

VIII

THE HUMEAN OBSTACLE TO
EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENTS FROM
SUFFERING: ON AVOIDING THE EVILS
OF 'APPEARANCE'

STEPHEN J. WYKSTRA

Many of us-believers as well as nonbelievers, car mechanics as well as philosophers-have at some times in our lives felt instances of suffering in this world to be evidence against theism, according to which the universe is the creation of a wholly good Being who loves his creatures, and who lacks nothing in wisdom and power. If it has proven hard to turn this feeling into a good argument, it has, perhaps, proven just as hard to get rid of it. Indeed, the most logically sophisticated responses to the 'problem of evil' can leave one wondering whether our intuitive perplexities have not been lost in the gears of the formal machinery brought to bear on them. Maybe this is an unavoidable epiphenomenon of analysis; nevertheless, I want to try to mitigate it here.

For this reason (and a second forthcoming one), my springboard will be William Rowe's recent formulation of the case from suffering against theism.¹ Rowe exemplifies the recent turn away from 'logical' (or 'deductive', or 'demonstrative') formulations, construing the case instead as 'evidential' (or 'inductive', or 'probabilistic') in nature. The crux of his argument is that much suffering 'does not appear to serve any outweighing good'. This 'does not appear' defence is succinct and non-technical, affording considerable insight into our ordinary intuitions, but also making itself easy prey to misconstrual. I shall thus be amplifying Rowe's argument and defending it against specious criticisms, as well as ultimately-rebutting it. This close

attention to Rowe and his critics, however, is not an end-in-itself. It is a means of elucidating and vindicating a perspective from which we can see why a theist should, as Hume puts it, 'never retract his belief on account of the sufferingatheologians are inclined to adduce as evidence against theism. Vindicating this perspective requires coming to close grips with the most lucid atheological evidential case one can find-and this is my second reason for taking Rowe's work as a springboard.

I begin by giving an overview of Rowe's case, amplifying both its 'conceptual' and 'evidential' strands, and teasing out some difficulties in the construals given it by two critics, Bruce Reichenbach and Alvin Plantinga. Section 2 clarifies Rowe's crucial 'does not appear' claim and its role in his argument. Against Reichenbach, I argue that Rowe's reliance on this claim cannot be dismissed as an appeal to ignorance, for he is using 'appears' in what Chisholm calls its 'epistemic' sense, making his inference construable as a plausible application of 'the Principle of Credulity'. I then argue that Richard Swinburne is mistaken in building into this principle a restriction that would preclude the application Rowe tacitly gives it.

Having clarified Rowe's case by defending it against two specious criticisms, Section 3 diagnoses the real defect in Rowe's argument: his 'does not appear' claim contravenes a general condition that must be satisfied if we are to be entitled to this sort of claim. This condition-'the Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access'-is explained, defended, and used to argue that the suffering in the world is not, as Rowe thinks, strong evidence against theism, and in fact isn't even weak evidence against it. The basic problem, I suggest, was identified by Hume as the main obstacle to any evidential case from suffering against 'theism'.

I conclude by giving an account of why we sometimes feel the credibility of theism weakened so much by cognizance of suffering and tragedy. For this feeling, if I am not mistaken, stems from a correct intuition about *the* bearing of suffering on theism; and we cannot understand why suffering does not really disconfirm theism unless we appreciate why, by an intuition not to be dismissed, it sometimes seems to.

1. ROWE'S CASE FOR ATHEISM

1.1. *Deductive and Conceptual Aspects of Rowe's Case*

Rowe's case has two stages, one 'evidential' and the other deductive. To bring the inductive stage into focus, we might best begin with the deductive

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¹ William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 33-41 [Chapter VII above; bracketed page references are to the present collection].

argument Rowe gives [pp. 127-8] to logically (though not textually) culminate his case:

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. Therefore, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

The conclusion of this argument follows from the premises, but are the premises true? Rowe gives his 'evidential stage' to show it is reasonable to believe that premise 1 is true. But before turning to this, we should briefly attend to the rationale for premise 2. The heart of P2 is, I believe, a conceptual truth unpacking part of what it means to call any being-not just any omniscient being-morally good. The key idea is that a morally good being would allow an instance of suffering only if the being had an ulterior purpose justifying it in so doing, where such a justifying purpose must (conceptually 'must', in order to 'justify') involve:

EITHER (A) the being's believing that there is some outweighing good that will obtain only if the being allows the suffering at issue or some comparable suffering;
OR (B) the being's believing that there is some evil comparable to the suffering at issue that would obtain were the being to prevent this suffering.

To avoid tedious reiteration of (A) and (B), I shall for brevity's sake speak as though 'justifying purposes' consisted only of sort (A); and I shall refer to an instance of suffering as 'serving' an outweighing good which a being purposes in justifiedly allowing the suffering. In this shorthand, the key idea of Rowe's second premise is that a morally good being would allow an instance of suffering only if the being believes that doing so serves some outweighing good. If this being is omniscient as well, his belief will of course be true; hence, in shorthand, premise 2: an omniscient and wholly good being will allow an instance of intense suffering only if doing so in fact

² By 'allow' I mean more than 'not prevent': one can allow something only if it is within one's power to prevent it. That I did not prevent the recent had weather in California does not mean I thought I allowed it to occur.

serves some outweighing good. It should be carefully noted that to say a good is 'served' by God's allowing some instance of suffering is, on this definition, not merely to say that God uses the suffering to obtain the good: it is to say that his allowing of this (or some comparable) instance of suffering is the only way in which he can obtain the good.

Should we accept premise 2? In answering this we need to avoid three confusions. First, P2 claims only that if there is an omniscient and wholly good being, then there must be outweighing goods served by every instance of suffering he allows. This claim does not involve any presumption that we can know in any given case just *what* these goods are.

