

# SLEEP TRAINING, DAY CARE, AND SWIM LESSONS: SKEPTICAL THEISM AND THE PARENT-CHILD ANALOGY

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{PENULTIMATE DRAFT}

Abstract:

Erik Wielenberg recently invoked the parent-child analogy in an argument against Christian theism. The argument relies on the claim that a loving parent would never allow her child to feel abandoned in the midst of what feels like gratuitous suffering. In this paper, I offer three clear counterexamples to Wielenberg’s central premise. At the same time, a successful counterexample does not a robust theology of suffering make. To that end, and with a careful eye towards anti-theodical concerns, I defend the need for a more proactive Christian philosophical examination of the role of suffering in a meaningful life.

Why do You stand far away, LORD?  
Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?  
-Psalm 10:1

## Introduction

In a recent paper, Erik Wielenberg presents an argument against the existence of the Christian God on the basis of “apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment.”<sup>1</sup> Crucially, this is not an argument for atheism in general. Instead, its primary target is the God affirmed by Christian skeptical theists—especially those who invoke the parent-child analogy in response to the evidential argument. Indeed, it is this very analogy upon which Wielenberg’s argument is built. His claim is not merely that the analogy is insufficient as a defense of skeptical theism, but rather that “the parent-

child analogy tells *against* rather than *for* skeptical theism's central claim.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Wielenberg's argument proceeds by analogy against Christian theism from what he takes to be "a central element of the parent-child relationship." (308)

Wielenberg's argument proceeds as follows:

1. A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.
2. If the Christian God exists, then the God-human relationship is relevantly like the parent-child relationship.
3. So, if the Christian God exists, then He never permits humans to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment if He can avoid doing so (from 1 and 2)
4. But if the Christian God exists, then He does permit His children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment when He could avoid doing so.
5. Therefore, the Christian God does not exist. (from 3 and 4.) (307)

This argument is importantly different from standard evidential arguments in one key respect: it does not require the reality of gratuitous suffering. There is no point at which the argument rests on an inference from apparently gratuitous to actually gratuitous suffering or abandonment. Thus, Wielenberg writes: "Because the argument does not employ any sort of noseum inference, on the face of things at least skeptical theism provides no response to it." (309)

My purpose in this paper is twofold. First, I offer a series of counterexamples to Wielenberg's first premise:

1. A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.

By bearing in mind (a) the real experiences of very young children and (b) the surprisingly high bar set by a close reading of this premise, I will show that the Christian can and should reject this claim. Loving parents sometimes do permit their children to experience (what feels to them like) prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense they have abandoned

them even when they could avoid doing so. Thus, my first task is to defend skeptical theism from Wielenberg's argument by rejecting this first premise.

At first glance, rejecting this premise seems cruel. I grant this; I will address the apparent cruelty. I grant, further, that my counterexamples will, in some sense, feel profoundly unsatisfying. I remain confident that they are successful counterexamples to Wielenberg's premise. My second task, therefore, is to defend these counterexamples from two likely objections: (1) that they do not do what they are intended to do, and (2) that they trivialize real suffering. I submit that they *do* do the former and do *not* do the latter. I intend to show that it is only at first glance that these apparently unsatisfying counterexamples are unsatisfying; more careful reflection both strengthens their force and clarifies Wielenberg's argument. The counterexamples work.

But what of the second objection? The examples I propose will face the challenge faced by all theodicy—that of minimizing or “explaining away” the very real suffering of human beings. I will conclude this paper by anticipating and disarming this final objection. I am profoundly sympathetic to the anti-theodical concerns about, in Kilby's words, “making meaning from, and thereby being reconciled to, *other* people's suffering.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, I am convinced that the Christian theist ought to be similarly concerned about the corollary risk—that of sending the message to suffering Christians that their suffering could never be redeemed, that their lives must be seen as a testament against the existence of a loving God.

It is especially important that the Christian be able to reject the first premise of Wielenberg's argument because, by my lights, there is no avoiding the *truth* of his fourth premise.

4. But if the Christian God exists, then He does permit His children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment when He could avoid doing so.

It is an uncomfortable truth that the God of Christianity and Judaism does, indeed, allow his creation to experience divine hiddenness in the midst of extreme suffering. Wielenberg is right that such experiences are common. I would go further and note that they are central to accounts found

in Hebrew and Christian scriptures. There is no escaping the cry of Christ on the cross for the Christian theist, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Nor can we ignore the sheer number of Psalms of lament or the oft-cited words of CS Lewis and Mother Theresa.<sup>4</sup> JP Moreland writes, “There is no easy answer to the sense of abandonment by God that many of us have experienced.”<sup>5</sup>

Many theists reject the claim that some suffering is gratuitous; a Christian could likewise reject a premise claiming that God *actually* abandons people in the midst of their suffering. What she cannot reject, at least not without great cost, is the claim that some people *feel* that they have been abandoned by God in their darkest hour. To deny this would be to deny the first-person experience of far too many people—Biblical, historical, and contemporary.

