

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

Keith DeRose

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## *A Powerful Problem*

### **1. A Brief Look at Where We're Going: The Problem of Horrific Suffering, 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 philosopher<sup>1</sup> 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 will 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

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<sup>1</sup> “Why Take a Stance on God?”, an interview Gary Gutting did with me in *The Stone*, the *New York Times* philosophy blog, 18 September 2014; reprinted with slight revisions as “Religion and Knowledge,” in Gary Gutting, *Talking God: Philosophers on Belief* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017) pp. 172-186.

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—well, as it pretty much must play a huge role in all of God's dealings with us (if God does exist and we are free). 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 the living 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 chock full of horrific suffering that somehow manages to be far worse than anything ever suffered in any earthly life, and that befalls not just “Hitler types,” but also what we take to be ordinarily decent people, who just have not done what's needed to have their run-of-the-mill sins forgiven. 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 argument for atheism that they reach for.

Provocative as my indented statement about 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.

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, oh my! 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. It was for me in large part a jolt of recollection. 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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."<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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 threat that horrific suffering posed for my theism. To her great credit, Marilyn was facing that challenge squarely.<sup>5</sup> And that enabled

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<sup>3</sup> *All the Power in the World*, p. 506.

<sup>4</sup> "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, Vol. 63 (1989): 297-310; *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Well, Adams was at least *in effect* facing the problem. In a move I always found frustrating, she consistently set up her discussion so that the problem she was explicitly addressing was the *logical* problem of horrific suffering, which is focused on the question of whether it is possible that there should have been a perfectly good God and also horrific evils (see, e.g., "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," p. 298, where Adams sets the task of exhibiting "compossibility of Divine perfection with evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in the actual world," and *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, p. 15). I find the problem of whether, in light of the horrific suffering our world contains, it is credible or

me to engage the challenge at a critical distance, by discussing the pros and cons of Marilyn's approach. But I did not face 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 issuing that challenge, some lighthearted semi-joking (or fully 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.<sup>6</sup>

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, this relief coming almost entirely in the

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believable to suppose that a wholly good God actually does exist to be a far more pressing and important problem. Thankfully, much of what Marilyn writes does seem germane to this more important problem—which is in large part why her work was and is so exciting.

<sup>6</sup> The paper I wrote for the seminar that Marilyn Adams and Bob Adams co-taught on the problem of evil came out a few years later as "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 13, and that alleges a logical *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 was not, as it was 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.

form of accounts of why God might allow horrific evils—so, in a common use of the term, in the form of theodicies! (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 did and will be here appealing to some truly great things, as I suppose one has to. ("The worst evils demand to be defeated by the best goods," as Marilyn Adams taught me.<sup>7</sup>) 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 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.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Unger did later still write what he wrote, so I think it's fair to say I didn't assuage his worries. And my guess is: probably not those of his (then soon to be our) colleagues, either.

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 to feel 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

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<sup>7</sup> "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," p. 309.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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. Of course, extremists of both kinds may still be interested in this as an interesting problem for others. 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 (in sect. xx), I think we can all profitably journey together.

### **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. 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. This includes some prominent Christian intellectuals. Here, for example, is one of the most prominent theistic philosophers alive, the eminent Richard Swinburne, with a strong statement indeed:

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 23. Like the statement of mine that I quote at the very start of section 1, Swinburne says that there is something wrong with those who don’t feel the power of the argument—though Swinburne doesn’t put that swipe in the mind of God. I don’t think I encountered this passage until after doing that interview: I believe I finally read that book of Swinburne’s when doing my literature check for writing this book. It was very interesting (and a bit reassuring to me) to see Swinburne express such an opinion.

And Swinburne is just a prominent example of thoughtful theists who admit this.

But others claim to see *no good reason whatsoever* in all the horrific suffering of our world for thinking there is no wholly good God—and this not because (or in some cases, not just because) they have an account of why God might allow the horrors in question that they are happy with. Rather, they just profess bafflement at what the reason for doubting God’s existence here 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.

So, just what *is* the problem here? One way to press it brings in probability theory to structure the discussion, resulting in a “Bayesian Argument from Evil,” where one argues that the evidence of the suffering in our world is antecedently much more probable on some hypothesis that’s an alternative to theism than it is on theism itself, in order to argue (via steps that I’m skipping here) that theism is probably false. (This will be the path not traveled, so those who don’t follow this and the following paragraph need not worry about losing the discussion.) For a good example, in his paper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,”<sup>10</sup> Paul Draper argues that crucial evidence concerning the pain and pleasure in our world is antecedently far more probable on his “Hypothesis of Indifference” that “neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons” (p. 332) than it is on theism, and argues that this gives us “a *prima facie* good epistemic reason to reject theism—that is, a reason that is sufficient for rejecting theism unless overridden by other reasons for not rejecting theism” (p. 331).

But I will seek to vindicate what I take to be the intuitively powerful argument from horrific suffering as that intuitive argument is usually made, often by non-philosophers, and often powerfully: with no explicit appeal to probability theory. I view the two ways of running the argument as running parallel to one another, often turning on similar issues. On the particular not-explicitly probabilistic way of running the argument that I will endorse, the reader will be left to judge the plausibility of a key premise that states that there is horrific evil in the world that wouldn’t be there if there were a perfectly good God. I will be pointing toward various ways that atheologists have tried to motivate acceptance of this premise, without appealing to the apparatus of probability theory, some of which I find quite powerful. But it’s certainly true that another way to advance the discussion is to bring in probabilities and start to ask the kinds of questions that drive Bayesian arguments: How antecedently likely are these evils on theism (or this or that particular theistic hypothesis), and how likely on this or that non-

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<sup>10</sup> *Noûs* 23 (1989), pp. 331-350: Here Draper executes a “Bayesian Argument from Evil,” but he so names that class of arguments in, e.g., his “The Problem of Evil,” in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 332-351.

theistic hypothesis? This is a way I myself am often happy to pursue, and I will note here and there where what I'm doing overlaps with Draper's efforts, mainly taking advantage of how some of Draper's later works answer some recent attempts by theists to avoid the problem of horrific suffering, citing Draper's counters to those moves.

As our problem is usually pressed, much of the attention is directed at conveying just how horrific our world is at many points 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 evils that occur in our world, giving their audience a sense of just how widespread and common they are, but they also often zoom in on a few particular evils, or a few particular kinds of evils, to describe them in some excruciating detail, in order to give the listener a vivid sense of just how horrific they 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 philosophical discussions for the last several decades, and 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 non-human 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 (presumably cute) 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

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<sup>11</sup> William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-341; p. 336.

truly horrific suffering, anyway, and the human perpetrator adds an element of interpersonal violation that makes the evil seem worse and for many intensifies the call on God to intervene.

The massively best-selling novel *The Shack*<sup>12</sup> 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 the theologian 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.<sup>13</sup>

Ivan comments explicitly on his choice of the young as his focus here, 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

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<sup>12</sup> *The Shack*, at first self-published by the author, William P. Young, in 2007.

<sup>13</sup> David Bentley Hart, “Tsunami and Theodicy,” a post on the blog, *First Things*, March 2005. An expanded (and diluted in power) version of this summarizing passage occurs in Hart’s book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Eerdmans Publishers, 2011).

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.<sup>14</sup>

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 gravest 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 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*.<sup>15</sup>

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?

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<sup>14</sup> *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."

<sup>15</sup> First published in 1779, after Hume's death.

#### 4. OK, So What's the Argument, Then?: The "Simple" Argument from Horrific Evils<sup>16</sup>

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 challenge to the completeness of their view, not as pointing toward a potential error in it. They see our world's evils as pointing to a hole in our understanding of God's ways, not as pointing to God's non-existence: "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.

In what has proven to be an important paper on our problem (that I will wrestle with later), 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>16</sup> Though we do all this in significantly different ways, 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 somewhat 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's paper, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): pp. 172-176.) One important difference between us (well, at least this is 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 esp. note 26\*, below.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 116 (1984): pp. 73-93; p. 73.

*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, at least 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 Wykstra might agree<sup>18</sup>) 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 (as I at least think tends to be the case for powerful philosophical arguments) 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 stunningly 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.<sup>19</sup>

To facilitate discussion, we can engage in some mild philosophy-write, and 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):

van Inwagen's Argument from Horrendous 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!

