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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM L. ROWE'S CONCEPT OF GRATUITOUS
EVIL AND CORNEA-RELATED DEFENSES WITH JESUS' THEODICY IN LUKE 13:1-9

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THESIS

There is not access to sufficient data for a warranted claim as to the existence of gratuitous evil. To see this, there will be a description of the current debate on theodicy with a contrast of William L. Rowe's evidential argument from evil and CORNEA-related defenses. Additionally, I will compare this data with Jesus' theodicy that instances of suffering should serve as incentives to repentance (Luke 13:1-9).

INTRODUCTION

For planet earth, suffering, and evil is nothing new. Alvin Plantinga defines suffering as, "Encompassing any kind of pain or discomfort: pain or discomfort that results from disease or injury, or oppression, or overwork, or old age, but also disappointment with oneself or with one's lot in life (or that of people close to one), the pain of loneliness, isolation, betrayal, unrequited love; and there is also suffering that results from awareness of others' suffering."¹ Ed Murphy astutely observes "Evil is the most perplexing problem ever faced by humanity."² Ancient sources such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world's oldest narrative with an original extant source, wrestle with this epistemological hydra. Gilgamesh, the bereaved hero, laments, "How can I be silent, how can I rest, when Enkidu whom I love is dust, and I too shall die and be laid in the earth."³ Millennia later multitudes still testify of a grief that is so acute that physical pain pales in comparison. Many a mother has experienced the brutal pangs of grief standing by the grave of her son whose young life was ripped apart by a maliciously crafted IED. The lonely

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 458.

² Ed Murphy, *The Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 17.

³ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N.K. Sandars (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 102.

orphan clutches her pillow under the dim light of a state operated orphanage, all the while wishing that the rough cotton would return affection as true parent undoubtedly would. Yet, they are not there. The widow, with wet cheeks and a shattered heart, stares silently at a faded portrait of what was once a happy family. She remembers when the laughter of children and familiar footsteps of her childhood sweetheart bounced happily through the now silent house. It was once a home but now all she hears is the faint hum of the heater and the wailing sirens of speeding ambulances. The young couple hangs their heads in an inaudible grief as the doctor quietly exits the room. It was another miscarriage. The serenity of the night is shattered by the cries of a victim of violent crime. A robust man drops to his knees as if pierced through the heart with a poisoned arrow upon receiving news that the recklessness of a drunk driver has made him a modern parallel with Job. The brave soldier on night patrol standing between barbarism and civilization echoes the confession of Julius Caesar, “It is nearly always the invisible dangers that are most terrifying.”⁴ David Hume captures the essence of Qoheleth’s view of life “under the sun”:

Were a stranger to drop on a sudden into this world, I would shew him, as a specimen of its ills, an hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewn with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. To turn the gay side of life to him and give him a notion of its pleasures; whither should I conduct him? to a ball, to an opera, to court? He might justly think, that I was only shewing him a diversity of distress and sorrow.⁵

For the vast majority of persons, the contemplation of personal and corporate tragedy has led to a desperate fight to keep above the nihilistic waters of a latent hopelessness and despair. Ever present is the haunting inquiry when one lifts his or her eyes from the blood red soil of earth to the vast expanse above and feigns to ask “Is there anyone there? Does anyone care?” Or

⁴ Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, trans. S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 182.

⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, X. 196. Last modified, August 6, 2012. <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dnr.htm>

what of Kornelis Miskotte's questions that led him to the slippery precipice of nihilism? He contemplates:

How in a time in which Auschwitz existed in any life with God possible? The strangeness has become too cruel, the hiddenness too deep. One can still "believe" in the God who permitted to happen what did happen, but can one still speak to him? Can one still call upon him? Do we dare to recommend the Job of the gas-chambers to the survivors of Auschwitz: "Call upon him, for he is good and his mercy endureth forever?"⁶

Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel remembers, as a sixteen year old, his reaction to seeing Nazi guards hang a seven year old boy, "Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice."⁷ Thus, arises the issue of gratuitous evil.

