instead opt for some version of “hell lite”—or easily solve the problem of hell by jettisoning hell altogether. (More on this when we get to hell!!)
But I do think the problem of (earthly) horrific evils is the “greatest” problem of evil in terms of being the most influential. Where atheism is based on argument at all, some form of the argument from horrific evils is among the first arguments cited, and many actual atheists join me in having this as the first and main atheist argument they reach for.

Provocative as my indented statement of the problem quoted at the start of the previous section may seem, especially at the end of that passage, I really was trying to be Mr. Moderate Peacemaker there: What had prompted the request for examples of pro- and anti-God arguments was my claiming that, because there are arguments on both sides of the issue that one could reasonably accept, there was plenty of room for the rationality of both theism and atheism, and I was appealing to the argument from horrific suffering to make that room for reasonable atheism.

But that may badly undersell the argument’s power. It can (and, to many, does) seem to be an intellectual steamroller, destroying the possibility of reasonable belief in God and leaving atheism as the only intelligent position available on the question of the existence of the God of standard theism (which we will construe as positing the existence of a wholly good God).

I was recently confronted with a stark case of this while reading a draft of a book about religious disagreement by a colleague of mine. Seeking examples of sharp disagreement over religious questions, he had found a terrific example of someone who rejects the wholly good God of standard theism and expresses that judgment with great and blunt assurance. My colleague quoted this “very accomplished philosopher” as taking up the question of the existence of a “benevolent almighty creator,” and then writing this:

Well, really, now, how credible do you find BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR [the claim that there is such a being]? Or, for that matter, how credible do you find any proposition even just remotely like that traditional, or traditional-sounding, doctrine? Well, you can put me down for a big loud, “Not Very!” And, boy, it’s a veritable landslide here, as the case for a negative answer is almost absurdly overwhelming.

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2 Richard Swinburne made a somewhat similar statement in his book, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998): “Just reflect on some of the horrors that we read about in our newspapers and history books: the prolonged cruelty of parents to lonely children, the torture of the innocent, the long-drawn-out acute physical pain of some disease, and so on. If we cannot see all that as a reason for believing that there is no all-good and all-powerful being, when we cannot think of any reason why such a being should allow it all to happen, there really is something deeply wrong with us. We have lost our sensitivity to the good’ (p. 23).
What is this “almost absurdly overwhelming” case? Our case from horrific evils. As my colleague explained, our prominent philosopher then takes a few paragraphs to catalog some of the worst suffering of our world, before concluding:

How horrible is that, I ask you, all you who dare to uphold, quite as heartlessly propounded as it’s brainlessly affirmed, any claim that’s even the least bit like the utterly incredible BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR? It’s certainly too horrible, I tell you, to have anyone believing, even the least bit reasonably, or the least bit intelligently, anything remotely like that extremely dubious doctrine.

Heartless and brainless! Upholders of this “utterly incredible” tenet brace ourselves for being painted as other characters from The Wizard of Oz.

I was jolted by these passages as I read them quoted—but for different reasons and in a quite different way from how other upholders of BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR would likely be provoked by them. The philosopher being quoted was one of my oldest friends in the field, and his quoted words seemed eerily familiar. Peter Unger and I had worked closely together for a number of years, reading and critiquing each other’s writings, but (largely due to my moving) I had dropped out of that collaboration as he began working on the book that my current colleague had found. So I was reading Unger’s remarks for the first time. But I had heard similar remarks from him (once, but memorably) before—in fact, directed at me, the first time we met in person.

I was in my last year in graduate school, and was on the (extremely tight—as it is today) philosophy job market. I had no job yet, but had a few possibilities going. New York University, where Unger worked (and still works) was interested enough that when they heard that my flight between two job talks I was giving made a stop at JFK, they told me to get off the plane there, grab a taxi to NYU, and they’d grill me for a couple of hours, before putting me on a train to Philadelphia, where I would be grilled at Temple University the next day. If it went well, and if NYU’s first choice didn’t take their offer, this could result in my getting NYU’s job.

NYU didn’t want me to read my “job talk” paper to them before taking questions. Instead, I sent the paper to them so they could read it ahead of time, and when I arrived, they would proceed directly to the “grilling”, asking questions about that paper, but then also about other things. My paper was not about religious matters, but my CV listed philosophy of religion

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3 The book is Unger’s All the Power in the World (Oxford University Press, 2005). Unger takes up God’s existence at pp. 501-508 of that book. The indented quotations above are from p. 506 and p. 507, respectively. I did know the basic topic of the book as Peter was writing it, but did not realize it included a foray into philosophy of religion. I sometimes wonder how things would have gone if I had continued to work with Peter as he wrote that book.
as one of my “areas of competence.” I thought things were going extremely well as we discussed my paper. But then when the questions moved away from that paper to a more general discussion of my work, Peter jumped in and first asked whether I was, as he suspected, an upholder of BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR (to use the allcaps label he later came to use for this doctrine). Having ascertained that I was, he launched into a diatribe that was in tone as well as substance very much like the portions of his later book quoted and described above.

Unger’s ramped-up rhetoric was in a way shocking, in that I would not have at all expected to encounter it in such a setting (or in many other settings, for that matter). But why not? What perhaps should have been strange is that I hadn’t been subjected to such charges before. Since so far back in childhood that I can’t recover its beginning, when I learned of some of the horrific evils this world contains (I was always most moved by accounts of some of the gruesome examples of intentional torture people have been subjected to), I have felt the threat these constitute for belief in a wholly good God. “Wouldn’t such a God have stepped in and prevented that?”; “If not that, what would it take to get God to prevent an evil?”; “What possible reason could God have for not preventing that?” Like many before, after, and around me, I imagine I often wondered in words that were, other than the distinctive three-capitalized-word phrase used to refer to God, close to these of Unger’s: “In all this, where, on God’s good green earth, is the Benevolent Almighty Creator? Nowhere, that’s where.”

Do the amounts and kinds of suffering this world contains render belief in a wholly good God “utterly incredible”? Well, why not? Are they horrible enough to prevent me from believing in a good God in a way that’s at all reasonable? Well, that’s the worry. If not, how bad would the evils of this world have to be to yield such conclusions?

Providence or Fortune had brought me, six years earlier, to what was likely for me the best place in the world for me to wrestle with such questions. As I fairly blindly stumbled into UCLA’s graduate program in philosophy, I had no idea that Marilyn McCord Adams, who taught there, would be working on her paper on “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” and then her book of the same name, and that I would get to study the problem of evil with her and with Robert Adams, and read much of the material in philosophical theology best suited to help me. This gave me plenty to talk about, and as the occasion called for it (a paper due for a seminar), to write about. But I was never faced with the pointed challenge, directed squarely at me: “Well, so, in light of all that stuff you’ve been reading, but also in light of the horrors of this world, for real now: isn’t it still utterly incredible to suppose there is a wholly good God?” To the extent that anyone approached that question, some lighthearted semi-joking (or fully

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4 All the Power in the World, p. 506.
joking) response about how hard that problem is (“I plan on solving that next quarter”) was enough to satisfy them—or at least to get them to politely act satisfied. Or at least to let the matter go. And I very politely was no longer pressing myself.6

But in the philosophy department conference room at NYU, my luck had run out. I was approaching a moment of truth.

Well, or maybe not. The chairperson of NYU’s philosophy department was visibly upset, I think by the tone of Unger’s line of questioning, and had tried, extremely unsuccessfully, to interrupt and derail it a couple of times. And as soon as the lecture/question was finished, he jumped right in and told me, “You don’t have to answer that.” Reprieve!

But then I heard a surprising response come out of my own mouth: “No, I want to answer it.”

“You’d better have something really good up your sleeve!” I thought at that part of me that had just spoken.

As I started talking, trying to explain how one might believe in a wholly good God in the face of the horrors of our world, two things occurred to me. First, and somehow surprisingly, the things I had read in the previous few years that tried to answer the problem really did seem helpful, and did provide material for significant relief. (And further helpful writings have appeared since then.) My not having to squarely face the big question before had kept me from realizing that. But second, there was no piece of writing that I could point to as really providing that much help by itself. (And that would still be the case today.) I was cobbling various things together, throwing in an idea of my own here and there.

No, I didn’t, and still don’t, have anything great up my sleeve. Well, I will be appealing to some truly great things, as I suppose one has to. But the result won’t be a response to the problem that is “great” in the sense of being extremely effective in a way to make the problem

6 The paper I wrote for the seminar that Marilyn Adams and Bob Adams co-taught on the problem of evil was published a few years later: “Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility, and the Problem of Evil,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 21 (1991): pp. 497-512. There I was writing about the more aggressive, but more easily answered, form of the problem of evil that we will consider in section xx, and that alleges an inconsistency between the existence of the God of standard theism and the existence of any evil at all in the world. I argued that Plantinga’s attempt to deal with such form of the problem were not, as they were widely held to be, successful. So, I was there pushing for a conclusion that falls on the anti-theism side of things. However, my conclusion was very limited, and, by focusing on a limited question concerning a form of the problem of evil that was not its most gripping form (as it doesn’t even get into just how horrible the evils of this world often are), my work on that paper is a good example of how I was able to feel I was “working on the problem [of evil]” without having to face the pointed question that the problem in its most gripping form should have pressed on me.
lose its force. Still, I did in that moment come to think of this problem as something that could and should be squarely faced, and didn’t have to be joked aside. It’s a fearful challenge, but not a clearly destructive steamroller. Or so I think. Well, or at least hope. I’m sure many will vehemently disagree, even after reading what I have to say. But I think the time has come to at least say it.

My audience’s reaction? Well, I did end up getting that job. On the other hand, Unger did later still write what he wrote.

And you, dear reader? Well, I don’t know where you stand with respect to BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR, so it’s very hard to say how you should respond to any of this. Those of you who are completely unimpressed by our “argument from horrific suffering” so far, and can’t see why anyone would find it at all persuasive or even troubling: I’ll try to move you on its power starting in the next section. Even if I fail to get you personally worried, I can perhaps still help you understand how others might find it so gripping, and reasonably so. But supposing we can all get on board in thinking the case can be a powerful one, where to go from there, as we see how the theist or would-be theist might seek relief from this problem, radically depends on where one is coming from. In the extreme case, if you are somehow infallibly certain that (a wholly good) God exists, you might be perfectly rational (well, insofar as your complete certainty of God’s existence is itself rational) in not being worried, at least so far as your own belief goes, in any of this, thinking, “I have absolutely no idea why God allows this awful stuff to happen, and I can see how that could stand in the way of others accepting that God exists, but I am infallibly certain that God does exist, and so that God’s existence is somehow compatible with even the worst things that have happened.” On the other extreme, if you are somehow certain on independent grounds that God does not exist, then none of this will matter to your own stance on theism, either. For some in the middle regions between those two extremes, your ability to embrace or stick with something like BENEVOLENT ALMIGHTY CREATOR may largely hinge on how things turn out here. But even so, where you end up will of course depend on what other grounds you have for and against the claim, in addition to how well, if at all, this problem can be dealt with. But for reasons we will see, I think we can profitably journey together.

As I recall, while NYU’s first choice did turn them down to take another job, the philosophy department convinced the NYU administration to offer me a job before he made his decision, and to hire both of us if we both accepted. I suppose this is further reason to think my presentation was at least not a total flop, though it’s quite possible that I failed badly in responding to Unger’s question, but they decided to ignore that part of the interview.
3. What’s the Problem Here, Anyway?: Just Look at the Horrific Evils of Our World!

First, we must address whether our problem really is so gripping—to the extent that it should challenge the belief of almost any theist. Explanatory note here? I face quite a divide: Aside from how upfront he is about it, even in relevantly “mixed company,” my friend Peter is utterly typical of a very wide swath of skeptics in seeing this challenge from horrific evils as such a killer problem that it decisively settles it that there is no wholly good God. And some theists also immediately and viscerally feel the gripping challenge this problem presents for them. (And we will hear from a couple[keep only if Swinburne added somewhere] of the most prominent of them shortly.) But others often claim to see no good reason whatsoever in all this for thinking there is no wholly good God, and sometimes express bafflement at what that reason might possibly be. These baffled theists in turn, of course, really bewilder those who insist that not only is there a real problem here, but one so bad that it renders belief in God beyond respectable acceptance—and sometimes beyond even respectable discussion.

As our problem is most influentially pressed, most of the attention is usually directed at conveying just how horrific our world is and at making this vivid to the audience. Unger’s attack, described in the previous section, is typical. Skeptics often catalogue some of the major types of horrors that occur in our world, giving their audience a sense of just how widespread and common they are, but they also zoom in on a few particular evils, or a few particular kinds of evils, to describe them in some gruesome detail, in order to give the listener a vivid sense of just how horrific these things are. As in Unger’s telling, the litany of horrors is often peppered with variations on the haunting question: “Wouldn’t a wholly good God have prevented that?”

The focus horrors vary. In a case that has been important in recent philosophical discussions, so to which we will return shortly, William Rowe chooses to highlight an example of intense animal suffering:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

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Rowe’s choice of animal suffering is likely guided by the thought that some of the often-proposed reasons God might have for allowing people to suffer horribly don’t apply (at all, or as smoothly) to animals. And Rowe’s choice of suffering caused by natural events, rather than harm intentionally inflicted by human actions, is likely motivated to choose a case where “free will defenses” seem inapplicable.

