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THE NECESSITY OF GRATUITOUS EVIL

William Hasker

It is widely accepted that a morally perfect God would prevent all "gratuitous evil," evil which is not necessary for some greater good. I argue that this requirement is unsound—that "if God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, morality is undermined." Objections by William Rowe complicate the discussion of this claim but do not refute it. In conclusion, a parallel argument concerning natural evil is presented.

That evil as such is inconsistent with God's existence is not much held anymore. It is evident that some evil could be a necessary condition for the existence of a greater good, and if this is so allowing the evil might be consistent with God's goodness. But evils which serve no such good purpose, *gratuitous* evils, are still widely thought to be inconsistent with theism and to provide the basis for a strong anti-theistic argument. William Rowe, for example, argues as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby preventing the occurrence of any greater good.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby preventing the occurrence of some greater good.

Therefore,

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.¹

As an instance of the sort of gratuitous suffering his argument appeals to, Rowe asks us to imagine a forest fire in which a fawn "is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering."² Such suffering obviously could be prevented by an omnipotent being, and Rowe doesn't think there is any plausible candidate for the "greater good"³ which comes about as the result of this suffering and would have been impossible without it.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to say something about the precise sense in which the evils here discussed are "gratuitous." Actually, there are two meanings of "gratuitous" which are relevant. According to the first, which has been the predominant way of understanding this notion, an instance



of evil is gratuitous if *it is not necessary for the creation of a greater good, or for the prevention of some equal or greater evil.* (In the interest of economy, the last clause will usually be omitted.) William Rowe's argument, however, suggests a somewhat different conception of gratuitous evil.⁴ On this conception, an instance of evil is gratuitous if *it is such that an omnipotent being could have prevented it without thereby having prevented the occurrence of some greater good.* These two conceptions will coincide in application in many cases, but not in all. In the next section of this paper we shall be working with the first conception of gratuitous evil; then in the following section we shall examine some additional complications which arise from the second conception.

Theistic responses to Rowe's sort of argument often take the form of denying (1), the premise which states that there is gratuitous evil. Such responses will normally admit that there are instances of evil for which *we cannot see* any redeeming benefits, but they point out that this fact in no way warrants the conclusion that there *cannot be* any such benefits. The theist, then, is well within his rights to maintain that, as a matter of fact, every evil which occurs is in some way a necessary means to a greater good, even though we are admittedly unable, in a great many cases, to say what this greater good might be.

There is much to be learned from responses such as this, but they also face serious difficulties. Our ordinary human experience seems strongly to suggest that gratuitous evil not only exists but is abundant. Now the theist may reason that, since theism is true, the appearance of gratuitous evil, which by hypothesis is inconsistent with theism, must be *only* an appearance. But while the rational justification for accepting theism may, in the theist's view, outweigh the justification for belief in gratuitous evil, the weight of experience supporting the latter belief does seem to have considerable epistemic force, and to that extent it detracts from the overall rational support for theistic belief. It would seem, then, that a counter-argument directed at Rowe's factual premise may weaken his argument but cannot entirely eliminate its force.⁵

Is Gratuitous Evil Necessary?

In view of considerations such as this, I believe the most effective response to Rowe's argument will involve challenging, not the factual premise about the occurrence of gratuitous evil, but the second premise, which asserts that a good God would of necessity eliminate such evil.⁶ If gratuitous evil is not, after all, inconsistent with God's existence, then the existence of such evil may be cheerfully conceded, since it will not constitute decisive evidence against theism. To be sure, it seems to many to be almost self-evident that a good God would not allow gratuitous evil. But arguments for this contention are not easy to come by, and I think it may well be possible to show that theism requires nothing of the sort.⁷

Perhaps, however, it may be possible for the theist to go even farther than this. The kind of argument suggested in the previous paragraph would contend that the existence of gratuitous evil is *consistent* with theism. But suppose it could be shown that the existence of gratuitous evil is actually *entailed* by propositions which are integral to theistic belief? Michael Peterson suggests that such is indeed the case; he writes:

[I]f the conception of human free will is taken to involve the possibility of bringing about really gratuitous evil (specifically, moral evil), then God cannot completely prevent or eliminate gratuitous evil without severely diminishing free will. That would be logically impossible. At stake here is not merely the ability of humans to choose among options, but the ability to choose among significant kinds of options: between goods and evils, even the highest goods and most terrible evils. Thus, free will is most significant—and most fitting for the special sort of creature man is—if it includes the potential for utterly damnable choices and actions. This is part of the inherent risk in God's program for man.... God cannot always meticulously override human choices in order to prevent or eliminate their gratuitous evil effects and still protect a significant range of free will.... Those who agree that God should allow man significant free will and who also insist that God must not allow any gratuitous evil... are unwittingly asking for the impossible.⁸

The advantage for the theist, if the strategy suggested by Peterson could be made to succeed, is evident. But can the strategy succeed? Is the existence not only of evil, but of gratuitous evil, really entailed by theism? In what follows I shall argue that while Peterson has not shown that it is, there is nevertheless the potentiality here for a strong refutation of versions of the atheological problem of evil which are founded on gratuitous evil.

In order to examine Peterson's argument more carefully, I will now formulate two arguments which I believe he means to endorse. The first is as follows:

4. God has arranged things in such a way that human beings make morally significant free choices between good and evil.
5. It is impossible to permit someone to make a free choice between two alternatives, and at the same time prevent one of the alternatives from being chosen.

Therefore,

6. God does not prevent human beings from ever choosing evil.⁹

And now the second argument:

7. God has arranged things in such a way that human beings make morally significant free choices in which they decide between good and gratuitous evil.
5. It is impossible to permit someone to make a free choice between two alternatives, and at the same time prevent one of the alternatives from being chosen.

