God and Gratuitous Evil

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GOD AND GRATUITOUS EVIL

by

Michael Schrynemakers

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Abstract

GOD AND GRATUITOUS EVIL

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Adviser: Professor Steven M. Cahn

William Rowe has argued for atheism as follows: (1) There seem to be evils God could have prevented without losing a greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, and (2) God would not allow such evils. This dissertation examines (2), the “No Gratuitous Evil Thesis,” and its role in Rowe’s argument. In Part One I argue that there are crucial ambiguities in the notion of a greater good this thesis appeals to and that these present dilemmas for Rowe’s argument, as well as for defining gratuitous evil. This leads to my approximation of the notion of gratuitous evil. Part Two is a defense of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. I first argue against Eric Reitan that a deontological moral perspective does not challenge the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, either as formulated by myself or by Rowe. I then argue that chance is irrelevant to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis via a critique of Peter van Inwagen’s work on chance and divine providence and of Daniel Howard Snyder’s revision of Rowe’s thesis. I complete my defense by arguing against Peter van Inwagen and William Hasker, the most influential critics of the thesis. Van Inwagen has argued that certain arbitrary yet morally permissible decisions show the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is false. Hasker has argued that it is incompatible with the divine goal of humans having significant morality and so should be rejected by theists. I argue that van Inwagen and Hasker both implicitly appeal to vagueness and that vagueness is irrelevant to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. My defense in Part Two provides an explanation for why we should
expect non-gratuitous evils to appear gratuitous, which is the subject of Part Three. I offer an account of the relations between God’s permission of instances of evil and the general goods of traditional theodicies that shows why those relations generally will not make the non-gratuity of evils conspicuous to us and moreover make non-gratuitous evils seem gratuitous. In this way my defense of Rowe’s premise (2) undermines the force of his premise (1).
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Introduction

In “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism” William Rowe presents the following argument for atheism:

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

This is widely considered one of the clearest and most forceful arguments for atheism based on evil. Most discussion of it has focused on the first premise.² The second premise has generally been thought clear and unambiguous. It has also mostly, though not universally, been regarded as in need of no further argument. Rowe defends it simply by saying “This premise is, I think, held in common by many theists and nontheists … [it] seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists …”³ Indeed, this “theological premise” is prima facie fundamental to our understanding of divine goodness. If permitting an evil is not necessary for a good that makes permitting the evil worth it then why would a perfectly good permit it?

The theological premise has been criticized, however. The most influential arguments against it are those of William Hasker and Peter van Inwagen.⁴ Hasker thinks it is incompatible with the divine goal of humans’ having significant morality and so should be rejected by theists. Van Inwagen thinks certain arbitrary yet morally permissible decisions show it is false. Several philosophers have proposed substantively different replacements of Rowe’s theological premise.
in response to van Inwagen’s arguments. It has also been challenged on the basis of deontological considerations by Eric Reitan.\(^5\)

In Part 1 of this dissertation I will argue that Rowe’s theological premise requires clarification. The notion of a greater good this thesis appeals to may be interpreted in different ways and identifying these ambiguities is crucial to assessing the plausibility and usefulness of Rowe’s claim. After this clarification, I defend Rowe’s theological premise, the more general form of which I call the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, in Part 2. I argue that considerations of deontology, chance, and vagueness are irrelevant to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis.

This defense then doubles as an explanation for why we should expect non-gratuitous evils to appear gratuitous. So my defense of Rowe’s second premise undermines his first. This is Part 3. I offer an account of the relations between God’s permission of instances of evil and the general goods of traditional theodicies that shows why those relations generally will not make the non-gratuity of evils conspicuous to us and moreover make non-gratuitous evils seem gratuitous. We should expect God’s permission of individual evils and amounts of specific types of evils (solely) for the sake of global goods to appear unnecessary for the offsetting goods that justify God’s permission of them, even though that permission satisfies the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. I call this mistaken perception of gratuity the “Local Gratuity Illusion,” and argue it has dramatically misdirected current discussion of Rowe’s argument. This explanation shows how Rowe’s appeal to individual instances of evil invites misinterpretation of the relevance of his examples. It invites the perception that lack of explanation for specific individuating features of evils and an evil’s appearing unnecessary for God’s purposes indicates gratuity when it does not. So I claim to show that Rowe’s argument is a kind of red herring because of the Local Gratuity Illusion.
These results are significant. The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is fundamental to our understanding of divine goodness. To think it is false or needs to be revised is to be fundamentally mistaken about the nature of God’s goodness. This work is also important because it shows that Rowe’s argument, by appealing to instances or narrowly defined types of evil, gains an illusory credence that can derail and misguide philosophical efforts to understand God’s relation to evil. For example, extant theodicies may mistakenly appear to lose credence upon consideration of Rowe’s argument.

My defense of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis and of the Local Gratuity Illusion is drawn from my objections to several key responses to Rowe: “Does the Argument from Evil Assume a Consequentialist Morality?” by Reitan, “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God” and The Problem of Evil by van Inwagen, “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil” by Daniel Howard Snyder, “Gratuitous Evil and Divine Providence” by Alan Rhoda, and “The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil” and related essays by Hasker. I articulate the Local Gratuity Illusion in part 3 as the lesson of my focused analyses of these essays in part 2 after preparing needed distinctions in part 1. Implications of this study for the broader literature on Rowe’s argument, as well as for atheist greatest possible world arguments, theories of divine providence, skeptical theism, and other topics is a continuing research program but lie outside the scope of this dissertation.

Now, it would be quite surprising if the work of such excellent philosophers as Rowe, van Inwagen, Hasker, and others concealed the crucial ambiguities, inconsistencies, and missteps I here claim without also having significant merit. What I claim is that their proposed counterexamples and thought experiments do have significant value for understanding the
possible relations between God’s purposes and evil, but that they are mistaken about what their examples and illustrations demonstrate.

My aim is not to defend any particular theodicy, though my arguments support the project of theodicy. The examples I give of goods justifying God’s permission of evil are meant only to help clarify my reasoning. Because of the complexity of inter-relations between events and goods, and for other reasons given at the end of my thesis, I believe my examples are overly simplistic and represent at best partial reasons for permitting evil that God may have. Relatedly, this work is abstract in a manner that may seem inappropriate for a treatment of God’s relation to suffering. In particular, the question of how God is benevolent toward those who suffer is not directly addressed either by the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis or this dissertation. Nevertheless, clarity concerning gratuitous evil can only assist the search for answers to the existential problem of evil. So my hope is that this work contributes clarity to this search with minimal insensitivity to the gravity of its subject.
Part I
Clarification of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis

Chapter I
Important Distinctions
A Reformulation of Rowe’s Theological Premise

To begin, let us examine how Rowe’s formulation of his theological premise differs from the following, what I will formally call “The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis”:

The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis (NGE): God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.

Instances of intense suffering can be particularly forceful examples of seemingly pointless evil, but to make Rowe’s thesis more general, the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis replaces “intense suffering” with “evil”. Also, it substitutes “offsetting good” for “greater good” and “an evil no better” for “some evil equally bad or worse”. This change more explicitly allows for the permissibility of permitting an evil when doing so is no better or worse than preventing it. These changes also better accommodate the possibility of incommensurability and of rough equality between goods and evils. For economy of expression, throughout this dissertation I will refer to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis as NGE.

Justified Morally Arbitrary Permission of Evil

A reason for replacing ‘greater good’ with ‘offsetting good’

NGE substitutes ‘offsetting good’ for ‘greater good’ to allow for the permissibility of permitting an evil when doing so is no better or worse than preventing it. Requiring that every evil God permits must be necessary for a good that outweighs and not merely counterbalances the evil is either implausibly restrictive or else assumes that God is never faced with a choice between equally good alternatives.
It is natural to think that God must have a positive reason to allow an evil and absent such a reason should prevent it. This is because the existence of evil is of course, and by any reasonable definition, inherently bad. Evil is something that, considered in itself, is better to not be than be. So, necessarily, there is always at least one reason in favor of eliminating any evil: the fact that it is evil. This means one cannot be in a position of having no *prima facie* reason of any kind for eliminating evil. So to be justified in allowing evil one needs a reason for doing so.

However, though it is true that one should eliminate evil unless one has a reason for not doing so, there is an ambiguity in the notion of possessing a reason for not eliminating an evil. This could mean having an “all things considered” or *ultima facie* reason to allow the evil or it could mean having a reason that is opposed to, and perhaps cancels, the presumption in favor of eliminating the evil. For example, God’s allowing Rob to suffer may result (or likely result) in his development of patience whereas God’s preventing Rob’s suffering may result in his spiritual enlightenment. The good of Rob’s enlightenment may be roughly equal in value to the value of Rob’s development of patience less the negative value of his suffering. So though there may be no reason for God to prefer allowing over preventing Rob’s suffering in this case (because of this rough equality), there is a good that allowing Rob’s suffering achieves, namely his development of patience. This good cancels the presumption in favor of preventing Rob’s suffering. It is a reason for not eliminating Rob’s suffering, and because it fully offsets the reason to eliminate that evil, it could justify allowing Rob’s suffering. But it is not an *ultima facie* reason for doing so. In this way, it can be permissible to allow an evil even if allowing it is no better than preventing it.

Perhaps this ambiguity, as well as prevalence of the term ‘greater good’, led Rowe to align his formulation of NGE with the common notion of an evil’s being required for a “greater...
good.” But I think this terminology is unfortunate. Calling the good that justifies God’s permission of an evil a “greater good” suggests God must have an ultima facie reason for allowing an evil to be justified in allowing it. But in general one does not need an “all things considered” reason for allowing rather than preventing an evil to be justified in allowing it. If a morally perfect being can make morally neutral choices, his allowing an evil may be justified if allowing it is not morally worse than his preventing it. If God can make morally neutral choices, why think He would only allow an evil if allowing it makes the world better? This would mean that if preventing an evil makes the world no better or worse God must prevent it. It is not obvious why one should think moral perfection requires this. Therefore, if God can make morally neutral choices NGE should not imply God would only allow an evil if God has an ultima facie reason to allow the evil, as it would if allowing an evil must be necessary for a good that outweighs the evil in order for the good to justify that permission.  

Of course, this reason for replacing greater good with “offsetting” good would be obviated if we grant that God never chooses between equally good alternatives, as Leibniz famously thought, for then His permitting an evil is always either better or worse than preventing it. But NGE should avoid commitment to this view, as well as its denial, if it can. Employed as a premise in an argument targeting only theism, NGE should be stated as uncontroversially as possible and not assume specific metaphysical views or specific views of divine praiseworthiness. Furthermore, much contemporary commentary on Rowe’s NGE, such as Peter van Inwagen’s and Daniel Howard-Snyder’s, either states or assumes that Leibniz’s view may well be false. So NGE should not assume God needs a reason in the form of a good that makes allowing the evil better than preventing it, nor even a reason that makes allowing the evil
good rather than morally neutral. Since every greater good is also an offsetting good, substituting the latter for the former in the formal statement of the thesis achieves this.