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<sup>18</sup> I *think* the way to read Wykstra here is as saying: Though it has proven difficult to turn this feeling into a good argument, Rowe has at least come close. Wykstra's strategy is then to critically examine this best way of trying to turn the feeling into a good argument, and show that, even then, the argument suffers from the killer problem that Wykstra raises.

<sup>19</sup> 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 declare themselves to be waiting to see something properly "formulated."

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. Though those terms are in a way quite vague, we can still see this limitation in the formulation of the problem: 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 affect 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<sup>20</sup>:

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<sup>20</sup> Here I break from van Inwagen, and with Rowe (whose formulation we're about to encounter), and perhaps with standard 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. (I suppose I thus strictly depart from the form of argument that in "The Problem of Evil" Draper labels as "MT arguments" (for "modus tollens") in order to contrast with the "Bayesian Arguments" that he prefers—though I think that the argument as I formulate it should still be thought of as being of the same basic type as these two-premise formulations, as similar issues will arise with respect to it. And I suspect Draper would think his reasons for preferring the Bayesian over the MT arguments would also be reasons for preferring the Bayesian argument over my formulation.) 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):

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.

### 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!”<sup>21</sup>

“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.”

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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.

<sup>21</sup> For present purposes, I imagine the argument being put forward aggressively. It would be in keeping with my own manner, at least in the moods I mostly inhabit, and also with my estimation of the power of even powerful, old arguments, to instead follow the presentation of such an argument with words like: “That’s it, really, wrapped up in old newspaper and string.” I’m borrowing these words from my late teacher (and dissertation advisor), Rogers Albritton, who was writing about another familiar, simple, and powerful old argument. The opening of the relevant talk (posthumously published as a paper):

I have been intermittently obsessed for years with a certain form of skeptical argument “from possibility,” as I will say. The idea of it is ancient and familiar. It’s that “anything’s possible,” as we say, so “you never know,” as we also say. Anything’s possible, so you never know. More expansively: you can always or practically always be wrong; but if you know, you can’t be wrong; so, you never or practically never know. That’s it, really, wrapped up in old newspaper and string. (“On a Form of Skeptical Argument from Possibility,” *Philosophical Issues* 21 (2011): 1-24; p. 1.)

I don’t know if I picked up my habit of spending my philosophical attention obsessing over simple, old, familiar, and intuitively powerful arguments from Albritton, but if I didn’t, our shared habit was then a large part of why I ended up working with him.

## 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 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 assertions from which, together with your other claims, 1s might plausibly follow. I mean, I have some ideas about how one might start to try to make a proper argument out of all this, but my attempts on your behalf aren't turning out very well. I'm having a very hard time outlining your argument!”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 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 label and 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

## 6. But What's the Case for That Premise, Then?: Rowe's Appeal and the "Good Cop, Bad Cop" Routine

No, these claims about the evils of our world are best not construed as premises from which 1s is supposed to follow. We instead follow the example of Rowe, whom I already mentioned (remember: he's the fawn guy), in making the case more effectively.

Though our formulation of the argument diverges from his, we need to look briefly at how Rowe outlines the argument, so we can see and convert the insightful moves he makes in defense of it. Rowe uses 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 Intense Suffering

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

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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 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 in professional philosophy, too. For me, the prime example of this (at least of trying to figure out an opponent's argument might be, in decidedly unhelpful ways) is Alvin Plantinga's response to arguments 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 at least the "case," as he puts it, from horrific suffering in more recent work, as we will see in section 17—though, as we'll also see, he still thinks there is no good "argument" from horrific evils.

some evil equally bad or worse,  
So, Cr. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>23</sup>

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 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 (one might suspiciously ask) 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 as "premises" in his reasoning, in the last sentence of the above, he instead asks us: In light of his example, and 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?

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<sup>23</sup> 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.

Expanding his case, his reasoning, for 1r, 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,"<sup>24</sup> before returning to his evaluation of 1r, which no longer employs just a mild questioning appeal,<sup>25</sup> but has become something of a "good cop, bad cop" routine, with some 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, tha[t] 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.<sup>26</sup> (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.

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<sup>24</sup> Rowe, p. 337, emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Note that while Rowe does say that *something* is "obvious" in the quotation above, it is not his premise, but rather 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 to exercise that power.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

## 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: In light of the facts and reasoning just displayed, 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 that conclusion is supposed to follow may seem subtle—perhaps suspiciously so. But it is important, and 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 form of something that can be well captured in a premise-and-conclusion outline. 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, hoping that their audience will both agree with these claims and agree that they count against God's existence. 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 especially if they are 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 effect, if not using these exact words, 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.<sup>27</sup> But just *how* that conclusion is based on those claims may not be fully articulated—and importantly, our arguer may not know how to make it fully articulated. Crucially, the connection may be loose, hard to specify, and may essentially involve other, likely unidentified, beliefs that are lurking in the background, unnoticed. 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 as playing a key role, support some conclusion—perhaps strongly, perhaps sometimes even with overwhelming strength—before we can say just how they do.<sup>28</sup> (And if we *can't* do this, then we might as well give up on all arguments for controversial and philosophically substantive conclusions. For all such arguments will rest on at

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<sup>27</sup> 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 other beliefs 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 whether, in holding 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).

<sup>28</sup> 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).

least one premise that is controversial and quite deniable, and for which no proper argument is offered, and so for which the kind of “case” that we are now describing is the most that’s on offer.)

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, and are just about to explain, 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 does logically 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 is instead, for now, appealing to us whether *those premises* seem to be right. And then they might make a “case” for those premises, with that case not being 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. 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 primarily by means of a heavily guided tour of some of our world’s horrors, and then appealing to you: Doesn’t 1s seem to be, appear to be, true? Doesn’t it seem 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?

## 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?

Some of the apparent (!) shakiness of appearances is due to a misleading trick of language: When appearances are strong and reliable, we’re usually in a position to say something stronger than just that things appear to be the way we take them to be. For instance, we’ll often then be in a position to say that things simply are that way—and sometimes even that we know them to be that way. And when we’re in a position to say something stronger like that, we typically *will* say that stronger thing, rather than the needlessly weak “It appears/seems that....”. So, though appearances can be strong and reliable, we’ll usually use “appears”/“seems” talk when shaky appearances are in play, and this can make us think of appearances as being generally shaky things, when in fact they run the gamut.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, 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

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<sup>29</sup> I here adapt H.P. Grice’s (philosophically) famous explanation, in “The Causal Theory of Perception,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 35 (1961), pp. 121-152, for why the likes of “It looks red to me” generates an “implication” (Grice later came to use the label “implicature” here) to the effect that there is some “doubt or controversy” about whether the object is red, though the sentence doesn’t actually say that there is such doubt or controversy.

“phenomenal conservatism,” as it’s known in 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.<sup>30</sup>

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,” anyway), 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<sup>31</sup> (though the early steps down the cognitive road we took to get to the appearances we now appeal to can be notoriously hard to reliably reconstruct). 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 starting premise; we can call it the argument’s “key premise”—that is itself interesting and substantial.<sup>32</sup> And potentially

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Huemer has been the most important champion of Phenomenal Conservatism, primarily in his paper “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenal Research* 74 (2007): pp. 30-55, but also in subsequent work—though Huemer may not go along with my description of the view in the text. Huemer construes Phenomenal Conservatism as the position that (to take his gloss in the just-cited paper) “appearances of all kinds generate at least some justification for belief” (p. 30), which falls short of saying that appearances are where all our justification ultimately comes from (and indeed, falls short of even saying that appearances generate very much justification—though I think Huemer would definitely want to insist on that much). But I think one can find in Huemer’s work pushes toward accepting a more thorough-going “Phenomenal Conservatism” than he himself officially endorses.

<sup>31</sup> 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, because I for one 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 from its fabled beginnings.

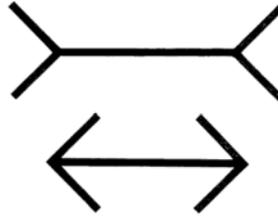
<sup>32</sup> I’m here assuming that arguments’ premises imply their conclusions. If an argument is not like that, and its controversial aspects instead concern whether the conclusion really follows from the premises, rather than whether the premises are true, it can be converted to the needed form by adding conditional bridge premises (“If [premise[s]], then [conclusion]”), which will then bear the weight of the controversy.

deniable.<sup>33</sup> And what can be said for 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 an initial premise of one's argument, and what I'm claiming here is that at least one of those *initial* premises of any argument for a substantial conclusion will itself be substantial and deniable. And, short of offering a proper argument for that premise, which we can now suppose our arguer is not in any position to do effectively, what can our arguer do in defense of their shakiest *initial* premise, other than to present it in its best light, perhaps asking their audience to evaluate it in light of certain considerations, 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? When the pusher of our Simple argument makes their case for their premise, but then ends with a mere appeal to appearances, they are doing what all arguers must do when they reach their initial premise(s).

