The Problem of Evil

The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion, William E. Mann, ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004

Derk Pereboom

Penultimate draft

Virtually all monotheistic religions profess that there is a divine being who is significantly good, knowledgeable, and powerful. The evils of this world present various challenges for such religions. The starkest challenge is directed toward views according to which there exists a being who is wholly good, omniscient, and omnipotent.[1] For it would seem that such a being would have the moral disposition, the knowledge, and the power to prevent any evil whatsoever, and from this one might readily conclude that if there were such a being, there would be no evil. On one version of this challenge, the coexistence of evil with a God defined in this way is logically or metaphysically impossible. This has come to be called *the logical* or *the modal problem of evil*. Another is that the existence of such a God is improbable given the evils of this world, or at least that the existence of these evils significantly lowers the probability that such a God exists. The concern expressed is that these evils provide good evidence against the existence of such a God. This version is known as *the evidential problem of evil.*

1. See for example, David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), Part X, p. 63.

One traditional response to these problems for theistic belief is to provide reasons why God would produce or allow evil. This is the project of *theodicy* -- the defense of God in the face of the problem of evil. Prominent among such attempts are the free will theodicy, according to which evils are not due to God but rather to the free choices of other agents; the soul-building theodicy, in which God allows or brings about evil in order to elicit virtue and to build character; and the punishment theodicy, by which God allows or brings about evil as punishment for sin. Part of the idea of a theodicy is that it is represented as true or at least highly probable given the existence of God.

Potential difficulties for this project are reflected by the concern that various theodicies are inadequate, and by the worry that because theodicies are essentially attempts to account for evil in terms of some good, they threaten to misrepresent evil as a good of some sort, and to misrepresent the nature of God by way of ascribing the endorsement of that "good" to God. Accordingly, a second theistic response is to deny the value or appropriateness of the project of theodicy and to argue instead that the existence of evil does not undermine rationality of belief in God for the reason that human understanding is inadequate to discern God's reasons for allowing evil. This response has come to be known as *skeptical theism*. This position is inspired by the book of Job, in which his friends claim that Job's suffering is divine punishment for his sins, to which God responds by expressing his incomprehensibility and by rebuking them because they "have not spoken of me what is right."[2] Another response, intermediate between theodicy and a radical skeptical theism according to which we have no inkling as to why God

2. Job 42: 7.

might allow evil, is motivated by the problems for theodicy, but is nevertheless concerned to provide a positive answer to the problem of evil. In his reply to the modal version of the problem, Alvin Plantinga introduces the notion of a *defense*, which is not, like a theodicy, a claim to grasp the actual reasons why God allows evil, but is rather a fairly well-specified hypothesis according to which the existence of God is consistent with the existence of evil, but which is advanced not as true, nor even as plausible, but simply as possible, or at least for which there is no reason to believe that it is impossible. As we shall see, Peter van Inwagen has emended the notion of defense to range over hypotheses whose degree of credibility is somewhat more impressive.

The Logical Problem of Evil for Traditional Theism

Is the coexistence of evil with an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God impossible, as J. L. Mackie argues?[3] The most discussed reply to the logical problem of evil is the free-will defense, formulated by Plantinga.[4] One might consider two distinct problems under this rubric: one is the *abstract* logical problem of evil, which poses the challenge that the existence of God and the existence of *any evil at all* are not logically compossible; the other is the *concrete* logical problem of evil, which raises the issue that the existence of God and the

3. "Evil and Omnipotence," in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 25-37; (first published in *Mind* 64 (1955), pp. 200-12).

4. *The Nature of Necessity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 164-90.

existence of *the world's actual evils* are not logically compossible. Of these, Plantinga has focused on the abstract logical problem of evil. (More precisely, he has focused on the abstract *modal* problem of evil – he not only wants to show that God and some evil are compossible in that there is no logical contradiction or inconsistency involved in claiming the existence of both, but also that they are compossible in the "broadly logical" or metaphysical sense of (com)possibility.) His strategy is to find a hypothesis whose possible truth is obvious, that is compossible with

(1) God, a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good, exists

and that entails

(2) There is evil.

Plantinga calls his proposed hypothesis *the free will defense*.[5]

This hypothesis involves first of all the claim that God is justified in creating beings that are *significantly free*. If a being is *free* with respect to a decision to perform an action, then, holding fixed the entire history of the universe up to the time of the decision, it is causally possible both that he make this decision and that he refrain from making this decision. Plantinga has in mind a paradigmatic type of libertarian freedom. If a being is causally determined to make a choice, then by definition he is not free with respect to that decision. Further, an action is *morally significant* for a person at a time if it would be wrong for him to perform the action then and right to refrain, or vice versa. A person is *significantly free* at a time if he is then free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him.

5. *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 165-7.

Now Mackie asks why it would not be possible for God to create a world of significantly free beings all of whom always freely choose the good.[6] Plantinga agrees that there is a possible world that has this feature, but the core of the free will defense is that it is possible that God could not have actualized this world. In making his case, he first distinguishes between two senses of actualization, *strong* and *weak*.[7] God can *strongly actualize* only what he can cause to be actual, so given that he cannot, as a matter of logical fact, cause our free decisions, God cannot strongly actualize any of our free decisions. But if God knows that an agent would freely perform an action if God were to place her in circumstances in which she is significantly free with respect to that action, and if God then causes her to be in that situation, then he *weakly actualizes* her free decision. So then, Mackie's hypothesis might be recast as the claim that God could have weakly actualized a world of significantly free beings all of whom always do only what is right.

Plantinga argues that it is possible that this claim is false.[8] For in his view it is possible that (God knows that) every possible person – i.e. every person-essence – has *transworld depravity.* For such an essence to suffer from transworld depravity is for it to be such that if God had created the person, and had given her significant freedom, then no matter what circumstances God were to place her in, she would go wrong with respect to at least one action, so long as God left her significantly free. Consequently, if an essence suffers from

6. "Evil and Omnipotence," p. 33.

