

## IS THEISM COMPATIBLE WITH GRATUITOUS EVIL?

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder

The most widely taught and frequently discussed version of the "problem of evil" is known as the argument from gratuitous evils. Its most popular representative is William Rowe. His most famous version of the argument goes like this:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. God would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. So, God does not exist.'

We shall say that an instance of intense suffering is a gratuitous evil just in case God could have prevented it without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Premise 1 is the factual claim that there are instances of gratuitous evil, and premise 2 is Rowe's incompatibility claim that God would not permit gratuitous evil. Critics mainly target the factual claim. In this essay, however, we begin to assess the prospects of denying the incompatibility claim.

Now, on the face of it, the idea that God may well permit gratuitous evil is absurd. After all, if God can get what He wants without permitting some particular horror (or anything comparably bad), why on earth would He permit it? It's not as though it would come as a surprise to Him, or that He'd be unable to do anything about it. No wonder, then, that Rowe writes: "This premise (or something not too distant from it) is ... held in common by many atheists and nontheists... [It] seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists" (336). And Rowe is not alone in this assessment. No less a critic of Rowe than Stephen Wykstra writes that

The heart of [Rowe's incompatibility claim] is ... a conceptual truth unpacking part of what it means to call any being-not just any omniscient being-morally good.... [Denying it] is tantamount to saying that God could allow some intense suffering either because he enjoys the sight of occasional suffering for its own sake, or because he is indifferent to it. It is hard to see how such a being could be meaningfully praised as a good God, worthy of our worship, our obedience, and-not least-our trust. I take this to be a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by