EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract: While experimental philosophy has fruitfully applied the tools and resources of psychology and cognitive science to debates within epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, relatively little work has been done within philosophy of religion. And this isn't due to a lack of need! Philosophers of religion frequently rely on empirical claims that can be either verified or disproven, but without exploring whether they are. And philosophers of religion frequently appeal to intuitions which may vary wildly according to education level, theological background, etc., without concern for whether or not the psychological mechanisms that underwrite those intuitions are broadly shared or reliable. In this chapter, I explore some of the fruit and possibilities for the emerging field of experimental philosophy of religion. First, in Section 1, I motivate and outline the chapter. Then in Section 2, I briefly consider how the tools and resources of experimental philosophy might be fruitfully applied to a seminal topic within philosophy of religion, namely, the problem of evil. In Section 3, we'll sketch some broader applications of experimental philosophy of religion.

Section 1: Introduction

From its very conception, philosophy of religion has arguably been accompanied by questions concerning why people form the religious beliefs that they do. Consider the following famous passage from the pre-Socratic philosopher, Xenophanes:

> Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other. But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own. The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do

the work that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves. (translation from Kirk and Raven 1960, 168–69, KRS 169-72)

Such an observation is often taken as a serious objection to various religious beliefs. Given the cultural genesis of many religious beliefs, we might justifiably suspect that people are simply inclined to worship gods of their own making; an observation that obviously casts doubt on such beliefs.

And we have good reason to think that Xenophanes' critique is still with us today. For example, ever since Karl Barth famously gave the doctrine of the Trinity preeminence in his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*—developing the Trinity as a lens through which we must see and develop distinctively Christian theology—many theologians have followed suit and tried to develop theological insights by extrapolating from the Trinity. In practice, however, it often looks like the Trinity is used as a mirror for reflecting whatever theological conclusions a theologian wants to arrive at. As Stephen Holmes notes in his article "Three verses one? Some problems of social trinitarianism" (2009) theologians with different leanings regarding ecclesiology, for example, can sometimes come to radically (but predictably!) different conclusions regarding what lessons we can learn from reflecting on the Trinity. A theologian with high-church leanings will likely find hierarchical ecclesiology to be supported by their doctrine of the Trinity. A theologian with low-church leanings will likely find the Trinity to be a foundation for more egalitarian conclusions. Such insights raise challenging questions: to what extent is our theology (or atheology) predicated on our prior commitments? Are our conceptions of God of our own making? Xenophanes' worry still lingers.

Psychology has had a long history of exploring the empirical foundations of religious beliefs[1]; however, despite the recent flourishing of philosophy of religion within the anglophone world[2], most scholars working within philosophy of religion have only rarely explored how the empirical literature might shed light on the field.[3] And while experimental philosophy has fruitfully applied the tools and resources of psychology and cognitive science to debates within epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, scholars within philosophy of religion have been slow to follow suit.[4] And this isn't due to a lack of need! Philosophers of religion frequently rely on empirical claims that can be either verified or disproven, but without exploring whether they are. And philosophers of religion frequently appeal to intuitions which may vary wildly according to education level, theological background, etc., without concern for whether or not the psychological mechanisms that underwrite those intuitions are broadly shared or reliable. And while quite a few contemporary scholars working within philosophy of religion have been interested in looking to the psychological literature for philosophical insights (see, for example, Barrett and Church 2013; De Cruz 2015; Cruz and Smedt 2015; Green 2015), relatively little work has been done conducting empirical research in the spirit of experimental philosophy as it has been done within

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[1] Freud himself frequently explaining religious beliefs in terms of "illusions" or "wish-fulfillment" (Freud 1953, 30). Some other seminal works in this area include: Durkheim 2008; Evans-Pritchard and Gillies 1976; Malinowski 2015.

[2] As Nicholas Wolterstoff noted in his 2011 article, "How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy", "Never since the late Middle Ages has philosophical theology so flourished as it has during the past thirty years" (2011, 155)

[3] This is perhaps especially surprising given that experimental philosophy can be seen as a continuation of very traditional philosophical projects. See Knobe and Nichols 2007, 3.

[4] That said, work within experimental philosophy of religion is starting to proliferate. Some of it is even quite favorable to various forms of theism. See, for example, Barrett and Church 2013; Church, Carlson, and Barrett 2020; Cruz and Smedt 2015; De Cruz 2015; 2017; Green 2015.

epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.[5] This is all starting to change. Thanks to generous funding from the John Templeton Foundation, a number of projects on the theme of experimental philosophy of religion are being funded; as such, we should expect a proliferation of literature on experimental philosophy of religion in the coming years.[6]

In this chapter, we'll explore some of the fruit and possibilities for this emerging field. In Section 2, I'll want to briefly consider how the tools and resources of experimental philosophy have been fruitfully applied to a seminal topic within philosophy of religion, namely, the problem of evil. For the sake of reducing the word-count, our focus here will primarily be on simply summarizing the results. Finally, in Section 3, we'll briefly sketch some broader applications of experimental philosophy of religion.

