

## IS THEISM COMPATIBLE WITH GRATUITOUS EVIL?

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder

The most widely taught and frequently discussed version of the "problem of evil" is known as *the argument from gratuitous evils*. Its most popular representative is William Rowe. His most famous version of the argument goes like this:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. So, God does not exist. [1]

We shall say that an instance of intense suffering is a *gratuitous evil* just in case God could have prevented it without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Premise 1 is the *factual claim* that there are instances of gratuitous evil, and premise 2 is Rowe's *incompatibility claim* that God would not permit gratuitous evil. Critics mainly target the factual claim. In this essay, however, we begin to assess the prospects of denying the incompatibility claim.

Now, on the face of it, the idea that God may well permit gratuitous evil is absurd. After all, if God can get what He wants without permitting some particular horror (or anything comparably bad), why on earth would He permit it? It's not as though it would come as a surprise to Him, or that He'd be unable to do anything about it. No wonder, then, that Rowe writes: "This premise (or something not too distant from it) is ... held in common by many atheists and nontheists. . . . [It] seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists" (336). And Rowe is not alone in this assessment. No less a critic of Rowe than Stephen Wykstra writes that

The heart of [Rowe's incompatibility claim] is ... a conceptual truth unpacking part of what it means to call any being—not just any omniscient being—morally good.... [Denying it] is tantamount to saying that God could allow some intense suffering either because he enjoys the sight of occasional suffering for its own sake, or because he is indifferent to it. It is hard to see how such a being could be meaningfully praised as a *good* God, worthy of our worship, our obedience, and—not least—our trust. I take this to be a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists

And Terence Penelhum concludes that the moral priorities set by Christian belief—namely, the "fundamental stress on certain relationships and states of mind"—imply that a Christian,

faced with what he admits to be an evil, [must] hold that God allows it because the existence or possibility of it, or of something equally bad, is a necessary condition of some such relationship or state of mind. To [say otherwise] would be to admit a proposition inconsistent with Christian theism. [3]

And many others recommend Rowe's second premise as a necessary truth. So it seems that expert opinion and the light of moral reason converge on the verdict that to query whether theism is incompatible with gratuitous evil is a monumentally unpromising project. Who would dare to try? Well, as it turns out, three people: Michael Peterson, William Hasker, and Peter van Inwagen. In what follows, we assess the efforts of the first two and commend the third. [4]

## 1. PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATIONS

Before proceeding, some clarifications regarding Rowe's incompatibility claim are in order.

### 1.1 *Rowe's incompatibility claim and "gratuitous evil"*

Philosophers use the term "gratuitous evil" in different ways. To avoid confusion, we briefly clarify how we will use it.

First, and foremost, our use of the term is fixed by Rowe's incompatibility claim. Thus,

An instance of evil is *gratuitous* =df God could have prevented it without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

We proceed in this way because our title question has been raised explicitly and repeatedly with respect to Rowe's

incompatibility claim. We shall call this *Rowe's conception* of gratuitous evil. Second, we do not use the term in either of these ways:

An instance of evil is *gratuitous* =df it is incompatible with theism.

An instance of evil is *gratuitous* =df it has *some feature* which is incompatible with theism.

On these definitions, our title question has a brief, unrefutable, and uninteresting answer: "No." On Rowe's conception of gratuitous evil, however, it is an open question whether gratuitous evil is incompatible with theism.

Third, Rowe's conception of gratuitous evil is not captured by this definition:

An instance of evil is *gratuitous* =df it is not necessary for the occurrence of any greater good or the prevention of any equally bad or worse evil.

To see this point, suppose that God permits evil so that we have it within our power to make a significant difference to how things go, and suppose this good is great enough to justify that permission. Then, given the definition in question, any actual instance of evil God permits is gratuitous—for how things go can be up to us even if there is no evil because, say, we always freely choose the good. By way of contrast, any actual instance of evil God permits for the sake of our having it within our power to make a significant difference is *not* gratuitous on Rowe's conception—for that good would not have occurred if those evils had been prevented and nothing comparably bad had been permitted.

### 1.2 *Rowe's incompatibility claim and consequentialism*

Rowe's incompatibility claim does *not* presuppose consequentialism. It is compatible with nonconsequentialist moral

theories; for example, it can be viewed as a *prima facie* duty of beneficence. [5] More importantly, however, even if no nonconsequentialist theory implies that it is morally *wrong* for God to permit an instance of suffering He could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, it is arguable that an unsurpassably good God would *supererogatorily* prevent such suffering.

