

# Nature Red in Tooth and Claw:

*Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*

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# *Contents*

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction	1
1. Problems of and Explanations for Evil	10
2. Neo-Cartesianism	41
3. Animal Suffering and the Fall	73
4. Nobility, Flourishing, and Immortality: Animal Pain and Animal Well-being	107
5. Natural Evil, Nomic Regularity, and Animal Suffering	130
6. Chaos, Order, and Evolution	166
7. Combining CDs	193
<i>Bibliography</i>	200
<i>Index</i>	207

# Introduction

In academic and popular discourse about the relationship between science and religion scholars and pop-cultural commentators alike seem to agree that while science and religion offer us important perspectives on a variety of crucial matters, the two modes of inquiry do not, and cannot, overlap. Science, we are told, treats matters of fact that are subject to discovery through sensory observation or direct empirical testing, while religion trades in nothing more than nonempirical matters of meaning and morality. And yet, at the very same time, it is common to find covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other major news periodicals which tell of scientists who claim that some discovery in cosmology, biology, or physics has finally ‘found God’. News that the universe appears fine-tuned for the possibility of life or that cells contain ‘irreducibly complex’ structures that point to a designer is trumpeted as (at least potential) evidence in favor of a cosmic creator or designer.

Which is it? Are science and religion isolated domains of thought and inquiry—‘Non-Overlapping Magisteria’ (or NOMA) to use the phrase coined by Stephen Jay Gould—or does science vindicate religion? Some say it is neither, of course. Rather, defenders of this third alternative take it that science is hostile to religion—if not outright demonstrating its falsity, at least providing us with powerful evidence against its truth. This stance is on display, for example, in a recent essay by philosopher of science Philip Kitcher, entitled ‘The Many-Sided Conflict Between Science and Religion’. In the essay, presumably intended as a survey article (appearing as it does in a general reference work on philosophy of religion<sup>1</sup>), Kitcher doesn’t squander his efforts discussing the merits of Gould’s NOMA, intelligent design, scientific arguments against belief in the miraculous, or other standard fare in the academic study of the relation between science and religion. Instead he focuses his attention on a topic that, by his lights, goes straight for religion’s jugular. The topic, one that is surprisingly rarely discussed in science and religion circles, is one we might call ‘the Darwinian problem of evil’. There are a number of ways in which Darwinism might be thought to raise problems of evil for theists. For Kitcher, the Darwinian problem consists in the vast and unquantifiable array of nonhuman-animal suffering that is endemic to the evolutionary machinery—machinery which has been winnowing unfit

<sup>1</sup> William Mann (ed.), *Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

organisms from the planet (often kicking and screaming) for nearly three billion years. In light of the evolutionary carnage, Kitcher finds it incredible that theists can sustain belief in an all-wise, benevolent creator:

[Were we to imagine] a human analogue peering down over a miniaturized version of this arrangement—peering down over his creation—it's hard to equip the face with a kindly expression. Conversely, it's natural to adapt Alfonso X's famous remark about the convolutions of Ptolemaic astronomy: had a benevolent creator proposed to use evolution under natural selection as a means for attaining his purposes, we could have given him useful advice.<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledged tensions between theistic belief in an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing providential creator and the palpable and pervasive reality of animal suffering are not new of course. Authors of the biblical texts as well as philosophers and theologians in the various theistic traditions have struggled with the phenomenon of pain and suffering for as long as they have struggled with the problem of evil itself. Many of those thinkers felt that the explanation for nonhuman-animal suffering was in one way or other to be found in wrongdoing by human animals, most notably Adam and Eve in the Fall. But by the early nineteenth century, as theists began to grapple with increasingly potent evidence that animals preexisted humans, explanations of evil that appealed to the Fall rang hollow. With the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 these concerns only intensified. While most theists had by that point made peace with an understanding of creation that required a less than fully literal understanding of Genesis, the claim that organismic complexity and diversity was best explained by appeal to phenotypic variation and natural selection was a theological bombshell. Not only did Darwinism embrace the notion that animals—with all of their predation, pain, and death—preexisted human beings, but predation, pain, and death were now viewed as among the very instruments of creation. It thus appeared that the natural order was hatched via a mechanism fraught with evil at its very core. As Darwin himself explained the problem, 'the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time' are apparently irreconcilable with the existence of a creator of 'unbounded' goodness.<sup>3</sup> Such sentiments led Darwin to utter his famous quip, 'What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!'.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, in the half century after the publication of the *Origin of Species* Christian apologists who adopted the evolutionary account of biological origins were forced to grapple with the pervasiveness of animal suffering and death required by Darwin's view.

<sup>2</sup> Mann (ed.), *Blackwell Guide*, 268.

<sup>3</sup> See Darwin's letter to Hooker of 13 July 1856 in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. F. Darwin and A. Seward (Murray: London, 1903), i. 94.

<sup>4</sup> *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, ii*, ed. F. Darwin (New York: Appleton 1901), 105.

Many Christian thinkers of the period attempted to come to grips with the problem, as we will see later, by highlighting those facets of Darwinian evolution that seemed rather more indicative of providential wisdom, power, or concern. For example, many pointed out that despite its unpalatable by-products, the biological world was created in such a way that it was capable of producing creatures which were progressively more conformed to the image of the creator, culminating in the appearance of human beings themselves. Still others saw the creation of living things by means of the 'natural law of variation and selection' as testimony to the wisdom of the creator in much the way that the machines used in industrial production testify to the wisdom of their designers. The popular nineteenth-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher noted, in an 1885 sermon, that while looking at an Oriental rug at a rug factory we might remark:

Well, that is a beautiful design, and these are skilful women that made it, there can be no question about that. But now behold the power-loom, where not simply a rug with long, drudging work by hand is being created, but where the machine is creating carpet in endless lengths . . . Now the question is this: Is it an evidence of design in these women that they turn out such work, and is it not evidence of a higher design in the man who turned out that machine . . . which could carry on this work a thousand-fold more magnificently than human fingers did?<sup>5</sup>

As Beecher summed up the underlying sentiment, 'design by wholesale is grander than design by retail'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, for Beecher, the processes of evolution gave the universe the appearance of an intricately and divinely designed assembly line.

Wealthy industrialists who filled the pews of Beecher's Brooklyn church were surely nodding their heads at his insightful (if somewhat sexist) remarks. But others found this line of reasoning to be profoundly unsatisfying. For as insightful as these attempts at explanation might have been, they failed to explain why the evolutionary process must be attended by the evident horrors it contains. It was failure of this sort that led Borden Bowne to exclaim in frustration:

If evolution is the law of life, of course the present must seem imperfect relative to the future, and the past imperfect relative to the present. . . . [But this] does not meet the question of why this progress might not have been accomplished at less cost of toil and struggle and pain. In truth, it is only another way of saying that the system is to be judged only in its outcome and the outcome is assumed to be good. The fact that evolution in any way diminishes the Creator's responsibility for evil is really somewhat infantile. . . . Why might not pain have been dispensed with as a means? Why might not everything have been made perfect at once? Things may be as good as possible, but if there is an omnipotent goodness at the root of things, why are they not better?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> H. W. Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hurlbert, 1885), 116.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> B. Bowne, *Philosophy of Theism* (New York: Harper, 1887), 227, 232.

Indeed, after continuing to wrestle with the problem, Beecher himself was finally led to admit:

The weak go under. When the lowest, the foundation forms of existence begin to spring up—both plant and animal in their lower conditions—the struggle for existence begins, and still the weak go under, the strong prevailing. It has been said that this is an evidence of benevolence. So that in the end they who remain will all be strong; but this is a poor consolation to any man asking, ‘why were they any weak? Why were they not all strong to begin with?’<sup>8</sup>

Such sentiments led many to conclude, in Beecher’s words, that God’s purposes in nature lie beyond our ken, and that ‘neither in Nature nor in Providence are His ways like our Ways’.<sup>9</sup>

By the close of the nineteenth century many felt that explanations for animal suffering had largely eluded Darwinian Christians. Disciple of Herbert Spencer John Fiske summed it up as follows:

A scheme which permits thousands of generations to live and die in wretchedness cannot . . . be absolved from the . . . charge of awkwardness or malevolence. . . . it is impossible to call that Being good who, existing prior to the phenomenal universe, and creating it out of the plenitude of infinite power and foreknowledge, endowed it with such properties that its material and moral development must inevitably be attended by the misery of untold millions of sentient creatures for whose existence their creator is ultimately alone responsible.<sup>10</sup>

Complaints about the compatibility of theism and the suffering of animals are not, however, confined to the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers. Numerous scientists have sounded a similar alarm, perhaps none more forcefully than Oxford biologist and ardent opponent of theism Richard Dawkins, who merits quoting at length:

If Nature were kind, she would at least make the minor concession of anesthetizing caterpillars before they are eaten alive from within. But Nature is neither kind nor unkind. . . . It is easy to imagine a gene that, say, tranquilizes gazelles when they are about to suffer a killing bite. Would such a gene be favored by natural selection? Not unless the act of tranquilizing a gazelle improved that gene’s chances of being propagated into future generations. It is hard to see why this should be so, and we may therefore guess that gazelles suffer horrible pain and fear when they are pursued to the death—as most of them eventually are. The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites;

<sup>8</sup> Bowne, *Philosophy of Theism*, 339.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in J. H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 135.

<sup>10</sup> John Fiske, *Miscellaneous Writings, iv. Outline of Cosmic Philosophy* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), 225.

thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. It must be so. If there is ever a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. Theologians worry away at the 'problem of evil' and a related 'problem of suffering.' On the day I originally wrote this paragraph, the British newspapers all carried a terrible story about a bus full of children from a Roman Catholic school that crashed for no obvious reason, with wholesale loss of life. Not for the first time, clerics were in paroxysms over the theological question that a writer on a London newspaper (*The Sunday Telegraph*) framed this way: 'How can you believe in a loving, all-powerful God who allows such a tragedy?' The article went on to quote one priest's reply: 'The simple answer is that we do not know why there should be a God who lets these awful things happen. But the horror of the crash, to a Christian, confirms the fact that we live in a world of real values: positive and negative. If the universe was just electrons, there would be no problem of evil or suffering.' On the contrary, if the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies like the crashing of this bus are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the evident difficulties that the long course of evolutionary history raises for theism, the compatibility of animal suffering and divine goodness has received strikingly little attention in recent philosophy of religion. This is surprising for a variety of reasons. First, the course of evolutionary theory over the last hundred years or so has made most of the halting nineteenth-century attempts to explain animal suffering even harder to defend. The notion that variation and selection is an inevitable tool for securing biological progress, for example, has long fallen out of favor. And the notion that evolutionary development has any teleological character at all is little defended. This silence is made even more striking in light of the fact that recent philosophers critical of theism have made important and widely known appeals to animal suffering as a way of pressing the argument for atheism that springs from evil. In the most commonly discussed argument for atheism from evil William Rowe presents, as his centerpiece example, the image of a deer, burned in a forest fire started by lightning, dying slowly and in great pain, alone in the woods. What kind of God, he asks, could possibly permit preventable suffering in an animal that lacks moral responsibility, if, as seems to be the case, that suffering exists and serves no purpose?<sup>12</sup>

This lack of attention might be excusable if the standard explanations for evil so often invoked by contemporary theists were easily adaptable to evils of

<sup>11</sup> R. Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 132.