Second, 'serves' is not to be taken in a narrow 'means-to;an-end' sense, or in a sense that excludes deontological considerations. The theist may hold that some suffering results from the evil choices of morally free creatures, and that some other suffering is God's just punishment for such choices. In my shorthand, the theist is then holding: (1) that God allows the first sort of suffering because doing so 'serves' the great good of having a universe with morally free creatures in it; and (2) that the second sort 'serves' the great good of having a universe in which certain principles of justice, perhaps reflecting the holiness of God, are satisfied.

Third, one must note that by P2 it is, strictly speaking, God's *allowing* the suffering, and not the suffering itself, that must serve some outweighing good. P2 thus does *not* entail the notion that every instance of suffering is such that the world is 'really a better place' for having this suffering than it would be without it. The theist may rightly protest that such a notion fails to recognize that evil really is evil. But this is no reason to reject P2. To see this, consider what the import of P2 is-and is not-for suffering which, on a free will theodicy, is caused by the evil choices of morally free agents. The import of P2 is that God's prevention of all such suffering would not make the world a better place, for it would eliminate the good of moral freedom. But this does not mean that the suffering itself contributes, in the long run, to the world's being a good place: the world might well have been better if all this suffering had been prevented-not by God, but by those agents who through their choices caused it. Odd as it first seems, theists can (and I think should) insist that for some suffering, it is within our power but not within God's to prevent it without the loss of an outweighing good.

If we avoid these confusions, we can see the force of the claim that if God exists, there is some outweighing good related in the specified way to every instance of suffering he allows. For denying this 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.³ I take this to be a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists alike; and though there may be technical difficulties in the way premise 2 formulates this truth, I shall assume that these can be remedied without affecting the validity of the argument.⁴

Granting this, and acknowledging that the argument is valid, atheism must be accepted if premise 1 is accepted. (By 'atheism' Rowe carefully means 'narrow atheism', i.e., the view that the omni-God of traditional theism does not exist: this of course does not rule out the existence of Apollo, the Ground of Being, the Force, or other objects of religious devotion or imagination.) The issue of concern-Rowe's, and mine here- is then whether there are reasons good enough to justify our acceptance of premise 1.

1.2. *The Evidential Part of Rowe's Case*

Premise 1 has, in effect two conjuncts: first, that there are instances of intense suffering; and second, that at least one of these instances has no 'God-justifying purpose' (as I shall put it)-i.e., serves no outweighing good that could justify an omniscient and omnipotent being in allowing the suffering. The first conjunct cannot reasonably be disputed. The second conjunct is the crucial and controversial one, and it is what I shall hereafter have in mind in referring to 'premise 1'.

Now Rowe's distinction between 'logical' and 'evidential' versions of the problem of evil betokens, I think, two ways of trying to support premise 1. Often it has been propounded on conceptual grounds alone-by arguing, for example, that if God is omnipotent, then by definition He must always be *able* to achieve any good he desires while still preventing all instances of intense suffering. But philosophical theologians from Aquinas to Plantinga have, Rowe owns, successfully defused this and other more sophisticated conceptual arguments for premise 1. So Rowe proposes to defend premise 1 in a different 'evidential' way, by appealing not only to conceptual truths, but also to broadly empirical knowledge of the scale and variety of human and animal suffering in our world. Such grounds do, Rowe claims, provide rational support for premise 1, and hence for atheism.

³ There are of course those who would deny this on the grounds that there is no positive analogy at all between 'good' as applied to God and as applied to creaturely agents. I have neither space nor motivation to deal with this position here.

⁴ These difficulties should not, however, be underestimated: see pp. 5-10 of Alvin Plantinga's 'The Probabilistic Argument from Evil', *Philosophical Studies* (1979), 1-53. Plantinga criticizes

an earlier version of Rowe's argument than that considered here.

Rowe's case for this has two phases. The first [pp. 129-31] focuses on a single instance of suffering: lightning starts a forest fire in which a fawn 'is trapped, horribly burned, and lies for several days in terrible agony before death relieves its suffering'. Rowe argues that the fawn's suffering is 'apparently pointless', for 'there does not appear to be any outweighing 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'. This does not, Rowe allows, prove that the fawn's suffering is pointless; but, he notes, the evidence often makes it reasonable to believe that a statement is true even though it does not allow us to prove or know with certainty that it is true. And in the case of the fawn's suffering, the evidence of 'apparent pointlessness' is such that 'it does not appear reasonable to believe' that there is a God-justifying purpose for it.

The second evidential phase adduces [pp. 131-2] the great number of instances of suffering which have this feature of apparent pointlessness. Even if we are by some chance mistaken about the fawn's suffering, is it reasonable to believe that *each* of these instances of seemingly pointless suffering is connected to an outweighing good in the way requisite to justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in allowing the suffering? The answer, says Rowe, 'surely must be no'. Given our knowledge of the scale and variety of suffering such a belief 'seems an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. Rowe thus concludes that 'it seems that although we cannot prove that premise 1 is true, it is, nevertheless, altogether reasonable to believe it is true'. And since (taking premise 2 as true) atheism validly follows, 'it does seem that we have rational support for atheism, that it is reasonable for us to believe that the theistic God does not exist'.

1.3. *'Rational Support'*

What does Rowe here mean by 'rational support'? Let us say that evidence *e* weakly supports (or confirms) claim *c* when *e* makes *c* to some degree more likely to be true than it would be on the antecedent evidence. And let us say that *e* strongly supports (or confirms) *c* when it increases the likelihood of *c* sufficiently to make *c* 'reasonable to believe' by a person who appreciates the evidence. (A parallel distinction can be drawn between a strong and weak sense of 'disconfirms'.⁵) Now in the passage cited above,

⁵ Both senses of 'disconfirms' are dynamic, involving the degree to which the adduced evidence changes the likelihood of a claim from its likelihood on our background knowledge, and are thus to be distinguished from the 'static' sense (which Plantinga addresses) of the probability of a claim with respect to the adduced evidence alone. In probabilistic terms, claim *c* is weakly disconfirmed by given background knowledge *k* whenever $P(c|k \& e) < P(c|k)$; and *c* is strongly

Rowe makes it clear that he is using 'support' in its strong sense: in a footnote [p. 132] he says he is claiming that certain facts about suffering 'make it more reasonable to accept premise 1 (and hence atheism) than to withhold judgement. ...'. And since atheism as we've defined it is just the negation of theism, evidence which strongly confirms atheism must, *ipso facto*, strongly disconfirm theism. Let us put this by saying that Rowe claims the facts of suffering provide a 'strong' evidential case for atheism (or - equivalently - against theism).