But the standard choice of highlighted evils seems usually to be horrific suffering, often at human hands, ending in death, by young human children—children developed enough to not only suffer greatly, but to appreciate how greatly they are suffering, while remaining young enough to be quite innocent and obviously underserving of any great suffering, to have their misery compounded by their complete inability to make any sense of what’s happening to them, and, let’s face it, to trigger our natural instinct to protect young children. (Note that Rowe, though he reaches outside our species for the victim of his focus horror, still chooses a fawn, rather than a full-grown deer.) Focusing on victims of human tormenters does perhaps invite the invocation of the free will defense, but, for reasons we will consider in section xx, the standard free will defense seems quite powerless in the face of such truly horrific suffering, anyway, and the human perpetrator adds an element of interpersonal violation that makes the evil worse and for many intensifies the call on God to intervene.

The massivly best-selling novel The Shack engaged many readers largely because (as its fans will tell you) it “deals with” or “does not back away from” the “hardest” questions/problems facing believers in a good God—where it’s clear that the problem mainly in view is something in the vicinity of our problem of horrific suffering. The novel centers on its narrator’s encounter with God after his already rocky relationship with God is destroyed when his young daughter is abducted and killed, in a grisly and horrific manner. Like Rowe’s fawn, this fictional case is clearly meant to raise to our consideration the many actual cases it approximates.

The speech by Ivan in Dostoevsky’s novel, The Brothers Karamozov, is perhaps the most famous prosecution of our problem, and it focuses largely on the sufferings of young humans. Let me here use David Bentley Hart’s description of the speech. He is comparing it with Voltaire’s Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne (which I suppose should also be mentioned as an example of the pressing of our problem, anyway):

For all its power, however, Voltaire’s poem is a very feeble thing compared to the case for “rebellion” against “the will of God” in human suffering placed in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov by that fervently Christian novelist Dostoevsky; for, while the evils Ivan recounts to his brother Alexey are acts not of impersonal nature but of men, Dostoevsky’s treatment of innocent suffering possesses a profundity of which Voltaire was never even remotely capable. Famously, Dostoevsky supplied Ivan with true accounts of children
tortured and murdered: Turks tearing babies from their mothers’ wombs, impaling infants on bayonets, firing pistols into their mouths; parents savagely flogging their children; a five-year-old-girl tortured by her mother and father, her mouth filled with excrement, locked at night in an outhouse, weeping her supplications to “dear kind God” in the darkness; an eight-year-old serf child torn to pieces by his master’s dogs for a small accidental transgression.9

Ivan comments explicitly on his choice of the young as his focus, as for instance here, where as he relates one of his several accounts (mentioned above in Hart’s summary) of horrific mistreatment of children:

These educated parents subjected the poor five-year-old girl to every possible torture. They beat her, flogged her, kicked her, not knowing why themselves, until her whole body was nothing but bruises; finally they attained to the height of finesse: in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn’t ask to get up and go in the middle of the night (as if a five-year-old child sleeping its sound angelic sleep could have learned to ask by that age)—for that they smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who made her! And this mother could sleep while her poor little child was moaning all night in that vile place! Can you understand that a small creature, who cannot even comprehend what is being done to her, in a vile place, in the dark and the cold, beats herself on her strained little chest with her tiny fist and weeps with her anguished, gentle, meek tears for ‘dear God’ to protect her—can you understand such nonsense, my friend and my brother, my godly and humble novice, can you understand why this nonsense is needed and created? Without it, they say, man could not even have lived on earth, for he would not have known good and evil. Who wants to know this damned good and evil at such a price? The whole world of knowledge is not worth the tears of that little child to ‘dear God.’ I’m not talking about the suffering of grown-ups, they ate the apple and to hell with them, let the devil take them all, but these little ones! I’m tormenting you, Alyoshka, you don’t look yourself. I’ll stop if you wish.10

There’s much going on there, but I would just like to comment on Ivan’s “to hell with them” dismissal of the suffering of adults, and say that one of the many grave problems facing young children who find themselves in our horror-strewn world is attitudes like those of Ivan: that if they survive to that point, they will soon grow up, inevitably “eat the apple,” and perhaps more


10 The Brothers Karamazov (tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), Part II, Book Five, Chapter 4, “Rebellion,” p. 242. I do love Alyosha’s response, which immediately follows the quoted passage: “‘Nevermind, I want to suffer, too,’ Alyosha murmured.”
importantly lose their cuteness, and then they will find that many of their fellows have lost their empathy toward what suffering they are subject to.

In addition to the examples already mentioned, I should also cite the at-least-philosophically-famous example of the presentation (that does not focus on children) that David Hume puts in mouth of his character, Philo (with some help from Demea), in Part 10 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.\(^\text{11}\)

My goal is not to add in any meaningful way to the depictions of the horrors of our world—which is why I instead here lean on the descriptions of others and point you to some noteworthy examples of that. What I’m seeking to address is: Once we have looked in an effective way at the horrors of our world, where does the case go from there?

4. OK, So What’s the Argument, Then?: The “Simple” Argument from Horrific Evils\(^\text{12}\)

Our baffled theists typically don’t deny that the horrors of our world present *some* kind of challenge to their worldview. But they see it as a blunder to suppose the challenge involves any decent reason against accepting the very existence of a good God, since they make it out to rather only point to a certain hole in our understanding of this good God’s ways: “Oh, it’s all truly horrific, I agree, of course! And I don’t mind admitting I have no idea why God allows it all. So I see how all this raises a very vexed question that I can’t answer. And, yes, I can see how that can deeply trouble someone. It does me. But what I’m not seeing is how, beyond raising an unanswerable question of why God operates as God does, any of this produces any *good argument* against the existence of a wholly good God, or good *reason* for thinking that such a God *doesn’t exist*. Just what is the argument supposed to be?”

“Umm...Well....Hmm.” Just what *is* the argument? One might stumble around a bit in response.

\(^{11}\) First published in 1779, after Hume’s death.

\(^{12}\) In seeking to construe the argument from horrific evils in a simple way, and then defending the power of the argument so construed, I take myself to be working along lines similar to those being explored by Trent Dougherty in his championing of what he calls the “The Common Sense Problem of Evil” (see esp. Dougherty’s ms of that title, though some of it is prefigured in Dougherty 2008). I will note important particular points of similarity between our treatments as we proceed: see notes x,x,x. One important difference (well, at least this important to epistemologists like Dougherty and myself) is that I do not, like Dougherty, construe the key premise(s) of the argument as being immediately justified: See note 22.
In what has proven to be an important paper on our problem, in which he goes on to argue that the horrors of our world don’t provide even a weak reason against theism, Stephen Wykstra acknowledges that it can be hard to escape the sense, the “feeling,” that they give us strong reason indeed for rejecting it:

Many of us—believers as well as nonbelievers, car mechanics as well as philosophers—have at some times in our lives felt instances of suffering in this world to be evidence against theism, according to which the universe is the creation of a wholly good Being who loves his creatures, and who lacks nothing in wisdom and power. If it has proven hard to turn this feeling into a good argument, it has, perhaps, proven just as hard to get rid of it.\(^{13}\)

In the absence of a carefully formulated, “good argument” (which we might have to hire a highly-trained—and hopefully reasonably paid—philosopher to produce), are we just left with a feeling here? Perhaps one to be explained away as stemming from our natural frustration over not understanding an aspect of how God operates with great relevance to what may lie ahead for us and our fellow creatures? A feeling that’s difficult to shake, but, insofar as it’s directed at belief in the very existence of a wholly good God, just a feeling, all the same?

Our problem (as I suspect Wykstra might agree\(^ {14}\)) is that the challenge to produce the argument is suckering us into seeking for the wrong kind of thing before being willing to call it a good argument. There is a powerful (perhaps all too powerful) argument against standard theism here, but it is simple and obvious. So simple and obvious that it is understandable why those presenting the problem of horrific suffering would not bother to formulate it, but just focus (as they tend to) on how horrific our world can be; and also so simple that it might fly under the radar screens of those looking for something more sophisticated.

We can start with this very simple “formulation” of our argument by Peter van Inwagen:

We find vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world; if there were a God, we should not find vast amounts of horrendous evil in the world; there is, therefore, no God.\(^ {15}\)

We can divide van Inwagen’s argument into numbered/lettered steps (adding ‘v’s on our labels, to indicate that these are steps from van Inwagen’s formulation, numbering our argument’s premises, and using “C” for its conclusion):

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\(^{15}\) Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, p. 56. I put “formulation” in quotation marks, not because van Inwagen says he’s “formulating” anything here, but to try to capture the sense of the challenger to the existence of any good argument here, who might be wanting to see something “formulated.”
van Inwagen’s Argument from Evil

1v. We find vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world
2v. If there were a God, we should not find vast amounts of horrendous evil in the world
So, C. There is no God

Now you have the argument in premise-and-conclusion form, suitable for a “Critical Reasoning” class!

But before presenting baffled theists with our formulation of the argument for discussion, I think we can tweak it to better capture how the intuitively compelling, but more informal, presentations of the problem operate. (Some readers may think van Inwagen’s argument itself should have been charitably understood as containing the upcoming tweak. But as this argument is our focus, it is worth making sure to capture it as best we can.) van Inwagen’s formulation has the argument proceeding just from the fact that there are “vast” amounts of “truly horrendous” evils in the world. Once an evil passes whatever the threshold is for this, it counts as “truly horrendous,” and once enough such evils pass whatever the threshold is for the world to count as containing “vast amounts” of such evils, 1v is satisfied. If even more truly horrendous evils occur, or if evils not only pass the threshold for counting as “truly horrendous,” but far exceed it, that does not effect this problem for theism, at least so far as van Inwagen’s formulation of it goes.

We can fix this, while retaining much of van Inwagen’s wording, by means of what we can call the following “Simple” argument from horrendous evils—and we will tack an ‘s’ on to our label for the argument’s premise, to indicate it’s the premise from our Simple formulation. Like van Inwagen, we take it that to count as “God,” a being must be perfectly good. And like van Inwagen, our argument is driven by the vast amounts of truly horrendous evils in the world. But our reformulation makes facts about just how truly horrendous these evils are, and just how vast is the amount of such evils, relevant to the strength of the problem that the evil of the world poses for theism. And I think it’s best to actually pare the argument down to one that has just a single premise\textsuperscript{16}:

\textsuperscript{16} Here I break from van Inwagen, and with Rowe (whose formulation we’re about to encounter), and perhaps with standards practice, in not employing two premises, one stating the facts about horrible evils that are being appealed to, and then another stating that those facts would not obtain if there were a (wholly good) God. We could have followed that tradition, I suppose, by using some term, like italicized occurrences of that, to point, as it were, at degrees of horrendousness and of vastness of our world’s evils, and arguing something like the following (as you consider different ways I might have taken this, you might start to get a sense for what’s lost by taking any of the particular possibilities):
The Simple Argument from Horrendous Evils

1s. If there were a God, we should not find the evils that we find in the world, especially including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them. So, C. There is no God.

“There’s your argument!”

“Ah, well, OK, but what’s the argument for that premise, 1s, then?”

“It’s a premise! There’s no argument for it. Then it would be a conclusion.”

5. OK, But What’s the Case for That Premise, Then?

Alright, that last response is too brusque—though there is a good point behind it. Forceful prosecutions of the problem of horrific evils typically spend their energy on confronting us with the horrors of this world, and what I’m proposing is that, insofar as they are challenging the existence of the wholly good God of standard theism, that energy is being expended in support of our 1s (or some claim much like 1s). The simplicity of our argument, together with how the

1s-alt. There is that vast amount of truly horrendous evils in our world, and many of them are that horrendous
2s-alt. If there were a God, there would not be that vast amount of truly horrendous evils in our world, with many of them getting that horrendous
So, C. There is no God.

But I don’t think our intuitive problem is best represented as following from two judgments, one about the nature of the world, and one about whether it would be like that if God existed. I think the problem is best represented as issuing from a single (though I suppose, a bit more complex) comparative judgment, concerning a glaring mismatch between how the world is, and how it would be if there were a God. This I think is best captured by a single premise, like our 1s. Our formulation also makes room for the relevance of features of horrendous evils beyond how horrendous they are. Perhaps some truly horrendous evils, though not being more horrendous than other truly horrendous evils (they’re not particularly horrendous, so far as truly horrendous evils go), do nevertheless have some other special feature which make them particularly hard to square with God’s existence. It will perhaps help if I explain that I take the second half of 1s (starting with the word “especially”) to be in a way idle: The first half of 1s already involves the “the evils that we find in the world,” including those that the “especially” clause highlights. We keep the second half, despite that idleness, because it helpfully calls attention to an important aspect of what’s in the first half—the aspect that provides much of our problem’s kick, at least according to those most moved by horrendous evils. Note, then, that our formulation has the special problem of horrendous evils taken up into the more general problem of squaring the evils of our world with the existence of God, and that other forms of the problem of evil could then be substituted into this scheme, by replacing the “especially” clause of our premise.
matter of just how horrendous our world can get seems relevant to our simple premise, explain why these forceful presentations proceed as they do. But then these presentations do seek to somehow support, or make some kind of case for, that premise, even if they offer no proper argument for it in the form of deeper premises from which the target premise is alleged to follow. In fact, that’s often about all that they do. So let’s scratch that quick and blunt response, and try a different tack:

“Haven’t you been listening? I’ve just spent the last several [pages/minutes] making the case for 1s!”