<sup>12</sup> W. Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 335–41.

this sort. But there is the trouble. Far from being easily adaptable, the standard explanations seem largely impotent when it comes to explaining nonhuman-animal suffering, making the Darwinian problem of evil all the more intractable. Indeed, for Kitcher, theists' attempts to take on the Darwinian problem of evil 'frequently resemble the flailings of seventeenth-century Aristotelians or late-eighteenth-century phlogistonians'. Can the theist do any better than that? That is the question of this book.

In what follows I will develop a variety of explanations that theists might defend in attempting to come to grips with the Darwinian problem of evil. After a brief and undoubtedly less-than-complete discussion of the argument from evil, I consider four general explanatory approaches that theists can take to the problem. In my view, any successful explanation will have to fall into one or more of these four approaches. The first, and perhaps most notorious, way that theists might try (and have) to explain animal pain and suffering is to simply deny the phenomenon altogether. Descartes is typically identified as the most ardent advocate of this view, though others have extended and developed the Cartesian explanation in more sophisticated ways. If a Cartesian or neo-Cartesian explanation of animal pain and suffering is to succeed it will have to show that such suffering is either not real or not morally significant. In Chapter 2 I consider whether or not such explanations of either sort have any merit at all. Approaches which raise questions concerning the nature of animal thought and cognition involve numerous disciplines and require careful reflection on the nature of mentality, consciousness, and the phenomenon of pain itself. As a result, in addition to considering whether or not contemporary philosophy of mind might be marshaled in support of such an explanation, I will also bring to bear the importance of a range of evidence that has been adduced in animal behavior, neuroscience, and ethology.

In Chapters 3 through 6 I will turn to consider explanations which assume that animal suffering is both real and morally significant. In Chapter 3 I examine the explanation that has been most widely embraced in the history of western theistic reflection on the problem; namely, that animal pain and suffering can be accounted for and justified by appeal to the moral wrongdoing of certain free creatures, human or preternatural. It is obvious that at least some of the pain and suffering experienced by animals is, knowingly or not, brought about at the hands of free creatures through hunting, domestication, factory farming, and so on. However, the explanations discussed in this chapter aim to argue that the totality of animal pain and suffering can be traced to some primeval misdeed by human or angelic free creatures such as the Fall of Adam and Eve or of Satan and his cohorts. As noted earlier, explanations of this sort largely fell out of favor in the late nineteenth century precisely because they seemed to be undercut by Darwinian accounts of biological origins; in light of the fact that animal pain and suffering so clearly predated the advent of free creatures (or human beings at least), it is hard to see how the pain and suffering can be a consequence of



their actions. In spite of this, explanations of animal suffering in such terms have continued to surface during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some of these explanations solve the apparent problem of prehuman-animal pain and suffering by simply denying it. This solution is frequently defended by so called young-universe creationists, who claim that all major phyla came into existence roughly simultaneously somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. However, others argue that explanations that appeal to the Fall can succeed even if we concede that animals, and their pain and suffering, predate free human creatures.

A number of philosophers and theologians over the last two millennia have argued that animal pain and suffering is permissible because it is a necessary condition for securing certain greater goods *for animals themselves*. For example, some have argued that mechanisms producing pain and suffering are the only way to insure that embodied organisms engaged in intentional action can protect themselves against serious threats to their physical integrity. Others have claimed that pain and suffering are essentially connected to the possibility of intrinsically good animal action, or to securing goods that animals will enjoy in states of postmortem existence. In Chapter 4 I examine explanations of this sort.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I explore an entirely different sort of explanation for nonhuman-animal pain and suffering. Philosophers and theologians commonly make a distinction between moral evil, evil that is culpably caused by free creatures, and natural evil, evil that results from natural causes for which no creature is culpable. Cast this way, it seems that the vast majority of animal pain and suffering falls into the latter category. Predation, disease, exposure, fire, famine, and so on are all natural causes of the natural evil of animal pain and suffering. Because of this, one might reasonably suspect that strategies often deployed by theists to explain natural evil could be pressed into service to explain this animal suffering. The most common explanation of natural evil, and the one that seems initially most likely to be of use in this context, is one that argues that there are overridingly good reasons for a created natural order to operate by regular and well-ordered laws of nature, a feature of the world I call 'nomic regularity'. One by-product of such law-likeness might be that organisms sometimes unintentionally blunder into lines of causation which cause them injury and, in turn, pain and suffering. If one could argue that the goodness of a nomically regular universe required the possibility of nonhuman-animal pain and suffering, and that the goodness secured in this way outweighed the evil of permitting such pain and suffering, one would be on the road to a successful theistic explanation of that pain and suffering. I will consider accounts developed along these lines in Chapter 5. Unfortunately, most attempts to defend theism in this way further argue that the outweighing goods that are secured by permitting natural evil are goods for human beings of one sort or another. Insofar as that is the case, such explanations will struggle to explain prehuman pain and suffering, in much the way that the explanations in Chapter 3 do.

I will argue that accounts of this sort cannot succeed unless they adopt the further claim that it is a good for the cosmos to come to contain significant (pockets of) order through a process that moves from chaos to such order via nomically regular means. I explore the defensibility of this claim in Chapter 6. Amended in this way, the 'nomic-regularity' explanation of natural evil can succeed as an explanation of nonhuman-animal pain and suffering because a universe that moves from chaos to order via nomic regularity will require two things. First, it will require a long prehuman history—since the accumulation of complex states (molecular, planetary, galactic, biological, etc.) will come to be via nomically regular means that move from the simpler to the more complex, and such processes naturally take enormous amounts of time. Second, it will require a long pedigree of prehuman animals capable of experiencing pain and suffering, since these animals will be necessary precursors to descendants capable of ever more complex forms of mental life and moral value. While such a view faces a number of challenges, the most immediate one is the apparent implausibility of the claim that a universe that proceeds from chaos to order over time is for that reason good. I thus explore various ways in which the goodness of this feature might be defended.

It should now be clear to the reader that the aim of this book is not to defend the adequacy of a single theistic 'solution' to the Darwinian problem of evil. The explanations offered in Chapters 2 through 6 do not add up to a unified and coherent account, if for no other reason than that some of the explanations they defend are mutually inconsistent. Yet while no critic of the Darwinian problem of evil could employ all of the attempted explanations outlined in the book, it is also true that the explanations in these chapters are not entirely mutually exclusive. In Chapter 7 I take account of this fact, describing which explanations might be harnessed together and the extent to which this would (or wouldn't) strengthen the critic's response to the Darwinian problem.

While there is little doubt that the readers of this book will be largely professional philosophers, I have tried to make most of the arguments accessible to a broader audience who might be interested in the Darwinian problem of animal pain and suffering. Although there are different points of entry that one might take into the topic, I will be approaching it as an instance of the general type of difficulty raised by the problem of evil. One need not be an expert in contemporary philosophy of religion to appreciate the problem of evil, of course. But casting the issue in those terms requires that the reader have some acquaintance with the contemporary state of the discussion in academic philosophy. The first chapter provides the reader with such an overview along with an explanation of how the project of this book fits in as a partial response to this more general problem. Since the aim of that initial chapter is to try to bring novices up to speed on the contemporary discussion, there will be some fine-grained facets of that discussion that will necessarily be set aside. These issues

will not be relevant to my attempt to address the problem of animal pain and suffering specifically, though they would be relevant to a complete discussion of the ways in which evil might count as evidence against the existence of God. In cases where these omissions might be of further interest to readers I offer suggestions for additional reading in the notes.

# 1

## Problems of and Explanations for Evil

The phrase ‘the problem of evil’ connotes different things to different people. For some it points to the existential problem we face when we confront evil directly—the way it is experienced when we or our loved ones are its victims. Understood this way, the problem of evil is the problem of how we can find hope or meaning when pain and suffering threaten to snatch them from us. In these cases, evil is a cause of *despair*. For others ‘the problem of evil’ constitutes evidence that the universe is not a place created and providentially tended by an omnipotent and morally perfect father. In these cases evil is a cause of *doubt*. Sometimes the doubts raised by reflecting on evil are doubts about the truth of theism itself. But for many theists the doubts raised by evil are doubts not about the existence of God as much as they are about some aspect of the divine nature (the goodness, power, or wisdom of God), or perhaps about how deep our grasp of divine creation and providence are when so much evil seems to make so little sense to us. Doubts of this sort are often reflected in the writings of religious authors who are themselves afflicted by evil. The most famous instance of this is found in the Hebrew Bible’s book of Job, but it is not confined there. The Hebrew prophet Habakkuk provides a typical expression of such doubt when he reacts to the impending doom of the nation of Judah at the hands of the pagan Babylonians:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so justice is perverted.

(Hab. 1: 1–4)<sup>1</sup>

Different problems and puzzles call for different solutions and explanations. In this chapter my aim is to describe the problem that I will be addressing in this book and to provide some criteria for what will count as a suitable resolution of that problem.

To do this I will begin with a brief and somewhat opinionated introduction to the recent discussion of the problem of evil in contemporary philosophy of religion. *That* problem of evil consists of various types of arguments aimed at

<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

showing the truth or rational preferability of atheism over theism. Assessing these arguments will accomplish two things. First, it will provide newcomers with an overview of those recent arguments and of responses to them. Those arguments and responses can and will inform the explanations for animal pain and suffering I discuss in subsequent chapters. Second, it will afford an opportunity to consider the claim made by some theists that reflection on this problem of evil shows us that attempts to explain evil should be abandoned altogether. If these theists are right, the project of developing explanations of evil in the way I intend to here should be avoided. As a result it will be important to consider these arguments to see why the project of this book is still a needed and indeed an urgent one.

### 1.1 THE CONTEMPORARY ‘PROBLEM OF EVIL’

Arguments for atheism from evil take a variety of forms. Some arguments intend to show that the existence of God is positively inconsistent with the existence of evil. Others aim to demonstrate the more modest claim that the existence of evil provides only some evidence against theism. And, of these latter, some take the evidence provided by evil to be strong enough to make belief in theism irrational, while others take it to provide merely one piece of an evidential case, the whole of which may or may not make belief in theism unreasonable.

Arguments for atheism from evil also have various starting points. Some argue that the existence of any evil provides sufficient grounds for constructing an argument for atheism. Others argue that it is only the vast *quantity* or *duration* of evil in the world that raises difficulties. Still others argue that it is one *type* of evil or another (animal pain and suffering, or horrendous evil, for example) that fits ill with the claims of theism. Others, finally, argue that some particular *token instance* of evil shows us that theism is untenable (the Holocaust, for example). In addition to different starting points, arguments for atheism from evil differ along two other dimensions: (i) the degree to which we are (or can be) certain about their factual premises and (ii) the sorts of logical relations that hold between the premises and the conclusion. Philosophers appeal to these two dimensions to describe two different types of argument from evil. The first type, standardly designated ‘Logical Arguments’, appeal to some fact about evil that is virtually *certain* and affirm that that fact is *incompatible* with the existence of God. The second type, often called ‘Evidential Arguments’, either (a) appeal to some fact about evil that is virtually certain and then affirm that this fact reduces the probability of the existence of God, or (b) appeal to some fact about evil that is not certain but only likely to some degree or another and affirm that this fact (if it indeed holds) is incompatible with the existence of God.<sup>2</sup> In what follows we will consider arguments of both sorts.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Dan Howard-Snyder for suggesting this characterization. This way of casting the division puts J. L. Mackie’s version of the argument squarely on the logical side (see his ‘Evil and

In the middle of the twentieth century the dominant version of the argument from evil could be stated in the following simple form:

- (1) If there were a God, there would be no evil.
- (2) There is evil.
- (3) Thus, there is no God.

