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# WILLIAM ROWE ON THE EVIDENTIAL VALUE OF APPEARANCES<sup>1</sup>

James Beilby

While William Rowe has argued that the principle of credulity does not lend justification to religious experience, he must affirm something quite like the principle of credulity in his empirical argument from evil. To do so Rowe has proposed a modified version of the principle of credulity.

I shall argue that Rowe's modified principle of credulity creates for him a dilemma regarding the justification of belief in other minds. I further suggest it is not adequate for bridging the logical gap between the existence of apparently pointless evils and the existence of genuinely pointless evil.

While radical empiricism as an epistemic theory has fallen on hard times, there still exists significant debate on the evidential value of appearances or initial perceptions. Of particular interest has been the principle of credulity—an epistemic construct which suggests that the fact that something appears a certain way gives one justification for believing that it is in fact that way unless overriding conditions obtain.

William Rowe, a prominent atheist, has found himself in a precarious position regarding the principle of credulity. On the one hand, he argues that the principle of credulity does not lend justification to religious experience and therefore any argument for the existence of God based on such experiences is invalid. On the other hand, Rowe must affirm something quite like the principle of credulity to bridge the logical gap between the acknowledged fact that *apparently* pointless evils exist and the assertion that *genuinely* pointless evils exist—an assertion that his empirical argument from evil requires.

In an attempt to walk this tightrope successfully, Rowe has proposed a modified version of the principle of credulity which, if valid, will allow him to affirm that one is *prima facie* justified in believing that genuinely pointless evil exists on the basis of experiencing evil that apparently has no justifying good while rejecting the *prima facie* justification of believing that God exists based on an experience presumed to be of a Deity.

I shall argue in this paper that Rowe arbitrarily assigns a higher evidential value to appearances which argue against theism (e.g., apparently pointless evils) than he does to those which argue for theism (e.g., religious experiences). If my argument is correct, Rowe must provide justification for this



seemingly contradictory practice. If he cannot, he must alter either his position on the evidential value of religious experiences or his formulation of the empirical argument from evil.

### I. Rowe's *Epistemology of Religious Experience*

It was C. D. Broad who first suggested an epistemic construct which would (in the absence of any defeaters) bridge the gap between appearances and reality.<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, however, has given the principle of credulity its current designation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is Swinburne's formulation of the principle of credulity that is most often discussed.

The following is Swinburne's expression of Broad's original principle.

(PC) It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present, then probably *x* is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so.<sup>4</sup>

While Swinburne's wording seems clear enough, for whatever reason, his principle has been the subject of many attempted refinements. Rowe's adaptation of the principle of credulity—a principle which he claims is identical to Broad and Swinburne's principle in every epistemically relevant way<sup>5</sup>—is as follows.

(PC\*) When subjects have an experience which they take to be of *x*, it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *x* unless we have some positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive.

Clearly something like the principle of credulity is assumed at the common-sense level since initial perceptions are treated as being *prima facie* justified. They are seen as being innocent until proven guilty. Rowe, it seems, is in full agreement with this general contention. He suggests that the principle of credulity is a "basic principle of rationality" because "if in order to be justified in moving from appearances to reality we had always first to justify a principle linking the two, we would be hard put to avoid skepticism."<sup>6</sup>

While Rowe does acknowledge that the principle of credulity is a "basic principle of rationality," he does object to the principle of credulity being employed in the case of an argument for the existence of God based on religious experience.

The argument to which Rowe objects goes as follows:

- (1) Experiences occur which their subjects take to be experiences of God.
- (2) When subjects have an experience which they take to be of *x*, it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *x* unless we have some positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive (PC\*).
- (3) There are no good, positive reasons for thinking that all or most experiences which their subjects take to be of God are delusive.

- (4) It is rational to believe that at least some experiences which their subjects take to be of God really are experiences of God.

therefore,

- (5) It is rational to believe that God exists.<sup>7</sup>

While some have attacked this argument by claiming that (3) is false,<sup>8</sup> Rowe does not feel that the prospects for this endeavor are very bright.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Rowe attacks the theist's use of (2), the principle of credulity (PC\*), by denying that it can be validly applied to an argument for the existence of God based on religious experience. The reason for his objection is that while in cases of sensory experience we are aware of the bodily and mental states<sup>10</sup> which create a delusive perception, "we do not know how to discover positive reasons for thinking that religious experiences are delusive, if such reasons do exist."<sup>11</sup>

Since Rowe desires to maintain the epistemic validity of the principle of credulity, he distinguishes between two versions of the principle of credulity, one which parallels Swinburne's version (PC\*) and his expanded version (PCA) which addresses the aforementioned objection.

