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Terry Christlieb

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WHICH THEISMS FACE AN EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL?

Terry Christlieb

Many philosophers simply assume that evil is evidence against a *generic* form of theism. Others have tried to offer an argument to *show* that this is so. I will argue in Part I that the most promising attempt to develop an argument of that sort fails. It will become apparent that generic theism is just *too* generic to permit anyone to show that known evils provide evidence against it.

Given the above results I will then in Part II examine the question of whether some other kind of evidential argument might still be possible. Perhaps an evidential argument from evil could be developed against a properly *elaborated* theism, that is, one more precise and detailed in its claims relevant to the relation of God to evil. But I will argue that it is doubtful that such can be shown against the really important forms of elaborated theism, namely those forms to which actual theistic religions are committed. I will point out a number of grave obstacles to the development of an argument of that sort. The conclusion will be that there is no adequate basis for the common assumption that evil is evidence against theistic religions.

I

For purposes of explaining and illustrating my position it will be useful to examine a particular presentation of the evidential argument against generic theism. I believe that the best development of an argument of this sort is William L. Rowe's so I will begin by briefly explaining his argument. I will then show why his argument in particular and this kind of argument in general cannot succeed.

Rowe's Fawn

Rowe has produced a series of articles in which he attempts to formulate and defend an "empirical" argument from evil.¹ The argument is aimed at what we might call "generic" theism. The generic theist believes that a unique, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being exists and created the universe in which we find ourselves. We will refer to that being as "God."

The evils on which Rowe's argument focuses are, roughly, cases of intense suffering which have no readily apparent "point" or "purpose." We may believe that we see why God has allowed some evils, but Rowe wants to call attention to cases for which the purpose is not known.



As an example Rowe constructs the case of a badly burned fawn.² The evil of interest is the suffering that the fawn undergoes over a period of several days before it dies. A number of features of the case are included in order to block efforts to specify a purpose for this suffering. At the same time, the goal is to choose a kind of incident which happens, perhaps even on a regular basis, on our planet.

The fawn's burns result from a forest fire started by lightning. Hence the suffering is not the result of a free decision of any created being, but instead has natural causes. Thus, one cannot appeal to the free will defense with respect to the origin of the suffering. Second, the suffering transpires without any creaturely moral agent—or perhaps without any other creature at all—knowing of it. Hence no one's character is developed by the suffering, no one has an opportunity to do a good act in response to the suffering, and no one learns about evil from the suffering. Neither will the fawn profit from the suffering. For the fawn will never recover, so it cannot have improved itself by, say, having learned to flee at the first hint of smoke. And fawns presumably do not repent of sins, so the evil could not have been allowed in order to give the fawn a chance of doing that.

Rowe says of the fawn case:

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.³

Later, in "Evil and Theodicy," Rowe adds another case for consideration. The new case is an actual case of the sort one finds with disturbing frequency in the news, a case in which a child was tortured and then killed.⁴ The new case provides an alternative for those unimpressed by the fawn case. The argument does not stand or fall on the fawn case (or the other one). Instead, those cases are offered to help the reader focus on the kind of case that he ought to think about, those cases of evil for which, try as he may, the reader cannot find a purpose. The reader can choose his own particular example. As Rowe says in "The Empirical Argument from Evil," the point is that there exists intense suffering in vast quantities for which we can see no purpose at all, let alone any purpose unobtainable by omnipotence without that suffering.⁵

It seems clear that Rowe is developing the case in the way that it must be developed if it is to succeed. If there is evidence from evil against theism then surely those cases of evil which we have thought through carefully and yet have found unexplainable must be part of that evidence. Focusing on those cases bypasses debate about whether the theist may know the purpose of the evil. The theist is challenged to begin with the difficult case, the one

for which she agrees that the purpose of the evil is unknown. So we can agree with Rowe's claim that his is the strongest sort of evidential argument, the sort that has the best chance of success.⁶ If these cases of evil are not evidence against theism, then none are.

Here is a summary of Rowe's argument.⁷ Let 'E' be used to refer to a case of evil for which no purpose is known. The fawn or the child torture case might be it, or, if the reader knows of a case of evil for which the purpose is even less apparent than for the ones mentioned, let 'E' stand for that case. Let 'J' be used to refer to whatever property a particular good state of affairs would have just in case obtaining that good would (morally) justify an omnipotent, omniscient being in permitting E. Let me also note that here and elsewhere 'good' or 'goods' should be understood as good token(s) rather than type(s) unless otherwise specified. Then,

1. We have evidence that all the good states of affairs we know of lack J.
2. So, we have evidence that every good state of affairs lacks J.
3. E is a case of a kind found in our world.
4. Therefore, we have evidence that evils exist which God would not permit to exist.
5. Therefore, we have evidence that God does not exist.

The claim is that evil with a certain characteristic—namely the conjunction of the characteristics of the case supplied for E—is actual and constitutes evidence that God does not exist. Rowe does not specify how much evidence there is. Let us assume, at least initially, that only the weakest claim is in view, so that the argument is only intended to show us *some* evidence that God does not exist.