The success of this simple argument hinges on our assessment of premise (1). Is it true, and if so, why? If we are inclined to accept premise (1) it is probably because we think that if there were a God, that God would be all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Any being that is all-good would, by definition, want to prevent evil. And of course, any being that is all-knowing and all-powerful would be aware of all evil and would be capable of preventing it. In light of all this, it seems reasonable to think that if there were a God, there would be no evil.

These considerations put us in a position to consider a more fully articulated version of the argument from evil, a version that counts as an instance of the Logical Argument:

- (4) If there were a God, he would be omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.
- (5) (a) A wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of every evil it is in his or her power to prevent; (b) an omniscient being would be aware of all possible and actual evils; and (c) an omnipotent being would be able to prevent all evils.
- (6) Thus, if there were a God, there would be no evil.
- (7) There is evil.
- (8) Thus, there is no God.

If this argument is a good one, it shows us how the existence of evil and the existence of God are logically incompatible.

Since premises (6) and (8) merely draw conclusions from other premises, the critic of the argument can only object by rejecting premises (4), (5), or (7). Although some religious traditions deny premise (7) (that is, deny the reality of evil) this does not seem to be a very promising response. The reality of evil seems as clear and evident to us as the reality of anything. The mere fact that I can (and sometimes do) experience excruciating pain alone seems good enough reason to accept (7).<sup>3</sup>

Omnipotence', *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200–12), while the versions of the argument defended by William Rowe and Paul Draper are instances of the first and second type of evidential argument respectively (see, e.g., their 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 335–41, and 'Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists', *Noûs*, 23 (June, 1989), 331–50, respectively).

<sup>3</sup> As one referee of the manuscript astutely noted, this sentence makes subtle mention of something that is of crucial, if not always widely noted, importance in discussions of the problem of evil. The crucially important fact is that it is not simply the actuality of evil (in this case, pain and suffering) that generates a problem of evil, rather it is the fact that God has permitted circumstances

Some philosophers have instead rejected premise (4). After all, why not simply account for the reality of evil by denying that God is all-powerful or all-knowing? Perhaps God is very, very powerful, but still not capable of preventing all evil. Or perhaps God is very, very knowledgeable, but still falls short of knowing every truth that could be known. One could accept these things and thus deny premise (4).

In rejecting premise (4) one undermines the Logical Argument in one sense. Still, rejecting the premise comes at the price of conceding the conclusion (i.e. that atheism is true)—hardly much comfort for the theist. Theism is the claim that there exists an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful being who creates and providentially superintends the universe throughout its existence. If this is right, then to deny that there is an all-powerful or all-knowing being (as the one who rejects premise (4) does) is to deny the truth of theism. And to deny the truth of theism is, as a simple matter of logic, to affirm the truth of atheism. So while rejecting (4) undermines the argument, it does so only by providing a different route to the same conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

The theist's last remaining option, then, is to reject premise (5). And, indeed, this premise has been the primary focus of attention by critics. What should we think of it? The most serious problem for premise (5) is part (a). And the problem is that it is false. A simple example shows us what is wrong with the claim that a good being always prevents every evil it can. Imagine that I am a surgeon and that you come to me with a case of cancer. Your cancer will take your life if you don't have an operation to remove the tumor. Recovering from this operation, however, includes a good deal of post-operative pain and recovery time. Still, you want the life-saving surgery and so you ask me: 'Will you do the operation?'. 'Of course not!', I reply. 'I'm a good person; and by definition no good person would allow evil to occur. Pain and suffering are evils, and this operation involves *lots* of pain and suffering. Therefore, as a good person, I must

which make evil possible even when it is not actual. The fact that God has created human beings who have it in their power to freely cause horrendous evil in the world, or the fact that sentient beings have the capacity to experience pain and suffering of the sort that seems to defeat the possibility of a meaningful life—it is these possibilities themselves, not simply actual instances of them—which require some explanation on the theistic framework.

<sup>4</sup> In the Introduction I mentioned that my review of the contemporary state of the discussion of the argument would, in some places, pass over subtleties that are not directly relevant to my aims in this book. This is one such case. A number of philosophers think that (4) can be denied without simply endorsing atheism. For example, process theists argue that God increases both in power and knowledge over time and that these limitations preclude God's preventing all evil. For two representative examples see David Ray Griffin's *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991) and Charles Hartshorne's *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984). Likewise, open theists argue that it is impossible for God to know many truths about the future and that this impossibility entails that some evils will not be preventable by God after all (see, for example, John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, HI: InterVarsity Press, 1998)).

refuse.’ If I were to say such things, I would show only that I am confused. Of course no good person inflicts *needless* suffering on others. But sometimes the permission of pain and suffering are *required* to bring about some *greater good*, or to prevent some *greater evil*. If the surgeon refuses to allow this bit of pain and suffering, and thereby contributes to my death, he is surely a bad person, not a good one. Perhaps at most we can claim: ‘A wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of every evil it is in its power to prevent *unless that being had some morally sufficient reason for not doing so*’.

What would it take to have a morally sufficient reason for permitting an evil? Three conditions must be met.

- (A) The Necessity Condition: the good secured by the permission of the evil, E, could not have been secured without permitting either E or some other evils morally equivalent to or worse than E.<sup>5</sup>
- (B) The Outweighing Condition: the good secured by the permission of the evil is sufficiently outweighing.<sup>6</sup>
- (C) The Rights Condition: it is within the rights of the one permitting the evil to permit it.

The case of the confused surgeon shows us why the Necessity Condition is required. If the surgeon proceeds with the operation, and later informs you that you also could have been cured by taking a single pill which is just as effective

<sup>5</sup> This way of casting the standards of moral permissibility rules out the possibility that God permits ‘gratuitous evil’. I think that gratuitous evils are not morally permissible by God. It would however be unfair to present this as settled territory, since a number of theists disagree. For defenses of the permissibility of gratuitous evils one should consider Peter van Inwagen’s ‘The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils’, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 74 (2000), 65–80, and William Hasker’s *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), chs. 4 and 5.

<sup>6</sup> One might object that the Outweighing Condition is questionable for the following reason. Consider two states of affairs: (1) P freely loves his neighbor, (2) P freely refrains from loving his neighbor. (1) is good, (2) is bad, and permitting (2) is a necessary condition for securing (1). Imagine that (2) obtains and (1) does not. That is an evil state of affairs and, according to (B), God only has a morally sufficient reason for permitting it to obtain if the good secured by the permission of the evil is sufficiently outweighing. But is the good sufficiently outweighing? One might think that the good God aimed at in this case was the good set forth in (1). But that good never came to pass. So is there some other outweighing good that suffices here? The standard reply would be that the outweighing good consists in the freedom to make morally significant choices between competing courses of action. I suspect that most theists would find this answer sufficient. However, I have, as one referee pointed out, elsewhere argued that the good of such freedom is only that of an instrumental good, and thus it is hard to see how it could rise to the level of a good sufficient to outweigh the obtaining of (2). I am now of two minds about this claim. Still, if one were to accept it, one should hold that whether or not permitted evil satisfies the Outweighing Condition can only be determined by considering the totality of the good obtained and the evil permitted by a particular *type* of evil. If God permits the good of free choice with the aim of bringing about love among neighbors, and the result is that the sum total of the goodness of the actual love of neighbors plus the goodness of the necessary conditions required to secure that goodness, i.e. morally significant freedom does not outweigh the evil of the free refraining from love of neighbors then God did not have a morally sufficient reason to allow that evil. I thank Dan Howard-Snyder for pressing this concern.



and which has no ill side effects, you would be rightly indignant. The surgeon is only justified in permitting you to experience the pain and suffering of surgery and recovery if such permission is *necessary* to secure your well-being. Likewise, a wholly good and omnipotent being can only permit evils in order to secure good which could not otherwise be secured without permitting the occurrence of evils equally bad or worse.

The Necessity Condition requires that certain goods could not have been obtained without allowing either the evil in question or some other evil which is as bad or worse. In some instances it may be the case that a particular good can only be secured by allowing a very specific sort of evil. Perhaps the only way to cure your cancer is through surgery that carries the risk of great pain and suffering. But it is likely that many outweighing goods can be secured by allowing a range of evils, none of which is singularly necessary for this purpose. If I want to buy a new car that is blue and has both leather seats and a Bose stereo system, I may arrive at the car dealer's lot only to find that no car has all of these options. Some are blue with leather seats, some have leather seats with sound system, but none has all three. I value all of the options equally, so I choose the blue car with leather seats. We might say that in order to get the car I had to live without the sound system. But that is not exactly right. In order to get the new car I had to live without the sound system *or some other feature that I value just as much*. The absence of the sound system was not a necessary condition for getting the car, but the absence of the sound system *or something equivalent* to it was. Similarly, when explaining evil one needs to show not why permitting some particular evil is itself necessary for some greater good, but why permitting that evil *or one just as bad* is necessary. This fact yields some important consequences to which I will return shortly below. However, in using the Necessity Condition I will not typically make reference to this additional complication.

The Outweighing Condition stipulates that the greater good in question is 'sufficiently outweighing'. Why not rather say that the greater good merely be 'outweighing'? What is the force of 'sufficiently' here? Note that there may be cases in which the evils that are necessary for bringing about certain greater goods are allowed, and in fact succeed in bringing about greater goods, but where the amount or severity of the evil that must be permitted is so great that the benefits of the greater good are simply too meager. We can imagine God considering, for example, the creation of a pair of worlds with the following features. World  $\alpha$  has an overall balance of 100 units of goodness that are secured by bringing about those 100 units while permitting no evil (there is of course no metric for good and evil but we can pretend for the purposes of the example). World  $\beta$  has an overall balance of 101 units of goodness and thus seems to exceed  $\alpha$  in overall goodness. However, this greater surplus of goodness in  $\beta$  is brought about by allowing  $10^{10}$ -less-101 units of evil which are jointly necessary for securing  $10^{10}$  units of goodness. Even if we assume that there was no other way to bring about a world with 101 or more units of goodness, the price of increasing the surplus

of good is simply too high, since the additional unit of overall goodness comes at the price of  $10^{10}$  additional units of evil. This is important, since those offering explanations for evil often provide plausible reasons for thinking that these evils are necessary conditions for certain goods, yet they just as often *refrain* from giving reasons for thinking that things are overall better with those evils and the goods they occasion than they would be without both.

The Rights Condition is necessary, since there may be circumstances in which one being can permit evils in the service of securing greater goods, but where the absence of a right to do so precludes such permission. If a stranger wants to take the life of my son in order to use his two kidneys to save the lives of her two children, we may conclude that saving two lives is better than saving one, and yet we still recognize that I have *no right* to permit the stranger to take my child and use him for such purposes.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, it may be the case that features of the moral situation (the intrinsic moral worth of persons for example) preclude God from having the right to allow some evils, even if they will lead to outweighing goods.<sup>8</sup>

What all of this shows us is that it is not the *reality of evil* that is incompatible with the existence of God, rather it is the reality of evils that are not or cannot be outweighed by some greater goods for which their permission is necessary. Evils of that sort would be *pointless* or *gratuitous* evils and are thus incompatible with the existence of the God of theism. In light of this, we can revise our Logical Argument one more time as follows:

- (9) If there were a God, there would be no gratuitous evils (GEs).
- (10) There is at least one GE.
- (11) There is no God.