Now it is almost a truism of inductive logic, noted by both Reichenbach and Plantinga, that a proposition whose likelihood is low on (or reduced by) certain evidence *e* may yet be entirely reasonably believed; it may, for one thing, have a high likelihood on other evidence that overrides *e*. Reichenbach and Plantinga conclude from this that a 'strong' probabilistic case against theism must show that the likelihood of theism is low relative to some available body of 'total relevant evidence', not just that it is low on (or reduced by) certain facts about suffering. Plantinga draws from this the further dictum that to make good such a case, the atheologist 'would be obliged to consider all the sorts of reasons natural theologians have invoked in favor of theistic belief, showing these do not outweigh whatever evidence is provided against theism by suffering.' And Reichenbach, with something like this in mind, construes Rowe as aiming 'to show that rational support for God's existence does not obtain'.⁷

But Rowe's case does not include any critical appraisal of the various arguments adduced by natural theologians. It thus seems odd to suggest he aims 'to show' that rational support for God's existence does not obtain. If, however, he is not aiming to show this, how can he - given the requirement of 'total relevant evidence' - claim to provide a strong probabilistic case against theism? Reichenbach's construal, taken together with Plantinga's dictum, would have us conclude that Rowe just forgets (or ignores) what he is obliged to do to achieve his aim.

There are, I suggest, two other ways to read Rowe, both more plausible than the construal just sketched. To see them we must note that the sentences using 'support' in its strong sense occur in the first section of Rowe's paper. In the second and third sections, Rowe considers what he

disconfirmed whenever, in addition, $P(dk \& c) < R$, where R is some value no doubt above .5 - on which *c* becomes 'reasonable' to believe. I assume that given certain background knowledge *k*, the 'evidential import' of *c* on *c* is in some way 'objective'; and that if, given *k*, *c* makes it reasonable to believe *c*, then *c* makes it reasonable to disbelieve (believe to be false) the denial of *c*.

⁶ Plantinga, 'The Probabilistic Argument from Evil', p. 3.

⁷ Bruce Reichenbach, 'The Inductive Argument from Evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 17 (1980), 223.

thinks is the theist's best response to the argument of the first section. That response - the 'G. E. Moore shift' - begins by pointing out that from the premise that God exists, and Rowe's second premise (P2), it follows that Rowe's first premise is false. The 'shift' is then to argue that it is reasonable to believe that God exists, and therefore is reasonable to believe that Rowe's first premise is false.

Rowe of course doesn't think that 'best strategy' succeeds, and he makes it clear that two things are involved in his thinking this: he 'finds himself persuaded' by the evidence for PI; and he doesn't think the evidence for the theist's first premise is sufficient to pull off the G. E. Moore shift. (Rowe does not here consider the issue, 'recently pressed by Plantinga, of why the reasonableness of theism requires that it be based on 'evidence'.¹¹ Neither shall I.) But Rowe doesn't make entirely clear what relation these two things have, and here lie two ways of reading his thought.

One possibility is that Rowe thinks the evidence of Suffering makes his first premise worthy of acceptance because he judges, on independent grounds, that the various arguments for theism have weaknesses by vice of which they fail to outweigh the evidence from suffering against theism. His overall claim, on this construal, is that the evidence of suffering supports atheism in what we might call a 'qualifiedly strong' sense, viz., it strongly supports atheism *provided* that independent assessment of theistic arguments shows these to be as weak as Rowe, based on his independent study of them, gives us his word they are.

A second possibility is suggested by the strategy of G. E. Moore in executing the very 'shift' against David Hume to which Rowe refers. To justify a decision between his own first premise ('I know this pencil exists') and Hume's principles (which entail I don't know this), Moore thought it quite unnecessary to assess the reasons given by Hume for his principles. The best justification for rejecting Hume's principles, he argued, is just that I am justified in believing 'I know this pencil exists', from which it follows that Hume's principles (and any arguments for them) must be mistaken.⁹ Similarly, perhaps Rowe means to claim that the evidence of suffering, just in making it unlikely that God exists, thereby shows it is unlikely that any theistic arguments hold water. This strategy may be compared to that of a scientist who argues that a certain body of evidence, because it massively disconfirms the flat-earth hypothesis, also shows it is unlikely that the arguments given for this hypothesis - by, say, members of the Flat Earth Society - are any good. When evidence *e* strongly disconfirms claim *c* in a

⁹ See, for example, Plantinga's 'Reason and Belief in God', in Plantinga and Wolterstorff

(eds.), *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, 1983).

¹¹ See G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London, 1953), 136 ff.

way that makes it reasonable to believe, 'in advance' as it were, that none of the arguments for *c* are likely to counterbalance *e*, let us say *e* disconfirms *c* in a 'super strong' sense.

Plantinga seems not to envisage the possibility of probabilistic evidence which super-strongly disconfirms theism; there may indeed be incoherence in the very notion of such evidence (which does not rule out the possibility that it is the operative notion in Rowe's thinking). These are difficult issues. Fortunately, we need not settle them here. In what follows, I shall argue that the evidence of suffering, as Rowe adduces it, does not disconfirm theism (or confirm atheism) even in the weak sense. And since that weak sense is included in each of the stronger senses I have distinguished, my argument, if successful, will show that suffering doesn't disconfirm theism in any of these stronger senses either .