Therefore,

8. God does not prevent human beings from ever choosing gratuitous evil.

The purpose of each argument is to show that propositions integral to theistic belief *entail* that God does not prevent the evil in question; if this is so, then the existence of such evil not only fails to refute theism, but is actually a confirmation of theism. Both arguments are evidently valid, and premise (5), which is common to the two arguments, is a necessary truth. The only serious question concerns the acceptability of the first premise of each argument. In order for either argument to succeed, the first premise must satisfy two requirements. First, the premise must formulate a proposition which would be widely accepted as an integral part of theistic belief. Second, the premise must itself be logically possible, which means in this case that the course of action ascribed to God must be consistent with God's essential attributes, in particular with his perfect goodness.

It seems to me that premise (4) fares well in both respects. Such a proposition is indeed endorsed by a very large number of theists as an essential part of their beliefs—roughly, by all those theists who subscribe to a libertarian view of free will. And the consistency of the course of action ascribed to God in (4) would also be widely acknowledged by both theists and non-theists: it seems to be readily conceivable that God could value the exercise of morally significant free will sufficiently that this would outweigh, and justify, the occurrence of some evil as a result of such exercise.

Premise (7), on the other hand, seems by no means obviously acceptable when judged by those same two criteria. That God allows human beings to choose and carry out *gratuitous* evil is hardly a matter of widespread consensus among theists; there are, after all, a great many theists who have wanted to argue that all of the evils which actually exist are *non-gratuitous*. Nor is the logical consistency of (7) immediately evident. Indeed, those theists who have denied the existence of gratuitous evil have presumably done so because of a strong suspicion that allowing such evil would *not* be consistent with God's perfect goodness, an attribute which (we will assume) is essential to God. And there is indeed reason for suspecting the logical consistency of (7) which was not present in the case of (4). It may seem reasonable that a good God would permit evils which are necessary for the occurrence of a greater good, and (4) suggests a good reason to think that some evils, or at least a willingness on God's part to permit them, are necessary if there are to be significant moral choices.¹⁰ But it is not evident that any of the evil thus permitted need be gratuitous. Conceivably, it may lie within God's power and wisdom to see to it that any evil whatever that might be brought about by some human choice serves the purpose of leading to some greater good. Alternatively, God might simply prevent human beings

from making choices when he foresees that the evil resulting from a wrong choice will be greater than any good which could be brought about by permitting the choice to be made. To be sure, God in so doing would be reducing the total number of free choices to be made. But there is no reason to suppose that even the most extreme evil consequences of human actions are automatically outweighed by the simple fact of those consequences' having been freely chosen; certainly this supposition is inconsistent with the attitude we ourselves often take with regard to permitting someone to choose something which is seriously harmful.

Perhaps it should be said also that Peterson's reference to the "highest goods and most terrible evils" is not obviously pertinent to the point at issue. What concerns us here is *gratuitous* evil, and there is no necessary connection between the seriousness of an evil and its gratuitousness. Even a relatively trivial evil may conceivably be entirely pointless—and, on the other hand, it is an essential part of Christian belief that even the greatest of evils (in particular, the crucifixion of Jesus) can be turned by God into the means of still greater goods.

Let me emphasize that it has not been my intention to argue that (7) is contradictory or that Peterson's theodicy is mistaken. I do think, however, that these considerations show that this theodicy needs considerable additional support if its claims are to be made good.

In our attempt to provide such support, we begin by examining a theodicy which is quite different from Peterson's, one which has recently been proposed by Eleonore Stump. Stump's theodicy in its entirety is quite complex, but her most striking claim is made in the context of a discussion of the suffering of children. She says:

With considerable diffidence...I want to suggest that Christian doctrine is committed to the claim that a child's suffering is outweighed by the good for the child which can result from that suffering.... It seems to me that a perfectly good entity who was also omniscient and omnipotent must govern the evil resulting from the misuse of significant freedom in such a way that the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces *for that person*; otherwise, we might justifiably expect a good God somehow to prevent that *particular suffering*, either by intervening (in one way or another) to protect the victim, while still allowing the perpetrator his freedom, or by curtailing freedom in some select cases.¹¹

It may occur to the reader that this claim is so strong as to be extremely implausible.¹² Rather than pursue that issue, however, I wish to pose another question: What would become of morality if Stump's claim were known to be true? Her theodicy has the implication that *no person can ever be ultimately harmed* by anything which happens to her or is done to her. True, one may undergo physical and mental suffering, torture, degradation, and death, but all of this will be more than compensated for by the benefits (chiefly of

a spiritual nature) which will come to one as a result of that suffering, provided only that one responds to the suffering by allowing one's own will to be more fully conformed to God and to his will.¹³

Now, assuming this to be true, there are serious implications for morality—in particular, for that (crucially important) part of morality which deals with our obligations towards other people. From the standpoint of any form of consequentialism, the very idea of treating another person wrongly simply disappears: according to consequentialism, we can treat another person wrongly only by harming her—but given Stump's claim, it is in the final analysis impossible ever to do this! Whatever apparent harm, suffering, or loss our action might inflict on another person, we can be sure that such harm cannot be more (though it might conceivably be less) than the optimum amount required to give her the best possible opportunity for union with God and salvation. To be sure, it might be the case that one's *intention* towards another person should be morally at fault, in that one might inflict pain and suffering *intending* to harm the other without realizing that it is ultimately impossible for us to do so. But one's intention, in this case, would be in need not so much of moral correction as of metaphysical enlightenment; one's need would be to learn the truth that it is ultimately impossible to injure another by anything one might do to her. Such an attitude concerning harm to others is characteristic of some forms of Hinduism, but surely not of Christianity, which has on the contrary assumed that, in being warned not to harm one another, we are being warned about something it is all too possible for us to do.