But before we get started, it's worth considering the following question: Why is it important to extend experimental philosophy to philosophy of religion? After all, philosophy of religion has seen an almost unparalleled flurry of activity over the past 50 years; what is experimental philosophy going to bring to the table? Let me briefly point to two motivations for experimental philosophy of religion: First, while philosophy of religion has indeed flourished over the past few decades in many regards, it's public image within the field more broadly is still somewhat suspect. As Draper and Nichols explain: "[In] spite of the recent expansion of work in philosophy of religion, it exhibits at least four symptoms of poor health: it is too partisan, too polemical, too narrow in its focus, and too often evaluated using criteria that are theological or religious instead of philosophical" (2013, 421). They go on to suggest that the contemporary philosophy of religion literature is permeated by scholars who "suffer from cognitive biases and group influences" (2013, 420). One of the central benefits of experimental philosophy of religion is that it might help us better understand the biases of scholars working within the field (myself included!) and perhaps even facilitate intellectual modesty. Here, I like to quote David Hume (who can, I think, in places be read as a proto-experimental philosopher):

> The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions; and while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments. To hesitate or balance perplexes their understanding, checks their passion, and suspends their action. They are, therefore, impatient till they escape from a state, which to them is so uneasy: and they think, that they could never remove themselves far enough from it, by the violence of their affirmations and obstinacy of their belief. *But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.* (1975, sec. 129; emphasis mine)

If we (i.e. philosophers of religion) could better understand the cognitive, social, and psychological mechanisms that underwrite our beliefs, we *might* (as Hume ultimately suspects) find that human understanding "is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects" (1975, sec. 7); however, more hopefully, we might simply learn a better way forward in the field—a way that's perhaps not so plagued with "cognitive biases and group influences", a way that's accompanied by more "modesty and reserve."

Secondly, experimental philosophy of religion might also push the field towards greater pluralism. A lot of work that is done in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion is done from

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[5] A prominent exception to this trend has been some of the work of Helen De Cruz. See, for example, Cruz 2017.
[6] This is the "Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion Project" (Project ID: 61886).

the perspective of Western academia, along with Western academic intuitions. And in many cases, that might be just fine. (If the subject under consideration is a technical Western concept, then it might make sense to take seriously the intuitions of technical Westerners.) The problem, however, is that academic Western intuitions are often assumed to be *everyone's* intuitions, and this is particularly problematic when arguments are being made that aim to apply far beyond Western academia, across religions and across cultures. It's not at all obvious that philosophers and theologians should prioritize the intuitions of Western academics when it comes to many central debates (like the debates surrounding the problem of evil, natural law, purpose, etc.). As such, one hope for experimental philosophy of religion is that it will expand the religious and cultural insights that are relevant to the contemporary debates, breaking down cultural barriers, and better revealing (and perhaps honestly owning) the presuppositions that shape our view of ourselves, the divine, and evil.[7]

Section 2: The Problem of Evil

From 2018 through 2020, Justin Barrett, Oliver Crisp, undergraduate research assistants, and myself worked on the "Problem of Evil and Experimental Philosophy of Religion" project (Grant ID: 61095, generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation), which explicitly aimed to applyd the tools and resources of experimental philosophy to a seminal issue within the philosophy of religion, namely, the problem of evil. The hope was that this research would lead to and motivate further work within experimental philosophy of religion.[8] While the research here is ongoing, in this section I will briefly report on some of what we have been finding. First, we'll consider Rowe's formulation of the problem, and then we'll sketch some applications from experimental philosophy. After that, I'll summarize our results.

Section 2.1: Rowe's Formulation of the Problem

While our 2020 article, "Evil Intuitions? The Problem of Evil, Experimental Philosophy, and the Need for Psychological Research" (co-authored with Rebecca Carlson and Justin Barret) pointed to broader applications, our research thus far has focused predominantly on William Rowe's seminal 1979 formulation of the problem of evil, which will be our central focus in this section. Here is Rowe's central argument:

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[7] This, of course, also connects with the previous point about modesty. The problem of "echo-chambers" in contemporary religious debates—where people only listen to pundits "on their side" while ignoring or caricaturing any opposition—is arguably antithetical to intellectual modesty, the honest exchange of ideas, and academic progress. If viable, divergent opinions are ignored, silenced, or simply overlooked, then it's all too easy to be intellectually arrogant—to think that our views are the only viable views, to just assume that our idiosyncratic ideas and intuitions are accurate representations of objective reality. As such, one hope of experimental philosophy of religion is that by opening the doors to a wide range of perspectives and intuitions regarding human nature, evil, and the divine, philosophers and theologians will be able to take a humbler and more reflective stance toward their own presuppositions and insights.