Careful readers will note that I have, so far, only affirmed *most* of premise four, dropping its final clause. It might be possible either to attempt a theodicy or to appeal to inscrutability simply by disputing this final clause and insisting that God could not “avoid doing so.” I don’t think this is the best way to proceed, but I will revisit the issue below. If we assume, with Wielenberg, that God could have avoided allowing his children to feel abandoned in the midst of suffering, then two options remain for the Christian skeptical theist: either (a) God is not like a parent after all (and so premise 2 is false) or (b) parents can, and sometimes do, justifiably allow their children to feel abandoned in the midst of what feels like gratuitous suffering. There are merits to the first option; God is clearly not *merely* or *exactly* like a human parent. Still, I think the analogy is worth preserving. God is, at least in some important respects, like a parent. For that reason, I believe the best path forward for the Christian is to take the latter option and reject premise 1.

### **Counterexamples**

But *how*? What kind of a parent would permit her child to feel abandoned in the midst of profound suffering? Wielenberg concedes that “some sufficiently creative philosopher” might be

able to construct such a counterexample, but he deems such instances likely to “occur very rarely or never in the course of a typical parent-child relationship.”<sup>6</sup> To the contrary, I offer a series of entirely ordinary counterexamples. If we are careful to distinguish perceived abandonment from actual abandonment, I think the answer to the question “what kind of parent would permit this?” is: “Most parents, perhaps even all of them.” This is especially true if we believe, following Wykstra, that our epistemic position relative to God is analogous to that of an infant and her parent.<sup>7</sup>

### **(1) Sleep training**

Consider a loving parent engaged in the process of sleep-training an infant. While this label applies to a wide range of practices, I will use it to denote varieties of the *cry it out* approach, up to and including the so-called *extinction method*. I may not have managed to let my infants cry for prolonged periods of time, but I know countless men and women who fully embraced the *cry it out* approach—and they loved their babies as much as I loved my own. What’s more, my own sleep-averse infant was, by all appearances, absolutely certain that he had been utterly abandoned and forgotten. Judging by his response, my meager ten-minute timer was an eternity to him. How much more for those infants and toddlers who wail for an hour or more without reprieve? Surely, they take themselves to have been abandoned in the midst of significant and prolonged suffering. It is one thing to reject or condemn this approach to parenting; it is another thing entirely to say that no loving parent would ever use it.

### **(2) Daycare.**

Still, there are those who condemn the *cry it out* approach precisely because of the infant’s perceived abandonment. This second example is perhaps less controversial: many parents leave unwilling, despairing children in daycare or a new and unfamiliar school. Sometimes they even leave their children when they know their child is in pain. Teething hurts, but a teething child rarely merits

a day off work for a parent. Good, loving, devoted parents sometimes leave their hurting children in the care of someone else, even when the child makes clear that it feels like abandonment.

### **(3) Swim Lessons**

So *ordinary and typical* is this experience that my third example unfolded organically while I was writing this paper. I have a friend whose children need to learn to swim. We live in Florida; even those of us without pools have neighbors with pools. It is vitally important that children learn to swim at an early age here. (A staggering 98 children drowned in Florida last year.) For this friend, swim lessons are the best solution to this problem. The trouble, of course, is that one of her children hates these lessons. Worse still, being able to see his mother increases his distress. If he can see her, he calls out for her. “Hold me! I want to be with you!” It is heart-wrenching, and yet—he needs to learn to swim. The instructor’s solution has been to move the lessons further from his mother. He still hates going to the lessons, but he is better able to endure them when his mother is not nearby. Here’s the point: to a swim instructor and, I think, to a parent, this makes sense. To the child? He experiences this as suffering, and almost certainly feels that his mother has *bidden herself* in the midst of his suffering. Worse yet, he is correct. She can prepare him in advance, she can comfort him when the lesson has completed, but during the lesson she must let him be. She must hide.

Of course, none of these three counterexamples is an instance of actual abandonment in the midst of prolonged suffering. It is crucial that we remember that this does not preclude them from serving as successful counterexamples. All that is required is that there be a loving parent who allows her child to *feel* that she has been abandoned in the midst of what *feels to the child* like prolonged and gratuitous suffering, even when the experience was preventable. It is not an exaggeration to state that infants, toddlers, and even preschoolers often respond to having been left in a loving and safe environment as if they had been abandoned. A crying infant, safe and secure in a crib with parents nearby, has not been abandoned; a teething toddler left crying in the classroom has not been

abandoned; a frightened child in a pool with an instructor has not been abandoned. Nevertheless, these children often *feel* abandoned. Feeling abandoned does not constitute being abandoned. Just as apparently gratuitous suffering may not be actually gratuitous, the feeling of abandonment need not be veridical.