Perhaps, however, we are of the opinion that the true account of morality is not a consequentialist account. In a deontological morality, our obligations are not based on a requirement to maximize good and minimize evil, and on this view obligations to persons might co-exist consistently with Stump's theodicy. This is no doubt true, yet I want to argue that moral principles of this kind would in an important way be *unmotivated*. In order to see why this is so, I cite the following principle stated by William K. Frankena:

[M]oral reasons consist of facts about what actions, dispositions, and persons do to the lives of sentient beings, including beings other than the agent in question, and the moral point of view is one which is concerned with such facts.¹⁴

This claim of Frankena's is not uncontroversial, but it seems to me that it enjoys strong intuitive support. Frankena's principle does not require a utilitarian or consequentialist morality; it does not stipulate that the only reasons which are relevant to the moral justification of an action are the consequences for sentient beings of *that particular action*. But it does say that morally relevant reasons must *in some way* have to do with the tendency of the action in question, or of the class of actions of that kind, to do good or harm to

sentient beings. And it seems to me that this is correct—that if we become convinced that certain ostensibly moral requirements or prohibitions have *no connection whatever* with the weal or woe of any rational or sentient being, then we soon cease to regard such commands or prohibitions as morally serious.¹⁵

If this principle of Frankena's is correct, it establishes a very close connection between the notion of a *morally wrong action* and the idea of *harm* to some person or other sentient being. And this, in turn, suggests two requirements which must be met in the lives of persons who have significant obligations towards others. First of all, it must be *possible* for these persons to act in ways that are significantly harmful to themselves and others, for otherwise the notion of morally wrong treatment of persons would lack significant application in their lives. Furthermore, they must be able to *know* that it is possible for them to act harmfully, for without this knowledge they would be *unable to apprehend* the kinds of reasons for action that make such moral prohibitions meaningful.

If Frankena's principle is correct, then (if we follow Stump's theodicy) moral reasons *could not be given* to justify obligations towards other persons: no person can be *harmed* by anything we might do to her, and if it were supposed that we might have an obligation to do something to *help* another, such a supposition would be self-defeating, since it entails that we would be harming her by failing to fulfill the obligations, and we know this to be impossible.

Evidently under circumstances such as those described morality, assuming it existed at all, would lack much of the significance we ordinarily assume it to have. In order to have available a brief characterization of such a situation, I will describe it as one in which *morality is undermined*.¹⁶

To be sure, Stump's theodicy goes considerably beyond what is necessary simply for the elimination of gratuitous evil. She requires not only that every instance of evil be a means to a greater good, but that it be the means to such a good *precisely for the person afflicted*.¹⁷ Now suppose that this requirement is relaxed—suppose, that is, that we stipulate that each evil must be a necessary means to a greater good, but not necessarily a greater good *for the sufferer herself*. What effect does this change have on the considerations discussed above?

In fact, the change makes less difference than one might suppose. If our ethical assumptions are consequentialist, there is no difference at all, since consequentialism, in evaluating our obligations, does not take account of the individuals to whom good and evil are done. From a deontological point of view, on the other hand, there does seem to be a foothold for moral obligation that was not there before. We are now supposing that each evil that occurs is a necessary means to a greater good, but that good may not benefit the person

who is harmed, and a harm to someone which benefits someone else may still constitute an *injustice* or some other form of morally improper treatment of the person thus harmed; there might, then, be moral principles which forbid such injustices. But is this really plausible? We are, after all, assuming that God is *perfectly morally good*. Any harm which comes to any person is harm which *God has permitted for the sake of a greater good which will result from it*; harm which will *not* result in a greater good, or which, even though it would so result, would nevertheless be excessive in relation to the sufferer, will still be prevented by God just as in Stump's theodicy. Now, given that this is the case, *what sense could there be in principles prohibiting the infliction of harm?* An agent who is considering what might harm another person will know that *if* that person really is harmed, it will be *only* as a God-approved means to the creation of a greater good. (And if, as would seem generally to be the case, the achievement of that greater good is not inconsistent with God's *compensating* the sufferer for her suffering, then she would *not*, on balance, be harmed after all.¹⁸) Is it intelligible, then, that there should be moral principles prohibiting what, if it is done at all, can only be done with God's approval and as an instrumentality of his purpose? I submit that this is *not* intelligible. But if no such principles can exist, then neither can moral obligations towards other persons exist. And so we reach our conclusion: *If God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, then morality is undermined.*¹⁹

But now we have what we need in order to provide support for Peterson's argument. Our new argument is as follows:

4. God has arranged things in such a way that human beings make morally significant free choices between good and evil.
9. In order for human choices to be morally significant, morality must not be undermined.
10. If God necessarily prevents gratuitous evil, then morality is undermined.

Therefore,

11. It is not the case that God is morally required to prevent gratuitous evil.

So the atheological argument from gratuitous evil is defeated: gratuitous evil is necessary.

Two Objections

At this point in our argument we turn to consider two objections raised by William Rowe²⁰ against the argument in the previous section. In order to appreciate these objections we need to recall the two conceptions of gratuitous evil mentioned earlier. According to the first conception, an instance of evil is gratuitous if *it is not necessary for the creation of a greater good*.

According to the second conception, on the other hand, an instance of evil is gratuitous if *it is such that an omnipotent being could have prevented it without thereby having prevented the occurrence of some greater good*. Rowe asserts that even if (as I claimed in the previous section) gratuitous evil in the first sense is necessary, gratuitous evil in the second sense is not, and that God could prevent all such evil from occurring, without morality thereby being undermined. So here is the question we have to answer: Is it the case that there is gratuitous evil in the second sense—evil such that an omnipotent being could have prevented it without preventing the occurrence of some greater good—yet such that if God were necessarily to prevent *all* such evil, morality would be damaged as a result? As we shall see, the question is a complex one, but I believe the answer is Yes. Or to speak more cautiously, I believe the case for saying that God must permit this kind of evil is just as strong as the case for saying that such evil exists at all.

It is clear, as Rowe points out, that

An evil choice by a morally free being might be gratuitous in the first sense but not gratuitous in the second. For the evil choice might lead to no greater good; nor would it be necessary for the person's freedom—the person would have been free had he made a good choice instead. So the evil choice, not being itself necessary for any good, including the person's freedom, may be a *gratuitous evil* in our first sense. But an omnipotent being could have prevented that person's evil choice only by taking away the good of the person's freedom to make that choice. So the evil choice may not be gratuitous in the second sense.