(PC\*) When subjects have an experience which they take to be of *x*, it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *x* unless we have some positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive.

(PCA) When subjects have an experience which they take to be of *x*, and we know how to discover positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive, if such reasons do exist, then it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *x* unless we have some positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive.<sup>12</sup>

Rowe suggests that PCA, not PC\*, better expresses that which he thinks should be considered a basic (or universally applicable) principle of rationality, since it includes an addendum regarding the subject's ability (or lack of ability) to recognize any existing defeaters for her perception. Moreover, since PCA cannot justifiably be used to confer rationality on religious experiences, Rowe claims that it is valid to both accept the principle of credulity and reject the argument for God's existence based on religious experience.

One who desires to defend the application of the principle of credulity to religious experience might accept the validity of Rowe's version (PCA) but claim that, contrary to Rowe's assertion, this rendering of the principle of credulity *can* be used in the case of religious experience. To do so would involve showing that it is possible "to discover positive reasons (if such reasons exist) for thinking religious experiences are delusive." I suggest that the success of such an endeavor is not very likely.<sup>13</sup>

Taking issue with Rowe's rejection of the evidential value of religious experience, therefore, will involve a rejection of PCA.<sup>14</sup> One approach will involve discussing one implication of accepting PCA. A second approach questions whether or not Rowe can apply PCA to his empirical argument from evil.

## II. Rowe's Principle of Credulity as a "Basic Principle of Rationality"

Rowe's modified principle of credulity (PCA) exists for the purpose of clearly distinguishing between that which is a proper object of the principle of credulity and that which is not. Clearly, "800 lb. occasionally invisible, but always malicious purple monsters under the bed" are not proper objects of the principle of credulity while red books typically are. Rowe's addendum to the principle of credulity which requires that one know how to discover positive reasons for thinking that their experience is delusive is designed to place religious experience in the same category with purple monsters—objects to which the principle of credulity should not be applied. In doing so, however, he has created for himself a dilemma. Given PCA, how does Rowe bridge the logical gap between an individual displaying physical symptoms indicative of mental activity and the actual existence of that person's mind? Indeed, minds are the charter member of a set of metaphysical realities whose existence is difficult to establish epistemically but are still widely (if not universally) accepted.<sup>15</sup>

For example, if I accept the validity of PC\*, upon having an experience of Stanley, a person who gives every appearance of having a mind much like my own (unless, of course, I am aware of conditions which serve to defeat that perception—say, for example, that I know that it is Stardate 1234.5, and that I am on the bridge of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and Stanley is really Commander Data<sup>16</sup>), I am rational in believing that Stanley does in fact have a mind. With PCA, however, before I may rationally pronounce Stanley as "mind-having," I must first know how to discover positive reasons (if such reasons exist) for thinking that my experience might be delusive, i.e., I must be aware of bodily and mental states which would create a delusive experience. Unless I have access to privileged information (like I would have if I saw Data running a diagnostic check on his neural net), it seems that I would not know how to go about discovering such reasons.

Rowe's desire to rule out religious experience as a proper object of the principle of credulity, I suggest, also forces him to undertake the notoriously difficult task of justifying his belief in other minds (and other similar metaphysical realities) without resorting to PCA or any similar principle. It may be that Rowe will concede this point and seek to provide a non-credulist justification. While I doubt the ultimate success of such an endeavor, there exists an even more pressing difficulty with PCA.

## III. *Rowe's Principle of Credulity and the Empirical Argument From Evil*

A second objection to Rowe's principle of credulity questions whether or not Rowe can live with the implications PCA has for his own empirical argument from evil. The empirical argument from evil, designed to show that God's existence is improbable, goes as follows.

- (A) There exist evils that *O* (an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being) could have prevented, and had *O* prevented them the world as a whole would have been better.
- (B) *O* would have prevented the occurrence of any evil it could prevent, such that had *O* prevented it the world as a whole would have been better.

