Candidate number: 387416.
Subject: Philosophy of Religion I.
Word count: 4898.

The power of the problem of evil.

[Abstract: Mackie claims that if theism is true, evil couldn't exist because God would prevent it. I defend this claim. Evil necessarily has no justification, so God could not allow it and theism precludes evil. The theist must instead claim that apparent evil is always only suffering that there is sufficient reason for. I defend Rowe's evidential case against the plausibility of this claim. It is possible that all apparent evil is only suffering, but this is improbable. Wykstra objects that the appearance of evil is precisely what theism expects given God's knowledge is much greater than ours, but this ignores the fact that we still have some knowledge, and this knowledge is in tension with widespread suffering. I consider but dismiss free will theodicies because they presuppose incompatibilism about free will, they fail to explain the value of freedom, they don't reconcile theism with actual suffering and they don't account for natural suffering. Rowe's evidential case remains standing.]

1 - Introduction.

The apparent existence of evil is commonly considered to cause problems for theism. Mackie famously claims that evil and theism are logically incompatible, and it is theism we must deny (1990, 25). He argues that if theism is true, then evil couldn't exist because God could and would prevent it. But evil clearly does exist, so theism must be

false.

By theism, this paper will mean the thesis that God exists. By God, it will mean an omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent being. By evil, rather than adopting the ordinary meaning of the concept according to which evil only covers human actions motivated by the worst intentions, it will instead follow the literature in referring broadly to all bad things (Adams & Adams, 1990, 1). So examples of evil include tsunamis and cancer as well as rape and murder. I will also sometimes refer to theodicy. This will mean a substantive possible explanation of why God would allow evil. I will offer a more detailed understanding of evil later on, in the course of making a central argument.

Despite the initial plausibility of Mackie's argument, it is widely believed to fail. All that is needed to demonstrate the logical compatibility of evil and theism is the possibility that God would allow it (Pike, 1990, 42). It is not even necessary that we find any such explanation plausible. So long as it is possible, Mackie's argument fails.

It is for this reason that those who still find the problem of evil powerful have recently made more modest claims. Rowe offers an alternative evidential case against theism, according to which the apparent existence of evil doesn't make theism impossible, but it does make it highly unlikely (1979).

But the evidential case has also met significant resistance. First, if unlike Rowe someone finds a particular theodicy plausible, then the evidential argument won't offer a strong case against theism. For instance, Plantinga (2002) and Hick (1990) claim that significant explanatory power lies in a free will theodicy. But Wykstra makes an even deeper objection to Rowe (1984). For reasons to be explained, Wykstra argues that given the nature of the theistic hypothesis, our inability to understand why God would allow evil is precisely what to expect, so it cannot count against theism.

There is something deeply fishy about Wykstra's response to Rowe. Many will retain the intuition that the existence of evil simply must count against theism, so we have reason to pursue an explanation of where Wykstra goes wrong. This paper will attempt to offer such an explanation. In short, I will defend the evidential case against theism on the grounds that its denial depends on an implausible level of scepticism about our ordinary knowledge. However, it will be seen that this is unlikely to worry some theists. Christians, for instance, seem happy to deny the truth of some ordinary knowledge claims. I will concede that the Christian cannot be defeated here on her own terms. It is only insofar as one accepts the truth of some ordinary knowledge claims that the evidential case against theism works.

But before defending the evidential case, I will offer a defence of Mackie's case for the logical incompatibility of evil and theism. I will distinguish suffering and evil, and claim that whilst suffering and theism are logically compatible, evil and theism are not *if* it is

essential to the concept of evil that it is unjustifiable. I will defend an analysis of evil according to which this is the case. However, since theists can respond to my argument by conceding that evil doesn't exist, albeit with some problematic implications, it will be granted that this is not fatal to their case. This is why the evidential argument is still important. In light of my revised understanding of evil, the evidential argument will concern the existence of suffering rather than evil.