But this means that, if we adopt this second conception of gratuitous evil, some of the claims made in the previous section of this paper will no longer hold:

For so long as the good of a creature's being free (on a certain occasion) to do good or evil (on that occasion) outweighs the evil that is done, the principle prohibiting the doing of that evil will make perfect sense even though that evil is not gratuitous on [the second] definition.

It is clear what Rowe has in mind. There may be an action which would bring genuine harm to some person without resulting in any outweighing good; yet, God will permit the action because the harm produced by the action is outweighed by the good involved in the agent's exercise of free will. And if God would permit such an action, there can also be significant moral principles prohibiting the doing of such harms; thus, morality is not undermined even though God prevents all gratuitous evil in the second sense.

I am inclined to think Rowe is correct about this,²¹ and if we are thinking in terms of the second conception of gratuitous evil it is necessary to modify the claim that if God necessarily prevents gratuitous evils there could not be significant moral principles forbidding the doing of harm to others. But how

significant are the sorts of cases Rowe has in mind here? The answer to this will depend on the value we assign to the exercise of free will, as compared with other values such as the prevention of undeserved suffering. If the value assigned to the exercise of free will is high enough, then conceivably gratuitous moral evil could be entirely eliminated by this consideration. But to assign this much value to individual instances of the exercise of free will is surely unrealistic—it would hardly do, for instance, to say that the evil of a deliberate murder is outweighed by the inherent value of the exercise of free will by which the murder was decided on! A more reasonable view would seem to be that the exercise of free will might have sufficient intrinsic value to outweigh slight harms to others, but not to outweigh major or long-lasting harms. Rowe apparently agrees with this; he says concerning his own argument:

But this is a somewhat minor point. For presumably it is important to morality to prohibit the doing of evils that are so great that their permission would not be justified by the moral freedom of the person doing the evil.

Rowe's argument brings out an important theoretical point, which is that the undermining of morality need not be an all-or-nothing affair. In the previous section, it was argued that if God prevents all gratuitous evil in the first sense, then significant morality is impossible. We now see that if God prevents all gratuitous evil in the second sense, there is still some possibility for morality to exist. But the range of application for morality under these conditions would be severely restricted: it could apply to minor affronts, but not to murder or treason—not, in Peterson's words, to the "highest goods and most terrible evils." If God were to limit our moral freedom to situations such as this, he would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, permitting us to develop our characters by arguing over the blocks, but stepping in to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt. Perhaps we could describe such a situation as one in which morality is *partially undermined* or *truncated*. And it is surely consistent with theism to hold that a situation in which morality is severely truncated is for God just as unacceptable as one in which it is undermined entirely. So this point of Rowe's requires a modification in my argument but does not seriously diminish its force.

Rowe introduces his second objection by pointing out a paradox which is inherent in the topic and indeed in our very title. On the one hand, certain evils are said to be gratuitous or pointless. On the other hand, those very same evils are said to be *necessary*, so that if God were to prevent them he would be losing a great good. Rowe asks, "[D]oesn't Hasker's argument contain the seeds of its own destruction?" The ultimate answer to this, according to Rowe, is Yes. Nevertheless, he points out that "the puzzle just presented has a solution initially favorable to Hasker's view." The key to this solution is to distinguish the *class* of gratuitous evils from *particular instances* of that

class. God, according to my argument, could not have prevented this class from having any members at all without losing a great good—namely, significant morality. So, “What Hasker’s argument shows, if his argument is successful, is that the class of gratuitous evils is not gratuitous.” But it may still be that *any particular instance* of this class *could* have been prevented by God without morality having thereby been undermined. So the individual instances are indeed gratuitous even though the class as a whole is not.

Rowe, however, is not satisfied with this solution. If any particular instance of gratuitous evil could have been prevented by God without losing the good of significant morality, then it follows that this class contains *more* instances than are needed for maintaining moral significance. “But if so, it follows that the class of gratuitous evils is *overstocked*.” God then could, and a good God surely would, act so as to *reduce* the instances of gratuitous evil as much as possible. (No doubt he would do this, as Stump suggests, “by intervening...to protect the victim, while still allowing the perpetrator his freedom, or by curtailing freedom in some select cases.”²²) “How far,” asks Rowe, “could the class of gratuitous evils be depleted without undermining significant morality? I would think a great deal.” Ultimately, to be sure, a point would be reached where “further depletion would undermine morality.” And at this point God would stop; he would, albeit reluctantly, consent to permit the remaining instances of evil rather than give up the great good of significant morality. But would these remaining evils be *gratuitous*? Surely not! For if God were to prevent any more of them, morality would indeed be undermined.

And what this means, I’m afraid, is that Hasker’s argument contains the seeds of its own destruction. A world suitable for significant morality would not require an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being to permit any *gratuitous* evil at all.

At this juncture I wish to point out, and question, two assumptions made in Rowe’s argument and the revised problem of evil based on it. The first assumption is, that there is *some particular amount* of the kind of evil in question, such that if God permits *that* amount of such evil to exist morality is maintained, but if he permits *any less* evil then morality is undermined. This assumption strikes me as artificial and arbitrary; I see no reason to suppose that this sort of quantitative measure applies to the topic at all. But assuming that it does, the second assumption is that *we can determine*, at least approximately, what the “critical level” is and can also determine where we stand in relation to it—as shown by Rowe’s statement that the evil in question could be reduced “a great deal” without morality being adversely affected. Rowe does not tell us how he knows this, and I for one am dubious. I am indeed inclined to think that *any individual instance* of gratuitous moral evil could have been prevented by God without any overall damage to mo-

rality. But then, any individual instance of moral evil amounts to rather little in proportion to the overall scheme of things, given the vastness of the world and the prevalence of evil within it.²³ And what atheologians like Rowe are claiming is that a good God would of necessity *very significantly* reduce the *total* amount of evil in the world; a few particular evils alleviated would make no real difference on the vast scale with which we are concerned. And I do not think it is at all evident that a sizable proportion of all the evils which occur could be eliminated by God without damage to morality.