[8] And this project is set to be followed by the "Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion" project, also funded by the John Templeton Foundation (61886). For more information on these projects, see here (https://www.templeton.org/grant/the-problem-of-evil-and-experimental-philosophy-of-religion) and here (https://www.templeton.org/grant/launching-experimental-philosophy-of-religion?fbclid=IwAR3CuKX-8pNYXK-76KHsdVZh1A7-7Xw_cBWXDtJHZ1B08gVikrDHhW6837g).

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. [Therefore,] there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. (1979, 336)

And given (i) Rowe frequently uses the shorthand "pointless" to refer to suffering where allowing it to happen doesn't either afford some greater good or prevent some other evil equally bad or worse and (ii) a traditional conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then we can simplify Rowe's argument to something like this:

4. There exists pointless suffering.
5. If there is a God, then there won't be pointless suffering.
6. Therefore, there is no God.

A fairly straightforward *modus tollens* argument. But why should we think the premises are true? Rowe takes premise 2(5) to be relatively uncontroversial; as Rowe notes, "This premise (or something not too distant from it) is, I think, held in common by many atheists and nontheists" (1979, 336). Agreed; if there is an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God, we wouldn't expect there to be genuinely pointless suffering in the world. That premise won't be our focus here. But what about premise 1(4)? Why should we think there is indeed pointless suffering in the world?[9]

Here, Rowe introduces a brief vignette, showcasing what appears to be an example of pointless suffering:

> **FAWN**: Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. (1979, 337)

According to Rowe, "so far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless" (1979, 337). Now, whether the suffering is genuinely pointless is up for debate, but Rowe's central point here is that such suffering seems pointless. And that certainly seems to be the case! While an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good being certainly could have prevented such an event, it's extremely difficult to imagine how permitting something like the suffering of FAWN could either prevent a greater evil from occurring or might usher in some greater good. Given this case, premise 1(4) looks extremely plausible!

To be sure, this doesn't amount to a proof. As Rowe is quick to point out, for all we can tell there *is* a greater evil that allowing E1 prevents or perhaps there *is* a greater good that allowing E1 affords. The problem, as Rowe sees it, is that given "*our* experience and knowledge of the variety and profusion of suffering in our world" it *seems like* evils like those manifest in E1 are wholly avoidable and more or less pointless; and while the above argument doesn't amount to a *proof*, it does, according to Rowe, provide "rational support for atheism, that it is reasonable for us to believe that the theistic God does not exist" (1979, 338, emphasis mine).

Section 2.2: Applying Experimental Philosophy
So how might experimental philosophy apply to Rowe's argument? One straightforward application is to see if the intuitions that underwrite Rowe's argument are shared across a wide range of demographics.

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[9] Notice how already the argument has an empirical component to it. If argument seems to clearly rest on the world being (or at least appearing) a certain way, namely as having instances of pointless suffering within it.

When epistemologists talk about "our intuitions" regarding Gettier counterexamples, experimental philosophers wonder, "whose intuitions?"; similarly, when Rowe talks about "our experience and knowledge of the variety and profusion of suffering in our world" we might also easily wonder "whose experience?" or "whose knowledge?".[10] Similarly, when Rowe says that it "does not appear" or doesn't "seem" reasonable to believe "that there is some greater good so intimately connected to [the suffering of FAWN] that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad", we might plausibly ask "does it 'appear' or 'seem' this way to everyone?"

If not, then we might wonder if we have any reason to champion one set of intuitions over another. And maybe we do, maybe those of us who feel the weight of Rowe's argument are drawing from intuitions that have been honed by years of training and expertise; maybe the divergent intuitions are simply reflecting a degree of ignorance. But if no such story can be plausibly told, then there is a legitimate worry that the philosophical import of Rowe's intuitions regarding the FAWN case might be significantly diminished.[11]

Along these lines, we predicted that intuitions regarding the FAWN case would indeed diverge across various demographics. Quoting from our submitted manuscript, we came up with the following hypotheses about the demographics of intuitions regarding the FAWN case:

> *Religion*: Intuitions regarding Rowe's case will significantly diverge according to the respondents' religious beliefs. More specifically, people who report being atheists or agnostics will, on average, agree with Rowe's intuitions regarding the FAWN case; whereas, people who are not atheists or agnostics will, on average, disagree with Rowe's intuitions regarding the FAWN case.

> *Gender*: Relatedly, given that men are statistically more likely to be atheists or agnostics than women (Cragun 2016:307), we predicted that men would, on average, agree with Rowe's intuition more than women.

> *Education*: Additionally, given that education levels negatively correlate with religiosity (Beit-Hallahmi 2006:313)—such that the more educated someone is the more likely they are to be an atheist or an agnostic--we predicted that more educated people will report greater agreement with Rowe's intuition, on average, than less educated people.

> *Nationality:* Given that Rowe is working within the American academy, we expected that Americans might, on average, be more likely to agree with Rowe than other nationalities.