Now clearly there are instances of intense suffering in our world. So far theist and atheist are agreed. But we must still exercise some caution in our description of such cases in order to avoid question begging. We cannot describe such cases as cases of "pointless evil" or "apparently pointless evil," for that is certainly not how the cases have seemed to the theist. The theist, at least before hearing Rowe's argument or one like it, has been thinking of the cases (if at all) as cases which *do* have a purpose or at least as cases of evil which have a purpose of which humans are unaware.

So if there is to be common ground there must first be an acceptable description of the case, a sufficiently "clinical" description of, say, the fawn or the child, the injuries, the physical pain, the psychological pain, any pain caused to others, etc. At a minimum the description must not be in terms of the actual purposefulness or purposelessness of the evil. Consistent with this requirement Rowe has focused our attention on the descriptions of the fawn and the child, descriptions which seem sufficiently "neutral" in the way indicated.⁸

The Failure of Rowe's Argument

Can the theist show that the cases mentioned are *not* evidence against God's existence? Let us decide by examining the kinds of responses that the theist might offer. For convenience I will follow Rowe's division of the possible responses into three groups.⁹

Option 1—Outweigh the Evidence

First, the theist might simply acknowledge that the argument *does* provide some evidence against the claim that God exists, but then resist the claim that God does not exist by piling up other evidence in favor of God's existence. This other evidence would be such that it "outweighs" the evidence from evil.

Obviously, if the theist takes this option she has accepted the weak claim that evil is *some* evidence against God's existence, and so has accepted the soundness of Rowe's argument as we initially read it. In "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" Rowe also suggested that this is the theist's *best* response to the evidential problem. But even if she did not possess favorable evidence the theist would not be without an adequate response to the evidential problem of evil, as we shall see. So having noted that this response is one of the theist's options we now set it aside, since an investigation of everything which might be thought of as evidence for or against God's existence is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁰

Option 2—Show that the Reasoning Is Unacceptable

The second sort of response is to try to show that somehow the reasoning goes wrong, that there is an unsupported premise or an illegitimate inference. In Rowe's opinion this response is a failure, but it seems to me that he has overlooked some considerations which show his assessment to be unwarrantedly pessimistic.¹¹

Before explaining these considerations I want to introduce a proposition to which Rowe might appeal for support of premise 1. Although this approach to supporting premise 1 has not appeared in Rowe's published works to date, he did utilize it as means of defending premise 1 in recent correspondence.¹² I will call this proposition premise 'L.'

L. All the goods we know of and which are such that we can tell whether they have J, lack J.

Here Rowe countenances the possibility that we may not be able to tell whether some known goods have J or not. But L also tells us that whenever we *can* tell, we always find that they lack J. This offers a reason, he suggests, for accepting 1. So, besides taking account of what Rowe offers in support of 1 in his published works, we will also consider this strategy of deriving 1 from a general principle like L.

We are now prepared to evaluate Option 2 in detail, beginning with premise L. What does Rowe offer in support of the claim that of all the goods we know of, either they clearly lack J or we cannot tell whether they have J or not? Rowe explains that a good that we “know of” is roughly a good that we *conceive* of and which we recognize as being intrinsically good.¹³ Goods we don’t know of are ones that “include states that are enormously complex, so complex as to tax our powers of comprehension,”¹⁴ or states that contain “simple properties we have never thought of...whose presence...might render that state a great intrinsic good.”¹⁵ To those we would have to add, presumably, goods we *could* conceive of, but just have not in fact conceived, for some reason other than their complexity or their possession of an unusual simple property, e.g., due to lack of time to spend on conceiving. With that understood, Rowe’s only defense of the premise is, so far as I can tell, an appeal to the reader to see if he can come up with a good that has J, while keeping in mind that God is omnipotent and would thus have at His disposal more potential means of securing any goal than we would.

It is obvious that many of these goods lack J. For when we contemplate them we see that their value is not high enough (e.g., my enjoyment on smelling a good cigar) to offset the evils in question. Other goods we know of may have a great deal of intrinsic value, perhaps even more value than [E has] disvalue. But here we readily see that an omnipotent, omniscient being could obtain them without permitting [E].¹⁶

The reader is invited to go to work and make the same discovery. Does he really know of some good that God could not obtain without the child’s torture or some equally bad alternative evil being permitted? If so, what would it be, or what good that we know of would be so important as to make it permissible?

Has Rowe in this way offered an adequate defense of premise L? I must admit that I find it persuasive. I may know of great intrinsic goods, even if I have only a rough understanding of their details, such as “humans dwelling for eternity in the presence of God.” But for that good I do not see exactly what connection it has with the suffering of the child or the fawn. So although it may not be true that I “readily see” that God could obtain that good without E, it is nevertheless true that I do not know whether that good has J, and that is enough to allow L. Or, I may know of some good that certainly does result from the occurrence of some evil. For example, the mother of a murdered child may be moved to keep a better watch on her other children, or to start a program to prevent similar crimes in the future. But even if those goods are recognizably connected to the child’s death, it is, however, not clear that they have J. It is not clear that they justify the torture and murder, for it is not clear that they are so good that they outweigh the evil, nor is it clear that they could not have been obtained in any other way.

