

1997

## God and Evil

William L. Rowe  
*Purdue University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex)

 Part of the [Epistemology Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Rowe, William L. (1997) "God and Evil," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex/vol28/iss1/5](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol28/iss1/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).



The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



*William L. Rowe*

# GOD AND EVIL

William L. Rowe

As a topic in philosophy, the problem of evil is generally considered to be the problem of trying to reconcile the existence of God with the fact that our world contains so much horrendous evil, evil that very often appears to us to be randomly distributed, without any rhyme or reason. Of course, if God is limited in power, intelligence, or goodness, the problem of reconciling his existence with the evil in our world is not so difficult. It is only if we think of God as the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good creator that the incredible amount of horrendous evil in our world creates a serious problem for us. But most of us, I suspect, do think of God in that way. After all, that is the chief way in which God has been thought of in the three major religions of the West – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And if we do so think of God, one way the evil in our world may be a serious problem for us is that it may lead us to question whether there really is such a being as God. We may reason that if there were such a being as God, there would likely be a good deal less evil in the world than there is. For evil is something that in itself is bad. So, unless God has some very good reason to permit it, being perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, he would prevent it. Of course, with some thought we can imagine reasons that God might have for permitting some evil to occur in his creation. But it is hard to imagine what good reasons God could possibly have for permitting as much horrendous evil as there is. Indeed, when we think about it, we may conclude that there are no good reasons such a being would have for permitting all the seemingly pointless evil in our world. It is this problem that I want to discuss.

Let's begin thinking about this problem by considering a simple argument from the existence of some of the evils in our world to the nonexistence of God.

1. There exist evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no good reason to permit.<sup>1</sup>
2. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a good reason to permit it.  
therefore,
3. God does not exist.

Let's say that a *theist* is anyone who believes that God exists, where God is understood to be the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good creator of the world. Now if a theist is to reject this simple argument for the nonexistence of God, she must either reject the first premise or the second premise. Most theists accept the second premise, as do nontheists. So, most theists must reject the first premise, holding instead that God has a good reason for permitting each and every evil that exists. But what would be a good reason for God to permit some evil he could prevent? Since an evil is something that by its very nature is bad, God's good reason for permitting it would have to be something else – either some outweighing good that, all things considered, he wishes to realize and cannot realize without permitting that evil<sup>2</sup>, or some equal or worse evil that, all things considered, he wishes to prevent and cannot prevent without permitting that evil. And the question we must ask ourselves is whether it is rational for us to believe that all the terrible evils that occur daily in our world are like that? Is it rational to believe that each evil is such that were an all-powerful, all-knowing being to prevent it, he would have to forfeit some outweighing good?<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it will make the issue before us a bit more concrete if we focus on some concrete examples of terrible evils, rather than just terrible evils in the abstract. Here are two examples.

A fawn is horribly burned in a forest fire caused by lightning. It lies on the forest floor suffering terribly for five days before death relieves its suffering.

A five-year-old girl is brutally beaten, raped and strangled in Flint, Michigan on New Year's eve a few years ago.

The theist must believe that for each of these evils there is some greater good to which it leads, a good that an all-powerful being simply could not realize without permitting that evil. But is what the theist believes about these two evils really so? Is there really some great good that an omnipotent being could bring about only by permitting that fawn to be badly burned and to suffer intensely for five long days before death relieves its torment? And is there really some great good that an omnipotent being could bring about only if he permits that little five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan to be savagely beaten, raped, and strangled? And even if it should somehow be so in these two cases, is it true that *all* the instances of intense human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world lead to greater goods in such a way that even an *all-powerful* being could not have achieved *any* of those goods without permitting the instances of suffering that supposedly lead to them? In light of our knowledge of the scale of human and animal suffering occurring daily in our world, the idea that none of those instances of suffering could have been prevented by an all-powerful being without the loss of a greater good must strike us as an extraordinary idea, quite beyond our belief. And if it does strike us in this way, the first premise of the argument we are considering – There exist evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing perfectly good being would have no good reason to permit – is bound to strike us as plausible, something quite likely to be true. But since the second premise is generally agreed to be true, we should then conclude that it is likely that our conclusion is true, that God does not exist.