### 1.3 Rowe's incompatibility claim and creating the best possible world

Some critics say that Rowe's incompatibility claim is implausible because it entails that God must govern the world in such a way that it is the best, or among the best, worlds He could bring about. For example, after citing some correctable minor infelicities, William Alston says:

There are more radical objections to Rowe's [incompatibility claim]. I think particularly of those who question or deny the principle that God would, by virtue of His nature, create the best possible universe, would create a universe that comes up to some minimal evaluative level.... On these views an argument like Rowe's never gets out of the starting gate. [6]

There are two mistakes here. First, we must never confuse the contentious claim that God would, by virtue of His nature, create *the best possible* universe with the irresistible idea that God would, by virtue of His nature, create a universe that comes up to *some* minimal evaluative level. Rowe's incompatibility claim expresses the latter idea, not the former. Second, the incompatibility claim does not entail that God would or must create the best world He can. For were God to abide by that claim, He might well refrain from creating anything at all, in which case a virtually empty world would result, a world that would not be as

good as some worlds He could create. Alternatively, God might create a world inhabited only by happy goldfish and the conditions necessary for their flourishing. So long as He prevented any intense goldfish suffering that wasn't properly related to greater goods or the prevention of comparable evils, He would not run afoul of Rowe's incompatibility premise.

### 1.4 Rowe's incompatibility claim and some minor infelicities

Several people have noticed minor infelicities in Rowe's incompatibility claim. For example, suppose we define the key term "greater good" like this: a good *G* is greater than an instance of evil *E* if and only if the conjunctive state of affairs *G and E* is a good state of affairs. Then we must deny the factual claim of Rowe's argument. For the actual world contains on balance more good than evil, and so for any instance of evil that you please, there is some greater good that could not obtain unless that evil were permitted, namely the actual world. [7] How might this result be avoided? By simply modifying Rowe's incompatibility claim like this:

- 2 God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby leaving things worse off than they otherwise would be.

This avoids the objection and incurs no new ones. [8]

We mention this objection in order to illustrate the sort of thing that we are *not* up to here. While we have no principled complaint against such nitpickiness, the objections we will examine are much more fundamental; if they work, no tinkering will help.

We now turn to the first argument for the compatibility of God and gratuitous evil.

## 2. PETERSON ON ROWE'S INCOMPATIBILITY CLAIM

### 2.1 Peterson's argument stated

For two decades, Michael Peterson has argued for the compatibility of God and gratuitous evil. Here is the latest version of his argument:

One line of argument for gratuitous evil within a theistic universe traces out the ramifications of significant free will. Plantinga has argued that evil is possible in a theistic universe that contains morally free creatures. We can extend this point, saying that if the range of free choices available to free creatures is to be really significant rather than trivial, then creatures must be capable of the highest goods as well as the most terrible evils. For God to limit the possibility of very serious evils is to limit the range of free choice. It would seem that significant freedom involves the ability to bring about utterly meaningless evils, a risk inherent in God's program for humanity. To preserve the value of human freedom and its potential goods, God must allow the possibility of horrible evils. The *actuality* of many evils is not necessary to any greater goods; such goods could have existed without such evils being actual. But the *possibility* of these evils is necessary to the preservation of significant free will. If God narrows the scope of free choice in order to eliminate the possibility of such evils, the moral enterprise is robbed of much of its importance.

If this way of drawing out the implications of Christian theism is essentially correct, then the critic's assumption—[notably Rowe's, whom Peterson explicitly cites] that God would not allow gratuitous evil—can be rejected.[9]

What should we make of Peterson's "moral enterprise" model for "gratuitous evil within a theistic universe"?

Suppose an incompatibilist conception of human freedom fits best with theism; and

suppose we cannot have a significant say about the sorts of persons we become and about the sorts of relationships we maintain unless we have it within our power to bring about "the most terrible evils"; and suppose the good of our being responsible in these ways and the good of the freedom such responsibility requires together outweigh the evil that must be permitted in order for those goods to obtain; and suppose that if God systematically prevented all of the "most terrible," "serious," and "horrible" kinds of evil we in fact bring about, the scope of our freedom would be restricted to trivial matters and we would not have a significant say about who we are and how we relate to others; finally, suppose God has given us this moral freedom and deep responsibility and let us suppose that humans have blown it, badly.

According to Peterson, "this way of drawing out the implications of Christian theism" has the consequence that the incompatibility claim "can be rejected." Is he right? In the model, does it *follow* that God must permit *gratuitous* evil?

### 2.2 Why Peterson's argument fails

Sure enough, in the model there will be instances of evil which are *themselves* unnecessary for moral freedom and those goods that require moral freedom. But does it follow that their *permission* is unnecessary for moral freedom and its potential goods? Not at all. Thus, instances of evil permitted for the sake of moral freedom and its potential goods would *not* be gratuitous in Rowe's sense of the term—they would not be such that "God could have prevented them without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."

So why does Peterson persistently claim that his moral enterprise model shows that God and gratuitous evil are compatible? The best answer we can come up with is

that he is deploying a different conception of gratuitous evil, namely this: an instance of intense suffering or evil is "gratuitous" just in case *it*—the particular instance of evil *itself* (or something comparably bad)—is not necessary for the existence of some outweighing good or for the prevention of some greater evil. [10] Of course, given *this* conception of gratuitous evil, God and gratuitous evil are compatible in Peterson's moral enterprise model. But it hardly follows that, given Rowe's conception of gratuitous evil, God and gratuitous evil are compatible in Peterson's moral enterprise model. For, as Peterson himself notes, in general, even if an occurrence of evil is *itself* neither necessary for a greater good nor the prevention of a greater evil, it might be that God could not prevent it without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some greater evil; and, in particular, this is true of all those evils in the model wrought in moral freedom.