On the other hand some theists would apparently not find this defense of premise L persuasive. If L is true then the good of human free will lacks J, or else we can't tell whether it has J. Similarly soul development or human knowledge—or any of the great goods traditionally mentioned in theodicies—will at best be goods for which we “don't know” whether they have J. But presumably some of those who give such theodicies believe that they *do* know a good that has J. Note here also that anyone who rejects L because they think that they do know what good has J will for the same reason reject premise 1 even if it is not defended by appeal to L. Others, myself included, would be willing to grant L while still rejecting 1 for reasons to be explained shortly.

Even the fawn case is not so obviously resistant to treatment by traditional theodicies as Rowe seems to suppose. It might be claimed, for example, that God would not let the fawn experience pain if no human came near it. Rowe might reply that that would be akin to a child's belief that little men come out from under the bed whenever the child closes his eyes. We have to assume a certain regularity of phenomena in the natural realm, and just as we do not posit a host of creatures that emerge only when our eyes are closed, so we should not assume that animal pain disappears when we are not watching. But such an appeal to regularity does not really settle the matter in Rowe's favor. For given the truth of such regularity it is plausible to say that we actually *do* know about the fawn's suffering even though we are never there to see it. Indeed, we could probably bring together an expert on forest fires and an expert on deer populations and behaviors and have them draw up a pretty fair estimate of just how many such cases of fawn suffering there will be in a given time period. Humans, then, are quite aware of this suffering. Given the similarity of our own bodies to those of higher animals—the animals plausibly thought to be capable of suffering—we even have first hand experience of all kinds of sufferings that animals face. But if we know all this, via our recognition of the regularities of nature, then our knowledge of these facts can play the same role in, say, character development as our knowledge of the suffering of the person sitting next to us. For example, a tender-hearted person might be moved by our knowledge of deer suffering in remote areas to start patrols in the forest to search for wounded animals.

However that may be I will waive this concern since, as I said, I find Rowe's claim compelling. I don't think that I can point out the good that has J for the candidates for E in question. Those who think that they can will judge that not even premise L is sufficiently supported.

What of the inference from premise L to 1? Since by hypothesis we do not know whether the other known goods have J, how can we infer that they don't? I know of no statement by Rowe on this particular inference. But it looks as though it is unacceptable as I now intend to show.

First, to simplify the discussion I will assume that there are only a finite

number of particular goods; a very great finite number, no doubt, but still only finite. Even if that assumption is false it will not change the point I want to make. In accord with the simplifying assumption, then, we might respond to the inference in this way: the strength of the inference from L to 1 will depend on what *percentage* of the particular goods we know of are goods for which we can determine whether or not they have J with respect to some E. If we knew of 1000 goods and we could tell for only 5 of them whether they had J, then even if none of the 5 had J that fact would be a shaky ground for proposition 1. After all, only a *single* good may justify the permission of *every* case of evil in the actual world, and in the situation just described 99.5% of the known goods still would not be eliminated from contention for that rôle.

This criticism if successful shows that if 1 is based on L, the “evidence” mentioned in 1 is for all we have been shown only very weak evidence. So it will be easily outweighed if there is any evidence on the other side. But the criticism does not defeat Rowe’s argument as we read it, for it does not show that E provides no evidence at all against God’s existence.

But perhaps Rowe could argue that the percentage is in fact rather *high*. He might argue that there have never been more than a few candidates for the J-good—things like the moral freedom of creatures. At the same time we know of all manner of goods—the smell of a pine tree, the warmth of a fire, etc.—that they lack J. And this response is forceful, given that we are so far only discussing goods we “know of.” Hence the first criticism will not even show us that the evidence generated by E would be minimal, let alone that it would generate none at all. But that brings us to a more important criticism of the L to 1 inference.

To see this second criticism, we must remember that these are by hypothesis *known* goods, which means that if we have decided that we can’t tell whether one of them has J, we have done so after “examining” or “considering” the good. We have found nothing about it to convince us that it has J and nothing to rule out its having J either. By hypothesis, we would need more information of some sort in order to make a decision about the possession of J by any of these goods. Now suppose that you are in a store looking at neckties. You want one that will match a sport coat that is at home. Ninety of them, you are sure, do not match the coat. But for ten of them you just can’t tell. Do you then have evidence that *none* of the ties match the coat? Surely the answer is “no.” Instead you have evidence that ninety of them don’t and that there are ten for which you have no evidence regarding whether they match the coat. If this situation is analogous to the case of interest—and it seems that it is—then Rowe’s inference is unwarranted. It is not true that we have evidence that all the good states of affairs that we know of lack J. Knowing whether a particular good has J requires a sort of “matching” or “comparison”

of that good with a particular E. In the case of the neckties, we just couldn't decide about some of them because the sport coat was not there, and the decision depended on detailed information about the tie-coat relation. In the same way we can't tell about some goods without a more detailed "look" at the relationship between the particular good and E. It makes no difference that we can quickly rule out some of the goods without having a more detailed look. So the inference from L to 1 is unwarranted.