If there is a problem with this argument, it is with premise (10).<sup>9</sup> To defend this premise one needs to demonstrate that there is at least one GE; and showing this means showing that there is an evil the permission of which is either *not necessary* for bringing about an *outweighing* good or *not within the rights* of God to permit. Do some evils fall into one of these categories? Let's consider them in turn.

Initially it might appear quite difficult to show that permitting some evils is not really necessary for bringing about greater goods. How could we know such

<sup>7</sup> The example is a modification of one used by Swinburne in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11. Of course one might not agree that saving the lives of two persons through killing a third, innocent person is an outweighing good. But none of this matters for the general point that there are conditions where one is not morally permitted to allow the occurrence of preventable evils the permission of which is necessary to secure outweighing goods.

<sup>8</sup> We will consider one such proposed case in Chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> Though a few theists have recently argued that we should reject (9). See, for example, Peter van Inwagen's 'The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil', in his *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 103–4, and William Hasker, 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, 9 (1992), 23–44.

a thing? The first thing to note is that in order to have a clear sense of what events or states of affairs are necessary for other events or states of affairs often we would have to possess quite detailed and specialized knowledge—knowledge which we might or might not have. A simple example might help us here. I once watched a mechanic who was about to replace an air bag in the steering wheel of my car. I assumed that he would start the job by pulling off the steering wheel or doing some other work in the front seat. However, this mechanic began the job by opening the trunk of the car and fussing around there. I assumed that he was just wasting time, trying to pile up labor costs for the job. However, I later learned that changing the air bag requires disconnecting the battery, and that this car has the battery in the trunk, not under the hood. Who would have guessed that fiddling around in the trunk was necessary to replace the air bag? Not me—because I just didn't know how things were put together. It seems reasonable to assume that we are not much better positioned to know whether or not permitting some evil that in fact occurs is necessary for securing some greater good, now or perhaps in the very distant future. As a result, it seems best to avoid defenses of (10) that rely on showing that permitting a certain evil is not a necessary condition for some outweighing good.

Another way to defend premise (10) would be to produce an argument showing that *all* evils are gratuitous. One way we could know that all evils are gratuitous is by having good reason to think that it could *never* be necessary for God to bring about or allow some evil in order to secure a greater good. If God never had a good reason of this sort, then *all* evils would be gratuitous.

Arguments for this conclusion claim that if God were to exist, *all* evils would be gratuitous, since an omnipotent being would never have to rely on allowing evil in order to bring about some greater good. To say otherwise would be to say that God is sometimes at the mercy of having to allow certain evils to occur in order to get some outcome that he wants. But how could an omnipotent being be at the mercy of anything in this way? We can imagine such things in cases like that of the surgeon mentioned above. Surgeons sometimes must inflict or allow pain and suffering in their patients in order to cure them. But God? Surely not. An omnipotent being would never be subject to such limitations. If God wants to bring about a certain good, God, being omnipotent, could surely just actualize that good unconditionally.

While that line of reasoning initially *sounds* compelling, it is, for all we know, invalid. We can see this by considering one example. Theists and atheists alike largely agree that it is a good thing that God create a cosmos, and that it is a good thing when that cosmos contains creatures with morally significant free choice (i.e. the sort of freedom that allows creatures to choose between good and evil alternatives). Creatures with free choice can enjoy the good of making free and autonomous choices as well as of producing genuine moral good in the world, engaging in relationships of love and friendship, displaying genuine charity and courage, and so on. Yet creatures with morally significant free choice

also necessarily have the ability to choose to do evil.<sup>10</sup> And if those creatures are genuinely free in making their choices, they cannot be determined to choose what they choose.

Now let's imagine that God is faced with the prospect of creating a universe. Wanting to maximize the varieties of good in the creation, and wanting to fill the creation with the greatest types of good, God decides to create a world containing a number of creatures with free choice. Can God create a world with such freely choosing creatures but in which those free creatures never choose to do wrong? Maybe or maybe not. We just don't know. When God considers all of the possible universes with free creatures in them, it just might turn out that in every one of them at least one of the creatures in them chooses to do wrong. And if that is indeed the case, God cannot create a world that contains the good of free choice, but which also has no evil in it. If that's the way things are in fact, a universe with evil is a necessary and unavoidable condition of getting a universe with the very great good of creatures with free choice.

The argument above is a descendant of the most widely cited response to the Logical Argument, a response known as the Free Will Defense which was first developed in detail by Alvin Plantinga.<sup>11</sup> However, it is worth noting that the argument here differs slightly from Plantinga's version. Plantinga argues that it is broadly logically possible that every free creature is such that it performs at least one evil act in every world in which it exists and which God can actualize. The epistemic version of the argument described above aims to show that there are, for all we know, some goods (like the good of free choice) which not even God can bring about without also allowing certain evils (specifically, morally evil choices) to occur. Since this is so, the atheist's general argument that God is never in such a position fails.<sup>12</sup>

Above we saw that trying to give arguments that particular evils are gratuitous is going to be difficult to defend. Now we have seen that the argument that all evils in general are gratuitous is also vexed. It is open to the critic of theism to offer other general arguments of this sort, though it is not easy to see how such other arguments would go.

Let's then turn to the second way of defending (10). In light of the Rights Condition (Condition (C) for the moral permissibility of allowing evils, listed

<sup>10</sup> Some contend that this is false. For example, perhaps robust morally significant freedom requires nothing more than an ability to choose between a variety of alternative goods. In addition, if we were free to choose between good and evil only when the choice would in fact be a free choice for good, we might be able to have morally significant freedom without in fact being able to choose evil. Some of these alternatives are considered by David Lewis in 'Evil for Freedom's Sake', *Philosophical Papers*, 22 (1993), 149–72.

<sup>11</sup> See his *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> This epistemic version of the argument seems to be suggested first in Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne's 'Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 44 (August 1998), 1–21, at p. 21.

above) one might argue that there are some evils that it is not within God's rights to permit, even if that permission were a necessary condition for securing greater goods. If there are such evils, they would be gratuitous, since no greater good to which they might be connected could outweigh or justify them. Can the defender of the argument make the case that there are some evils of this sort? One might argue, for instance, that some evils are so horrendous that no one, God included, could be justified in allowing them even if they were necessary conditions for bringing about some outweighing good. For example, perhaps it would never be permissible to allow a child to die a painful, lingering death due to cancer, even if it is a necessary means to some great good. Unfortunately, arguments of this sort will all be grounded in moral principles that are highly contentious. As a result, it is hard to imagine that arguments of this sort will be of much value in supporting premise (10).<sup>13</sup>

For reasons of the sort we have been outlining above, the Logical Argument is not much defended these days. Instead most of the discussion of the problem of evil focuses on a second version, to which we now turn: the Evidential Argument.

## 1.2 THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT

The problem with the Logical Argument is that we can (reasonably easily) conjure up possible explanations for God's permission of evil which, if they were true, would show that the existence of evil and the existence of God are compatible after all. Still, the average nonphilosopher who takes evil to be problematic for theism is often not impressed by the fact that there are *some possible goods* which *for all we know* can only be secured by way of permitting evils. One reason for this is that even if we can come up with an explanation that shows us that the existence of God and the existence of evil are compatible, it is still possible that the existence of evil makes the existence of God very *unlikely*. And if evil in fact makes the existence of God unlikely, theists still have a substantial problem on their hands. A simple example makes clear why this is so. Last year my son and I went to watch an NCAA college basketball game. With three minutes left in the game my favorite team was behind by thirty points and I decided to head for the parking lot for a quick exit. When I got home my wife asked me who won the game. I told her that the other team had won. When she asked for the final score I told her I didn't know it because I left with three minutes to go. She could have pressed me at this point on my belief that the other team won. After all, it is *possible* for a team to score thirty points in three minutes. But the circumstances required to make that happen are so improbable and belief that they occurred so incredible that there is no way that any reasonable person would believe anything

<sup>13</sup> We will, however, examine one version of this sort of argument at the end of Chapter 6.

other than what I believed: that my team lost. The mere *possibility* that my team could have overcome the gap and won the game did nothing to dislodge my belief that they lost.

Similarly, when considering the existence, magnitude, duration, and types of evil, some atheists are inclined to argue that although it is *possible* that God and evil of the sort permitted in our world both exist, it still seems very unlikely. What might support a judgment like this? In the case of the basketball game, I judged that it was unlikely that my team would win because I know all of the ways in which a team can score thirty points and it seemed to me highly unlikely that they could avail themselves of those means in under three minutes of playing time. Does the one who accepts the argument for atheism from evil know something that allows her to judge that the explanations showing the existence of God and evil to be jointly possible are unlikely? Above we saw that some argue for this compatibility by claiming that there are, perhaps, no worlds that God can create with free creatures that in fact always refrain from evil. Perhaps the defender of the argument can claim that it just seems very unlikely that among the infinity of worlds that God can create, none contains significant quantities of good, free creatures and no moral wrongdoing. Alternatively, one might not claim to believe anything as specific as that, but instead might simply claim that when he or she considers the vast amount of evil or some particular case of evil, it is simply unbelievable that its permission is necessary for securing outweighing goods. Arguments of this sort fall into the category of ‘Evidential Arguments from evil’ because they support the notion that evil gives us good evidence, even if not positive proof, that God does not in fact exist.

There is more than one way of formulating the Evidential Argument. In what follows we will consider two versions.

### 1.2.1 The ‘direct’ argument

The most common Evidential Argument claims that, all things considered, we have good reason to believe that some of the evil in our world is gratuitous. The argument can be framed most simply as a variant of the Logical Argument, as follows:

- (12) If there were a God, there would be no gratuitous evils (GEs).
- (13) It is probable that at least one of the evils in our world is a GE.
- (14) Probably, there is no God.

In discussing the Logical Argument we saw that the defender of the argument is going to have a difficult time giving us a demonstration or proof of premise (10), the claim that there is gratuitous evil. The problem is that, for all we know, God has good reasons for allowing the evil we see around us to occur. What the defender of this Evidential Argument insists on is that even though, for all we know, there might be such reasons, it is not *very likely* that there are.

This way of putting the argument resonates with our ordinary way of thinking of the connection between the existence of God and the existence of evil. For some reason, citing certain possible, for-all-we-know reasons for the reality of seemingly gratuitous evil does not remove the persuasive force those evils have; and this leads us to doubt the existence of God. One reason for this is likely that the average person who is inclined to accept premise (13) is inclined to accept it on grounds other than those supposed in the Logical Argument. Defenders of the Logical Argument often accept that evils are gratuitous because of a more general argument that God's omnipotence renders all evils gratuitous. Defenders of the Evidential Argument accept (13) because they find themselves powerfully struck by the idea that some of the evil they see around them is just pointless.<sup>14</sup> Of course, advocates of this version of the argument would not go so far as to claim that they are *certain* that some evils are pointless. They would insist instead that the gratuitousness of some evil just seems to them vastly more probable than not. And because of this, they conclude that (13) is true and thus that atheism is also vastly more probable than not.

There are only three ways for the critic to respond to the argument cast this way. The first two aim to show that we have good reason to *reject* (13). One way to show this is to embrace (12) and show that we have very good reason to believe in the existence of God. This would entail that (13) is false. The second is to show that we do, after all, know all, many, or some of the reasons that God permits the evils in the world, and that this knowledge either shows us that (13) is false or at least drastically lowers our confidence in it. The third way is to argue that the atheist simply has *no good reason to accept* that (13) is true. Let's examine these responses briefly.