2. TWO MISCONSTRUALS OF ROWE

My critique in Section 3 shall focus on Rowe's claim, crucial to his case, that 'there does not appear to be any outweighing good' of a God-justifying sort served by (say) the fawn's suffering. To prepare the ground, I shall here clarify Rowe's use of 'appears' and its role in his argument by defending his case against two lines of criticism that seem to me mistaken.

2.1. Rowe's Use of 'Appears'

Though the term 'appears' is ubiquitous in his case, Rowe provides no explication of its meaning. I shall provide one, suggesting that he uses the term in something close to what Swinburne, following Chisholm, calls its 'epistemic' sense (as distinct from its 'comparative', 'phenomenal', and

'hedging' senses).¹⁰ But the 'appears idiom' is a philosophical swamp with - an enormous literature, most of it of dubious relevance to Rowe's use. To avoid getting bogged down in it, I propose th~ following as a paradigm of Rowe's use that will give us our initial bearings.

Imagine two teachers, Ken and Nick, discussing their young colleague Tom, whom Ken thinks has mentally snapped under the stress of job- seeking. Ken tells Nick of a recent incident: Tom had abruptly excused himself from an important departmental meeting, saying he had urgent personal business. As it was later learned, he spent the next hour out by the parking lot, digging up earthworms and making, of all things, a fat sandwich

¹⁰ Richard Swinburne. *The Existence of God* (Oxford. 1979). 245 ff.

with them. 'So it appears', Ken says, 'that Tom has gone off the deep end.' If Nick resists this conclusion, saying 'But perhaps Tom had some sane and rational reason for needing a worm sandwich', Ken might adduce other bizarre episodes of Tom's recent behavior. Of each he says 'Here again, it does not appear that Tom had a rational and sane reason for so behaving'; and the instances together he puts forward as clinching a cumulative case: 'It is almost beyond belief that we could be mistaken about each of these instances. ,

Ken, like Rowe, uses 'appears' to register what he takes to be the 'evidential import' of the specific situations he adduces. This evidential import may well be enthymematic, depending upon a complex web of background beliefs: but typically, I think, a speaker using 'it appears that' (or 'it does not appear that') in this way will regard these background beliefs and their bearing as relatively unproblematic in the context of discussion. In the above case, Ken would not think it behooved him to show, by a detailed argument, that Tom's sandwich-making behavior evidences a mental disorder. This conclusion of course rests upon some tacit inference; but the evidential import of some things is more readily 'seen' than 'shown' ; and the 'appears' idiom concerning us is characteristically used for just such things.

There is, then, nothing inherently suspect about Rowe's appeal-without- further- argument to the claim, of certain instances of intense suffering, that they 'do not appear to serve any outweighing good' .He supposes that this is something the thoughtful reader, contemplating such instances, will as it were just see. The situations, when one attends to them unblinkered by prejudice, exert their own pressure on one's beliefs, inclining one to concur: 'No, that *doesn't* seem to serve any outweighing good of a God- justifying sort.' The appears-claim can, Rowe takes it, provide a 'stopping point' to his argument-and even philosophers must stop argument some- where. Hear Hume on a different topic:

I know not whether the reader will readily apprehend this reasoning. I am afraid that should I multiply words about it or throw it into a greater variety of lights, it would only become more obscure and intricate. In all abstract reasonings there is one point of view which, if we can happily hit, we shall go further toward illustrating the subject than by all the eloquence and copious expression in the world.¹¹

All of this is not to say that 'appears' claims can't be disputed. Clearly they can be, in at least two ways. One way is to admit that the adduced situation does have the *prima facie* evidential import imputed to it (that Tom's behavior, say, does *seem* schizophrenic) , but to argue that there is

¹¹ David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, end of section VII

other evidence that outweighs or defeats this *prima facie* evidence. The other way is to argue that the adduced situation does not even have the *prima facie* evidential import imputed to it by the 'appears' claim. My mode of argument will be the second and more radical of these.

2.2. Reichenbach's Misconstrual

Dismissing Rowe's case as 'an appeal to ignorance', Reichenbach writes:

the atheologian claims that instances of suffering which are seemingly or apparently pointless are in fact or likely pointless, for we do not know of any higher good to which they are a means. But this constitutes an appeal to ignorance; that we know of no higher good does not entail that there is no such good, or that one is unlikely.²

It is clear that Reichenbach takes the driving premise of Rowe's argument to be 'that we know of no higher good' of the requisite sort. But is this really the same as the claim that 'it does not appear that there is any outweighing good' of the requisite sort-which claim is, we have seen, the actual 'stopping point' of Rowe's case?

To answer this we must carefully note how the word 'not' functions in appears-locutions of this sort. In some locutions-believes-locutions, for example-the meaning of a sentence will depend on *where* the 'not' is located in it. Thus

'Rowe does not believe that Reagan has brown socks on'
and 'Rowe believes that Reagan does not have brown socks on' \

express (to a philosopher at any rate) different propositions: the first, but not the second, is compatible with Rowe's having no beliefs at all about the color of Reagan's socks. But contrast this with the pair

(1) It does not appear to me that Mrs. Reichenbach is sane and (2) It appears to me that Mrs. Reichenbach is not sane.

A philosopher might try to insist that, strictly speaking, (1) means just 'it is not the case that it appears to me that Mrs. Reichenbach is sane'; so let us call this the 'strict' sense of 'does not appear'. In this sense, if I have absolutely no acquaintance at all with Mrs. Reichenbach, it would be perfectly true for me to say 'it does not appear to me that Mrs. Reichenbach is sane'. But Mrs. Reichenbach might well feel she has a case for slander if I go around talking this way about her: for in ordinary usage, 'it doesn't appear to me that p' is almost always taken to mean 'it appears to me that not-p'. So let us call this the 'ordinary sense' of 'does not appear' locutions. The ordinary sense is, we may note, stronger than the strict sense.