To sum up, then: if Peterson uses his idiosyncratic conception of gratuitous evil, his "moral enterprise" model is irrelevant to Rowe's incompatibility premise; however, if he uses a conception of gratuitous evil that is relevant (i.e., Rowe's), his argument is a glaring non sequitur.

### 3. HASKER ON ROWE'S INCOMPATIBILITY CLAIM

To his credit, Hasker distinguishes Peterson's conception of gratuitous evil from Rowe's, and he concedes that God may be justified in permitting evils which were themselves unnecessary for moral freedom. Nevertheless, he says, God and gratuitous evil are compatible.

#### 3.1 Hasker's main argument stated

To begin to see that God and gratuitous evil are compatible, says Hasker, consider the fact that the exercise of moral freedom

has little "inherent" or "intrinsic" value. But even so, we might ask, how is that fact relevant to the denial of Rowe's incompatibility claim? Hasker continues:

If the value assigned to the exercise of free will is high enough, then conceivably gratuitous moral evil could be entirely eliminated by this consideration [i.e., the value of the exercise of free will]. But to assign this much value to individual instances of the exercise of free will is surely unrealistic—it would hardly do, for instance, to say that the evil of a deliberate murder is outweighed by the inherent value of the exercise of free will by which the murder was decided on! A more reasonable view would seem to be that the exercise of free will might have sufficient intrinsic value to outweigh slight harms to others, but not to outweigh major or long-lasting harms.... We now see that if God prevents all gratuitous evil . . . , there is still some possibility for morality to exist. But the range of application for morality under these conditions would be severely restricted: it could apply to minor affronts, but not to murder or treason.... If God were to limit our moral freedom to situations such as this, he would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, permitting us to develop our characters by arguing over the blocks, but stepping in to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt. Perhaps we could describe such a situation as one in which morality is *partially undermined* or *truncated*. And it is surely consistent with theism to hold that a situation in which morality is severely truncated is for God just as unacceptable as one in which it is undermined entirely. [11]

In short, Hasker's argument is this:

1. If God were to prevent all gratuitous evil, then morality would be partially, perhaps even severely, undermined.
2. God would be justified in arranging things in such a way that morality would not be thus undermined.
3. So, God and gratuitous evil are compatible.

What should we make of this line of thought? We begin with two points of agreement.

### 3.2 *Two points of agreement*

First, we agree with the second premise. God would be justified in arranging things so that what we did and who we are *really mattered*. Depending on our choices, we could benefit others enormously or we could harm them severely, and we could make or break ourselves too, with all the repercussions that might have for our eternal well-being. If God were to set things up this way, our behavior, personal virtue, and individual relationships, and our social mores, practices, and institutions, would matter tremendously.

Second, we agree that no individual instance of the exercise of free will can *by itself* justify God in permitting some instance of horrific, undeserved suffering. Neither the fact that a perpetrator acted freely nor the fact that the victim or bystanders responded freely suffices to justify God. Considered in itself, and not in relation to anything else at all, moral freedom is not valuable enough to outweigh horrific, undeserved suffering.

In connection with this second point of agreement, it is important to see that even if moral freedom has little value *by itself*, it may nevertheless have immense value if it is required to secure other goods that are immensely valuable. Are there any such goods? It seems so. For example, there are all the goods associated with what makes the moral life so significant: the good of our forming our own characters; the good of our developing worthwhile relationships with others and from amongst these, the good of the best forms of love; in addition, there is genuine creativity and friendship with God. Consider the latter briefly. According to Christian tradition, the greatest good for human beings in a theistic universe

is a relationship with God—not as God's pets or tools, but as God's friends. We can't be friends with God if we are mere causal conduits for His action. We must be fresh sources of creativity and change. Moreover, friendship with God requires, paradoxically perhaps, that we can reject it. Consequently, we must have it within our power to bring about harm and misery, both to ourselves and others. And the same goes for these other goods.

So then, we agree with Hasker that while the "inherent" or "intrinsic" value of no individual instance of the exercise of a free will justifies God in permitting horrible evil and suffering, the greater good of a moral life that matters immensely does justify God.

### 3.3 *Why the first premise of Hasker's main argument is false*

With these two agreements in place, what should we make of Hasker's first premise? Is it true that if God prevented all gratuitous evil, the moral life would be restricted to the equivalent of a moral kindergarten, where we are permitted to argue over the blocks but prevented from really hurting each other? Is it true that if God prevented all gratuitous evil, He would have to arrange things so that what we did really didn't matter all that much?

On the face of it, these questions seem more than just a bit puzzling. After all, suppose God prevented every instance of horrific evil and suffering which is such that neither its permission nor the permission of something comparably bad is necessary for some greater good. And suppose that one of the greater goods He aims at is the maintenance of a human moral life which is as significant as ours is. Now consider those instances of horrific evil and suffering whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for that good to be secured.