It will be helpful to slow down and take a closer look at what a successful counterexample to premise 1 would require. Recall the premise:

1. A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so. (307)

There are four important aspects of the claim being made here; a successful counterexample must include all four. First, the suffering involved should be “prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous.” Second, it must be accompanied by the experience of abandonment (and, perhaps, the worry that the parent never existed in the first place.) Third, it must be the case that the parent could have spared the child this experience and chose not to. Because the experience itself is twofold—suffering *and* abandonment—there are two corresponding means of prevention: prevent the suffering or prevent the feeling of abandonment. To satisfy this requirement, an ideal counterexample would be one in which both aspects were avoidable. Either might suffice, but to address the core of Wielenberg’s concern, the strongest response will be one according to which the parent could have spared the child the suffering *and* could have spared the sense of abandonment. Finally, for a successful counterexample, we should be able to say with confidence that the parent is *loving*.

### **Sleep Training**

Does sleep training fulfill the first of these criteria? I think it does, but we must take care to remember whose experience settles the matter. Were there a way to ask the howling infant, it seems likely that she would describe her suffering as “prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous.” There

is something odd, of course, about putting these words in the mouth of a pre-verbal baby, but that shouldn't be held against the skeptical theistic defense. After all, it is precisely this degree of incommensurability that the skeptical theist affirms. Just as an infant could not possibly hope to understand, let alone articulate, the motivations of a sleep training parent, so too are we unable to understand the motivations of an eternal God.

Likewise, the sleep training infant certainly seems to experience perceived abandonment. Whether these feelings rise to the level of doubting the existence of a parent or not I couldn't say, but I don't see why they couldn't. An infant wailing for a parent who will not come is emblematic of the feeling of abandonment and its resulting despair. That the parent is nearby, that the infant is safe and secure, does not mitigate the experience *as* an experience of abandonment and despair.<sup>8</sup>

The third and fourth criteria require a bit more work. In particular, we must show both that the parent could have avoided the suffering and that, in failing to do so, she nevertheless acted as a loving parent. The tension between these two requirements is the heart of the challenge: why would a loving parent not prevent her child from experiencing suffering and abandonment unless out of desperate necessity? In fact, some readers might be inclined to think that this tension is precisely why *cry it out* methods are, as one author wrote, "a form of need-neglect." Unless we can say with confidence that loving parents sometimes allow their children to *cry it out* even when they could avoid doing so, this counterexample will not suffice.

Despite initial appearances to the contrary, the truth of this claim—and, with it, the satisfaction of the third and fourth criteria—is demonstrable, perhaps even to the point of being indisputable. To see why, we need only take seriously the terms of Wielenberg's argument. Premise 1 does not claim that a loving parent would prevent experiences of suffering and abandonment "unless there was some great good she could not obtain without doing so." This is by design; it is the distinguishing feature of this argument. Suppose it did begin with such a premise:



- 1\* A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place unless there was some great good she could not obtain without doing so.
- 2\* If the Christian God exists, then the God-human relationship is relevantly like the parent-child relationship.
- 3\* So, if the Christian God exists, then He never permits humans to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment unless there was some great good she could not obtain without doing so.
- 4\* But if the Christian God exists, then He does permit His children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment when there is no great good he could not obtain without doing so.
- 5\* Therefore, the Christian God does not exist. (from 3 and 4.)

If this were the argument, premise 1 would be nearly impossible to reject. What loving parent would allow her child to feel abandoned in the midst of suffering for *no good reason*? This new premise is much stronger, but it is not what Wielenberg's premise says.

More importantly, it cannot be what Wielenberg intends. This is not a premise in need of minor revision. This revision would not be minor. Changing premise 1 in this way would require the corollary change that yields premise 4\*. Where premise 4 requires only that the experience of abandonment amidst suffering really does occur, the revised 4\* adds a further claim: that some such experiences *are gratuitous*. After all, if we suppose that God could have abstained from creating humanity, and we grant that some people feel abandoned by God while they are suffering, then we have all that we need to affirm premise 4. To affirm 4\*, we must add the further claim that God had *no overriding good* which might justify these experiences. We must agree that these instances of suffering are gratuitous. We must, *contra* Wielenberg, make that dreaded *noseeum* inference. For this reason, Wielenberg's first premise must be taken at face value: as claiming that a loving parent would do *anything in her power, at any cost*, to prevent her child from ever feeling abandoned in the midst of great suffering.