7. *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 173.

8. *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 184-90.

transworld depravity, it is not within God's power to weakly actualize a possible world in which the corresponding person is significantly free and yet never makes a wrong free decision. But if it is possible that every relevant essence suffers from transworld depravity, then no matter what world featuring significantly free beings God weakly actualizes, there will be evil in that world. Consequently, there is indeed a possibly true proposition, viz.,

(3) Every (relevant) essence suffers from transworld depravity

that is clearly consistent with

(1) God, a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good, exists

that entails

(2) There is evil,

and the free will defense is complete.

Many of those involved in this debate agree that Plantinga has provided a successful response to the abstract logical problem of evil. Michael Tooley contends, however, that this is only a small victory, for the genuinely pressing issue is raised instead by the concrete version of the problem.[9] Tooley believes that the more significant concern is that the existence of God and the existence of the world's actual evils – their kinds, amounts, and distributions – might not be compossible. But others have expressed misgivings about the plausibility of the free will defense itself. David Lewis points out that even if (3) is possible, God could nevertheless have

9. "The Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), pp. 89-134, at pp. 91-3.

avoided evil by allowing creatures to have significant freedom only when he foresees that they will make right choices.[10] So if God foresees that a creature would make the wrong choice if left alone, God might then causally determine her to make the right one instead. One answer to this "selective freedom" response is John Bishop's, that if God pursued this policy for every wrong free choice he foresees, much of the value of giving creatures significant freedom would be lost.[11] But this claim can obviously be contested.

Keith De Rose contends that we should be at least somewhat dubious about whether

(3) Every (relevant) essence suffers from transworld depravity

is possibly true -- he for one, has no clear intuition that it is.[12] Our reason, he thinks, for believing that (3) is possibly true is that there doesn't seem to be anything that threatens its possible truth. Perhaps this is the only reason -- Plantinga himself offers no argument in favor of its possibility. But as De Rose points out, Plantinga would then seem to be relying on the *presumption of the possibility of a proposition* – which one might formulate as follows:

(PPP) If nothing threatens the possibility of a proposition, then one can justifiably regard it as possible.

---

10. "Evil for Freedom's Sake," *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993), pp. 149-72, at p. 162.

11. See David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake," pp. 161-8, for a thorough discussion of selective freedom.

12. "Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility, and the Problem of Evil," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1991), pp. 497-512.

But Plantinga himself contends that PPP is dubious. For, in general, suppose that I want to enlist PPP to justify my claim that some proposition P is possible. Someone could just as well use PPP to assert the possibility of *necessarily not-P* or *impossibly P*, and, by standard modal logic, the possible truth of each of these claims entails that P is impossible. It would seem, then, that if PPP has any legitimacy at all, there must be some restriction on the propositions to which it can be applied. Jonathan Bennett argues that PPP be restricted to propositions that do not themselves have modal concepts nested within them.[13] But given this limitation, PPP does not legitimately apply to (3), for the reason that it has nested within it certain complex modal relationships. In effect (3) asserts that every possible person is such that, were God to actualize that being in some world, there is no possible world accessible to it in which that creature is significantly free and always does what it right.

Marilyn Adams agrees with Tooley that the concrete version of the logical problem of evil is the more pressing one, and she endeavors to explain the compossibility of God and the world's actual evils. Adams points out that especially intractable have been the horrendous evils, which she defines as "evils the participation in which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participants's life could be a great good to him/her on the whole."[14] As examples, she cites "the rape of a woman and axing off her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties,

---

13. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), p. 72.

14. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 26.

child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation." Her strategy is to specify a possible scenario in which God is good to all persons by insuring each a life that is a great good to the person on the whole, not merely by *balancing off* but also by *defeating* her participation in horrendous evils within the context of the world as a whole and of that individual's life.[15] Roderick Chisholm distinguishes the *defeat* from the *balancing off* of an evil: an evil is balanced off within a larger whole if that whole features goods that equal or outweigh it; while an evil is defeated within a larger whole when it actually contributes to a greater good within that whole. Adams doubts that the required scenario can be delineated without recourse to values that are specifically religious, such as the good of intimacy with the divine, but she acknowledges that this move would render its possibility less credible to atheists. She in fact claims that any successful defense will make sense only within the framework of controversial philosophical and theological assumptions.[16]

In Adams' account, balancing off of horrendous evil could be guaranteed by an afterlife in wholesome environments in which persons live in beatific intimacy with God. But, in addition, actual defeat of such evil is also possible. For it is possible that God defeat human suffering by empathetically identifying with it, since this would allow human beings to re-envision their suffering as a point of identification with God. And so, "by virtue of endowing horrors with a good aspect, Divine identification makes the victim's experience of horrors so

---

15. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, p. 55.

16. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, p. 179.

meaningful that she would not retrospectively wish it away."[17] At the same time Adams denies that participation in horrors is necessary for an individual's incommensurate good, for "a horror-free life that ended in beatific intimacy with God would also be one in which the individual enjoyed incommensurate good."[18] Accordingly, one might question why God would then allow anyone at all to suffer horrendous evil. Adams claims not to have any more than partial reasons in response to this question.[19]

Theodicies

Theodicies are more ambitious than defenses, for theodicies aim to provide explanations for God's allowing or bringing about evil that we can know to be true or are at least highly probable given God's existence. Theodicies might be divided into two categories. *Traditional theodicies* retain the notion of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, while *non-traditional theodicies* dispense with this notion. Of the traditional theodicies the most influential today are the free-will, the soul-building, and the punishment theodicies. Both currently and historically the most prominent non-traditional theodicies dispense with divine omnipotence.

It is fairly often granted that the various traditional theodicies provide reasonable

17. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, p. 167.

18. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, p. 167.

