

William Rowe on the Evidential Problem of Evil

See William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' in M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams (edd), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: OUP, 1990)

The argument for atheism based on evil:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Rowe: "The argument is valid; therefore, if we have rational grounds for accepting its premises, to that extent we have rational grounds for accepting atheism."

Do we have rational grounds for accepting the premises?

Both atheists and theists are likely to accept 2. But what about 1? Consider the lingering death of the fawn. Such suffering seems preventable and pointless—which *suggests* (rather than proves) that 1 is true.

We could never know that 1 is true, but we could have rational grounds for believing that it is true. With respect to the fawn's suffering, Rowe asks: "Is it reasonable to believe that there is some greater good so intimately connected to that suffering that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad?"

Rowe claims that it is not reasonable to believe this. What do you think?

Even if you think it is reasonable to believe it in the case of the fawn, is it reasonable to believe it about every instance of seemingly pointless human and non-human animal suffering?

Rowe concludes that 1 is rational belief. Given 2, then, the argument for atheism goes through.

How might a theist respond? A theist must try to establish that it is reasonable to believe that 1 is false. There are two strategies: First, a direct attack: For every instance of suffering point out a good to which it may be connected. However, the theist does not have enough information to carry this off. Second, an indirect attack: The "G.E. Moore shift".

Given an argument: p, q , therefore, r . Instead of arguing directly against p , another argument is constructed— $\text{not-}r, q$, therefore, $\text{not-}p$. Compare:

	p	$\text{not-}r$
	q	q
Therefore	r	$\text{not-}p$

If one of these arguments is valid, the other must be too. But they cannot both be accepted. So the question becomes: which of these arguments is it more reasonable to accept?

Now, apply the G.E. Moore shift to the argument for atheism:

not-3. There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

not-1. It is not the cases that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

The theist can now say that he has rational grounds for believing not-3, accepts 2 as true, and sees that not-1 follows from not-3 and 2. So the theist claims rational grounds for rejecting 1 of the argument for atheism, thus claims that the argument fails.

The dispute will then focus on whether the theist does indeed have rational grounds for rejecting 1. I.e., rejecting that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

A theist might appeal to several ideas to support the rejection of 1.

- Human suffering is a punishment for sin.
- Suffering is a form of test.
- This world is a “vale of soul-making”.
- Certain suffering might bring benefits to those who inflict it.
- There are immense benefits to the world following a law-like natural order.

Questions

1. Is it more reasonable to accept premise 1 of the argument for atheism than to reject it?
2. Is it possible to reach an objective conclusion about the argument from atheism? I.e., a conclusion that every rational person could agree with despite his or her background beliefs.

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