Would God prevent *all* of these evils, without permitting anything else comparably bad? Surely not. Because if He did, a greater good would be completely lost, namely, a significant morality. Would God prevent *any* of them, without permitting anything else comparably bad? Again, no. Because if He did, the very same good would be partially undermined. Morality would be slightly less significant than it in fact is. But then it follows that the following propositions could be true all at once:

God prevents all gratuitous evil.

God permits all those instances of horrific evil and suffering whose permission (or the permission of evils equally bad or worse) is *necessary* for the preservation of the significance of morality.

Morality is neither severely nor partially undermined.

Thus, Hasker's first premise is false.

### 3.4 Hasker's response...and why it fails

Hasker is aware of this objection. And, for the sake of argument—but *only* for the sake of argument—he is willing to grant its presupposition that there is some particular amount of evil, such that if God permits that amount of evil the full significance of morality is maintained, but if He permits any less, it is undermined, at least partially (33). Hasker defends premise 1 by first distinguishing two classes of evils, the class of "genuinely gratuitous evils" and the class of "ostensibly gratuitous evils":

(a) the class of *genuinely* gratuitous evils is the class of evils each member of which God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse,

which is just the class of gratuitous evils in Rowe's sense of the term "gratuitous"; on the other hand,

(b) the class of *ostensibly* gratuitous evils is the class of evils each member of which could have been prevented by God without thereby preventing the existence of any greater good (or necessitating the permission of some evil equally bad or worse) *apart from the benefit God's permission of such evils may have in preventing the undermining of morality.* (34, his italics)

It follows from (b) that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils contains all those evils whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is *required* for the prevention of the undermining of morality. It might also contain, as Hasker notes, some genuinely gratuitous evils as well. And it might contain, as Hasker does not note, some evils that are clear cases of genuinely nongratuitous evil, in light of the italicized clause. For it seems that a great deal of evil must be permitted in order to maintain the full significance of morality, in which case a great many actual instances of evil are such that their permission, or the permission of some evil equally bad or worse, is strictly necessary for the prevention of the (at least partial) undermining of morality. Thus, given Hasker's definition, all such evils are "ostensibly gratuitous"—even though they are genuinely nongratuitous and may seem to be so. So, rather surprisingly, it turns out that an instance of evil can be "ostensibly gratuitous," in his technical sense of the term, yet genuinely and obviously nongratuitous! So long as we keep this quirk in mind, we shouldn't be too far misled by his terminology (although one will be pardoned if one wished for better).

Now, it seems to us that (b) might be read in two different ways. It might be read so as to imply that

(b1) the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is the class that contains all those evils

whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of significant morality, a class that *includes* both actual occurrences of evil as well as *merely permitted evils*, i.e., evils that were permitted but which did not occur due to the good free choices of moral agents. [12]

On the other hand, (b) might be read so as to imply that

(b2) the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is the class that contains all those evils whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of significant morality, a class that includes actual occurrences of evil but *excludes* merely permitted evils.

In the next two sections, we trace the implications of both interpretations, arguing that either way Hasker's defense of premise 1 implies falsehood. In effect, then, we present a dilemma. [13]

### 3.4.1 The first horn of the dilemma: (b1)

Suppose the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils contains all those evils whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of significant morality, a class that includes both actual occurrences of evil as well as evils that were merely permitted but which did not occur. Hasker's next move is to define an *optimal* class of ostensibly gratuitous evils, one which obtains when the evils it contains are such that their permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is "just sufficient" in amount and severity, to prevent the undermining of morality. [14] Given (b1), an optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is a class that (i) contains actual occurrences of evil as well as merely permitted evils (ii) whose permission, or the permission of something comparably bad, is "just sufficient" in amount and severity to secure

the full significance of morality. Note three implications of this definition. First, the phrase "just sufficient" suggests "barely sufficient," i.e., *necessary* and sufficient. Consequently, "in an *optimal* class of ostensibly gratuitous evils, none of the instances of evil is genuinely gratuitous, since none could be deleted by God without undermining morality" (34). But, second, and most importantly, while *God's* deleting—or preventing—some evils in an optimal class would at least partially undermine the significance of morality, *our* freely failing to bring about any of them would not do the same. Third, on this definition, if the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils falls below the optimal amount *for whatever reason*, then the significance of morality will be at least partially undermined.

With this notion of an optimal class of gratuitous evils in hand, Hasker's defense of premise 1 of his main argument—the claim that if God were to prevent all (genuinely) gratuitous evil, then morality would be partially, perhaps even severely, undermined—comes to the following:

- 1a. Suppose that morality is as significant as we tend to think it is.
- 1b. If morality is as significant as we tend to think it is, then God must govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall *below* the optimum. (from 1a and the [b1] reading of "an optimal class")
- 1c. So, God must govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimum. (from 1a and 1b)
- 1d. The *only* way God can govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimum is to permit genuinely gratuitous evil.
- 1e. So, God permits genuinely gratuitous evil. (from 1c and 1d)

- 1f. So, if morality is as significant as we tend to think it is, then God permits genuinely gratuitous evil. (from 1a-1e, conditional proof)
1. So, if God prevented all gratuitous evil, then morality would not be as significant as we tend to think it is; that is, it would be partially, perhaps even severely, undermined. (from 1f)

The main premise here is 1d. To help us discern its truth, Hasker asks us to imagine a man contemplating some heinous crime.