19. *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, pp. 165-6.

explanations for the existence of some evils. For example, most would agree that some evils, such as certain pains, would be balanced off by making possible higher-order goods such as free choice between right and wrong and courage in the face of adversity. It is generally agreed that theodicies encounter severe difficulties in accounting for cases of especially horrible evils.

The Free Will Theodicy

The free will theodicy in systematized form dates back at least to St. Augustine, and remains the most prominent of all theodicies. On the most common version, God had the option of creating or refraining from creating significantly free beings. A risk incurred by creating such beings is that they might freely choose evil and the choice be unpreventable by God. Benefits include creatures having moral responsibility for their actions and being creators in their own right. Since the benefits outweigh the risks, God is morally justified in creating significantly free beings, and he is not culpable when they choose wrongly. An obvious concern for this theodicy is that there is considerable controversy about whether we have the libertarian free will entailed by significant freedom. Part of the task of this theodicy, then, is to make it plausible that we are free in the required libertarian sense.

Another issue for the free will theodicy is that many of the more horrible evils would not seem to be or result from freely willed decisions.[20] People being injured and dying as a

20. I discuss these problems for the free will theodicy in "Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence," written for a festschrift for Nicholas Wolterstorff.

result of earthquake, volcanic eruptions, diseases – including mental illnesses that gives rise to unfree evil choices -- would not seem to result from freely willed decisions, and for this reason are standardly classified as *natural* as opposed to *moral* evils. In response, Plantinga suggests the hypothesis that evils of this sort result from the free choices of beings such as demons, and they would then count as moral evils after all.

A further objection, raised by Lewis, is that even if we have free will of the libertarian sort, and many of our choices are freely willed in this libertarian sense, God could still have acted so as to prevent the consequences of those decisions.[21] Given the nature of libertarian free will, God might not have been able to prevent the Nazi leaders from making their decisions to perpetrate genocide, supposing the circumstances of these decisions are held fixed. Nevertheless, God could still have prevented the genocide, by, say, having key leaders die of illnesses before being able to act on their decisions, or arranging circumstances differently so that prior to acting on their decisions would-be assassins had succeeded rather than failed, or by a dramatic manifestation of the divine at an appropriate moment, or by miraculously causing the means of genocide fail. One reply is that if God were regularly to prevent evils in such ways, we free agents would not adequately grasp the sorts of consequences our choices could have, and this would have considerable disvalue. But it would

---

21. "Evil for Freedom's Sake," p. 154. On a related note, Mackie remarks that "Why should [God] not leave men free to will rightly, but intervene when he sees them beginning to will wrongly?", "Evil and Omnipotence," p. 34.

seem that much greater overall value would be secured if God so intervened in at least some of the more horrible cases.

A response developed by Swinburne is that not only free decisions, but complete freely willed actions successfully executed have a high degree of intrinsic value, and this value is high enough for God to be justified in not preventing such evil consequences.[22] Freely willed actions successfully executed exhibit freedom that is much more intrinsically valuable than free decisions whose consequences are prevented. Moreover, the sharper the moral contrast between the options, the more valuable the free choice for the good. An example of especially horrible evil that would result from free choices concerns the slave trade from Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. About this practice Swinburne writes:

> But God allowing this to occur made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not and to treat them well or ill; for ordinary white people and politicians to campaign for its abolition or not to bother, and to campaign for compensation for the victims or not to bother; and so on.[23]

A first problem for this line of thought is that it conflicts with deeply ingrained intuitions about moral practice when horrible evil is at issue. First, as Lewis points out, for us the evil-doer's

---

22. *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 82-107.

23. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, p. 245.

freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration; that is, when one is deliberating about whether to prevent or allow evil, an evil-doer's free will has no value that we take into consideration.[24] For example, when during World War II the inhabitants of a village in the Soviet Union decided to resist the SS unit threatening them with annihilation, we would not have expected these villagers to consider at all the value of their attackers' freely willed actions successfully executed. But this value would immense if value of this sort were sufficient to justify God in not preventing the slave trade. In addition, if Swinburne were right, then when 1000 SS soldiers are attempting to perpetrate genocide, potentially 1000 times as much value is at stake as when there is only one. Furthermore, all else being equal, there would be significantly less reason to harm in self-defense an attacker who appears to have free will then someone who is understood to be mentally ill and not capable of free choice.[25] Genuinely endorsing Swinburne's view would seem to require a radical change in the way we deliberate morally, a change that would not clearly be salutary.

Another problem for the free will theodicy is occasioned by Swinburne's plausible view that to choose freely to do what is right in a serious and valuable way one must have an appreciably strong countervailing desire to do what is wrong, strong enough that it might actually motivate a free choice.[26] Swinburne thinks that this point supports the free will

---

24. "Evil for Freedom's Sake," p. 155.

25. Mark Moyer made this point in conversation.

26. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 86-9.

theodicy, since it can explain why God allows us to have desires to do evil, and, by extension, why he allows choices in accord with those desires. But this point rather serves to undermine the force of the free will theodicy as an explanation for many horrible evils. For we do not generally believe that the value of a free choice outweighs the disvalue of having desires to perform horribly evil actions that are strong enough that they may result in choice. For example, the notion that it is more valuable than not for people to have a serious desires to rape and kill young children for the reason that this gives them the opportunity to choose freely not to do so has no purchase on us. Our practice for people with desires of this sort is to have them undergo therapy to diminish or eradicate such desires. We have no tendency to believe that the value of making a free decision not to rape and kill made in struggle against a desire to do so carries any weight against the proposal to provide this sort of therapy. Furthermore, were we to encounter someone with a strong desire to reinstate slavery but who nevertheless resisted actively seeking do so, we would not think that his condition has more value overall than one in which he never had the desire to reinstate slavery in the first place. Moreover, I daresay that a significant proportion of people alive today – well over 90% – has neither intentionally chosen a horrendous evil nor had a genuine struggle with a desire to do so – they have never, for instance, tortured, maimed, or murdered, nor seriously struggled with desires to do so. But we do not think that their lives would have been more valuable had they possessed such desires even if every struggle against them was successful. Thus it is dubious that God would allow such desires in order to realize the value of certain free choices

for the good. This aspect of Swinburne's theodicy may have some credibility with respect to evils that are not especially terrifying, but has at best little when it comes to horrendous evils.