With this in mind, it is clear that loving parents sometimes allow their infants to *cry it out* when they could avoid doing so. We could go further and note the substantial goods sometimes

made possible by this decision: increased maternal mental health, an improved marriage, greater economic stability, emotional availability for older siblings, and any number of goods that many of us take for granted. We could, as well, note the significant economic and racial disparities in the adoption of infant sleep practices, even within the United States. We hardly need to consult a study to understand why an overworked and underpaid single mother might choose the simplest path to better sleep, whether that be bed-sharing or a few days of the “extinction method.”<sup>9</sup> We *could* explore these motivating factors, but we *need not*. In order to undermine the truth of premise 1, all that is required is that we show that loving parents sometimes let their children *cry it out* when they could avoid doing so. It is possible to prioritize attending to a crying child above all else. It is typically possible, even for the most desperate of parents, to stay by the side of your infant at all costs—even at the cost of maternal depression, economic hardship, and ill health. If loving parents sometimes allow their child to feel abandoned in the midst of avoidable suffering, premise 1 is false. Crucially, that a decision is *justifiable* does not suffice to show that it is *unavoidable*.

### **The First Objection**

There is an obvious sense in which this counterexample seems inadequate. After all, many parents find themselves in challenging circumstances which render the *cry it out* approach to sleep training, if not strictly necessary, then something akin to unavoidable. Surely we can distinguish between those parents who let their children cry so that they can watch a new show on Netflix and those who do so as a last resort to facilitate a return to work made necessary by extreme poverty. Furthermore, the kinds of pressing concerns that might compel desperate parents to let their unattended infants cry are *distinctly human concerns*. The God who “neither slumbers nor sleeps” has no such excuses.<sup>10</sup> Even if God is like a parent in some ways, He is surely not like a parent in these ways. In short, there seems to be an important difference between those who choose the *extinction method* for their own convenience and those who do so out of practical necessity—and an even

greater difference between sleep-deprived human parents and God. It is worth considering whether these differences undermine the success of this counterexample.

I am confident that they do not. On the contrary, I maintain that neither of these distinctions, no matter their plausibility, has any bearing whatsoever on the success of this counterexample. Suppose we affirm the first and insist on a morally relevant difference between the two sets of human parents. Is this not a difference of *justificatory reasons*? If we feel that loving parents might permit this suffering for substantial practical gains, but never for selfish convenience, it must be because we understand that the goods gained by the former *outweigh* the suffering felt by the child. In contrast, the suffering permitted in the latter scenario seems to be *gratuitous*. There is no alternative explanation; *ex hypothesi*, the only difference between the sets of parents is their motivation. The desperate parents permit suffering to obtain some great good; the Netflix parents just want a casual evening together. (As a brief but important aside, I suspect that some loving parents do, in fact, allow their children to *cry it out* so that they can watch Netflix together. I am not inclined to set the bar for loving parents so high as to exclude this possibility.)

This is also why the cited differences between human parents and God are, in this context, ultimately irrelevant. Wielenberg's argument is not supposed to be about gratuitous suffering; it is not supposed to require a *noseeum* inference. As written, premise 1 says the following:

A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.

The final clause is of central importance. Undoubtedly, much of what is unavoidable to us is avoidable to God. Even so, we must remain careful not to conflate *avoidable* with *avoidable at no significant cost*. Plenty of justifiable suffering is nevertheless avoidable; *unavoidable* sets a much higher standard than does *justifiable*. If loving parents sometimes permit their children to experience avoidable suffering and abandonment, then this premise is false; it remains false even if those

parents only do so in cases where there is a substantial good to be gained. (It is also worth noting that the disputed premise makes a claim about loving parents in general; logically speaking, a human counterexample should suffice.)

For these reasons, the fact that (a) some parents have more to gain from allowing their infant to *cry it out*, and (b) God lacks analogous reasons for allowing his children to feel abandoned in the midst of suffering, has *no bearing whatsoever* on the truth of premise 1 or the success of this argument. If this feels wrong, it may be that Wielenberg's argument secures much of its rhetorical force from an implicit *noseeum inference*, after all.

### **Daycare**

The second counterexample succeeds, as well. The teething toddler who has been left at daycare (a) is in pain, (b) feels as if he has been abandoned by his parent while suffering, and (c) feels that no good reason could justify this abandonment.<sup>11</sup> For some children, daycare is difficult on a good day. Whether it be teething pain, a diaper-rash, or residual symptoms from a waning illness, those children are sometimes left in a daycare setting with the added stress of physical pain. It is my contention that the parents who allow these children to suffer in this way may nevertheless count as loving parents. It is also my contention that the love of their parents does not prevent those children from feeling as if they have been abandoned in the midst of significant, prolonged suffering. Wielenberg claims that a successful counterexample would require creative thinking, invoking scenarios that would “occur very rarely or never in the course of a typical parent-child relationship.” (310) I maintain, to the contrary, that it is so common as to be ordinary.