**Corresponding Notions of Pointless Evil**

Accordingly, having no reason to allow an evil, so that allowing the evil is “pointless”, may mean:

1. **Allowing the evil is morally arbitrary**: There is no *ultima facie* reason to allow the evil and there is no *ultima facie* reason to *prevent* the evil. In this case (to speak loosely, as I will explain) some good must offset the permitted evil; or

2. **Allowing the evil is unjustified**: Reasons for preventing the evil (including the intrinsic badness of the evil) are not counterbalanced by reasons to allow it. There is *ultima facie* reason to *prevent* the evil. Allowing the evil is without reason in the sense of being unjustified or irrational; or

3. **Allowing the evil is completely pointless**: There is no reason at all, not even a *prima facie* reason, to allow the evil, in which case allowing the evil results in no good at all. Therefore, there is *ultima facie* reason to *prevent* the evil.

These senses of having no reason to allow an evil are clearly not equivalent. What matters with respect to justifiably permitting an evil is just whether or not one has *ultima facie* moral reason to prevent it, as the example just given illustrates. In this example, God has no *ultima facie* moral reason to allow rather than prevent Rob’s suffering because doing so achieves no net good (though God’s allowing Rob’s suffering does result in the justifying good of Rob’s patience). So here God’s permitting the evil is only “pointless” in the innocuous first sense of being morally arbitrary, not in the impermissible second and third senses.
According to NGE as I have formulated it, then, in the specific sense of being arbitrary, God’s allowing an evil may be “pointless”! There may be no net good achieved by God’s permitting rather than preventing an evil. God’s permitting an evil need not be morally preferable to His preventing the evil. Again, the good requiring the permission of evil need not outweigh the evil; it need only offset the evil. So, for example, if God is justified in permitting Rob to suffer a disappointment because that permission is necessary for Rob’s conversion, Rob’s disappointment may be merely offset by his conversion; it need not be better that Rob experience disappointment and its resultant conversion rather than neither. In this case, God’s permitting Rob to suffer is pointless and God had no reason for permitting it in the sense that God might just as well have prevented that evil. God’s permitting Rob to suffer is not pointless in the stronger sense that no good at all results from that permission, however. Nor is it pointless in the sense that reasons to prevent it outweigh reasons to allow it. By stipulation this is not the case.

In this example, is Rob’s suffering, as opposed to God’s permission of it, pointless? This is, again, ambiguous. Rob’s suffering is not an “absolutely” pointless evil in the sense that it is not a “sheer loss” or something better to have not occurred, all things considered. Its occurrence does not make the world any worse. It is also not absolutely pointless in the sense that it does make a specific good possible that otherwise would not be, namely Rob’s conversion. However, it is pointless in the sense that its occurrence achieves no net good: it is no better (or worse) that it has occurred rather than not. Its occurrence serves no purposes that are (in total) morally preferable to, or more valuable than, whatever purposes or goods that would be served by its non-occurrence.
Rowe’s Accommodation of Morally Neutral Divine Permission of Evil

Rowe mentions in a footnote of “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism” that the term ‘greater good’ could be interpreted broadly to include goods such that the value of permitting the evil and obtaining the good does not exceed the value of preventing the evil and losing the good:

… we should perhaps not fault OG [an omniscient, wholly good being] if the good G, that would be lost were s1 prevented, is not actually greater than s1, but merely such that allowing s1 and G, as opposed to preventing s1 and thereby losing G, would not alter the balance between good and evil.17

Here Rowe accepts that the “greater good” may be such that God’s allowing evil e results in no worse a balance between good and evil than God’s preventing e. It is important to note that Rowe has, inadvertently it seems, shifted attention from the greater good’s relation to the specific evil whose justified permission is under consideration to a relation between the net values of God’s alternatives in deciding whether or not to permit the evil. There being a good of no less value than the evil whose divine permission is required for the good is not equivalent to God’s permission of the evil’s having no less value (balance of good and evil) than God’s prevention of it. This is because permitting an evil may result in further evil and loss of good in addition to the gain of a specific good that offsets the evil. So Rowe’s explicit proposal is distinct from allowing that according to NGE the “greater good” may offset rather than outweigh the specific evil under consideration, which he may also have intended. I will discuss the difference between these two understandings in detail in chapter three.
Rough Equality and Incommensurability

The possibility of rough equality and incommensurability between goods and evils

Another reason for replacing “greater good” with “offsetting good” and for replacing “some evil equally bad or worse” with “an evil no better” is to accommodate incommensurability. Referring to comparative magnitudes between goods and evils as either equal to, less than, or greater than, as Rowe’s formulation does, suggests all goods and evils are commensurable, but some may not be. Many philosophers believe the value of some goods is neither greater than, nor less than, nor equal to the disvalue of some evils. For example, perhaps the goodness of a particular enlightenment may be neither greater than nor less than the disvalue of precisely one year of suffering through a particular illness without the value of that enlightenment being equal in magnitude to the badness of that suffering. One reason to think this is that the benefit of that same enlightenment may not only seem neither greater than nor less than the disvalue of the actual suffering but also seem neither greater than nor less than the disvalue of that suffering lessened by, say, one week. Alternatively, rather than say the enlightenment and the suffering are incommensurable, one might prefer to say they are in some sense equivalent, just not precisely or quantitatively equivalent. One may wish to say that the enlightenment and the suffering due to illness are only roughly comparable in magnitude rather than incomparable. This is Ruth Chang’s notion of parity. However one wishes to apply or reserve the term ‘equality’, what matters is that though a large increase in one value may make it greater than another given value, slight increases may not. This suggests these values may not be precisely equal - they are either “incommensurable” or only “roughly equal”.
NGE need not assume the commensurability of all goods and evils and so should not be formulated so as to suggest it requires that justifying goods be “equal to” or greater than the magnitude of evils (or total disvalue) whose permission they require.\textsuperscript{22} NGE only requires that justifying goods are \textit{not of less value} than the disvalue of the evils they are permitted for the sake of. By a good’s “offsetting” an evil I mean just this: that the good \textit{does not have less} value than the evil has disvalue, that the evil does not outweigh the good. Similarly, by “an evil no better” I mean an evil that is \textit{not worse} than the permitted evil. Saying that a good or prevented evil is \textit{not} outweighed by a permitted evil does not necessarily imply that it is either better than or precisely equal in magnitude to that permitted evil. This phrasing allows that the values or disvalues involved may be incommensurable or only roughly equal and so cannot be compared in a precise quantitative manner.

So, to offer another example, according to NGE, if God permits someone to die of cancer, either there must be a good that requires that permission (or that of an evil no better) and that offsets that evil or there must be an evil whose prevention requires that permission and that is no better than that person’s dying of cancer. This may be satisfied if, for example, the good of that person’s serious contemplation of her life requires that God permit her cancer, even if the value of that good is \textit{not greater than} the badness of her dying of cancer, nor in some precise quantitative sense \textit{equal to} the disvalue of that evil. One might think that this good of serious self-reflection cannot be \textit{precisely equal} in magnitude to the evil because some increases of this good, in depth or duration, still might not make the magnitude of the good seem greater than that of the evil.
The Offsetting Good Need Not Be an Amount of Goodness

This clarification may seem unnecessary. If NGE is interpreted charitably, being ‘equal to’ should perhaps be taken to include being ‘roughly equal to’ or simply ‘not less than’. After all, an example of a permission of evil for the sake of preventing an incommensurable, rather than “equally bad”, evil or for the sake of obtaining an incommensurable, rather than equal, good, would be a transparently spurious proposed counterexample to NGE.

However, there are (epistemically possible) examples of divine permission of evil involving relations of rough equality or incommensurability between magnitudes of goods and evils that reveal hidden complexities in NGE. These are worth attending to in order to avoid potential misunderstanding. For example, suppose the permission of one year of suffering, e1, will bring about great and noble honesty in Sal, good G1, whereas the permission of one year and one month of that suffering, e2, will bring about less honesty but also increased courage in Sal, compound good G2. Suppose also that goods G1 and G2 are either incommensurable or only “roughly equal” in magnitude, G2 being neither better nor worse than G1. Rowe’s theological premise may seem to preclude God’s permission of the additional month of suffering for the sake of G2. God’s permission of that additional suffering was necessary for G2 but an amount of goodness no less, namely, G1, could have been had without permitting that additional evil. Is God’s permission of the additional month of suffering necessary for a greater good in a sense that satisfies NGE?

God’s permission of the extra suffering, evil e, is not necessary for any amount of goodness that outweighs it. Yet God’s permission of e seems permissible and non-gratuitous. God’s permission of e actualizes the specific good G2, Sal’s courage and honesty, and makes the
world no worse than it would be if God prevented that evil and actualized G1 instead. Acknowledging only strict equality, that is, ignoring the notion of rough equality and the possibility of incommensurability, the fact that G2 is not greater than G1 would imply that God could have made the world better by preventing that additional month of suffering (if no other goods and evils are involved). However, by accepting the possibility that goods G1 and G2 are only roughly equal in magnitude we may say instead that even though e2 is greater than e1 and G2 is not greater than G1, (e1 and G1) is not better than (e2 and G2). So, given the possibility of circumstances like this where there is a relation of rough equality or incommensurability between values, it seems that Rowe’s theological premise should be formulated in a way that does not imply that God’s permission of an evil must be necessary for an amount of goodness that outweighs it. So one prima facie viable interpretation of Rowe’s thesis is ruled out by the possibility of incommensurability or rough equality between values.

Although God’s permission of that additional month of suffering, evil e, is not necessary for any amount of goodness that outweighs it and even though there is no clearly identifiable good that God’s permission of the evil requires and that is equal to e in magnitude, this still leaves at least two different senses in which God’s permission of e is not gratuitous:

God’s permission of e:

1. makes the world no worse, and
2. is necessary for a specific good (though not an amount of goodness) that offsets e, namely G2.

Both these senses of an evil’s being non-gratuitous block spurious counterexamples to NGE based on incommensurability or rough equality. NGE need not be interpreted as requiring that God would only allow an evil if allowing that evil is necessary for an amount of goodness
(per se) no less in magnitude than the evil. Again, given the rough equality or incommensurability between the goods involved in the above example, no goodness would be lost had God prevented e and allowed only one year of suffering instead, yet God’s permission of the evil does not seem unjustified or pointless. This is because His doing so does not make the world worse and is necessary for a greater good, namely G2.

These two senses in which God’s permission of evil may be considered non-gratuitous mark an ambiguity in the notion of a “greater good” in Rowe’s thesis. A greater good may be understood as the good that makes God’s permitting the evil no worse than His preventing it. A greater good may also be understood as some specific good that outweighs the evil permitted. This ambiguity was noted previously in my comment on Rowe’s footnote concerning divine morally neutral choices (section B1c). To repeat: these interpretations are distinct and not co-extensive. Permitting an evil may result in further evil and loss of good in addition to the gain of a specific good. Therefore, permitting an evil necessary for some specific offsetting good and so non-gratuitous in the second sense may result in a worse world than preventing it and so be gratuitous in the first sense.

The considerations of this section illustrate how carefully NGE notion of an offsetting good must be defined, despite its surface simplicity. This section also introduces the two interpretations of NGE that I will elaborate on in chapter three. In that chapter I will argue these interpretations comprise a dilemma for NGE.
Contrast with the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis

Analysis of the Distinction

I have expressed the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis (NGE) as:

NGE: God would only allow an evil if allowing the evil is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.