Since the philosophical revolution spearheaded by Alvin Plantinga leading to the defeat of logical positivism, the debate on the problem of evil has encountered a massive shift. J.L. Mackie's attempt to discount the existence of God due to the existence of evil, once a bulwark of philosophical orthodoxy has been largely discarded due to Plantinga's famous "Free Will Defense."⁸ The shift in debate now centers on the issue of "gratuitous evil."⁹

I) Summary of Rowe's argument from gratuitous evil

Rowe's argument for atheism is as follows:

⁶ Kornelius H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: Collins, 1967), 248-249.

⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958, 2006), 45.

⁸ See, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

⁹ Rowe even admits the defeat of the logical problem of evil. He writes, "Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is *logically inconsistent* with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim . . . There remains, however, what we may call the *evidential* form—as opposed to the *logical* form—of the problem of evil: the view that the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, *rational support* for atheism." William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil & Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.¹⁰

A. Strengths of Rowe's argument

Premise 1 of Rowe's argument, from which he gained much of his philosophical fame, hinges upon the example of a hypothetical fawn's seemingly pointless suffering. Rowe argues:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse . . . since the fawn's intense suffering was preventable, and, so far as we can see, pointless, doesn't it appear that the premise (1) of the argument is true, that there do exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.¹¹

It is extremely important to remember that Rowe is targeting narrow theism in this argument.¹² The force of Rowe's argument lies in the fact that such suffering *could* have been prevented and, furthermore, that it avoids the clutches of any sort of "greater good" defense or theodicy. A common theistic response is that God allows suffering for some purpose that ultimately justifies the amount of suffering. By arguing that God *could* have prevented the fawn's suffering, the theist enters into the minefield of "why?" which, according to Rowe's argument, there appears to be no reason. What good could come of the fawn's suffering if the

¹⁰ Ibid, 2.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Rowe writes, "By a "theist" in the narrow sense I mean someone who believes in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, supremely good being who created the world." Rowe goes on to list Tillich as an example of a theist who rejects the classical version of theism. Ibid, 2.

fawn's agony and slow death was in total seclusion from the factors that could produce a greater good? If the theist argues that God *could not* have prevented the fawn's suffering, then one no longer has an omnipotent God. Neither is the denial of God's omniscience a favorable option for classical theism.

Rowe later reinforces his argument with the following reformulation:

P: No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2;
 therefore,
 Q: no good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscience, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2;
 therefore,
 Not G: there is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.¹³

E2 is the case of "the rape, beating, and murder by strangulation of a five-year-old girl."¹⁴

Rowe clarifies that P represents all *possible* available data on the subject.¹⁵ Of the goods in question, Rowe explains, "I mean to include goods that we have some grasp of, even though we have no knowledge at all that they have occurred or ever will occur."¹⁶ Interestingly, Rowe goes so far as to allow for spending eternity with God in heaven as a *possible* good albeit with the following stipulation, "Of course, if the good in question never does occur, then it is not a good that justifies God in permitting E1 or E2."¹⁷ The importance of eternal life with God becoming actualized is possibly the most important qualification in Rowe's argument.¹⁸ Before continuing

¹³ William L. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 263.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 264.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ While Rowe holds to "friendly atheism" the prospect of allowing for eternity with God as . Given Rowe's atheism, eternal life with God is not even something he posits as possible. However, *if* God exists, then Rowe admits that even in Sue's case (E2), "eternal felicity in the presence of God" would be sufficient to remove

further, theists who venture to answer the quagmire of E2 should be careful in avoiding being too cavalier with automatically applying a greater good theodicy or defense. As Rowe questions, it may be possible for God to use evil to bring about a greater good but does it justify God for essentially allowing Sue's horrific suffering to bring that about?¹⁹ It seems qualitatively unfair for God to "use" the beating, rape, and strangulation of a five-year-old girl in order to bring about *any* good for another person. Why do they get the benefit and Sue gets the pain? If some sort of greater good theodicy holds true then can God be charged with using persons as mere chattel? Is there something to be learned from the persons who seem to be marked for suffering and others to gain some spiritual benefit from being turned to God because of the suffering? Rowe is arguing that even *if* heaven awaits Sue, it still does not answer the question of the morality of her life existing merely for the benefit of another. Rowe's basic contention is that if this is the case, then God is doing little more than using Sue as cannon fodder for some "greater good." The thinking theist quickly realizes that, on its face, Rowe's point is that such a state of affairs casts God as a cosmic pragmatist; hardly a Being worthy of one's devotion or praise.