The Punishment Theodicy

Another traditional theodicy is that God brings about or allows evil as punishment for sin. One problem with this theodicy is that much suffering that occurs cannot reasonably be justified as punishment. On no account that can be taken seriously does a five-year-old deserve to be punished by being raped and beaten. Does an average 65-year old man who has committed no serious crime, and is not an extraordinary sinner, deserve the lingering, excruciating pain of a disease and then death as punishment for his wrongdoing? Our judicial system would regard punishment of this sort *for crimes* as monstrous. Imagine if we were to punish murderers by inducing such suffering – very few would find that conscionable. Someone might reply that since each of us deserves an eternity of torture, *a fortiori* each of us also deserves suffering of this sort. But since it is doubtful that anyone genuinely understands why we all might merit punishment of this sort, this line of thought does not suggest a theodicy, but at best a defense or a version of skeptical theism.

It is useful to keep in mind the various theories for justifying punishment - retributive, deterrence, and moral education. The horrible evils just discussed would constitute punishments far too harsh to be justified retributively, and even if these evils have the potential of deterring similar wrongdoing or morally educating wrongdoers, a limitation on the

severity of punishment is understood to be a constraint on punishment justified in these ways. Moreover, clearly communicating the reason for punishment to the wrongdoer or to others is required for deterrence and moral education, and such horrible evils are at least typically not accompanied by any such communication. It might nevertheless be suggested that these horrible evils could somehow be a means to improvement or development of moral character, but this would not be by virtue of their counting as just punishment.

The Soul-Building Theodicy

John Hick has in recent times advocated a theodicy according to which evil is required for the best sort of human intellectual, technological, moral, and spiritual development.[27] Sin and suffering is valuable, on his account, because it occasions freely chosen efforts whereby it might be overcome, and because improvement of character – both within an individual and throughout human history -- results from such efforts. Without evil there would be no stimulus to the development of economic, technological and social structures, which lie at the core of human civilization. And without evil there would be no occasion for care for others, devotion to the public good, courage, self-sacrifice, for the kind of love that involves bearing one another's burdens, or for the kind of character that is built through these qualities.

Eleonore Stump advocates a version of the soul-building theodicy that adduces an explicitly theological good. She argues that moral and natural evil contribute to a humbling

27. *Evil and the God of Love, Revised Edition,* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1978).

recognition of oneself as having a defective will, which in turn can motivate one to turn to God to fix the defect in the will.[28] The defect in the will is that one has a bent towards evil, so that one has a diminished capacity to will what one ought to will. In Stump's account, both the turning toward God, and God's fixing the will have considerable value for a person.

The main problem for this sort of theodicy, which Hick is indeed concerned to address, is that evils often do not give rise to the specified goods, and in fact sometimes destroy a person rather than contributing to his salutary development. Here Hick cites massive disasters like earthquakes and famines, but also particular sorts of individual illnesses:

> ...when a child dies of cerebral meningitis, his little personality undeveloped and his life unfulfilled; or when a charming, lively, and intelligent woman suffers from a shrinking of the brain which destroys her personality and leaves her in an asylum, barely able to recognize her nearest relatives, until death comes in middle life as a baneful blessing; or when a child is born so deformed and defective that he can never live a properly human life, but must always be an object of pity to some and revulsion to others ... when such things happen we can see no gain to the soul, whether of the victim or of others, but on the contrary only a ruthlessly destructive process which is utterly inimical to human values.[29]

Hick's main response is that such evils are only apparently without purpose. For in a world

---

28. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 392-418.

29. *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 330.

without such evils

> ... human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is bad for the sufferer... in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized.[30]

However, evils on the order of World War II or the bubonic plague are clearly not required to occasion virtuous responses of these kinds or the attendant personal development. But still, it might be argued that these and similar calamities did provide unusually challenging opportunities for virtuous responses, and that they did in fact result in especially valuable instances of such responses. Yet one might well doubt whether refraining from preventing these calamities could be justified by the expected or foreseen gain. Similarly, for more localized evils such as a child suffering and dying of cerebral meningitis, one might also doubt whether the good effects, such as sympathy and efforts to aid, could justify a failure to prevent them. It is telling that we would not consider the loss of occasion for virtue and character development as even a mild countervailing reason to the development of a vaccine for this disease. More generally, the pressing doubt about the soul-building theodicy is that virtuous

30. *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 334.

responses and admirable character development would be possible even if human life featured much, much, less apparently pointless suffering than it does, and even if allowing this suffering would result in some gain, the gain seems insufficient to justify it.

Non-traditional theodicies

Throughout history, people have been willing to deny divine omnipotence as a component of an answer to the problem of evil. Zoroastrianism and its successors, such as the Manichaean position, countenance two very powerful but non-omnipotent supernatural beings, one good, the other evil. The history of the universe is a great struggle between these two forces. Evil is explained by the activity of the evil being and allied forces, and by the limited power of the good being and its cohort to prevent it. This view at the same time accommodates the force of several of the key reasons for belief in the existence of a good God, such as those displayed by the teleological argument and by arguments from religious experience. Purely as a solution to the problem of evil, this position is impressive, but most Christians, Jews, and Muslims have been unwilling to give up the omnipotence of God, perhaps mainly due to the degree to which divine providence would be compromised. Nevertheless, certain elements of this view have always been found in Christianity in particular. The New Testament affirms the existence of Satan, demons, “principalities and powers,” against whom God actually struggles for victory. In fact, as we have seen, Plantinga suggests that such beings may indeed be responsible for some of the evils that we find in the world.