This is distinct from:

The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis: God would only allow an evil if the evil is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.

Rowe, William Hasker, and others have emphasized the significance of this distinction.23 According to the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, for any evil that occurs, if that evil hadn’t occurred a good would have been lost, given theism. This is not implied by NGE. NGE only says that for every divine permission of evil, if that permission hadn’t occurred a good would have been lost.

These theses are not equivalent. Every evil that occurs is an evil permitted by God, (given theism), and so both theses state all actual evils must be required in some sense (given theism), but the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis states an absolute requirement, whereas the NGE requirement can only plausibly be construed as conditional. Even if it is supposed that a divine permission of evil is only necessary for a good if the evil permitted is, (and just because the occurrence of the evil follows from its divine permission) the necessity invoked is only charitably and naturally understood as conditional on the evil’s occurrence. According to NGE, the divine permission of evil need not be absolutely necessary for an offsetting good, in which case the evil itself would be necessary, but may be only necessary given the evil occurs (or
would occur unless God prevents it). That is, God’s permission of an evil may be necessary for a good because factors other than God’s permission would bring about the evil unless God prevents it. To suppose otherwise would be to lose the point of distinguishing the necessity of an evil from the necessity of God’s permission of it.

This is illustrated by the example of moral freedom given by Hasker and Rowe to distinguish the two theses. Given that I choose evil, God must permit my evil choice for the good of my having moral freedom. If I don’t choose evil, then the good of my having moral freedom does not require the (impossible) occurrence of God’s permission of my evil choice, nor my evil choice itself. By contrast, if an evil is necessary for an offsetting good in the sense required for God’s justifiably permitting it according to the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, the necessity involved is absolute necessity. In the sense relevant to the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, a good’s requiring an evil is not conditional on some further circumstance. So, according to this thesis some good would, of absolute metaphysical necessity, be lost if I had chosen good instead of the evil I chose, given theism. Because the good of my being able to choose between good and evil is not lost if I choose good rather than evil, according to the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis there must be some other good that obtains if and only if I choose evil, given theism. But on NGE, the good of my being able to choose between good and evil may be the only good secured by God’s permitting me to choose evil.

Again, the two theses are not equivalent because the permission of an evil by x requires that the evil would occur unless prevented by x and a good may require the permission of an evil if this latter condition holds though not if it does not. Of course, if the latter does not hold, that is, if it is not true that the evil would occur if not prevented (if I choose good instead of evil, say), then no actual good can require the permission of the evil, for that is impossible. But this
impossibility should not obscure the fact that a good’s requiring a divine permission can be conditional on a circumstance that might not obtain. Again, to interpret NGE as stating that every divine permission of evil is absolutely necessary for a greater good would be to lose the distinction between NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. Because all divine permissions of evil are co-extensive with all actual evils, given theism, the only way the two theses can be distinct is if the necessity involved is different, that is, if the evil’s being necessary for a greater good may be considered conditional on some actual but possibly contingent circumstance, as per NGE. The point of introducing the necessity of God’s permission rather than the necessity of the evil is just to make this distinction, that is, to allow, plausibly, that some justifying goods require evils not absolutely but given they would occur unless God prevents them. This is why I claim the NGE requirement can only plausibly be construed as conditional.

Another way to state this then is that by NGE, it is strictly speaking not God’s permission that must be required for an offsetting good, but God’s not preventing the evil that is required. God’s not preventing an evil obtains if either God allows the evil or if the evil does not occur for reasons other than God’s preventing it. So, to illustrate and make my point in a different way: some goods may be lost if God intervenes to prevent evil, say by preventing me from carrying out some evil intention, that are not lost if the evil does not occur for other reasons, such as my freely choosing to be good. God’s willingness to permit my making an evil choice (which means God would permit it should I make that choice) may be necessary for the good of my moral freedom, but the evil of my actually making the morally wrong choice is not necessary for that good. I still would have been morally free if I had made the right choice instead.

Rowe and Hasker both point to this good of moral freedom to distinguish the theses, but the distinction can be framed more generally, and I have tried to do so just now. To consider
another example that distinguishes NGE from the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, suppose it is

good that creation be autonomous, or that the order of nature is uniform, and hence that God not
intervene in nature. Suppose given the state of the natural world a particular natural disaster may
or may not occur, due to natural indeterminism, provided God does not prevent it. Suppose the
natural disaster occurs, unprevented by God. On the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis there must be
some good that offsets the evil of the natural disaster and that would not have occurred if the
natural disaster had not. This good cannot be the good of creation’s being autonomous, for that
good would not be at all compromised had the (indeterministic) natural forces not produced the
natural disaster. NGE does not require such an additional good, for on NGE it is only God’s
prevention of the natural disaster that necessarily would have compromised a good. So on NGE
the only good involved may be the uniformity of the natural order.

**NGE serves Rowe’s argument better than the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis**

NGE serves Rowe’s argument better than the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. First, NGE is
entailed by the No Unnecessary Thesis and so is at least as plausible. If an evil is necessary for a
good then so is God’s permission of it. Second, NGE seems *prima facie* more plausible than the
No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. As indicated by the above analysis and examples, NGE allows
justifying circumstances for God’s permission of evil that it seems should be allowed. *Prima
facie*, goods that outweigh evils *God must permit* for them could justify God’s permission of
those evils even if the evils themselves are not necessary for those goods. Third, and relatedly,
NGE more directly follows from the theses’ common rationale in a basic understanding of God’s
moral relation to evil. The common motivation for these theses is just the idea that God
necessarily prefers less over more evil, all else being equal. It is *God’s choice* to allow rather
than to prevent an evil that must be justified, and if there is a good that justifies this choice, in
satisfaction of NGE, then argument would be needed for why more, possibly an additional good, is required.

I do not claim there are no reasonable arguments for the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. One such argument may be that God’s sovereignty would be impugned by any ultimately “unredeemed” evil and evil can only be redeemed by good if it ultimately serves some good. Perhaps this and similar arguments are sound. My present point is that the No Unnecessary thesis needs such support whereas NGE does not. By assuming less, NGE makes Rowe’s argument stronger than it would be if it employed the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis instead.

The Possibility of Evil’s Making the World Worse

There are very significant differences in what the two theses imply about evil. If the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is true, the occurrence of evil cannot by itself make the world worse than it would be without the evil. Only a loss of a good could do so. This is because, again, on that thesis, for every evil there is an offsetting good that would be lost without the evil. This is not true on NGE. On NGE the world may be made worse by the occurrence of evil (even if the occurrence of the evil does not also result in the loss of a good (besides the good of a better world)). It may be unfortunate that God had to permit an evil for the sake of a good that could have been had without the evil. For example, suppose God permits an unfortunate result of free choice in order to preserve significant moral freedom. If the evil choice had not been made (for reasons other than God’s intervention) neither the good that justifies God’s actual permission of the evil, namely, significant moral freedom, nor any other good need be lost. Or suppose God permits an unfortunate result of natural indeterminism in order to preserve the uniformity of nature. If it had not been true that, apart from God’s possible intervention, the unfortunate result
of natural indeterminism would occur, neither the good that justifies God’s actual permission of the evil, namely, the uniformity of nature, nor any other good need be lost.

In other words, because on NGE, a justifying good may only require God’s permission of the evil, given that the evil would occur (apart from God’s possible prevention), and a justifying good need not require God’s permission of the evil simpliciter, which would imply the occurrence of the evil, on NGE and not on the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, the occurrence of evil may make the world worse than it would have been without the evil (even if the evil does not also result in the loss of a good (other than the good of a better world)).

It is easy to conflate the two theses, perhaps because the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis entails NGE and if the implicit conditional necessity highlighted here is ignored NGE entails the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis.

For example, in a discussion of Michael Peterson’s argument that gratuitous evil is compatible with the existence of God, Alan Rhoda says:

It is important to observe, however, that an evil event may be included in a larger event which is, on the whole, not evil. If this weren’t so there could be no non-gratuitous evils. For such to be possible something has to be evil considered in itself, but appropriate, fitting, or justified within a larger context.²⁵ [my italics]

If an evil is necessary for a greater good then although the evil is bad considered by itself, considered in the wider context that includes the greater good, it is better that the evil occur than not. The sense in which it is better that the evil occur must be construed carefully, though. If the evil is an injustice then its being necessary for a greater good does not imply that it is not really regrettable or that it is not wrong for someone, including an omnipotent being, to permit it.²⁶ However, if an offsetting or outweighing good would have been lost without the evil, then there
must be a sense in which the occurrence of the evil is not what we might call wide-context-regrettable or “ultimately regrettable.” By an evil’s being “appropriate, fitting, or justified within a larger context” I take Rhoda to mean its occurrence is not ultimately regrettable.

There are at least two ways in which an evil event may be “included” in a larger event that is not evil. An evil may be not ultimately regrettable in either a strong sense and a weaker sense corresponding to the distinction Roderick Chisholm has made between evil being defeated and being balanced off, respectively. 28 This distinction is important for points I make in chapter three, so I take this opportunity to describe it. If an evil contributes to the goodness of the greater good it is necessary for, such that that good, considered as a whole, would be less valuable without the evil (if that were possible), then the evil may be considered defeated by the greater good. Chisholm provides this example: my suffering brought on by my contemplation of my misdeeds may heighten the depth of my remorse. Not only is my suffering necessary for my remorse, the remorse is made more valuable by the intensity of that suffering. For another example, if we suppose that fear is necessary for the virtue of courage, the fear I have may ennoble my act of heroism. From the wider perspective of the goods of remorse and heroism of which the evils are an integral part, the evils are not entirely regrettable in an absolute or unqualified sense. 29

This contrasts with a weaker sense of not being ultimately regrettable. In this case, the evil is necessary for the greater good but does not contribute to the goodness of that good. For example, suppose the existence of pain is necessary for the evolution of human beings. The good of the evolution of humans may be worth that pain, but the value of human beings is not enhanced by the occurrence of the pain that necessarily preceded our existence. Here, the evil
may be thought compensated by the good and, because it is necessary for the outweighing good, the existence of the evil is not entirely regrettable.

According to my understanding of Chisholm’s contrast between an evil’s being counterbalanced by good and an evil’s being defeated by good, the corresponding senses of an evil’s not being regrettable is marked by this: the necessity of the evil for a good that merely counterbalances it may be seen as unfortunate whereas the necessity of an evil for a good that defeats it cannot be coherently viewed as unfortunate. This is because the defeated evil is essential to the nature of the good that defeats it. So these are two ways in which an evil may be “included” in a larger event which is not evil and so be non-gratuitous.

But an evil may be non-gratuitous by NGE even if it is not included in a larger event which is not evil, even if it is ultimately regrettable. To assume otherwise is to conflate NGE with the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. God’s permission of an evil may be justified by that permission’s being necessary for a greater good even if the evil itself is not necessary for a greater good. If the evil itself is not necessary for a greater good, then the existence of the evil may be regrettable, even when viewed from the widest possible perspective. So, again, given that humans choose to sin, God must permit moral evil for the greater good of significant moral freedom. A sin’s being an actual instance of moral freedom of course entails God permitted that sinful choice, but it may be in no sense good that the sinful choice occur rather than the good choice. The good of moral freedom does not entail moral evil. Returning to our other example, given that indeterministic natural forces would produce natural disasters, God must permit natural evil for the greater good of an autonomous creation. But since moral and natural evil are not necessary for these goods, NGE allows it may be ultimately regrettable that God had to
permit them. This difference between NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis will be relevant to our analyses of the challenge of deontology to NGE.