B. Weaknesses of Rowe's argument

In the case of the fawn (E1), it is difficult to see the correlation between the fawn's suffering and a specific instance of moral evil. One will look in vain for a correlation with the abuse of free will in Rowe's example. In fact, it appears to be a somewhat misplaced argument because the entire scenario involves natural evil. One could argue that even natural evil exists due to the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden but it is doubtful that the Genesis account would appeal to Rowe as a premise of friendly atheism.

the label of gratuitous evil. See, William L. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 264.

¹⁹ Ibid, 273.

Possibly the greatest weakness in E1 is that Rowe is virtually challenging the operation of the physical laws of the universe. Friendly atheists may deny this charge but Rowe is arguing that because God did not *miraculously* intercede on behalf of the fawn, then the subsequent gratuitous evil makes God's existence highly improbable. Since the forest fire was not a result of any human action per se then nature itself is to blame. In order for Rowe to argue against the probability of God's existence from E1, Rowe must provide some sort of criteria for how and when God should suspend physical laws or intervene in the natural order. Would God redirecting the lightning so that it burns another satisfy Rowe? Should God have stopped the lightning altogether? Why not just proceed to negate the other barometric factors that surround the occurrence of lightning? Then again, why not alter the fabric of the cosmos so as to create some sort of safety mechanism that allows for weather patterns to go unimpeded except in cases where fawns would suffer as the result of forest fires? Clearly, such a state of affairs is pregnant with far more difficulties than E1 (a hypothetical scenario). The necessary criteria for such a standard would certainly require infinitesimal data so as to make Bentham's Hedonistic Calculus seem embarrassingly elementary.²⁰ Continuing with the trajectory of Rowe's reasoning, one could argue that the interruption or alteration of the forest fire could produce an explosion of wood mites, thus leading to a depleted forest and massive segments of the deer population slowly starving to death. Only a selectively interventionist God satisfies Rowe's requirement. One needs not dwell upon living in such a universe to realize how profoundly awkward an existence would be where divine intervention into the standard operation of natural laws becomes a regular part of life so that the operation of physical laws is to be viewed with suspicion at best. Such a world seems little different than that of the amusing tales of Greek mythology.

²⁰ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 27, 2009. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/#JerBen>

In the case of Sue (E2), Rowe curiously identifies the strongest good as “[eternal] felicity in the presence of God,” which can be argued to ultimately warrant any level or duration of suffering, but must actually occur in order to qualify as good. Given Rowe’s atheism, such a prospect seems highly unlikely. Yet, in placing eternal life with God on the highest pedestal in the economy of goods, Rowe has opened up the question of God’s existence; a question that takes more into account than analytic philosophy.²¹ Although Rowe makes the case that no good that we know of could justify E2, why could evidence for God’s existence *outside* of this scenario not play into the probabilistic calculus? To render God’s existence highly improbable based upon one alleged instance of gratuitous evil, while admitting the very same instance could be rectified by eternal life with God, yet denying the existence of God based upon alleged gratuitous evil, is a textbook case of circular reasoning. Rowe argues that gratuitous evil itself precludes the possibility of God’s existence. However, if God does exist, and Sue’s eternal abode was in the presence of God, then one could argue that E2 does not qualify as gratuitous evil.