“OK, then, but what’s your argument for 1s? What are your premises for it? Do you mean to be putting forward all these (true, I admit) claims about the horrors of our world—that this happened, that that happened, that this or that kind of thing happens a lot, etc., and that it’s all so awful—as premises from which you conclude 1s? Because I don’t see how 1s is supposed to follow from all that. Beyond such claims, you ask a lot of questions like ‘Wouldn’t a wholly good God have prevented that?’ But I can’t see how to convert those questions into claims from which, together with your other claims, 1s might plausibly follow. I’m having a very hard time outlining your argument!”

[17] Here I’m mainly seeking to characterize a type of stance one will hear often enough from a certain type of Christian “apologist”—a type that, among other things, bears the marks of having some philosophical training (perhaps a “Critical Reasoning” course, or various skills picked up in philosophy classes). This is part of a wider phenomenon one can observe on social media (among other places), if, I guess, one has the “right” contacts there: argumentative battlers for various causes, set on “winning” whatever argumentative game they take themselves to be playing, using jargon and tools learned in the study of philosophy, whether in defense of religious (or anti-religious), or political/ideological, positions, or other stances. These are the folks who will count the “fallacies” that occur in their opponents’ arguments. And, more to our current concerns, these are the folks who ask what their opponents’ arguments and premises might possibly be, and who then try to “helpfully” clarify their opponents’ arguments by outlining them in premise-and-conclusion form, before attacking them. They find the claim that functions as their opponents’ argumentative starting point that they think is the most vulnerable, and then know to ask something like this about it: “But why in the world should we accept that?” When they are the ones making or defending an argument, they have labeled their most vulnerable starting claim as among their “premises,” and when it comes under scrutiny, know to respond in something like this way (which puts presumption on their side): “Well, like all arguments, mine begins from premises, which others might reject. But my opponent has failed to refute my premise; so that premise stands.” (Yes, I realize that I sound here like a grumpy old man, complaining about the “kids these days.” But sometimes grumpy old men painting with broad brushes have helpful, if caustic, observations to make. Or so I like to think.)

For the most part, I don’t suspect instructors of philosophy classes of teaching their students to carry on in this way. My suspicion (and hope) is rather that these warriors have learned certain things (jargon and tools) from their philosophy training, and that, once they get out onto the “battlefield”, they
No, these claims about the evils of our world are best not construed as premises from which 1s is supposed to follow.

6. But What’s the Case for That Premise, Then?: Rowe’s Appeal and the “Good Cop, Bad Cop” Routine

We instead follow the example of Rowe, whom I already mentioned (remember: he’s the fawn guy), in making the case more effectively.

Rowe formulates his argument in three numbered steps: two premises leading to his atheistic conclusion (we add an ‘r’ to the steps’ labels, to distinguish them from the steps of other formulations of the argument):

Rowe’s Argument from Evil
1r. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2r. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse,
So, Cr. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.18

1r is Rowe’s key premise; it’s in defense of it that Rowe tells us about his fawn, and more generally cites the evils of our world. But Rowe does not call the claims he makes in defense of 1r “premises” from which 1r is supposed to follow—and, more importantly, as I’ll quickly figure out how to use these things to so battle their “enemies”—and/or learn this from argumentative warriors who went before them.

But while I am characterizing a stance one will mainly encounter in non-academic settings, one can find it professional philosophy, too. For me, the prime example of this (or at least of the trying to figure out an opponent’s argument might be, in decidedly unhelpful ways) is Alvin Planting’s response to Rowe’s argument from horrific evil (that I have already mentioned, and will return to soon) in Plantinga’s paper, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil,” Philosophical Studies 35 (1979) pp. 1-53. However, I should draw attention to the age of that paper (it’s from 1979), and report that Plantinga has displayed a refreshingly better attitude toward the “case,” as he puts it, from horrific suffering in more recent work, as we will see in sections xxxx, where I wrestle with Plantinga’s response to our problem.

18 William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," American Philosophical Quarterly 16 (1979): 335-341; p. 336. Rowe’s formulation points to “intense,” rather than “horrific” or “horrendous” suffering, but when he starts pointing to instances to back up his claims, it becomes clear that the instances of intense suffering he has in mind can be well characterized by our h-words.
explain, he doesn’t *treat* them as premises, either. He instead issues these claims, along with some related reasoning, and then *appeals* to us to evaluate his premise, 1r, in light of them. How does that work, and how does it differ from advancing premises of a proper argument from which 1r is supposed to follow?

Let’s look. Here again is Rowe’s fawn, but also now what follows it:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn's suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn's suffering been prevented. Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented the fawn's apparently pointless suffering? The answer is obvious, as even the theist will insist. An omnipotent, omniscient being could have easily prevented the fawn from being horribly burned, or, given the burning, could have spared the fawn the intense suffering by quickly ending its life, rather than allowing the fawn to lie in terrible agony for several days. Since the fawn's intense suffering was preventable and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn't it appear that premise 1r of the argument is true, that there do exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse? (Rowe, p. 337)

Note the nature of the appeal Rowe makes on behalf of 1r. After citing his example, he discusses it a bit, and even does some reasoning (as I think it’s fair to call it) concerning evil and its relation to 1r. But instead of claiming that 1r follows from some deeper claims he is using in as “premises” in his reasoning, in the last sentence of the above, he instead asks us: In light of his example, and probably also his discussion of it, including claims that he puts forward in support of his premise, “doesn’t it appear that” his premise is right?

Rowe then broadens out the considerations he’s raising, and asks us to consider 1r in light of “all the instances of seemingly pointless human and animal suffering that occur daily in our world,”19 before returning to his evaluation of 1r, which no longer employs just a mild questioning appeal,20 but has become something of a “good cop, bad cop” routine, with some

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19 Rowe, p. 337, emphasis in the original.
20 Note that while Rowe does say that something “obvious” in the quotation above, it is not his premise, but a claim he makes in the course of defending that premise, namely, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented the fawn’s suffering, by which he seems to mean only that such a being would have the power to have done so, however bad an idea it might or might not be do exercise that power.
much more assertive (note especially the “extraordinarily absurd” part), “bad cop” parts mixed
in. Rowe asks whether it is reasonable to resist 1r in light of all that horrible suffering he has
just mentioned, and answers:

And surely the answer to this more general question must be no. It seems quite unlikely that
all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the
 occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad; and even more
 unlikely, should they somehow all be so related, than an omnipotent, omniscient being could
 not have achieved at least some of those goods (or prevented some of those evils) without
 permitting the instances of intense suffering that are supposedly related to them. In the light
 of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in
 our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent
 being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an
 extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. It seems then that although we cannot
 prove that [1r] is true, it is, nevertheless, altogether reasonable to believe that [1r] is true, that
 [1r] is a rational belief.21  (pp. 337-338)

Mixed in here with his more assertive language, Rowe is still appealing to his readers to note an
appearance—here phrased in repeated talk about what “seems” to be.

7. “Making the Case” for the Premise of the Simple Argument from Horrific
Evils

I propose we understand presentations of the problem of horrendous evils as similarly
appealing to the audience to consider 1s, or something much like 1s, in light of the evils of our
world that our skeptics are pointing to. They confront us with evils of this world and then ask
us, sometimes with some associated reasoning, and often urgently: Doesn’t it seem that if
there were a wholly good God, we should not find the evils that we find in the world, especially
including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them? In
other words: Doesn’t 1s appear to be true?

The distinction I’m seeking to make between more generally “making a case” for a claim
and more specifically offering an argument for a conclusion in the form of premises from which

21 Rowe, pp. 337-338. Toward the bottom of this passage, how Rowe’s article actually reads is that the
denial of his premise in “an extraordinary absurd idea”. In part because there is no comma between
the two adjectives there, my best guess is that this is some kind of misprint, and the phrase should be: “an
extraordinarily absurd idea,” as I have rendered it.
that conclusion is supposed to follow may seem subtle—perhaps suspiciously so. But we can make good sense of it by starting with the more general type of case, and asking when such a case becomes a proper argument.

Imagine someone just “making a case” for there not being any (wholly good) God, having not yet presented any “proper argument” for that conclusion. In the course of making their atheistic case, they make a lot of claims, some, but perhaps not all, of them about the evils of our world, that they think militate against the existence of God and that they hope their audience will agree with. They may also explain a bit why they think those facts militate against the existence of God.

Well, if they are making claims in support of God’s non-existence and also explaining how they think those claims support their contention that God does not exist, are they not arguing against God’s existence? Indeed they are, on a (and perhaps the) perfectly good and ordinary use of “argue.” And we can well call the contention that God does not exist the “conclusion” of this “reasoning”—as we should be happy to call what they are doing. But importantly, they are not yet giving what we are narrowly calling a “proper argument,” in the form of premises from which their conclusion is supposed to follow. That’s the key here: Our case-maker is not alleging that their conclusion follows from some set of claims they are making. Rather, they are making claims, and engaging in some reasoning concerning them, but then, instead of claiming that God’s existence follows from some of their claims, they are appealing to us to consider God’s existence in light of their claims and the reasoning they have offered, and asking us, in light of all that: Doesn’t it seem that, doesn’t it appear that, their conclusion is right?

Such a case could be quite effective. Perhaps the considerations advanced really do create, and quite rationally so, at least for many who consider the matter, a strong appearance that God does not exist. And if it does create such a strong appearance for someone, and they thereby come to believe that God doesn’t exist, this belief will likely be at least partially based on some of the claims made in the case that moved them. But just how that conclusion is

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22 This point is pivotal to the point of difference between Dougherty and myself over whether such a belief in the conclusion of such a “case” is immediately justified, i.e., justified in a way that does not involve its being based on other beliefs. I think such beliefs are best construed as being based on others (usually including some of those cited in the making of the “case”) via an inference that, if it is made at all, is not made consciously, and often cannot be explicitly stated by the believer themselves. Dougherty, by contrast, sees such a belief as not being based on inference at all. This seems to be due to Dougherty’s deep general suspicion of “unconscious inferences.” And I might be happy enough to cede the matter of whether there’s an unconscious “inference” here to Dougherty. For me, the crucial question concerns when one belief is based on others. This crucial question is also often exceedingly tricky, especially where there is no process of inference that the believer is aware of. One thing I think it makes sense to look for before ruling in such a case that one belief is based on others is if, in holding
based on those claims may not be fully articulated. The connection may be loose, hard to
specify, and may involve other, likely unidentified, beliefs that are lurking in the background.
That’s why our contender didn’t claim their conclusion follows just from any of the claims they
explicitly made in support of it: because, likely, it doesn’t! (And if you “help them out” by
“clarifying” their argument, and present it as if their conclusion is supposed to follow from
some of those claims, you are “setting up a straw man,” as I think it’s put in “Critical Reasoning”
classes. Or is it a “straw person” these days?) Still, it is utterly common for us to be able to
reasonably judge that some considerations, perhaps with the aid of background beliefs that we
share but can’t yet identify, support some conclusion—perhaps strongly, perhaps even with
overwhelming strength—before we can say just how they do.23

Perhaps for other listeners, the case fails, either because they don’t see the
considerations put forward as really militating so strongly, or perhaps at all, against the
existence of God, or perhaps because they think other considerations militate even more
strongly in favor of God’s existence. In the latter case, if these pro-God considerations are put
forward by our skeptic’s opponent, we might soon arrive at an interesting discussion, which in
perfectly good English would be described as a two-way “argument,” and perhaps a heated one
at that, with two sides advocating for opposing claims, each advancing many considerations
that they think push toward their claim, appealing to each other, and perhaps to a wider
audience, in light of the considerations they have pointed out, “Don’t I seem right?” But since
both sides are just asking us to consider their desired conclusion in light of the considerations
they have raised, and are not claiming that their conclusion follows from some of their claims,
which function as their “premises,” we still have no proper argument, in the restricted sense we
are using, on either side of this discussion.

But sometimes, a more focused line of reasoning will emerge from the wider tangle of
such a case, and an arguer will see how some of the considerations they are urging lend
particularly powerful support to a small group of claims from which their desired conclusion

that first belief, the believer is sensitive to the support provided for it by those other beliefs, where such
sensitivity consists in such facts as that the believer wouldn’t hold that first belief, or at least wouldn’t
hold it to the degree that she does, were it not for the evidential support provided for it by those others.
One could be in that way sensitive to the support relations that hold among one’s beliefs even where
one gives no conscious thought to those relations, and yet it seems to me that epistemic justification
might well be transmitted from some beliefs to others in virtue of such sensitivity to relations of
support. For an idea of some of the considerations that I think are involved, see my discussion of
whether “I am not a brain-in-a-vat” is typically based on our ordinary perceptual beliefs, or is instead
immediately justified/known, in Chapter 7, esp. sects. 18-20, and super-esp. sect. 19, of (DeRose 2017).
23 As Wykstra nicely puts this point, in defense of Rowe, one’s conclusion in such a case “rests upon
some tacit inference; but the evidential import of some things is more readily ‘seen’ than ‘shown’; and
the ‘appears’ idiom concerning us is characteristically used for just such things” (Wykstra, p. 80).
does follow. It may be wise to then focus on the support these particular claims lend to the desired conclusion by taking them to be premises of a proper argument to that conclusion. Though this argument can still be seen as part of a larger overall cumulative case for its conclusion, insofar as we focus on the argument in question, our arguer is no longer appealing to us to agree that their desired conclusion appears to be true in light of all the considerations they are bringing forward, but is placing special focus on a set of claims—their argument’s “premises”—from which they claim that their desired conclusion follows, and are instead, for now, appealing to us whether those premises seem to be right. And then they might make a “case” for those premises, which case might not be a proper argument for them.