The No Gratuito Evil Thesis and Divine Middle Knowledge

Expected Utility as a Greater Good

The denial of divine middle knowledge provides another way in which evils may be non-gratuitous and yet not included in a larger event that is not evil. If God does not know what would result from each of His choices, God may be justified in permitting an evil for the offsetting good of its expected utility, in satisfaction of NGE (or in satisfaction of the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis). Events may then unfold so that there is no good event that includes the evil, in which case God’s permission of the evil turns out to be unfortunate.

According to the doctrine of divine middle knowledge there are truths about which (completely specified) possible world would result given any of God’s possible actions and God knows these truths. If this doctrine is denied, if God does not always know what would occur given His choices, it may be that it would have been better not only that a non-gratuitous evil not occur but that God not have permitted it. So the denial of middle knowledge allows for another sense in which an evil may be non-gratuitous yet not included in a larger good event and therefore be entirely regrettable. God may be justified in permitting an evil because at the “moment” the choice is made and the evil occurs permitting it is better than not. The expected utility of permitting it may be higher than that of not. For example, God’s permitting someone to suffer may be worth the small chance of its precipitating a conversion and so God may be justified in permitting it for the sake of that good. God may be so justified even if He knows that the goodness of the person’s having the greater opportunity to change his character does not
outweigh the badness of the person’s suffering, and even if He knows it is more likely that the person will resist conversion than not. The great good of repentance may make the expected utility of permitting the suffering positive. Free choices or the results of indeterministic natural forces may then unfold so that it would have been better if God had prevented the evil. Here it turns out that for reasons that could not have been known beforehand, it would have been better if the evil had been prevented. So God’s permission of the evil was justified by a greater good, the evil was non-gratuitous, and yet because that greater good was expected utility (prior to the actual consequences of the divine permission) rather than a concrete good, such as having the opportunity to repent, there is no larger good event that includes the evil.

In “Gratuitous Evil and Divine Providence” Alan Rhoda’s treatment of Rowe’s theological premise accommodates the denial of divine middle knowledge differently. His initial definition of gratuitous evil is:

(7) A gratuitous evil =def. An instance of evil which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented in a way that would have made the world overall better.\(^{30}\)

He then writes:

… suppose God could have prevented a certain evil E by doing A but that there was no antecedently knowable fact about whether God’s preventing E by doing A would have made the world overall better. Under those conditions, a theist could admit E as gratuitous on the grounds that while God could have prevented E by doing A, and while such prevention would have made the world overall better, God couldn’t have known his preventing E in that way would make the world overall better and so was not obligated to do A. We close this loophole with:

(8) A gratuitous evil =def. An instance of evil which an omnipotent, omniscient being antecedently knew he could have prevented in a way that would have made the world overall better.\(^{31}\) [my emphasis]
I do not think this is satisfactory. The notion of gratuitous evil is the notion of evil whose permission by God is pointless. If there is no divine middle knowledge, then unless determinism is true, it is reasonable to think that many significant potential evils could and perhaps should be averted by God before God knows His averting them will not make the world worse than it would have been if He had not. If there is no divine middle knowledge, God may often know the expected utility of preventing an evil is higher, perhaps much higher, than permitting it without knowing it is not possible for events to later unfold so that in fact it would have been better if He had permitted it. If God were to permit such evil and it turns out that it would have been better if God had prevented them, then such divine permissions, and the evils themselves, would be pointless. (And if it turns out that it would have been worse if God had prevented them, then the divine permission of them could be unjustified and the evils “accidentally” not pointless – which would still contravene theism if theism entails that necessarily, if God exists, there is no gratuitous evil) Rhoda’s definition does not classify such evils as gratuitous. This is unsatisfactory because, as Rhoda remarks, one desiderata for a definition of gratuitous evil is to classify as gratuitous as many apparently gratuitous instances of evil as possible.

One might object that if God knows preventing an evil will likely make the world better, the possible world in which God prevents the evil must at that moment be better. However, although the greater likelihood of future good is a reason to prefer one possible world over another, it is not obvious that mere probability of future good (as opposed to the goods that explain that probability) adds to the actual value of a world. So Rhoda’s definition in terms of what God knew He could have prevented in a way that would have made the world better is not adequate unless divine middle knowledge is assumed. So perhaps NGE can only accommodate
the denial of divine middle knowledge by allowing offsetting goods to include the expected value of God’s permitting an evil.

NGE does not imply Meticulous Providence

Rowe unpacks NGE into the following necessary condition for God’s permitting an evil e:

Either (i) there is some greater good, G, such that G is obtainable by [God] only if [God] permits e,

or (ii) there is some greater good, G, such that G is obtainable by [God] only if [God] permits either e or some evil equally bad or worse,

or (iii) e is such that it is preventable by [God] only if [God] permits some evil equally bad or worse.

He then explains:

It is important to recognize that (iii) is not included in (i). For losing a good greater than [e] is not the same as permitting an evil greater than [e] And this because the absence of a good state of affairs need not itself be an evil state of affairs. It is also important to recognize that [e] might be such that it is preventable by [God] without losing G (so condition (i) is not satisfied) but also such that if [God] did prevent it, G would be lost unless [God] permitted some evil equal to or worse than [e]. If this were so, it does not seem correct to require that [God] prevent [e]. Thus, condition (ii) takes into account an important possibility not encompassed in condition (i).

This seems correct; condition (ii) should be included in NGE. However, it is not immediately clear that (ii) is already contained in Rowe’s formulation of NGE, as he claims.

“God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for a greater good or the prevention of an evil no better” is naturally read as: God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for a greater good or is necessary for the prevention of an evil no better. Condition ii states God’s permission of e may not be necessary for either because it may be necessary for both. That is, the necessity invoked should not be distributed across the disjunction: God’s permission of e need only be necessary for (a greater good or avoiding another evil no better). So, making condition
(ii) explicit, NGE reads: God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for a greater good or necessary for the prevention of an evil no better or necessary for obtaining both a greater good and the avoidance of an evil no better. So, according to NGE, if God allows an evil, God had to either permit the evil or forfeit a greater good or permit another evil no better.

Is condition (ii) really distinct from (i) and (iii)? Is (iii) really distinct from (i)? No evil is necessary simpliciter, if God exists. If God hadn’t created there would be no evil. If an evil is necessary this is because the good or goods of God’s creation require it. So the occurrence of one evil’s being necessary for the non-occurrence of another is always relative to a good that requires some evil (of that magnitude). Second, if a good g requires either evil e or evil e’ then evil e is necessary for a specific good, namely the good: g and the non-occurrence of e’. If winning the battle requires either Pat die or Sol die, then Pat’s death is necessary for the good state of affairs: the battle’s being won without Sol’s death, which is distinct from the good of winning the battle.

Whether or not (ii) and (iii) are really distinct from (i), noting the possibility of a divine choice between evils and merely offsetting goods and between equally or incommensurably bad evils is important for clarifying the relation between NGE and meticulous providence. To do just this, I here distinguish several claims about God’s relation to evil, ordered, roughly speaking, from stricter divine control to less “meticulous” types of providence.

**Strict Meticulous Providence:** Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a divinely unqualifiedly willed concrete instantiation of a greater good (and so is unqualifiedly willed by God).

Because on this view every particular evil and every particular good is part of God’s perfect will and God’s perfect will is necessarily actualized, according to this view the occurrence of every particular evil and every particular good is necessary, either absolutely or given God’s free
choice to create. This does not imply there are no undetermined evil events however. Strict Meticulous Providence holds there is an ultimate contrastive explanation for every event, but that explanation need not be causal. If God necessarily knows what would result from any of His choices and knows He can actualize the greatest possible world by choosing as He does, the ultimate explanation for any event that occurs, including those that result from libertarian free will and natural indeterminism, is that it is best for it to occur. One may wonder how it can be necessarily true that God can actualize His perfect will (the greatest possible world), if there is libertarian free will and natural indeterminism, which lack ultimate contrastive causal explanation, but a theist may attribute this to the mystery of the nature of God’s sovereignty and of divine middle knowledge. One historically important Christian tradition holds and argues that God’s creation is necessarily the greatest possible and so this world, including its causally contingent history of sin and suffering, is the greatest possible.

The No Chance Role for Evil Thesis: Every particular instance of evil serves a greater good that is specifically willed by God.

The No Chance Role for Evil Thesis differs from strict meticulous providence in that it allows that God may be indifferent about which evil brings about a greater good. A particular instance of evil serves a greater good if it or an evil no better is necessary for the greater good. In this way the occurrence of an evil may fill an essential role in God’s purposes, where God’s purposes are taken to be particular goods (rather than types of goods). For example, Jo’s suffering may be necessary for his conversion. On this thesis Jo’s suffering from rabies need not be necessary for God’s purposes, such as Jo’s conversion, but must serve God’s purposes. This is possible because although Jo’s suffering from rabies actually leads to Jo’s conversion, Jo’s suffering from another disease could have done so equally well.
The No Unnecessary Particular Evil Thesis: Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a greater good.

One difference between this view and the preceding is that this view allows that God may be indifferent about how a good may be instantiated or even about which goods are instantiated. Perhaps He may be indifferent about this because these may vary without diminishing the total of a certain type of goodness or the total (optimal) goodness of creation. So particular instantiations of goods may be left to chance by God. Nevertheless, according to this thesis every concrete instantiation of a good may be considered part of God’s plan because each may play an essential role in the total optimal value of creation.

It is important to note that this thesis does not state every particular instance of evil is necessary for God’s purposes, only for a greater good. The specific greater good a particular evil is necessary for may belong to a type and amount of good intended by God without that particular good being specifically intended by God. So this allows that God may not specifically intend every particular evil because which goods obtain is not necessarily always a matter of divine preference.

The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis: Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a greater good or the prevention of an evil no better.

This thesis has been contrasted with NGE in the previous section. It seems a natural extension of the preceding view of God’s possible indifference between equally valuable goods to God’s indifference between equally bad evils (or equally good trade-offs between good and evil). By allowing that an evil may be necessary for the prevention of an evil no better the latter allows that a particular evil may be unnecessary for a greater good so long as it either prevents an
evil no better or serves a greater good. So this allows that God may not specifically intend every particular evil because which evil serves which good is not necessarily always a matter of divine preference.

One may argue that this thesis is equivalent to the previous No Unnecessary Particular Evil Thesis, for reasons mentioned earlier: if a good $g$ requires either evil $e$ or evil $e'$ then evil $e$ is necessary for a specific good, namely the good: $g$ and the non-occurrence of $e'$. Whether these theses should be treated as equivalent or not, they both imply the following:

**The No Pointless Evil Thesis:** Every particular instance of evil serves a greater good.

On this view, there is a sense in which, all things considered, the occurrence of evil is good. One rationale for this view is that if evil may occur that is not part of God’s plan then God’s will may be thought to be thwarted in a way that diminishes God’s sovereignty. For example, although injustice is inherently bad and opposed to by God, on this view there remains a sense in which every injustice fulfills God’s purposes. Perhaps this is for the reasons adduced by Marilyn McCord Adams, including the act of injustice’s revealing the perpetrator’s evil will.\(^{32}\) Unless the occurrence of the injustice ultimately serves a good, then in the end it remains a regrettable loss, and a respect in which God has failed to “turn all evil to good”. (One may also wish to add that unless it is not true that more good could have been achieved without the evil, the occurrence of the evil is regrettable.)