Although the ultimate adjustment of seemingly gratuitous evil hinges upon the actualization of eternal felicity with God, according to Rowe, evidence for God’s existence cannot include that from what he calls “information [from] ordinary religious experiences and mystical religious experiences.”²² Rowe does not provide further clarification on the definition of such experiences. Experiences such as the eyewitness testimony from the narratives of the gospel writers or profound personal experiences that result in a radical transformation of one’s life seem

²¹ Honest scholars will admit that far more issues come into play in the debate over whether God exists than merely one aspect of analytic philosophy. Douglas Groothuis covers the following areas in, *Christian Apologetics: The Ontological Argument, Cosmological Arguments, The Design Argument, Origins, Design and Darwinism, Evidence for Intelligent Design, The Moral Argument, The Argument from Religious Experience, The Uniqueness of Humanity, Deposed Royalty: Pascal’s Anthropological Argument, and Jesus of Nazareth*. See, Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 7-8.

²² William L. Rowe, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 266.

to fit into Rowe's category. At this point, the theist is well within the bounds of reason to challenge Rowe's *a priori* naturalism. Even in the venue of "friendly atheism," there appears to be the unspoken rejection of the evidence considered by the Major World as the *most* compelling evidence. This arbitrary standard of evidence is entirely unwarranted given that Rowe provides no reasons *why* it should be automatically rejected. The fulcrum of theism is, in its essence, supernatural, especially classical theism. To remove all evidence from all personal experience with God, Rowe has craftily tunneled under the defenses of theism so as to render it highly susceptible to the inevitable conclusion of E2: that God's existence is improbable.

At this point it is helpful to note Craig Keener's recent groundbreaking work on the documentation of miracles. Keener writes, "It is arrogant and unprofessional for Western scholars to outright reject the miraculous, totally ignoring the testimonies of thousands of people, based simply on their own lack of such experience."²³ Rowe's arbitrary refusal to allow entrance to "religious experience" serves as an unfortunate example of this sort of Western, academic bias.²⁴ One can almost smell the association of the term "mystical" with "religious experiences" sounds strangely rings of Hume's ultimatum:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.²⁵

Semantics aside, Hume's gaping fallacy stands open: he is attempting to reject theology, metaphysics, and any other discipline other than empirically based disciplines; via a

²³ Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 217.

²⁴ William L. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," 266.

²⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Vol. XXXVII, Part 3. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1914), np.

philosophical statement! Notice that Hume does not make his argument in mathematical terms but in philosophical ones. Hume sees himself as holding the kingly scepter of truth; a luxury not afforded to others. Rowe appears to commit the same fallacy. Most theistic theodicies or defenses incorporate some level of good ultimately resulting from evil in the afterlife. Hence, to reject religious experience as possible evidence, the theist is the student who must bear the restrictive burden of evidence prescribed by the authoritative atheist. Honest dialogue is difficult if such an *a priori* gap of warrants exists between theist and atheist.

Hume's influence can be seen in Rudolph Bultmann who led the way in "demythologizing" Christianity of which Keener writes, "Bultmann, however, unwittingly excluded from the modern world the majority of the world's population . . . in a manner that current sensitivities would regard as inexcusably ethnocentric . . . Bultmann's perspective was not a result of biblical scholarship per se but of a particular philosophic epistemology."²⁶ Concerning the prejudicial nature of cultural bias, David Pailin writes, "Those who embark on such an enquiry, however, must take into account its unavoidable limitations. The recognition of its proper character does not make theistic understanding impossible or pointless, but it does make clear that it is human understanding and unavoidably conditioned by its anthropological character."²⁷ Therefore, Rowe's rejection of religious experience may have more to do with an anti-supernatural bias than the purely logical deduction of a disinterested academic.

Integral to Rowe's case is the background information (k), which represents the entire range of data relevant to the topic. Rowe states, "I take it as important here that k be restricted almost entirely to information that is shared by most theists and nontheists who have given some thought to the issues raised by the problem of evil. To this end, we will want to include in k our

²⁶ Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 8.