Since we cannot infer 1 from L, is there some other way for Rowe to support 1? The only other defense of it offered by him is given in capsule form in the excerpt from "Evil and Theodicy" quoted earlier. We will have to contemplate all the goods we know of, and, for every one of them, we will "readily see" that they do not possess J.¹⁷ This is just not an adequate defense of such a sweeping claim. For great goods like moral freedom, salvation from hell, the existence of the actual world, and others this claim does not seem obviously true. Rowe will have to do more than just assert that we will "see" that it is so, for I for one do not see it. And agreeing as I do that we do not know which good has J for, say, the fawn case does not establish 1, even though it does establish L to my satisfaction.

Thus this second line of criticism accomplishes what the first could not. It shows that we do not have reason to accept premise 1. As a result, unless some way of supporting premise 2 other than by appeal to 1 can be found, there will be no reason to hold that E is any evidence at all against God's existence.

But even though none has been given, suppose that some good reason to accept 1 could be found. Would the inference from premise 1 to 2 be acceptable? It seems to me that it would be OK. But at the same time we cannot suppose that 1 provides more than minimal evidence for the claim that all goods lack J (i.e., for 2). Only if in addition to 1 we could be confident that the goods we know of, as a percentage of all goods, known and unknown, is rather high, or alternatively, that the goods we know of are a representative sample of all goods¹⁸, could the evidence be shown to be more than minimal. But neither of those additional items can be shown. For given what Rowe (rightly) acknowledges—that we have reason to suppose that there are goods of which we know not—how could we hope to estimate how many of those unknown goods there are? And if we do not have a handle on that, how could we assess how the number of known goods compares with the total number? We couldn't. Similarly, since the unknown goods are unknown, it is hard to see how we could become confident that the class of known goods is representative of the class of all goods.

So, yes, the inference from 1 to 2 is acceptable and it shows at most that there is some *weak* evidence that all goods lack J if 1 is true. But in fact there is, as we have seen, no reason to accept that 1 is true. So 2 is unsupported.

Is there some other way to support 2? Bruce Russell has recently argued that anyone who does not know the point of a particular evil has evidence against God's existence.¹⁹ If he is right then premise 2 must be OK. Russell appeals to a hypothetical example to make his case. A skilled doctor is visiting a Stone Age tribe and determines that a young man needs his appendix removed at once. The tribesmen know nothing of surgery and have never seen anyone survive a wound to the abdomen of the size that would be needed. The father does not see the point of the evil of cutting the abdomen and so is rational in believing that the doctor, despite his promise of help, is either ignorant or malevolent. In the same way, says Russell, if we know of any "apparently pointless" evil, then we have evidence that God does not exist. This is true, he suggests, of "everyone" who does not know the point of an evil.²⁰

To see why this is incorrect first note that premise 2 would certainly follow from something like

Rs: We know that all goods lack J.

But if we think carefully about the case, it is clear that we have no reason to think that the father has a basis for holding something like Rs when he finds the operation "apparently pointless." Instead, his experience supports only a claim like L (discussed earlier) or perhaps only a claim even weaker than L like

Rw: We do not know the good that has J.

Obviously if the example will only support L, it is of no help in supporting 2 if 2 cannot be derived from L via 1.

The situation that confronts the tribal father supports only proposition L or some weaker claim. This helps us see a crucial point: it is not simply the "appearing" that dictates the father's conclusion that the doctor is either malevolent or ignorant. Other factors come into play. In particular, he must be sufficiently confident that his judgment in this area is better than that of the doctor. In the case as Russell has described it, the father knows little or nothing about the doctor and presumably is also confident of his own knowledge of the world and his own ability to make good decisions. But the case might have been otherwise.

For example suppose, not implausibly, that cases of "sudden pain on this side of the belly" are recognized by the tribe as usually fatal and beyond the powers of the local shaman to counter. With little confidence about his own understanding of the phenomenon this father, or some other tribesman, might be inclined to let the doctor go ahead with the operation even though they don't see the point of what the doctor is proposing to do. And it seems to me that they would be rational in doing so.

Just because the doctor has made a suggestion (to cut the boy open) which the father considers unusual or peculiar does not mean that the father must immediately lower his opinion of the doctor's intelligence or goodness. He does not have to change his opinion even initially. Anyone who has ever *learned* anything from any sort of teacher must have had the experience of hearing that teacher utter something which seemed unusual or surprising. We do not need to suppose that when we hear the surprising remark we always lower our opinion of the intelligence of the teacher, not even initially.

The point is that it is not inevitable that our failure to see a particular point for a particular evil means that that evil is evidence against God's intelligence or benevolence. I conclude that the truth of premise 2 is not supported by the means proposed by Russell either.

Thus, there is much more to this second line of response than Rowe thought. The problem does not even look as though it can be corrected, for that would require obtaining information that we have no way of obtaining. That is, we would need information about the presumably vast number of unknown goods and their relationships to the candidate for E. As a result, it will not be possible to show that there is evidence that no good has J for the given E. And if it can't be shown that there is evidence that no good has J, then it won't be possible to show that E is evidence that God does not exist via this argument. Moreover, if, as seems to be the case, this is the strongest version of the evidential argument against generic theism, then we have reason to believe that it will not be possible to show by any argument that evil is evidence against generic theism.