The first response takes the tack William Rowe has dubbed the 'G. E. Moore shift'.<sup>15</sup> The response is named after the twentieth-century philosopher G. E. Moore, who argued that we should reject many of the well-worn arguments for general skepticism because of the implausibility of their conclusion. Moore thought that arguments to the effect that we might always be dreaming or that we might be under the deceptive spell of an evil genius should not move us to accept skepticism at all. Such arguments have the general form:

- (a) If the skeptic's premises are correct, then I do not know that there is a computer in front of me.
- (b) The skeptic's premises are correct.
- (c) I do not know that there is a computer in front of me.

<sup>14</sup> While it is true that many who find the Evidential Argument plausible do so because they take it to be merely obvious that there are some pointless evils, professional philosophers defending this position have offered positive arguments for this claim. See, for instance, Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, 'Skeptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81/3 (2003), 496–516, and Nick Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (Netherlands: Springer, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> See his 'Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism'.

However, arguments of this sort invite us to accept a conclusion that is very implausible, by appealing to premises that are even *less* plausible. This naturally invites us to consider the following argument:

(a) If the skeptic's premises are correct then I do not know that there is a computer in front of me.

not-(c) I know there is a computer in front of me.

not-(b) The skeptic's premises are not correct.

The arguments share premise (a). They differ in that the skeptic adopts (b) and moves to the highly unbelievable (c), while the other adopts not-(c) and concludes the highly plausible not-(b). When confronted with arguments like this we must ask ourselves which of the two arguments is more believable. The only way to decide in this case is to ask ourselves whether premise (b) or premise not-(c) seems more plausible to us. Moore claims that not-(c) is patently more reasonable.

Likewise, one confronted with the Evidential Argument must compare that argument to the following one:

(12) If there were a God, there would be no gratuitous evils (GEs).

(15) There is a God.

(16) There are no GEs.

Since the Direct Evidential Argument and the above argument share premise (12), the only question is whether it is more reasonable to accept (13) (that there are GEs) or (15) (that God exists). One confronted with the problem of evil might well conclude that (15) is more reasonable and thus that the Direct Evidential Argument should be rejected.

What might convince us that it is more reasonable to accept (15) than (13)? Perhaps it is the evidence arising from consideration of one or more of the arguments that philosophers offer for theism. This sort of evidence is communicable and thus can be shared with the evidential critic who can subject it to direct critical scrutiny. Perhaps the various arguments that have been offered for the existence of God would suffice to convince the critic as well, perhaps not. Both parties in the dispute ought to be aware, however, that even if the critic of theism remains unconvinced that the (communicable) evidence favoring (15) outweighs the grounds the critic has for affirming (13), the theist might still reasonably conclude the opposite. One reason for this is that the theist might believe that the critic has simply misunderstood the weight of the evidence presented in favor of theism. In addition, or instead, the theist might be in possession of incommunicable evidence which the critic lacks and which accounts for the strength of his belief in (15).

We can illustrate this point as follows. Perhaps one day you and I meet. After some conversation, I mention that I am married. A skeptical look comes across your face. How, you wonder, could he have fooled someone into marrying



him? You express your doubts, and I undertake to convince you that I am, in fact, married. I show you my wedding ring, some pictures of my wife and children in my wallet, etc. You survey the evidence, but none of it convinces you. Anyone, you tell yourself, can purchase a gold band, and anyone can download pictures and pretend they are pictures of family members. Having exhausted all of the evidence at my disposal, I surrender; I acknowledge that I am not going to convince you. But in surrender I only concede that you are entitled to maintain your belief that I am not married. I certainly do *not* concede that since the evidence I showed you was insufficiently convincing I should give up *my* belief that I am married. And the reason for this is simple: *my* evidence is not the evidence I shared with you. What I shared was the *communicable* evidence. What convinces me of this belief are my own memories of past experiences—memories that cannot be (directly) shared. In similar fashion, the theist is fully entitled to reject (13) on the basis of the fact that she is in possession of incommunicable grounds or evidence for her theistic belief that outweigh any likelihood she attaches to (13). The most obvious sort of incommunicable evidence that might be relevant here is religious experiences on the part of the theist.<sup>16</sup> In any case, unless the theist thinks that the communicable evidence is likely to be sufficiently weighty, something that seems doubtful to many theists in light of the recent doubts about the evidential value of theistic arguments, she will need to pursue one of the other objections to the Direct Argument, at least if her aim is to help the atheist see why she should not endorse atheism on the grounds of the argument found in premises (12), (13), and (14).

The second way that one might respond to the Direct Evidential Argument is to offer what appear to be good reasons for God to allow the evils that there are. If there are such reasons, it will make us far less confident that other evils (which we cannot explain) really don't have any explanation. Notice that one can respond successfully to the argument in this way even if one does not have an explanation for every evil or every type of evil permitted that someone might take to be gratuitous. What one will need is at least a few plausible explanations. An analogy will help us see why.

Last fall I was flying from Shanghai to Philadelphia and had to change planes in Tokyo. A couple sat next to me who did not stop complaining from the moment they sat down. And they had a number of complaints: the flight did

<sup>16</sup> Whether or not religious experiences can have the evidential value supposed in this discussion is controversial. Those interested in pursuing this topic further should consult the following. For introductory readings on the topic: Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), sect. 4. For a more detailed examination of the issues: William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and B. Clark and W. Power (eds.), *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 31, 2–3 (1992), special issue: 'The Epistemic Status of Religious Belief'.

not board quickly enough, the seats were uncomfortable, there was not enough room for their carry-on luggage, and so on and so on. In addition, they told me over and over again that everything the airline did was ‘stupid’. They just could not believe that everything the employees did was so stupid. It was so ‘stupid’ that the people in the back of the airplane boarded first and took up all ‘their’ luggage space. And it was really stupid that they had to get off the plane in Tokyo with their carry-on bags since they were reboarding the same plane to the USA. It was even more stupid that the plane was taking off late and might cause passengers to miss connecting flights. What a stupid airline! You get the idea. Now I have seen airline employees do lots of things—things that were inscrutable to me. But my neighbors were being too harsh. Everyone knows that flights board from the rear to speed up the boarding time, and it is reasonable to suppose that all the passengers had to get off the plane and reboard because the security screening in Japan is more careful and thorough than the security screening in China. As for the flight leaving late, well, I had no idea what the cause of that might be. Nonetheless, I wasn’t (yet) ready to chalk it up to stupidity.

Notice that my fellow passengers thought that three things were stupid: the boarding pattern, the fact that they had to get off the plane, and the late departure. I knew the explanation for the first, had a reasonable guess as to the explanation of the second, and had no idea what the explanation was for the third. But the known and reasonable explanations in the first two cases made me reluctant to think there was no explanation for the third. I was agnostic about that. In the same way, if a critic of the Evidential Argument can construct explanations that she knows or reasonably believes to be true, this should lead us to lower our confidence in (13) correspondingly.

However, such explanations are not necessary to turn back the force of the Direct Argument, for reasons we will see next.<sup>17</sup> If we can turn back the Direct

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder has suggested that such reasons are unlikely to be sufficient either. The worry is this: Even if the critic of the Evidential Argument can come up with very plausible explanations for God permitting some evil (or even a lot of evil), what typically grips defenders of the Evidential Argument is the existence, duration, and magnitude of *horrendous evils* (mutilations, drawing and quartering, the wracking pain of cancer consuming guts and bones, the crushing hopelessness and despair of severe clinical depression, etc.). Whatever explanations the theist might offer for evil (that it is a necessary condition for morally significant freedom, that it is necessary for ‘soul-making’, etc.) could, perhaps, lower our confidence in (13) if we are thinking about non-horrendous evils. But, one might reasonably suppose, none of those explanations has the least bit of plausibility (or relevance) when it comes to explaining horrendous evils. Thus, even if the reasons I offer in attempting to explain why God might permit evil could serve to lower my confidence in claims like:

(13\*) It is very unlikely that there is some justifying reason for people experiencing the evils of sore muscles, broken relationships, lost wallets, etc.

none of this will have any relevance at all to the confidence I have in claims like:

(13\*\*) It is very unlikely that there is some justifying reason for people being exterminated through mass genocide, for the ravages of AIDS, etc.

Argument without offering such explanations then is there any reason to offer them at all? Some have argued that there is not, their denial arising directly out of the third way of responding to the Direct Argument.

### 1.3 THE INSCRUTABILITY RESPONSE

The third response to the Direct Argument claims that the defender of the argument is mistaken in thinking that we have good reason to affirm (13). There are more and less skeptical ways of defending this position. The more skeptical approach, taken by so-called skeptical theists, argues that we are in no position to judge whether or not (13) is true. To reasonably think otherwise, we would have to have some reason (indeed *good* reason) to think that we are well-positioned to judge that there are no goods (a) that God aims to bring about and (b) of which we are unaware, that might justify the permission of an evil. But, it seems, there is no good reason to think that we are well-positioned to make that sort of judgment. Furthermore, even if we were aware of all of the goods that God aims to bring about, we would further have to have some reason (indeed *good* reason) to think that we are well-positioned to understand how the permitted evils might serve as necessary conditions for outweighing goods. But, again, there seems no good reason to think we are well-positioned to understand such things. To think that, we would have to think that we are likely to know how various permitted evils might be necessary to secure goods in distant times and places. But what could make us think we are likely to know such things? After all, none of us thinks that we are in a position to describe *all* of the, say, *causal* consequences of the occurrence of any event. Particular events might be necessary conditions (causally or otherwise) for bringing about consequences hundreds or thousands of years hence. Absent omniscience, it is hard to know how we could grasp which

The reason for this is simply that any explanation I might have that is relevant to (13\*) won't have any relevance to (13\*\*).

Assessing this criticism of the second way would require a much longer discussion of theodicies of horrendous evil than I can undertake here. However, let's note a few things about it. First, this criticism of the second way is correct only if it is true that the explanations that serve to undermine our confidence in (13\*) are not in fact relevant to our confidence in (13\*\*). But it is not at all clear that this is right. For all I know the reasons that explain God's permission of broken relationships are quite relevant to the explanation of God's permission of mass genocide. Perhaps the good of morally significant freedom, or creaturely interdependence, or . . . do in fact serve to explain both. I don't think we are entitled to much confidence that this is the case . . . or that it isn't the case. Second, it is not clear that even if the explanations relevant to (13\*) are not directly relevant to (13\*\*), the explanations for the first should not still undermine our confidence in the second. This is what the 'stupid airline' example was supposed to illustrate. If a number of practices of the airline are unreasonable to me, and I then come into possession of a number of good reasons for some of these practices, this will, under suitable conditions, undermine my confidence that the other practices that seem unreasonable really are. Of course, the trick here is specifying what the 'suitable conditions' are.

events are necessary conditions for other particular events which are distant in time and space.<sup>18</sup>

We can, however, take a less skeptical approach in these matters. A less skeptical theist might argue, for example, that given the immensity of divine goodness and the finitude of our human cognitive and moral faculties, it seems likely that there are some, perhaps many, types of good that God aims to bring about in creation with which we are not in any way acquainted. And if we do not even know what the relevant goods are for which evils might be necessary conditions, our attempts to make judgments about whether or not evils are gratuitous will be futile. On this view, we should conclude not (as the skeptical theist does) that we are in no position to make judgments about whether or not there are unknown goods for which some permitted evils are necessary, rather we should conclude that we are (likely) *not well-positioned* to make such judgments.<sup>19</sup> The less skeptical theist might argue, second, that even if we believed ourselves to be acquainted with the goods God aims to bring about in creation, there is good reason to think that we would be unable to grasp whether or not permitting particular types or token instances of evil plays a role in bringing those goods about. Here the reasoning will be similar to that set out above. Since we are so poor at discerning the consequences of present events for the future, and so ill-equipped to understand which conditions might be necessary for states of affairs that are spatially or temporally distant, we would