²⁷ David A. Pailin, *The Anthropological Character of Theology: Conditioning Theological Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 200.

common knowledge of the occurrence of various evils in our world, including E1 and E2.”²⁸

Rowe’s formula is as follows:

If we conceive of k in the way just suggested, what assignment should be given to the probability that God exists, given k , $\text{Pr}(G/k)$? Many nontheists hold that the enormous amount of evil in our world, particularly instances of horrendous human or animal suffering such as E1 and E2, make the existence of the theistic God unlikely. Many theists and some nontheists, however, will disagree with this assessment. On the other hand, many theists will argue that the mere existence of a world (or the order in the world) makes the existence of God likely. But some theists and many nontheists will disagree with this assessment. In order not to beg any of these questions, I will assign a probability of 0.5 to $\text{Pr}(G/k)$, and, of course, 0.5 to $\text{Pr}(\sim G/k)$.²⁹

Rowe then moves to clarify why information from religious experience should be rejected.

He explains, “If it should turn out that we have reason to believe that P is true and that P lowers the probability of God’s existence, it is open to the theist to reply that the addition to k of our information concerning the occurrence of ordinary and mystical religious experiences restores the balance or even tips the scales in favor of theism.”³⁰ Rowe’s allowance of the strongest proofs for theism *only* as a defensive measure if and when P is demonstrated to be true is evidence of a weighted evidential argument. This amounts to ostensibly imprisoning the strongest genre of information in favor theism except after P has already been proven to be true. Upon closer examination, it appears that Baye’s Theorum has been formed into the image of Rowe by the arbitrary classification of categories of evidence via Rowean criteria.

Rowe’s final analysis is as follows:

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

Therefore, it is probable that

$\sim G$: There is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 266.

³¹ Ibid, 270.

When one considers the massive scope of P, it becomes apparent that the conclusion of the improbability of God's existence is somewhat premature. The probability of God's existence being "no greater than 0.333," is only if one accepts the arbitrary limitations of Rowe's categories.³² A philosophical slight of hand can be seen where Rowe writes, "Using some concepts employed by Chisholm, so long as we had only k to go on we might say that believing theism was not more reasonable than believing atheism, and believing atheism was not more reasonable than believing atheism. *Adding P to k, however, shifts things in favor of atheism.* It is not more reasonable to believe atheism than it is to believe theism."³³ Rowe's arbitrary selection on allowable evidence is quite revealing. To state that one can prove virtually any set of data given the freedom to arbitrarily "stack the deck" not only in which questions are asked but also what sort of information is allowed to provide a warranted rebuttal is almost passé. Yet, near the end of the essay, Rowe admits, "And I must confess that I know of no way to *prove* that P is true."³⁴ Hence, Rowe's evidential argument, taken together with the rejection of religious experience as allowable data, at best, renders God's existence improbable.

II) CORNEA-related defenses

A. Strengths of CORNEA-related defenses

Repeatedly, Rowe's language of assumption (in his first article), "so far as we can see . . . Nor does there seem to be . . . so far as we can see,"³⁵ points to the principle of credulity, which

³² Ibid, 272.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 282.

³⁵ Ibid, 4.

Greg Welty notes as a “viable philosophical option.”³⁶ However, Rowe’s implicit assumption essentially says how things appear to us is how they actually are. It is here that Wykstra’s “noseeums” argument, as follows:

In the Midwest we have “noseeums”—tiny flies, which, while having a painful bite, are so small you “no see’um.” We also have Rowe’s inductive argument for atheism. Rowe holds that the theistic God would allow suffering only if doing so serves some outweighing good. But is there some such good for every instance of suffering? Rowe thinks not. There is much suffering, he says, for which we *see no* such goods; and this, he argues, inductively justifies believing that for some sufferings there *are no* such goods. Since it gives such bite to what we cannot see, I call this a “noseeums argument” from evil.³⁷

Rowe’s position could be stated as, “I can’t see what reason God could have for *p*; therefore, probably God doesn’t have a reason for *p*.”³⁸ There is an embedded reliance upon human cognition to identify the reason for God allowing E1 and E2. It’s almost as if to say, “If my mind cannot discern the reason then the reason must not exist because my mind is the final arbiter of truth. In order for Rowe’s conclusion to be truly warranted, one must not only have access to the necessary data but also have the ability to properly factor all the data.