This suffering is often avoidable. Although the general use of daycare is a practical necessity for many parents, it would be difficult to show that it is strictly unavoidable. Harder still would be to show that it is unavoidable even on those days when a child is in pain. What might make such a choice unavoidable? Economic need? The threat of losing a job that is a great good to your family?

Neither will suffice; each requires an appeal to an outweighing good which might justify the ensuing suffering. To say that some suffering is, on balance, worth it for the family—to say, even, that it is worth it *for the good of the child*—is not to say that it is unavoidable. If Wielenberg’s argument is to avoid the *noseeum inference*, it cannot appeal to a sense of *unavoidable* that relies upon the weighing of goods and harms.

### Swim Lessons

This final counterexample invokes a true anecdote shared by a loving mother in my own life: a child suffering through swim lessons. This last case includes details which will prove to be philosophically relevant, so they are worth repeating here. The story involved a young boy (4) who was substantially distressed by his daily swim lessons. To minimize this distress, the instructor asked his mother to stay out of sight for the duration of the lesson. She complied. After all, Florida is an especially high-risk state for childhood drownings. Swimming is an essential life skill, the earlier the better.

Can *swim lessons* really serve as an example of suffering and abandonment? Lest we be inclined to dismiss as benign such an ordinary life experience, we would be wise to remember that suffering is in the eye of the sufferer. Presumably, the child who is learning to swim is not in any physical pain. Even so, he is suffering. He may be cold, he may feel he is drowning, he may be afraid of the instructor, or the pool drains, or any number of things. The fears of a 4-year-old are not always rational; neither are they always proportional to objective danger. Like suffering, the experience of time is also relative. A half hour of misery to a 4-year-old could easily count *to that 4-year-old* as “prolonged suffering.”

Furthermore, he almost certainly felt abandoned by his mother in the midst of this suffering. This feeling would be reasonable; his mother was actively hiding from him while he endured what was, to him, the worst half-hour of his day. Surely, she warned him; surely, she did her best to

explain why she had to remove herself from the situation. Just as surely, these preparations could not guarantee that he would not feel abandoned in his more difficult moments. Finally, this suffering is avoidable. His mother could have allowed him to quit, despite her concerns about his safety; she could have insisted on staying poolside, despite his increased agitation. Instead, she allowed her son to experience “prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned [him]” when she, indisputably, “could avoid doing so.”

It isn’t enough to say that a loving parent could make the choice that this mother made. I submit that, in these circumstances, she made the loving choice. (This is not to say that it was the only loving choice available, but that it was, in many ways, more loving than the immediate alternatives.) Had she withdrawn him from swim lessons, he would have lost this opportunity to learn a life-saving skill. He may even have experienced an increase in, or solidification of, his fear of water. Had she refused to hide during the lessons, she would have increased his distress. As the instructor noted, her presence was an unhelpful distraction. Finally, in the state that has the awful distinction of ranking first in the nation for the “unintentional drowning death rate among children ages 1 to 4 years,” pulling your child from swim lessons is a dangerous move.<sup>12</sup>

### **Extending the Counterexamples**

I am convinced that my friend acted as a loving parent when she allowed her son to feel abandoned in the midst of what felt like prolonged suffering. Still, we could strengthen this counterexample. Suppose her child was not a neurotypical 4-year-old; suppose he had been an active toddler, or a young child with a significant cognitive disability, or a neurodivergent child with an especially strong aversion to the feeling of wetness. These children are not immune from drowning. On the contrary, some neurodivergent children are at a significantly increased risk.<sup>13</sup>

More broadly, when we consider the experiences of cognitively disabled children and adults, or those of any children in need of serious life-saving medical care, we find further counterexamples.

Many of the former will have a significantly more difficult time understanding why they are not always able to be with their preferred caregiver; many of the latter will have to endure things like prolonged hospitalizations and the isolation of an ICU ward, coupled with scary and painful medical procedures. These parents do not want their children to feel abandoned. And yet, because they want their children to be well, they must sometimes allow those children to have that experience—not because they could not do otherwise, but because they could not do otherwise *except at great cost to the child*.

There remains one aspect of Wielenberg's premise that I have not adequately addressed. It is unclear whether the children in my counterexamples ever come to doubt the existence of their parents. Might Wielenberg strengthen his argument simply by changing the "or" in premise 1 to an "and?"

A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them [and] never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.

Setting aside the complications such a change would engender, I want simply to note that this change would not save Wielenberg's argument. Even this much stronger claim is easily refuted. To be sure, the circumstances surrounding a counterexample to this revised premise would be a less mundane than my preceding examples. Nevertheless, they are not difficult to imagine.