Since (A) and (B) entail

- (C) *O* does not exist,

if (A) is probable and (B) is true, then it is probable that theism is false.<sup>17</sup> While some have questioned the truth of (B),<sup>18</sup> most who reject Rowe’s argument have done so on the basis of the falsity (or probable falsity) of (A).<sup>19</sup> While some argument may be made against (B), I will concentrate on (A).

The evils referred to in (A) are pointless evils. An evil is “pointless” if it does not serve to bring about either the existence of a greater good or the eradication of an equal or greater evil. Rowe’s example of such an evil is the following.

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.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly the evil which comprises the fawn’s death is *apparently* pointless. This, however, does not imply that it is *genuinely* pointless, i.e., has *no* actual outweighing associated goods.

For Rowe’s empirical argument from evil to succeed, he must show that an experience of *apparently* pointless evil entitles us to infer that *genuinely* *pointless* evil also exists. Delmas Lewis notes that the following principle must be shown to be true before such an inference is warranted:

- (D) If there are goods for the sake of which *O* must permit instances of intense human and animal suffering *then we would know or be able to imagine* these goods and understand why *O* must permit the sufferings in order to obtain them.<sup>21</sup>

Rowe, however, rejects Lewis’s demand that the truth of (D) need be established to bridge the logical gap between apparently pointless evil and genuinely pointless evil. He simply claims

That things appear to us to be a certain way is itself justification for thinking things are this way. Of course, justification may be defeated. But apart from such defeat, the fact that things appear to us to be a certain way renders us rationally justified in believing that they are that way.<sup>22</sup>

Rowe therefore defends his position by appealing to the principle of credulity. This credulist assertion, however, parallels PC\*, not PCA—there is no men-

tion of Rowe's addendum. Is this omission significant? I suggest that it is. Rowe's defense of his jump from the apparent existence of pointless evil to the actual existence of pointless evil does not stand if his own principle of credulity (PCA) is applied.

For the following to be true

When subjects have an experience which they take to be of *pointless evil*, and we know how to discover positive reasons for thinking that experience delusive, if such reasons do exist, then it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *pointless evil* unless we have some positive reasons for thinking their experiences are delusive.

Rowe must show that we know how to discover positive reasons for thinking that an experience of pointless evil is delusive and that no reasons exist. But how can he do so? What distinguishes a veridical experience of pointless evil from a delusory experience of pointless evil is, obviously, whether or not the evil which is experienced is actually pointless or not.

Therefore, the task of "knowing how to discover positive reasons for thinking that an experience of pointless evil is delusive" would involve the difficult task of specifying bodily and mental states which would create a delusive perception of pointless evil. One could, of course imagine a voice from heaven, accompanied by astonishing miracles, which would proclaim, "There is a reason for all of these evils!" An especially compelling theodicy might also provide a degree of justification. In the absence of similar extraordinary phenomena, however, it seems that human cognitive, spatial, and temporal limitations make us unable to conceive of the breadth and depth of information required to specify states which would cause a delusive perception of pointless evil.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, on Good Friday, Peter must have viewed the crucifixion of his Lord as being consummately pointless. And yet, if the history of the Christian church and Christian theology are taken to mean anything at all, Christ's death, far from being pointless, was the greatest good of all. Although of less eschatological significance, there are similar experiences (I could list *many* personal examples) which also strengthen the contention that what seems pointless is often only so because the entire scope of the situation is not perceived.

Therefore, since Rowe cannot meet his own criterion (i.e. specify how one might discover positive reasons for thinking that an experience of pointless evil is delusive), Rowe's own stronger principle of credulity (PCA) cannot, therefore, justify his claim that genuinely pointless evil exists.

#### IV. Conclusion

It seems that some revision of Rowe's position on religious experience or the problem of evil is in order. If Rowe's principle of credulity (PCA) is not valid,

then he must either provide us with reasons to reject Swinburne's principle of credulity (PC) or revise his negative assessment of the evidential value of religious experience. If his principle of credulity (PCA) is valid, then he must revise his empirical argument from evil in such a way as to bridge the logical gap between apparently pointless evil and genuinely pointless evil. Which he does is up to him. I have merely endeavored to show that one of the two ought to be done.