Wykstra proposes CORNEA: Conditions of reasonable epistemic access.³⁹ The brilliance of this defense is that it latches onto Rowe’s (k), qualification, “The evidential problem of evil derives its strength from our almost inescapable conviction that among the goods that fall within our intellectual grasp none can reasonably be thought to constitute God’s justifying reason for

³⁶ Dr. Greg Welty, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: Rowe’s First Look,” (Lecture, PHREL 4383, God & Evil, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, March, 2007).

³⁷ Stephen John Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 126.

³⁸ Dr. Greg Welty, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: Rowe’s First Look.”

³⁹ Stephen John Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, *ibid.*

permitting such horrendous evils as E1 and E2.”⁴⁰ Wykstra’s rebuttal is, “the heart of the real CORNEA was that Rowe’s inference works only if it is reasonable (on Rowe’s part) to believe that God’s purposes for the evils he cites would be seeable.”⁴¹ The importance of this point cannot be overestimated. Beginning with Immanuel Kant’s shattering work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, pure Rationalism has been forced to deny the absolute infallibility of human reason. Taken to an extreme, Kant’s observations about the *phenomenal* and *noumenal* world have produced such epistemologically nihilistic films such as *The Matrix* and *Inception* where the lines between reality and non-reality become so fine that absolute knowledge is impossible.⁴²

Although Wykstra nowhere declares to be bearing the flag of Kantianism, he does not allow Rowe’s tacit Rationalism to pass unchecked. Wykstra questions as to whether God’s reasons for allowing certain cases of evil would be discernable to us. Wykstra uses the “parent analogy” of a one-month-old infant being unable to understand certain pains that the parents are allowing for her benefit.⁴³ From this analogy, Wykstra argues that, in a similar fashion, there are “good reasons to think that if there were God-purposed goods for sufferings, it is expectable that these would often be beyond our ken.”⁴⁴ Does Rowe really expect to be able to identify the reason/s for not only E1 or E2, if in fact there are any? Rowe counters with the charge that the infant analogy is a *non sequitur* because Wykstra is equating infants, whose reason is not

⁴⁰ William L. Rowe, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” 282.

⁴¹ Stephen John Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 136.

⁴² For a thorough treatment on warranted belief, see, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴³ Stephen John Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

developed, and sentient adults.⁴⁵ Yet Rowe, grudgingly admits, “Of course, we have to allow that there may be kinds of intrinsic goods we have not thought of.”⁴⁶ This seems strikingly parallel to the admission of the prophet Isaiah, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:8-9, ESV). One must consider the infinitesimal number of data necessary for working certain instances of evil for the good “to those who love God and are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

William Alston offers six factors of human “cognitive limits” that warrant much more intellectual humility than afforded by Rowe:

1. Lack of data. This includes, inter alia, the secrets of the human heart, the detailed constitution and structure of the universe, and the remote past and future, including the afterlife if any. 2. Complexity greater than we can handle (The lightning bolt that started the forest fire that killed the fawn was connected to weather patterns that are necessary for the preservation of life), 3. Difficulty of determining what is metaphysically possible or necessary (that God would create beings that had no ability to feel pain), 4. Ignorance of the full range of possibilities, 5. Ignorance of the full range of values, 6. Limits to our capacity to make well-considered value judgments.⁴⁷

Taken together with Wykstra’s defense, these factors level devastating undercutters to Rowe’s premature assumption that simply because there are no goods that we know of that may justify E1 and E2 that, therefore, God’s existence is rendered improbable. Rowe simply provides

⁴⁵ William L. Rowe, “The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” 275.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument From Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 120. Alston goes on to note, “I want to underline the point that my arguments in this paper does not rely on a general skepticism about our cognitive powers, about our capacity to achieve knowledge and justified belief. On the contrary, I have been working with what I take to be our usual nonskeptical standards for these matters, standards that I take to be satisfied by the great mass of our beliefs in many areas. My claim has been when these standards are applied to the kind of claim exemplified by Rowe’s 1, it turns out that this claim is not justified and that the prospects for any of us being justified in making it are poor at best. This is because of the specific character of that claim, its being a negative existential claim concerning a territory about the extent, contents, and parameters of which we know little. My position no more implies, presupposes, or reflects a general skepticism than does the claim that we don’t know that there is no life elsewhere in the universe.” Ibid, 121.

no justification for holding that we would be able to discern God's reason for E1 and E2. Such unqualified assumptions should not receive an philosophical free pass.