Option 3— "Defeat" the Argument

The strategy in the case of the third response discussed by Rowe is to attempt to "defeat" the support for the conclusion.²¹ Evidence is not acknowledged but then "outweighed" by some other line of evidence, as in the first response, and it is not rendered ineffective by showing that there has been an error in reasoning as in the second response, but instead it is "defeated" by bringing forward some additional information which when added to our original information dissolves the support it seemed to provide.

The alleged evidence would be defeated, for example, by offering some reason to believe that we should *expect* the good that has J with respect to some evil, if it exists at all, to be among the goods we know of but cannot tell whether they have J or else among the goods of which we do not know. If this could be shown then premise 2 would be unsupported and the argument would fail.

Is there any reason to expect the good that has J to be in either of the categories just mentioned, given the confines of generic theism? Here is one line of argument for such a conclusion. God is infinitely good, so we could

expect Him to pursue very great goods. Goods that we know of are sometimes greater because they are more complex, so we can expect that there would be very great goods that are very complex. If it would take a very great good to justify the evil that occurs in case E, then we might expect that good to be a very complex one. Since humans can only conceive states of affairs of limited complexity, we have reason to suppose that the J-good would be among those states of affairs we cannot conceive and hence do not know of.²²

I find this line of thought a plausible one, but I will not pursue a defense of it here. If it is sound then we have yet another reason to suppose that Rowe's argument fails to show that evil is evidence against theism. If the line of thought just outlined is not sound then the support for Rowe's conclusion remains undefeated.

Reflection on this third option does, however, show once again that the evidence provided for the claim that God does not exist will be at best minimal. For if we have reason to believe that the good that has J is *just as likely* to be among those goods we don't know of as among those we do know of, and if there is no reason to suppose that we know of more than a tiny percentage of all goods, then the evidence that all goods lack J will be small. And given the strictly limited capacities of human intelligence, there is no reason to think that we would know of more than a tiny percentage of all goods. And surely the J-good is just as likely to be in one group or the other unless there is reason to suppose that we humans would be particularly attuned to that good, unless, that is, there is reason to suppose that there would be some special connection between our faculties of understanding and that good. But why should there be such a connection?

This last point is more readily seen if we keep in mind the distinction between generic and elaborated forms of theism. In our culture any discussion of theism and evil is likely to attract the unconscious importation of the doctrines of some particular form of theism, and especially doctrines from the "Judeo-Christian" tradition. Rowe himself called attention to this in responding to Wykstra.²³ Rowe utilized such a distinction, calling generic theism '*restricted* standard theism' ('RST') and any elaborated version an '*expanded* standard theism' ('EST'). RST involves only the claims that God exists and is omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent and creator of this universe. ESTs are RST plus "certain other significant religious claims."²⁴ Traditional Judeo-Christian theism is thus an EST.

Now within that tradition it is true that humans are quite special and that God has some willingness to let them know what is going on in the universe. So, it *might* then be expected that God would make sure that humans know about the good that has J for some particular case of evil, and that might be reason to suppose that it is less likely that it would be among those goods we do not know about. But given a really generic theism, one as generic as the

one Rowe's argument attacks, the J-good would be just as likely to be among those goods we don't know. Nothing in generic theism demands that humans be privy to these matters. So, this third line of response at least shows that we have no reason to suppose that E provides very much evidence against God's existence, and it may show more if the argument to show that the J-good would be beyond our grasp has any force.

Summary of Part I

We looked at three options for a reply to Rowe's argument. The first option simply granted the claim that evil is *some* evidence, and for that reason cannot undercut Rowe's argument when read as the weak claim that a particular evil is some evidence against generic theism. Study of the third option shows that we have no reason to think that the evidence generated by any E would be more than minimal, but also suggested a line of argument which, if it proves sound, would show that E does not generate any evidence against theism. The second option, which questioned the reasoning employed in the argument, established that Rowe's argument fails to show that evil is evidence against theism, and that the failure apparently cannot be remedied.

Moreover, we have found support for the claim that evil is *not any* evidence at all against (generic) theism. For 1) Rowe offers a very strong presentation of the case for treating evil as evidence against theism, 2) the case was examined for its success at merely providing *some* evidence that God does not exist, and 3) the case was shown to fail in ways that appear impossible to patch up.

Is the outcome we have discovered just a result of relying on Rowe's evidential argument? I do not think that the outcome would be different for other evidential arguments. As I mentioned earlier, Rowe suggests that the sort of argument that he has given is the "strongest" sort of argument from evil. His fawn case is specially crafted so as to yield an argument resistant to theistic rejoinders. It is meant to block attempts to show that there is a J-good for the evil described. So we have reason to think that we have not merely offered the theistic response to an anemic form of the evidential argument.

But could it really be that evil is not evidence against theism? I submit that the foregoing arguments are reason to think that it is *not* evidence against *generic* theism, despite what is often said. I will next try to explain what remains to be done if anyone is to show that evil is evidence against theism in some other sense.

II

The Possibility of an Evidential Argument

Generic theism is simply *too* generic to be susceptible to an evidential

attack. Unless the set of propositions that constitutes generic theism is somehow supplemented, its relation to propositions about the evils of this world will remain obscure. It will certainly be too obscure to justify the claim that a significant evidential relation exists between them.