Our agent knows ... that if he brings about an ostensibly gratuitous evil, this evil will be a member of an *optimal* class of such evils. But if this is so, then the *omission* of such an evil will mean that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils will be *sub-optimal*; it "will be depleted beyond the point necessary for significant morality." But of course such a situation cannot be allowed to stand: We are assuming that the maintenance of significant morality is an *overriding concern* in the divine governance of the world, so if the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is rendered *sub-optimal* by the omission of a member, then surely the balance must be restored by the permission of *some other* ostensibly gratuitous evil, one which would not have been permitted had the evil action under consideration been performed. And since the original class was *optimal*, containing neither more evils nor more severe evils than are requisite for the maintenance of morality, it is evident that the "replacement evil" can be *no less severe* than the one which has been foregone.... [Consequently,] the agent will be able to say to himself that if he performs the action in question, the resulting evil is *permitted by God as the most economical means* to an end of overriding importance—namely, the maintenance of significant morality. So once again, morality is undermined. (35-36. his italics)

What should we make of Hasker's conditional proof, and the thought-experiment used in its defense?

The proof hangs on premise 1d, the claim that *the only way* God can govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimum is to permit genuinely gratuitous evil. Unfortunately, this premise is false, for two reasons.

First, it implies that God has it within His power to do something that is absolutely impossible. To begin to see this, note that, in conjunction with an obvious truth, Hasker's premise 1d has an important implication. The obvious truth is this: it is within God's power to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils remains optimal. Surely no one will deny this. [15] All it takes is for God to orchestrate His permission and prevention of suffering and evil in such a way that the significance of morality is maintained. But, if it is within God's power to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils remains optimal, then if, as Hasker says, the *only way* God can do that is by permitting genuinely gratuitous evil, it follows that God has it within His power to permit instances of evil of a peculiar sort, evils that are (i) genuinely gratuitous even though (ii) their permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils to remain optimal. Why are evils that have both of these two features so peculiar? Because any such evil is absolutely impossible. To see this point, suppose some instance of evil is such that (ii) its permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils to remain optimal; then its permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is *necessary for a greater good*, namely the maintenance of significant morality (or the degree of significance that in fact obtains); consequently, given

Rowe's conception of a gratuitous evil, it is false that (i) it is genuinely gratuitous. So then, it is absolutely impossible for there to be an instance of evil that has these two features. But in that case, does God really have it within His power to permit such peculiar evils, as Hasker's premise implies? Presumably not. For somebody has it within his power to permit something only if that thing is possible. To sum up: God has it within His power to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils remains optimal; thus, if, as Hasker asserts, the only way God can do that is by permitting genuinely gratuitous evil, then God has it within His power to do something that is absolutely impossible; God has no such power; so it's *false* that the only way God can govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not drop below the optimal level is to permit genuinely gratuitous evil. That is, Hasker's premise 1d is false.

The second reason premise 1d is false is that, even if, *per impossibile*, the permission of genuinely gratuitous evil was *one* way for God to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils did not drop below the optimal level, there *is another* option: to permit instances of horrendous suffering and wickedness whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is required in order for the moral life really to matter to the degree that it in fact does. Surely *that* is a way God can ensure that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimum; and this way does not require the permission of any genuinely gratuitous evil at all.

But what about Hasker's thought-experiment in defense of premise 1d, the case of the deliberating moral agent? Doesn't it show that God must permit genuinely gratuitous evil in order to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils remains optimal? Not at all. Sure

enough, an agent who was deliberating whether to perform some heinous deed in a universe in which God prevents all gratuitous evil may well know that if he refrains, then there will be fewer actual occurrences of ostensibly gratuitous evil. But, it does not follow—nor is it true—that he knows that if he refrains, then the amount of ostensibly gratuitous evil is not optimal or that God will have to permit some other evil. For the maintenance of significant morality (at such and such a degree) requires God to *permit* the crime; it does not require the crime *to occur*. So whether our agent commits or refrains from committing the crime makes no difference *at all* to whether the class of evils God permits in order to maintain morality is at the optimum level. Indeed, our agent cannot delete an ostensibly gratuitous evil from the optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils since their simply being permitted suffices for the class to be at its optimal level, whether or not he or anybody else commits any of them. Consequently, although the agent knows that "if he brings about an ostensibly gratuitous evil, this evil will be a member of an optimal class of such evils," he *will not* be able to say to himself, *contra* Hasker, "If I forgo this wicked deed, then the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils will be suboptimal; it will be depleted beyond the point necessary for significant morality. God will have to replace it with another evil, one that is no less severe."

We now turn to the second horn of the dilemma.