For the time being, however, we will waive these objections and concede provisionally to Rowe that (1) there is some “critical level” of evil which God must permit and (2) it is possible for us to determine, at least approximately, what this level is. In order to further evaluate Rowe’s objection, some terminology will be helpful. Let us designate as *genuinely gratuitous evils* those which are gratuitous in what we have been calling the second sense—namely, evils which could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without losing any greater good. And let us use the term *ostensibly gratuitous evils* to designate evils which could be prevented by God without thereby preventing the existence of any greater good, *apart from the benefit God’s permission of such evils may have in preventing the undermining of morality*. (It should be noted that an ostensibly gratuitous evil may or may not be genuinely gratuitous.) Let us say, furthermore, that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is *optimal* if the evils it contains are just sufficient, in number and severity, to prevent the undermining of morality. In an optimal class of ostensibly gratuitous evils, none of the instances of evil is genuinely gratuitous, since none could be deleted by God without undermining morality. If on the other hand the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils contains *more* than the optimal amount of such evils, that class is *overstocked*—which Rowe believes to be true in the actual world. But a good God, he says, would not permit this, so God does not exist.

But is this really correct? In order to examine this we need to consider the implications of the policy Rowe claims God would of necessity follow—the policy, namely, of preventing any ostensibly gratuitous evils above the optimal level. What effect would such a policy have, if it were carried out?

In order to pursue this question, we need answers to two preliminary questions. First of all, how is it exactly that ostensibly gratuitous evil works to maintain the significance of morality? The answer, I take it, has two parts. On the one hand, in order for there to be significant moral principles forbidding the infliction of unjustified harm, it must be *really possible* for such harm to occur. It would be meaningless for God to *prohibit* us from doing what it is impossible for us ever to do in any case. But there is also an *epistemic* dimension to the situation. In order for the individual moral agent to be within the scope of moral principles, it must be *apparent to the agent*

that it is possible for him to harm others in unjustified ways. In teaching morality, it is of great importance to show how persons are hurt by behavior of the kind which is forbidden. And actual instances of ostensibly gratuitous evil are the object lessons which are needed to make this apparent.

The other question is, what should we assume with regard to the prevalence of ostensibly gratuitous evils in the situation we are considering? Abstractly, there are three possibilities. One is that human beings, through their own uncoerced exercise of moral freedom, voluntarily keep the amount of ostensibly gratuitous evil below the optimal amount. In this situation there would be no requirement for divine intervention, no undermining of morality, no genuinely gratuitous evil—and no basis for a sound atheological argument from evil.²⁴ Professor Rowe believes we do not live in this kind of world.

A second possibility is that humans voluntarily do a great deal *more* ostensibly gratuitous evil than is requisite for the maintenance of morality, so that the class of such evils is overstocked. By hypothesis, however, God would not permit this to occur. So our considerations must be based on the third possibility, according to which human beings, if left to their own resources, *would create* excessive amounts of ostensibly gratuitous evil, but God, by intervening in the various ways which are open to him, keeps the amount of such evil in the world precisely at the optimal level.²⁵

Now that these preliminary questions have been answered, let us consider the situation of an agent who knows that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils in his world is optimal, and who is considering the commission of some putatively morally wrong action. What possibilities confront him, as he ponders the significance of the evil he is about to perpetrate?

One possibility, of course, is that God may not permit this evil at all. But this possibility may be disregarded here, since it would not give the agent any *moral* reason to refrain from the action, though it might give him a prudential reason.

A second possibility is that the evil to be done will lead directly (apart from considerations concerning the undermining of morality) to the occurrence of some greater good which would justify it, or to the prevention of some equal or greater evil. I have argued, and Rowe apparently concedes, that if the agent knows that the evil to be done by him will be of this kind, the force of the moral requirement that he abstain from it is undermined.

But of course, our agent does not know this. So far as he knows, the evil he brings about may be an *ostensibly gratuitous evil*—and given *this* possibility, Rowe claims, the force of morality remains undiminished.

But our agent knows something else: he knows that if he brings about an ostensibly gratuitous evil, this evil will be a member of an *optimal class* of such evils. But if this is so, then the *omission* of such an evil will mean that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils will be *sub-optimal*; it “will be de-

pleted beyond the point necessary for significant morality.” But of course such a situation cannot be allowed to stand: We are assuming that the maintenance of significant morality is an *overriding concern* in the divine governance of the world, so if the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is rendered *sub-optimal* by the omission of a member, then surely the balance must be restored by the permission of *some other* ostensibly gratuitous evil, one which would not have been permitted had the evil action under consideration been performed.²⁶ And since the original class was *optimal*, containing neither more evils nor more severe evils than are requisite for the maintenance of morality, it is evident that the “replacement evil” can be *no less severe* than the one which has been foregone.

But now, surely, we have reached a situation exactly parallel to the one which led to our previous conclusion about the undermining of morality. The agent will be able to say to himself that if he performs the action in question, the resulting evil is *permitted by God* as the *most economical means* to an end of overriding importance—namely, the maintenance of significant morality. So once again, morality is undermined, and it is Rowe’s objection, rather than my argument, which self-destructs.

But isn’t there an unjustified assumption in this reasoning? We have assumed, in the last few paragraphs, that the agent *knows* that the class of ostensibly gratuitous evils is being maintained by God at the optimal level, so that the omission of one such evil will result in the permission of another. But why should we assume this? If the agent does not know this, then so far as he or she is aware we may rather be in the situation where humans, by their own voluntary choices, maintain the amount of ostensibly gratuitous evil *below* the optimal level, and in this case no divine intervention is called for and morality remains fully in force.

The assumption that it is possible for the agents in our hypothetical situation to know that the level of ostensibly gratuitous evil is optimal is derived from Rowe’s assumption, discussed earlier, that it is possible for us (specifically, for him) to know what the optimal level is and recognize that the level of such evil in our actual situation is “a great deal” above the optimum.²⁷ What Rowe can find out, the agents in our hypothetical situation can also find out.²⁸ If on the other hand it is *not* possible for them to know that the level is optimal, then how is the atheologian able to trust his own estimate concerning our present situation? So the dialectic of our argument results in a sort of “epistemic trade-off”: If we take a favorable view of our human capability to determine the optimal level of evils, we must conclude that the agents in our hypothetical situation would know their world was at that optimal level and morality would be undermined for them, whereas a lower estimate of this capability leaves the atheologian with little basis for his claim that our present world is overstocked with evils.