Why did Rowe aim the argument at generic theism in the first place, given that he recognized the existence of elaborated versions of theism? After all, the expanded forms of theism *predate* the restricted form. Moreover, it is the expanded forms that constitute religious belief systems. So far as I know, there are few, if any, religious groups whose theology consists of only RST.

Presumably Rowe has simply inherited this minimal "restricted version" of "theism" from earlier, now discredited, attempts to stick theism with a *logical* problem of evil. The idea was to ignore all irrelevant elements of theism, attending to only those which would be needed to yield the alleged internal *contradiction*.

It now appears that dealing with generic theism does not bring the issue into sufficiently sharp focus. Or, if it does, then we must conclude that there is no real problem of evil. For it is now generally conceded, as Rowe himself concedes, that there is no logical inconsistency in holding that evil exists and that generic theism is true. In the face of that result Rowe's argument, in effect, tries to salvage matters for the atheologian via a minimal withdrawal, i.e., by claiming that evil is at least *evidence* against *generic* theism. As we have seen, that claim is false. So, either there is no good argument from evil against theism, or, if there is it will be an as yet unformulated argument directed at an *elaborated* theism. It becomes important, then, to be clear about the notion of an "elaborated theism."

Elaborated Theisms

Showing that evil is evidence against theism means showing that evil is evidence against some *elaborated* theism. Not just any sort of elaboration will do. It will have to be an elaboration which provides more details about the relationship held to exist between God and evil. It seems clear that propositions with content of at least three different sorts must be added. First, propositions about God's "plans"; second, propositions about the nature of the creation and the experiences of the creatures that inhabit it; and third, propositions about what is and is not valuable.

"Plan" propositions would be about God's goals and intentions for the creation, including his plans for achieving those goals. For example, "God is attempting to produce a hedonistic utopia" would be such a proposition. We need more detail about why God created what He did or about why He created at all if we are to assess whether what we see in the creation is evidence that He does not exist.

Second, we need more detail about just what it is that we see in the creation.

Propositions about the nature of creation would be ones like “Dogs have free will” or “*Ceteris paribus*, higher intelligence intensifies pain experiences.” Propositions about the history of the universe might be required as well. Again, evaluating His plans for achieving His goals would require an understanding of what possibilities for achieving such goals might exist. In any case there will have to be further details about the nature of the created world, something well beyond the claims that it was created by God and that it contains evil E. Propositions about value would be ones like “Free will is valuable” or “The same moral standards apply to both God and man.” We need to be clear about the theist’s basis for evaluating the creation and the purposes of God.

Next we must ask how such propositions come to be added to generic theism. There are several different routes by which materials for an elaboration could be added to the generic view. It is important to distinguish these because they are not all equally useful, given the goal of developing an interesting evidential argument from evil. Generic theism might be “elaborated” through 1) supplementation by “neutral” propositions, 2) adoption of a “given” elaboration, or 3) introduction of a “speculative” elaboration. Any combination of the above options could also occur.

The first route is intended to cover elaboration that is “neutral” in the sense that both parties to the discussion—both theist and atheist—are committed to the truth of the additional propositions. An example of neutral elaboration would be the addition of propositions about various empirical findings to generic theism. There may be controversy about what has or has not been found empirically at times, but there is no reason to think that atheists could never, say, point out important research findings with which the theist might also agree (or *vice versa*). For example, if scientists were somehow able to show conclusively that there is an upper limit on how much pain a fawn experiences when burned, that might have some bearing on the debate. The theist might want to “elaborate” her position by pointing out this finding.

But theism may also be elaborated through the addition of propositions that are not neutral. One way involves adoption of a “given” elaboration. By a “given” elaboration, I mean an elaboration of generic theism as found in an established religious tradition. Some given elaborations will predate the specification of generic theism, but they need not. Usually they will have arisen independently of any concern with generic theism in and of itself. What is most important about a given elaboration, however, is that at least some theists will be committed to the truth of that elaboration in the same way and to roughly the same degree that they are committed to the truth of generic theism. It will be for them a non-negotiable elaboration. There are, in this way, “ready made” elaborations of theism around, which in an important way are prior to generic theism or even arguments from evil.

What counts as a “given” elaboration? There is no room to treat the answer in any detail here. To offer only one example, there are some Christians who take the Bible, and perhaps especially the New Testament, as containing the elaboration of theism which is given and to which they are thus committed. But even then there would of course be varied schools of interpretation to contend with.

In contrast, one might concoct a “designer” theism, one which is not a neutral elaboration of generic theism and which also does not closely match any given theism. Let us call these “speculative” elaborations. Perhaps if, as some have suggested, Spinoza ought to be counted as a theist, his views would be an example of a speculative theism. There may be controversy about whether a certain elaboration is given or speculative, but I think that we can recognize at least a rough distinction here. In any case neither a given nor a speculative elaboration need include only propositions that the atheist agrees are true.

It sometimes happens that speculative elements are added to a given elaboration. To return to our previous illustration, Christians who take the Bible itself to be the only *given* elaboration might count a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity as a speculative elaboration. But other Christians may see a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity as a part of given elaboration.