I will then turn to the free will theodicy as found in Plantinga and Hick. Such theodicies will be argued to fail because they depend on an implausible libertarian theory of free will, because they offer no good reason for thinking such freedom is valuable, because they can only plausibly reconcile theism with *some* suffering rather than the *actual* amount of suffering in the world, and because they don't adequately account for the existence of natural suffering. I will offer an extended discussion of natural suffering before concluding that overall, the problem of evil retains significant power to cause damage to the credibility of the theistic hypothesis.

2 - The logical incompatibility of theism and evil.

Mackie's argument for the logical incompatibility of theism and evil rests on the premise that an omnibenevolent being would always eliminate evil when it could, and God could because God is omnipotent (26). One way the theist can deny this premise is by claiming that omnibenevolence might not require the elimination of evil. This argument is made by Pike.

Pike claims that evil could be consistent with God's omnibenevolence if there is morally sufficient reason for allowing it, and this reason could be provided by the fact that evil is a logically indispensable component of the Best Possible World (47). Since this could be true, evil and theism are logically compatible. Omnibenevolence and omnipotence might not require that all evil be eliminated.

In attempting to demonstrate the plausibility of his claim, Pike draws an analogy with the fact that loving parents should sometimes inflict suffering on their children, such as through dental treatment (40). In no way does this undermine parental love or justify disapproval of their decision, since the suffering is necessary for health, which is a greater good. The implication once more is that similarly, God could have justifying reasons for allowing evil which are consistent with his omnibenevolence.

Unfortunately for Pike, this analogy fails because it slides between an example of suffering and the contemplation of evil. It is clear that there can be sufficient reason for allowing suffering, but there is something strikingly odd about the idea of a justified evil. This suggests that the concept of evil is such that there cannot be sufficient reason for it. We don't consider dental treatment evil precisely because we deem it to be justifiable. Contrary to Rowe (1979, 335), if we were to acknowledge that an act is justified but we insisted on resenting its occurrence and still calling it evil, then it seems clear that we would be guilty of a conceptual confusion. It is inherent to the concept of evil that the

suffering it involves is meaningless.

This is significant because following Pike, theists normally respond to Mackie by granting evil's existence but insisting God could allow it. But if evil is necessarily unjustifiable, then God necessarily couldn't allow it, so theists must instead deny evil's existence. Tsunamis, rape and so on would instead only be instances of suffering for which there is sufficient reason like dental treatment. As Chisholm hints that he is willing to concede (1990, 61), this would mean that the theist cannot resent the occurrence of tsunamis and rape, since their occurrence is only logically compatible with theism on Pike's suggestion that they are logically indispensable components of the Best Possible World. This means that theists are surely committed to *embracing* the existence of tsunamis and rape, rather than labelling them evil and resenting their occurrence as we intuitively want to.

This is a striking and deeply unpalatable implication, but I conclude that it is one that theists are logically committed to accepting. For the sake of argument, however, let's entertain the claim that only suffering exists rather than evil[1]. I will now assess how plausible the claim is that there is sufficient reason for all the suffering in the world.

3 - The evidential argument.

[1] It is an unfortunate consequence of my position here that I must conclude the vast majority of the literature on the problem of evil is guilty of a basic and central conceptual error. This will mean I can discuss the arguments of others only by altering their terminology, which means my paper could easily become confusing. However, since I am confident that my position is both correct and important, I believe this cost is worthwhile.

Whilst Mackie argues that the truth of theism conjoined with the existence of evil is logically impossible, Rowe makes the more modest evidential argument that it is highly *improbable* that there is sufficient reason for the suffering that happens to exist in our world (1979, 337). The point here is that it is not enough for the theist to show that suffering *could* be justified. It must further be shown that it is likely that this is the case. To defend the claim that this is unlikely, Rowe invokes the fact that, for instance, we have reason to believe fawns die regularly and randomly in forest fires, suffering a slow, unwitnessed and agonising death (337). Now, it *could* be the case that this event is a logically indispensable component of the Best Possible World, but Rowe's claim is that this kind of suffering *seems* meaningless, and we thereby have reason to conclude that it is. Based on our earlier conceptual discoveries, we can characterise Rowe's position as the claim that plenty of actual suffering also appears to count as instances of evil. This is something the theist must deny.