More recently, theistic views have emerged that deny divine omnipotence without positing a powerful supernatural evil being. Process theologians, influenced by A. N. Whitehead, provide a prominent example.[31] Charles Hartshorne, for instance, contends that each created being has a power of self-determination of some degree or other, and that divine power is restricted to the power of persuasion, and that thus God cannot prevent creatures from going wrong when they determine themselves to do so and resist the persuasive power to do what is right.[32] From the point of view of traditional theism, such a position faces several problems. One is that if God's lack of power alone (and not in addition some countervailing evil force) explains why he did not in the past prevent diseases such as smallpox, then since we can prevent smallpox now, we are in some respects now more powerful than God, at least than he was in the past. And since we are not worthy of worship, God's worthiness to be worshiped is thus rendered doubtful. Another problem is that if God's lack of power explains why he did not prevent smallpox, or the people in the Lisbon earthquake of 1754 from being crushed by the rubble of the churches they were attending that Easter Sunday morning, then how could he be powerful enough to create bacteria and viruses or wood and stones, let alone the entire universe? Furthermore, if God is not powerful enough to be the creator, the reasons for believing in God expressed by the teleological argument will have to be relinquished.

---

31. *Process and Reality,* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

32. *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

Baruch Spinoza retained omnipotence but rejected instead divine goodness.[33] In his view, any conception of the good is essentially interest-relative, and indeed the human conception of the good is tied to the kinds of concerns we have. But Spinoza's God has no interests, and indeed no desires or plans or wishes, and thus there could be no such thing as divine goodness per se. Spinoza's position has not won large numbers of adherents among those predisposed towards theism, undoubtedly in part because it rejects divine providence, a cornerstone of traditional theism, and also because it too must dispense with the reasons for belief in God expressed by the teleological argument. Nevertheless, the existence of evil does not raise a problem for the existence of Spinoza's God.

Skeptical Theism

The skeptical theist position avoids theodicy, and claims instead that the nature of the good is or at least might be beyond our understanding to such a degree that we should not expect to understand how it is that God's governance of the universe accords with his goodness.[34] In recent times, Stephen Wykstra has developed an influential version of this view.

---

33. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, E. Curley, ed. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 408-617, especially Part I.

34. Kant advocates a position of this sort in "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," in Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.

One expression of the challenge to God's existence from evil is this:

> It appears that there is no moral purpose God could have that would justify his bringing about or allowing certain horrendous evils to occur.

In response, Wykstra proposes the following general "Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access:"

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p' only if it is reasonable 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.[35]

17-30. For contemporary developments of this position see Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" in *The Problem of Evil*, Adams and Adams, eds., pp. 138-60; (first published in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73-93; and "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 126-74; William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in Howard-Snyder, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 97-125 (first published in Philosophical Perspectives 5 (1991), pp. 29-67; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 286-31. All of these contemporary developments respond to Rowe's work on the evidence against theism that

35. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," p. 152.

For example, in a situation in which Joey is standing next to Billy, and Billy is crying with an apparently fresh bite-mark on his arm, and Joey is triumphantly holding Billy's toy car, and no one else is nearby, a parent is entitled to claim 'It appears that Joey bit his brother' only if given how the parent has gathered evidence and given the evidence he has, if Joey did not bite his brother, the situation would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. Normally, a parent would be entitled to a claim of this sort in this kind of situation. But if the situation includes the parent's cognition of frequent and elaborate deception of the relevant sort on Billy's part, the parent may not be entitled to the claim. Wykstra employs this Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access to argue that our cognitive situation does not entitle us to claim that it appears that there are evils that serve no God-justifying purpose – it does not justify us in affirming that it appears that there are states whose occurrence God would not allow. The reason for this is that if God existed, our understanding of the good would be so minimal by comparison to the divine understanding that we would have no reason to hold that the evils we are inclined to think serve no God-justifying aim in fact do have such a purpose. We might not understand the full nature of goods of which we have some understanding, or there might be goods of which we have no understanding whatsoever, or there might be connections that we fail to grasp completely between goods (and evils) and certain types of states of affairs. An apt analogy is provided by William Alston.[36] When, I, a chess-novice, while watching a Karpov-Kasparov match have no inkling of the point of one of Karpov's moves, I am

36. "Some (Temporary) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 311-32, at p. 317.

not entitled to claim 'It appears that Karpov's move was pointless,' for given my poor understanding of chess, if that move did have a point, I would not likely discern this fact.

An advantageous way of casting the issue is in terms of the extent to which the world's evils reduce the probability of God's existence. Let E be a proposition that details the kinds and amount of evil that the world features, and G be that hypothesis that God exists. What is the probability of G on E? According to skeptical theism generally, given the limited nature of our cognitive capacity to understand the nature of the good, E does not reduce the probability of G so as to make it less likely than not. In fact most skeptical theists will not concede that E significantly reduces the probability of G -- whatever probability the existence of God has independently of E is substantially retained given E. A reason for taking this stance is that once the theist admits that E can significantly reduce the probability of G, she is in the position of having to haggle over the precise extent of the reduction. According to an importantly distinct strategy, developed by van Inwagen, the limitations of our cognitive capacities and of our actual knowledge and understanding render it true that we are in no position to assess the probability of G on E. Van Inwagen's version is of a piece with his more general – but limited – skepticism about probability assessments. In his view, our capacity for assessing probabilities is scant in domains removed from the ordinary concerns of everyday life.