Some parents of very young infants have to deploy for months or years at a time. They do so knowing they may not come home. Surely, on some such occasions, the children may be sick or injured at the time of deployment. Other parents face the far more difficult choice of leaving their child with extended family for months, for years, or for the duration of their childhood. Most strikingly, there are parts of the world in which the surest way to get your infant the treatment she needs for her cancer, for her devastating birth defect, for her life-threatening ailment of *any* kind, is to allow her to be adopted by parents in a wealthier nation. Sometimes, as heartbreaking as it must

be, the loving thing to do is to allow your child to live a life in which you will be forgotten. That this is the result of awful circumstances, that it is almost certainly a sign of some great injustice, does not mitigate this reality. If any loving parent has ever sent her sick child away for care, knowing that the cost of doing so is their relationship, then even this revised premise 1 is false. Loving parents sometimes have to make unfathomably difficult decisions.

These counterexamples defeat premise 1. Loving parents sometimes do permit their children to experience avoidable feelings of abandonment in the midst of suffering. They do so only for good reasons, perhaps only for reasons which directly benefit their children; they do so having done their best to prepare their child, and they comfort their child when (or if) they are reunited. They do so *lovingly*, but they do so, nonetheless. Even setting aside the more exceptional cases, if premise 1 is true, then it is not possible for there to be loving, attentive, excellent parents who use swim lessons, daycare, and *cry-it-out* sleep training when it is possible for them to avoid doing so. A bar this high is not merely unattainable, it is undesirable. Good parents count the cost and weigh the relative goods. Wielenberg's first premise cannot account for this without introducing a *noseeum inference* to the argument. Thus, these counterexamples serve to refute premise 1 and, with it, Wielenberg's argument.

### **The Second Objection**

It is tempting, I think, to reply to these counterexamples as follows: in each of these examples, the parents had good, loving reasons for permitting their child to endure this bit of perceived abandonment and suffering. Indeed, in each of these examples, the parents had good, loving reasons for believing the experiences to be objectively less severe than the child takes them to be. Sure, a parent might allow their child to feel abandoned in the midst of what feels to the child like gratuitous suffering, but only when there is some greater good to be obtained. Often, if not always, that greater good is a good gained for the child. Thus, these counterexamples are not really



counterexamples to premise 1 after all. The preceding discussion has, I hope, adequately addressed this first objection.

There is, however, a second sense in which my counterexamples may seem not only unsatisfying but offensive: to borrow a phrase from van Inwagen, the “magnitude, duration, and distribution” of this world’s suffering goes well beyond things like day-care drop-offs and swim lessons.<sup>14</sup> Are we really prepared to say that things like human trafficking, sexual violence against children, and the pain of watching your own child starve to death while being unable to help them are *just like* being dropped off at daycare while teething? *I am not*. Of course not. This *is* an offensive suggestion. Crucially, we do not need to say this in order to endorse these counterexamples. The premise makes a very specific claim about what a loving parent would do, and it does so in a way that is designed to avoid a noseem inference. By design, it requires only the experience of great suffering and abandonment; the experience of a hurting, lonely child is not helped or changed by the reality that there is far worse suffering in the world.

An adequate defense to one argument does not a robust theology of suffering make. The first premise can, and should, be rejected; nevertheless, Christian philosophers will still have to contend with the truth stated in the fourth premise. These are two very different tasks. When we forget or disregard the distinction between a defensive and proactive philosophical posture, we run two significant risks: (1) the risk of setting the bar for an objection to an argument too high, and (2) the risk of setting our expectations for a philosophical treatment of suffering too low. An adequate defensive position does not, need not, and *should* not exhaust the range of positive philosophical resources.

### **Positive Skeptical Theism and the Limits of Counterexamples**

It will be helpful to look, once more, at the challenge posed to skeptical theism. In particular, we should briefly consider John DePoe’s response to Wielenberg’s argument. DePoe is a skeptical

theist, but not what he calls an “ordinary” skeptical theist. Instead, DePoe defends his “positive skeptical theism” from Wielenberg’s argument.<sup>15</sup> With Wielenberg, DePoe agrees that the resources of ordinary skeptical theism cannot meet the challenge of “suffering and abandonment.” Echoing Wielenberg, he writes:

It is important to recognize that mainstream skeptical theism has no response to Wielenberg’s argument since it does not rely on the fact that suffering and abandonment are, in fact, purposeless and unjustified. The premise he employs only requires that some experience of suffering and abandonment *appear* to be gratuitous or purposeless, which is eminently more modest and plausible. (308)

Both Wielenberg and DePoe agree on this much: the mere inscrutability of God’s motivations is not enough to explain the way in which sufferers tend to feel abandoned by God. Barring some “second-order justification for the appearance of gratuitous evil” (DePoe, 93) or *serious* violation of the ordinary parent-child relationship (Wielenberg), no loving God should be expected to permit this.