Wykstra provides the following analogy to further illustrate the possibly inscrutable reasons for God allowing certain instances of seemingly gratuitous evil:

A professor of ceramics, newly appointed as Dean of College, is deciding whether to award tenure to a young philosopher on the faculty. The Dean has never studied philosophy. Sitting in on a session of the philosopher's graduate seminar, he hears the philosopher speak many sentences, which are Greek to him. (He's never studied any Greek either.) Of such a sentence, is he entitled to say, 'it does not appear that this sentence has any meaning'?⁴⁸

The ceramic professor's ignorance disqualified him from intelligently passing judgment on not only the Greek sentence but on the graduate seminar as a whole. Likewise, the limits of the human condition, taken together with the complexity of God's plan, restricts humans from making definitive judgments as to the impossibility of God having a justification for allowing E1 and E2.

Alvin Plantinga follows with a comparison between St. Bernards or "noseeums" in a tent. Plantinga muses:

Even if there were noseeums there, I wouldn't see 'em; they're too small to see. And now the question is whether God's reasons, if any, for permitting such evils as E1 and E2 are more like St. Bernards or more like noseeums. Suppose the fact that God has a reason for permitting a particular evil like E1 or E2 and suppose we try to figure out what the right reason might be: is it likely that we would come up with the right answer? Is it even likely that we would wind up with plausible candidates for God's reason?⁴⁹

Like Wykstra and Alston, Plantinga probes for the atheist to admit the obvious: God's reasons for allowing evil could simply be beyond our cognitive reach. It could be that we are like

⁴⁸ Stephen J. Wykstra, "On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 151.

⁴⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 466.

the creature battled by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film *Predator* that is not able to see clearly as humans do.⁵⁰

B. Weaknesses of CORNEA-related defenses

It is possible that CORNEA-related defenses could lead to a sort of agnosticism. Such a charge would be an overreach. Alston cautions with a somewhat humorous reference for Sci-Fi fans, “My position no more implies, presupposes, or reflects a general skepticism than does the claim that we don’t know that there is no life elsewhere in the universe.”⁵¹ John Feinberg observes, “Theists should require atheists to offer an instance of suffering which they can prove is genuinely pointless. That will be a hard challenge to meet, especially because of our limited knowledge.”⁵² In like fashion, Alston, Wykstra, and Plantinga all appear to lodge such defenses as an undercutter against the unwarranted inductive argument from evil. Understood as such, atheists must either vouch for the prospect that God’s reasons for permitting cases of seemingly gratuitous evil are *not* beyond our ken, or concede that such cases do not automatically render God’s existence improbable.

III) Theodicy of Jesus

Why would the theodicy of Jesus (if one can quantify such a thing), be included in an academic paper of this sort? For Christian theists, Jesus is the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and doctrine. If one could define Jesus’ teaching on this subject, however culturally obtuse in the 21st century, Western world, simply the impact of Jesus upon world history should obligate

⁵⁰ *Predator*, directed by John McTiernan (1987; Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2004, DVD).

⁵¹ William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument From Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, 121.

⁵² John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 235.

thinking persons to investigate. The most compact example of Jesus' theodicy is Luke 13:1-5 which reads as follows:

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

D.A. Carson identifies the following themes in Jesus' statement:

1. First, Jesus does not assume that those who suffered under Pilate, or those killed in the collapse of the tower, did not deserve their fate.
2. Second, Jesus does insist that death by such means is not *prima facie* evidence that those who suffer in this way are any more wicked than those who escape such a fate.
3. Third, Jesus treats wars and natural disasters not as agenda items in a discussion of the mysterious ways of God, but as incentives to repentance.⁵³