Why do that? Well, they may think that this set of claims from which their desired conclusion does follow is such that each of the claims gives, or can be made to give, a particularly strong appearance of being true. If so, the special focus would be wise.

That’s how we should view our Simple argument from horrific evils—though it’s a special case where the set of claims which function as premises consists of just a single claim. From among the tangle of considerations which can seem to militate against the existence of God, what seems to be a particularly powerful line of thought, at least to the backers of the argument, runs through 1s, from which the atheistic conclusion follows, and which, according to fans of the argument, in light of various facts about the evils of our world, does give a very powerful (perhaps even overwhelmingly powerful) appearance of being true.

The case for 1s can be given in a variety of ways—some of which we have been looking at, and will continue to consider in the following section. But to the question: “Well then, what’s your argument for 1s, what are your premises from which 1s is supposed to follow?,” our skeptics’ answer is: We’re not giving that kind of “proper argument” for 1s. We are making the case for 1s by means primarily of a heavily guided tour of some of our world’s horrors, and then appealing to you: Doesn’t 1s appear to be true?

8. A Very Powerful Appearance, A Very Powerful Argument

Appearances can seem feeble things: “mere appearances,” as we might say. We usually say something “seems” or “appears” to be so when we don’t feel in a position to flat-out declare that they are so. And the most proverbial thing we know about appearances is that they can be deceptive. How solid, and how compelling, can our premise, and then our argument, be if it is based on an appearance?
Well, some of us, myself included, think that all we know about the world, including the things we know most solidly, are ultimately based on appearances. According to this “phenomenal conservatism,” as it’s known in the philosophy, in developing our view of the world and our place in it, we all start with some appearances, play them off of each other, getting rid of some as deceptive, but, thankfully, finding many of them to fit together well to form a good, coherent picture of what the world is like. Because much of the resulting picture fits together so well, and incorporates incoming experience so well, we end up knowing many things, some of them being things we know very solidly indeed, and being very justified in many of our beliefs—despite it all being ultimately based on appearances.²⁴

Admittedly, the question of what we so “start with,” and what our knowledge of the world is “ultimately based on,” is an extremely tricky one, and this “phenomenal conservatism” provides only a controversial answer to it. Thankfully, though (since I don’t think anything like 1s could be one of our ultimate “starting points”), good arguments to substantial and interesting philosophical conclusions don’t have to—and I think almost never do—reach so far back into the cognitive mists as to begin exclusively from where our knowledge of the world ultimately begins, but instead make use of appearances that emerge some distance down the cognitive road.²⁵ Where its conclusion is indeed substantial and interesting, any philosophical argument will have at least one premise—let’s say its most controversial and shaky premise—that is itself interesting and substantial.²⁶ And potentially deniable.²⁷ And what can be said for

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²⁴ PC note – stating that my presentation of the view here bears the marks of my particular take on it. Note that MH doesn’t seem to commit to what I’m calling PC
²⁵ I should perhaps here cancel any suggestion that if we could dig down to where our knowledge of the world begins, we would then be starting from something unusually, much less unshakably, solid, for I suspect the appearances we begin with are mostly quite uncertain, shaky ones, that do give rise to all our knowledge, including some very certain knowledge, only after a lot of playing these appearances off each other, and so quite a ways down the cognitive road toward our picture of the world.
²⁶ Xx need a note that I’m construing arguments so that their premises entail their conclusions? If an argument is not of this form -- and its controversial aspects concern whether the conclusion really follows from the premises, rather than in the truth of the premises -- it can be converted to the needed form by adding conditional bridge premises, which will then bear the weight of the controversy
²⁷ “So much the worse for philosophical arguments!”—I can hear the response. And I do agree that philosophical arguments generally aren’t strong enough to produce anything close to knowledge of their conclusions. In fact, though I don’t think this could provide an exception-free definition, I think there is something to a characterization of philosophers as specialists in addressing some of the questions we find important, but which nobody has yet figured out a knowledge-producing way to get answers to, generating answers to such questions, and good (even if not knowledge-producing) support for those answers—sometimes in the form of “proper arguments” for these conclusions, and sometimes by means of other “cases” for them. None of this is to put philosophy down. Philosophy is wonderful—and in large part precisely because it deals with those important but hard questions. (And I think there’s something to the idea that once we get to the point that philosophy is producing actual knowledge about a topic, then the area of philosophy that deals with the area is likely to break off and no longer be
such a premise? Well, one can offer a proper argument for it, but then it becomes a conclusion (or a sub-conclusion: a claim that one provides an argument for, but that then one uses to argue for further conclusions), with premises supposedly leading to it, and not a starting premise of one’s argument, and what I’m claiming here is that at least one of those starting premises will be substantial and deniable. And what can our arguer do in defense of their shakiest starting premise, other than to present it in its best light, perhaps asking their audience to evaluate it in light of certain considerations (which of course are not construed as premises from which the starting premise is supposed to follow, in which case our starting premise wouldn’t be a starting premise), and appeal to their audience, to us, in light of the considerations adduced: Doesn’t that seem right? Doesn’t it appear to be true?

Such appearances can be very strong: Sometimes it really seems that something is the case. Insofar as philosophical arguments for substantial conclusions go, where the shakiest of the starting premises are ones whose credentials are that they give a strong appearance of being true, so far from being a feeble argument based on “mere appearances,” that’s the good case! That’s what the best of our arguments are like. Would that more of them had such claims as their shakiest starting points! And those pushing our problem of horrendous evils often think their case is that powerful. Rowe, for example, starts the last of the passages indented above by asserting that his premise’s answer to the question it’s directed at “must” be right, then softens a bit by saying “it seems quite unlikely” that it’s wrong, but soon gathers enough conviction to declare that its denial is “an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.” Such an aggressive declaration rhetorically clears the way for the meek (“good cop”) claim that follows, that his premise is “reasonable to believe,” making it seem a generous understatement.

Such a defense can also (and I think even better) be applied to the premise of our “Simple” argument and its key (and only) premise. To appreciate the power our problem has for many, and perhaps to also begin to feel its power in your own thinking, you may find it helpful to imagine encountering in person a Rowe (or an Unger, or an Ivan), moved by the horrors of our world to declare the likes of that “there is just no way” that a wholly good God would have allowed all that. It may even help to imagine them getting more verbally aggressive, and stating forcefully how absurd it strikes them that there might be a God actually allowing that, and that, and all that. Perhaps even ridiculing the very idea that there is a wholly good God who has actually decided to let that — I mean look at it: that! — happen. We may often respond to such verbal bullying very defensively, but sometimes I think it does help to appreciate the power of a claim to see how someone else can find it, not just plausible, but

thought of as philosophy.) Philosophy is sometimes attacked as a waste of time for dealing with such questions, but quite inconveniently, those making such an attack appear to be engaging in philosophy in the very making of the attack — and often not very well! (I suppose it’s no great surprise that those who don’t value an activity tend not to be so good at it.)
overwhelmingly powerful—and then perhaps ask how horrible things would have to get before you would find the case powerful, too. And having imagined such a convicted display, one can then evaluate how reasonable our skeptics might seem in then stepping back into “good cop” mode, and simply saying that, well, it sure seems to them that if there were a God, we should not find the evils that we find in the world, especially including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them.

It might also help to get comparative and imagine them asking for what philosophical arguments for substantial and interesting conclusions you do like, and then critically comparing the shakiest of the starting premises of your darling with 1s in terms of which gives the more secure appearance of being true. Though I don’t know what your favorite argument is, and so can only be so confident of this, I have to guess that I would have a lot of sympathy for the claim of our Rowe-ish character were they to say, “Wow, I find 1s a whole lot more powerful than that!” Or a bit more snarkily: “Wow, after all your complaints about 1s, that’s what you do find powerful? Really?!” This guess of course is based on my judgment that 1s is extremely intuitively powerful for the shakiest premise of a philosophical argument to a substantial and interesting conclusion. And since it is our Simple argument’s only premise, and since that argument’s conclusion really does follow from it, that would make our Simple argument a powerful philosophical argument.

One of the most powerful I know.

9. Against Aggressive Skeptical Theism

Section in progress I’m hoping that by now, if you are not feeling the power of our argument from horrific evils in your own thinking, you’re at least understanding how others could. And to the extent that you are unmoved by it, I’m hoping that that’s because you have in mind certain explanations for why God might allow horrific suffering that you think this argument is failing to consider, and not because you just can’t understand what the argument is supposed to be in the first place if it’s to be any good.

And we will pursue accounts of why God might have allowed the evils of our world. But are such accounts needed? In this section and the one that follows, we will consider and defang two prominent attacks that try to show that, even before we give any such accounts, arguments like ours really don’t really cause any trouble for theism.
We start with Skeptical Theism, which responds to arguments from evil against God’s existence by appealing to human cognitive limitations, and, in particular, to our limited perspective on what God’s reasons for allowing evils might be. In weak forms, skeptical theism is just plain good sense: any treatment of the problem of evil should recognize that our perspective on what reasons an omniscient God might have for allowing evils would have to be quite limited. But aggressive forms of skeptical theism, on which such skeptical considerations are held to completely or nearly completely disarm arguments from evil like ours, have been prominent in recent analytic philosophy of religion—and tap into some intuitively tempting lines of thought. In this section, I explain why I think the attack of such aggressive skeptical theism fails. Seeing how it fails will help clarify the basis for the argument from evil.

Basic idea behind ST is certainly correct, and can provide some relief

Esp. if accompanied by an explanation of hiddenness

Target is “aggressive ST”, which attempts to show that our argument doesn’t provide a very good reason for doubting theism

Answering it will clarify the case for 1S: It’s not just based on a “noseeum” premise!

CORNEA, and how it can be passed with a better account of what our premise is based on

10. “Probabilistic” Arguments from Evil and What Plantinga Gets Right about Them

We must now grapple with the ace defender of theism, both in general, and in particular from problems of evil, Alvin Plantinga. In particular, we must consider Plantinga’s attack on arguments from evil like our “Simple argument” in his influential paper “The Probabilistic Problem of Evil” (henceforth “PPE”), and updated in some later works. Note needs to be reworked, maybe re-placed?

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28 Plantinga, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil,” Philosophical Studies 35 (1979): 1-53. Note that this is 21 years earlier than Plantinga’s WCB, which we were looking at the previous section. As I noted, in WCB Plantinga seemed to have warmed somewhat to the “case” for atheism that could be mounted from the evils of our world. However, I don’t think he ever backed down from his attack in PPE – and certainly, if you try to advance a “probabilistic” argument from evil, and you don’t address Plantinga’s
Plantinga opens PPE by introducing the label “atheologian” for those who offer arguments against God’s existence (p. 1), and he then gives a brief history of atheology, writing that “The vast majority of those who offer an atheological argument from evil have held that the existence of evil (or of the amount and kind we find) is inconsistent with the existence of a wholly good, omniscient and omnipotent God,” but then relates that atheologians have generally since retreated from such bold charges of inconsistency to what he calls “the probabilistic argument from evil”:

More recently, however, those who make an atheological argument from evil have conceded that the existence of evil may be logically consistent with that of God; nevertheless, the former renders the latter unlikely, or improbable, or provides evidence against it, or gives a good reason for accepting its denial. (PPE, p. 1)

Our “simple” argument, along with van Inwagen’s and Rowe’s arguments are all such “probabilistic” arguments, as opposed to the old-style “deductive” arguments, and so fall would fall in the scope of Plantinga’s attack, though Rowe’s is the only one that was around when he wrote, and so the only one he explicitly addressed. (Plantinga had previously attacked deductive arguments in other works. Indeed, his attack may be largely responsible for the retreat of at least some atheologians to the less aggressive arguments. It is widely reported to be responsible for that retreat.) And certainly an atheologian who endorsed any one of our probabilistic arguments would think that it “gives a good reason for accepting” the non-existence of God. Is there anything in Plantinga’s attack to show that they’re wrong to think so?

First, we must address the scheme of classification here. None of our “probabilistic” arguments actually have anything about probability in their formulations, so one might wonder how they earn the label, and also what holds them together. To see the difference between deductive and probabilistic arguments, consider:

The Classic Deductive Argument from Evil
1d. Evils exist
2d. An omniscient and perfectly good being eliminates every evil it can eliminate
3d. An omniscient and omnipotent being can eliminate every evil
So, C. There is no God
“God” in the conclusion here denotes the God of standard theism, who is by definition perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient, which is why the non-existence of such a being follows from the premises of the argument: If such a being existed, it would have both the ability and the will to eliminate all evils (or so the argument’s second and third premises claim), so there would be no evil whatsoever; and since there is evil, we can conclude that there is no such God. We can now contrast this “deductive” argument with the three “probabilistic” arguments we have considered (reproduced here for convenience):

van Inwagen’s Argument from Evil
1v. We find vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world
2v. If there were a God, we should not find vast amounts of horrendous evil in the world
So, C. There is no God

Rowe’s Argument from Evil
1r. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2r. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse,
So, Cr. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

The Simple Argument from Horrendous Evils
1s. If there were a God, we should not find the evils that we find in the world, especially including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them.
So, C. There is no God.