> *Ethnicity*: Given that Rowe is working within the anglophone academic world, a world that has historically been predominantly populated by people of European descent, we expected that people who identify as White would, on average, be more likely to agree with Rowe than other ethnicities.

Let's call these the *religion-hypothesis*, *gender-hypothesis*, etc. respectively.

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[10] For such work on the Gettier problem, see Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich 2001.

[11] Critically, it's our intuitions regarding FAWN that are the driving force for thinking that premise 1 (4) is true. As Plantinga elucidates Rowe's argument in *Warranted Christian* Belief (2000), if it *seems* as though the suffering in FAWN is pointless, then that gives us a reason for thinking that the suffering in FAWN is pointless; and insofar as we have evidence for thinking that the suffering in FAWN is pointless, then that will give us evidence against theism (given Rowe's argument; 465–466). As such, if we don't think that the suffering of the FAWN is pointless, contrary to Rowe, then the evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1 (4) is true greatly diminishes. And if our evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1 (4) is greatly diminished, then, as Rowe rightly acknowledges, the evidence the argument generates against theism greatly diminishes too.

We might also inquire into the psychological mechanisms that underwrite intuitions regarding the FAWN case. In addition to directly testing the stability of key philosophical intuitions across various demographics, it is also worth exploring what factors might contribute to people having the intuitions that they do. We might think of this as the *psychology of philosophy* or the *psychology of philosophers* (heaven help us!). For example, given that fawns exceptionally cute animals (just think of Bambie!), we might wonder if cuteness is a driving factor behind our intuitions regarding the FAWN case. Would horrific death of a less cute animal—for example, perhaps a boar or a vulture—be seen as any less pointless? And what if we tried to bring the cuteness to the fore by presenting people with the picture of a cute fawn along with the standard FAWN case? Or if they're reading a version of the vignette with a boar or vulture instead, what if we included a less than flattering picture of the boar or vulture respectively? Call this the *cuteness-hypothesis*. If cuteness is driving the perception of pointlessness, then that might give us a reason to wonder how veritic such intuitions are.[12]

Finally, we might also wonder if the brevity of the FAWN case—being only two sentences long—is what's contributing to the perception of pointlessness. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of context and narrative when wrestling with the problem of suffering[13], so we might wonder if the presence of some background information as context might diminish the perception of pointlessness. Call this the *context-hypothesis*.

Section 2.3: Summary of Results

Justin Barrett and I (along with some undergraduate research assistants) began exploring these hypotheses during the "Problem of Evil and Experimental Philosophy of Religion" project (ID: 61095), and we've started to submit our findings to various academic journals. Some of the results were published open access in our article "The Context of Suffering" (forthcoming), but others are still awaiting publication. In either case, we can only briefly summarize our findings here. Please consult those articles for a more detailed description of our methods, data-analysis, and results; we're hoping they'll be available by the time this *Compendium* is in print![14]

Let's start with the hypotheses regarding whether or not intuitions regarding the FAWN case diverge across various demographics (*the religion-hypothesis*, *the gender-hypothesis*, etc.). Across those five demographic variables—gender, education, ethnicity, religion, and nationality—we saw significant divergences from Rowe's intuition regarding the Fawn case; however, not always in ways we predicted. Some results weren't terribly surprising; where atheists and agnostics on average agreed with Rowe's intuitions regarding the FAWN case, all religious groups with a sufficient amount of data (Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, and "other Christian") disagreed with Rowe's intuitions on average. Other intuitions were more surprising. While intuitions do seem to diverge according to gender, it's women (not men) who are more likely to agree with Rowe regarding the FAWN case. And while intuitions also seem to

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[12] To be sure, the goal here isn't to commit the genetic fallacy; in other words, the goal here is *not* to suggest that if we can explain why someone believes something, then that their belief must be false. (After all, if we can explain why someone loves their spouse, that doesn't mean that they don't love their spouse!). However, there can be something deeply revealing about explaining why people have the beliefs and intuitions that they do. And, in at least some circumstances, if we know that the psychological mechanisms that drive a target intuition are not sufficiently truth-sensitive, then that can give us pause to reflect on the philosophical import of those intuitions.

[13] Eleonore Stump's 2012 work, *Wandering in Darkness*, is particularly relevant here.

[14] We pre-registered our research with the Open Science Framework; see here: https://osf.io/ebgpd

diverge according to education, it was the least educated (not the most educated) who were most likely to agree with Rowe.

But perhaps what is most striking from all of this research is the fact that so few people across all of these demographics agree, on average, with Rowe's intuition regarding the FAWN case. While White and Hispanic participants were significantly more likely to agree with Rowe's intuition than, say, Asian participants, Whites and Hispanics nevertheless, on average, still disagreed with Rowe's intuition. While Americans and Brazilians were significantly more likely to agree with Rowe's intuition than Indians, Americans, on average, nevertheless still disagreed with Rowe's intuition regarding the FAWN case. While women were significantly more likely to agree with Rowe's intuition than men, women, on average, nevertheless still disagreed with Rowe's intuition.