This dilemma for the atheologian is intensified if we consider God's situation *vis-a-vis* the actual world. Rowe believes that a good God, if one existed, ought to be actively intervening to prevent a great deal of the ostensibly gratuitous evil which occurs in the actual world. This intervention would, of course, have to be kept secret from human beings; if we were to become aware of God's massive intervention, the cat would be out of the bag. This concealment would amount to a pervasive policy of deception on God's part, which in itself is morally objectionable. But it also seriously undercuts any remaining possibility that we might have the capability to determine that there is "a great deal too much" evil in the world. For if God is massively intervening to prevent evil, but concealing that fact from us, then there is every likelihood that a great deal of what *appears to us* to be evil really is not so; in ever so many cases, God could leave the *appearance* of evil as a salutary lesson for us, yet remove the *reality* of evil by his secret intervention. So the prospects for Rowe's being able to know what he thinks he knows simply are not very bright. Earlier I claimed that the case for saying God must permit some genuinely gratuitous evil is just as strong as the case for saying that such evil exists. I believe that claim has now been vindicated.

Some readers may find that there is something artificial or even morally offensive about this picture of God nicely calculating the precise amount of ostensibly gratuitous evil which must be permitted in order for morality to be maintained. If so, I agree entirely—the picture is not one I am advocating, but one which is generated by Rowe's objection. My own view is that God does *not* frequently intervene in order to prevent the evil consequences of human actions—and that there is no valid moral requirement that he should do so.

Gratuitous Natural Evil

It is possible that some readers are yet unsatisfied. We began this discussion with Rowe's example of the fawn suffering and dying in the forest fire—an example, apparently, of gratuitous *natural* evil. But our counter-argument concerned gratuitous *moral* evil; thus, even if that counter-argument were entirely successful, the original problem has not been resolved.

This line seems not unreasonable, yet before plunging ahead we will do well to pause and consider just how the question stands. Rowe's example was presented, and has been treated here, as a specific instance used to illustrate his argument for atheism based on gratuitous evil. In response I have not claimed to be able to identify any "greater good" which comes about as a result of the fawn's suffering. I am, in fact, prepared to admit that this *does* seem to be a case of genuinely gratuitous evil. But what follows from this admission? My aim has been to refute a certain *argument*, and the refutation has been accomplished by discrediting a premise of that argument, namely

(2), which declares gratuitous evil to be inconsistent with God's existence. Now, if more remains to be done, what is the further argument to which we should respond? It would seem that it is up to the atheologian at this point to provide *and defend* a new premise, perhaps one which declares only gratuitous *natural* evil to be inconsistent with the divine existence. But why should any such premise be taken seriously? There did, after all, seem to be a certain intuitive plausibility in the notion that a morally perfect God would not permit *any* gratuitous evil. But if, as I claim to have shown, it follows from plausible theistic assumptions that God not only can but *must* permit certain kinds of gratuitous evils, then surely it takes some solid argument to show that, while God *must* permit evils of *these* classes, there are *other* classes of gratuitous evils such that the occurrence of even one gratuitous evil of *those* classes is logically incompatible with God's existence. So the atheologian has a job to do, and until he has done it there really is no further argument to be answered.

Nevertheless, I am going to waive these considerations; I will myself supply a new premise of the sort the atheologian apparently needs, and will pretend for the time being that some sort of plausible case for that premise has been made. The new premise is as follows:

12. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering *resulting from natural causes* which it could, unless it could not do so without thereby preventing the occurrence of some greater good, *even though it might very well permit gratuitous suffering resulting from free moral choices.*²⁹

Given this, the argument proceeds as follows:

13. There exist instances of intense suffering resulting from natural causes which an omnipotent being could have prevented without thereby preventing the occurrence of any greater good.

Therefore,

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Now that we have this argument before us, how shall we proceed? In the previous sections we identified a certain good—namely, the existence of morally significant free choices—which is possible only if persons are allowed to choose freely between good and evil, and we argued that the possibility of this good would be undermined if God were always to prevent gratuitous moral evil. Is there any similar move that can be made with regard to gratuitous natural evil?

It is not at all difficult to indicate goods which may and in fact do come about as a result of humans being confronted with situations in which natural forces threaten harm of various kinds. A short list of such goods would include knowledge, prudence, courage, foresight, cooperation, and compas-

sion.³⁰ Because nature seems likely to harm or frustrate us in various ways, we are motivated to gain knowledge of its workings, to take thought to avert undesirable consequences, and the like. Now, what effect would it have on these goods, if God were to prevent all gratuitous natural evil—if, in other words, God were to prevent all natural evils, except as they were logically necessary to the occurrence of greater goods?

Interestingly, such a course on God's part might have relatively little effect on the attainment of the goods in question, *so long as human beings did not know or suspect that God was doing this!* If it *seemed to us* that natural causes can and often do cause irreparable and uncompensated harm, then we would be strongly motivated to prevent such harms even if, *unknown to us*, God prevents all truly gratuitous harms. But it can scarcely be suggested that such a strategy is the one God ought to follow. This strategy would involve in effect a massive "disinformation campaign" on God's part, something which is surely morally dubious in itself. Furthermore, the impossibility of gratuitous natural evil is supposed to be *derived from the truth about God's nature*; it is just *because* God is an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being that there cannot be such evil. But on any plausible theistic account one of God's chief purposes in creating rational beings is to bring them to a knowledge of himself, and this, surely, would include a knowledge precisely of those aspects of his nature which are (allegedly) inconsistent with the occurrence of gratuitous evil. So in fulfilling *that* purpose, the purpose of leading persons to accurate knowledge concerning himself, God would automatically be undermining his other alleged purpose, namely the purpose of keeping humans ignorant of his policy of preventing gratuitous evil.