Since such seemings or appearances are so important to our argument, and indeed to any substantial philosophical argument, it's worth pausing to remark on how the appearances that underwrite good arguments compare with some other appearances. Sometimes we say that something "seems" or "appears" to be the case, even though we are not at all tempted to believe that things really are here as they appear to be. For instance, even after being effectively informed (perhaps before even encountering it) that it really is an illusion, and that the two horizontal lines included here in it really are the same length, many will report that the horizontal line on top here "appears to be longer" (or "seems to be longer") than the other, lower one in this display of the Müller-Lyer illusion:

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<sup>33</sup> "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 right about 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 thought of as philosophy.) Philosophy is sometimes attacked as a waste of time for dealing with such questions, but quite inconveniently for them, 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 can tend not to be so good at it.)



Though they are fully convinced that the top line is not longer, I think that when they say “Wow, the top line seems to be longer!”, such a person is still reporting some push toward believing that the top line is longer that they can feel within their soul. This push or inclination to believe may never have had any chance of resulting in a belief that the top line is longer, given their unwavering trust that the lines are in fact the same length, but the push is still there, and can still be felt, and is I think what we are reporting with the relevant “seems” or “appears” claims.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I believe that “seems” and “appears” claims generally report some push toward believing the proposition that one is saying “seems” or “appears” to be true. Here, I go against Huemer, who in his main work, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism” (see note 29\*), argues as follows:

Nor should appearances be identified with dispositions or inclinations to form beliefs. One reason is that one might be so convinced that an appearance was illusory that one was not even inclined to believe its content. One could even be convinced in advance that one was going to experience an illusory appearance, so that there would be no time at which one had the relevant inclination to believe. (p. 31)

But as I pointed out in the main text (and I had Huemer’s argument in mind when I did so), there can be push toward (and the same point would hold for an inclination toward) belief that is preemptively and thoroughly checked by some other force.

In later work (“Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles,” in Chris Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, Oxford University Press, 2013); pp. 328-50), Huemer argues as follows:

A natural approach to analyzing seeming is to appeal to dispositions to believe. One might hold that its seeming to one that P is simply a matter of one’s being in a state such that one would believe that P, were there no other factors interfering with one’s forming such a belief.

It is worth briefly reminding ourselves of one of the main reasons for rejecting that approach. This is the fact that one can be disposed to believe P for different sorts of reasons, other than its seeming to one that P. If I am disposed to believe in the afterlife because I *want* there to be an afterlife, this is quite different from my being disposed to believe in the afterlife because that seems true. The lesson is that appearances are only one sort of ground for the disposition to believe. (p. 329)

But I think that to someone inclined to believe something because they want it to be so, the thing does seem to them to be the case. Of course, there are different levels of inclinations to believe things, and not everything that can be called a “disposition” to belief in someone forces us to say that the thing “seems” or “appears” to them to be so. My desire for there to be an afterlife may not yet have generated any felt push in me toward believing that there is an afterlife, though it may have made me particularly open to the thought, should it be urged by those around me, and in that way, may have in

By contrast, the seemings that we hope underwrite the premises of our philosophical arguments are those reported by what I call “all-in” appearance or seeming claims. Here, the claimant is not just reporting a push toward belief at some initial stage of cognitive processing that may have been checked by some other processing occurring elsewhere in her soul, but is reporting what she is inclined to believe at her final (so far) stage of inquiry on the issue, taking into account all the relevant considerations she has access to.

Well, our philosophical arguer is likely not just reporting her own all-in inclination to believe, but is in effect also appealing to her audience, “Hey, doesn’t it seem that way to you, too?” Our arguer has likely just raised various considerations which (she at least thinks) push toward the judgment that things are as she’s claiming they appear, and she is asking us to consider the matter with those considerations especially in mind, but she is inviting us, appealing to us, to agree, all-in, that, yes, it sure seems as if that’s the case.

And often, of course, to many of us, the arguer’s key premise does *not* seem true: When we bring all the relevant considerations to bear, including those the arguer has just stressed, we are not all-in inclined to think that the key premise is true. Indeed, this is the usual case. But even when unconvinced, we can often recognize the power of the argument: “Well, that key premise still doesn’t seem to me to be true, but I can certainly see how someone else might find it plausible.” At that point, you might be able to explain a bit why things seem otherwise to you, and the conversation may advance. Or maybe you can’t. These things go in different ways.

It’s rare, but the appearances behind the key premises of some substantial philosophical arguments 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 very 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 initial premises! And those pushing our problem of horrendous evils often think their

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some sense, I suppose, “disposed” me toward belief. But this is not a case, to use Huemer’s words (in the above quotation), of “one’s being in a state such that one would believe that P, were there no other factors interfering with one’s forming such a belief,” and the fact that some ways of being “disposed” toward belief don’t generate what we would call “appearances” of truth doesn’t show that “appears” and “seems” claims don’t generally report pushes or dispositions toward belief.

One important way that I agree with Huemer about the meaning of appearance claims is that, like him, I reject the multiple senses of “appears” and “seems” that were posited by Roderick Chisholm (whose approach was adopted by Wykstra; see note 40\*), and instead hold that there is just a single sense: see sect. 1.3, “One Sense of ‘Appear,’” pp. 323-332 of “Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles.” However, this single sense, on which, on my view, one reports some push toward belief, displays a lot of context-sensitivity, as one can report these pushes (or lacks thereof) at various stages of cognitive processing.

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," hopefully (from the arguer's perspective) making it seem a wildly 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, if you dare: *that!* — happen.<sup>35</sup> We

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<sup>35</sup> In a passage that Michael Bergmann's work brought to my attention (see his "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004): 709–27; p. 723), the Eighteenth Century Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid had this to say about the role of absurdity and ridicule in thinking about "first principles":

We may observe, that opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd: And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice.

This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature has furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth when properly used. (Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, D. R. Brookes (ed.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002; Essay VI, Chapter IV, p. 462)

I am very sympathetic to the importance of recognizing absurdity, in cases where argument fails us, and even in such cases where what's seen absurd is only contingently false (and Reid does see this as operative in cases of contingent falsehood): How the suggestion that we are brains vats strikes us as absurd and ridiculous plays a key role in my account (in Chapter 7 of *The Appearance of Ignorance* (Oxford UP, 2017), see esp. pp. 227-28) of how we come to know (at least by ordinary standards for knowledge) that we are not brains in vats (which belief I think is immediately justified). Of course, these tools can be misapplied; and ridicule—especially when publicly ridiculing the claims of another person—should be used with caution.

But I think I am inclined to apply Reid's insight to a broader scope of judgments than Reid himself did—though it isn't always easy to map Reid's epistemological terminology on to my own. Reid is speaking of "first principles," but what are those? Bergmann says that for Reid, first principles are believed "noninferentially" (Bergmann, p. 722), and indeed, in the passage Bergmann cites for this, Reid says that in the case of first principles, "There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments;

may often respond to such verbal bullying very defensively (to the point of even resorting to the likes of *Wizard of Oz* jokes to deflect the pressure), 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 overwhelmingly powerful—and then perhaps ask how horrible things would have to get before *you* would find the case powerful, too. (Or is there really no conceivable limit for you?) 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 can also help to get comparative (and a bit personal) and imagine them asking you for what philosophical arguments for substantial and interesting conclusions you *do* like, and then critically comparing your key premise (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.

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the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another. . .” (Reid, p. 452) And Bergmann seems to speak of what is believed and known noninferentially as being known “directly” (Bergmann, p. 722, n. 28), and, very much in keeping with this characterization, Reid’s description of first principles that I’ve just quoted immediately continues with these words: “. . . it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another.” (And it is not for nothing that Reid is often referred to as a “direct realist.”)