My chief concern in this paper is to describe and critically evaluate what seem to me to be the most promising theistic responses to the challenge I've just described. I believe there are three such responses.

## I

The first response the theist may put forth goes something like this.

"The first point I want to make is that thus far we have been given no reason at all to think that premise (1) is true. For all you have pointed out is that we don't know what good it is that justifies God in permitting many horrendous evils, like the fawn's suffering or the little girl's suffering. But to argue from the fact that we don't know what good it is that justifies God in permitting a certain evil to the conclusion that there is no such good is to engage in a fallacious argument from ignorance; we don't know of any justifying good, therefore there isn't any. So, you haven't really given any good reason at all to think that there are terrible evils for which there are no God-justifying goods. All that you have shown, if you have shown anything, is that if these evils do serve some God-justifying goods, we don't know what they are. And the interesting question to ask about our ignorance of these justifying goods is this: Given that God's mind *infinitely transcends* ours, is it really at all likely that the goods for the sake of which he permits much horrendous suffering will be goods we comprehend? After all, isn't God in relation to us like good, loving parents in relation to their small child? Such parents may permit their very young child to suffer for goods that the child simply cannot comprehend. So too, we should expect that if God exists he may permit many instances of human or animal suffering so as to realize goods our minds simply cannot comprehend. And if that is so, the fact that we don't know the goods that justify God in permitting much horrendous



suffering cannot really be a reason for thinking he doesn't exist. For it is just what we should expect to be true if he does exist."<sup>4</sup>

What are we to make of this response by the theist? Are we really just arguing from ignorance? Perhaps we can come to see that we are not by first distinguishing between goods we know about (goods within our ken) and goods beyond our ken. Consider the suffering of the five-year-old girl as she was brutally beaten, raped, and strangled on New Year's eve a few years ago in Flint, Michigan. I believe that no good we know about justifies God in permitting that suffering. By 'goods we know about' I *mean* goods that we have some cognitive grasp of, even though we may have no knowledge at all that they have occurred or ever will occur. For example, consider the good of the little girl experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God. Theists consider this an enormous personal good, perhaps the greatest personal good possible for the little girl. So, even though we don't have a very clear grasp of what this great good involves, and even though we don't know that such a good state of affairs will ever be realized, I include the good of her experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God among *the goods we know about*. Of course, if some good state of affairs we know about does justify God in permitting her suffering, that good state of affairs must have already been actualized or become actual at some point in the future. But the notion of a good we know about extends to many future goods and to goods that never have and never will occur. And what we have good reason to believe, I think, is that none of the goods we know about justifies God in permitting the horrendous suffering of that little girl. For with respect to each such good we consider, we have reason to believe either that it isn't good enough to justify God in permitting that evil, or that the good in question cannot justify God because it is never actualized, or that the good in question could likely be actualized by God without his having to permit the horrendous suffering of that little girl.

Of course, even granting that we know of many great goods and have reason to think that none of these goods justifies God in permitting the little girl's suffering, there still remains the possibility that some good we cannot even conceive does so. And it is here that the theist may appeal to the analogy between the good parent and God. For we cannot deny that some good the child's mind cannot even conceive may justify the parents in permitting the child to suffer. And by analogy won't the same be true of God in relation to us as his children? Indeed, since the disparity between his mind and ours may greatly exceed that of the good parents' minds to the mind of their child, isn't it likely that the goods that justify him in permitting us to suffer will often be beyond our comprehension? But against this argument from analogy, two points need to be made.