This dilemma for theism is familiar: if all evil is necessary for good then it seems God, and we, cannot appropriately will against it and if not all evil is necessary for good, then God’s victory over evil may seem incomplete. The No Pointless Evil Thesis secures clarity regarding the completeness of God’s sovereignty at the cost of accepting the mysterious notion of God’s
rightly willing necessary evil. Because this trade-off is a prima facie genuine dilemma for theism, The No Pointless Evil Thesis has a rationale that any treatment of chance and providence should address.

NGE does not imply any of these theses: it does not require that the evil permitted is specifically and non-arbitrarily willed by God as essential to His purposes. It does not require that the greater or offsetting good is specifically and non-arbitrarily willed by God, as essential to His purposes either, just that there be an offsetting good. It does not require that the evil permitted is necessary for, or even serves, an offsetting good, just that God’s permission of it is necessary for or serves an offsetting good. So NGE does not imply meticulous providence, strong or weak, in any of these varieties. It does not deny them, either.

**General Policy Theodicies**

William Alston+ has stated:

> Consider the idea that God’s general policy of, e.g. usually letting nature take its course and not interfering, even when much suffering will ensue, is justified by the overall benefits of the policy. Now consider a particular case of divine nonintervention to prevent suffering. Clearly, God could have intervened in this case without subverting the general policy and losing its benefits. To prevent this particular suffering would not be to lose some greater good or permit something worse or equally bad. And yet it seems that the general policy considerations of the sort mentioned could justify God in refraining from intervening in this case. For if it couldn’t, it could not justify His nonintervention in any case, and so He would be inhibited from carrying out the general policy.

I understand this passage to state that God may be justified in permitting a particular evil because permitting a good many evils of that type, e.g. usually letting nature take its course, is necessary for some good g, e.g. nature’s being highly regular, even though permitting e is not necessary for permitting a good many evils of that type nor for g. This seems correct and it also
seems to provide counterexamples to NGE. Is there any good such a morally justified divine
permission of e is necessary for? Alston thinks so. He says such cases are not counterexamples to
NGE provided one widens the sphere of goods for which e is necessary to include Q “the good of
maintaining a beneficial general policy except where there are overriding reasons to make an
exception.”

I do not think this is correct. Although I agree that for every evil God permits for the sake
of general policy considerations there is a good that requires God’s permission of that amount of
evil, I think Alston’s reasoning for this and his description of that justifying good is based on a
misunderstanding of the nature of general policy theodicies (though he has just correctly
described them).

This is why I think Alston’s accommodation of general policy theodicies is not correct:
The “beneficial general policy” here must be ‘letting nature take its course’; it can’t be ‘usually
letting nature take its course’ because permitting extraordinary evils are not exceptions to that,
and we’ve agreed permitting e is not necessary for that. So, according to Alston, God’s
permitting e is necessary for the good of policy P: letting nature take its course except where
there are overriding reasons to make an exception. Now, it certainly is a good to permit only
those evils that do not have special characteristics or circumstances warranting their prevention,
what we may call “ordinary evils.” However, e refers to any ordinary evil the permission of
which is not necessary for Q or for nature’s being highly regular. For the permission of e to be
necessary for P is for P to require the permission of all such ordinary evils. But why think there
is a good that requires the permission of all such ordinary evils? Why think P is good? The only
good involved in the above passage is the good of nature’s being highly regular and we have
already agreed permitting e (and hence P) is not necessary for that. If P requires the permission of e, then P is not necessary for that good either.

The idea of a general policy theodicy, as described in Alston’s above paragraph, is that there is a certain category of (potential) evils, the divine permission of a vague amount (“most”) of which, but no particular amount, is necessary for general good g to obtain, and e’s belonging to this category justifies God’s permission of e. One way of putting this is that God may be justified in permitting some evil because He is justified in permitting the type of evil to which e belongs, even if He has no reason for permitting that particular instantiation or amount of that type of evil. The idea is not that there is some class of potential evils, natural disasters say, which may be divided into ordinary and extraordinary, such that the permission of all the former are necessary for g.

Of course, if members of the class of evils natural disasters differ in the net good or evil that permitting them would result in, God would have reason to prevent the worst. This means He will have reason to prevent all clear-cut exceptionally bad or extraordinary cases or bad trade-offs, but this does not mean there exists a determinate amount of ordinary cases such that He must permit all of them for general good g. The challenge posed to NGE by general policy theodicies, as introduced by Alston, is based on the idea that a general good does not seem to require the permission of a determinate amount of evil. We can define some precise class of evils and a corresponding specific general policy, such as the divine policy of never preventing natural evils below a certain magnitude of disvalue, but the notion of a general good, for the sake of which God adopts a general policy, by itself gives us no reason to think that there is a good involved in God’s adopting that policy rather than some other, and so seems to give us no reason to think there is a good God’s permitting e is necessary for.
As mentioned, I think this challenge can be answered and I will answer it in chapter six. Here I wish to clarify the nature of the challenge. The general policy objection raised by Alston is based on the idea of general or vague goods requiring vague amounts of divinely permitted evil. I suggest Alston fails to appreciate the centrality of the notion of vagueness in this objection. To anticipate chapter six, van Inwagen thinks this apparent counterexample to NGE is real and therefore rejects NGE. Interestingly, Alston thinks instead that we should simply broaden our notion of goods to accommodate general policy theodicies. Although I think Alston’s proposed solution doesn’t work because it ignores the challenge’s appeal to vagueness, I think it is closer to the truth than van Inwagen’s response, which does implicitly recognize the challenge as an invocation of vague divine purposes. In chapter six I propose that the considered class of goods must be narrowed rather than widened: permitting e is necessary for a specific instantiation of the good of nature’s being highly regular in satisfaction of NGE. To see how this may be so requires application of the distinctions made in this chapter and the next.
Chapter 2

The Evil Offsetting Good and the Prevention Offsetting Good:

A Dilemma Over a Crucial Ambiguity in the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis
What Must the Offsetting Good Offset? Two Views

To accommodate incommensurability and rough equality and the permissibility of permitting an evil when that is no better than preventing it, the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis replaces “greater good” in Rowe’s formulation with “offsetting good”, again, as follows:

The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis (NGE): God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.

Although I have argued NGE should allow for the permissibility of permitting an evil when that is no better than preventing it, I do not mean to suggest the thesis must be interpreted as a requirement concerning the relative goodness of permitting versus preventing an evil. That depends on how “offsetting good” and “evil no better” are interpreted, and this raises the important issue mentioned earlier: What must the offsetting good offset? Rowe thought the greater good must be greater than the evil permitted, and this may seem the obvious and only plausible candidate. However, the situation is complex. Just as permitting an evil may be necessary for a particular greater good, permitting an evil may also be logically tied to the occurrence or non-occurrence of multiple other goods and evils. This makes the requirement for the existence of an outweighing or offsetting good ambiguous.

God’s preventing an evil could be better in some respects than His permitting it not only because of the evil prevented but because other goods would be gained by its prevention (and so would be lost by its permission). Perhaps God permits Lor’s suffering even though preventing Lor’s illness would result, or likely result, in Sam’s increased commitment to God, for example. Should “offsetting good” then refer to whatever makes God’s permitting the evil no worse than His preventing it, offsetting both evils gained and goods lost? This will seem necessary if it
seems necessarily gratuitous for God to permit an evil whose prevention would have made the world better and if an offsetting good is thought of as the good that makes God’s permission of an evil non-gratuitous. Let us call this the “Prevention Offsetting Good” interpretation because it interprets the offsetting good as offsetting whatever good is involved in God’s preventing an evil.

One may think that NGE need not capture the Prevention Offsetting Good sense of an evil’s being gratuitous or that God may have a justifying reason for permitting an evil even though preventing it would result in a better world. So, alternatively, an offsetting good may be understood instead only as some specific good that is not less in magnitude than the evil permitted. We may call this the “Evil Offsetting Good” interpretation.

To illustrate this distinction, suppose God’s miraculously preventing Lor’s illness may likely result in Sam’s increased devotion and commitment to God, but God’s permitting the illness may be required for Lor’s deeper conversion. On the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation, Lor’s conversion is an offsetting good because and only because it offsets both the negative value of the illness and the loss of the good of the optimal chance for Sam’s increased commitment. This good (which in other cases could be an avoidance of evil) makes permitting the evil result in a world no worse than the world that would result if God prevented it. On this interpretation what is necessarily offset by the offsetting good is the total value preventing the evil would have (which includes the value of avoiding the evil) if not for this good. In our example, God’s preventing Lor’s illness has the value of the optimal chance for Sam’s increased commitment to God plus the absence of Lor’s illness. This value God could have obtained by preventing the evil is offset by the good of Lor’s conversion God obtains by permitting the evil because what makes God’s preventing Lor’s illness not of net value (and possibly a net loss) is
the loss of Lor’s conversion. On the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation, Lor’s conversion is an offsetting good only because it makes God’s permitting Lor’s illness no worse than preventing it and therefore makes it morally permissible or morally best. By contrast, according to the Evil Offsetting Good interpretation, Lor’s conversion may be an offsetting good provided only it is not of less magnitude than Lor’s illness. It need not offset both Lor’s illness and the loss of the good of optimal chances for Sam’s conversion.

Though Rowe’s elaboration of his thesis in terms of a good (or prevention of evil) that outweighs the magnitude of the evil permitted suggests the Evil Offsetting Good understanding rather than the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation, the former seems to admit obvious counterexamples. If an offsetting good need only offset the evil permitted, an evil permitted for an offsetting good may still seem gratuitous because its permission may entail losses of other greater goods and gains of other worse evils. So one might argue that Rowe’s thesis should have been formulated more simply and perspicuously by referring only to the value of God’s permitting the evil relative to the value of preventing it, as per the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation. But the Prevention Offsetting Good Thesis also faces significant difficulties. I will argue that it implies this is the most valuable world God could actualize, given theism. Though my reply to a deontological challenge to NGE will rebut some difficulties for the Prevention Offsetting Good Thesis, this interpretation is still much stronger than the thesis Rowe described, as I will explain.

So I will argue NGE faces a dilemma: either an offsetting good need only offset the evil permitted, in which case the permitted evil may still seem gratuitous, or else the offsetting good must offset all the good preventing the evil would involve, but then NGE seems overly restrictive. Let us now begin our analysis of these interpretations, i.e. the horns of this dilemma,
and the merits and difficulties of each. This will pave the way for a limited solution to the
dilemma and a better understanding of NGE and the notion of gratuitous evil in the next chapter.