It’s vital to observe that none of our probabilistic arguments explicitly conclude just that God probably doesn’t exist. Instead, like the deductive argument, their conclusion is simply that God does not exist. (Rowe explicitly spells out the properties of God that are in question, while the other arguments build that into how they are using the term “God.”) What’s more, like their deductive cousin, the premises of our probabilistic arguments are supposed to logically (deductively) imply this simple atheistic conclusion. What’s the difference, then?

The difference is in the nature of the premises. Atheologians who peddle the classic deductive argument think that their premise 1d, which simply reports that there is evil, is inconsistent (as Plantinga puts it) with the claim that such a God exists. They may similarly claim that there is a contradiction in holding that both evils and God exist. In keeping with such claims, they think that the only other premises they need to get from that premise to their atheistic conclusion—2d and 3d—simply unpack the meaning of the key terms in their argument (“perfectly good,” “omnipotent,” and “omniscient”), so that the very meaning of the
terms involved rule out there being both God and evil. In its evil-reporting premise, this classic argument appeals only to the fact that there are some evils or others, no matter how few, how small, or of what kind. One could beef up that premise to one that appeals to something about the amounts and kinds of evils that exist, and still be offering a “deductive” argument, if the premises of one’s argument are still only a) reports of the evils our world contains and b) premises that simply unpack the meanings of the key terms in one’s argument: that way, one will hold that the existence of the evils mentioned in one’s evil-reporting premise are logically inconsistent with the existence of God.

Our probabilistic arguments are not like that. van Inwagen’s first premise is just a report about the evil of our world. Unlike the classic deductive argument, he relies not just on there being some evils or other, but on the fact that there are “vast amounts of truly horrendous evil in the world.” But if he could somehow get from that premise to the non-existence of God by using only other premises that simply unpacked the meanings of key terms, he would be advancing a deductive argument to show that it’s inconsistent to accept both that there are vast amounts of truly horrendous evils and that God exists. But that’s not his goal. His second premise offers a judgment that atheologians pushing his argument will find plausible (or perhaps even compelling), but there is no pretension that it simply unpacks the meanings of some of the terms involved in the argument. Rowe’s argument and our Simple argument don’t even offer a premise that is just a report of the evils in our world, much less do they propose to get from such a report to the non-existence of God just by the meanings of any terms used in the arguments. So none of our probabilistic arguments purport to show any contradiction or inconsistency between God and evils (or of evils of certain amounts or kinds).

But they do still aim to show that God does not exist. And those who endorse them do think they provide good reason for accepting that atheistic conclusion.

So, again, does Plantinga’s attack show that such probabilistic arguments fail to so “give a good reason” for atheism? Or even that they fail to give an exceedingly powerful reason for atheism? Things very quickly fly off the rails. Though the atheologian I’m defending falls squarely in Plantinga’s announced intended range, Plantinga’s punches seem only to strike things that they aren’t saying. And it’s not just a matter of whether our atheologian uses forms of the word “probable”; there’s a more serious disconnect here.

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29 We will later see reasons for thinking this argument does not work, but those who find the matter urgent can right now think about the kinds of considerations that might make one retreat from 2d to something like Rowe’s more limited premise 2r, and then consider whether it really follows just from something’s being perfectly good that it eliminates every evil it knows about and can eliminate.

30 Note on how Pvi says he doesn’t think it’s even worth responding to the deductive arg
Plantinga cheekily construes the atheologian as utilizing the claim:

E  There are $10^{13}$ turps of evil,

continuing: “where the turp is the basic unit of evil, so that ‘$10^{13}$ turps’ is a name of the evil, past, present, and future, the actual world (call it ‘α’) contains” (PPE, p. 2). So Plantinga’s atheologian is appealing to the amount of evil the world will ever contain. Our atheologian is appealing not to just how much evil there is, but on what a lot of it is like, but let’s let that pass. The real problem here is still coming. Not being one of those old-style ones, the “atheologian” Plantinga is dealing with here does not claim that E is logically inconsistent with

G  God exists and is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.

Instead:

[T]he probabilistic argument contends that E is evidence against G, or that given E, is unlikely that G is true. (p. 2)

This may be alright so far. I mean, as we’ve noted, our atheologian’s argument is simply for the conclusion that God does not exist, with nothing explicitly in that conclusion about either evidence or unlikelihood. But in advancing that argument, our atheologian certainly intends to convey that the evil of our world is “evidence against G,” and also that (as I’ve already said) it provides us with good reason to reject G, whether or not they care to pronounce on the overall likelihood of G. So, this may be characterizing them well so far, if this is an easy-going “or” (which can be satisfied by satisfying either of the items the “or” connects; the other reading would be the “or” of reformulation—the “or in other words” “or”). But then Plantinga’s punches begin to miss our atheologian wildly; immediately following the above, we read:

And we shall have to ask why the atheologian thinks this is so; what is his reason for thinking G is improbable with respect to E? But before we ask that question, let’s suppose, for the moment, that the probabilistic atheologian is right and that the fact is, G is improbable on E. What is supposed to follow from that? How is that to be construed as an objection to theistic belief? How does the atheologian’s argument go from there? It doesn’t follow, of course, that theism is false. Nor does it follow that one who accepts both G and E (and, let’s add, recognizes that G is improbable with respect to E) has an irrational system of beliefs or is in any way guilty of noetic impropriety. For it could be, of course, that G is improbable with respect to E but probable with respect to something else we know. (p. 2)

Wait a minute! How did our atheologian get into the business of accusing theists of having “an irrational system of beliefs” or of being “guilty of noetic impropriety”? Of course, some may make such charges. But is an atheologian who does not go there—who does not get into
charging (all?) those who disagree with him of irrationality—off the hook, so far as Plantinga’s attack goes?

Things get worse. After an illustration to that show that one claim can indeed be improbable on another, yet still be probable on something else that one might know (which we should all grant), Plantinga continues:

What the atheologian must show, if he wants to show that there is a viable objection to theism here, is that on some relevant body of total evidence—his own, perhaps, or the theist’s, or perhaps a body of total evidence shared by all those who are party to the dispute—G is improbable. If he could show that G is improbable on his own total evidence, the atheologian could show that he has a good reason for rejecting theism; if he could show that G is improbable on the theist’s total evidence then he could show, perhaps, that the theist is irrational or guilty of noetic impropriety in accepting G.

So the atheologian must show that G is improbable with respect to the relevant body of total evidence, whatever exactly that is. To do this, he would be obliged to consider all the sorts of reasons natural theologians have invoked in favor of theistic belief—the traditional cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments, for example. He would also have to consider more recent versions of the moral argument as developed, for example, by A. E. Taylor, and still more recently by Robert Adams, along with the sorts of broadly inductive arguments...

Alright, let’s cut that off (mid-sentence) right there. How did we get to the point that our atheologian cannot be offering a decent argument against God’s existence unless they have (as part of that argument?) considered and countered every argument offered for the opposing view?

Plantinga has somehow saddled his atheological opponents with the burdens of showing that their conclusion is likely on some body of total evidence, which would require them to counter every argument against them before their own argument can be any good; and of showing that those who disagree with them are irrational.

And here is what Plantinga gets right about probabilistic arguments from evil: Though I haven’t construed the atheologist as trying to do so, I readily agree with Plantinga that probabilistic-argument-wielding-atheologists have not met those burdens that Plantinga has assigned to them: Atheologians have not by means of such arguments shown that their own arguments are better than all the arguments that are on the other side of the issue, nor that theists who disagree with them are irrational. And I also readily grant that there are good considerations in Plantinga’s work for saying that atheologians have failed to show such things.
11. After Plantinga’s Attack: Our Still Extremely Powerful “Probabilistic” Argument from Evil

But boy howdy, those would be tough things to show! And not just on the matter at hand: If you somehow get maneuvered into the position that you must meet such burdens in order to be credited with having a good argument for your side on any controversial matter, I’m just going to give you up for dead. (So while, as I said, I find that Plantinga has helpful things to say in arguing that atheologians have not met these burdens, that is all in service of a conclusion that I would have been inclined to just spot him from the get-go anyway, on completely general grounds.) And, yes, that holds in the special case of the atheologian’s opponent: If in presenting arguments in favor of God’s existence (one of Plantinga’s favorite activities, it seems) theists have to counter all arguments for atheism before their argument is a decent one, or are somehow necessarily dragged into the project of charging atheists (perhaps all of them?) with irrationality, I’m going to find their cause hopeless, too.31

Here’s the problem: That there is a good (or successful, or cogent, or powerful, or even very powerful) argument for some conclusion, by itself, doesn’t show anything about the rationality of believing that conclusion, or the irrationality of failing to believe that conclusion, or of believing the opposite of that conclusion. For all that, there could possibly be other, even more powerful arguments, or other powerful rational considerations, pointing against your conclusion. And how could you rule that out? I suppose the most natural way to get from the existence of even a very powerful argument for some claim to the conclusion that it’s rational to believe that claim, and/or irrational to believe that the claim is false, would appeal to there being no arguments close to as powerful that point away from your claim (and good luck with actually showing that, no matter how right you are about it), together with some principle

31 Plantinga thinks that the old-style, “deductive” argument from evil, if it worked at all, would work in a way that would relieve its backers from having to consider arguments for God’s existence: “Herein lies the beauty of the deductive argument from evil (from the atheological point of view); if that argument could only be made to work the putative favorable evidence could be gracefully ignored” (pp. 3-4). Perhaps some arguments in favor of God’s existence are of that type as well, then? However, if I have a good sense of the type in question, this would apply to only a few theistic arguments, and not really the best ones. At any rate, I don’t buy these different treatments of the two types of arguments. If the “deductive” argument from evil did work, it would derive God’s non-existence from reports about the evils in our world together with analyses of the meaning of the attributes being assigned to God (omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness). But even if we did happen to hit upon the correct analyses of those attributes, and demonstrated God’s non-existence from our world’s evils along with those correct analyses, I would still think that, being human, and so fallible on matters of analysis of terms, as well as on other matters, we’d still have to harbor some worry that we got those analyses wrong, and so would be open to claims that we should consider counter-arguments, especially if we were throwing around charges of irrationality.
connecting rational belief with arguments (and good luck with that, too). But what a tough argumentative row to hoe!

But then, since the above holds even for extremely powerful arguments, merely making the case that some opponent hasn’t by means of their argument met the unreasonable burdens in question doesn’t show that their argument isn’t a good one—nor even that it isn’t extremely powerful.

Nor even that it isn’t in fact (despite your opponent’s inability to show this) so powerful as to render belief in its conclusion rational and disbelief irrational for anyone who encounters the argument with a somewhat open mind toward its conclusion. Really setting this off not only as a sentence unto itself, but as a paragraph?!

So, to echo the close of section 8, undisturbed by Plantinga’s attack, I still maintain that our Simple argument against God’s existence from horrific evils is one of the most powerful philosophical arguments for a controversial conclusion that I know, powerful enough to cause me to wonder how belief in the God of standard theism can be rational in its face.

12. **Plantinga on the Powerful Non-Argument from Horrific Evils:**
   “Isn’t It Just Apparent, Just Evident?”

I realize I have raised many questions for some readers about how atheologians (and perhaps me, too) get off impugning (or in my case, questioning) the rationality of theists without showing them to be irrational. And, yes, about my own insinuations about the power of our atheological argument. And also about my fairness to Plantinga: Why wonder how atheologians ever got into the business of charging theists with irrationality? Haven’t they—or at least many of them—put themselves in that business? Aren’t they an aggressive bunch? Haven’t many of them in fact made such charges? We will take a look at the stance of aggressive atheologians who can’t show their charges to be right, and I will also explain my own stance, in the next section.

But first: having just explained why I think Plantinga fails in PPE to show that our argument from horrific evils isn’t a powerful one, I want to actually enlist (or, I suppose, conscript) Plantinga’s aid in making the case for the power of the argument from horrendous evils. This move may be surprising to those who know Plantinga’s work, since he has never sounded very impressed by anything he’s called an argument from evil that’s anything like the one that we’re considering, though he has spent much energy dealing with such arguments.
Nevertheless, though he would not himself categorize what he’s doing in these terms, I think that in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* (henceforth “WCB”), Plantinga himself in essence makes a presentation of our argument from horrendous evils—and quite effectively.

After countering some attempts at arguments from evil, Plantinga suggests that perhaps no argument is needed:

Perhaps the defeating power of these facts in no way depends on the existence of a good antitheistic argument (deductive, inductive, abductive, probabilistic, whatever) from the facts of evil. (WCB, p. 482)

In showing how this “defeat” might work, Plantinga starts to convey the horrors of our world that such a non-argument (as we might call it) might use, and in doing so, he sounds a lot like those we have already considered, pushing the problem of horrific evils, even quoting Dostoevski’s Ivan. Plantinga sums up, and then quoting Eleonore Stump (after the colon, below), adds to the horrific picture:

The list of atrocities human beings commit against others is horrifying and hideous; it is also so long, so repetitious, that it is finally wearying. Occasionally, though, new depths are reached:

A young Muslim mother in Bosnia was repeatedly raped in front of her husband and father, with her baby screaming on the floor beside her. When her tormentors seemed finally tired of her, she begged permission to nurse the child. In response, one of the rapists swiftly decapitated the baby and threw the head in the mother’s lap.