First, although arguments from analogy are rather weak, I think the analogy in question has some merit if drawn between a good parent and a good deity of considerable but nevertheless *finite* power and intelligence. For, like the good parent, a deity with great but finite powers may reasonably believe that he cannot realize some important future good for some of his creatures without permitting a present evil to befall them. And there may be occasions when, like the good parent, the finite deity is simply unable to prevent a dreadful evil befalling his creatures even though there is no good at all served by it. But the theistic God has unlimited power and knowledge. A good parent may be unable to prevent some suffering her child undergoes, or even the child's death from some painful disease. Can we seriously think that an *infinitely* powerful, all-knowing deity was powerless to prevent the horror of Auschwitz? A good parent may see that she cannot realize some important future good for her child without permitting some present evil to befall the child. Can we seriously think that there is some far off future good for the victims of Auschwitz, a good that a deity of *infinite* power and knowledge judged to be

worth the horror of Auschwitz, and was powerless to achieve without permitting that horror? Perhaps we can if we turn from reason to faith. But the infinite distance between the God of traditional theism and the good mother with the sick child doesn't, in my judgment, provide human reason with good grounds for thinking that such a being would be powerless to prevent any of the countless, seemingly pointless horrors in our world without losing some good so distant from us that even the mere conception of it must elude our grasp.

But suppose we do reason from the good-parent analogy to the behavior of an all-powerful, all-knowing, infinitely good deity. I think we shall see that the good parent analogy may lead in a different direction from what its proposers desire. For we know that when a good, loving parent permits her child to suffer severely in the present for some outweighing good the child *cannot comprehend*, the loving parent then makes every effort to be consciously present to the child during its period of suffering, giving special assurances of her love, concern, and care. For the child may believe that the parent could prevent her present suffering. So, of course, the parent will be particularly careful to give her child special assurances of her love and concern during this period of permitted suffering for a distant good the child does not understand. And indeed, what we know about good, loving parents, especially when they permit their children to suffer intensely for goods the children cannot comprehend, is that the parents are almost always consciously present to their children during the period of their suffering, giving special assurances of their love and care. So, on the basis of the good parent analogy, we should infer that it is likely that God too will almost always be consciously present to humans, if not other animals, when he permits them to suffer for goods they cannot comprehend, giving special assurances of his love for them. But since countless numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of God's presence or any special assurance of his love and comfort, we can reasonably infer either that God does not exist or that there are unknown reasons why he does not act toward his children in the way in which good parents almost always act when they permit their children to suffer for reasons they cannot comprehend.<sup>5</sup>

Our conclusion about the theist's first response is this. The argument in support of premise (1) is not an argument from ignorance. It is an argument from our knowledge of many goods and our reasonable judgment that none of them justifies God in permitting instances of horrendous evil. It is also an argument from our knowledge of what a being of infinite power, intelligence, and goodness would be disposed to do and would be capable of doing. Of course, there remains the logical possibility both that some goods incomprehensible to us justify God in permitting all these horrendous evils that occur daily in our world and that some goods incomprehensible to us justify God in not being consciously present to so many who endure these horrendous evils. So, we cannot *prove* that premise (1) is true. Nevertheless, the first response of the theist should, I believe, be judged insufficient to defeat our reasons for thinking that premise (1) is probably true.

Before turning to the theist's second response, we should note that some theists will protest the conclusion we've come to about the first response. Here is what such a theist may say.

"Your distinction between goods we know about and goods beyond our ken is well-taken. Moreover, you are right to insist that your argument is not a flagrant example of an argument *ad ignorantiam*. But there is one quite important point you have failed to establish. It is crucial to your argument that we should expect to know the goods for the sake of which God permits much terrible suffering or, failing such knowledge, be

particularly aware of God's presence and his love for us during the period of intense suffering for goods we cannot comprehend. For if we have no good reason to expect to know these goods, or to expect God's special presence during our suffering, then the fact that we don't know them and don't experience God's presence and love won't really count against the existence of God. And my point is that God may have good reasons for not revealing these goods to us. And he also may have good reasons (unknown to us) for not disclosing himself and his love during the period when many suffer terribly for goods they cannot comprehend. How are you able to show that this point of mine is just a mere *logical possibility* and not the way things really are? I think you need to treat more seriously than you do the distinct possibility that God's reasons for permitting so much horrendous evil involve goods that are presently incomprehensible to us."