The Prevention Offsetting Good and No Better Alternative

A First Approximation

Let us try to express the Prevention Offsetting Good notion of an offsetting good more
precisely, leaving examination of the Evil Offsetting Good for the next section. I will follow
Rowe in letting ‘offsetting good’ include the avoidance of evil. The justificatory condition
required by the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation is that the world in which evil e is
permitted by God is not worse than the world that would result if e were prevented. One issue to
consider here is whether there is a fact about which world would be actual if God had prevented
rather than permitted an evil. This is required to speak meaningfully of a definite (though
perhaps vague) difference in value (perhaps zero) between permitting rather than preventing the
evil, to speak of “the” offsetting good. I will argue that this view should not be formulated in
terms of a definite offsetting good and that this makes it unlikely that this interpretation is what
Rowe intended.

How can the Prevention Offsetting Good justificatory condition be adequately and
helpfully expressed in terms of a good or value that offsets the value of preventing the evil?
Supposing (against the above reservation) there is a closest possible world P in which God
prevents e, we may proceed to answer this by describing the offsetting good as follows:

World A in which e is allowed contains x evils and/or y goods that are not also in the
closest possible world P in which e is prevented, which in turn contains x’ evils and/or y’ goods
not in A. What gains of good and avoidances of evils in A compose the offsetting good? Evils of
A not in B are evils avoided by B, and vice versa. Evils gained then need not be tallied in addition to evils avoided, for that would be to count the evils twice. Goods in A not in B are goods gained by A, and vice versa. Goods in A not in B are also goods lost by B, but goods lost should also not be tallied in addition to goods gained in a comparison between A and B, because, again, that would be to count them twice. So in comparing two alternatives we need only consider the goods gained and evils avoided.

So we can say world A contains (gained) goods x and/or avoidances of evil(s) y’ and world P contains (gained) goods x’ and/or avoidances of evils y (which include e). (We know that P includes at least one avoidance of evil, namely e, and so A, to be no worse, must contain at least one gained good or avoidance of evil.) So allowing A is necessary for an offsetting good provided goods and avoidances of evils in A but not in P are not of less value than goods and avoidances of evils in P but not in A.

But what is the offsetting good here? It cannot be the difference in value between permitting and preventing the evil because NGE claims there must be an offsetting good but there may be no such difference in total value. We are allowing that permitting the evil may be no better than preventing it, as described previously. So it seems that if there is an offsetting good it must be either those specific goods and avoidances of evils in A but not in P or the value of those goods and avoidances of evils in A but not in P. If these are not of less value than the goods and avoidances of evils in P but not in A, they offset the good that would have been gained by preventing the evil.
Is There a Determinate Alternative to God’s Permitting an Evil?

Now let us return to the complication mentioned previously. The reference to an offsetting good in this Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation seems to treat as determinate what may be indeterminate, namely the complex of goods and evils that would have resulted if God had prevented an evil rather than permitted it. Any truth about what would have resulted had God (perhaps per impossible if God is necessarily good), not permitted the evil depends on what God’s alternative action would have been. Is there in general an objective fact about what God would have done had He not permitted an evil?

In the human case, in which the agent is not unlimited in power and goodness and does not have complete control over all of creation, the alternative to preventing an evil is generally conceived of as fairly circumscribed and unproblematic. If we do not prevent an evil perhaps we simply do not act in a certain way or perhaps we direct our causal influence on a different part of the world. We can generally imagine or perhaps form reasonable judgments about what the part of the world containing the evil would be like. Perhaps it would even go on as if we were absent. Likewise, the alternatives to our permitting an evil generally comprise a fairly limited set of likely actions and circumstances. But what would God’s preventing an evil He has in fact chosen to permit involve? Is there a closest possible world in which God prevents an evil he has in fact permitted?

God may prevent an evil in many different ways and each way can have implications for what else God chooses to do. Would God prevent Lor’s illness by aiding his doctor, by directly removing Lor’s disease, or by creating a different world? Would God forfeit Lor’s conversion or permit some other less effective suffering to achieve it? Would this be Lor’s suffering or
someone else’s? In general, would God have kept the purpose He actually has in permitting this evil, but achieved it in a different, worse, way? Or would God have adopted different aims if He had prevented the evil? Which aims? Is there a best set of purposes of those that involve God’s preventing this evil?

Supposing there is a fact about what God’s alternative choices would have been which determines the value of the world that would have resulted had God not permitted an evil faces other significant challenges. Assuming God’s permission of an evil is not morally arbitrary (and hence not relevant) God’s actual permission issued from His perfect benevolence, justice, power, knowledge, and other perfections. In what sense are divine actions incompatible with these traits possible? One difficulty here is that the world in which the evil is permitted is the actual world and God’s actual causal activity in general, or in permitting this evil specifically, may issue freely but necessarily from his perfect goodness, power, and knowledge. This is at least one traditional point of view. If we are to consider counterfactuals with impossible antecedents, which impossibilities are to be considered? Would God have acted almost perfectly lovingly? Would God have been less than perfectly just? Would God have failed to know permitting the evil is best? There being a correct answer to these and other questions depends on what should be kept “fixed” in determining the closest possible world in which God prevents the evil and that depends on what is most necessary or most fundamental to the divine nature. I suggest it is possible that there is no uniquely correct answer, no fact about what God would have chosen instead of how He actually has chosen.

It may be thought that the enormous difficulty of even attempting to answer such questions is not relevant. God would prevent the evil in the best way possible and so actualize the best possible world in which He prevents the evil, whatever that may be. The offsetting good
then is the set of goods and avoidances of evil that do not obtain in that alternative and that make
God’s permitting the evil no worse than this best possible world in which He prevents it. So if
the best way God can prevent Lor’s illness is by direct miraculous intervention this is what He
would have done. If the best possible world in which God prevents the evil contains different
divine purposes, God’s purposes would have been different. We do not need to have any way to
judge how God would prevent an evil to accurately define the offsetting good required for God’s
justifiably permitting it.

But this objection mistakes my point. My aim is not to question our ability to determine
which possible world would be actual if God had not permitted an evil. That skepticism is well
justified. Also, I am not challenging the claim that we can reasonably judge that an omnipotent
being could have obtained some better world by preventing rather than permitting an evil. I am
also not here challenging the claim that a gratuitous evil should be defined as an evil that could
have been prevented by God in a way that would have resulted in a better world. I here point out
that the assumption that there is a fact about what goods and evils would have resulted if God
had chosen to prevent an evil deserves examination. A formulation of NGE according to which
God’s permission of an evil must be necessary for the existence of a greater good where that
good is defined as the good or value achieved by permitting rather than preventing an evil seems
to make this assumption. So I am here only posing difficulties for the view that there must be
either a specific amount of good or a specific set of concrete goods (required for an omnipotent
and perfectly good being to permit an evil), which can be defined in terms of the relative
goodness of God’s permitting versus preventing the evil.

To restate my point: although it does seem meaningful to speak of specific goods that
would have been lost if God had prevented an evil He has in fact permitted, as per the Evil
Offsetting Good Thesis, (and to claim that every instance of divine permission of evil also instantiates such goods) it is not obviously meaningful to speak of the total value of the best possible world in which God, contrary to actuality, prevents the evil. It is much less speculative to say of an actual particular good that God’s permitting an evil is required for it, than to say that there is a fact about what combination of goods and evils would result if God had prevented an evil he has in fact permitted.

To make an analogy, one may argue that defining an offsetting good as the difference in value between the actual world in which God permits an evil and the best possible world in which God prevents it is like defining one’s “natural speed limitation” as the difference between one’s actual best mile run (or even best possible mile run given natural parameters) and one’s best mile run if the laws of physics were different. Even if we suppose the “laws of physics” or powers in nature could be suspended, the circumstance being referred to is so underspecified as to make the difference referred to lack significant meaning. Which laws are being changed? Which laws can be changed so that I can still be said to run? Would an instantaneous “movement” count? Etc. The circumstance and implications of God’s preventing an evil in the best way possible, contrary to God’s actual motives and purposes, is also so underspecified as to make the notion of the value of the resulting world not obviously meaningful.

How should we think about God’s prevention of an evil e He has permitted? Does God prevent the evil for a reason? According to the Prevention Offsettening Good Thesis, in deciding whether or not to permit an evil, God’s morally best choice is the choice that actualizes the best balance of good over evil. God’s reason for preventing evil e cannot then be to actualize the best world for then He would have permitted e. Is there a less than best, yet moral, choice God is thought to have lapsed into in this world? Is there a fact about which reason this would be, and
for how long or when God would act upon it? Would it be the best of reasons that are not best? Why think there would be an objective best moral reason, or even best family of moral reasons, among moral reasons that are not best? If preventing the evil e would result in a worse world than permitting it, and this is not morally best, then what would be the reason for God’s preventing it that would factor into how God prevents it and how else God would act so as to determine the value of the world in which God prevents e?

If, on the other hand, we take it as a brute unexplained given that God prevents the evil (as if God had acted for no reason in preventing the evil), then there is still no determinate answer to the questions: How would God prevent the evil? What counts as a divine prevention of evil? Given that a better world results from God’s permitting e than preventing it (as the Prevention Offsetting Good Thesis supposes), the best possible world in which God prevents e might be a world in which God prevents e and then causes a duplicate of e. Though God’s causing e may be morally worse than God’s permitting e, whether this rules out this example is (doubly) unclear because we had to make an exception to God’s perfect goodness to consider His doing what is not morally best. Would this inexplicable prevention and then re-introduction count as preventing the evil? Or perhaps the best possible world would be one in which God does not reintroduce e but corrects for the mistake of His preventing the evil. So, to refer to our previous (perhaps overly simplistic) example, the best possible world in which God prevents Lor’s illness may be one in which God first acts in a way contrary to His purpose of bringing about Lor’s conversion (by preventing Lor’s illness) and then allows a misfortune in order to achieve Lor’s conversion. So we may have competing criteria: coherence of God’s actions and the world’s value. Is there an objectively best trade-off between these? This is not obvious.
The No Better Alternative Formulation

This difficulty seems to be an artifact of defining the Prevention Offsetting Good Thesis as a requirement for the existence of an offsetting good. If we do not assume there is a unique possible world that is the world that would be actual had God prevented the evil (or even a unique set of worlds of the same value that would be the alternatives to God’s permitting the evil), we may state the Prevention Offsetting Good Thesis as:

God would only allow an evil if, for any world P in which God prevents the evil, the goods and avoidances of evils in the actual world in which God permits the evil but not in P are not of less value than goods and avoidances of evils in P but not in the actual world.

Since which goods and evils are in A but not in P or what value they have will depend on which world P is considered, it does not seem that the notion of an offsetting good has a specific application or sense in this thesis. This phrasing expresses the requirement that God’s permitting the evil be no worse than any way He can prevent it, but there is no sense in which an “offsetting good” makes it so. That is, it does not seem that there is any such thing as “the” offsetting good in this definition. Rather, according to this expression of the Prevention Offsetting Good Interpretation, for each possible way God could have prevented an evil (that He has permitted) there exists a set of goods and avoidances of evil involved in permitting the evil which outweigh the goods and avoidances of evil of that way of preventing the evil. So this seems to be a needlessly verbose rendering of the claim that God would only allow an evil if the evil could not have been prevented in a way that would have made the world better. This is precisely how Rowe’s NGE is expressed by Rhoda and also how it is interpreted by Eric Reitan and others. ¹³ I will call this the “No Better Alternative Thesis” because it claims that God would only allow an evil if there is no better possible world in which He prevents it.
No Better Alternative Thesis (NBA): God would only allow an evil if the evil could not have been prevented in a way that would have made the world better.36

I will now examine ways in which the No Better Alternative Thesis differs from Rowe’s formulation of his theological premise. For economy of expression, “the No Better Alternative Thesis” will be abbreviated ‘NBA.’