1. Reichenbach. 'The Inductive Argument from Evil'. p. 226.

Reichenbach, we now can see, takes Rowe to be appealing to the premise 'there does not appear to be any outweighing good' in its *strict* sense: it isn't the case there appears to be any such good. And if this were all Rowe is appealing to, Reichenbach would surely be right in smelling an argument from ignorance. But *is* this all Rowe is appealing to?

That it *isn't* is all but given away by Reichenbach's own description of Rowe's argument. The argument, he tells us, is 'that instances of suffering which are seemingly or apparently pointless are in fact or likely pointless, for we do not know of any higher good to which they are a means'. Reichenbach thus has Rowe moving from

'We do not know of any higher good to which they (apparently pointless instances of suffering) are a means'

to

, 'Apparently pointless instances of suffering are in fact or likely pointless.'

This is curious, for the class of 'apparently pointless' instances of suffering is the class of instances which 'do not appear' to have a point in the ordinary (and stronger) sense: they are instances that appear to have no point. When Rowe concludes that it is reasonable to believe that instances of *this* class do not have a point, why suppose he is appealing to the weaker claim that we don't know of any good served by them? It is not only there no textual basis for supposing this; there is no logical need for it in the argument. For if an instance of suffering appears not to have a point, *that* is a reason for thinking it has no point.

The form of Rowe's move, I am claiming, is not from

'It is not the case that it appears that p'
(the strict sense of 'it doesn't appear. ...')

'It is reasonable to believe that not-p.'

This would indeed be an argument from ignorance. **It** is instead from 'It appears that

not-p'
(the ordinary sense of 'It doesn't appear that p')

13 Of course, part of what grounds Rowe's claim about the fawn's suffering is that we don't see a point for it. But then, part of what grounds Ken's claim that Tom's behavior appears to have no sane purpose is that we don't see a sane purpose for it. It would be precipitous to charge from this that Ken's claim (or Rowe's) rests merely on an appeal to ignorance. To call a charge precipitous is not to say it is false; it is only to say that more work is needed before one can know whether it is true or false. In a sense, the remainder of my paper is just so much disagreement with Reichenbach as an effort to do the work he leaves undone.

to

'It is reasonable to believe that not-p.'

And *this* move is, on the face of it anyway, licensed by what many philosophers regard as a proper, indeed primary and indispensable, principle of justification: what Richard Swinburne calls 'the Principle of Credulity', or what might more descriptively be called 'the "seems so, is so" pre. sumption'.¹⁴ As Swinburne expounds it, the principle is that if something appears to be the case (in theepistemic sense of 'appears'), then this *prima facie* justifies one in believing it is the case. If we fail to distinguish the strict and ordinary senses of the 'does not appear' locution, we run the risk of failing-like Reichenbach-to see the real nerve of Rowe's argument. IS

2.3. Swinburne's Slip

Commenting on the principle that 'how things seem to be is good grounds for a belief about how things are', Swinburne writes:

Note that the principle is so phrased that how things seem postively to be is evidence of how they are, but how things seem not to be is not such evidence. If it seems to me there is present a table in the room, or a statue in the garden, then probably there is. But if it seems to me that there is no table in the room, then that is only reason for supposing that there is not, if there are good grounds for supposing that I have looked everywhere in the room, and. ..would have seen one if there was one there. ¹⁶

So on Swinburne's account, the principle of credulity allows one to-go from a 'positive seeming' like 'there seems to be a table in this room' to 'there probably is a table in this room'. But it does not entitle one to move from the 'negative seeming' (1) 'There seems to be no table in this room' to (2) 'There probably is no table in this room.' In order to move from (1) to (2) it must, says Swinburne, additionally be the case that (3) I have good grounds for believing that I would have seen a table if one were there. One needs (3) to get from (1) to (2) because (1) is a 'negative seeming': if it were instead a case of 'how things positively seem to be', one could go directly from (1) to (2) using the principle of creduHty as one's inference ticket (subject, of course to the caveat that no defeating considerations are present).

The difficulty here is that the distinction between 'how things seem to be' and 'how they seem not to be' characteristically depends upon rather

¹⁴ I-I Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, pp. 254-71.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Rowe gives his qualified endorsement of the principle of credulity in his 'Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity', *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, 13 (1982), 85-92.

¹⁶ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, pp. 254-5.

arbitrary choices of formulation. Consider Swinburne's own example. Its seeming 'that. no table is in the room' is formulated negatively. But suppose one were to say that it seems to one that the room is bare or empty? This seems to be a case of something's seeming positively to be the case-just as much so, at least, as if it seems to one that one's wife is bare; but then, this is a case of its seeming to one that no clothes are on one's wife, which makes it sound like a case of how something seems *not* to be-just as much so, at least, as its seeming to one that no articles of furniture are in the room. Since the distinction between positive and negative seemings depends so much upon formulation, it is hard to see how it can have the epistemic bite Swinburne gives it.

3. AVOIDING THE EVIL OF 'APPEARANCE'

3.1. CORNEA

If Swinburne's actual claim is mistaken, there may nevertheless be in its vicinity a sound intuition about 'does not appear' claims (in their ordinary and strong sense). Consider the use of such claims in the following three situations;

- 1) Searching for a table, you look through a doorway. The room is very large-say, the size of a Concorde hangar-and it is filled with bulldozers, dead elephants, Toyotas, and other vision-obstructing objects. Surveying this clutter from the doorway, and seeing no table, should you say: 'It does not appear that there is a table in the room'? 2) Your spouse asks you if the milk in the refrigerator is sour. Taking it out, opening it, and smelling it, you detect nothing of that characteristic odor of milk gone bad. You have a headcold which, as you know, almost entirely takes away your sense of smell. Should you inform your spouse: 'It does not appear that the milk is sour'?
- 3) 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'?