The theist here raises an important point. Using the theist's own good-parent analogy, I argued that there is reason to think that when we don't know the goods for the sake of which God permits some horrendous suffering, it is likely that, like the good parent, he would provide us, his children, with special assurances of his love and concern. Since many endure horrendous suffering without any such special assurances, I suggested that we have further reason to doubt God's existence. And the theist's reply must be that there are unknown goods that justify God in not being present to us when we endure terrible suffering for goods beyond our ken. And I've allowed that we cannot *prove* that this isn't so. It remains a logical possibility. But I've said that we can conclude, nevertheless, that premise (1) is probably true. But the theist says that I'm not justified in concluding that premise (1) is probably true unless I give a reason to think it likely that there are no unknown goods that justify God in permitting much horrendous suffering or no unknown goods that justify God in not being present to us when we endure suffering for unknown goods. The theist may grant me that no goods we know of play this justifying role. But before allowing me to conclude that it is probable that premise (1) is true and, therefore, probable that God does not exist, the theist says I must also provide some grounds for thinking that no unknown goods play that justifying role.

Suppose we are unsure whether Smith will be in town this evening. It is just as likely, say, that he will be out of town this evening as that he will be in town. Suppose, however, that we do know that *if* Smith is in town it is just as likely that he will be at the concert this evening as that he won't be. Later we discover that he is not at the concert. I conclude that given this further information (that he is not at the concert) it is now less likely that he's in town than that he's out of town, that given our information that he is not at the concert, it is more likely that he is out of town than that he is in town. I do admit, however, that I haven't done anything to show that he is not actually somewhere else in town. All I've established is that he is not at the concert. I acknowledge that it is logically possible that he's somewhere else in town. Nor do I know for certain that he is not somewhere else in town. All I claim is that it is *probable* that he is not in town, that it is *more likely* that he is not in town than that he is in town. Those who want to believe that Smith is in town may say that I'm not justified in concluding that it is probable that he's out of town *unless* I give some reason to think that he is not somewhere else in town. For, they may say, all I've done is exclude one of the places he will be if he is in town. Similarly, the theist says that if God exists then either some known good or some unknown good justifies him in permitting some horrendous evil. We might even agree that if God exists it may be equally likely that the justifying good is a good we know of as that it be a good beyond our ken. After all, when we understand why God may be permitting some terrible evil, that evil will be easier to bear than it is if we haven't a clue as to why God permits it to occur. Suppose we then consider the goods we know of and



conclude that none of them justifies God in permitting that terrible evil. The theist may even agree that this is true. I then say that it is *probable* God does not exist. The theist says I'm not justified in drawing this conclusion *unless* I give some reason to think that no unknown good justifies God in permitting that terrible evil. For, he says, all I've done is exclude one sort of good (goods known by us) that may be God's reason for permitting that terrible evil. Who is right here?

Let's go back to the claim that it is *probable* that Smith is not in town this evening. How can we be justified in making that claim if we've learned only that he is not at the concert? The reason is this. We originally knew that it was equally likely that he would be out of town as in town. We also agreed that *if* he is in town it is equally likely that he will be at the concert as that he won't be. Once we learn he is not at the concert, the likelihood that he is out of town must increase, as does the likelihood that he is somewhere else in town. But since it was equally likely that he is out of town as in town, if the likelihood that he is out of town goes up it then becomes greater than 1/2, with the result that it is *probable* that he is not in town.<sup>6</sup>

Turn now to the existence of God and some terrible evil. Either God exists or he does not. Suppose for the moment that like the case of Smith being or not being in town, each of these (God exists, God does not exist) is equally likely on the information we have prior to considering the problem of evil. We then consider some terrible evil. Let's suppose, before we examine that evil and consider what sort of good (known or unknown) justifies God (if he exists) in permitting it, we take it to be as likely as not that the justifying good is known to us as that it is unknown to us. We then examine the known goods and that terrible evil and come to the conclusion that no known good plays that justifying role. That discovery parallels our discovery that Smith is not at the concert. And the result is just the same: it is then more probable than not that God does not exist.