What does this mean for Rowe's seminal formulation of the problem of evil? Does such a variety in response to FAWN really threaten Rowe's argument? After all, a defender of Rowe's argument might argue that their conclusions about FAWN are not driven by intuition but are the result of a rational assessment of the possibility of rational justification of the target suffering! To be sure, many philosophers (e.g. see Wykstra 1984; Russell and Wykstra 1988; Inwagen 1988; Alston 1991; Plantinga 2000) have already cast doubt on such a response; however, given the details of our empirical research, such a response now might seem especially implausible. Do we have a good reason for thinking that as people become more educated, they become generally less able to rationally assess the FAWN case? Do we have a good reason to think that Brazilians are better at rationally assessing the FAWN case than Indians? That people of European decent are better at rationally assessing the FAWN case than Blacks or Asians? Surely not. Minimally, then, these empirical findings might raise serious concerns about the ultimate success of Rowe's formulation of the problem of evil, since it seems to suggest that Rowe's response to FAWN might be underwritten by cognitive mechanisms and influences that are not nearly as reliable, universal, or objective as we might have previously hoped.
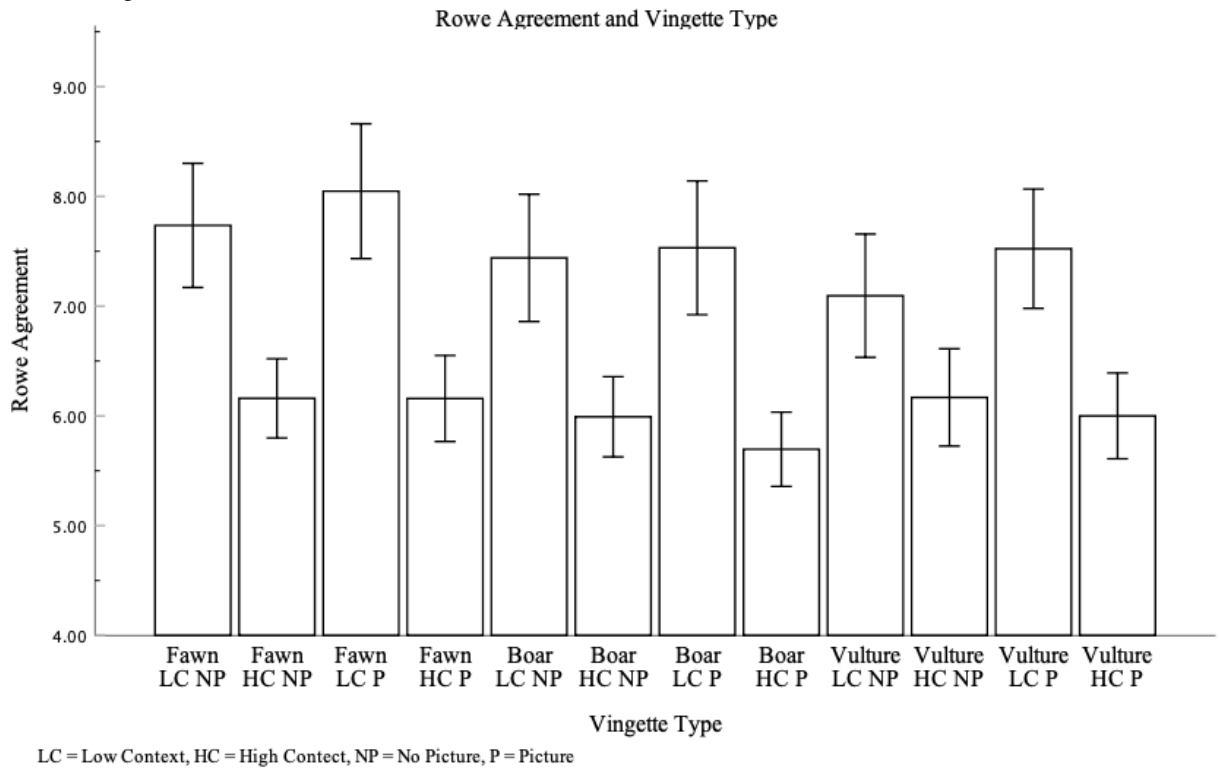
What about the cuteness-hypothesis? Does the cuteness of an animal have a significant impact on the perception of pointlessness in FAWN-style cases? No, it doesn't seem to. We didn't see any significant differences between people's responses whether or not they received the case with a fawn in the vignette, or with a boar, or with a vulture. It also didn't seem to matter whether or not we included a picture of the target animal.