Wykstra objects to Rowe that the inference from suffering *seeming* meaningless to the conclusion that it *is* meaningless is an inference we are not entitled to make (86-91). Wykstra's argument is that in the same way that upon walking into a huge room filled to the ceiling with junk, we wouldn't be entitled to immediately conclude it seems unlikely that there's a chair in the room, upon encountering suffering we cannot claim that it seems likely that no justification for it exists. Wykstra thinks this for the following reason. In the same way that our inability to spot a chair is precisely what we should expect in such unfavourable conditions, given the implication of theism is that our

knowledge of what is good and what's necessary to bring it about is impoverished compared to God's knowledge of such subjects, the appearance of evil is precisely what we should expect.

McCord Adams shows support for Wykstra's argument when she claims that God's reasons for allowing suffering are of a kind we're too immature to fathom, like children being subject to the logic of wiser adults (1990, 305). Fitzpatrick similarly argues that given God's omniscience implies our knowledge is comparatively minimal, it would be unreasonable to assume our understanding of goods and causality is sufficient to explain how suffering can be reconciled with theism (1981, 25). It is with such claims in mind that Wykstra asks Rowe to explain how it is that what a theory thoroughly expects can count as evidence against it (93). Fitzpatrick claims that this puts the onus on the sceptic to show there is something unsatisfactory about the theist's appraisal of humanity's epistemic conditions (29).

I believe Fitzpatrick's challenge can be met. There *is* something deeply unsatisfactory about the theist's appraisal of our epistemic conditions, and this gives us reason to think that Wykstra's response to Rowe fails insofar as it rests on this appraisal.

The problem is that Wykstra *et al.* claim they are working on the assumption that our moral and causal knowledge is far inferior to God's, but they don't pay sufficient respect to the fact that even on the theistic hypothesis, it can and should be acknowledged that

we have *some* moral and causal knowledge. And given this knowledge, it is simply implausible to claim that the appearance of unjustified suffering is precisely what we should expect. For instance, our moral knowledge includes the fact that physical pain constitutes suffering, and that this tends to be bad. We need not endorse utilitarianism in order to grant this. My claim is not that pain is the only bad thing, nor that it must be minimised. I claim only that we know pain is generally bad and this gives us reason to want it not to obtain.

Given this minimal moral knowledge, then, the extent to which pain occurs so pervasively in this world and often dominates the experiences of creatures is undoubtedly *not* something we should expect if theism were true, since God's omniscience would ensure God knew pain is bad, and God's omnibenevolence would mean that God generally prevented it. It is, of course, possible that the distribution, quantity and intensity of pain that obtains in the world could be justified. But given we know that pain tends to be bad, it is absurd to suggest its widespread existence is in no sense even surprising.

There is an obvious tension between the badness of pain and its widespread existence that counts against theism. To defend their form of sceptical theism, Wykstra *et al.* must instead make the stronger claim that we have *no* moral and causal knowledge. But this is an implausibly extreme level of scepticism about our epistemic conditions that requires denying that we even know pain is generally bad.

It is for this reason that Wykstra's case fails. The pervasive obtaining of pain is not to be reasonably expected on the theistic hypothesis because even theists must accept that we have some knowledge, and this knowledge must include the general badness of pain. This is all the evidential case needs to conclude that the apparent existence of evil counts against theism.

An analogy offered by Pike may prove illuminating here (50). If an artist were to always paint portraits relying heavily on the colour green, then we have reason to believe the artist likes the colour green. It may be logically compatible with heavy use of the colour green that the artist in fact despises it, but this is not what we should expect. Similarly, given the badness of pain, if theism is true we should expect it to generally not obtain.