Plantinga then insightfully reflects on how such facts can militate against the existence of a wholly good God:

These things are absolutely horrifying; it is painful even to consider them, to bring them squarely before the mind. To introduce them into cool philosophical discussion like this is

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33 Here is Plantinga summing up his take on arguments in the vicinity by Rowe and by Paul Draper; he finds some nice to say about them in terms of the issues they cause us to think about, but his estimation of the arguments’ power seems quite negative indeed: “These new arguments by Rowe and Draper are subtle and sophisticated; many deep and interesting topics come up in considering them. Upon close examination, however, they fail, and fail resoundingly. They fail to provide a defeater for theistic belief and, indeed, give the person on the fence little if any reason to prefer atheism to theism. . . .If the facts of evil really do provide a substantial challenge to Christian or theistic belief, it must be by a wholly different route,” Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, p. 481.

distressing and can seem inappropriate, even callous. And now the question: wouldn’t a rational person think, in the face of this kind of appalling evil, that there just couldn’t be an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good person superintending our world? Perhaps he can’t give a demonstration that no perfect person could permit these things; perhaps there isn’t a good probabilistic or evidential atheological argument either: but so what? Isn’t it just apparent, just evident that a being living up to God’s reputation couldn’t permit things like that? (WCB, p. 484)

Well, isn’t it “just apparent, just evident” that a wholly good God would not permit such things? That’s just the kind of appeal I have construed our argument from horrific evils as being based on. Plantinga does studiously avoid calling this an “argument” against God’s existence, but he does call it a “case” (which seems for him, as it is for me, a broader category, which would include “arguments” or what I’m calling “proper arguments”) and, apparently a good one—or at least the “best” one:

Something like this, I think, is the best version of the atheological case from evil. (WCB, p. 484)

Well, that’s a comparative evaluation, and the “best” needn’t be very good, I suppose. But one definitely gets the impression in this material that Plantinga thinks one needn’t be stupid to find this “case” to be exceedingly powerful indeed.

And then, I don’t see why this shouldn’t mean there is a powerful argument here (even in the narrow sense we’ve been using for “proper arguments”). Can’t this very “case” that Plantinga is conveying be helpfully seen as running through something like our premise, 1s, a premise that would seem intuitively powerful, and which implies our argument’s atheistic conclusion? What more would one want from a powerful argument?35

Indeed, I imagine some readers by now find the argument so powerful that they are wondering how Plantinga, ace defender of theism, manages to escape the problem he has so persuasively set up. And it turns out that the nature of the escape Plantinga resorts to36 in WCB betrays the intuitive power of the argument. As I have agreed (see the last paragraph of section 2), Plantinga notes that those who are somehow rationally absolutely certain of the existence of a wholly good God can reasonably react to the evils of this world by retaining their confident

35 My best guess here is that Plantinga resists calling this a powerful atheistic argument because he finds premises like our 1s to be somehow too close to the conclusion it is being used to support?
36 I don’t mean to be insinuating that Plantinga’s response is silly. It is provocative—and fascinating. But I say he “resorts” to it because I think that if he had a response that could be more helpful to those who don’t find themselves so completely certain of God’s existence, and who also don’t buy his contentious anthropological and methodological machinery, according to which, in an important way, we ought to be completely certain of God’s existence, he would have (also) presented that response.
belief in such a God, and supposing that God has a reason for allowing those evils that completely escapes them (WCB, p. 485). But, moving beyond this agreed upon point, Plantinga thinks that the just described reaction is in an important way the rational response to our problem, since he thinks that a human whose cognitive faculties were functioning properly would be completely certain of the existence of such a God—they would be “as convinced of God’s existence as of her own” (WCB, p. 485)—and it is only because of a (very common indeed) cognitive disorder that any of us are ever less than absolutely certain of God’s existence.

Plantinga’s response rests on some fascinating theological anthropology, on which our cognitive faculties were designed to have a sense of God (“what [John] Calvin calls a sensus divinitatis or sense of divinity” (WCB, p. 172)) so lively that we would be completely certain of God’s existence, and on which cognitive malfunctions that are the result of human sin are what stand in the way of our enjoying such certainty. Also crucial is some provocative epistemology and philosophical methodology on which, for Plantinga’s purposes, the success of the “case” from horrific evils can be measured by how one would rationally respond to it if one’s cognitive faculties were functioning in their non-fallen, proper way.

Without contending with that elaborate theological and methodological framework Plantinga has constructed, and within which he deals with the problem of horrific evil in WCB, we will instead seek what rational relief we might find that does not so evade the problem by appealing to any normative absolute certainty of the existence of a wholly good God. This is largely because engaging that fortress would be a huge undertaking. But it is worth noting that if Plantinga’s maneuver does work against our argument, it would similarly work against any case against God, no matter how powerful, since if you were absolutely certain that a good God exists, you could reasonably judge that any case against God must have some mistake somewhere. If then cases against God are to be judged by how we should react to them if we were so absolutely certain of God’s existence, they’re all doomed, no matter how powerful they might seem.37

37 Indeed, more generally, for any claim you might seek to defend, whether that claim involves God’s existence or not, if you’re willing to assert that humans are designed to be absolutely certain that your claim is right, and that it’s only through some cognitive malfunction that we fail to have such certainty, and if you are ready to evaluate the success of cases against your claim by reference to how we would rationally respond to them if we were functioning in the way you contend we were designed to, you are set to so defend that claim, whatever it is, against any case against it, no matter how powerful. (Well, I suppose that’s just so long as the case against you isn’t strong enough to produce absolute certainty that you are wrong—and even then, it isn’t clear what should result from the resulting hypothetical clash of opposing absolute certainties. Perhaps you should claim that no case against you could be that strong?) But it should be acknowledged that a key move in this Plantinga-style defense—namely, the assertion that humans are designed to be completely certain of the truth of the claim one is defending—
13. "Hey, Are You Calling Me Irrational?!": The Stance of Our Aggressive Atheologians

“But wait! Why wonder how atheologists ever got into the business of charging theists with irrationality? Haven’t they—or at least many of them—put themselves in that business? Aren’t they an aggressive bunch? Haven’t many of them in fact made such charges? Check against near start of previous section Didn’t we see Unger go there? And in his “bad cop” moments, didn’t Rowe at least strongly insinuate such a charge? And why then say that Plantinga has saddled probabilistic-argument-wielding atheologists with unreasonable burdens? Haven’t they taken those burdens on themselves? And, really, haven’t you been insinuating such things yourself, hiding behind your skeptics/atheologians?”

✓ Some have made the charge

But not all—or maybe: but they don’t have to (with note on ’92?)

& anyway, that’s not claiming to show

The stance of our aggressive atheologian

My stance – maybe in a new section?, closing off first part of book, on “The Need for Theodicy”?

Well, yes, some actual atheologists have been aggressive in this way. Plantinga certainly thinks of them as being so. And I wouldn’t be surprised to find out that some actual

might be considerably less plausible when employed in defense of many claims than it is in defense of the existence of God. So, though this type of defense can be applied very broadly, that doesn’t mean it can be applied just as well in defense of any claim whatsoever as it is in Plantinga’s own actual use of it. Evaluating the plausibility of this aspect of Plantinga’s defensive maneuver would be “contending with that elaborate theological and methodological framework Plantinga has constructed,” and so is just what I’m avoiding here. But interested readers should consult Warranted Christian Belief, where Plantinga most fully develops all this.

38 This is all foreshadowed in the very opening two sentences of PPE:

Ever since the days of Epicurus there have been philosophers who believed that the existence of evil constitutes a formidable objection to theistic belief and a powerful argument for atheism. We might call those who urge this argument ‘natural atheologians’; just as the natural theologian offers arguments for the existence of God, or for the rational propriety of theistic belief, so the natural atheologian offers arguments for the non-existence of God, or for the rational impropriety of theistic belief. (PPE, p. 1)
atheologians, wielding some probabilistic argument from horrific evils, really ticked Plantinga off at some point with such insinuations or explicit charges. But in response, we should remember some important things.

First, an atheologian doesn’t have to be aggressive in that way to count as being among Plantinga’s announced targets. Consider an atheist who endorses one of the probabilistic arguments we have considered, but who makes no claims or insinuations whatsoever about anybody’s irrationality. In backing such an argument, the conclusion of which, after all, is that God does not exist, the atheist certainly counts as one of Plantinga’s “atheologians,” for Plantinga has described this character as one who “offers arguments for the non-existence of God” (see the quotation in note 37). And, as we noted in section 10, though no form of the word “probable” occurs in the formulation of the three arguments I have labelled as such, they all are “probabilistic” arguments from evil.39 So our atheologian is supposed to be among Plantinga’s targets, despite their not impugning anyone’s rationality. And the interest of Plantinga’s attack is surely largely dependent on his having appeared to have cast his net so widely. But, as we’ve been seeing, his attack seems to land only on those within the announced scope of his attack who are extremely aggressive in certain ways.

Second, there’s an important difference between insinuating that one’s opponents are irrational, or even explicitly charging that they are, on the one hand, and on the other hand claiming to have really shown that the charge is in order. So now consider a more aggressive atheologian—one who does go there and make a charge of irrationality, perhaps specifically claiming to have really shown that the charge is in order. So now consider a more aggressive atheologian—one who does go there and make a charge of irrationality, perhaps specifically

39 Here again is Plantinga’s description of the retreat from deductive to probabilistic arguments, which lists several alternative ways (all connected by “or”s) for an argument to count as the latter:

More recently, however, those who make an atheological argument from evil have conceded that the existence of evil may be logically consistent with that of God; nevertheless, the former renders the latter unlikely, or improbable, or provides evidence against it, or gives a good reason for accepting its denial. (PPE, p. 1)

Now, our arguments don’t explicitly include anything about “good reasons” in their formulations, but in endorsing one of them, the atheist/atheologian we are now considering is certainly is presenting it as giving “a good reason for accepting” that God does not exist. I mean, in what way could you be endorsing an argument if you didn’t think it at least provided such a reason for accepting your conclusion? And Plantinga does explicitly count Rowe as among his targets, though Rowe’s argument is for the simple conclusion that God does not exist, with no explicit mention of “good reasons” or anything like that in his formulation of his argument.
because they find their argument so compelling that “they just can’t see,” as they might put it, how anyone could reasonably believe in God in the face of it. They can still just happily agree with Plantinga that they haven’t really shown their aggressive charges of irrationality are right.

But what then are we to make of an aggressive atheologist’s charge or insinuation, if it’s not something they even claim to show to be right? Is it just bluster?

Well, we might construe it as such.

And third, suppose that we find the argument from horrific evils to be a powerful one, perhaps even so powerful as to in fact threaten the rationality of belief in God, but we wisely grant that, of course, we don’t think anyone has shown belief in God to be irrational by means of such an argument—since we see that that would be a boy howdy tough thing to really show. We will then derive little comfort from Plantinga’s defense.


Well, then, how will I seek relief from our problem? By means of a very natural, and very common, if also much maligned, type of response to it: a “theodicy,” in the form of a credible account of what God’s reasons might be for allowing the horrific evils of our world.

“Theodicy” ordinarily means something quite general, along the lines of a “defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil,” as many dictionaries have it, more or less. But following some fairly common usage in philosophical theology, I will be using the term more narrowly to cover only such defenses that proceed by proposing potential reasons God might have for causing or allowing evils. (Thus, those who defend belief in God in the face of the evils of our world, and so are offering a “theodicy” in the normal, quite general sense of the word, but who eschew any speculation about God’s reasons, and instead argue belief in God can be defended just fine without any proposing of such divine reasons, are rejecting the project of “theodicy” in the more narrow sense I will be using, even as they engage in the project in the more general sense of that word.)
The challenge that horrific evils pose for theistic belief sometimes presents itself in the first place in a way that explicitly involves the notion of God’s reasons, in the form of thoughts like: “There couldn’t possibly be a good reason for God to allow that!” But even if one’s worry is instead guided by a more general thought like “There’s no way that a world governed by a wholly good God would contain that!” (which doesn’t explicitly mention God’s reasons, or lack thereof), a cogent account of why God might allow the horrors in question, if such an account could be given, would still seem a good way to show how those evils might occur despite the existence of a perfectly good God. So it’s natural for a defense of standard theism to concern itself with what God’s reasons might be—for a “theodicy” in the general sense to take the form of a “theodicy” in our more narrow use.

But while natural, attempts at theodicy, in our narrow sense, are often disparaged—with the attacks coming from wildly different directions. The attempt to specify reasons for allowing truly horrific suffering can seem appalling and insensitive to how bad our world’s worst evils are. Some who find it so are atheists who judge the argument from horrific evils to be overwhelmingly powerful, and find theodicists’ attempted responses to it to be both doomed and disgusting. But others are themselves theists who suppose God’s reasons are beyond us and who think that for us to speculate about those reasons is both presumptuous and inevitably insensitive. How can the reasons we come up with even come close to justifying the allowance of the horrors of our world, and how can we think we know the mind of God?