Jesus' comments initially seem callous in that he affirms the depravity not only of all those who died but of all living in Jerusalem. Whereas most theodicies attempt to justify God's actions, Jesus' theodicy places sinful humanity on trial. Yet Jesus avoids what seemed to have been the common punishment theodicy within 1st century Judaism as formulated by Rabbi Alexander, who taught, "No one gets up from his bed of sickness until all his sins have been forgiven."⁵⁴ When the disciples assumed that blindness was a result of pre-natal sin or the sin of the parents, Jesus took the opportunity to demolish such presuppositions. Jesus answered, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him*" (John 9:3, ESV). Note that Jesus never denied that the man was a sinner but that there was no discernible correlation of the blindness to a specific sin. Taken together with the account in Luke

⁵³ D.A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 60-61.

⁵⁴ R.A. Martin, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 48.

13, Jesus both avoids a karma-esque treatment of suffering and also a denial of human culpability. For both the slaughter of the Galileans and the quasi-natural evil of the tower's collapse, Jesus calls the hearers to repentance.

Jesus immediately transitions proceeds to tell a parable:

And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. 7 And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' 8 And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. 9 Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9, ESV).

Jesus' Jewish hearers would have recognized the fig tree imagery as representing Israel.⁵⁵ For Jesus, the only reason for the continued existence of the hearers was God's mercy in allowing them time to repent. Thus, for God to take one's life at any time would not be cruel; it would be just. The love of God is evidenced by the fact that the person had not yet perished. Simply put, according to Jesus, there are no innocent persons. With this paradigm, the question morphs from, "Why does God let bad things happen to good people?" to "Why does God continue to give mercy to a guilty world?" Some may claim that God's mercy in the face of the amount of evil and suffering in the world is laughable. To this, C.S. Lewis writes, "Pain is God's megaphone to get our attention."⁵⁶ One may inquire as to whether Jesus' theodicy equally applies to infants. It appears from the context that it does not.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: The Anchor Bible, Volume 28a* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 1008.

⁵⁶C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 133.

⁵⁷ For an excellent treatment of infants and salvation, see, R. Albert Mohler Jr., and Daniel L. Akin, "The Salvation of the 'Little Ones': Do Infants who Die Go to Heaven?" Thursday, July 16, 2009, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/the-salvation-of-the-little-ones-do-infants-who-die-go-to-heaven/> and, R. Albert Mohler Jr., "In the Shadow of Death—The Little Ones Are Safe With Jesus," January 5, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/01/05/in-the-shadow-of-death-the-little-ones-are-safe-with-jesus/>

While the limits of this paper will not allow for a full treatment on the origin of sin, the short answer is that God allowed for human freedom while knowing that such freedom would be abused. Yet God chose to enter into the sphere of human existence in the person of Jesus Christ and suffer the full scope of evil. N.T. Wright recounts, “The nations of the world got together to pronounce judgment on God for all the evils in the world, only to realize with a shock that God had already served his sentence.”⁵⁸ In the crucifixion, Christ experiences the full scope of God’s punishment against sin and in the resurrection, gains full victory over it. Therefore, the call to repent is the call to come to Christ who has far more experience with evil than the most decorated philosopher can ever hope to have. Christ’s call to repent was not just an admonition to accept certain propositions but rather, “it involved a total reorientation that was to affect every sphere of life.”⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to provide a substantive discussion of the debate over seemingly gratuitous evil. I have argued, via various CORNEA-related critiques, that there is not access to sufficient data for a warranted claim as to the existence of gratuitous evil. Furthermore, I provided a comparative analysis with Jesus’ theodicy wherein universal human depravity is affirmed. A collectively guilty humanity is in the debt of God whose mercy sustains them when death is the just penalty for sin. God’s purpose in mercy is so that persons may come to repent. Understood in light of Jesus’ subsequent crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Luke 13 stands forth not only as one of many theodicies but as eye-witness evidence of one who claims to have defeated the power of itself.

⁵⁸ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 94.

⁵⁹ Eryl W. Davies, *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, J.W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, ed., (New York: Oxford, 2006), 743.

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