The power of this response may help to explain why when philosophers propose theodicies, they tend to deny the general badness of pain. The implication then is that we do not know pain is generally bad, so its widespread obtaining in the world is not in tension with theism as the evidential case claims. This seems to be an especially common response from theists who are also Christians. McCord Adams, for instance, argues that it is useless to argue against Christianity by claiming that God clearly doesn't minimise pain, since Christianity never claimed utilitarianism was true anyway (298). To assess the logical coherency and probable truth of a religion, we must consider its own views on what has value, and a key claim of Christianity is that there are far more

important things than pain, such as our relationships with God offered through spiritual life (306).

This paper will now consider the free will theodicy that is proposed with this Christian framework in mind (Plantinga, 2002; Hick, 1990). In arguing that it fails, I will implicitly defend standing by the evidential case. Before proceeding, however, it is worth noting why our discoveries in this section should already give us reason to be sceptical about the potential for such a theodicy to work. Since the free will theodicy will be explicitly premised on a denial of what I took to be an ordinary moral knowledge claim - viz., that pain is generally bad - insofar one accepts that we do know this, the fact the theodicy will advocate a contradictory theory of value should immediately count against the probability that it is true. The further reasons I will offer in favour of dismissing free will theodicies will only worsen their case.

4 - The free will defence.

Plantinga's free will theodicy assumes libertarianism about free will (29). This means that for Plantinga, to be free one's actions must have no antecedent conditions or causal laws determining what you do. This also means that Plantinga is an incompatibilist about free will, since he believes that if causal determinism is true, freedom would not exist. When considering the compatibilist alternative which claims that causal determinism and freedom coexist, Plantinga dismisses it as 'utterly implausible' and refuses to take it seriously (32).

Plantinga's libertarianism about free will means that for any free act, God cannot ensure what is done, since this would require causal determinism which is contrary to freedom. This means that it is impossible for God to cause free beings to never do wrong, and God's omnipotence is not undermined because omnipotence only requires that God can do anything that is possible.

For this reason, Plantinga claims that it could be the case that once God created free agents, actions bringing about suffering in the world were inevitable (30-31). If we then add the claim that a world containing free beings is more valuable than a world containing no free beings, then the free will theodicy is complete because this fact would provide God with sufficient reason for creating beings and thereby allowing suffering.

The best attempt to justify the premise that a world with free beings is more valuable than a world without them is offered by Hick's free will theodicy, which argues that free will is essential to the project of soul-making. This is an example of a theodicy borrowing resources from a distinctly Christian theory of value. According to Hick, since what is of most value is spiritual development, we should expect a world where suffering often obtains. This is because Hick believes that freedom is essential to spiritual development (168-169), and since Hick follows Plantinga in adopting a libertarian theory of free will, he similarly concludes that the existence of freedom makes wrong

actions causing suffering inevitable[2].

Hick thus claims that suffering is precisely what we should expect to find in a world in which theism is true, since God would intend a world where there are, so to speak, pitfalls along the road (170). God's aim would not be to only allow for pleasurable experiences. Spiritual development requires the cultivation of virtues like compassion and courage, and this requires free choice and encounters with suffering (Hick, 171). And the reason that spiritual development requires free will is that goodness obtained through suffering and 'uncompelled responses' is far more valuable than our being endowed with natural virtue *ab initio* would ever be (169). Hick claims that this is what justifies God in allowing suffering.