In each of these situations, Swinburne's condition is not met: even if (in the first scenario) there were a table somewhere in the room, it is scarcely likely

that you (lacking Superman's x-ray vision) would see it. But what precisely is the consequence of his condition's not being met? It is, one would think, that you are not entitled to make the 'does not appear' claim in question. If so, Swinburne's condition (or something close to it) is relevant in 'getting' to the belief that, say, no table is in the room (or that the milk is sour), but it is relevant: not, as Swinburne thinks, in order to reasonably move from 'It seems no table is present' to 'Probably no table is present'; but rather, in order to be entitled to the initial claim 'It seems no table is present.'

We are, I propose, here in the vicinity of a general condition –necessary rather than sufficient –for one's being entitled, on the basis of some cognized situation *s*, to claim 'it appears that *p*'. Since what is at issue is whether it is reasonable to think one has 'epistemic access' to the truth of *p* through *s*, let us call this 'the Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access', or –for short –CORNEA:

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

CORNEA is, I think, made plausible by the examples I've given. It is desirable to undergird it with an epistemological rationale; but this is also difficult, requiring attention to numerous issues about Rowe's epistemic use of 'appears'. The following section (3.2) addresses some of these issues. We shall apply CORNEA to Rowe's case in 3.3.

3.2. CORNEA's Rationale

To explore the rationale for CORNEA, consider Swinburne's construal of the epistemic use of 'appears'. To say 'it appears (epistemically) that *p*' is, Swinburne stipulates, merely 'to describe what the subject is inclined to believe on the basis of his present sensory experience'. He thus explains:

If I say 'the ship appears to be moving', I am saying [1] that I am inclined to believe that the ship is moving, and [2] that it is my present sensory experience that leads me to have this inclination to believe.¹⁷

CORNEA presupposes a two-fold emendation of Swinburne's construal. The first is to add a third clause to the two conditions of Swinburne's construal. If Swinburne's (1) and (2) exhaust the meaning of the claim 'it appears that *p*', then CORNEA is false: for these two autobiographical

¹⁷ Swinburne. *The Existence of God*. pp. 246.

claims can both be true even if the condition required by CORNEA is not satisfied. CORNEA presupposes the addition of the third clause:

[3] that I 'take' there to be an *evidential* connection between what I am inclined to believe and the cognized situation that inclines me to believe it. (Note that Swinburne's [2] involves only a *causal* connection between my experience and my belief-inclination.)

To illustrate the difference made by adding (3) to Swinburne's explication, imagine a man, Mort, who is inclined to believe 'this woman hates me' of any woman who, in conversing with him, does not constantly smile. Suppose further that Mort has, through psychoanalysis, become fully conscious that this belief-forming disposition is completely unreliable, and is the result of certain psychological traumas in his childhood. Now, talking with a normal woman (i.e., one who doesn't constantly smile), Mort once again feels in himself the familiar inclination to believe the woman hates him; but he also lucidly knows that this inclination is pathological, and is not due to the woman's behavior in any way 'evidencing' hatred of him. On Swinburne's explication of 'appears', it would be correct for Mort to assert 'This woman appears to hate me', for both of Swinburne's conditions are met. On my amended explication, the appears-claim would no longer be correct, for Mort no longer takes there to be an evidential connection between the woman's behavior and what he believes.

The example is intended to illustrate the difference made by my emendation, not to justify it. The epistemic use of 'appears' is a technical one, not arbitrable by appeal to ordinary usage; and fully justifying my proposal would require more chisholming¹⁸ on this topic than space permits. The heart of the matter, however, is that since we want the epistemic sense of 'appears' to cover just those situations to which principles of epistemic justification (like Swinburne's principle of credulity) apply, those occasions will be ones which, though characterizable 'internally', nevertheless involve 'takings' of the sort that my third clause makes explicit. The case for this has been developed in several papers by Roderick Chisholm.¹⁹

The second revision we need to make is perhaps best seen, not as amending Swinburne's explication, but as defining a species of 'appears' that is different from the one Swinburne has in mind, though still belonging to the epistemic genus. Swinburne is concerned with that epistemic sense of

¹⁸ To 'chisholm', according to *The Philosophers' Lexicon* (APA, 1978), is 'to make repeated small alterations in a definition or example'.

¹⁹ *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca, 1957), 75-7; 'On the Nature of Empirical Evidence', reprinted in Pappas and Swain (eds.), *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (Ithaca, 1978), 269 ff., and 'Appear', 'Take', and 'Evident', in Swartz (ed.), *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing* (Garden City, 1965).

'appears' covering what we might call 'sensory-epistemic appearing', i.e., belief-inclinations triggered by 'sensory experiences'. But we also often find ourselves with belief -inclinations produced when a broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations are brought to bear upon 'cognized situations'. Consider the following: a chess master finds himself strongly inclined to believe that White has a winning game after a novel pawn thrust on the 17th move of a complex Dragon line in the Sicilian Defence--and what 'triggers' this belief-inclination is his 'visualization' (in his imagination) of the situation after this move. (Many masters can play fine games of 'blindfold chess', having no need for sensory experience of the board.) If the master says 'It appears' that this pawn: thrust gives White a won game', he is using 'appears' in what we might call its 'cognitive-epistemic' sense. And this seems to be the way Rowe uses the term: in appealing to the fawn's suffering he is, after all, appealing not to a 'sensory experience', but to a 'cognized situation' (akin to the chess master's visualized board), which he takes to be uncontroversially instantiated in the real world, and which produces (*via* a range of other considerations) a strong inclination to believe a proposition about such suffering (*viz.* , that it serves no God-justifying purpose).

Now it is perhaps not completely clear whether epistemic principles (like Swinburne's principle of credulity) have the same cogency when extended to cover cognitive-epistemic appearances. But let us grant Rowe such an extension. It remains true, I shall now argue, that appears-claims of the cognitive-epistemic sort are, like those of the sensory-epistemic sort, subject to CORNEA. Given the cognitive situation on the chess-board, our chess master is entitled to say 'It appears that White has a winning position' only if it is reasonable for him to believe that, given his cognitive faculties and the use he has made of them, if White did not have a winning position , the cognitive situation would be different than it is in some discernible features.