<sup>18</sup> This more skeptical stance is defended in, for example, Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil', *Noûs*, 35/2 (2001), 279; Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil'; and William Alston, 'Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil', these latter both in Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996), at pp. 292–3 and 321 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder has (in correspondence) challenged this first less skeptical claim as follows. Let S stand for the claim that 'God's cognitive and moral attributes swamp those of human creatures'. Let U stand for the claim that 'there are some, perhaps many, types of good that God knows but with which we are unacquainted'. The less skeptical theist is committed to the claim that  $P(U/S) > 0.5$ . But why should we think this when a number of analogous conditional probabilities are low or zero. Consider U1: 'There are some, perhaps many, simple mathematical truths which God knows but with which we are unacquainted', or U2: 'There are some, perhaps many, ways in which chess pieces can move that God knows but with which we are unacquainted', or U3: 'There are some, perhaps many, types of salmon of which God is aware, but with which we are unacquainted', etc. The value of these conditional probabilities is, it is reasonable to think, zero. Why conclude any differently with respect to U? The answer is that U is not properly analogous to the other claims. What is true of U, and false of these alternatives, is that goodness is simply not a concept for which we have a transparent grasp of its intrinsic nature. Defending this claim in any detail would require, first, setting out an account of what goodness consists in. That is a task that outstrips a footnote (not to mention a page, section, or chapter). However, the view I find most plausible in this regard is a Platonic account defended along the lines recently proposed by Robert Adams (see his *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)). On this account goodness consists in a particular species of resemblance to the divine. Not surprisingly, there are many ways in which resemblance to the divine can occur and, given S, it is reasonable to think that those ways vastly outstrip our ability to grasp them.

be similarly poor at discerning which permitted evils are necessary conditions for purported outweighing goods.

Our less skeptical theist can add a third reason to be doubtful that we have good grounds for affirming (13). In considering the Necessity Condition we noted that an evil is permissible when it or some equally bad or worse evil must be permitted in order to secure an outweighing good (and the other two conditions for morally permitting an evil are met as well). To have the good of the new car I had to choose to live without the sound system or the blue color. Anyone who knew my preferences and saw the car that I actually picked would initially be surprised that it lacked the sound system and would be at a loss to explain it unless they were aware of the limited choices I confronted at the dealer. Even if one might surmise that the explanation for this fact was a limited range of available options, there would be no way of guessing that the two best options were a car that lacked only a sound system or a car that lacked only the blue color. This is relevant here since it shows us that unless we are aware of what the relevant options are when it comes to divine creation, it will be hard for us to know what evils are avoidable and which are not. If God had only two creative options that were identical except that one contained a murder in 1928 in Moscow and the other contained a murder in 2003 in Berlin, God might be ambivalent about the choice between them. If he actualizes the one with the murder in Moscow, philosophers in that world might puzzle over why God would permit such an evil to occur. They would likely be quite surprised and puzzled to learn that the only alternative that is as good or better would be a world with a murder in Berlin in 2003. How could these two evils be connected so that eliminating one would result in the other? The answer is that the creative options were limited. But there is no way one could know or guess such things without detailed (and unavailable) information about the options available to God. Considerations of this sort should provide us with a healthy dose of skepticism about our ability to make judgments about whether any evil is gratuitous or not, since evils not only might be necessary conditions for greater goods within a world, but might be necessary conditions for having a world that is greater on balance than alternative creation options.

Finally, our less skeptical theist can further plausibly claim that if theism is true we should expect that evil will sometimes be inexplicable for the simple reason that knowing the explanation for an evil can, in some instances, preclude the outweighing benefit that the evil was supposed to secure. In cases like that, God would have to obscure the reasons for permitting an evil from us in order to bring about the good or goods that explain the permission of the evil in the first place. To see how this might be so, let's consider another analogy. I have a friend whose teenage son likes to fix cars. But, like many teenagers, he is notorious about not returning his tools to their place. Despite my friend's repeated attempts to get him to change his ways, the bad habit continued. One day he learned that his son had invited some friends to help tune up an old car, and he decided to

teach him a lesson. He found his timing light and hid it in a little used drawer in the garage.<sup>20</sup> As the son began working he discovered that the light was missing and spent two frantic hours tracking it down. When he finally discovered it, he believed it was just another instance of his own bumbling carelessness and resolved to change his ways.

While the son learned his lesson because his father hid the tool, he did so only in virtue of his mistaken belief that he had lost it *himself*. If, after he discovered the light, the father had instead told him that *he* had hidden the light in the drawer, the son might have continued in his old pattern, either out of resentment toward his father or from the mistaken belief that his own bad habits were not responsible for any of his troubles. It is easy to see how analogous principles may well apply in typical instances of evil. The point here is simply this: even if God *could* make us aware of the reason for our suffering, doing so might sometimes thwart some role the evil is intended to serve. As a result, in these cases, we can imagine that God would prevent our discovering the explanation for his permitting evil. This provides us with still further reason for thinking that our inability to see or understand the explanation for evils is not surprising or unexpected given theism.

As mentioned earlier, the most common way of objecting to the Evidential Argument by this third route is the way of ‘skeptical theism’. However, the reasons set out above provide good grounds for thinking that ‘less skeptical theism’ has significant merit. Both views share in common a central thesis—a thesis I will refer to as *inscrutabilism*—according to which we have no good reason to think we are in a position to endorse (13) or claims of its ilk. When it makes a difference in what remains in the chapter, I will speak in the voice of the less skeptical theist.<sup>21</sup>

What the observations make plain is that the atheist’s confidence in (13) arises not because *she can see that there are no* morally sufficient reasons for some evils, but because *she cannot see that there are any* such reasons. That is, the atheist considers actual types or token instances of evil, fails to see any point to them, and thus concludes that they’re pointless. This general style of argument, moving from a failure to perceive something to a conclusion that the thing is absent, has been labeled a ‘noseeum’ inference.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For younger readers, a timing light is a device used to tune up a car in the days before electronic ignition.

<sup>21</sup> This is, of course, to defend a stronger claim when the weaker (mere ‘skeptical-theism’) claim would suffice. Still, the arguments provided here seem to me to warrant the stronger claim. For those who find defense of the stronger position implausible, they are invited to reinterpret the arguments in the remainder in the voice of the skeptical theist.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, S. J. Wykstra’s ‘Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil’, in Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 126–50. It is worth noting here that while the literature casts the arguments in terms of ‘not seeing’ reasons for the permission of evil, what is really at stake is the inability of those defending the Evidential Argument to *conceive* of such reasons. So, to return to my basketball-game analogy earlier, when I left the game with three minutes to go and

Are *noseeum arguments* good arguments? Sometimes they are. If my wife asks me to get her the milk from the refrigerator and I open the door, look carefully, and don't see any milk there, it is reasonable for me to conclude that there is no milk in the refrigerator because 'I don't see it'. That is a good *noseeum argument*. But not all *noseeum arguments* are good. Imagine that you go to the doctor to get your immunizations. The doctor removes the protective sleeve from the needle and is about to inject you with it when he accidentally drops it on the floor. He picks it up and appears ready to inject you when you object: 'Doctor, I think that needle might be dirty; there might be germs on it!'. The doctor holds the needle up to the light, closes one eye, and stares at it intently. After a few seconds he says, 'I have looked very closely and I don't see any germs on it; there's nothing to worry about'. This doctor has made a *noseeum inference*—and it is a *bad one*.

What separates good *noseeum inferences* from bad ones? For a *noseeum inference* to be good two conditions must be met. First, it must be the case that I have good reason to think that I am looking for the thing in question in the right place. If my wife asks me if we have any milk and I look in the oven, I am looking in the wrong place. My failing to see it *there* would not be good evidence that we don't have any milk. Second, it must be the case that I have good reason to think that I would see the thing in question if it really were there. If my wife asks me if we have ants in our lawn and I look out the window and say 'Nope. I don't see any', I have made a bad *noseeum inference*. I am looking in the right place, but ants are too small to be seen by me even if they are there.

With this we can return to the question of whether or not the atheist is in a good position to make a *noseeum inference* to the claim that there are gratuitous evils. Are defenders of the Direct Evidential Argument more like me when I conclude that there is no milk in the refrigerator, or more like the doctor who deems the needle clean? For the reasons described above, *inscrutabilists* argue that they are like the doctor. Even if they are looking in the right place (and how would we know that they are?), there is no reason to think that they would find what they are looking for if it were there.

Two things might be thought to follow from the reply of the *inscrutabilist* if it is indeed correct. First, this reply would succeed in undercutting the support for (13) and thereby defanging the Direct Evidential Argument. Since the reasons for evil would be *inscrutable* if present, we can show the atheist that the appearances are no more trustworthy here than they are in the doctor case. Let's call this the '*inscrutability reply*' to the Evidential Argument.<sup>23</sup> Second, and just as relevant

my favorite team was behind by 30 points, I concluded that they lost because, given what I know about the rules of basketball, I could not conceive of a plausible scenario in which they went on to win. The defender of the Evidential Argument is making a parallel *no-conceivum inference*.

<sup>23</sup> There has been a great deal of discussion of what I am calling the '*inscrutability reply*' in recent years. Defenders of the evidential argument from evil have argued against this reply. Those interested in pursuing this argument are encouraged to look carefully at the article by Michael Bergmann,

for our purposes, considerations of inscrutabilism might serve more generally to undercut one's enthusiasm for engaging in the task of trying to 'explain' evil at all. There are a number of reasons for this. If our capacities for explaining apparently pointless evil are as meager as this reply suggests they might be, and since, on inscrutabilism, there is no way to know whether or not this is the case, there is not much incentive to look for connections between evils and outweighing goods. Further, since inscrutabilism shortcuts the need to seek out explanations for evil to defeat the Evidential Argument, and since we have reason to think that our attempts to explain evil would fail miserably even if we tried, perhaps the task of explaining evil is best ignored altogether. Such theorizing, we might conclude, is simply beyond our ken. Let's label this stance 'noumenalism'. The label is apt in this case since, like Kant, the inscrutabilist is here arguing that given what we know about our own cognitive capacities, we have good reason to think that we will always be stuck at the 'level of appearances' when it comes to evil—never able to know very much in the way of the truth about evil 'as it is in itself'. If inscrutabilism and noumenalism are right, then we have a powerful response to the Direct Argument, and also good reason to desist from looking for explanations for evil.

Before going further, let's take stock. In the preceding sections we have considered three ways in which one might respond to the Evidential Argument under consideration. The first way is to argue that the evidence in favor of theism (that is, in favor of (15)) is sufficiently strong to outweigh the plausibility of the claim that there are some gratuitous evils (premise (13)). This approach does not seek to undermine any reasons we might have for endorsing (13) directly, but rather appeals to evidence in favor of (15), a claim which is (as far as these arguments are concerned) incompatible with (13). The second way is to argue that there are good reasons that would justify God in permitting some (or much or all) of the evil that is permitted in the world. These reasons, if plausible, serve either to undermine or significantly lower our confidence in (13). Of course, these good reasons only defeat the Evidential Argument if they lower our confidence in (13) enough to make us think that it is false (or at least less likely than the denial of the conclusion of the Evidential Argument; that is, less likely than the denial of (14)). The third way aims to show that any initial confidence we had in (13) is misplaced, since we are not in a proper epistemic position to affirm its truth. This is the way afforded by inscrutabilism and noumenalism. As we will see shortly below, however, there is at least one other way to argue that we are not in a proper position to affirm the truth of (13) that does not involve appeal to inscrutabilism or noumenalism, and it is this approach that will be followed in the remaining chapters of the book.

cited earlier, as well as the article by Daniel Howard-Snyder and M. Bergmann, 'Grounds for Belief in God Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism more Reasonable than Theism?', in M. Peterson and R. van Arragon (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 13–25.