So we may recognize various ways of elaborating generic theism: neutral elaboration, given elaboration, speculative elaboration, and various combinations of these. These distinctions might be further refined but perhaps this is now adequate to allow the claim which follows to be understood. I want to claim that an evidential argument must be shown for an elaboration that includes a *given* elaboration if it is to be of real interest. For, as we have seen, arguments (like Rowe’s) that are aimed against a generic theism or a generic theism with only *neutral* elaboration fail.²⁵ And, on the other hand, launching an argument against a merely *speculative* elaboration (or again a merely neutral elaboration) risks failing to come to grips with the real concern. Since it would not show that evil is evidence against an actual theistic religion, with real adherents who are committed to the truth of its doctrines, it will only be a preliminary exercise.

Prospects for Success

Since it is an evidential argument against some *given* elaboration of theism that is needed, it should next be clear that we cannot assume, from the outset, that a successful evidential argument against a particular given elaboration can be produced. It has *not* been shown that evil is evidence against *generic* theism, so there is no presumption for the claim that evil counts against given theisms. One must then accept the challenge of showing that it is evidence against a given elaborated theism if one hopes to show that there is an

evidential problem. I would like to suggest that there is little prospect for success.

The reason is that even given elaborations still appear to be too general with respect to what they say about evil to allow the formulation of an evidential case. As a result the outcome will be similar to that for Rowe's argument against generic theism. Moreover, there is no advance guarantee that an honest attempt to elaborate one of the given elaborations even further (via introducing neutral and/or speculative elaboration) would yield materials sufficient for an evidential argument.

To see this, (for purposes of illustration) assume that the Bible is the source of our given elaboration. Then consider the sorts of propositions that we said would be needed for an elaboration to become open to an evidential argument from evil. "Plan" propositions were one sort. The Bible does contain statements about God's plans. He plans to bring Israel out of Egypt, to have Solomon build His temple, to have the Gentiles hear the gospel, and so on. But one will certainly look in vain for a detailed discussion of *all* of His plans or even for a systematic outline of all the main projects. Even the leaders of His people are caught off guard. The Jewish leaders are surprised by the Messiah's behavior and the Christian leaders, including Peter, are surprised to find that the Gentiles are also going to receive grace. And if we need to know more in this area in order to decide whether evil is evidence we may have a long wait. We cannot really plan on gaining details about God's plans beyond those offered in the particular given elaboration under consideration. We have no way of reading God's mind.

Moreover, the Bible not only lacks details of the sort needed, but even contains passages which positively affirm that humans do not have the necessary information nor the wherewithal to obtain it. For example in Romans 11:33 Paul writes of God's wisdom and says "how unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out." This theme is actually rather prominent in the Bible.²⁶

As regards propositions about the nature of creation, if the Bible is the given elaboration then it offers very little in this category. What it does offer is mostly about humans and their experiences. It does not offer treatises on all of the modern fields of research. Moreover, even if we added scientific findings about the creation (as neutral elaboration) to our given elaboration, a little reflection on the speculations of cosmological theorizing, the counter-intuitive deliverances of quantum mechanics, the struggle to understand our own consciousness and similar cases are enough to show the difficulty of attaining a full picture here. This is especially clear when we consider the history of the universe as a whole. Since the role of one evil may only be clear in the context of the role of others, it may prove important to have the whole picture if the goal is to trace out the reasons for evil.

Moreover, even if we did know what all of the goods and evils are, there is no guarantee that we would have the intellectual capacity to begin tracing out the interconnections among them to see whether or not all of the evils were really unavoidable. That this difficulty exists is not *merely* a doctrine of theism. It is a simple matter of empirical fact that human thinkers are quite limited in memory, ability to consider a large number of facts at one time, etc.

Finally, the Bible would certainly be a much richer source of elaboration with regard to values—the third sort of proposition—than with regard to the other two categories. But even then not all of the questions about values that seem to be relevant to this issue are answered in the Bible. There is, for example, no careful, systematic discussion of whether (and if so how) the differences between God and His creatures affect what it is or is not allowable for Him to do as opposed to what they can allowably do.

So, it seems probable that this very well-known given elaboration of theism would not be sufficiently detailed to allow the desired evidential argument from evil. I would have to say a lot more about even this one elaboration to fully secure the claim that it is not sufficiently detailed to make an evidential problem possible, but I think that I have said enough to make the claim plausible to many who have thought about these matters. I now want to mention two other important points, ones not limited to the evaluation of any particular given elaboration.