So, to address some of the consternation right away (and to do so only partially for now), I should quickly add that I won’t be claiming to be articulating God’s actual reasons for allowing horrific evils. On the other hand, I don’t merely seek a logically possible account of what a wholly good God’s might have been. This is supposed to be credible as an account of God’s actual reasons might be. Credible, but almost certainly wrong – for the general skeptical reason that we are extremely unlikely to have correctly discerned the mind of God, should God exist. And it will certainly be lacking in detail, so that, for instance, even if it is true, it won’t be developed enough to explain why one individual rather than another, was exposed to horrific evils. (Indeed, as we will see, I tend toward views of the world on which God doesn’t really have reasons for subjecting some of us, as opposed to others, to horrific evils, but on which forces in the world other than God (often, us) determine just who suffers what, and God’s reasons are for letting those forces play out. But more on that later.)

On these matters, I align closely with the wise approach laid out by my late friend, David Lewis. Lewis was into evaluating “theodicies,” but in light of influential work by Plantinga,

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40 I am one of many philosophers to have benefitted from philosophical correspondence with Lewis. This began as I working on my paper, “Solving the Skeptical Problem,” and discovered, through mutual friends, Lewis’s then unpublished paper, “Elusive Knowledge,” but did eventually come to include the
Lewis had to clarify that he was not interested in “theodicies” in the technical, special use of that term that Plantinga introduced and made prominent (at least in some philosophical circles), and is for us yet a third use of that term:

Alvin Plantinga, our foremost modem authority on free-will theodicy, would recoil from that name for his subject. He has taught us to distinguish ‘theodicy’ from ‘defence’. ‘Theodicy’, for Plantinga, means an audacious claim to know the truth about why God permits evil. And not just a trivial bit of the truth—God permits evil for the sake of some good or other—but something fairly substantive and detailed. One who claims to know God’s mind so well (especially if he claims to know without benefit of revelation) will seem both foolhardy and impudent.41

After rejecting the project of such an “audacious” (in Lewis’s term) “theodicy,” Plantinga retreated to seeking a mere “defense”, which in Plantinga’s special terminology, is just a logically possible account of what a perfectly good God’s reasons for allowing evils might have been. Lewis sees this as an over-reaction, and proposes a better,42 middle course for the theist (and specifically, here, the Christian) to follow:

Defence is too easy; knowing God’s mind is too hard. I think the topic worth pursuing falls in between, and has no place in Plantinga’s scheme of theodicy versus defence. Pace Plantinga, I’ll call that topic ‘theodicy’, but I don’t mean the know-it-all theodicy that he wisely disowns. Rather I mean tentative theodicy, even speculative theodicy. The Christian needn’t hope to end by knowing for sure why God permits evil. But he can hope to advance from a predicament of not having a clue to a predicament of indecision between several not-too-unbelievable hypotheses (maybe still including the hypothesis: ‘none of the above’). The job is to devise hypotheses that are at least somewhat plausible, at least to the Christian, and to find considerations that make them more plausible or less.43

15. On Goalposts

In seeking a theodicy in the form of a credible account of what God’s reasons for allowing evils, and in particular, horrific evils, might be, I am following Lewis’s middle option, roughly as he

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topics of this book. Two long conversations with Steffi and David Lewis, largely on the topics of God, evil, and hell, one in a hotel restaurant near Franklin & Marshall College, and another in a restaurant near Rutgers University, are among my fondest memories.

42 Fn on logical problem xxxxx
43 “Evil for Freedom’s Sake?”, p. 152.
describes it. My aspiration for a “credible” account may be setting the bar a bit higher than Lewis’s proposed goal of hypotheses that are “not-too-unbelievable,” though perhaps it’s quite closely aligned to his other description of the goal as hypotheses that are “at least somewhat plausible.”

But why set that as the goal? Why would a theodicy in that particular form help? Just how credible, and just how detailed, would it have to be to help? And credible to whom? And how much relief would it actually provide? All good questions—that for the most part I can’t give definite answers to—but for what I hope is a good reason.

Critical readers will be especially alert, and perhaps even suspicious, as I set the goalposts for this inquiry. The main worry here would be that I started with an idea of what I could achieve, and then, in a bit of reverse-engineering, am now setting my goalposts to that point, with no reason for thinking that just that is what is needed for success other than that I thought that’s the standard I could meet, and I will then declare victory as I make the case that I have met it. And the vagueness of “credible” may add to the suspicion of the wise, as I could try to get that squishy term construed in a stronger way to motivate the thought my goalposts are plausible ones, but then angle for a weaker reading as I argued that I have reached them.

But that’s not how this is going to go down. There will be no declaring of victory. Well, nothing beyond what I’ve already foreshadowed: You have likely already gathered that, though I find our problem a gripping one, I’ve found enough relief to continue in my theistic ways, as I do count myself a theist. And I’m sure some will think this a mistake brought on by my failure to really face up to the power of our problem. But what I’ll be about is, in Lewis’s words, attempting to “devise hypotheses that are at least somewhat plausible.” How plausible, how credible? As plausible as they can be made. The more credible, the better. I’m looking for as much relief as I can find.

Why would locating credible hypotheses as to God’s reasons—and the more credible, the better—help here? Well, that’s pretty much a report on what would seem to make the appearance of truth that attaches to the premise of our simple argument to fade: If a credible reason could be given, and especially if it were very credible indeed, well, then, one supposes, I guess a wholly good God might well exist despite the evils of our world. (But that’s a very big “if,” the skeptical will add.) I should add that the if such a credible hypothesis could be found, that would help largely by making the “none of the above” possibility more reasonable: If you’re in a state where you’re inclined to declare “There’s just no way a wholly good God would allow that!”, it seems nothing would loosen you up to the possibility that God has some good reason for allowing that that you cannot discern like encountering what seems a credible account (that you are made to discern) of what such a reason might be. xxx is enou
vaguely said that I’ve found enough relief in the theodical ideas to follow to make it possible to “go on”—whatever that means! (I’ll have more to say there.)

And no, in various ways, the account won’t be very detailed. Even if it is right, it won’t be complete enough to be able to explain why, for instance, one individual, rather than another, suffered horrifically. (Though I will seek to explain why our world might such as to subject some of us or other to horrific suffering.)

Theodicy (def).

But also much maligned

“Incredible, or revolting, as this suggestion may seem to some, for reasons we will see, I think that relief from this pressing problem comes, if at all, in the form of credible accounts of why God might not prevent the evils in question—of what are God’s reasons for this.

Credibility is in the eyes of the beholder, and, though we may say things with some hope of moving one another on questions of credibility, at the end of the day, we all must make these calls about the credibility of the proposed accounts for ourselves, and, as I observed in the previous paragraph, whether and how theism hangs in the balance will vary from person to person. But we can consider proposed accounts together. Though you will no doubt find me to be at spots extremely opinionated, I nevertheless hope to be a good guide as to what some of the most important considerations are, and how they might be pursued. And even if your own position, one way or the other, cannot be impacted by how this plays out, you might still be interested in how it might be, or in understanding how others might think it might be, that a wholly good God exists, yet does not prevent the horrific evils our world contains. MOVE?

For some, thoughts like “There couldn’t possibly be a good reason for God to allow that!” explicitly motivate the move from the horrific evils of our world to the non-existence of the wholly good God of traditional theism. But even if one’s thought is guided by something that doesn’t explicitly appeal to the notion of God’s potential reasons (something perhaps like “There’s no way that a world governed by a wholly good God would contain that!”), a reasonable account of why God might allow such horrors would hold significant promise for mitigating the problem: A good account of why God might allow horrors would seem to show how they might occur despite God’s existence. And skepticism about the compossibility of God and horrors naturally extends to the prospects of any such account being credible.
1. Do We Need a Theodicy?: Against Aggressive Skeptical Theism

2. Know-It-All Theodicy?

3. The Project of Theodicy: Hopeless and Heartless?

4. The Free Will Defense as an Attempt to Allow a More Perfect Hatred of Horrific Evils

5. van Inwagen’s Extension of the Free Will Defense, Why It’s Beyond the Limits of the Standard FWD, and Why It’s Incredible

In some key ways, my treatment of the problem of horrific suffering is following the path laid out by van Inwagen.

- his “global” problem: IV: 2.0

- seeking what he calls a “defense”: 19.0

- says free will defense the only one that has a chance: 17.8 and 25:n9

- but it fails for 2 reasons: 21.6, but see my note toward bottom of p. 1 of PvI-notes

- so he moves to his “expanded FWD”: 20.6

- this moves beyond the standard FWD: see 2.2 of my notes

- his history seems incredible to me, but I won’t press that
-the incredibility I wish to press concerns whether God’s using such horrific means to bring us around, when it seems God could easily do that even more effectively at a much lower cost.

-But this brings us to the more general problem with standard FWDs to the Problem of Non-Heaven

6. The Problem of Hell, the Problem of Non-Heaven, and the Universalist Challenge

7. The Meaning of “Free” in Philosophy-Speak

On the standard Free Will Defense, the good God is aiming for in virtue of which God allows the possibility of evil is free actions, and, in particular, free good actions, by us, God’s free creatures. Why can’t God just cause us to do these free actions, thereby achieving the aim with no risk of evil? Because even an omnipotent being cannot causally determine someone else to freely act in a particular way, for free action is incompatible with being causally determined to act as one does by some events over which one has no control. Or so (the well-named) “incompatibilists” claim. Our Free Will Defender will advocate a position known as “libertarianism” which consists of such incompatibilism along with the claim that, nonetheless, we at least sometimes do act freely. This commits the libertarian, and so our Free Will Defender, to holding that we do sometimes act without being causally determined to act as we do by any outside events over which we have no control, including God’s actions and decrees. If God wants us to freely act in a certain way, even God has to (put us in the needed situation, if need be and) let us do our thing, taking a risk that we will instead do otherwise. If God determines us to act in the way God wants so as to eliminate that risk, God does so at the cost of eliminating our freedom, at least with respect to the action in question. If God determines everything we do, God eliminates our freedom altogether.

“Compatibilists,” as you can probably tell by their name alone, will have none of this. They think that our acting freely is perfectly compatible with our being causally determined to act as we do. They typically hold that if and when we are causally determined to act as we do, whether we act freely depends on just how we are causally determined to act as we do. Many compatibilist accounts make freedom turn on whether the chain of events that begins outside us and ends with us performing the action in question goes through our willing or deciding to act as we do in some proper way. The accounts vary, and can get very detailed, but the basic idea you already have is all we need for our purposes. On the compatibilist view, God can
causally determine us to act as God wants, thereby eliminating all risk that we will act otherwise, so long as God does so in the right way (where there’s flexibility from one compatibilist account to another over what constitutes the right way).

In the above two paragraphs, I believe that I have been using “free,” as a description of actions, in a way that differs from how the term is most ordinarily used, but is common in philosophical and theological discussions of such matters as the problem of evil, God’s relation to our world – and whether free action is compatible with causal determinism. And this difference will be vital to clarify in assessing Free Will Defenses, since slippage between the two uses of the term can cloud our judgment to very ill effect.

Here I’m following van Inwagen’s lead in some important ways—though I will also have important differences with him, and even where we do agree, I will repay van Inwagen for his leadership by turning our main point of agreement against him.

So, van Inwagen also thinks that there is an important difference between ordinary and philosophical uses of “free” (or, as he puts it, acting with “free will” or “of one’s own free will”). But it’s not that he thinks there are two tolerably clear meanings for the word here that just differ from one another: He thinks the ordinary use is perfectly fine and meaningful, but the different philosophical use of the term is so radically messed-up that there’s no usually no coherent meaning behind most such uses. Here he follows a general suspicion—that I share, but in a different form—about special philosophical uses of terms.44 Consider this piece of “advice” van Inwagen gives concerning philosophical methodology (#1 of two numbered directives he gives in “How to Think about the Problem of Free Will”):

(1) Define every term you use that is neither a word or phrase of ordinary language nor a technical term of some discipline other than philosophy (in which discipline, one supposes, it will have been given an adequate definition). Do not waive this requirement in the case of some term simply because philosophers use that term a lot.45

Here, we are dealing with a term, “free,” that does have an ordinary use. But philosophers use it differently, and so, I guess (van Inwagen does apply this advice to our case at hand), van Inwagen treats this as a different term, and holds these philosophical uses suspect unless and until those so employing the “technical” use of the term provide a decent definition of it in terms of ordinary English. (Of course, it’s alright to use technical terms in your definition, so

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44 There is no doubt some decent use of the term here in which van Inwagen and I are both “ordinary language philosophers,” but, though that label is probably more frequently applied to me, in ways relevant to our discussion, van Inwagen proves to be more of an “ordinary language philosopher” than I am.

Now van Inwagen himself traffics in philosophical uses of “free” and “free will”, but that’s alright, because (you guessed it) he does provide a good definition of his use of these terms, at least by his own lights. His definition follows one of two main traditions of explaining the philosophical use of the term, on which one makes it out to be roughly a matter of whether one could have done otherwise than what one did. Unfortunately, van Inwagen claims, a proper definition cannot be based on “could have done otherwise” itself, because that phrase turns out to be problematically “ambiguous”, as are most phrases nearby in meaning to that one. Fortunately, van Inwagen claims, we can get a workable definition by use of the term “able”. By means of that term, used in its ordinary way, van Inwagen defines the relevant sense of “within one’s power”, and then he’s off to the races, providing suitable, stable definitions for all the philosophical terms used in discussions of “free will.” And everything’s fine, because it’s all bottoming out in an ordinary term, used in its nicely stable, ordinary way:

I want to make what seems to me to be an important point, a point that is, in fact, of central importance if one wishes to think clearly about the freedom of the will: compatibilists and incompatibilists mean the same thing by “able.” And what do both compatibilists and incompatibilists mean by “able”? Just this: what it means in English, what the word means.