This being the case, we must ask what the consequences would be if God were *known* to prevent all gratuitous natural evils. And it is evident that the consequences with regard to the list of goods noted above—knowledge, prudence, courage, foresight, cooperation, and compassion—would be rather drastic. Surely the motivation to acquire and/or respond in accordance with any or all of these goods would be greatly reduced, if not eliminated entirely, if we *really believed* that God would prevent any natural evils which were not essential to the realization of still greater goods. To be sure, we might still have some inclination to avoid outcomes that seemed especially distasteful to us personally—but such an inclination would be of questionable rationality, inasmuch as by preventing those outcomes we would also be preventing the occurrence of goods which are at least equal and possibly greater. The truly reasonable attitude would be the one which has in fact been advocated by a good many religious leaders and philosophers: Good and bad fortune, while subjectively important to the unenlightened, are objectively indistinguishable in a universe in which, in the sense that truly matters, whatever is, is good. Those who hold such an attitude, or hold that we ought

to hold it, will of course also hold that gratuitous evil is illusory, and so they will have no need for the argument of this paper. But surely it is open to the theist to hold rather that God intends our responses to the world's evils to be informed by scientific knowledge, prudence, and compassion. And if that is his intent, then he cannot be morally required to prevent gratuitous natural evil. For such a theist, then, gratuitous evil, whether natural or moral, in no way conflicts with the goodness and perfection of God.³¹

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NOTES

1. William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1978), p. 87. This same argument occurs in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 333-41.

2. *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 88. For present purposes I will assume that "intense suffering" is mentioned simply as a specific example of the general category of gratuitous evil.

3. We will understand "greater good" in the following sense: the consequences of the evil in question must be *better than the situation which would have obtained if the evil had not occurred*. This is clearly what Rowe has in mind, and this is the meaning of "greater good" which will be employed throughout this essay.

It has been pointed out to me that "greater good" might be understood as meaning that the consequences are *better than the situation which obtained before the evil occurred*. This leaves open the possibility that the situation resulting *without* the evil's occurring might be even better than the situation which comes about as a result of the evil. Nothing in the present essay argues against the supposition that all actual evils may lead to "greater good" in *this* sense. But it may be that the sense in question is too weak to be of substantial help in theodicy. Suppose, for instance, that a child, who would otherwise have had excellent prospects for a very happy life, suffers an accident during birth resulting in extensive neurological damage. Through considerable effort, the child achieves a life that has some slight positive value—that is, a life which it is (barely) better for it to live than not to live. (We will assume that those who are in contact with the child have lives that are on balance neither better nor worse than they were before it was born.) Then the accident would qualify as a "non-gratuitous evil," because the result (a life with some small positive value) is a "greater good" than the previously existing situation (no life at all, or pre-natal existence, which I assume to be *in itself* neutral in value). But isn't it clear that such an accident, resulting in a severe and essentially uncompensated loss, *is* a gratuitous evil?

4. I am indebted to William Rowe for pointing out to me the difference between these two conceptions.

5. This remark does not, however, apply to the argument presented by Stephen Wykstra, which denies that there is even *prima facie* evidence from experience for the existence of gratuitous evil (see Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments

from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984), pp. 73-93). Wykstra's contention is that, if there were outweighing goods resulting from the evils we experience, there is no reason to expect we would know what they are, so our failure to recognize such goods creates no presumption against their existence. I believe Wykstra's line of argument is important, but I do not think it succeeds in eliminating altogether the force of the experiential evidence for gratuitous evil.

6. It should be pointed out that Rowe has admitted that arguments against this premise by Plantinga, Schlesinger, and Peterson "do cast some doubt on" the premise. See "The Empirical Argument From Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 228, n. 3.

7. For argument in support of this point see Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), pp. 93ff., and William Hasker, "Must God Do His Best?" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984), pp. 213-23.

8. Peterson, p. 104f.

9. This formulates the argument implied by Peterson's remarks on p. 104 of his book. It should be noted that Peterson attributes this idea to Alvin Plantinga (see *The Nature of Necessity*, New York: Oxford, 1974, pp. 164-95). But Plantinga's "free will defense" is a great deal more complicated than the simple argument presented by Peterson, and the differences between them exceed the limitations of this study.

10. Clearly, God might be willing to permit evils, gratuitous or otherwise, without those evils actually occurring. In view of this, the strictly correct title for this paper would be, "The Necessity of the Possibility of Gratuitous Evil."

11. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), p. 411.

12. For discussion of this point, as well as other aspects of Stump's theodicy, see my "Suffering, Soul-Making, and Salvation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (March 1988), pp. 3-19.

13. It should be emphasized that, on Stump's view, it may depend on me whether I am actually benefited by suffering that comes my way; this will occur only if I allow the suffering to mold me to God's will. There is also the possibility that I may be harmed as a result of my *own* misuse of free will; harm resulting in this way is not necessarily compensated by a greater good.

I want to take this opportunity to correct an earlier misstatement about Stump's theodicy. In chapter 10 of *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), I wrote:

It is evident that for [Stump's] theodicy to work there must be a very high degree of planing and coordination on God's part so as to insure that all of the apparently random events in the world's history work together to achieve his goal.... [O]ne would think that for the scheme to work God must have *at least* as much control as would be afforded by middle knowledge (p. 201).

I now realize, as a result of discussions with Eleonore Stump, that this is incorrect. The benefits which, according to Stump's theodicy, result from suffering are chiefly of a moral and spiritual sort; insofar as special divine action is required, this would consist mainly

of gracious influences on the soul of the sufferer, and does not require a high degree of coordination of external events. I am happy to be able to state that Eleonore Stump and I are agreed that there is no middle knowledge, and that God does take risks.

14. William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 113.

15. It should be noted that for my purposes here Frankena's principle does not have to apply to *all* of morality (though I suspect that it does); it is sufficient that the kinds of reasons which are most central and basic to the moral life are of the kind he indicates.