## II

The second response the theist can give to the challenge of the problem of evil is the following.

"It is a mistake to think that the goods for which God permits these horrendous evils are totally beyond our ken. For religious thinkers have developed very plausible *theodicies* that suggest a variety of goods that may well constitute God's reasons for permitting many of the horrendous evils that affect human and animal existence. When we seriously consider these theodicies we can see that we have good reason to think that premise (1) is false. For these theodicies provide us with plausible accounts of what may be God's good reasons for permitting the evils that occur in our world."

The theist's first response was to argue both that we have given no reason at all for thinking that premise (1) is true and that our ignorance of many goods that God's mind can comprehend precludes us from being able to establish that premise (1) is true. In the second response, the theist proposes to give a good reason for thinking that premise (1) is false. And, of course, to the extent that theodicies do provide a good reason for rejecting premise (1), to that extent the theist will have pointed the way to reconciling the existence of God with the fact that our world contains the horrendous evils that it does. But do these theodicies really succeed in providing a good reason for rejecting premise (1)? I don't think they do. But to demonstrate this we would have to show that these theodicies, taken together, are really unsuccessful in providing what could be God's reasons for permitting the evils in the world. Although I believe this can be done,



I propose here to take just one of these theodicies, the one I think is most promising, and show how it fails to provide a good reason for rejecting premise (1). I refer to the *soul-making theodicy* developed at considerable length and with great skill by John Hick.<sup>7</sup>

Early on in his career Hick adapted Wittgenstein's idea of "seeing as" as a conceptual tool for understanding all of our experience of the world. Given different concepts and/or different backgrounds, two individuals may encounter the same reality, the one experiencing it as one thing, the other experiencing it as something else. Of course, if two people have the concept of red and have normal vision and are similarly placed, they cannot help but see something as red. But even in ordinary visual experience, one person may see a complicated series of dots on paper as a picture of a human face, while another may see it only as a series of dots. Hick argues that the world and events in it may be experienced merely as natural phenomena and also may be experienced religiously. But if there is a God, why should he not make his presence evident to us in a compelling way? Why does God hide himself among the series of dots, rather than confronting us unambiguously like the redness of a brilliant sunset? Hick's answer is that if God's acts were overwhelmingly manifest and unmistakable, then we would have no *cognitive freedom* in relation to our maker. What is most valuable, Hick argues, is the state in which a person comes *freely* to develop spiritually into a child of God.

Hick's response to the perennial challenge of the problem of evil is to develop and defend a theodicy stemming from Irenaeus, a theodicy in which the divine purpose is to create imperfect creatures within an environment in which they can freely develop themselves into moral and spiritual beings and eventually enter into an eternal life of love and fellowship with God. In support of Hick's soul-making theodicy, I do think (a) that if we believe there is an omnipotent, perfectly good being, it would not be unreasonable for us to believe that this being might have such a purpose for us, and (b) that given this purpose it is understandable why such a being would permit the existence of moral and natural evil in the world. For unless there are real obstacles in nature to overcome, and unless human beings are capable of doing real harm to one another, freely attained moral and spiritual growth would be practically, if not theoretically, impossible.

Although Hick's soul-making theodicy can explain why the world contains both moral and natural evil, it initially seems incapable of accounting for the apparently excessive amount of evil in our world and the fact that much of this evil seems quite unrelated to moral and spiritual development. Hick is aware of this major difficulty for his theodicy. Indeed, what seems obvious to Hick and to us is that the amount and intensity of evil in our world far exceeds what is needed for soul-making, and that the evils in our world are distributed in a haphazard fashion, apparently unrelated to anyone's stage of development in soul-making. In light of this, how can anyone seriously propose the good of soul-making as the reason for God's permission of all the pain and suffering in our world?