(p. 333)

The problem with van Inwagen’s “able-ism,” as we might call it, is that the meaning of “able” moves around on us, too, pretty much (so far as I can see) like “could have done otherwise” does, and so, as with “could have”, if we’re defining “free” in terms of “able,” we’d need to be somehow told which meaning of “able” is in play.

Suppose we are mad scientists (whose madness doesn’t prevent us from being perfectly competent speakers of English) manipulating the actions (or apparent actions, if these shouldn’t even count as “actions”) of a couple of people. None of the things we might cause them to do would be in any good philosophical sense of the term “free actions,” as both compatibilists and incompatibilists would agree: We just zap the motor centers of their brains in such a way that the actions we want are performed (or apparently performed, if, again, these wouldn’t count as actions; and we perhaps then also do what’s necessary to produce the illusory sense in our victims that the action (or “action”) was something they somehow decided to do on their own. And then we cackle.). But our two victims have different capacities. One can both walk and run—and those are both things we can make her do. But the other can walk, but just does not have the physical capacity to run: Try as he might, he cannot run, and try as we might to cause him to run, we could never succeed. I’ve just used “can” in describing our victims’ capabilities, but, I submit, it would be utterly natural to similarly use “able,” and say
that the one is able to both run and walk, while the other is able to walk, but not to run. There
would be nothing at all wrong or at all unnatural with our so using “able” in describing to each
other the physical capabilities of our victims. If we cause the victim with the greater capacities
to walk across the room (as opposed to running across it, or staying where she is), she does not
do so freely (and it was not, in the sense relevant to philosophical freedom, “within her power”
to do otherwise). This is no doubt tied to there being some good sense in which she was “not
able” to do otherwise than she did, given our zapping of her brain. Yet, there is the other good
sense, which we just using a couple of sentences above, when we were comparing her
capacities to that of our other victim, is which she was “able” to do otherwise than she did: she
was in that sense “able” to run across the room (and also, presumably, to stay put). As with
“could have done otherwise,” we can vary what we mean by “was able to do otherwise” by
(roughly, but this gets to what’s going on well enough) varying what we try to hold constant in
the counterfactual scenarios we consider. The “able-ist” could try various methods to focus in
on the meaning of “able” that we need here to define our use of “free”, but we need some way
of doing so if we are to define our key terms in the way van Inwagen seeks, just as we would
need some way of zeroing in on the right use of the terms van Inwagen rejects as “ambiguous.”

I think our best move is to turn to the second main way of explaining our meaning, and
say, again roughly at first, that a free action is one that the agent controls in the way needed for
her to be morally responsible for the action. To define “free” (or cognate terms) in terms of
moral responsibility (to follow the second main path) would be to violate a directive van
Inwagen issues very forcefully:

Whatever you do, do not define “free will” this way: “Free will is whatever sort of freedom is
required for moral responsibility” (or “Free will consists in having whatever sort of access to
alternative possibilities is required for moral responsibility”). (p. 329)

But since van Inwagen doesn’t say why one should not go this second way, one might be
tempted to press on.

But I’m not sure whether I’m violating the directive (and not just because I like to
discuss “free” rather than “free will”), since I don’t know whether I am (and I actually doubt
that I am) seeking to do what van Inwagen would call “defining” the use of “free” in question.

One thing philosophers (who work in English) might find helpful in some situations is to
create a new “technical” philosophical term (as we’d call it) that is not a part of ordinary
English, or take a term that already exists in ordinary English, and give it a new “technical”
meaning, different from (but usually related to) what it means in ordinary English. When doing
those things, it would be important to define one’s technical term or technical use of a term.
(Though I suppose when doing the second thing, one needn’t always define the term from
scratch, but can sometimes use the term’s ordinary use as a foundation, and then make do with stating just how one’s technical use varies from the ordinary one.) Though employing such “technical” terms might be helpful in some situations, as I think back over my work, I’m unable to recall having done these things.

But another thing we might find helpful, and that I have actually done, is take a term of ordinary English whose meaning squishes around a bit in some way or other, and specify that one is using it (“semi-technically,” as I put it) according to one of the meanings, but not others, that the term can bear. Here, a definition—the kind of thing one would have to provide to someone who starts out with no idea of what your term means, but does know other, more basic (perhaps because ordinary) terms in which your term might be defined—would not seem called for. You do still have to explain your use of the term, but you are just seeking to help one’s audience locate the relevant meaning of the term from among the various things it can mean.

I think the philosophical and theological uses of “free” that I employed in the first two paragraphs are something like such “semi-technical” uses. It’s not just professional, or highly trained, philosophers and theologians, coached to do so by some highly contingent feature of our education, who so use the term. Ordinary speakers of English, with no special training, can and do quite naturally find themselves using the term in the “philosophical” way if and when they find themselves in discussions of those (philosophical and theological) topics where such a use is called for. And actually, I don’t think the meaning of “free” just has two “gears” as it were, ordinary and philosophical, that we shift between. Rather, as we will see shortly, even what I have been calling the “ordinary” use of the term has a range of meanings that we seem to slosh around in.

So, let’s try to locate the use of “free” in the first two paragraphs of this section (and in other settings where various philosophical topics are discussed), by means of the basic idea that freedom in the relevant sense is what’s needed for moral responsibility, where we take this to be one of the various ways that this piece of English can be flexed. To make sense of the dispute, we want to explain the meaning of the term in such a way that neither compatibilism nor incompatibilism is ruled out by the very meaning of the term. Perhaps the best way to elucidate the difference in meaning between our philosophical and the ordinary use of the term is by means of examples of cases to which the two uses clearly do, and clearly do not, apply. So we can start with an explication like this:

An agent’s action is free in the philosophical sense if and only if it has that property, (a) the possession of which sometimes (in one natural use of the term) leads us to call an action “free” (and the lack of which sometimes (in the same natural use of the term) leads us to deny that an action is “free”), (b) that is had by these actions, and not by those (at least
actions, and (c1) the possession of which is required for the agent to be morally responsible for the action, or (c2) the possession of which is required for the agent to have the kind of control over her action needed for her to be morally responsible for it. Not just required, but enough

And where we clearly need to go from there is to fill in the these and the those in clause (b) with some examples of clear (or, well, clear if anything is) cases of actions that are “free” and actions (or at least apparent actions) that fail to be “free” actions in the relevant sense.

For the former, I’ll just take myself, some ordinary guy (well, in the relevant respects), as I am right now, in some pretty ordinary situation, with no mad scientists messing with me, and I ordinarily decide to and do raise my right hand (and I’m actually doing this right now, typing for a moment with my left hand only), for the reason (as it happens) of producing an action that is clearly free. That raising of my hand seems a morally neutral action, for which I deserve no blame nor credit (well, other than blame for not coming up with a better example), but I seem to be exercising the kind of control over that action that is needed for moral responsibility. (One reason for choosing a morally neutral action is to illustrate that such actions can be free.) This action seems “free” in the philosophical use of the term we are trying to explicate, and also in the ordinary use of the term.

But things are different with our negative example. When using “free” in the ordinary way it’s typically used outside of philosophy, a clear example of an action that is not done “freely” (nor “of one’s own free will”), and in fact the first kind of example of that that would likely leap to mind would be something like this: A thief points a gun at you, orders you to carry the loot from his heist out to his getaway car, threatening to shoot you if you don’t, and you comply. To get a contrasting companion case for our positive example, we can suppose that our thief (or any gun wielder will do now) instead orders me to raise my right hand, threatening to shoot me if I don’t. The raising of my right hand here seems, as we ordinarily use the term, a clear case of an action that is not “free”. However, when “free” is used in the philosophical way, these actions, while perhaps not clearly free, do seem to count, if a bit cloudily, as “free” actions, and certainly do not clearly fail to be free. Philosophically speaking, you were free to comply with the gun wielder’s order, and you were free to refuse, and then likely get shot (and likely be badly hurt, and possibly killed). You had very strong reason to act as you did, and you made a wise choice, but your action was “free.” If someone were to think that these clearly failed to count as “free” as that term is used in philosophy, I would then take them to be misunderstanding the philosophical use of the term.

Before continuing to explicate our philosophical use, I’d like to pause a moment over what I’ve been calling the “ordinary” use of “free”—though I won’t seek to give a full explanation of it. This ordinary use also seems tied to moral responsibility. Supposing it would
have been wrong for me to carry the loot out to the thief’s car if I had not been acting under threat, the threat that renders my action one that does not count as “free” in the ordinary sense also seems to get me off the moral hook, at least in this case. It’s not fair to blame me: I wasn’t acting freely. But the ties between this “freedom”, ordinarily so-called, and moral responsibility seem kind of loose, a bit nebulous, and they seem to run in both directions, as comes into view when we play around with the severity of the threat and the strength of the call to act against that threat. Sometimes, rather than our judgment about moral responsibility following our call on whether or not the act in question was “free,” our decision as to whether to all it “free” seems to follow, or at least be influenced by, whether we think the threat the agent was acting under was severe enough to relieve her of moral responsibility. (I focus on threats, but other types of strong reasons for acting in certain ways seem, to me at least, capable of functioning as “freedom” killers as well.) I have promised to meet you at a certain location, and arrive a bit before the designated time. I would have stayed and waited for you, but a bully told me to leave, credibly threatening to punch me, not hard in the face, but only medium-hard on the shoulder, if I refused. You later confront me (we suppose you know bullies do sometimes chase people off of that location, to explain why you bring up the issue of my freedom): “Hey, you promised to meet me at our meeting place, and I heard that you were there, but then left [freely / of your own free will] before our meeting time. What gives?” It seems to me the ordinary use of “free” is flexible enough that I don’t have to answer one way or the other to reply accurately: I can agree that I did leave “freely,” while appealing to the threat I was acting under to nonetheless relieve me of at least some of my moral responsibility, or I can appeal to the threat I acted under to deny that I had really left “freely.” As often happens with squishy terms, what matters to one’s use of them seems not to depend on whether one affirms or denies, but on whether one makes it tolerably clear somehow just where in the range of the term’s possible meanings one is using it. Well, or so it seems to me.

When using the terms in the philosophical way, by contrast, our clear negative examples don’t involve the likes of threats from bullies, or other good reasons for acting one way or another, but, well, things like cackling mad scientists zapping your brain in ways that bypass your will. We libertarians think, credibly or not (and that’s the topic of our next section), that in the philosophical sense, we do often act “freely,” and so we often are morally responsible for our actions, but because we are not then causally determined to act as we do. We think that if our actions were causally determined, then, no matter how nice a path the chain of determining events took through our souls, so far as our moral responsibility for our action goes, we’d be like the victim of the mad scientists. We might have a sense of philosophical “freedom”, depending on how things went, but, if so, that sense would be illusory. The compatibilist won’t buy that, and thinks that we can be free even where we are causally determined by events outside us and over which we have no control to act as we do. If some mad scientist, or if God, causes us to act as we do, or if ours is a deterministic world in which
we are always determined to act as we do by outside forces, whether we are morally responsible for our actions, and whether we act “freely” in the philosophical way, depends on whether the determination works in the right way. Our explanation for the philosophical use of “free” seems not to rule out, or even to clearly favor, either compatibilism or incompatibilism, but to present how the term can be used in such a way that the dispute between these views is substantive, and not merely verbal.

I should note that I have set up this discussion with a couple of relatively cheery views in mind, on which we do act with philosophical “freedom,” at least where it seems clear to us that we are morally responsible, and this is reflected in the wording of my explication. There are more ominous views. What of those who think we are always causally determined by outside forces to act as we do, and that this is incompatible with our being morally responsible for our actions, and so think we never are responsible? Or the person who thinks that, though we’re often enough (or always) not causally determined to act as we do, our actions are then somehow just the upshot of stupid, little random events occurring in our brains, over which we have no control, and for that reason, we never bear any moral responsibility for how we act, but are morally on par with the victims of cackling scientists? These folks hold that there is no property of our actions that satisfies the clauses of our explication of the philosophical uses of “free”: There is no morally important difference between these and those, where these and those are even what seem to us the clearest cases of actions for which we do and for which do not stand in the right relation to bear moral responsibility.

I think we can construe our explication of the philosophical use of “free,” so that, on such dark views, we never act freely, since there is no property that fills the bill to make our actions count as philosophically “free.” And I think such views are often construed as ones on which we don’t ever act freely (in the philosophical sense). But I think we could also construe our account so that, if such views were correct, our whole distinction between actions that are free and (at least apparent) actions that are not free, in the philosophical sense, would just turn out to be utter bullshit in such a way that neither “I acted freely” nor “I didn’t act freely,” where “freely” is used philosophically, can be either true or false. I believe that if I held one of the ominous views in question, I’d be inclined to go with that.

8. Is Libertarianism Credible?