#### 3.4.2 *The second horn of the dilemma: (b2)*

Let us suppose that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is the class containing all those evils whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of morality, a class that excludes merely permitted

evils. In that case, an *optimal* class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is defined as one that (i) contains all and only actual occurrences of evil (ii) whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is "just sufficient"—i.e., necessary and sufficient-in amount and severity to secure the significance of morality. Notably, while the conception of an optimal class defined in terms of (b1) allows for an optimal class that contains some, even only, *merely* permitted evils, the conception of an optimal class defined in terms of (b2) implies that an optimal class contains *no* merely permitted evils. On (b2), an optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils contains nothing but actual occurrences of evil whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary and sufficient, in amount and severity, to maintain the significance of morality.

Here an important question arises: could there be such a class? Suppose that only half the time that humans were given a choice between good and bad they freely went wrong. In that case, would there be a class of all and only actual occurrences of evil whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is *sufficient*, in amount and severity, to maintain the full significance of morality? Not at all. For that class would not include the vast number of merely permitted evils that humans did not perform when they were given a free choice between good and bad and went right, a vast class all of whose members are such that their permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of morality. Would our judgment about this case change if 80 percent of the time that humans were given a choice between good and bad they freely went wrong? 90? 99? Again, not at all. For in each case the optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils would not include at least some merely permitted evils that

humans did not perform when they freely went right, and those merely permitted evils (or the permission of something comparably bad) are necessary for the maintenance of morality; consequently, there would not be a class of all and only actual occurrences of evil whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) was sufficient, in amount and severity, to maintain morality. Now let us suppose that humans are so depraved that on every occasion that God permitted them to choose freely between good and bad, they went wrong. In that case, every permitted evil would be an actual evil; thus the class of all and only actual occurrences of evil whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) would be sufficient, in amount and severity, to maintain the full significance of morality. Indeed, on reflection, there seems to be no other way in which there could be such a class. Consequently, it seems that the only possible way for God to govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimal level—the level that is "just sufficient, in amount and severity" for the maintenance of the full significance of morality—is if He orchestrates things so that humans always freely choose what's wrong.

And now we are in a position to see an important point. Recall that Hasker's defense of premise 1 of the main argument—a defense that doubles as a reply to the objection of section 3.3—contains the premise that

- 1b. If morality is as significant as we tend to think it is, then God must govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall *below* the optimum.

In the last paragraph we saw that the only way God can govern the world so that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evils does not fall below the optimum is if He orchestrates things so that humans always freely choose

wrong. Therefore, if premise 1b is true, then morality is as significant as we tend to think it is only if God orchestrates things so that humans always freely choose wrong. But God can't orchestrate things so that humans always freely choose wrong. He has to leave it up to them. So premise 1b is false.

### 3.4.3 On "teaching morality"

We have argued that if we understand a class of "ostensibly gratuitous" evils in terms of either (b1) or (b2), then, given Hasker's conception of an "optimal class" of ostensibly gratuitous evils, either premise 1d or 1b is false. But perhaps neither (b1) nor (b2) capture what Hasker is after. Perhaps he means to combine elements of both (b1) and (b2). Let's look into the matter briefly.

Suppose we begin with the (b1) idea that an optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is a class that (i) contains actual occurrences of evil as well as merely permitted evils (ii) whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is just sufficient, in amount and severity, to maintain the full significance of morality. Now let's add a (b2)-ish idea: there must *be* some evils in order to prevent the undermining of morality. Specifically, there must be some evils for it to be apparent to humans how they ought and ought not to behave. Such evils, one might say, would be "object lessons which are *needed* to make this apparent" (35, our emphasis). For our own part, we don't quite see why suitable hardwiring or Hollywood analogues couldn't stand in for real, live "object lessons," but we won't press the point. Let's suppose that actual instances of horrific wickedness and intense suffering are the only possible object lessons "to show how persons are hurt by behavior of the kind forbidden" by morality (35). It follows that if there aren't enough evils for this purpose, then the full significance of

morality will not be apparent and morality will be at least somewhat undermined. So on the hybrid view under discussion, a class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is at the optimal level only if it contains some actual occurrences of evil, just sufficient, in amount and severity, *for teaching morality*, which is itself necessary for the maintenance of morality.

Does Hasker's defense of premise 1 claim that if God prevented all gratuitous evil, then morality would be partially, perhaps even severely, undermined—fare any better on this hybrid view? To get at the answer, it will prove worthwhile to recast Hasker's defense explicitly in terms of the essential role of actually occurring evils in teaching morality. Here it is:

- 1a. Suppose that morality is as significant as we tend to think it is.
- 1b. If morality is as significant as we tend to think it is, then God must govern the world so that the evil needed for teaching morality is just sufficient, in amount and severity, for the maintenance of morality. (from 1a and the story about teaching morality)
- 1c. So, God must govern the world so that the evil needed for teaching morality is just sufficient, in amount and severity, for the maintenance of morality. (from 1a and 1b)
- 1d. God must permit genuinely gratuitous evil in order to govern the world so that the evil needed for teaching morality is just sufficient, in amount and severity, for the maintenance of morality.
- 1e. So, God permits genuinely gratuitous evil. (from 1c and 1d)
- 1f. So, if morality is as significant as we tend to think it is, then God permits genuinely gratuitous evil. (from 1a-1e, conditional proof)