Hick's persistent answer is to employ what he calls the method of "counterfactual hypothesis" and to emphasize the importance of mystery in soul-making. Let's see how the argument goes with respect to the fact that the amount and intensity of evil in our world appears to far exceed what could be rationally intended for soul-making. In response, Hick asks us to consider a world in which no evil occurs in an amount beyond what is needed to play a role in significant soul-making. Moreover, he asks us to suppose that we all *know* that this is so. He then argues that the result would be that we would make no significant efforts to overcome evil. But it is precisely such efforts (or the need for them) that lead to significant moral growth and development. A similar line of argument is developed for the haphazard, random distribution of evil. In a world in

which suffering by a person is permitted only if it is merited or needed for soul-making, then if we further suppose that we all *know* this to be so, no one would make efforts to relieve the suffering of others. Paradoxically, then, soul-making would be considerably limited in a world in which we all knew or rationally believed that suffering is permitted only as it is required for soul-making.

The point of Hick's argument seems to be this. Significant soul-making requires not only the existence of evils; it also requires that it be *rational for us to believe* that excess evils exist; it must be rational for us to believe that evils occur that omnipotence could have prevented without loss of significant soul-making. For if we were to believe that each evil that occurs is one that even an omnipotent being could not prevent without loss of soul-making, we would make no significant efforts to overcome evils. And, as we've noted, it is precisely such efforts that are crucial to significant moral growth and development. Significant soul-making, then, has two requirements. First it has a *factual-requirement*: there must be real evils to be overcome. Second, it has an *epistemic requirement*: it must be rational for us to believe that excess evils occur in our world. This second requirement has the air of paradox. It seems to say that evils not needed for soul-making are, after all, needed for soul-making. But it doesn't say this. What Hick's paradox says (roughly) is that rationally believing that there are evils not needed for soul-making is, after all, needed for soul-making. And, although paradoxical, such a claim is not incoherent.<sup>8</sup>

How does Hick's argument strengthen his theodicy? Well, having noted that soul-making requires real evils to be overcome, the problem was that it seems obvious to us that the amount and intensity of evil is far in excess of what an omnipotent being would have to permit for significant soul-making to occur. Hick's ingenious response is that if it were not rational for us to believe that excess evil occurs, soul-making would be significantly diminished. Some might reject his claim. I am inclined to accept it. And what this implies is that the amount, intensity and distribution of evil in our world must be such as to create and sustain our belief that evils occur in excess of what an omnipotent being would need to permit for our moral and spiritual growth.

Suppose we grant the force of Hick's argument. My objection to it is that it doesn't really solve the problem of the amount and intensity of evil in our world. For it not only seems obvious to us that evil occurs far in excess of what an omnipotent being would have to permit for soul-making, it also seems obvious to us that evil occurs far in excess of what an omnipotent being would have to permit for us to be rational in believing that excess evil occurs. Clearly, if there is an omnipotent being, such a being could have prevented a good deal of evil in our world without in the least altering the fact that the amount and intensity of evil makes it rational for us to believe that evils occur in excess of what an omnipotent being would need to permit for our moral and spiritual growth. Who would say that if only five million had been permitted by omnipotence to perish in the holocaust it would *not* have been rational to believe that evils occur that omnipotence could have prevented without loss of our moral and spiritual growth? Hick's argument does show that our world must have enough evil to support the belief that there are excess evils. But since it is clear that evil occurs far in excess of what is necessary to support such a belief, Hick's argument, in my opinion, doesn't solve the problem of the amount, intensity and distribution of evil in our world.

## III

The third way a theist may respond to the argument from evil that we've been discussing is to turn the argument on its head. Since nearly everyone accepts the second premise of the argument, the dispute between the theist and the proponent of the argument from evil has been focussed on the first premise. The proponent of the argument thinks that the first premise is probably true, and concludes, therefore, that it is likely that God does not exist.<sup>9</sup> The theist thinks that the conclusion of the argument is false; she thinks that God does exist. So why can't the theist start with *God exists* as her first premise, keep the same second premise, and conclude that it is not true that evils exist that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no reason to permit? What I'm suggesting here is that instead of trying to refute the original argument by arguing *directly* against its first premise, the theist may choose to begin her counter-argument with a premise that she thinks she has good reasons to believe – *that God exists*. Her argument, then, will proceed as follows.