The rationale for CORNEA here derives from the 'taking' clause that is, as argued above, a third component of an epistemic appears-claim. If I say 'it appears that p', I am saying (among other things) that I take there to be an evidential connection between what I am inclined to believe (namely, that p) and the cognized situation that inclines me to believe it. If it is not reasonable for me to take this evidential connection to obtain, then I am not entitled to say 'it appears that p'. Now suppose that it is not reasonable for me to believe that if p were not the case, s would be different than it is in some discernible respect. That is (in shorthand): suppose it is not reasonable for me to believe that the 'epistemic access condition' is satisfied. In this event it can scarcely be reasonable for me to believe that an evidential

connection obtains between what I am inclined to believe, and the cognized situation inclining me to believe it. Hence, if it is not reasonable for me to believe' that the epistemic access condition is satisfied, then I am not entitled to say 'it appears that p'. So to be entitled (by cognizance of s) to say 'it appears that p' , it must be reasonable for me to believe that if it were not the case that p, then s would likely be discernibly different than it is.

In here requiring that it be 'reasonable' for H to believe that the epistemic access condition is satisfied, I do not mean to require that H believe this in any conscious or occurrent way. I mean, roughly, only that should the matter be put to H, it would be reasonable for her to affirm that the condition is satisfied: that is, no norms of reasonable belief would be violated by her believing this. This need not always involve her having, or being able to produce, an evidential or inferential justification for so believing: in some cases, this might properly be believed in a 'basic' way. But even in these cases, if H has been made aware of good reasons for thinking the epistemic access condition is *not* satisfied, then it will not be reasonable for her to believe it is satisfied-unless she defeats these reasons with other considerations. And in now applying CORNEA to Rowe's case, I shall provide good reasons for thinking that the epistemic access condition is not satisfied for the appears-claim upon which his case rests.

3.3. CORNEA Applied

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

We must note here, first, that the outweighing good at issue is of a special sort: one purposed by the Creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are the, before somewhat greater than ours. How much greater? A modest proposal might be that his wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month old infant's. (You may adjust the ages and species to fit your own estimate of how close our knowledge is to omniscience.) If such goods as this exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them: even a one-month old infant can perhaps discern, in its inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him. But if outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of

.suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer- which is to say, it is not likely at all. So for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this: our cognized situation would be just as Rowe says it is with respect to (say) the fawn's suffering.

This doesn't quite mean that, by CORNEA, Rowe is not entitled to his does-not-appear claim: for CORNEA requires, not that the epistemic access condition be satisfied, but that it is reasonable for Rowe to believe it is satisfied. I have given reasons to think that such a belief would be false, but this doesn't show it is always unreasonable for anyone to have the belief: perhaps one couldn't rightly expect Rowe to have considered the reasons I've given. But if these reasons are good reasons, it seems fair to say that for anyone who (reading this paper) grasps them, it would be un-reasonable to believe that the epistemic access condition is satisfied. Unless the reasons I have given are defeated, the claim that a given instance of suffering 'does not appear (appears not) to serve any outweighing good' is comparable to the claim of the aforementioned ceramics teacher that a sentence of the philosopher does not appear to have any meaning. And it is evident that the case cannot be repaired merely by pointing out the number of instances of suffering which have no evident purpose-unless one has justification for believing that these instances belong to a class such that if Divinely purposed goods exist in connection with all known instances of suffering in this class, these goods would always or usually be within our ken.

In a footnote [p. 132], Rowe indicates that he attaches importance to the following consideration: for an outweighing good to provide a 'God-justifying purpose' (as I've called it) for an instance of suffering, the good and the suffering it serves must be connected in an especially intimate way-a way so intimate that even omnipotence cannot pry them apart. Let us call this 'the intimate-connection consideration'. If my appeal to CORNEA is correct, the relevance of this consideration turns upon whether it justifies one in concluding that the epistemic access condition is satisfied- viz. , that if all instances of suffering are connected in this intimate way to outweighing goods, then when the suffering falls within our ken, so would the intimately-connected outweighing good by virtue of which God allows

it. If the intimate-connection consideration could be shown to warrant this conclusion, Rowe's case would be vindicated *vis-a-vis* my critique.

But it is hard to see how the intimate-connection consideration can justify such a conclusion. And Rowe does not himself claim it provides such

justification: indeed there is reason to think that he doesn't see his case as presupposing that the epistemic access condition is satisfied. He notes (p. 133) that one of 'the basic beliefs associated with theism' is that God's purposes for allowing suffering will generally be outside our ken, and he seems to concede the reasonableness of this -of, that is, the proposition that *if* theism is true, then the outweighing goods by virtue of which God allows suffering would generally be beyond our ken.

If CORNEA is correct, such a concession is fatal to Rowe's case: for by CORNEA, one is entitled to claim 'this suffering does not appear (i.e., appears not) to serve any Divinely-purposed outweighing good' only if it is reasonable to believe that if such a Divinely-purposed good exists, it would be within our ken. So to vindicate Rowe's case from the CORNEA-critique, one must show the reasonableness of believing that if theism is true, then a basic belief long regarded as a logical extension of theism is probably false. The prospects of doing this do not seem especially bright.

3.4. Philo's Reluctant Concession

The basic point underlying my critique of Rowe's case is broadened by Philo, the closet atheist of Hume's Dialogues. In Section XI, Philo is pressed by Cleanthes on whether the misery in the world is significant evidence against the existence of a beneficent and supremely powerful Creator. In answer, Philo distinguishes two issues: (1) whether suffering constitutes *negative* evidence against Cleanthes' theism; and (2) whether this suffering makes it more difficult to develop, from our knowledge of nature, positive arguments for theism. To the first of these issues-the one concerning us-Philo concedes that the answer is 'No', Philo's reason should have a familiar ring: a person, brought into the universe with the assurance that it was the creation of such a being

... might, perhaps, be surprised at the disappointment, but would never retract his former belief, if founded on any very solid argument; since such a limited intelligence must be sensible of his own blindness and ignorance, and must allow, that there may be many solutions of those phenomena, which will forever escape his comprehension!