Different versions of skeptical theism concur that we do or might well have only limited cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good. But significantly, they diverge in their formulation of the result this limitation has for our attitude towards the existence of the

requisite God-justifying purposes. In one version, because our cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good are limited, *we are in no position to deny* (or, equivalently, *we are in no position to rule out*) that there are moral reasons for God's allowing the world's evils to occur, even if we have no inkling as to what these reasons might be, and hence we have no good reason to believe that not-G is more likely on E than G is. But this statement of the position is vulnerable, for, by close analogy, a skeptic about quantum mechanics would then have an easy argument against his quarry. Is the claim that quantum mechanics is approximately true (Q) well-supported by the evidence physicists have currently amassed for it (V)? Well, because our cognitive capacities for understanding physics are limited, we are in no position to deny that there is a currently unspecified theory distinct from quantum mechanics that is metaphysically more plausible and that explains V as well, and hence we have no reason to believe that Q is more likely on V than not. Skepticism about historical claims can also be easily generated along these lines. Our cognitive capacity to discern historical truths is indeed limited, but there are many cases in which we reasonably judge some historical claim to be more likely than not on the evidence, while at the same time we are in no position actually to deny or rule out the existence of some as yet unspecified alternative hypothesis. The general problem is that one's rationally assigning a high probability to P is compatible with one's not being a position to deny the existence of some unspecified alternative hypothesis. Thus one's being in no position to deny that there is some unspecified God-justifying purpose for some evil to occur is compatible with one's rationally assigning a

high probability to there being no such purpose.

A possible remedy is to supplement skeptical theism with more developed skeptical hypotheses, a role naturally played by defense hypotheses. A crucial question is whether the extent to which skeptical theism is plausible depends on the plausibility of such hypotheses. In the quantum mechanics case an analogous claim would clearly hold – the plausibility of skepticism about quantum mechanics would be dependent on the plausibility the skeptic's hypothesis. But furthermore, here it also seems clear that the lowering effect of a skeptical hypothesis on the probability of the claim that the skeptic targets is merely a function of the probability of the skeptical hypothesis. So the lower the probability of a skeptical hypothesis about quantum mechanics, the smaller its lowering effect on the probability of the received theory. The analogous claim would seem to hold for skeptical theism. The lower the probability of a defense hypothesis, the smaller its lowering effect on not-G given E. So it would appear that a plausible skeptical theism requires a defense hypothesis or a set of such hypotheses whose probability is significantly high.

Furthermore, William Rowe points out that skeptical theists of the sort we are now discussing – those who affirm that we are in no position to rule out that there are moral reasons for God's allowing the world's evils to occur – have typically not conceded that the unavailability of a reason for God's permitting some evil significantly lowers the probability of God's existence given this evil, no matter how horrendous the evil and no matter how little reason we have for believing the proposed defense:

> What their view comes to is this. Because we cannot rule out God's knowing goods we do not know, we cannot rule out there being goods that justify God in permitting *any amount of evil whatever* that might occur in our world. If human and animal life on earth were nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death, the position of my friends would still require them to say that we cannot reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist. For, since we don't know that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we can't know that it is likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting human and animal life on earth to be nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death. But such a view is unreasonable, if not absurd.[37]

But one's not being in a position to deny or rule out a skeptical theist's defense hypothesis does not undermine the rationality of believing that not-G is more likely on E than G is, nor, *a fortiori,* the rationality of believing that G is significantly lowered by E. Rowe is clearly right here. Moreover, the problem Rowe points out here is threatening for skeptical theism generally. For if a skeptical theist strategy works equally well no matter what the degree of evil in a world, one is thereby given reason to doubt its value.

Matters are not improved if the skeptical theist's claim is not simply that we are in no

---

37. Daniel Howard-Snyder, Michael Bergmann, and William Rowe, "An Exchange on the Problem of Evil," in William Rowe, ed. *God and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 124-58, at pp. 156-7.

position to deny or rule out that there are God-justifying goods of which we have no inkling, but rather, as Alston suggests, if the claim is that there are goods of which we have some inkling such that we are in no position to deny that they are God-justifying.[38] But even if we are not in a position to deny some partially specified hypothesis, we may still be in a position to assign it a low probability. For example, Alston argues that as a result of our cognitive limitations for grasping the nature of the good we are in no position to deny that Sam's horrible suffering from a long-term, painful disease can be accounted for as his punishment for sin.[0] For we are in no position to deny that retributive punishment, meted out in proportion to sin, is a good, and that Sam has sinned inwardly to the degree that merits his suffering. Indeed, we are in no position to deny that there are sins that many don't countenance, such as rejection of God, that contribute to his meriting this suffering. And thus the probability of God's existence is not lowered by the fact of Sam's suffering.

But it is doubtful that kind of strategy that Alston advocates here constitutes an advance. For given his view, why shouldn't the cognitive limitations hypothesis together with the punishment defense then also justify no such concession in the case of a child who is brutally beaten and raped? After all, given our cognitive limitations, we are in no position to deny that punishment, justified on retributivist grounds, and meted out in proportion to sin, is a good. Furthermore, given our cognitive limitations, we are in no position to deny that the

---

38. "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," p. 103.

039. "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," pp. 103-4.

retributive good can be realized by punishment that precedes the crime. For all we know the reason we find it just to punish only after the crime is epistemic, but God, who foresees sin, is not bound by this epistemically-grounded limitation. In addition, given our cognitive limitations, we are in no position to deny that the child may in the future commit sins that merit being brutally beaten and raped. Suppose the child is killed, and it is not plausible that she has committed any sin meriting judicial beating, rape, and murder. But then, given our cognitive limitations, we are in no position to deny that she will be given a second chance in an afterlife in which she performs actions that merit being brutally beaten, raped, and murdered. Imagine that this is the best defense we can devise for the evil at issue. This defense is seriously implausible, and it does not significantly effect the probability of G on E (or of not-G on E). Consequently, even if it is true that due to our cognitive limitations we are in no position to deny that a good of which we have some inkling is God-justifying with respect to some horrible evil, this might do little to advance the cause of skeptical theism.