But, as I conveyed in note 26\*, I think many of our beliefs are *based on* others of our beliefs, and so, in Reid’s terminology, “borrow their light of truth” from other beliefs, though we have performed no conscious inference from the basis to the based, and have not and cannot formulate any arguments. When one or more belief does evidentially support another, and we are sensitive in our holding the supported belief to the support it gets from those other beliefs—in that we would not have held the supported belief, or would not have held it so strongly, were it not for the support it receives from those others of our beliefs—then I think the supported belief is not held “directly,” but on the basis of the beliefs from which it receives support, even though conscious inference has been performed, and no argument has been formulated, and is perhaps beyond the ability of the believer to formulate. And I think the role Reid assigns to absurdity and ridicule should be applied to such “indirectly” held beliefs: Where a judgment is very strongly supported by others of our beliefs, but in a way we can sense but cannot articulate, our sense of absurdity often kicks in to be a guide to truth, where argument fails us.

One of the most powerful I know.

## 9. Wykstra's Challenge: CORNEA and Suspect Appearances

I will soon (starting in section xx) be urging that the way to get relief from this powerful argument against theism is/would be via the avenue I reported provided me with some relief: by providing credible accounts of why God might allow the horrific suffering of our world—to engage in “theodicy,” in a prominent use of that term. And the rest of this book will then largely be an attempt to obtain such relief. But is theodicy needed here? We are for now wrestling with swipes at the power of our argument that don't depend on the swiper producing any theodicy—bafflement at what the argument could possibly be having been the first such complaint.

But we now move on to consider a couple of important attacks on such arguments as our Simple argument from horrific evils that are in the philosophical literature and that also seek to cut these arguments off before the need for theodicy ever arises—attempts to show that there is no good argument against theistic belief here worth worrying about, even in the absence of any account of what God's reasons might be for allowing horrific suffering. These attacks, by Stephen Wykstra and by Alvin Plantinga, are not only influential in philosophical circles, but answering them may help address related intuitive worries about our argument that might naturally arise for many readers, or that they might encounter in discussion of these issues.

Stephen J. Wykstra's wonderful essay, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’” (note 17), sparked the movement in philosophical theology known as “skeptical theism” (that we will discuss more generally a bit in section 12), and also, taking Rowe's argument as its example target, posed an important challenge to evidentialist arguments from evil that we must answer. Wykstra has followed that paper up with more recent work, but I find the most valuable lessons to be in Wykstra's original.

Wykstra spends much of the beginning of his paper very insightfully defending Rowe, and, by extension, evidentialist arguments in general. As Wykstra sees, any argument must start with some premise(s) that is/are not argued for (see esp. pp. 80-81), and starting with a premise that gives a strong appearance of being true seems a good place to start. Wykstra thus concludes that there is “nothing inherently suspect about Rowe's appeal-without-further-argument to the claim” that some instances of intense suffering appear to not serve any

outweighing good.<sup>36</sup> And Wykstra shows openness in general to a principle—a principle expressing a form of epistemic/methodological “conservatism”—that would underwrite Rowe’s move from appearances to reasonable beliefs in what appears or seems to be the case. As Wykstra puts it: “And *this* move is, on the face of it anyway, licensed by what many philosophers regard as a proper, indeed primary and indispensable, principle of justification: what Richard Swinburne calls ‘the Principle of Credulity,’ or what might more descriptively be called ‘the “seems so, is so” presumption’” (p. 83).

Yet, after all this able defense of Rowe, and, by extension, evidential arguments generally, Wykstra ends up arguing that the great suffering of our world does not even weakly support the atheistic conclusion of arguments like Rowe’s (pp. 77-79), because, although there is nothing *inherently* suspect in Rowe’s starting his argument by an appeal to how things seem to be, and while appearances can *often* be presumed to be a guide to how things are, the appearances that ground apparently powerful evidential arguments from horrific evils fall into a problematic class of appearances that cannot be rationally relied upon.

Wykstra attempts to show this by means of cases in which appearance claims seem out of place. Here is one of his cases:

Searching for a table, you look through a doorway. The room is very large—say, the size of a Concord hangar—and it is filled with bulldozers, dead elephants, Toyotas, and other vision-obstructing objects. Surveying this clutter from the doorway, and seeing no table, should you say: “It appears that there is no table in the room?”<sup>37</sup>

Especially if the table you are seeking would be a small one,<sup>38</sup> and the objects cluttering your view are very large and many, you would not seem to be in a position to make the appearance claim being considered. Wykstra thinks that this, and similar verdicts about his other cases, are explained by his proposed “Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access,” or “CORNEA” principle:

CORNEA: On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim “It appears that *p*” only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use

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<sup>36</sup> Wykstra, p. 80. The claim Rowe actually rests on is that these instances of suffering “do not appear to serve any outweighing good.” But as Wykstra argues (esp. pp. 82-83), this is best understood as the claim that they “appear to not serve any outweighing good.” (“Does not appear to” in its “ordinary sense”, as opposed to its “strict sense,” generally means “appears to not.”) I am here skipping this whole kerfuffle by just putting things in “appears to not” terms in the first place.

<sup>37</sup> Wykstra, p. 84. Wykstra phrases the claim he is asking about at the end of this case as “It does not appear that there is a table in the room.” In keeping with the previous note, I have modified this to instead consider the claim phrased in “It appears that not” terms.

<sup>38</sup> Wykstra would have done better here to have chosen something smaller than a table to be the object of the search. The key elements of this example seem to be the result of Wykstra basing this case on an example quickly given by Swinburne in a passage quoted at (Wykstra, p. 83).

she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (p. 85)

In short, the problem with your claim as you look into the large cluttered room, is that it's not reasonable for you to think that if there were a table in there, things would look any different to you. Well, at least different in any way likely to impact your judgment about there being a table in the room—an addition that probably should have been reflected in Wykstra's formulation of his principle. Suppose it's reasonable for you to think things would look discernibly different if there were a table in the room—if, say, you're reasonable to think that one of the large objects you see from the doorway would then be in a somewhat different location, maybe because the objects in the room are so tightly packed that any significant addition would have called for a little reorganization. Still, if it's not reasonable for you to think any of these differences would have any impact on your judgments about whether or not there is a table in the room (or whether or not there may be, or whether or not there appears to be, a table in the room), you are still in no position, just standing there in the doorway and peering in, to declare: "It appears that there is no table in the room."

Something like Wykstra's CORNEA principle seems to be right, at least as applied to what I called "all-in" appearance claims to which one wishes to apply the "seems so, is so presumption,"<sup>39</sup> as we can see more securely by expanding on his case for it. As Wykstra hoped we could sense, the character in his case is not entitled to the appearance claim being considered, and she also fails his CORNEA test, so the CORNEA test gives the correct result here. And the same happens with Wykstra's other two cases. But just giving the right result on three cases isn't much of a reason for thinking a general principle like this is correct—especially when the three cases are structurally as similar to one another as Wykstra's are. Yet, when considering his examples, it's easy to get the sense that something like CORNEA doesn't just spit out the intuitively correct results here, but is really getting at the correct explanation of

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<sup>39</sup> Appearance claims which report some push toward a belief at some stage of cognitive processing that has been thwarted at a later stage, so the push does not constitute an "all-in" inclination to belief, are not governed by anything like CORNEA. Wykstra intends CORNEA to apply only to some appearance claims, though he has a different approach than me to the varying meaning of those claims, on which he intends his principle to apply to those made in the "epistemic sense." But he steps lightly over the various meanings: "Though the term 'appears' is ubiquitous in his case, Rowe provides no explication of its meaning. I shall provide one, suggesting that he uses the term in something close to what Swinburne, following Chisholm, calls its 'epistemic' sense (as distinct from its 'comparative,' 'phenomenal,' and 'hedging' senses). But the 'appears idiom' is a philosophical swamp with an enormous literature, most of it of dubious relevance to Rowe's use. To avoid getting bogged down in it, I propose the following as a paradigm of Rowe's use that will give us our initial bearings. . ." (p. 80). And I trust that, despite our different ways of navigating the swamp, Wykstra and I end up focusing in on roughly the same range of claims as those to which to apply CORNEA: it's claims to the kind of appearance of truth that one hopes attaches to the premises of one's arguments.