The intense suffering in the world fails to strongly disconfirm theism, Philo thus concedes, because of the limited cognitive access we can presume to

have to 'solutions of those phenomena'.

211 Some issues related to my line of argument are discussed by F. J. Fitzpatrick in 'The Onus of Proof in Arguments about the Problem of Evil', *Religious Studies*, 17 (1981), 19-38, and by David O'Connor in 'Theism, Evil, and the Onus of Proof: Reply to F. J. Fitzpatrick', *Religious*

Studies, 19 (1983), 241-7.

²¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, second paragraph of pt. XI.

Arguably because of an oversight that we today have no excuse for repeating, Hume fails to see, or at least to show, the full import of Philo's concession. It is only 'theism' of the sort proposed by Cleanthes that Philo concedes is not disconfirmed by suffering: traditional theism, he in contrast avers, is not merely disconfirmed by suffering, it is decisively disproven by it. For traditional theism (which Rowe has in mind) asserts that God is omnipotent, and this-thinks Philo-entails that he is able to achieve any good he desires without allowing any suffering at all, so that there can be no 'justifying purpose' for his allowing any suffering. Cleanthes, acceding to this 'disproof, proposes to save theism by allowing that God, though 'supremely powerful', falls short of being omnipotent (or 'infinite' in power). Deliberately or not, Hume here keeps both Philo and Cleanthes (not to mention poor Demea) in ignorance of the case (made among others by Aquinas) that even an omnipotent God is subject to logical constraints, not being able to make married bachelors and similar non-things, for example. In our day the work of Plantinga and others has made much clearer the import of such broadly logical constraints, making this talk by Philo (or, only a few decades ago, by Mackie) of 'decisive disproof look like naive bluster. Acknowledging that 'no one has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim', Rowe (like others) thus retreats to the more modest 'evidential' approach. But the very insights (about the logical constraints on omnipotence) that lead us to see Hume's claim as 'extravagant' also collapse his distinction between the 'supremely powerful' God of Cleanthes and the 'omnipotent' God of traditional theism. Hence, if Hume is right in having Philo concede that suffering fails to strongly disconfirm Cleanthes' theism, then Hume has also placed an obstacle in the way of a retreat to an evidential case from suffering against traditional theism. By amplifying Philo's insight and applying it to Rowe's case, my aim has been to show that the obstacle is a considerable one indeed.

4. ETIOLOGY OF AN ERROR

My critique of Rowe may seem to show too much. Can it really be that the vast suffering in our world serving no goods within our ken does not even *appear* to serve no God-justifying purpose, and hence does not even *weakly* disconfirm theism? Is it not more sensible to allow, as Basil Mitchell does, that

The theologian surely would not deny that the fact of pain counts against the intuition that God loves men. This very incompatibility generates the most intractable

of theological problems-the problem of evil. So the theologian *does* recognize the fact of pain as counting against Christian doctrine. But...he will not allow it-or anything-to count decisively against it... 22

Perhaps Mitchell's *argument* here is less than compelling: for what theologians may generally have found intractable is the project of theodicy -of giving an *account* of the goods by virtue of which God allows pain; and if they go on to take *this* as evidence against theism-well, even theologians are not exempt from conceptual confusions. Nevertheless, it is-among believers as well as non-believers-a persistent intuition that the inscrutable suffering in our world in some sense disconfirms theism. And a convincing critique of Rowe should show why such suffering should strike so many as disconfirming evidence if, as I have argued, it is not. One factor may be failure to distinguish the strict from the ordinary sense of 'does not appear', making it easy to slide from the weak claim that it isn't the case that some suffering appears to serve as a God-justifying purpose, to the stronger claim that some suffering appears not to serve such a purpose. But there is, I shall in conclusion suggest, a deeper source of confusion.

Rowe, I have allowed, is right in claiming that a wholly good God must be 'against' suffering in this sense: such a being would allow suffering only if there were an outweighing good served by so doing. Rowe is also correct in seeing that such goods are, in a great many cases, nowhere within our ken. The linchpin of my critique has been that if theism is true, this is just what one would expect: for if we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable-given what we know of our cognitive limits-that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken. Since this state of affairs is just what one should expect if theism were true, how can its obtaining be evidence *against* theism?

But suppose one has not thought (in the light of our evident cognitive limitations) about the sort of Being theism proposes, and so has not realized what is 'contained' in the theistic proposal. Reflection on instances of tragic suffering, forcing one to 'postulate' hidden outweighing goods, will then seem to increase what must be believed to believe theism. And with its content so 'increased', theism may then seem more top-heavy than it did, relative to whatever evidential base one takes it to have. And this might well reduce one's confidence that it is true, or increase one's confidence that it is false.

What, then, is wrong with saying that such instances of suffering are disconfirming evidence against theism? Is not the situation parallel to, say,

22 Basil Mitchell, 'Theology and Falsification' (response to Hew), in Hew and MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Macmillan, 1955).

the initial disconfirmation of Copernicus's theory by the absence of observable stellar parallax? (To preserve his theory in the face of this, Copernicus was led to say that the stars were immensely more distant than anyone had any good reason to believe.) The difference is this. The absence of observed stellar parallax required Copernicus to *add* a postulate to his theory. The observed sufferings in the world do require us to say that there are outweighing goods connected to them that are entirely outside our ken, but this is not an *additional* postulate: it was implicit in theism (taken with a little realism about our cognitive powers) all along. If we have realized the magnitude of the theistic proposal, cognizance of suffering thus should not in the least reduce our confidence that it is true. When cognizance of suffering does have this effect, it is perhaps because we had not understood the sort of being theism proposes for belief in the first place.

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