16. To be sure, not all aspects of morality would be eliminated by the considerations we have mentioned. Perhaps there could still be a morality of personal virtue, though it is hard to know what the significance of virtue would be if its connection with acting properly towards others is eliminated. It might be, also, that I could still harm *myself* by my own actions—but a morality in which this is the primary thing I have to avoid might be hard to distinguish from prudential self-interest. In any case, it is clear that obligations towards other persons, and in particular obligations to refrain from harming others, are absolutely central to the moral life as we know it. A "morality" without such obligations would bear at most a distant resemblance to the morality which is a part of our lives at present.

17. It is noteworthy that Stump will not even accept a situation in which the victim is *compensated* for the evil which she suffers: the evil must *itself* be a necessary means to *that person's* good.

18. It is evident that in general the evil of a person's being harmed is *less* if she is compensated for the harm than if she is not so compensated. So if God permits an *uncompensated* harm for the sake of another's good, this can be only because compensation for the harm would *prevent* the existence of the greater good. Perhaps such situations are conceivable, but they seem rather unlikely.

19. The antecedent of this conditional is necessary, because the course of action ascribed to God is supposed to result from an essential divine attribute, namely perfect goodness. But I do not claim that the proposition as a whole is necessary, nor in general do I claim this status for the conclusions of this paper. These conclusions rest on certain very general but contingent facts about what the world and human moral agents are like.

20. These objections were put forward in Professor Rowe's "Response to Hasker's 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil'" (unpublished), a comment on a previous version of this paper presented at the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association in April, 1988. Quotations from Rowe in the following pages are from this Response.

21. There is, however, this consideration: It may be that in such a case the good involved in the choice's being freely made is outweighed by the *moral* evil of the choice's being made wrongly; if this is so, then the evil *resulting* from the action will still be gratuitous. But this is a difficult and debatable point, and I do not wish to insist on it in what follows.

22. I believe Stump is correct in assuming that in most cases God would intervene to protect the victim *after* the decision to do evil had been made, rather than intervening beforehand to prevent the decision itself. By preventing free choices from being made God could prevent some gratuitous evil, but only at the cost of a correspondingly large

reduction in the permitted exercise of free will. (I assume God does not possess middle knowledge; for argument see *God, Time, and Knowledge*, ch. 2.)

23. "Events" we might tend to think of as exceptions to this, such as the Holocaust and the World Wars, are of course not individual instances of moral evil but rather comprise many thousands, even millions, of individual decisions.

24. It should be noted that morality is undermined only if *God* reduces the amount of ostensibly gratuitous evil below the optimal level; no such consequence ensues if human beings, of their own free choice, simply refrain voluntarily from the commission of evil deeds.

25. There are several additional questions, which will not be pursued here, concerning the way in which the status of the world with respect to the optimal level of evil is determined. Is this determination one which is made concerning the world as a trans-temporal whole? Or is it one made at each time summing up the history of evils up to that time? If the latter, do all evils count equally, or is there a temporal weighting so that more recent evils count more than those in the remote past? If there is such a weighting, what is the weighting function? Since our hypothesis concerns the way in which God *necessarily* acts, there must be necessary (and hence non-arbitrary) answers to these questions. The working out of the actual answers, however, is left as an exercise for the reader.

26. But wouldn't the fact that God is *willing to permit* the evil in question suffice for the maintenance of morality, even if the evil is not in fact done? The answer is No. It is true that God's willingness to permit the evil means that this evil is really possible, and thus that it is possible for there to be a significant moral principle prohibiting the doing of the evil. But the *epistemic* requirement, the requirement that the agent should be able to *know* that it is possible for him to do unjustified harms, is not satisfied. For under the assumed conditions God is in fact interfering extensively in the course of events in order to prevent gratuitous evils from occurring, so in a given case it cannot be known apart from the event whether or not God would permit a particular evil.

27. John Glenn has argued, on the contrary, that "There seem to be all sorts of instances in which a person can judge that there is a great deal too much of something, without being in a position to say when there is *precisely* the optimal amount of it. I can, for example, judge that a certain amount of mashed potatoes is a great deal too much to serve at a dinner for four, without being able to judge what is precisely the right amount" ("Remarks on William Hasker's 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,'" presented at the Society for Philosophy of Religion in March, 1990).

Professor Glenn is certainly right about the mashed potatoes. But I believe this example (as well, I suspect, as others that could have been given) has a feature which vitiates it as support for Rowe's argument. For why is it that we can't determine the exact right amount of mashed potatoes? Pretty clearly, because there *does not exist* any exact right amount—rather, there is a fairly broad and ill-defined range which would be "all right," and only when we are clearly beyond that range can we say there is "too much" or "too little." Now, I believe Rowe's argument requires that *the amount of permissible ostensibly gratuitous evil is fairly sharply defined*. If not, then the categories "optimal," "sub-optimal," and "overstocked" lack any clear meaning. Nor is it realistic to suppose there is a serious *moral requirement* for God to prevent an "overstock" unless the boundaries of what is permissible are fairly clearly defined.

28. To be sure, there might be a number of individuals who through lack of intelligence or opportunity, or simply because of sloth, would never learn that ostensibly gratuitous evil was at the optimal level. Morality might, then, remain in force for these individuals even though it was undermined for those better informed. I shall assume without further discussion that this is *not* an acceptable resolution of our problem.

29. Clearly the emphasized final clause is not essential for the argument as such, but it is nevertheless important because it helps us to see clearly how apparently arbitrary this premise is; otherwise, we might tend to see the premise merely as a specification of the general prohibition on gratuitous evil.

30. See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); also, my "Suffering, Soul-Making, and Salvation."

31. This article owes a great deal to a number of people who have made comments and suggestions about earlier versions, including Eleonore Stump, William Alston, Thomas Flint, John Glenn, and Philip Quinn. I am greatly indebted to William Rowe, not only for the Response cited above in the text, but for many additional helpful comments in oral discussions and correspondence concerning this material.