What did matter, however, was context. With some of the variations of Rowe's FAWN case, we included the following paragraph of information before showing target vignette:

> Forest fires are often viewed as some of the most dangerous and destructive natural disasters. While some fires of catastrophic size can be detrimental to forests and endanger human lives and infrastructure, smaller forest fires are actually an essential aspect of the forest ecosystem. It may seem counterintuitive that fires could be beneficial to the life of a forest, however, recent ecological research has shown that small burns play a major role in the health of an ecosystem as a whole. Fires, often resulting from lightning strikes, quickly and efficiently clear away thick undergrowth, dying trees, and the dead material that congregates on the forest floor. If left unchecked, dead organic material and undergrowth will prevent new trees and plants from taking root and being able to grow. The burnt organic material such as plants, shrubs, and animals, leave behind topsoil that is rich in nutrients from which new plant life can easily grow. Small forest fires also play an important role in preventing fires from reaching catastrophic sizes. When a fire is small, it is usually confined to burning the undergrowth and dead material on the forest floor and does not burn the tree canopy or kill the large trees of the forest. However, if a forest goes too long without a fire, the undergrowth will become so thick that when it does burn it will easily ignite not only the forest floor but also the trees themselves. Many experts attribute the record-setting fires that have been seen in recent years to decades of fire suppression in forests, which has left entire ecosystems vulnerable to catastrophic fires.

Many species of plants have adapted to occasional fires and can quickly regrow burnt branches. Some trees even need fire to reproduce due to seed-cones that will only open when exposed to extreme temperature.

We then gave participants a variation of Rowe's FAWN case (some with boars, some with vultures, some with pictures, etc.). Across the board, participants who received the context paragraph reported (on average) significantly less "pointlessness" in the target case than participants who did not receive the context paragraph ($p < 0.001$).[15] Consider the following graph from Church, Warcol, and Barrett forthcoming:

Rowe Agreement and Vingette Type

LC = Low Context, HC = High Context, NP = No Picture, P = Picture

Please note: In these results, a score of 8 represents a midpoint of neither agreeing or disagreeing with Rowe. Anything above 8 (up to a maximum of 14) represents agreement with Rowe on average. Anything below 8 (to a minimum of 2) represents disagreement with Rowe on average. Here again, it's easy to see that the type of animal (fawn vs. boar vs. vulture) or the inclusion of a picture had no significant effect; that said, however, the effect of context on perceptions of pointlessness is (in our opinion) genuinely remarkable.[16]

To be sure, more research is needed before we can know what philosophical conclusions to draw from this result. Maybe the significance of context is a result of "points" being found in context; if that were the case, it wouldn't be surprising that Rowe's original case seemed pointless, because it was only two sentences long! That said, the significance of context might also be a result of some other factor.

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[15] And, to be sure, no interaction effects across the different variables were statistically significant.
[16] For more information on this result, please see "The Context of Suffering" by Church, Warchol and Barrett (forthcoming).

Given that we're pattern loving critters, maybe context gives us the resources to imagine a "point" where there isn't one." Again, more research is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions.[17]

Section 3: Further Topics

While our research has primarily focused on applying empirical tools to seminal formulations of the problem of evil, experimental philosophy has promising applications more broadly. In this final section, I'd like to simply point to a few areas for future research.

Theological Methodology
One of the great effects experimental philosophy has had on contemporary philosophy is to generate a healthy amount of angst over what philosophers are doing when doing philosophy. Shortly after work in experimental philosophy started challenging the theoretical import of so many intuitions that undergird central projects in philosophy, the academic literature saw a flurry of interest in philosophical methodology. (See, for example, Williamson 2007; Cappelen, Gedler, and Hawthorne 2016; De Cruz 2015b.) Where do our intuitions come from? Are they a reliable foundation for theory-building? Are some intuitions better than others? Why or why not? Are our philosophical intuitions simply a reflection of our worldview, our upbringing, our culture, or our personal experiences? What are philosophers doing when they do what they do?! Angst indeed.

But angst loves company. And experimental theology might very well give theologians reason to take a long look in the mirror and further reflect on their own methodology. And as we saw in the introduction of this chapter, from Xenophanes' classic critique of religious belief being made in our own images to the predictable responses to Barth's emphasis on the Trinity, questions concerning theological methodology can be of central interest for experimental philosophy of religion. Where do our theological intuitions come from? Are they a reliable foundation for theory-building? Are some theological intuitions better than others? Are our theological intuitions simply a reflection of our worldview, our upbringing, our culture, or our personal experiences? Further empirical research is needed.

Theodicies
While the above considerations regarding Rowe's formulation of the problem of evil arguably takes some pressure off of traditional brands theism, it's worth noting that applying resources from experimental philosophy to philosophy of religion or philosophical theology is a double-edged sword. In this instance, the result might take some pressure off of theism; however, additional work on experimental philosophy of religion might very well cut against various theological or religious projects. One immediately relevant project, of course, is the project of trying to develop a theodicy to justify God's allowing for the evils of this world. In his landmark work, *Evil and the Love of God* (1966), John Hick identifies several seminal theodicies (or families of theodicies) within the relevant philosophical and theological literature, and the literature has only continued to expand. The worry here then is that, in addition to potentially undermining the evidential problem of evil, experimental philosophy of religion might also call into question seminal explanations for why God allows for the evil we see in the world.