I will now offer four reasons for thinking free will theodicies fail. Firstly, a major problem lies in the fact that they presuppose a libertarian theory of free will. This is common amongst philosophers of religion. As well as Plantinga and Hick, Merrihew Adams endorses libertarianism (1977). Swinburne also defends it, arguing that to be free to choose good we must experience the temptation of doing bad without being causally determined to do good (1979, 238)[3]. Theists are motivated to endorse this theory because if compatibilism about free will is true, then they face a powerful objection

[2] There seems to be a tension in Hick's thought here that is worth acknowledging. His theodicy implies that both freedom *and* suffering are necessary to realise the value of spiritual development. Yet on his theory of freedom, it could be the case that suffering does not widely obtain. It is not clear how Hick could respond to this observation, but this problem will be bracketed for the purposes of this paper.
[3] Further evidence that those specialising in philosophy of religion are more likely to endorse libertarianism about free will is offered in Bourget and Chalmers, 2013.

made by Mackie (33). According to compatibilism, free will is, roughly, acting in accordance with one's desires, where which desires one has is causally determined. But if this is true, the question arises as to why God wouldn't universally endow us with good desires, so we always freely choose to do good and thus develop spiritually without causing suffering.

The problem for Hick and Plantinga is that compatibilism about free will is a compelling and popular position. Whilst a defence of compatibilism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that Bourget and Chalmers offer us reason to believe that a large majority of philosophers accept it (Forthcoming, 12). Insofar as we do have reason to accept compatibilism, then, Mackie's objection stands. It is not the case that freedom and spiritual development require the obtaining of suffering in the world, and a key premise of the free will theodicy is false.

Secondly, even if the plausibility of a libertarian theory of freedom was granted, the question then arises as to why this sort of freedom could justify suffering. The worry here is that the alleged value of soul-making lacks 'normative weight'. We understand without explanation why suffering is generally bad, but it is not obvious what is so good about the spiritual development Hick talks of. And even if it was granted that spiritual development was *a* good, one could still wonder whether it was sufficient to justify the existence of suffering. Hick owes us an account of why the freedom to cause suffering is more valuable than preventing the suffering from actually occurring.

This objection can be better understood in the context of Hick's claim that cultivating virtues like compassion and courage justify the existence of suffering. The problem here is that Hick seems to get things the wrong way around. In the same way an umbrella is only valued insofar as it rains, it seems that the reason a virtue like compassion is good is that it helps to alleviate suffering. It would be better if suffering didn't exist and there was thereby no need for compassion. Insofar as free will theodicies fail to see this, we once more have reason to reject them.

The third objection is noted by Hick himself, and may provide an even bigger problem for free will theodicies (183). This is the fact that whilst *some* suffering may be justified in order to allow for soul-making, the problem is that in our actual world, the amount of suffering appears to cause soul-*crushing*. If God created a world in which it was necessary to work in order to acquire food so that we learn the virtue of hard work, then that would be one thing. But in our world, there are regularly famines that slowly kill thousands of people through starvation (Hick, 183). Hick makes a major concession when he acknowledges the force of this objection, and suggests the only appeal left may be to mystery (186). Swinburne also expresses 'considerable sympathy' with this objection (263). Once more, then, the free will theodicy is undermined and the case for the evidential argument is strengthened.

The fourth objection will be discussed in the next section. This is the problem raised by

the existence of natural suffering.

5 - Natural suffering.

What is distinctive about natural suffering is the fact that it is not caused by human intentions. So whereas rape, murder, theft and so on do not count as instances of natural suffering, typhoons, tsunamis and earthquakes do[4]. The reason natural suffering is especially problematic for free will theodicies, then, should be obvious. Hick claimed suffering is a necessary byproduct of bad choices made through the intrinsically valuable exercising of human freedom, but the vast majority of suffering is natural suffering which has no such causal relation to human freedom. Even if humans always chose to act well, natural suffering would still be endemic.

There are some responses available here to the free will theodicy, but they face versions of the objections already outlined above. Plantinga, for instance, claims that if natural suffering was reduced, then persons would produce less moral good because such encounters allow for the cultivation of the virtues (57). We saw that this is to misunderstand the value of virtues like compassion, which are only good insofar as suffering exists. It would be better if there was less natural suffering, even if this meant less people were compassionate. Plantinga's response must also once more address the fact that the extent to which natural suffering obtains seems excessive for such purposes. Typhoons and tsunamis don't tend to offer challenges to be overcome.