**NBA Is Not a Concise Expression of Rowe’s formulation of NGE**

NBA seems very poorly expressed by Rowe’s formulation of NGE, sufficiently poorly to warrant thinking that it is not what Rowe intended. On Rowe’s thesis the magnitude of the evil permitted must be outweighed or offset by either the gain of a good or the avoidance of evil. Although this is also required by NBA, NBA requires more than this.

NBA requires a certain relation between entire possible worlds: that the total value of the actual world in which God permits e is not less than any possible world in which God prevents e. What is relevant to the moral goodness of God’s permitting an evil, on this construal, is the value of all the goods and avoidance of evil involved in God’s permitting e and the value of all the goods and avoidance of evil involved in preventing e. God’s permission of e must gain goods and avoidances of evil that offset e, according to NBA, otherwise permitting e would be worse than preventing it, but if God’s permission of e involves losses of good and gains of other evils, then these too must be offset. What this means is that (1) the permitted evil must be offset by some of the value of the goods gained and evils avoided by permitting the evil and (2) possible other evils gained and losses of goods by permitting the evil must also by offset by some of that value. So the permitted evil’s being offset by good or avoidance of evil is a poor way to describe the required circumstance. What makes it morally best for God to permit the evil by this thesis is
just that the alternative is no better, and this may be for a variety of reasons. According to NBA, what makes this offsetting relation obtain are all the necessary connections between the permission of the evil and other goods and evils and the comparative value of the different goods and evils brought about in these alternatives. Because a consideration central to Rowe’s formulation of NGE, the magnitude of the permitted evil, is not central to the No Better Alternative formulation, NBA is not a straightforward paraphrase of Rowe’s formulation.

This dissimilarity between Rowe’s greater good requirement and NBA is removed only if Rowe’s greater good can be a positive sum of values and disvalues. That is, NBA expresses Rowe’s greater good requirement only if God’s achieving a greater good may be God’s, by permitting an evil, obtaining a set of goods, evils (which do not include e), forfeited goods, and avoided evils, that offset the permitted evil e. This is because what NBA implies is that the total value of that set of evils gained, goods gained, goods lost, and evils avoided must not be less than the magnitude of that evil. But it is a misuse of words to speak of a gain of evils and forfeited goods as components of a good that outweighs (or offsets) the gain of the permitted evil.

It does seem that Rowe should have added another distinct justificatory condition: that permitting an evil is necessary for an outweighing combination of good and avoidance of evil. God’s allowing Rob to suffer may be necessary for His increased patience, a good that does not outweigh the badness of the suffering, as well as for the prevention of Rob’s selfishness to a certain degree, a prevention of evil that also does not outweigh Rob’s suffering, where the combination of Rob’s increased patience and decreased selfishness does offset that suffering. So Rowe’s notion of a greater good must be widened to include good and avoidance of evil combinations. This is not problematic because both have positive value. However, to reconcile
Rowe’s notion of a greater good with the NBA requirement, Rowe would have to further widen the notion of a greater good to combinations of goods, lost goods, avoided evils, and evils gained; that is, a greater good would have to be considered a sum over both positive and negative values, a net value that outweighs the permitted evil. This sufficiently stretches Rowe’s notion of a greater good to warrant doubting that this is what Rowe intended. Being necessary for an outweighing good and being necessary for the prevention of a worse evil are two distinct justificatory conditions according to Rowe (though for convenience of expression, he often called the prevention of a worse evil a greater good), so he could not have intended a greater good to be a net value of goods and evils. We will consider whether Rowe should have expressed his theological premise as NBA next.

**NGE Does Not Imply the No Better Alternative Thesis**

**Alan Rhoda’s Summary of Rowe’s Thesis**

One may argue that Rowe should have expressed his NGE as NBA. In “Divine Providence and Gratuitous Evil” Alan Rhoda has briefly argued for the No Better Alternative interpretation of Rowe’s NGE.

According to Rowe’s theological premise, a gratuitous evil is an evil God could have prevented without losing a greater good and without permitting an evil as bad. So, for Rowe, a gratuitous evil is an instance of evil God could have prevented in a way that would not a) forfeit a greater good, b) require a worse evil, or even c) require an equally bad evil. (I have argued earlier that requirement ‘d) or forfeit a good that (merely) offsets the evil’ should be added.)
Rhoda writes:

If an evil may be permitted to prevent something worse, then not to permit it is, in effect, to forego a greater good, namely, a world lacking that worse evil. Thus, to forego a greater good is to be left with something overall worse than what one could have had. And to permit something equally bad is to settle for what is overall no better. So the whole phrase boils down to the idea that the evil in question could have been prevented in a way that would have made the world overall better.41

So Rhoda thinks Rowe’s formulation may be simplified. To obtain a worse evil is to lose the good of a world without that evil, so Rowe’s b) (requiring a worse evil) may be subsumed under Rowe’s a) (forfeiting a greater good). According to Rhoda, to prevent an evil and lose a good that outweighs the evil (Rowe’s a) is to make the world worse, to prevent the evil but gain a worse evil (Rowe’s b) is also to make the world worse, and to replace the evil with an evil equally bad (Rowe’s c) is to make the world no better. So, according to Rhoda, Rowe’s NGE means that if an evil is gratuitous, God’s preventing the evil need not have resulted in a worse world by a) losing a good that outweighs the evil, or by b) requiring a worse evil, and need not have resulted in a world no better by c) requiring an evil just as bad as the evil prevented. So Rhoda thinks the essential idea of Rowe’s theological premise may be concisely expressed by the claim that if God exists there is no gratuitous evil, where gratuitous evil is defined:

\[ \text{A Gratuitous Evil} =_{\text{def}} \text{an evil God could have prevented in a way that would have made the world better.} \]
Are All Greater Goods World Improvements?

I now argue against this rendering of Rowe’s theological premise. Rowe’s NGE does not imply this definition of gratuitous evil and it is not obvious that it should. If preventing an evil only differs from a world in which the evil is permitted by the absence of the evil and the loss of a good that outweighs the evil, to prevent the evil is to make the world worse. Likewise, if preventing an evil only differs from a world in which the evil is permitted by the absence of the evil and the gain of a worse evil, to prevent the evil is to make the world worse. But preventing an evil may also differ from permitting it with respect to other goods and evils.

Rhoda assumes that the goods NGE refers to must be net amounts of good, a positive difference in value of possible worlds. In holding that if choosing A over B involves the loss of a greater good then A must be worse than B, Rhoda is equating the relevant sense of a greater good with a world improvement or a net increase in value. So although of course Rhoda would agree A may be worse than B even if A contains particular goods that B lacks, he thinks this is not relevant. According to Rhoda, what makes an evil gratuitous is whether preventing it in the right way would have resulted in net good. Likewise, in holding that if choosing A, which includes an evil, over B, which lacks it, involves the permission of a worse evil then A must be worse than B, Rhoda is equating a gain of evil with a world worsening or a net decrease in value. (Again, of course Rhoda would agree A may be worse than B even if A contains particular goods that B lacks.) So Rhoda equates the goods Rowe refers to with world improvements.

We can see why these equivalences would be made. It may seem that what matters can only be the comparative value of allowing versus preventing an evil: if permitting an evil is necessary for a good that outweighs the evil but also results in an evil that outweighs that good,
then permitting that evil may be worse than not. So being necessary for a particular good that offsets it is not sufficient for an evil’s being non-gratuitous. It may therefore seem that what matters to whether or not an evil should be permitted is the net good that permitting the evil is necessary for. And, if God could have prevented an evil so as to make the world better it may seem gratuitous for Him to not do so. On Rhoda’s view, the fact that permitting an evil is necessary for some good only matters as a component of the total value permitting the evil achieves.

Whether or not these assumptions can be defended, Rowe’s NGE does not entail NBA. Rhoda’s assumptions about what counts as a greater good in NGE are not unavoidable. Those assumptions may be somewhat favored by taking NGE to define a notion of gratuitous or pointless evil, but it need not be so understood. The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is an alternative interpretation deserving of consideration, especially since interpreting a greater good as a net value or world improvement, despite initial intuitive appeal, is problematic, as I will argue in chapter four.

The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis Alternative Interpretation

Perhaps a morally perfect being may be justified in permitting an evil only if he has a reason to permit the evil in the sense that some good offsets that permission so as to make permitting no worse than preventing the evil. Or perhaps a morally perfect being may be justified in permitting an evil only provided he has a reason to permit the evil in the sense that some good results from permitting that evil that otherwise would not and that good is not of less magnitude than the evil. In such cases God has a reason for not eliminating an evil in the sense that He has a
reason that cancels the \textit{(prima facie)} presumption in favor of eliminating it. These are distinct requirements.

NBA expresses the former requirement. An “offsetting good” in NGE \textbf{may} be interpreted accordingly: as whatever makes permitting the evil result in a world no worse than preventing it. That is, NGE may be interpreted such that it precludes the possibility that God permits an evil even though a \textbf{net} amount of goodness is thereby lost. For example, suppose if Rob loses his job he will reorder his life priorities, a good that exceeds the disvalue of his suffering due to his job loss and that would be lost without that suffering, \textbf{but} if God prevents Rob’s job loss, some \textbf{even greater} good, such as the deeper conversion of his wife, will ensue. On this interpretation of offsetting good, Rob’s conversion is not an offsetting good because it does not make preventing the evil no better than permitting it. In this example although God’s permitting Rob’s job loss is necessary for the good of Rob’s conversion, it still involves a net loss of goodness: it makes the world worse than it otherwise would be.

Alternatively, an offsetting good may be interpreted not as whatever makes preventing an evil no better than permitting it, but simply as any good that requires the permission of the evil (or one no better) and that is not of less magnitude than the evil permitted. On this interpretation, Rob’s conversion is an offsetting good. It offsets the evil permitted, though not necessarily the good that would result by preventing it.\textsuperscript{43} This interpretation could include as an offsetting good the net “good” of all goods gained and lost and evils avoided and gained by permitting \textbf{rather than} preventing the evil, but need not. So this interpretation of the No Gratuitous Evil requirement does not require that God’s permitting the evil is no worse than God’s preventing it, only that God’s permitting the evil is \textbf{either} better than God’s preventing it \textbf{or else} brings about some other good or avoidance of evil (or good and avoidance of evil combination) that is not of
less value than the disvalue of the permitted evil. This more general requirement may be expressed as:

**The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis:** God would only allow an evil if allowing the evil is necessary for a good (which may involve the prevention of evil) that is not of less magnitude than the evil.