I believe that Wielenberg and DePoe are just wrong about this. In order to avoid the *noseeum inference*, Wielenberg must set the bar for a loving parent unreasonably—and I would say undesirably—high. I wonder if there is any parent who has managed to spare their child this experience; I wonder if, in doing so, they have done a better job as a parent. At the same time, I also believe that Wielenberg and DePoe share a common insight that Christian theists ought more readily to embrace: namely, that the degree and kind of suffering in this world really does demand— or better, *invite*—something more than a merely defensive posture from the Christian. Contra DePoe and Wielenberg, I maintain that ordinary skeptical theism suffices as a response to Wielenberg’s argument; this does not mean that it suffices as a Christian response to divine hiddenness in the midst of suffering.

In general, there are at least two aspects of the challenge of suffering for the Christian theist. On the one hand, she must be able to respond to arguments which purport to demonstrate that the

God in whom she believes does not exist. Like any philosophical position, theism in general and Christian theism in particular need only *disarm* opposing arguments. If she can rationally defend the rejection of a premise in the argument, that argument has been disarmed. The argument may be revised and thereby revived, she may be called upon to do the same for further arguments, but a false premise or a faulty inference undermines an argument. This is, after all, what we all teach our undergraduates.

The second aspect is at least as important; in many ways it is more important. A Christian ought to go beyond the merely defensive maneuvers required to disarm some argument or another and ask, further, what the reality of suffering tells us about the creator and his creation—but this is what the *theist* must do, it is not what a successful objection to a particular argument must do. Again, there are good reasons not to conflate these two tasks.

With this in mind, let's consider what these counterexamples can and cannot do. They can be used to justify the rejection of Wielenberg's first premise and ensuing argument. They are examples of loving parents allowing their children to experience preventable suffering and feelings of abandonment; they are successful counterexamples to this premise. They are not examples of loving parents permitting this suffering for no good reason. Not one of these counterexamples involves needless or gratuitous suffering—but neither do they need to. After all, the whole point of this argument is to undermine Christian theism *without* having to infer that some suffering is gratuitous. These counterexamples can defeat Wielenberg's argument.

What they cannot do is serve as a complete model for how Christians ought to think about God and suffering. They do not adequately reflect the degree and kind of suffering that we find in the world. By design, they are examples for which we can see the justification of the suffering involved; we are the adults, not the children, in these scenarios. The actual suffering of this world, in contrast, includes a great deal for which we *cannot see* the justification. This is a challenge, but it is

not new. It is the evidential argument from evil; it is the argument in response to which skeptical theism was conceived. A successful objection undermines an argument; Christian philosophers should aim to do a great deal more than merely undermine atheistic arguments. If an objection succeeds, its work is done, but *our* work—the larger project of making sense of suffering—is far from finished.

### Looking Forward

To that end, I want to conclude by gesturing towards the work that remains. Although Wielenberg's argument fails to undermine Christian skeptical theism, I submit that it succeeds on two counts: it rightly emphasizes the philosophical significance of (a) the *experience* of sufferers and (b) the specific doctrinal commitments of theistic philosophers. Wielenberg is right to note that the God of Christianity is susceptible to accusations of divine hiddenness that go beyond those levied against the God of the philosophers. It is not enough to consider the possibility of a generic *nonresistant nonbeliever*; the Christian philosopher should also contend with the accounts of *believers* who feel abandoned by God in their darkest hour. We need not accept that anyone is, in fact, abandoned by God; that they *feel* abandoned is itself significant. As Christian philosophers, we ought to ask: Given that God does not abandon anyone, why might he permit us to think that he has done so? What could this mean? What, if any, function might these experiences serve?

When I propose that Christian philosophers devote more of their resources to considering the role of suffering in a meaningful, flourishing life, I recognize that doing so invites significant risk. I will not expound on those risks here, noting instead that Kilby, Coakley, Panchuk, Griffioen, Adams, and others have done outstanding work in this area.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, I am convinced that there are real and significant risks incurred by the avoidance of theodicy, or something akin to theodicy, as well. In his recent book, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing our Mortality Frees us to Truly Live*, J. Todd Billings asks what it means to live as “a dying creature before the One whose

days have no end.”<sup>17</sup> Billings is a theologian, a husband, and a father. He is also a Christian who lives with incurable cancer and its resultant chronic pain.<sup>18</sup> When he calls upon Christian philosophers and theologians to dwell more deeply on suffering, it is, at least in part, *his own suffering* he has in mind. His is both a professional and personal endeavor.

Consider the following passage, in which Billings recalls his exchange with a friend:

“Lisa had seen chronic pain before, and she was empathetic, but she wasn’t scandalized by it. In contrast, when a friend responds to my ongoing pain as a terrible affront, my life feels diminished; the outrage seems to imply that this wound could never be part of ‘the good life.’” (96)

To be clear, Billings immediately goes on to note: “And yet, perhaps it’s exactly right to say that my life is ‘diminished.’” He does not shy away from the intractable complexity of suffering and goodness in the Christian life. He offers no easy answers.