1. So, if God prevented all gratuitous evil, then morality would not be as significant as we tend to think it is; that is, it would be partially, perhaps even severely, undetermined. (from 1f)

What should we make of this argument? Clearly enough, premise 1d is false for reasons reminiscent of those in section 3.3. First, it implies that God has it within His power to do something that is absolutely impossible, namely, make it the case that some instance of evil is (ii) such that its permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for a greater good, namely keeping the level of evil needed for teaching morality just sufficient, in amount and severity, for the maintenance of morality, and (i) genuinely gratuitous. Second, even if permitting genuinely gratuitous evil was *one* way for God to govern the world so that the level of evil needed for teaching morality is just sufficient, in quantity and severity, for the maintenance of morality, there is *another* option: permit instances of evil whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is required for the teaching of morality. Finally, as for the case of the deliberating moral agent: it is true that he will know that if he refrains from the heinous crime, there will be fewer occurrences of ostensibly gratuitous evil. But it does not follow—nor is it true—that he will know that if he refrains, then the evil needed for teaching morality is *not* sufficient, in amount and severity, for the maintenance of morality; nor will he know that if he refrains, God will have to permit some other "replacement" evil for the teaching of morality.

Hasker's rejection of Rowe's incompatibility claim is unjustified. In the next section, we sketch a more promising strategy.

#### 4. VAN INWAGEN ON ROWE'S INCOMPATIBILITY CLAIM

Peter van Inwagen's rejection of Rowe's incompatibility claim can be put in various ways. What follows is one that we find particularly forceful.

If there were a God and if His purposes included anything like the greater goods involved in our most plausible theodicies, He would be justified in permitting some intense suffering, perhaps even a great deal. (Virtually everyone who endorses an argument from gratuitous evil accepts this.) Now, suppose with Rowe that God would prevent any instance of intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil. It follows that if the greater goods for the sake of which He permits evil did not, strictly speaking, call for Him to permit some particular horror, or to permit anything else comparably bad, then He would have prevented it. To illustrate, suppose God has set His mind on achieving some purpose that involves some greater good that can be secured only if He permits Rowe's fawn to lie in excruciating pain for several days after being burned in a forest fire caused by lightning (or He permits something comparably bad). Now, either (a) the greater good involved in His purposes *does not* call for Him to permit the fawn's suffering (or anything comparably bad), or else (b) it *does*. Naturally enough, God would know which is true. Suppose He knew it does. Then He will permit the fawn's suffering, or else prevent it and permit something else comparably bad. If, on the other hand, He knows that the greater good in question does not call for Him to permit the fawn's suffering, He will prevent it, and He will not permit anything else comparably bad to "take its place."

And here an important point emerges: if Rowe's incompatibility claim is true, then what is true of the fawn's suffering is true of *every* other instance of intense suffering.

This important point has an equally important implication: if Rowe's incompatibility claim is true, then there is a minimum amount of suffering that God must permit in order for the greater goods involved in His purposes to be secured. To see this, consider the following oversimplified but useful story: Imagine an enormous pool of *possible* instances of intense suffering each of which God has it within His power to permit or prevent. Suppose that He must permit some, but not all, in order to secure the goods involved in His purposes. So He must select from the pool. As He selects, he asks of each one: "Do the greater goods require the permission of it or something (or some things) comparably bad, given the amount of suffering I'm already permitting?" If the answer is "yes," then He puts it on His right; if the answer is "no," He puts it on His left. When this selection process is complete, three things will be true. First, for any possible instance of intense suffering, either it will be on God's right or on His left. Second, on His right will be a set of instances of suffering the collective badness of which is such that God must permit no more or no less in order to secure the goods involved in His purposes. (What if for some reason God were to prevent one of those instances of suffering on His right from occurring? Then He would have to reach over to His left to find some other instance or instances of total comparable badness to permit; otherwise, the relevant greater goods would not occur.) Third, if we were to add up the amount of suffering in the instances on His right, we'd eventually arrive at a *precise* amount. That amount would be the amount of intense

suffering that must be permitted in order for the greater goods involved in God's purposes to be secured, and if there was any less suffering than that amount permitted, those goods would not all be realized and God's purposes would be thwarted, at least in part. It follows that—and this is the crucial point to which the preceding has been leading—the greater goods involved in God's purposes require the permission of a *minimum amount* of intense suffering. This presupposes that *there is* a minimum amount of intense suffering that God must permit to secure those goods.

To sum up, then: if God prevented the occurrence of any instance of intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad or worse evil, *then* there is a minimum amount of intense suffering God must permit in order to secure those goods involved in His purposes.