Consider, for example, Alvin Plantinga's influential *felix culpa* theodicy as found in his 2004 work, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'" In that paper, Plantinga argues that any possible world

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[17] Please see section 3 of Church, Carlson, and Barrett (2020) for further empirical dimensions of the problem of evil that could be explored.

that contains features of divine *incarnation* and *atonement* (in the way that the Christian religion describes[18]) will be better than any other possible world that doesn't contain these features. Even if we're comparing a utopian world where there is no sin or death or suffering to a world that is wallowing in depravity and sadness, if the broken world contains divine incarnation and atonement it is a better world than the utopian world.[19] A strong view indeed! But if this is right, then this can account for the broken and fallen world that we find ourselves in; after all, if the world wasn't fallen, broken, and in need of redemption, then there wouldn't be a need for divine incarnation and atonement (at least on the Christian picture of things).

One of the difficulties for theodicies like this comes in knowing how we should weigh the value of different possible worlds. Just like we might wonder how our observations of the distribution of pain and pleasure in the world would be more plausible based on theism or a hypothesis of indifference (cf. Draper 1989), so too might we wonder how best to weigh the value of possible worlds and how we might know if features like incarnation and atonement really have the *decisive* value Plantinga attributes to them. Plantinga, no doubt, has arguments to support his view; however, many people (perhaps especially non-Christians) might find his theodicy counter-intuitive. And it's for this reason, we might wonder if many theodicies, like Plantinga's *felix culpa* theodicy, rest on intuitive insights that might diverge across many demographics. And as such, this could potentially be another area of fruitful research in experimental philosophy of religion.

Argument from Design
Another important argument in philosophy of religion where the tools of experimental philosophy seem particularly apt is the argument from design, especially because the argument (at least as it's typically formulated) fundamentally relies on particular interpretations of empirical phenomena. As the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* nicely summarizes the typical structure of the argument:

> Design arguments typically consist of (1) a premise that asserts that the material universe exhibits some empirical property F; (2) a premise (or sub-argument) that asserts (or concludes) that F is persuasive evidence of intelligent design or purpose; and (3) a premise (or sub-argument) that asserts (or concludes) that the best or most probable explanation for the fact that the material universe exhibits F is that there exists an intelligent designer who intentionally brought it about that the material universe exists and exhibits F. (Himma n.d.)

So, to put it roughly, arguments from design typically rest on appeals to elements of the natural world that seem to manifest the hallmarks of design; and given such design, we can seemingly conclude that there must be a designer. While the devil is in the details, of course—especially in terms of how the aforementioned "hallmarks of design" are fleshed out—many formulations of the argument from design make fairly bald appeals to elements in the natural world that simply appear to be designed. And because of this, it's easy enough to see where work in experimental philosophy might be fruitfully done. After all, is the appearance of design in the natural world common to everyone? Or is it the case that where some people see order and design, others see the result of chaotic, natural processes?[20]

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[18] There is, no doubt, tremendous disagreement regarding how we should understand the atonement and the incarnation within the Christian religion; however, let's put these disagreements to the side for the time being.

[19] For some of the ongoing conversation on Plantinga's *felix culpa* theodicy, see, for example, Diller 2008; Adams 2008.

[20] Helen DeCruz and Johan DeSmedt (2015, chapter 4) have made similar observations.

Following Hume in his *Enquiries*, we might also ask what kind of design that we see in the natural world? As Hume noted, "When we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect" (1975, sec. 105). And this can radically affect how we think about the Argument from Design. Again, quoting Hume:

> Allowing, therefore, the gods to be the authors of the existence or order of the universe; it follows, that they possess that precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their workmanship; but nothing farther can ever be proved, except we call in the assistance of exaggeration and flattery to supply the defects of argument and reasoning. (1975, sec. 106)

As such, if we see a flawed design we can, at best, only conclude that there might be a flawed designer. Here it's helpful to think of some human creations to make this point. Whoever honestly considers a pug, for example, cannot but conclude that such an animal—with it's constant struggle to breath, its propensity to pop its eyes out of their sockets whenever it sneezes, etc.—is not meant for this world and a sin against nature. And whoever is responsible for the creation of such a creature—most saliently, human beings in this case—is surely deranged! And, depending on how misanthropic you're feeling, that might seem like a very plausible conclusion. So even if the appearance of design is resilient to humans across a wide range of cultures and demographics, we might still wonder how individual "appearances" might diverge (whether the appearance is of perfect design or not) in order to further assess what conclusions we might draw.