## 1.4 THE ARGUMENT FROM DISTRIBUTION

As mentioned earlier there is more than one way of formulating the Evidential Argument from evil. The Direct Evidential Argument took as its evidence the existence of particular instances of evil which, as far as we can make out, occur for morally permissible reasons. A second and more recent form of the Evidential Argument takes as its starting point the general pattern or distribution of evil. In other words, the inspiration for this argument comes not from considering a case of apparently pointless evil and concluding that there is likely no God. Rather, it comes from consideration of phenomena like those pointed to in the writings of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, who puzzled over the apparently indifferent distribution of evil:

You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?

(Jer. 12: 3)

Evil befalls the virtuous and the wicked in at least equal measure, and pain and pleasure do not seem to be distributed in ways that accord with merit or desert. It seems that things would be otherwise if there were indeed a God.

The Argument from Distribution has been developed in detail by the philosopher Paul Draper.<sup>24</sup> Draper asks us to consider two rival hypotheses which might be cited to explain the observed pattern or distribution of pleasures and pains that we find among human and nonhuman animals. Draper designates the observed pattern 'O.' The two explanatory hypotheses in this instance are *Theism* (*T*) and the *Hypothesis of Indifference* (*HI*), where the Hypothesis of Indifference is the claim that 'neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings of earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons'.

When we try to assess the credibility of two competing explanations, we do it by considering the relevant evidence and then asking ourselves: Are things more likely to be this way if Hypothesis 1 is correct or if Hypothesis 2 is correct? If we think that things are more likely to be as they are if Hypothesis 1 is correct than they are if Hypothesis 2 is correct then, all other things being equal, it is more reasonable to believe Hypothesis 1 over Hypothesis 2. The last time I was in Boston I happened to be outside of Fenway Park at the end of a Red Sox game. Throngs of fans poured out, many of them with Red Sox shirts and caps on. In addition, there was a small handful of fans wearing Yankees caps and shirts. Fans with Red Sox caps on looked depressed and dejected. Fans with Yankees caps on were smiling from ear to ear, giving each other high-fives while whistling and

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, his 'Pain and Pleasure', 331–50.

whooping as they walked down the street. There are two hypotheses that one might have for this behavior. Hypothesis 1: The Red Sox won and the Yankees lost. Hypothesis 2: The Yankees won and the Red Sox lost. Would the evidence here be more likely if Hypothesis 1 were true or Hypothesis 2 were true? Of course, the answer is: if Hypothesis 2 were true. And so we should conclude (again, all other things being equal) that the Yankees won.

Draper then asks us to consider the question: Would we expect things to be the way *O* describes them to be if *T* were the case or if *HI* were the case? He thinks it is fairly obvious that the answer is that it is more likely that things would be as *O* describes them if *HI* were the case, for two reasons. First, when we set aside pleasure and pain that seem to have biological value for organisms, there is no connection between the remaining types of pleasure and pain and moral goods that are taken to be central in theism (like justice and virtue). If theism were true we would expect this nonbiologically-relevant pleasure and pain to have some connection with bringing about such goods. They don't. Second, if *HI* were true we would expect that nonbiologically-relevant pleasure and pain would rather be a mere by-product of the systems that produce biologically relevant pleasure and pain, and indeed this is exactly what we find. As a result, given the relevant evidence, it seems that *HI* is much more probable than *T*. And thus it is more reasonable (all other things being equal) to accept atheism than theism.<sup>25</sup>

There are a number of important distinctions between the Direct and the Distribution Arguments. In the Direct Argument, if we have reason to think that some evil is gratuitous, then we have reason to think atheism is true. In the Distribution Argument, we are led to focus our attention on a certain range of phenomena (the distribution of pleasure and pain, to take Draper's specific example) and ask what explanations seem more likely if we concentrate on those phenomena alone. What the argument does not tell us is whether or not those phenomena are the only or the most relevant phenomena in deciding between the competitors. To see why this matters, let's return to my story about the Red Sox and Yankees fans. Yankees fans don't like the Red Sox and most of them don't like Red Sox *fans* either. Let's imagine that immediately after a game that the Red Sox won (and the Yankees lost), the fans cleared out of the stadium when, suddenly, an earthquake struck. As a result of the quake, the Red Sox's beloved Fenway Park crumbles to the ground. Perverse as it might be, many Yankees fans would be happy about that. In fact, the destruction of Fenway might even outweigh any disappointment they might have felt from having lost the game. So now imagine that as my evidence I see the distraught Red Sox

<sup>25</sup> Above I noted that this procedure can be used to decide between competing hypotheses only when 'all other things are equal'. In this case that would mean that we take the prior probability of each hypothesis to be roughly the same, and that we regard other evidence available to us as not tipping the scales in competing directions. Are all other things equal when it comes to the competing hypotheses of theism and the hypothesis of indifference? The answer is no. As a result, this argument will only become a plausible argument for atheism if these other factors can be 'controlled for'.

fans, the cheery Yankees fans, and the stadium behind them lying in ruins. What should I think about who won the game given the totality of my evidence? Well, nothing really. There is another perfectly reasonable explanation for the evidence of the happy Yankees fans and the distraught Red Sox fans—an explanation which has nothing to do with who won or lost. Those distraught looks might be caused by the collapse of the stadium instead.

Similarly, if we focus our attention simply on the distribution of pleasure and pain, we may conclude that *HI* is more reasonable than *T*. But perhaps other evidence is more relevant. And here the problems raised for the Direct Argument seem to be equally problematic for the Distribution Argument. As in the case of the Direct Argument, perhaps the more relevant data when it comes to assessing the likelihoods of *T* and *HI* comes from arguments for the existence of God. If one judges those arguments to be sound, the balance will tilt against *HI*. Or perhaps the various explanations that might be offered for God's permission of evil will be judged to be plausible and sufficient for us to conclude that evil provides no evidence favoring *HI* over *T*. Finally, the Distribution Argument faces a problem similar to the one faced by the noseem inferences in the Direct Argument. In that case we had to acknowledge that we are not well positioned to know what goods God might want to secure in creation nor how present evils might be necessarily connected to outweighing goods. In the case of the Distribution Argument we must concede, for reasons cited by the inscrutabilists, that we do not know whether or not other facts beyond the distribution of pleasure and pain—facts known or unknown—can or should tip the balance of probabilities in such a way that *HI* is more or less probable than *T*. Once again there are relevant facts that are inscrutable.

As a result, inscrutabilists raise an objection that seems to undercut the two most prominently discussed versions of the argument from evil. What is more, the claims of the inscrutabilist might be thought to encourage noumenalism. It is important then that we give some consideration to inscrutabilism and noumenalism, since one might reasonably think that accepting these claims obviates the need for a book that attempts to give any explanation for apparent evils—as this book aims to do. In light of these two positions, we can imagine a theist arguing as follows: 'There is no need for theists to give an explanation for animal suffering, since they already know how to respond to evidential challenges to theism based on apparently gratuitous evil or the distribution of evil, and that is simply to admit that they have no probative value, and that we have no business aiming to figure them out'. Is the noumenalist right? Is it time to stop reading?

### 1.5 INSCRUTABILISM AND EXPLAINING EVIL

There are at least two ways that one might resist the claims of the inscrutabilist-noumenalist. The first is to argue that, contrary to appearances, the inscrutabilist

cannot turn away the evidentialist challenge by appealing to inscrutability alone. If the defender of the evidential argument can give us reason to think that she is warranted in accepting (13) in the face of the inscrutability reply, the theist will need to look for explanations of God's permission of evil that serve to undercut that warrant. The second is to argue that even if the inscrutabilist reply to the evidential argument succeeds, there are other reasons, not related to turning back the Evidential Argument, which make it worthwhile to continue to propose explanations for evil.

I am not going to have anything to say about the first way here, except that I think that the inscrutabilist response to the Evidential Arguments succeeds. The reason I will not say anything further is straightforward enough: if it turns out that I am wrong and that the inscrutabilist response to these arguments fails, the theist will need to offer either considerations that explain (at least some of) the evil in our world or considerations that raise the probability of theism in comparison to its competitors. That is the very thing this book aims to do. As a result, if inscrutabilism fails, explanations of the sort I consider here are crucial for turning back the Evidential Argument.

What if the inscrutabilist challenge succeeds? In this case the explanations I offer here will not play any crucial role in responding to the Evidential Arguments. There are nonetheless good reasons to continue to pursue explanations for evil. One such reason is that theists in the major theistic traditions already believe that God has revealed some explanations for evil or at least some clues that are starting points for explanations in texts taken as divinely authoritative in their tradition. For example, Christians, Muslims, and Jews all claim that at least some evils experienced by human beings are punishments for wrongdoing. Theists have good reason to consider these purported explanations in order to assess their defensibility. Furthermore, while it is likely that there are some goods that God aims to bring about in creation of which we are unaware, this is not true for all goods. Theists typically take themselves to be aware both of what some of these goods are (the glory of God, bliss in the beatific vision, love and friendship between persons, etc.), and of the ways in which suffering and evil are instrumental in securing those goods. In fact, the authoritative texts of the major theistic traditions often give some quite specific examples of such explanations. For Christians, to take just one example, the pain and suffering involved in the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ are genuine evils that serve greater goods. As a result, I suspect many theists would be willing to admit that explanations for evil are not *entirely outside our ken*, as the most extreme inscrutabilist might hold.

This shows us at least one good reason why noumenalism should be rejected, and why the task of attempting to construct explanations for evil should be pursued. However, were one to reject this line of argument, it is still useful for the theist to construct explanations for evil, where possible, in an attempt to help the critic see how it could be that evils of the sort permitted in the actual

world are necessary for securing outweighing goods. We might see the usefulness of such explanations by reconsidering our analogy of the doctor and the dirty needle above. Perhaps the patient can help the doctor see the unreasonableness of his belief by pointing out that his judgments about the cleanliness of the needle are based on an errant noseem inference. But it wouldn't hurt to also hand him a magnifying glass or a microscope. Insofar as we can demonstrate to him the error of his reasoning *and* the falsity of his conclusion, so much stronger will the case against him be. If the theist wants to blunt the force of the reality of evil for the critic, the same is true in this case. How much better if the theist could go beyond arguing that our ignorance makes it unreasonable to accept the claim that there are gratuitous evils, to supplying suitable reasons that might explain God's permission of actual evils.

### 1.6 DISTASTEFULNESS, PRIDE, AND ARROGANCE

Considerations arising from inscrutabilism and noumenalism provide one reason why enthusiasm sometimes runs low when it comes to generating explanations for evil. Others lack enthusiasm for such a project because they think it to be distasteful, prideful, or arrogant.