4. God exists.
5. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a good reason to permit it.  
therefore,
6. It is false that evils exist that an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would have no reason to permit.

What would be wrong with the theist making this kind of *indirect* response to the first premise of the argument from evil for the nonexistence of God?

Let's consider an analogy to the theist's third response. I would say that I know that I am now standing up and talking. Suppose someone who has read Descartes or Russell argues as follows:

7. For all you know, you are now sound asleep and just dreaming that you are standing up and talking.
8. If you are sound asleep and just dreaming that you are standing up and talking then you don't know right now that you are standing up and talking.  
therefore,
9. You don't really know right now that you are standing up and talking.

If I should agree that the conclusion (9) follows from (7) and (8), and if I should find no fault with the second premise, (8), how should I respond to (7)? Should I try to refute it by some kind of direct attack – perhaps asking you to confirm that I really am standing up and talking, and not just dreaming that I am? Perhaps not. Perhaps my best response to (7) is to argue against it indirectly. I can turn the argument on its head and argue as follows.

10. I really do know right now that I am standing up and talking.
11. If I am now sound asleep and just dreaming that I am standing up and talking, then I don't know right now that I'm standing up and talking.  
therefore,
12. I can be certain that I am not now sound asleep and just dreaming that I am standing up and talking.

Undoubtedly, there are important differences between the argument from unjustified evils to the nonexistence of God and the argument from the possibility that I am dreaming to my not knowing right now that I am standing up and talking. Perhaps an indirect response to the first premise of the dream argument is more reasonable than an indirect response to the first premise of the unjustified evils argument. In any case, my



suggestion is that it may be the best response in both cases.

Purdue University

## ENDNOTES

1. I am assuming here that any evil that God permits is an evil that he could have prevented.
2. It could be that the outweighing good cannot be realized without permitting *that* evil or *some other* evil just as bad. But for ease of understanding the fundamental issue I will ignore this complication.
3. To avoid needless complexity, I'll not mention the other possibility, that God permits the evil in question so as to prevent some equal or greater evil.
4. This response has been elegantly developed by Stephen Wykstra in "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 ( 1984): 73-93 .
5. Theists may say that there are special reasons applying to God, but not to loving parents, that prevent him from making his loving concern for our sufferings apparent to us, thus adding a further epicycle to the theistic response to evil. Tough minded theists may insist that it is human perversity itself that prevents God from responding to human suffering in the way the loving parent responds to her child's suffering. Tender minded theists may say that our freedom in relation to God would be destroyed if he were not to remain hidden during our times of apparently pointless travail and suffering. For a helpful discussion of questions concerning the hiddenness of God see John Schellenberg's *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993 ).
6. Two important points must not be neglected when we consider arguments of this sort. If it is initially *very likely* that Smith is in town, then our discovery that he is not at the concert will not significantly diminish the probability that he is in town. Second, if it is initially *very likely* that if Smith is in town, he won't be at the concert, then our discovery that he is not at the concert will not significantly increase the probability that he is not in town.
7. See *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1996) for his fullest account of this theodicy. Portions of my discussion of Hick are taken from my essay, "Paradox and Promise: John Hick's Solution to the Problem of Evil," in *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick*, ed. Harold Hewitt, Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1991).

8. An analogy to Hick's paradox might be the following. Suppose a marathon runner is such that if he believes that he will win, he won't train and, therefore, won't win. But if he has grounds for believing that he will lose, he will train to the utmost so as to come as close to winning as he can. Of such a person it might be correct, although paradoxical, to say: "rationally believing that he won't win is, after all, required if he is to win."

9. Suppose the proponent of the argument from evil is entirely correct in concluding that it is probable that God does not exist. Will this justify the belief that God does not exist, as opposed to the conclusion that disbelief is more reasonable than belief? For an argument that it will not justify the belief that God does not exist see Stephen Wykstra's "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).