*why* the characters can't issue the relevant appearance claims. Perhaps the best way of see why this is so is by considering series of cases made by making alterations to the originals, as we'll now do with the table case we are focused on.<sup>40</sup> Imagine changing Wykstra's example in various ways, slowly (by a series of small alterations), in order to approach and then move beyond a point where our judgment on whether the speaker is entitled to their appearance claim flips. For instance, you can try imagining slowly reducing the number and size of vision-obstructing objects in the room into which you are peering. Once you get down to where there are only a few scattered objects, all far too small to effectively hide a table, then, as we can sense, you *are* in a position to declare: "It appears that there is no table in the room."<sup>41</sup> And you will also then pass CORNEA, so chalk up another success for that principle. But by structuring our cases, we see that the very changes that make our judgment flip on whether the appearance claim is in order make us flip on whether CORNEA is satisfied. Also, as you move through the "grey zone" of cases—close-call cases in which it's hard to say whether you're entitled to the appearance claim—you should also find yourself in a CORNEA grey zone, where it's a tough call whether you pass the CORNEA test ("Is it really reasonable for me to think that...?"). And throughout the cases we consider, whether you pass the CORNEA test intuitively seems tightly connected to whether you can make the appearance claim: it seems to be pointing to quite relevant considerations on which the matter of whether you can make the claim quite plausibly turns. Similar results obtain for Wykstra's other cases. It's considerations like these that show us that CORNEA is on to something here.

## 10. The Importance of the Basis of an Appearance

Nailing down all the needed details of how to formulate and apply CORNEA would be a very difficult and long task, most of which we'll skip here. But before getting to why Wykstra thinks his principle undermines the key appearance claims of argument like ours, and why I think he's

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<sup>40</sup> Here I pursue the argumentative strategy I employ in defense of an "insensitivity" explanation for when we will seem to not know that something is the case at (DeRose 1995: 23-26 = DeRose 2017: 18-20). Wykstra's CORNEA principle is an insensitivity principle for when we are entitled to appearance claims.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in keeping with the points made in the second paragraph of sect. 8, at a certain point down this path, you should no longer say "It appears that there is no table in the room," because you should say something stronger instead: that "There is no table in the room," for instance. But this is a case where you are entitled to the appearance claim, but still shouldn't issue it, because you are entitled to, and ought to say, something stronger, instead.

wrong about that, we do have to take a look at one very important feature of how to wield CORNEA.

Consider this example of a company that buys old houses, updates them and fixes them up, and then sells them. As the construction and remodeling team nears the end of a very big job, they are looking for a new smaller project that they can squeeze in to the few weeks open on their schedule before they are committed to starting work on another big job. They are considering a few houses that are on the market, and look from their listings like plausible candidates. From the age and size of the houses, which can be ascertained from their listings, the company can start to get an idea of whether fixing them up would be too big a job for them to take on in their current circumstances, and they can start to weed out some potential candidates and zero in on others. But they need a better basis than what they can gather from the listing before actually taking on a job. As it happens, they have just sent one of their workers to the vicinity of one of the candidate houses, anyway (to deliver a contract, say), so they decide to have that worker take a look at the house. Unfortunately, the look has to be a very quick walk-through, and not a careful inspection, because the worker has another important appointment to get to.

At this point, our story divides into two versions. On one variant, the worker is an Old Pro, who has looked through many old houses, and can often ascertain quite reliably the likely size of a job from even a quick look-through. On our second variant, the worker is a Newbie, who has little idea of what to look for. As they approach the house, both take a fairly quick look at the roof, since if the roof needs to be replaced, that adds considerably to the size of the job. We can suppose that the need for a new roof would not by itself mean the project was unfeasible, but would take things a significant distance in that direction. Neither of our inspectors sees any indication that the roof needs to be replaced, but Newbie is in no position to be very confident that it isn't needed. If the roof were in horrible enough shape, even Newbie would likely see signs of trouble, but it could easily happen that more subtle signs of big problems elude Newbie. But Old Pro, knowing just what to look for, is in a position to be at least fairly confident that the roof is in good enough shape. This is emblematic of what happens throughout the look-overs of the house, with Old Pro being confident enough that they won't be plagued with each of the various sources of major trouble that she ends up being quite confident indeed that there won't be enough total major problems to make the project unworkable. Imagine the cases so that Old Pro, but not Newbie, ends up in a position to declare that, given the company's time and financial constraints, "It seems that we can do this job," with Newbie left in a position to only say something like, "Well, there weren't indications of any really major problems that I was able to catch."

To check if and how it can explain our contrast, let's look at CORNEA again:

CORNEA: On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim “It appears that p” only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (p. 85)

And it seems that CORNEA can account for the difference here, because it seems that it *is* reasonable for Old Pro, but not for Newbie, to think that “given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them,” if the job had been unfeasible, the “cognized situation” likely would have been different in a way that would have been not only discernible to her, but (to take account of the little tweak I suggested to the principle) would have affected how she was inclined to judge the feasibility of the project. Note that to handle the cases correctly, we had to pay attention to what our inspectors’ judgments were based on, what they were “going by”: this was an aspect of the use Old Pro made of her cognitive faculties that was vital to the correct application of CORNEA to her case. It’s because Old Pro was taking into account various signs of no-big-trouble and various lacks of signs-of-big-trouble that Newbie was in no position to appreciate that Old Pro, but not Newbie, ended up in a position to issue the appearance claim. This is the key lesson of how to use CORNEA that we have to apply as we consider our argument from evil.

## **11. What Our Atheologian Is Relying on and How They Pass CORNEA: An Appearance Reasonably Relied Upon**

Wykstra thinks CORNEA undermines Rowe’s crucial appearance claim, and more importantly, since Rowe is just the exemplar Wykstra is using to address them, evidentialist arguments generally. But I think Wykstra attains this result by underestimating the basis for these claims. In the below passage, I emphasize how Wykstra characterizes what our atheologian is going by as Wykstra opens his crucial section, “CORNEA Applied”:

Return, then, to Rowe’s fawn, suffering in a distant forest. Rowe’s claim is that the suffering appears not to serve any God-justifying purpose. It is clear, I think, that *the feature of the cognized situation crucial to Rowe’s claim is that there is no outweighing good within our ken served by the fawn’s suffering*. CORNEA thus forces us to ask the following question: if there were an outweighing good of the sort at issue, connected in the requisite way to instances of suffering like this, how likely is it that this should be apparent to us? (pp. 87-88)

And Wykstra’s answer (p. 88), given how much greater God’s mind would be than ours, is that it isn’t very likely at all that the outweighing good God was acting toward is one that would be

apparent to us, and thus, in brief, we, and Rowe, cannot reasonably judge that we would see what that good was, if it existed, and thus, we, and Rowe, are not entitled to Rowe's appearance claim. Well, at least about this one case involving the fawn. As we saw, Rowe then steps back and considers how things appear given all the horrible suffering of our world. But Wykstra thinks this will not help:

And it is evident that the case cannot be repaired merely by pointing out the number of instances of suffering which have no evident purpose—unless one has justification for believing that these instances belong to a class such that if Divinely purposed goods exist in connection with all known instances of suffering in this class, these goods would always or usually be within our ken. (p. 88)

It is puzzling why Wykstra thinks we'd have to be reasonable in thinking that the goods in question would always or usually be within our ken, rather than just that they would be so more often than they in fact are.

But the larger problem here is that Wykstra isn't taking into account all that our atheologists are going by as the basis of their key appearance claim: Wykstra is in that way treating Old Pro as if she were Newbie. Those who press our argument are not just going by their or our inability (or complete inability) to discern the goods for the sake of which God allows the horrors of our world (for Rowe), or (more generally) the good reason God has for allowing them. If that were all they were going by, their claim would be in jeopardy of failing a fair application of CORNEA, for the reasons Wykstra gives.<sup>42</sup> But they are also, and in a way I'm about to explain, independently, going by just how vast and horrible so many of these evils are.

Of course, anyone who has encountered the arguments in question, and certainly Wykstra, realizes that they make use of just how awful and extensive the evils of our world are. But the way the arguments often go can make it seem that those features of our world's evils are just used as theodicy killers: to knock out as insufficient particular proposed reasons God might have for allowing evil, and thus to reinstate the claim that we can't discern (or more aggressively: can't even begin to discern) God's reasons for allowing the evils of our world: "Oh, yes, that would [or "might," to taste] be a good reason for allowing *some* evils, but it can't account for why God might allow all the truly horrific evils of our world, so we're right back where we started: We have no idea why God allows the evils of our world." For instance, in Ivan's famous speech in *The Brothers Karamozov* that we looked at in section 7, Ivan targets a

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<sup>42</sup> Here, I echo Draper's evaluation of how a limited kind of evidential argument from evil (in Draper's terms, "arguments from the failure of theodicy" (see Draper, "Confirmation Theory and the Core of CORNEA," esp. pp. 138-9)) are challenged by Wykstra's arguments, but Draper is issuing his evaluation with respect to more recent efforts of Wykstra's.

particular account of why God might allow evils, claiming it is not good enough to account for the horrific evil he has been conveying:

[C]an 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.’