And there are a host of important questions on the psychology behind the argument from design that are worth asking here. For example, when and why do people attribute design to natural phenomena when they do? Human beings, it seems, are naturally inclined to look for and recognize patterns in nature (e.g., see Kelemen & Rosset 2009). Is this what drives us to see the design patterns that we think we see? Human beings might also be inclined to attribute design to a natural phenomena that they can't otherwise explain. (And arguably, something like this has happened throughout human history. We'd see a natural phenomenon that we didn't understand, and attribute that phenomenon to the hand of the divine; only later recognizing it had a natural cause all along.) Is our attribution of design in nature at all connected with a need for cognitive closure?

Divine Hiddenness
In his seminal works, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993) and *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (2015). John Schellenberg powerfully argued, in sum, that if God is perfectly loving, he would make it so that anyone capable of having a personal relationship with him would be able to reasonably believe that God exists. Given that some people do *not* believe in the existence of God— even after careful, sincere, and open investigation—then such a perfectly loving God does not exist. Such an argument rests on two seemingly uncontroversial assumptions. First, the assumption that because God is perfectly loving he would make his existence sufficiently manifest to everyone or at least everyone capable of having a relationship with him. Call this the perfectly-loving assumption. The second assumption, the one we're more interested in here is that someone can sincerely and honestly consider the question as to whether or not God exists and non-culpably maintain non-theistic belief, that someone can be non-resistant in their non-belief. Call this the *non-resistant non-belief assumption*. Importantly, this is an empirical assumption—in a way, it seems as if we can go and see if there really is non-resistant non-belief. That said, it's nevertheless an empirical assumption that is very easy to grant for the sake of argument. Various social norms might even make

it taboo to deny that someone can be non-resistant in their non-belief. After all, if an atheist tells us that they've sincerely and honestly considered the arguments for and against belief in God and have concluded in atheism, who are we to deny their sincerity and honesty, their non-resistant evaluation of the various arguments? To be sure, some philosophers *have* responded to the problem of divine hiddenness by rejecting the non-resistant non-belief assumption on theoretical grounds; however, such a move often seems very uncharitable and unfriendly, at the very least. But interestingly, no work exploring the empirical viability of the non-resistant non-belief assumption has been done.

Here is another area where empirical methods—like those used by experimental philosophers—might be fruitfully applied to an important debate in philosophy of religion. To what extent is non-resistance possible from a psychological point of view? Is it really the case that anyone is entirely sincere and objective when they are considering a debate as monumental and potentially life-changing as the question of whether or not God exists? Current psychological literature on heuristics and biases might already cast doubt on this assumption—numerous studies have shown that we evaluate arguments that support our views much higher than arguments that go against our views and that we are much more inclined to find objections to conclusions that might impinge on us.[21] That said, however, further empirical research connecting this literature to the problem of divine hiddenness and additional research into the non-resistance assumption itself are both needed.

Conclusion

Over the past 50 years, analytic philosophy of religion has experienced a renaissance of activity that is arguably unmatched in the Western philosophical tradition. And along with this renaissance of analytic philosophy of religion, analytic philosophers have started to increasingly speak into theology—utilizing the analytic passion for clarity and logical rigor to try to develop and shed light on longstanding theological debates.[22] About the same time, however, analytic philosophy itself has gone through some changes. In the past 20 years, experimental philosophy has increasingly spoken into analytic philosophy—highlighting how empirical data can and should inform and indeed shape our philosophizing. The goal of this paper has been to better see how these two trends might be brought together, to see how experimental philosophy might speak into analytic philosophy of religion, with work on the problem of evil serving as a proof of concept.

While empirical questions have arguably always attended philosophical reflections on religion, experimental philosophy of religion—as a expansion of the experimental philosophy projects of the last 20 or so years—is still an emerging area of research. In this chapter, we explored some of the fruit and possibilities for this emerging field. First, I elucidated some of the motivation for experimental philosophy of religion. Then, in Section 2, we considered how the tools and resources of experimental philosophy have been fruitfully applied to a seminal topic within philosophy of religion, namely, the

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[21] For example, see Gilovich (1991) for an accessible introduction to this area of research. And belief in a personal God who makes significant moral demands on us, requires that we appreciate our own sinfulness and fallenness, etc., certainly can impinge on us.

[22] In his 2011 article, "Theology as a Bull Session", Randal Rauser aptly (and very amusingly!) sketches some of the reasons why the analytic theology movement has picked up so much traction recently. That said, analytic theology hasn't always been welcomed with open arms. Mike Rea, a leading advocate in favor of analytic theology, wrote an introduction to analytic theology in 2011 that, in my view, best outlines some of the worries someone might have against applying analytic methods and tools within the context of theology.

problem of evil (more specifically, Rowe's 1979 formulation of the problem). Finally, section 3, I sketched some broader applications of experimental philosophy of religion.

Given that the "Launching Experimental of Religion" project (Grant ID: 61886) is due to run from September 2021 through August 2024 (thanks to generous funding from the John Templeton Foundation), we can reasonably expect the field to significantly expand in the coming years. It will truly be exciting to see how the field evolves and develops.

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