First, it might turn out that there are several given elaborations of theism *with respect to evil*. Theists presumably do not have to agree about everything, and this may be an area where there is not uniformity. So, even if an evidential argument can be shown to be available against one of these, there may not be one available against the other. This possibility is unavoidable so long as a variety of elaborations exist. Of course, even showing that *one* given elaboration is subject to an evidential objection might be useful in a sense, but it might not be useful for the establishment of atheism. It might simply have the effect of showing theists what some of the better theistic options are.²⁷

Second, it could happen that when a sufficiently detailed elaboration is specified, we will find that evil is evidence *in favor of* theism rather than evidence against it. For if the elaboration should somehow show a) that there is some particular goal that God—consistent with His attributes—would certainly pursue, and b) that attaining that goal would necessitate allowing the evils that we find, then the evil in the world would provide strong confirmation of God's existence.²⁸

So the task of finding an evidential argument from evil against theism is formidable, and there is no guarantee that the atheist would be pleased with the outcome. But once again it must be recognized that carrying out that task

is what is ultimately necessary if one wants to show—and not merely assert—that evil is evidence against theism. It is unreasonable simply to assume that it is, especially in light of the failure to show that evil is evidence against generic theism.²⁹

Austin, Texas

NOTES

1. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16 (October 1979), pp. 335-41; hereafter 'PEVA'; "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 227-47; hereafter 'EAE'; "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984), pp. 95-100; hereafter 'ETH'; "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Fall, 1988), pp. 119-32; hereafter 'EAT.' Also see Rowe's *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1978), chapter 6.

2. PEVA, p. 337.

3. PEVA, p. 337.

4. This case is also used by Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 2 (April, 1989), pp. 121-39.

5. EAE, p. 246f.

6. EAT, p. 131. What other formulations of an evidential argument from evil might there be? One might choose an evil for which the purpose *is* known, and then argue that God would not be morally justified in allowing that evil in order to obtain that purpose. But I believe that the considerations which will be advanced in response to Rowe's argument will show how this argument will be no more likely to succeed than Rowe's.

Thomas P. Flint suggested to me that a stronger argument would claim that we have evidence that God, if he existed, would have created a world even better than the actual world even if it still contained E. But this does not seem to me to provide a stronger case for two reasons. First, it appeals to the obscure and controversial question of whether there is always a better possible world, and second, it assumes that we know what the actual world is in more detail than we do.

Another option would be to argue in the fashion of Paul Draper ("An Evidential Problem of Evil," forthcoming in *Nous*) that theism does not explain evil as well as some competing (presumably naturalistic) theory. Alvin Plantinga has told me that he believes this is the best formulation of the problem. But so far I am not persuaded of that. For this formulation lands the atheologian in the midst of the intractable difficulties of trying to compare "world views." Or, if it does not, then it seems to me doubtful that the alternative hypothesis that Draper mentions really does offer an explanation of evil on the same level as theism.

7. This follows closely the way it appears in EAT, his most recent publication on the matter. But the general notion has not changed since PEVA. On p. 120 of EAT he says

that the premise P affords "reason to conclude" that Q, so I will assume that the argument is only intended to be inductive.

8. Rowe's formulation of the argument in PEVA generated discussion of Rowe's use of "appears" claims. See Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Objection to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73-93; Keith Chrzan, "Debunking Cornea," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 21 (1987), pp. 171-77; Richard Swinburne, "Does Theism Need a Theodicy?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18 (June, 1988), pp. 298-300; Russell, fn. 4 above. Also see the section on "Option 2" of this article.

9. EAT, pp. 121-26; also see EAE, fn. 16, p. 240f.

10. PEVA, p. 339. Swinburne has of course tried to produce such evidence in *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), although he argues there that the facts about evil do not lower the probability that God exists anyway. An attempt to develop evidence against theism is J. L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

11. EAT, p. 124.

12. Letter to William P. Alston, spring, 1988. Thanks to Prof. Rowe for permission to cite this letter.

13. EAT, p. 132, fn. 3.

14. EAT, p. 123.

15. EAT, p. 132, fn. 4.

16. EAT, p. 123.

17. EAT, p. 120.

18. Suggested to me by Philip L. Quinn.

19. Russell, "Persistent," p. 134f.

20. Russell, p. 134, bottom.

21. EAT, p. 124ff.

22. William P. Alston has told me that he has raised something much like this point to Rowe in discussion.

23. In ETH.

24. ETH, p. 95.

25. Neutral elaboration of generic theism will not suffice because the Rowe argument was blocked by the fact that there are known goods that bear an indeterminable relation to E, and also unknown goods for which the same must be true. No neutral elaboration will help with the case of the *unknown* ones; they remain unknown. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that neutral elaboration would settle the case for known goods for which we cannot determine the relation to E, due to the sheer complexity of the factors that would have to be taken into account.

26. Quotations are from *The New International Version* (East Brunswick, New Jersey: New York International Bible Society, 1978). A few other examples of this theme: Acts 1:7; Acts 13:41; I Corinthians 1:19, 25; 2:6-9; Ephesians 3:2-6; I Thessalonians 5:1f; I John 3:2.

27. For an example of an effort to deal with evil in connection with an *elaborated* theism see Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 2 (October, 1985), pp. 392-423.

28. Michael L. Peterson has attempted to develop this idea in "Evil as Evidence for the Existence of God," (manuscript, 1984). Also see Richard Swinburne, "Does Theism Need a Theodicy?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June, 1988), pp. 287-312.

29. Thanks to Eleonore Stump, Thomas Flint, Philip Quinn, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Daniel T. Snyder, William S. Anglin, and especially William P. Alston for helpful discussion of earlier stages of this work. Thanks to William Rowe for making available to me a draft of "Evil and Theodicy." Thanks to the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame for support during the time this was being written.