An obvious remedy is to find a defense hypotheses with higher probability. But the heart of skeptical theism is that such hypotheses will be difficult if not impossible to come by. So the skeptical theist seems to face a dilemma: at-best minimally specified hypotheses, or fairly well-specified defense hypotheses with low probability, are inadequate to counter the claim that E significantly reduces the probability of G, and she maintains that defense hypotheses with a higher probability are unavailable. A promising way out has been suggested by van Inwagen – his aim is to devise a defense hypothesis that would show that *we are in no*

position to judge that the sufferings of this world are improbable on the existence of God. In his conception, a defense of the right sort must first of all be a reasonably well-specified hypothesis that is true for all anyone knows (and not simply one that we are in no position to deny). Then, if a defense of this sort (D) can be found such that S (a proposition that details the actual degree of the world's suffering) is highly probable on G (God exists) and D, and, crucially, is such that we are in no position to make a judgment about the probability of D on G, then it will have been established that we are in no position to judge that S is improbable on the existence of God.[40]

---

40. Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Howard-Snyder, ed., pp. 151-74 (originally published in Philosophical Perspectives 5 (1991), pp. 135-65; "Reflections of the Chapters by Russell, Draper, and Gale," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Howard-Snyder, ed., pp. 219-43. Van Inwagen argues that judgements of epistemic probability are judgments about possible world proportions. In accordance with that conception, he expresses the (valid) general principle at work here as follows:

We are not in a position to judge that only a small proportion of the p-worlds are q-worlds if there is a proposition h that has the following two features:

– a large proportion of the p & h worlds are q-worlds;

– we are not in a position to make a judgment about the proportion of the p-worlds that are h-worlds.

Suppose that van Inwagen's schema is valid (as it seems to me to be). Then the challenge is to find a defense that meet these specifications – one worry is that in the last analysis, any candidate will turn out to have a fairly well circumscribed possibility on G. Van Inwagen proposes a defense, and it consists of these three claims:

(1) Every possible world that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by S, or else is massively irregular.

(2) Some important intrinsic or extrinsic good depends on the existence of higher-level sentient creatures; this good is of sufficient magnitude that it outweighs the patterns of suffering recorded by S.

(3) Being massively irregular is a defect in a world, a defect at least as great as the defect of containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by S.

But are we really in no position to assess the probability of this defense on the existence of God? A misgiving about this claim arises from the fact that through fairly recent advances in technology and medicine we have prevented a significant amount of suffering, and, obviously, we have by these means prevented this suffering without introducing massive irregularity. But if we are now able in this way to prevent suffering, it would seem that God could have done so long ago without introducing massive irregularity. For instance, a significant component of human suffering results from clinical depression, but we have produced drugs that relieve

---

("Reflections of the Chapters by Russell, Draper, and Gale," p. 228.)

many forms of this illness, and we are on a trajectory for finding more. It is far from unlikely that within a century we will be able to insert mechanisms in the body that dispense such drugs automatically -- and this would be accomplished without introducing massive irregularity. But if it is possible for us to produce and implant such mechanisms, it is far from unlikely that supposing God exists, God could have designed us with similar mechanisms without introducing massive irregularity. And if this is so, then we are in a position to judge that the probability of (1) on G is low. Nevertheless, even if this proposed defense does not meet van Inwagen's specifications, there might be one that does.

Another challenge to the skeptical theistic position further explores the claim that the degree of skepticism to which the skeptical theist is committed generalizes to skeptical claims that are unacceptable, or at any rate, skeptical claims that actual skeptical theists would not accept. One important version of this challenge has been advanced by Bruce Russell, and it claims that this view will have skeptical consequences for our moral practice.[41] If the theist claims that there are goods not fully understood by us that could not have been realized had God prevented various horrible evils, and that God might well be justified in allowing these evils in order to realize those goods, then there might well be situations in which we fail to prevent evils of these kinds where we do no wrong. In fact, we may on some such occasions be obligated not to prevent these evils. Or at the very least, on certain occasions we might have to give serious consideration to reasons not to prevent those evils when ordinary moral practice

41. Bruce Russell, "Defenseless, in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 193-205, at pp. 197-8

does not feature giving serious consideration to such reasons. Let us call this *the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality*.

Now Alston, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Michael Bergmann have replied to this objection by claiming in effect that in morally justifying our actions, we are limited to goods that we understand, while the possible goods the skeptical theist is adducing are at least to some degree beyond our understanding.[42] But this does not seem right; our moral justifications should not be limited to goods we understand -- as Russell in fact argues. One might amplify Russell's contention in the following way.[43] Consider first an analogy to the skeptical theist's situation that features only human agents. Jack, a nurse, assists doctors in a clinic that specializes, among other things, in a painful bone disease. He has excellent reason to trust the doctors as thoroughly competent. The clinic stocks morphine as a pain killer, and Jack knows that if morphine were administered to the bone disease patients, their acute pain would be relieved. But the bone specialists never, in his experience, have given morphine to patients suffering from this disease, even though they, in his experience, have given it to other patients in the clinic. Jack has no inkling why the doctors do not administer the morphine to the bone

---

42. William Alston "Some (Temporary) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil," p. 321; Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 2000; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument From Inscrutable Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Howard-Snyder, ed., pp. 286-310, at pp. 292-3.

43. I present this pair of cases in "Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence."

disease patients. However, for all he knows, they might have given it to such patients in certain circumstances in the past, although he has no reasonable guess as to frequency, and he has no idea of what these circumstances might be. One day, as a result of bad weather, all the doctors are away from the clinic, but Jack is there. A patient is suffering from the bone disease, and Jack has the opportunity to administer morphine. It would seem that he has some significant moral reason not to do so.