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### NOTES

1. The general argument of this paper arose from my experience at the 1993 IVCF Graduate Seminar on the epistemology of religious experience taught by Keith Yandell in Madison, WI. I am indebted to IVCF for their invitation and to Keith Yandell for his thought provoking address. I am also indebted to David Clark, Paul Eddy, Philip Quinn, Robert Rakestraw, and an anonymous referee for this journal.

2. C. D. Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God. II," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 40 (1939), pp. 157-67.

3. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 254-76.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

5. William L. Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 13 (1982), p. 87. Since it is Rowe's understanding of the principle of credulity that I am investigating, I will use his wording (PC\*) of Swinburne's principle (PC) in the remainder of this paper.

6. Rowe, "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 244.

7. Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," p. 87. I am using Rowe's adaptation of Broad's argument since it is Rowe's position that I am discussing. While his argument is fairly stated and adequate for our purposes, for what I suggest is the best such argument, see Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

8. For example, Freud's causal account of theistic belief and Bertrand Russell's position as exemplified by the following quote:

From a scientific point of view, we can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition and therefore has abnormal perceptions.

Bertrand Russell, *Science and Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 188.

9. Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," p. 90.

10. Rowe is not clear on what would constitute "positive reasons for rejecting an experience as delusive." For clarity's sake, following Jonathan Kvanvig, I have added to



Rowe's objection the concept of "bodily and mental states." I think that something quite like this is what Rowe had in mind. See Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Credulism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984), pp. 102-103.

11. Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," p. 91.

12. Emphasis mine. *Ibid.*

13. Kvanvig, however, argues that "the argument from religious experience works equally as well with Rowe's altered credulity principle as it did with Swinburne's original principle." He, however, rejects the use of the principle of credulity in an argument for the existence of God. While I do not find either of these arguments compelling, a thoroughgoing treatment of this issue would most certainly have to explore his argument. See *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984), p. 103.

14. Of course, one might construct an argument for the existence of God based on religious experience which does not refer to the principle of credulity (or *anything* like it). Even if such an argument can be made (I am inclined to doubt its ultimate success), I will not discuss this possibility here.

15. Here I am assuming that the mind is not equal to the brain. My point does not, however, rely on the "other minds" analogy. Those who would reject my assumption of mind-body dualism may substitute "belief in a world outside one's mind" for "belief in the existence of other minds."

16. On "Star Trek: The Next Generation," Commander Data is an android whose highly developed positronic brain allows him to appear, for all practical intents and purposes, as having a human mind.

17. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16 (October 1979), pp. 335-41. See also his "The Empirical Argument from Evil," pp. 227-47.

18. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 35 (1979), pp. 1-53 and Michael Peterson, *Evil and The Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), chs. 4 and 5.

19. See Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984), pp. 73-93; Delmas Lewis, "The Problem with the Problem of Evil," *Sophia*, vol. 22 (April 1983), pp. 26-35; Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham Press, 1982); and M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

20. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," p. 337.

21. Emphasis mine. I have used Rowe's adaptation of Lewis's principle because it more closely parallels the terminology this paper has employed. See Rowe's, "The Empirical Argument From Evil," p. 242.

Lewis's original principle is as follows:

If there is a morally sufficient reason which explains why an omniscient, omnipotent being could not prevent some instance of evil without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, then we would know it.

See Delmas Lewis, "The Problem with the Problem of Evil," *Sophia*, vol. 22 (April 1983), p. 30.

22. Rowe, "The Empirical Argument From Evil," p. 244.

23. Wykstra makes this point in his "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" pp. 85-91. Rowe has, on a number of occasions ("Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984), pp. 95-100 and "The Empirical Argument from Evil"), attempted to answer Wykstra's critique by differentiating between *standard*, *restricted*, and *expanded* theism. I suggest that his defense is invalid simply because *standard* and *restricted* theism are only theoretical constructs—they do not actually exist. Even the most simplistic theology, on Rowe's own definition, must be characterized as *expanded* theism. Therefore, Rowe's concession (in "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis") that Wykstra's attack only works if one assumes *expanded* theism, I suggest, is fatal to his argument. This however is not the subject of this paper and is not germane to my argument.