[4] I ignore the interesting question of whether phenomena such as cancer and global warming should count as natural suffering, given the role of human choice in causing them. Whilst interesting and important, such borderline cases are not central to our purposes here.

Normally, they kill people.

Swinburne offers a more detailed discussion of the problem of natural suffering (240-257), but his suggestions are no better. He initially responds in the same way that Plantinga does, and the same objections hold. But Swinburne offers a second explanation of the importance of natural suffering according to which it is necessary as a source of causal knowledge to facilitate human freedom (247). The argument here is that to meaningfully exercise freedom, which is *ex hypothesi* of highest value according to free will theodicies, humans must know the likely consequences of their actions, and this in turn requires causal laws to operate regularly.

Leave aside the fact that it is deeply unclear how, exactly, my freedom is supposed to be dependent upon knowledge acquired by observing natural suffering. It is simply not as obvious as Swinburne assumes how my witnessing tsunamis is supposed to enhance my ability to act. A greater objection to this theory is the fact that, as Swinburne himself notes, God could surely have endowed us with this causal knowledge without the need for natural suffering to regularly obtain (252). We could, for instance, all be born with this knowledge. Swinburne's response is, staggeringly, to claim that acquiring this knowledge by responding to suffering and learning of causal laws through repeated experiences is the only morally permissible way God could give us this knowledge, since this process is a great good (255). There is little we can say in response to this claim. I hope its absurdity is apparent to most people. It is inconceivable that this could justify

the obtaining of widespread natural suffering. Once more, we have reason to dismiss the adequacy of free will theodicies.

6 - Conclusion.

This paper has explored various issues raised by the problem of evil, and has attempted to defend its power to still undermine theism. I argued with Mackie that contrary to common belief, theism is indeed logically incompatible with the existence of evil once we understanding evil correctly as something that necessarily has no moral justification. Insofar as all attempts to show that theism and evil are consistent involve showing there could be sufficient reason for God to allow evil, they fail to understand what evil is. I therefore argued that theists must argue that evil does not exist, and instead only suffering exists that God has sufficient reason for allowing.

I then considered Rowe's argument for the evidential case that even if there could be sufficient reason for all suffering, this is highly improbable. Wykstra had famously objected to Rowe that since theism implies humans have little knowledge compared to God, our inability to understand God's reasons for allowing suffering is exactly what to expect, so the appearance of evil does not make its existence probable after all. I defended Rowe against Wykstra by noting that even according to theism, we have some knowledge, and this plausibly includes the fact that suffering is generally bad. If it is conceded that this is true, then the widespread existence of suffering *would* be very surprising on the theistic hypothesis. So Rowe's evidential case still stands.

It was seen, however, that Christian philosophers are more than willing to deny the general badness of suffering, and by implication the claim that this constitutes part of our knowledge. The denial of this claim is central to free will theodicies, which argue that God has sufficient reason to allow suffering because of the value of human freedom, which makes the existence of suffering inevitable. I objected to free will theodicies on several fronts. Firstly, they depend on an implausible incompatibilist theory of freedom. Secondly, they fail to explain what's so valuable about freedom. Thirdly, they may be able to explain the existence of some suffering, but they cannot plausibly account for the actual amount of suffering that obtains in the world. And fourthly, it was seen that such theodicies do little to explain the existence of natural suffering. Insofar as free will theodicies can thus be dismissed, Rowe's evidential case against theism remains standing once more.

In conclusion, it is worth acknowledging one point that Wykstra is undoubtedly right about (144). This is the fact that a good evidential case against theism must consider all the reasons for and against theism, rather than focusing only on the problem of evil. So, for instance, the arguments from design and religious experience would have to be assessed before we know how probable theism is. Such considerations are, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. But it must be clarified in light of this that my claim is specifically that the existence of widespread suffering, considered on its own, counts significantly against the likelihood that theism is true. If the existence of God is to be

convincingly argued for, theists should concede this, and instead focus on defending their belief on other more fruitful grounds.

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