So, yes, the nature and extent of our world’s evils are used to counter particular proposed reasons God might have had. But, you know, it’s not only those theists invested in the particular theodicy Ivan targets who are made to squirm by Ivan’s attacks. Fans of other theodicies, or combinations of theodicies, can also have their faith shaken—and rationally so—by a real look at the horrors of our world, as they wonder whether the accounts they’ve accepted can really handle all that. And important to our current concerns: The same can happen to those who haven’t latched on to any particular theodicies, but have just supposed that God allows evils for reasons they can’t see. They can be quite reasonable being happy to take that stance with respect to some (perhaps minor) evils, but then think it is very unlikely indeed that God (exists and) has some good unknown reason for allowing all *that*, as they point to unspeakably horrific suffering. There’s nothing irrational in finding it more unlikely that there is a God-justifying reason for the world’s evils as one finds those evils to be more horrifying and horrifying evils to be vastly more extensive.

“Well, so isn’t it still possible that God has some good reason, even for all *that*, that you can’t discern?”

“I suppose anything is *possible*. I just judge it [incredibly] unlikely. After looking at all that unspeakably horrific evil our world contains, it’s really [—and I mean *really*—] seeming to me 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. I mean, have you really looked at those things?”

That seems a perfectly reasonable stance. And in keeping with it, there seems to be a perfectly reasonable, and closely related, response to a CORNEA-based challenge to it, when we keep in mind that our atheologian is in large part going by just how horrible and extensive the evils of our world are:

“Well, do you think that, given your cognitive faculties and the use you have made of them, if there *were* a God-justifying reason for our world’s evils, the situation would likely be different in a way discernible by you? Is it *reasonable* for you to think that?”

“Well, yes, in the relevant way, I do think that, and quite reasonably so. I am basing my appearance claim in large part on just how unspeakably horrible so many of the world’s evils get, and I do think it likely that if there were a God-justifying reason for the world’s evils, there wouldn’t be so many of them that were so unspeakably horrible. In fact, for many particular ones, I’m finding it quite likely that if there were a good God watching over things, those would not have been allowed to get so horrible. But taking them all together, do I think it’s likely that things would be different if there were a God-justifying reason for all the world’s worst evils?: Yes!”

“But isn’t it possible that if there were a God-justifying reason for all the world’s evils, the relevant aspects of our situation—for you, how many of the world’s evils get so unspeakably horrible—would be just as they actually are, and so not discernibly different at all?”

“I suppose I can’t really rule out that being *possible*, but you didn’t ask whether it’s possible, but whether it’s likely. And on the matter of whether the “cognized situation” would be discernibly different in the way I spoke of, I’m finding that very likely indeed.”

## **12. “But We’re All Newbies Here!”: Sensible Skeptical Theism vs. the More Aggressive Varieties of It**

When, in the above section, I wrote that Wykstra is “treating Old Pro as if she were Newbie,” I was just making the point that Wykstra is neglecting some of the basis of the atheologists’ claims. But some readers were probably yelling at me: “We’re all Newbies here!”, having in mind the good point that none of us have had the opportunity to observe many worlds, some governed by a perfectly good God, and others not, so that we could compare the two types in terms of the worst evils they contain.<sup>43</sup> In that way, we are much like the Newbie of my house inspection story. Let me quickly assure the provoked that I agree it’s wise to keep in mind this similarity they have pointed out, and that it can sensibly be taken to provide those moved by our argument from horrific evils with some reason for displaying some modesty in how certain they take their judgment to be here: We would indeed be better positioned to judge the likes of premise 1s if we had the experience to make us in the relevant way like Old Pro. Some caution here seems like a very sensible bit of “skeptical theism,” where (to take a good encyclopedia

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<sup>43</sup> Hume passage? x

statement of it) we take that in general to designate strategies “for bringing human cognitive limitations to bear in reply to arguments from evil against the existence of God.”<sup>44</sup>

But Wykstra is not just sounding that sensible note of caution, but is making the much more aggressive skeptical theist claim that the horrific evils of our world don’t even count as weak evidence against the existence of a perfectly good God. And here, our atheist can remind us that even Newbie would be in a position to see signs of trouble, if they were bad enough. I should point out that in later work, Wykstra has toned down his skepticism a bit, arguing instead that arguments like Rowe’s do not provide “leveraging” evidence—evidence strong enough to rationally move someone from belief in God to disbelief.<sup>45</sup> However, the story here gets complicated, because Rowe is there being construed (alas, with his consent) as relying on (what Wykstra dubbed) a “noseum” inference, from our inability to see a good reason for God to allow the evils of our world to there (probably) being no such reasons—a move which considerably weakens the argument.

My interest here has been to defend our “Simple” argument from the aggressive form of skeptical theism embodied in Wykstra’s CORNEA principle. This involved skipping the many twists and turns in the subsequent literature on skeptical theism, in order to see how our argument escapes an aggressive, though in its way quite intuitive, attempt to undermine it—and thereby arrive at a better idea of how our argument’s premise, 1s, is based on the horrific evils contained in our world. (And in particular, to now use the terminology just introduced, how it’s best not to construe our arguer as relying on a “noseum” inference.<sup>46</sup>)

But to update you a bit on the state of the discussion of skeptical theism: It is not at all unusual for skeptical theists to adopt a stance as aggressively skeptical as Wykstra’s was in his original paper, and that may indeed deserve to be thought of as the “standard” position of skeptical theists: See section 1.2 of his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on “Skeptical Theism,” where Trent Dougherty presents the places where several very prominent skeptical theists (Peter van Inwagen, William Alston, and Michael Bergmann) make strong claims of the likes that, for the kinds of reasons skeptical theism gives, arguments from the evils of our world provide no good reason whatsoever for thinking that God does not exist. (Dougherty labels the strong claim of this sort the “No Weight Thesis.”)

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<sup>44</sup> Opening sentence of Trent Dougherty’s entry on “Skeptical Theism,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; entry first published Jan. 25, 2014; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skeptical-theism/>

<sup>45</sup> Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseum Arguments from Evil,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 126-150; see esp. pp. 130-131 for an explanation of “leveraging evidence.”

<sup>46</sup> In the manuscript cited in note 16\*, Dougherty is also insistent that the atheological argument here is best not construed as a “noseum” inference.

As I noted above (and as Dougherty also notes), Wykstra himself has toned down the skepticism in his skeptical theism a bit. However, it's still fairly aggressive—and certainly goes well beyond the “don't be so certain” stance that I labelled “sensible skeptical theism.” And what's more, his arguments still rely on an overly narrow view of the atheologian's basis for their argument that I pointed out in sections 11-12, above. In “Confirmation Theory and the Core of CORNEA,”<sup>47</sup> a critique of Wykstra's more recent work, Draper notes how Wykstra toggles between claiming that the vast horrific evils of our world fail to provide strong reason against God's existence and claiming that our inability to fathom God's reason for allowing that fails to provide such strong reason (see esp. section 6, pp. 139-141 of Draper). My best explanation for this switching is based on how, as I noted in section 11, above, the vastness and horrifying nature of the world's evils is often seen as functioning: as just knocking down particular theodicies, so that we are returned to a state of not knowing God's reasons. Given this (mistaken) view of how those features of the world's evils function, those features can be seen as playing some role (which they obviously are), while the atheist's inference can still be viewed as wholly going through our inability to discern God's reasons. As I claimed with respect to Wykstra's original effort, his argument does not go through on a proper construal of the basis of the atheologian's case. Similarly, but with respect to Wykstra's more recent work, Draper argues that Wykstra's case does threaten attempts to wrest God's non-existence from our inability to see God's reasons for allowing evils, but “fails to show that the evils themselves are not strong evidence against theism” (p. 132).

### **13. Plantinga and “Probabilistic” vs. “Deductive” Arguments from Evil**

I certainly cannot be making claims about how powerful our Simple argument is without grappling with the attack on arguments like it made by the ace defender of theism, both in general, and in particular from problems of evil, Alvin Plantinga, perhaps most vociferously in his paper, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil” (henceforth “PAE”), and updated in some later works.<sup>48</sup> Especially in sections 3-6 above, I considered challenges to “produce the argument!” issued by those who might claim to be having a hard time seeing what the argument from evil is even supposed to be. I was construing the professed bewilderment as one is likely to encounter it from various “apologists” for theistic belief (on this, see note 21\*, above), but insofar as such a response to the problem is directly or indirectly inspired by

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<sup>47</sup> In Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer, ed., *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 132-141.