Those who find this sort of endeavor distasteful argue that attempting to explain evil somehow serves to blind us to the genuine horror of evil, to console us into complacency, or perhaps to induce a stoic resolve with respect to evil and its consequences. Such blindness, consolation, and resolve often have the direct and unfortunate further effect of deflating our enthusiasm for opposing it.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, critics of the project of explaining evil are in some measure right. Explanations for evil are sometimes used to lull the theist into a form of complacency concerning evil. One sees this, for example, in some of the works of the seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. In his much discussed, and often lampooned, work the *Theodicy* Leibniz cites the work of another philosopher approvingly when he affirms that

vices and crimes do not detract from the beauty of the universe, but rather enhance it, just as certain dissonant notes would offend the ear by their harshness if they were heard quite alone, and yet in combination they render the harmony more pleasant. [There are also] various goods involved in evils, for instance, the usefulness of prodigality in the rich and avarice in the poor; indeed it serves to make the arts flourish.<sup>27</sup>

While Leibniz takes the gravity of evil more seriously in other places, passages like this underplay the severity of evil and our need to be concerned about it.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1988), 440.

Who could object to vices that enhance the beauty of the cosmos and contribute towards the flourishing of the arts!?

However, such inadequate explanations of evil are not reason enough to abandon our task altogether. There is, on the contrary, reason to be emphatic about the (obvious) fact that attempts to explain evil, even if they succeed, do not make it any less real, serious, and horrible. The patient whose hand is amputated due to an incurable gangrenous infection might understand that the loss was required in order to save his life. But explaining why this evil was unavoidable does not serve to diminish his suffering and loss. The loss is real and the suffering painful. No explanation of the necessity of the loss and suffering suffices to 'explain it away'. In the same way, by attempting to explain evil the theist is not, and ought not think herself to be, attempting to 'explain it away'.

Those inclined to lay the charges of pride and arrogance on those attempting to construct explanations for evil typically do so because they overestimate the explainers' ambitions. Some theists offer explanations of evil with the aim of showing in no uncertain terms exactly why God allows (at least some of the) evils that there are. We are all too familiar with the proclamations of televangelists who write off natural disasters to the sins of those who are afflicted. These confident condemnations are unsettling, in part, because of the self-righteous tones in which they are uttered. On the other hand theists who shy away from *any* attempt to explain evil are themselves forced to confront the fact that sacred writings in the major theistic traditions often provide such explanations in spite of them. Texts such as the Hebrew book of Job sometimes adopt a more skeptical stance towards the human endeavor to understand evil. But this stands in stark contrast to the fact that in some cases the explanations are plain. As noted earlier, Christians regard the Passion and death of Christ as genuine evils—but they are clear about the fact that they are evils which serve to bring about the great good of salvation for humanity. There is nothing intrinsically prideful or arrogant about claiming to know the explanations for such evils. Rather, in cases like this Christians are simply telling things as they must be told if they are to be faithful to their own narrative tradition. Such explanations are, or ought to be, rather a humble submission to one's own tradition.

In what follows we will be considering explanations of evil that for the most part stretch far beyond anything that comes straight out of purported revealed texts or theistic theological tradition. What of these? Explanations of this sort can be arrogant or prideful when they are confidently offered as the whole and sober truth concerning God's permission of evil. But this sort of thing is, and ought to be, rare. More common are attempts to show how certain goods we highly value in our world might be unavoidably caught up with the possibility of evil—perhaps even some quite severe evil. The theist offering such explanations has to be open to the possibility that he or she will be shown ways in which the goods in question might arise without any evil at all, or will be shown that

the goods in question can't possibly be reasonably taken to be outweighing. Offered in that spirit, such explanations need not smack of pride or arrogance. Such a theist is not aiming to offer the whole or sober truth about evil. These explanations are merely attempts to figure out ways to piece together parts of the theist's paradigm that may seem anomalous to her or to those who view her commitments from the outside.

Indeed, one might think there to be something more prideful or arrogant in the stance of the theist who can comfortably ignore the challenges raised by sincere critics like Rowe or Draper. Is there nothing that theists can say to them, or at least to their audience, to help them see how by their lights the pieces of the apparently disparate puzzle of creation fit together? Or is there something theists can say and yet care not to? Can theists rest content merely throwing up their skeptical hands and sending the critics on their way? It seems rather that the theist ought, as best he or she can, engage the critic by offering some sort of explanation as to how one might make sense of the apparent chaos. This book is an attempt to see how this might go when it comes to the pervasive and palpable reality of suffering among nonhuman animals.

## 1.7 WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS?

Before we proceed it is worth asking what an 'explanation' for evil looks like in this context. What is the critic of the argument from evil up to when trying to 'explain' the existence of evil, undercutting the suspicion that some evils are gratuitous? One thing that would not be useful here is the sort of explanations used to turn back the Logical Argument: explanations that show the mere logical compatibility of the existence of God and evil. Contemporary philosophers of religion call such explanations 'defenses'. Defenses will be of little use in our context because, as we have already seen, they do not aim to provide explanations that undercut the *evidential* value of evil.

Alternatively, the theist might aim to provide the known truth about why God permits evil. Such explanations, typically called 'theodicies', carry their own liabilities. First, even if one were capable of delivering on the promise of theodicy, it would be hard to know that one had succeeded. The theist's insight into the explanations for God's permission of evil is, by all accounts, simply too weak or impaired to give us any confidence that we have found a true explanation for evil, even when we have. Thus, as David Lewis claimed, constructing theodicy is just 'too hard'.<sup>28</sup> Second, it is not clear that such a true explanation, were we to find one, would move the critic who endorses (13). Perhaps such true explanations would involve claims which the critic is nonetheless in doubt about (or even believes false).

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, 'Evil for Freedom's Sake', 152.

Those who have tried to find a middle way between defense and theodicy are not in complete agreement about what is necessary. Lewis claims that we need to develop ‘hypotheses that are at least somewhat plausible, at least to the Christian [or other theist presumably],’<sup>29</sup> which show how evil provides a permissible and necessary means for certain goods. Yet this standard also seems too high. It would be nice if the theist could devise such hypotheses. But the theist’s task in this context is to preserve the reasonableness of theistic belief in the face of the apparent evidential challenge raised by evil. In that context the theist may freely admit that she is not aware of any *plausible* hypotheses which turn back the evidential challenge. Still, there might be a variety of reasons which are, for example, *true for all she knows* and which are such that if they were true they would constitute good explanations for evil (that is they would be consistent with theism and would explain why permitting the types of evil would be necessary for securing outweighing goods). Reasons like these would not fairly count as *plausible* (nor *implausible*) but rather as *as plausible as not, overall*.

Peter van Inwagen argues that what is required is rather ‘a story according to which God and suffering of the sort contained in the actual world both exist, and which is such that . . . there is no reason to think that it is false, a story that is not surprising on the hypothesis that God exists.’<sup>30</sup> However, this standard turns out to be too high still. To see why, consider the following variation on an analogy van Inwagen employs in discussing this issue. Suppose that Jane wishes to defend the character of Richard III in the face of evidence that Richard murdered two princes in the Tower. What evidence might she have? Perhaps the following: Richard’s hold on the throne was tenuous and the princes were regarded as the primary alternate claimants; a loyal servant of Richard confessed to having carried out the murders on his behalf; Richard never produced the two claimants alive to quell rumors of their murder. All of these provide Jane with ‘some reason’ to think that Richard had the princes murdered and thus to think that Richard is morally contemptible.

Still, what if Jane also accepts the following claims as, at least, epistemically possible: while Richard’s claim to the throne was tenuous, the two princes had already been ruled ineligible to assume the throne by Parliament; the loyal servant’s confession was coerced; and a claimant to one of the interred princes’ duchies had been given charge of the Tower the very night they were rumored to have disappeared.<sup>31</sup> In light of these additional possibilities, Jane considers the possible hypothesis that the claimant murdered the princes, believing that Richard would ultimately be framed for the crime. Jane does not *know* this hypothesis to be true, it is not *rendered plausible by what she knows*, and she

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, ‘Evil for Freedom’s Sake’, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Peter van Inwagen, ‘The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence’, in *God, Knowledge, Mystery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 156.

<sup>31</sup> As John Howard, later first Duke of Norfolk, was in fact.



has *some reason to believe it false*. Still, the hypothesis allows her to maintain the reasonableness of her belief in Richard's good character, since she is not justified or warranted in *rejecting* this epistemic possibility in light of the *totality* of the claims she justifiably accepts.

This, in fact, is the sort of reasoning we engage in all the time when we encounter evidential challenges to beliefs we hold with some confidence. When someone tells me that a trusted colleague was seen entering my office after hours, my first inclination is to assume that he was looking to borrow some books, not to steal them. Do I know that to be the case? Of course not. Is it rendered plausible by what I know? Surely not—he could have just as easily been borrowing a pen or an Ethernet cable. Instead, it is a hypothesis which, if true, would explain the observed evidence by invoking hypotheses which are consistent with my standing belief that he is morally upright, and which I have no good overall reason to reject. Similarly, to deflect the evidential worries raised by evil, one need only be able to construct hypotheses (a) which show how certain permitted evils meet conditions (A) through (C) described above, and (b) which she is not justified or warranted in rejecting in light of the claims she justifiably accepts.

Put this way, the task of deflecting the evidential worries raised by evil can look quite different depending on one's starting point, varying as we vary which claims one reasonably accepts and which claims the reasonable acceptances warrant one in rejecting. In what follows I will be offering a variety of potential explanations that might meet this standard, though the success of these explanations will depend largely on the extent to which one thinks the explanations (and what those explanations presume) warrant rejection in light of one's justified acceptances. In offering these explanations I will seek to show that the explanations do not stand in tension with most of what I will take to be a common set of justified acceptances endorsed by individuals who are reasonably well-educated in matters of contemporary philosophy and science.

Still, there will undoubtedly be cases in which differences in justified acceptances will fall along the very lines that divide theists and nontheists. In such cases, the explanation of evil in question will function differently for each group. For example, if the justified acceptances of theists give them insufficient reason to reject a purported explanation of evil, that explanation can serve to maintain the reasonableness of the theists' belief in the face of evidential weight of the evil in question. However, the same explanation may not deflect the evidential force of the same evil for a nontheist whose justified acceptances are quite different. If we encounter cases like this (and perhaps we will when considering explanations of the sort we will consider in, for example, Chapter 3) the task of explaining evil might divide into two different tasks: preserving reasonable belief in God in the face of evil (for theists), on the one hand, and showing that evil does not provide evidence sufficient to make it reasonable to deny theism (for the nontheist), on the other. Some explanations might be successful at one task, some at the other, and some at both.

Since the uses of the terms ‘theodicy’ and ‘defense’ are now firmly entrenched in the literature, I will avoid using them to describe the quite distinct sorts of explanations that are relevant for these purposes. Although I share the common aversion to neologisms, in this case the new category deserves a new name. Since Leibniz was accorded the courtesy of naming one of these two entrenched methods of explaining the reality of evil (‘theodicy’—the title of the only book-length work he published), perhaps we could grant him the favor one more time. In the final (Latin) section of the *Theodicy* (unfortunately not contained in the only published English-language edition of the work) Leibniz offers a masterful and insightful summary of his views on evil, cast in the terms of traditional scholastic Latin. The title of the section is ‘De Causa Dei’, a phrase adapted from juridical contexts referring to the case offered at trial on behalf of a defendant’s innocence. Such a case is offered *de causa X* or ‘on behalf of X’s innocence in light of the evidence’. The phrase provides an apt description of the sort of explanation I aim to develop here. For this reason, I will designate any explanation of evil of the sort I am seeking a *causa dei* (or ‘CD’ for short).