Now consider the analogous situation. Sue, a doctor, knows that there have been thousands of cases of people suffering horribly from disease X. Suppose at a certain time she becomes a skeptical theist who believes that God is justified for the sake of goods beyond her ken in not preventing these thousands of cases of suffering (she trusts God in a way analogous to the way in which Jack trusts the bone specialists). Suppose that her belief in God is rational, and also that her belief regarding the God-justifying goods is rational. In addition, for all she knows, God in the past might have prevented people from suffering from this disease under certain circumstances, although she has no reasonable guess as to how often God might have done this, and he has no idea of what these circumstances might be. Around the same time a drug that cures disease X is developed and is made available to Sue, and she is now deciding whether to administer it. Sue's situation seems similar to Jack's: it would seem that insofar as Sue is rational in believing that God has significant moral reason to allow thousands of people to suffer from disease X, she has significant moral reason not to administer the drug that cures

disease X.[44] Consequently, this problem for skeptical theism is not as easily resolved as some of the advocates of this view have claimed.

Swinburne points out a further important difficulty for the skeptical theist's position, one that entertains the possibility that due to our cognitive limitations we might also fail to understand that apparent goods really serve greater evils:

> ...while our moral beliefs (and factual beliefs, we may add) may indeed be in error in some relevant respects, we need some further argument to show that they are more likely to be biased in the direction of failing to understand that some apparent bad states really serve greater goods, rather than in the direction of failing to understand that some apparent good states really serve greater bad states.[45]

Swinburne's idea is that independent of other evidence relevant to the existence of God, and given the skeptical theist's claim about our cognitive limitations, it is equiprobable that apparently bad states serve greater goods and that apparently good states serve greater evils. So given our cognitive limitations, it may be just as likely that apparent goods have consequences that render allowing these goods illegitimate. So if on the face of it, independent of considerations regarding our cognitive limitations, E significantly lowers the probability of G, then even counting these considerations, E will still significantly lower the probability of G.

---

44. Thanks to David Christensen, Michael Bergmann, and Daniel Howard-Snyder for discussions that helped formulate this case.

45. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, p. 27.

Note that even if Swinburne's claim is true, it still may be that once the other evidence relevant to God's existence is counted in, E will not significantly lower the probability of G. For if this evidence weighs heavily in favor of G, then it will be much more likely that apparent bad states serve greater goods than that apparent good states serve greater evils.

Finally, part of the skeptical theists position is that the possible goods we know of need not be representative of the possible goods there are. This claim all by itself should be uncontroversial. Within the past century human beings, or at least many of them, arguably became aware of the good realized by professional psychological counseling and equal treatment across gender and race. It would be rash to claim that there are further goods of which many are not aware. For our appreciation of the goods that there are develops over time. But the skeptical theist needs much more than this – he needs there to be unrecognized goods the realization of which can justify inaction in the face of the most horrendous kinds of evil the world has ever seen.

Conclusions

Even if there is a successful response to the argument to the logical problem of evil, it does seem that consideration of the world's evils reduces the probability of the existence of God – conceived of as omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, at least considered independently of the other evidence. The traditional theodicies do not seem to provide a credible explanation for the coexistence of God with the horrendous evils, and the skeptical theist approach faces a series of problems that have yet to be adequately addressed.

Nevertheless, it is true that all of this is compatible with the claim that when one considers all of the evidence, the horrendous evils do not lower the probability of God's existence at all. Here one should keep in mind a point urged by Plantinga, that even if the probability of P on Q is very low, so that Q significantly reduces the probability of P, that fact all by itself does not render the probability of P low.[46] Under these circumstances Q may not reduce the probability of P at all, and Q need not render epistemically irrational a high degree of belief in P. To use Plantinga's example, consider:

P: Feike can swim.

Q: Feike is Frisian and nine out of ten Frisians can't swim.

The probability of P on Q is 0.1. But if I am now swimming with Feike, the probability of P for me in my epistemic situation may be close to 1.0, and my epistemically rational degree of belief would conform to this assessment. Plantinga points out that in fact each of many propositions that I rationally believe is such that its probability is low on some other proposition I rationally believe. Hence, even if the probability on G on E is low, that all by itself does not preclude my having a high rational degree of belief in G.

Plantinga argues that many have non-propositional evidence for God's existence – he adduces the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, an innate sense of the divine. Others might add other types of religious experience, mystical religious experience, for

46. "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Howard-Snyder, ed., pp. 69-96, at pp. 87-89.

example. If it turns out that for some individual the testimony of the Holy Spirit provides evidence for the existence of God analogous to that which swimming with Feike yields for the claim that Feike can swim, then it may well be that the fact of horrendous evil does not significantly reduce the probability of God's existence all things considered. So perhaps our verdict should be that there may be individuals who have a high rational degree of belief that God exists, for whom the fact of horrendous evil should not have a lowering effect on this degree of belief. This is compatible with there also being those who have a low rational degree of belief that God exists, perhaps individuals who have seriously considered the problem of evil, but do not have the *sensus divinitatis*, the testimony of the Holy Spirit, nor any religious experience.

A problem with this line of reasoning is that the fact of horrendous evil may well provide a much deeper challenge to the claim that God exists than the fact that nine out of ten Frisians can't swim does to the claim that Feike can't swim. For if I swim with Feike every day, my being apprized of the fact that nine out of ten Frisians can't swim clearly should have no effect on the extremely high degree to which I believe that Feike can swim. It should not, for example, indicate that I should seriously consider the possibility that my experiences of Feike swimming are non-veridical. However, many people, even those strongly inclined toward theism, have never had experiences of God relevantly analogous to experiences of Feike swimming (or at least do not believe they have had such experiences). But furthermore, suppose that I do regularly have experiences as of the presence of an extremely powerful and

good being, but then find that I lack any theodicy or even a remotely plausible defense for horrendous evil. Perhaps this is more like a case in which a longtime friend, whom I've always experienced to be a very good person, is accused of a crime, and there is impressive evidence that he is guilty. In this case, this evidence might well yield a much stronger challenge to my belief in my friend's innocence than the statistical evidence about Frisians provides for my belief that Feike can swim.

The problem of evil remains a very difficult issue for theists. Although the last thirty years have produced very careful, imaginative, and important work on the issue, this problem still constitutes the greatest challenge to rational theistic belief.