But, says van Inwagen, there is no such minimum amount. To suppose that there is such a minimum amount is like supposing that, if God's purposes required an impressively tall prophet to appear at a certain place and time, there is a minimum height such a prophet must have and if he were the least bit shorter God's purposes would not be served; it is like supposing that if the state's purposes required a fine to deter illegal parking, there is a minimum dollar-and-cents figure that would suffice, and if the fine were one cent less, it would not be a significant deterrent. Of course, if there is no minimum height, no minimum fine, and no minimum amount of intense suffering, it is absolutely impossible for God or the state to permit or produce it, and so it is absurd to insist that either should do so. [16]

What should we make of this line of thought?

It seems pretty clear that God and gratuitous evil are incompatible only if there is a minimum amount of intense suffering that God must permit in order for the greater goods at which He aims to be secured. Thus, if there is no such minimum amount, then Rowe's incompatibility claim is false. The question before those who find in Rowe's argument a powerful case for atheism is this: can we reasonably deny the *No Minimum Claim*? That is, can we reasonably deny that

Until we articulate principled grounds for denying the No Minimum Claim, we cannot responsibly say that theism is incompatible with gratuitous evil; until we articulate principled grounds for denying this, we cannot responsibly accept Rowe's incompatibility claim, or the argument that goes with it. To date, no one has met this challenge; indeed, no one has even tried. [17]

*Seattle Pacific University  
Western Washington University*

There is no minimum amount of intense suffering that God must permit in order for the greater goods He aims at to be secured.

#### NOTES

1. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979):335-341.
2. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 75-77.
3. "Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 2 (1966-67): 107.
4. We assess van Inwagen's argument in a companion essay, "Vagueness and the Compatibility of God and Gratuitous Evil," unpublished essay.
5. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), p. 21.
6. William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 63, n. 10; collected in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
7. Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 7-8.
8. This is equivalent to Rowe's (B) in "The Empirical Argument from Evil," *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 228. Note: neither Rowe's (B) nor our modification in the text implies that God must create the best possible world that He can. So contrary to what Rowe says at p. 228 n. 3, the arguments of Plantinga and Schlesinger-" The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," pp. 8-10, and *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977), chaps. 9 and 10, respectively-cast no doubt on (B) or our modification.
9. "The Problem of Evil: The Case against God's Existence," chap. 6 in *Reason and Religious Belief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 126-127. See also *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), chap. 4.
10. See *Evil and the Christian God*, p. 96.
11. "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 32. Parenthetical page references in the text refer to this article.



12. Note to fastidious metaphysicians: Unless you are an *extreme* modal realist, you will have choked on the phrase "evils that were permitted but which did not occur." Merely possible evils are not evils any more than merely possible elephants are elephants! Fair enough, read (b1) as follows:

(b1) the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is the class of all those evils whose permission (or the permission of something comparably bad) is necessary for the maintenance of significant morality, a class that *includes* both actual occurrences of evil as well as *states of affairs which God permitted moral agents to bring about but which were not brought about due to their good free choices.*

We invite you to make the appropriate changes in the text when fitting.

13. Others find fault with Hasker's argument, but they are either mistaken or don't get to the heart of the matter which, by our lights, is confusion over (b1) and (b2). See, e.g., Keith Chrzan, "Necessary Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 134-137; William Rowe, "Ruminations About Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 69-88, esp. 79-86; and David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 53-70.

14. Hasker writes: "the optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is optimal if the evils it contains are just sufficient, in number and severity, to prevent the undermining of morality" (34). This is misleading, for two reasons. First, even if there is some particular amount of evil, such that if God permits that amount the full significance of morality is maintained and if He permits any less it is not, the permission of no exact *number* of evils is necessary. A precise amount of evil can be instantiated by different numbers of instances of evil. Second, the clause "whose permission, or the permission of something comparably bad" must not be dropped from the definition of an optimal class. The particular evils in an optimal class are not *themselves* "just sufficient, in number and severity, to prevent the undermining of morality." While they, in amount and severity, are sufficient for that good, *they*, in amount and severity, are *not* necessary; hence, they, in amount and severity, are not "*just sufficient*," i.e., *necessary* and sufficient. These two infelicities matter. In what follows, we will correct for them.

15. Provided, of course, that there is such an optimal level, an assumption which, we have seen, Hasker is willing to make, for the sake of argument.

16. Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): esp. p. 64, n. 11, and "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* (1988): 67-68, both collected in *God, Knowledge and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and the first in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*.

17. Some philosophers give up Rowe's incompatibility claim and the argument from *particular instances* of gratuitous evil that goes along with it; they then develop and assess an argument grounded on something like the claim that God would not permit so much horrific evil rather than a lot less. See, e.g., Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, esp. pp. 286-291; David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, esp. pp. 70-75; and Theodore Drange, *Evil and Nonbelief* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1998), esp. pp. 37-38. So far as we can tell, everybody else writing on the topic-it wouldn't be polite to mention names-continues to rely on Rowe's incompatibility claim knowing full well that the No Minimum Claim stands in the way. This irresponsible reliance is found in theists as well, as they develop their targets. See, e.g., Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 6-14.

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