<sup>48</sup> Plantinga, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil,” *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 1-53.

material in the professional philosophical literature, I imagine it is Plantinga's attack that is responsible. Plantinga certainly professes an inability to see what his opponents' argument is supposed be at crucial points, as well as a willingness to attempt to help those hapless opponents out by exploring what their arguments might be—only of course, to find all attempts to help them out to come to naught. But Plantinga is in part responding to Rowe's argument, laid out in numbered steps, so his problem can't be one of not knowing how the argument for the non-existence of God might be formulated. Rather, Plantinga construes Rowe and others who might use similar arguments for atheism as aiming to establish further conclusions related to the claim that God does not exist, and what Plantinga turns out to be at a loss for is seeing how those further conclusions might be established. In executing this strategy, Plantinga is saddling his opponents' argument with completely unreasonable burdens, and if someone is inclined to find an argument like our Simple argument from horrific suffering to be a powerful one (as I certainly am), there is nothing in Plantinga's attack that should lead them to retract such a judgment. Or so I will argue.

But first: I keep talking about arguments "like" our Simple argument—and Rowe's and van Inwagen's argument. What is the type in question? Answer: These are what are called in the philosophical literature "probabilistic" (or sometimes "evidential"), as opposed to "deductive" arguments from evil. Plantinga has prominently attacked both kinds of argument, but we are here considering his attack on the former. To evaluate the success of Plantinga's defense, we need a decent idea of the scope and nature of the arguments he intends to be defending against.

Plantinga opens PAE 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 had recently 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. (PAE, p. 1)

Though the distinction here might not be as clear as one might like (see notes 49-51\*), our "Simple" argument, along with van Inwagen's and Rowe's arguments would all seem to be such "probabilistic" arguments, that do not trade in charges of inconsistency, as opposed to the old-style "deductive" arguments, which do, and so all three fall in the scope of Plantinga's

attack in PAE—though Rowe’s is the only one that was around when Plantinga wrote PAE, and so the only one he explicitly addressed there. (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 an atheologian who endorsed any one of our probabilistic arguments would certainly think that it “gives a good reason for accepting” the non-existence of God. We are wondering if there is anything in Plantinga’s attack to show that they’re wrong to think so.

Note that none of our “probabilistic” arguments actually have anything about probability in their formulations, so one might wonder how they earn the label. To better 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” or “evidential” arguments we have considered (reproduced here for convenience):

van Inwagen’s Argument from Horrendous 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 Intense Suffering

- 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.

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 evil-reporting premise to their atheistic conclusion—those other premises being 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. (Whether these arguments succeed is another matter: In what I'm calling the "Classic" formulation of the argument, 2d, in particular, seems wrong, and is certainly quite problematic as a mere unpacking of the meaning of its key terms—especially of "wholly good."<sup>49</sup> But we are currently interested in what proponents of such arguments were at least *trying* to do.) In its evil-reporting premise, the 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<sup>50</sup> and b) premises that simply unpack the meanings of the key

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<sup>49</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> There is an issue of what are the kinds of evils whose existence we can just "report," in the sense in question. Clearly, one cannot just so report that there are "evils which would not exist if a perfectly good God existed." The existence of evils of *that* kind, so designated, certainly is inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly good God, but that's not a kind that we can in this context just report to be exemplified in our world. That there are "horrific" evils, or "natural" evils (to cite a kind much discussed in connection with the problem of evil), by contrast, can be in the relevant sense just reported. Likewise for certain ways of relating the *amounts* of evils that exist: that there are, say, "vast" amounts of horrific evils can be reported (however vaguely); but not that the amount of horrific evils is "more than a

terms in one's argument: that way, one will hold that the existence of the evils mentioned in one's evil-reporting premise are *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.<sup>51</sup> His second premise offers a judgment that atheologists 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,<sup>52</sup> 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 use evils of our world to argue that God does not exist. And those who endorse these arguments do of course think they provide good reason for accepting that atheistic conclusion.

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perfectly good God would allow." One idea here is: for a type of evil whose existence can just be reported, characterize it independently from the likes of whether God could allow it, or could have prevented it without jeopardizing some greater good, etc.

<sup>51</sup> van Inwagen seems unhappy with the distinction between the two types of arguments, but classifies his own as "evidential" nonetheless: "Since I find the distinction artificial and unhelpful, I am, of course, not going to allow it to dictate the form that my discussion of the argument from evil will take. I am, as it were, jumping right into the evidential problem (so-called; I won't use the term) without any consideration of the logical problem" (*The Problem of Evil*, p. 68). His skipping to the evidential problem seems due mainly to his not being very impressed by the logical problem. Having found the importance of the discussion on the evidential side, and finding the distinction a mess, anyway, he didn't expend effort on the logical problem or the distinction between the two forms of the problem. I don't imagine my discussion here would satisfy van Inwagen that the division has been made clear: the distinction I rely on between those premises that do and those that don't simply "unpack the meanings" of the key terms is quite vague—as is the distinction between those premises that do and those that do not simply "report" on the evils of our world (see the immediately previous note). But I suppose I would be joining van Inwagen as classifying the four arguments in front of us as I do, placing three of them on the "evidential" side, and one on the "logical" side, of this vague distinction.

<sup>52</sup> See two notes above for an explanation of why Rowe's first premise is not the relevant sense just a report of a kind of evil we find in the world. Rowe certainly doesn't treat it as just such a report, as we have seen when we took a good look at Rowe's defense of that premise.

## 14. Plantinga's Attack on Probabilistic Arguments from Evil and What the Attack Gets Right

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 atheologist I'm defending (one who endorses our "Simple" argument) 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 atheologist uses forms of the word "probable"; there's a more serious disconnect here.

Plantinga cheekily construes the atheologist 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 ' $\alpha$ ') contains" (PAE, p. 2). So Plantinga's atheologist is appealing to the amount of evil the world will ever contain. *Our* atheologist is appealing not to just how much evil there is, but also to 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 "atheologist" 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, it is unlikely that G is true. (p. 2)

This *may* be alright so far. I mean, as we've noted, our atheologist'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 atheologist 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 atheologist wildly, striking only at strong claims they need not be making; immediately following the above, we find:

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 endorses a probabilistic argument from evil as providing a strong reason (or, say, an overwhelmingly strong reason) for denying God's existence, but who does not get into the business of calling all who disagree with them irrational, off the hook, so far as Plantinga's attack goes?

Things get worse. After an illustration to 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. . . (p. 3)

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, in a way which seems to 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 atheologian as trying to do so, I readily agree with Plantinga that probabilistic-argument-wielding-atheologians 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 have they shown 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.

## **15. 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 (or a powerful argument, or an extremely powerful 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.) These are unreasonable burdens. 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.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> It's interesting that the way Plantinga sets up the positions at the start of his paper discourages turning around some unreasonable burdens to apply to theists like him. Note the opening two sentences of PAE:

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

Here's the problem: That there is a good (or successful, or cogent, or powerful, or very powerful, or even exceedingly 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 not to believe it, and/or 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 connecting rational belief with arguments (and good luck with formulating that, too). But what a tough argumentative row to hoe!

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belief, so the natural atheologist offers arguments for the non-existence of God, or for the rational impropriety of theistic belief. (p. 1)

"Natural atheologists" are here portrayed as offering arguments for God's non-existence, just as natural theologians offer arguments for God's existence. So far, so fair. But we then for some reason move right into what these folks are trying to show about the rational status of some beliefs, and there, while the natural theologians are construed as trying to show the "rational propriety" of their own belief (that God does exist), the "natural atheologists" are portrayed, not as defending the rationality of their own belief (that God does not exist), but as contending for the "rational impropriety" of their opponent's belief. I don't think this difference in construals can be justified by a claim that it's only those on the atheological side of this debate who have taken swipes at their opponents' rationality. One thinks immediately here of what is perhaps the best known bit of natural theology, where Anselm, kicking off the presentation of his famous ontological argument, approvingly quotes the Psalmist, saying, "The fool says in his heart that there is no God."

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" (PAE, pp. 3-4). Perhaps some arguments in favor of God's existence are of that type as well, then? If so, that might at least explain why their backers aren't being asked to address all the arguments against their conclusion before their arguments can be credited as good. 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, anyway. 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 in fact happen to hit upon 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 arguments for conclusions opposite of our own to weigh them against each other, even if our own argument was of the "deductive" variety, especially if we were throwing around charges of irrationality.