Instead, he helps us to see why, despite the absence of easy answers, we must do better. In our haste to avoid the harm done by overvaluing the redemptive power of suffering, Christian philosophers run the risk of leaving suffering believers with a devastating range of options. Atheistic, agnostic, and even deistic philosophers are free to conclude that suffering is *exclusively* bad, that no good could ever justify, let alone redeem, the worst kinds of suffering that we encounter in this world. Christian philosophers, on the contrary, should be wary of this view. We *know* that the world is rife with suffering; we *know* that Christians and other religious believers are not exempt. Christian philosophers are not free to wonder whether God might permit his creatures to feel abandoned in the midst of their suffering; we are stuck with a world in which this happens, a world in which God lets it happen.

What is the message we send to suffering believers when we tell them that their suffering could never be redeemed? That it is offensive even to consider the possibility of there being a good that might ultimately be worth it all? That their darkest days are just that—dark days, devoid of meaning, purpose, and any hope of redemption? Are we really prepared to tell Todd, and those like

him, that his suffering “could never be part of ‘the good life?’” I do not mean to suggest that critics of theodicy hold this position. Not at all! Further, the concerns they raise are vitally important. We would be wise not to forget them. I mean only that we should take care not to overcorrect. We can be mindful of the risk of harm, taking care to learn from our historic mistakes. We can do so while pressing on in careful inquiry into the possible role of suffering—and even the feeling of having been abandoned by God—in the flourishing human life.

### **Conclusion**

The first premise of Wielenberg’s argument makes an extremely strong claim that we must reject:

1. A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.

Loving parents take the long term good of their children into account. They consider the overall health and stability of their families. Often, these calculations include their own mental and physical health. Loving parents evaluate the goods to be gained when deciding whether or not to permit some instance of suffering. When permitted, the suffering that results is avoidable; it may remain, all things considered, preferable.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wielenberg, “The Parent–Child Analogy and the Limits of Skeptical Theism”

<sup>2</sup> (emphasis mine) Specifically, Wielenberg uses the parent-child analogy to undermine what he calls (SC2): “Every actual instance of inscrutable evil, E, is such that it would not be surprising if there are possible goods, evils, or entailments between good and evil that are beyond the ken of human beings (but not beyond the ken of an omniscient God) that would justify God in permitting E.”, 306

<sup>3</sup> Kilby, ‘Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,’ 98

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Wielenberg, 302 and Moreland, *Finding Quiet*, 155

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<sup>5</sup> Moreland, *Finding Quiet*, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Wielenberg, 310

<sup>7</sup> Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil"

<sup>8</sup> There is some empirical evidence, as well, which may support the claim that crying infants experience (cry it out) sleep training as suffering and abandonment. Their cortisol levels seem to be inversely related to maternal responsiveness. I say "seem to be" because the science is not altogether clear. (See, for example, this paper, in which only some of the authors' hypotheses were confirmed: Philbrook and Teti, "Associations between Bedtime and Nighttime Parenting and Infant Cortisol in the First Year," If we combine the increase in cortisol with the plausible hypothesis that infants self-soothe by seeking out a caregiver, it is nearly definitional that unattended crying infants experience suffering and apparent abandonment. (In support of this latter hypothesis, see: <https://evolutionaryparenting.com/distress-self-soothing-and-extinction-sleep-training/> and Darcia F. Navaez, "Dangers of 'Crying It Out'"

<sup>9</sup> LM Gaydos et al., "Revisiting Safe Sleep Recommendations for African-American Infants"

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 121. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments pertaining to this section.

<sup>11</sup> Depending on the age of the child, it is difficult to say whether or not the child could come to doubt the existence of her parents. I will return to the hiddenness aspect of the argument in the conclusion of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/drowning-prevention/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.autismfl.org/drowning-prevention#:~:text=Kids%20with%20ASD%20are%20160,drowning%20than%20their%20neurotypical%20peers.>

<sup>14</sup> van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil"

<sup>15</sup> Very briefly, De Poe disputes Wielenberg's claim that apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment would constitute *deception* by God.

<sup>16</sup> S. Coakley and K.K. Shelemay, *Pain and Its Transformations*; Griffioen, "Therapeutic Theodicy?" Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*; Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*; Michelle Panchuck, "Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences"

<sup>17</sup> J.T. Billings, *The End of the Christian Life*, 95. To be clear, as Billings notes we are *all* living as dying creatures; this is the human condition.

<sup>18</sup> He shares more of his personal experience as a terminally ill Christian in: Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament:*