But then, since all of the above is so general, and holds even for extremely powerful arguments, merely making the case that some opponent hasn't by means of their argument shown contrary view to be irrational, nor met the other 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 their argument.

Of course, I don't find our Simple argument *that* powerful. But I do find it very powerful indeed, and am finding little in Plantinga's attack to dissuade me from that evaluation. (And those who find it even more powerful than I do should also find nothing in Plantinga's attack to dissuade them from that evaluation.) I'm just finding reasons for thinking atheologians haven't achieved by means of their argument something that I think is never achieved by *any* philosophical arguments for controversial conclusions.

## **16. Distinguishing Probabilistic Cases from Evil from the Trash Talking often Associated with Them**

“But wait! 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?<sup>54</sup> Didn't we

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<sup>54</sup> Of the places where atheologians have in print explicitly targeted the rationality of theism on the basis of the problem of evil, a passage from J.L. Mackie is worth singling out, not just because it is well-known and clear on the point in question, but also because it is often quoted by Plantinga in setting up his discussions of the problem of evil. It's from the opening paragraph of Mackie's paper, “Evil and Omnipotence” (*Mind* 64 (1955): pp. 200-212). Mackie opens by remarking on (what he takes to be) the failure of arguments for God's existence, but also how the theologian can handle this failure:

The traditional arguments for the existence of God have been fairly thoroughly criticised by philosophers. But the theologian can, if he wishes, accept this criticism. He can admit that no rational proof of God's existence is possible. And he can still retain all that is essential to his position, by holding that God's existence is known in some other, non-rational way.

Then, in the passage Plantinga likes to quote, Mackie turns toward the problem of evil, and shows that he is indeed targeting the rationality of theists:

I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another. . . (p. 200)

ourselves see Unger totally go there, with great gusto? And in his “bad cop” moments, didn’t Rowe at least strongly insinuate such a charge? So why then say that Plantinga has saddled probabilistic-argument-wielding atheologians with unreasonable burdens? Haven’t they taken those burdens on themselves? And, really, DeRose, haven’t you been insinuating such things yourself, though you hide behind the skeptics/atheologians you are defending as you do so?”

Well, yes, some actual atheologians have been aggressive in this way. Plantinga certainly thinks of them as being so—and I presume this is based on plenty of first-hand experience.

But this surely does not mean we should require that atheologians succeed in such things as showing that their opponents (all of them?) are irrational, or that all the arguments on the other side are lacking—in meeting requirements that no proponents of arguments for any controversial philosophy can ever meet—before we can recognize them as having a good or powerful argument for their atheistic conclusion.

And as our atheologians will be quick to point out, when on offense, theists, at times, can be pretty triumphalist themselves.

To straighten this all out and sensibly evaluate the strength of the case for atheism before us, we should start by distinguishing that case itself from any associated trash-talking by the atheologian that may accompany it. (A parallel procedure is in order in evaluating pro-God arguments.)

What makes for successful or strong or powerful arguments, beyond the “proper argument,” as I’ve been calling it (the thing that can be outlined in premise-and-conclusion form), is the arguer’s ability to make a “case” for their key initial premise(s): to present the issue of whether that premise is true in a way that makes it rationally seem that it is. This is a matter of getting the audience to view the matter from the proper angle (or, more suspiciously: from an angle favorable to the arguer’s cause) in order to see that apparent truth. And it will often involve quite a bit of reasoning for the truth of that key initial premise—though not in the form of presenting deeper premises from which the premise in question follows, in which case that premise wouldn’t be an initial premise. The arguer presents their case, including what

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Plantinga began quoting this passage in Plantinga’s famous paper, “The Free Will Defense” (in Max Black, ed., *Philosophy in America*, Cornell UP, 1965; pp. 204-220), p. 204. Mackie is presenting the *logical* problem of evil as the challenge to the rationality of theism, which logical problem is the focus of Plantinga’s famous 1965 paper. But in later treatments, Plantinga worked the quotation from Mackie into Plantinga’s overall narrative on which atheologians later retreated from such a logical form of the problem, but then started pressing the probabilistic or evidential argument from evil, as a new way to pursue (among other goals) the old goal of attacking the rationality of theists: See *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 459-464, where the Mackie passage is quoted at p. 460.

reasoning they have for that premise, and in light of that case, appeals to their audience: “Doesn’t that premise seem true?”

As we’ve seen, our arguer might also register, and perhaps quite aggressively, how the matter strikes them—and perhaps even what they think of those to whom things might seem different. Or in stating just how strong they find the appearance of truth attaching to their key premise, and then how powerful they find the argument itself, they might venture opinions—often quite bold—about how that argument compares with what could or has been said on the other side of the issue. All this can be viewed as trash-talking: attempts to play up the strength of one’s own side of the debate and/or denigrate the other. It’s an interesting aspect of intellectual battles, and one’s ability to engage in it successfully often turns on how well one can subsequently back up that trash-talking—or how well one can appear to do so. It’s almost inevitable in philosophical arguments, though the degree of aggressiveness varies greatly from case to case.

And of course, it’s wise not to be cowed by an arguer’s trash-talking into an evaluation of their argument matching theirs. But the line between what I’m calling “trash-talking” and the more rational aspects of an arguer’s case is subtle. As I indicated toward the end of section 8, I think it can be enlightening to encounter an aggressive trash-talker, and through them to get a feel for how matters look to one who finds a key appearance to an argument very compelling.

But however you feel about the potential for any positive value to trash-talking, you should not let the fact that the arguer hasn’t shown various of the trash-talking claims they made in association with their argument to be true lead you to think the argument itself is weak. That would lead you to disparage all substantial arguments. It’s in the nature of trash-talking that its claims haven’t been duly demonstrated—and often that they’d be very hard to demonstrate.

Ultimately, dear reader, the call on how powerful premise 1s, and then our Simple argument that it fuels, as always, is yours to make. But I urge you in making that call not to think Plantinga has demolished the argument. Or that he’s really done anything that should make you lower your estimation of how strong the argument is. Well, unless you actually were thinking that atheologians had shown their trash-talking claims to be true, in which case Plantinga can set you right about *that*. Otherwise, if you found the argument convincing, or strong, or powerful, you should never retract that judgment based on an attack like Plantinga’s.

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

Ratcheting things up a bit, I want to close this portion of the book by actually enlisting (or, I suppose, conscripting) Plantinga’s aid *in defense 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 at all by anything he’s called an argument from evil that’s anything like the one that we’re considering, and has spent much energy fighting against 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”),<sup>55</sup> Plantinga himself in essence makes a presentation of our argument from horrendous evils—and quite forcefully.

After countering some attempts at “probabilistic” arguments from evil,<sup>56</sup> Plantinga suggests that perhaps no *argument* is needed for the facts about the evils of our world to work against belief in God:

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 his tour of our often hellish world, and then enlisting the help of Eleonore Stump (whom Plantinga is quoting 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:

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<sup>55</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2000. Note that we have moved forward in time 21 years from PAE.

<sup>56</sup> Here is Plantinga summing up his take on arguments in the vicinity by Rowe and by Draper: He finds some nice things 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.

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.<sup>57</sup>

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 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. (I take "evident" here to meaning something in the vicinity of "very apparent.") Plantinga does studiously avoid calling this an "argument" against God's existence, but he does call it a "case" (which seems for him 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, though Plantinga has an answer to this "case" (that we will soon examine), one definitely gets the impression in this material that Plantinga thinks one needn't be stupid to find it 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, other than perhaps

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<sup>57</sup> WCB, pp. 483-484, quoting Eleonore Stump, "The Mirror of Evil," in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reasons*, ed. Thomas Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 239.

complications, to make things seem more sophisticated (even if not more rationally persuasive)?

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 to<sup>58</sup> 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 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 highly provocative epistemology and (more to the point) 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*

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<sup>58</sup> I don’t mean to be insinuating that Plantinga’s response is silly. It is provocative. 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.

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—or, as I would say, how powerful they might be.<sup>59</sup>

### *Theodicy, Goalposts, and Relief*

#### **18. Theodicy, in the Form of a Credible Account of What God's Reasons for Allowing the Horrific Evils of Our World Might Be**

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: by attempting to give a credible account of what God's reasons for allowing the evils of our world might be.

This is to attempt to give a "theodicy," in a philosophically common use of that term that I've been utilizing in this book, and that's a bit narrower than what seems to be the term's most common use. "Theodicy" ordinarily means something quite general, along the lines of a

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<sup>59</sup> 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—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.