### Is the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis Relevant?

Is satisfying NBA necessary for God’s justified permission of evil? Should NGE or a definition of gratuitous evil only consider net amounts of goodness across entire possible worlds as greater goods, as per the No Better Alternative Interpretation? This is to assume particular goods cannot be preferred by God over other goods for any reason other than that their permission brings about a world with more value, and this seems to assume a consequentialist morality that theists need not adopt. Could God have a reason to prefer a worse world over a better? Later I will consider deontological reasons to think satisfying the No Better Alternative requirement is neither necessary nor sufficient for God’s justified permission of evil. In this section I will examine NBA and the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis and then arrive at a better understanding of the notion of gratuitous evil and why it is difficult to define in the next chapter.

In explicating Rowe’s theological premise, Rhoda says “to forego a greater good is to be left with something overall worse than what one could have had.” This seems correct because, all else being equal, a world without a good is worse than a world with it. But what if all else is not equal? The aim here is to articulate a necessary condition for God’s choosing to permit an evil, so we must consider all possible divine choice situations. Suppose God must choose between possibility A which includes good g and possibility B which does not include good g, but B is not worse than A (because A and B differ with respect to other goods and evils). In this case,
although choosing B is to forfeit the specific good g, choosing B over A is not forfeiting any amount of goodness, and so, in a sense, God is not losing any good. However, if by a good is meant an instance of good, then in that sense choosing B is to forfeit a good, namely g.

Suppose that God’s allowing an evil e will bring about good g that outweighs e and God’s preventing the evil will bring about good B. Now, we can speak of the good achieved or lost by God’s allowing e as the difference between the goods g and B, provided those are the only goods involved. If B is more valuable than g then to allow e is to forfeit the amount of goodness by which B exceeds g. But it is also true that by preventing e God would lose good g. Suppose B is better than g by more than amount e and allowing e does not prevent any other evils. Then allowing e makes the world worse, and so would be gratuitous on Rhoda’s formulation. However, allowing e is necessary for token good g, a good that outweighs all the evil that must be permitted for it, and so satisfies the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. Which thesis best serves Rowe’s evidential argument from evil? Could g be considered an offsetting good in a sense useful to NGE? Or is g’s offsetting e made irrelevant by the fact that preventing e brings about a good that outweighs g? In other words, does the requirement that God not make the world worse by permitting an evil serve the evidential argument from evil better than the requirement that God achieve some good that offsets the disvalue of the evil He permits? To ask a different question: Which thesis better defines gratuitous evil? Let us take up this last question first. Later sections will address the preceding questions.

If looking for necessary and sufficient conditions for God’s permission of an evil, or a definition of gratuitous evil, as Rhoda is, then NBA may seem superior to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis for admitting fewer obvious counterexamples. For example, suppose God must choose between permitting excruciating pain in order for someone to recover the use of her left
foot and permitting mild pain for that same person to recover the use of her right foot as well as of both arms. If the use of her left foot is worth her excruciating pain, then, construed as a necessary and sufficient condition for God’s permitting evil, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis apparently sanctions God’s choosing the former over the latter. This would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of that thesis, so construed. God’s permission of the additional physical pain (the difference between the mild pain and the excruciating pain) seems pointless: it achieves no good. The additional pain itself also seems pointless. It seems to serve no purpose because less of the same kind of pain could bring about more of the same type of good. So the existence of a good that both outweighs and requires divine permission of an evil may not seem sufficient for the evil (and for God’s permission of it) to be non-gratuitous.

But we must be careful. If the *same* good could have been obtained without the permission of an evil (or one no better), the permission of the evil and the evil itself may seem gratuitous. But what counts as the same good? If the goods referred to may be individuated not by kind and amount, but by specific instantiation, then the requirement that permitting an evil be necessary for a greater good, rather than simply in fact resulting in a greater good, is trivially satisfied. Any token good that results from a divine permission of evil will be in some respects distinct from a token of the same kind and amount of good that does not have the exact same causal history. So we may charitably interpret Rowe’s No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, and the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, as requiring that, for every divine permission of evil, there is an instance of a type and amount of good that requires God’s permission of that type and amount of evil (where one type of good is the good of resulting in a world no worse than the alternatives). If the good of the above example is ‘recovery of the use of a foot’ rather than ‘recovery of the use of a left foot’ then God’s permission of the greater physical pain is not necessary for any good that
outweighs it and is appropriately classified as gratuitous by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. So such examples need not be construed as counterexamples to that thesis.

The Gratuitous Offset Sub-Optimal Evils Objection to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis

Although this and similar examples need not be construed as counterexamples to that thesis, perhaps there are relevant examples where the goods are clearly different. For example, perhaps God must choose between permitting pain that brings about a physical recovery that outweighs the disvalue of the pain and preventing that pain to bring about a more valuable psychological sense of well-being.

A proponent of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis could, without inconsistency, discount all token offsetting goods that are components of sub-optimal choices as subsumed under a broader category. That is, if God’s permitting an evil is necessary for a good that offsets it but God’s preventing it would result in a more valuable good (as per my opening abstract formulation in terms of goods g and B), so that the permitted evil seems gratuitous, a proponent of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis could always claim both goods are instances of the same kind of good, thereby making permission of the evil unnecessary for that good, and hence gratuitous, to avoid counterexample. In our examples the broader good may be ‘use of one’s foot’, ‘limb recovery’, ‘bodily health’, or ‘well-being’, as needed. After all, one could appeal to goodness as a kind of good, if necessary, for the broadest category of good is just goodness itself.

It may be argued that the arbitrariness of this accommodation of what counts as gratuitous evil demonstrates that the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not adequately define gratuitous evil. By the above response, if we judge an evil is non-gratuitous because of an offsetting good even though preventing the evil would result in greater good (should there be
such cases), we may accept the goods as distinct. If we judge the evil is gratuitous we may treat the goods as tokens of the same type. Our judgments of gratuity would then guide our classification of offsetting goods rather than the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis’s notion of an offsetting good’s expressing what guides our judgment that an evil is gratuitous. Further, the same goods may then be treated as distinct in one context and the same in another, with no rationale for doing so.

For these reasons, one may pose this argument in favor of NBA: Let us call evils whose permission is offset by good but where God’s preventing the evil would result in a greater good “sub-optimal offset evils.” There is no non-arbitrary way to individuate goods so as to distinguish the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis from NBA in a way that does not succumb to suboptimal offset evil counterexamples. Consistency and coherence can be had only if only the amount of goodness or total value counts in tallying goods for the sake of which God permits evil. But given this, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis implies God never chooses a sub-optimal possible world in permitting evil. So the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, construed as a definition of gratuitous evil, non-arbitrarily evades counterexamples of gratuitous, because sub-optimal, offset evils only if equivalent to NBA.

Reply to the Gratuitous Offset Sub-Optimal Evil Objection

Is this argument correct? Can offset sub-optimal evils be accommodated by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis in a principled way? How are goods to be individuated according to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis? Does the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis need a criterion for individuating goods to be both substantive and distinct from NBA? To answer these questions, it is important to note how the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis (understood as definitive of gratuitous
evil), even if defended in the way I have described, by selectively classifying different token
goods as the same good, is distinct from NBA: its category of non-gratuitous evils is broader. If
an evil could not have been prevented in a way that would result in a better world, it is offset by
good (or prevention of evil), the good of resulting in net value no less than the evil has disvalue,
but permission of an evil may be necessary for a good that offsets the magnitude of the evil even
if this is not so, and such suboptimal offset evils are candidate non-gratuitous evils as well. So
the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may be helpfully broader than NBA. It may correct NBA’s
classification of suboptimal offset non-gratuitous evils as gratuitous, should there be any. If this
correction is needed, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may offer a better definition of gratuitous
evil, despite its vagueness. A vague accurate definition is better than a precise inaccurate one.

The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis would still face the charge of avoiding counterexample
only with inconsistent (or non-existent) criteria for individuating goods. But how strong is this
criticism? Perhaps there are no clear and precise simple rules for when an evil is offset by good
so as to be non-gratuitous in circumstances that violate the No Better Alternative requirement
(where preventing the evil results in a better world than permitting it). This would not mean the
Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is unilluminating. There may still be a correspondence between an
evil’s being offset and its being non-gratuitous. To see this, suppose again that the goods and
evils of God’s choice alternatives are dissimilar. Suppose God must choose between permitting
psychological suffering for the sake of a spiritual good and permitting physical pain for the sake
of physical well-being, where the net value of the latter exceeds the net value of the former. We
may of course wonder why God would permit the psychological suffering rather than the
physical, but if He did, would the psychological suffering, or the vague amount by which that
evil exceeds that of the physical suffering, be pointless? The answer is not obvious. That
psychological suffering brings about a good that outweighs it, the spiritual benefit that otherwise
would not obtain. So the suffering does serve a purpose (in a local rather than a world-
comparative sense).

The lesson, I think, is this: to the extent it seems that the same good (same in both amount
and type) could have been obtained without permission of an evil, the evil seems pointless (for
cases where we cannot think of a non-consequentialist reason God would choose a sub-optimal
world). But with that same degree of clarity a proponent of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may
plausibly claim the permission of the evil is not required for an offsetting good. If the same good
can be achieved without permission of an evil, permission of the evil is not required for that
good, as in the “foot” example. To the extent it seems that, in a divine permission of evil offset
by some resultant good, only a dissimilar good could have been obtained without permitting the
evil, there is a correspondingly plausible sense in which the evil is not pointless (or at least there
is an unclarity as to whether the permitted evil is pointless). Permitting the evil is necessary for a
good that offsets it and so serves some purpose. This is illustrated by God’s permission of
suffering that serves a spiritual good even though a greater good could have been achieved with
less suffering (of a different kind). So, without having clear criteria for when two tokens of good
count as the same good, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may still correctly define (and prohibit)
gratuitous evils as those that achieve no offsetting good. In doing so it would leave out of
consideration whether there may be additional moral constraints on divine permission of evil,
such as NBA.44

A proponent of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may also add an explanation for this
proposed correlation between an evil’s being non-gratuitous and its being offset though sub-
optimal, an explanation that does provide a criteria for individuating goods. She may say there
are no clear cases in which God’s permission of an evil is necessary for an offsetting good where God’s preventing the evil is necessary for a dissimilar (qua good) greater good so that the evil seems pointless or gratuitous because the relevant dissimilarity between goods correlates with divine moral reasons. Perhaps goods may be naturally divided according to different deontological or other moral duties they issue, such as respect for beauty, for truth, and for the intrinsic value of persons. For example, if God has no reason to permit Kim’s spiritual well-being that is distinct from reasons He has to permit Po’s well-being then His permitting an evil for the offsetting good of the former rather than the greater good of the latter makes the evil gratuitous. But if God has no moral reason that applies uniquely to Kim’s well-being, then the good involved may be considered creaturely well-being rather than Kim’s well-being, and if so, God’s permitting the evil that brings about Kim’s welfare is not necessary for an offsetting good. On the other hand, if God does have a reason to permit that evil for Kim’s well-being that does not also apply to Po, this must be because there are relevant differences in God’s moral relationship to Kim and these differences plausibly make the good of Kim’s welfare relevantly (qua type of good) distinct from the good of Po’s welfare.

The Gratuitous Evil that is Offset But Sub-optimal Due to Greater Evil Objection

There are further complications, however. The Evil Offsetting Good requirement may be satisfied even if God’s permitting an evil results in more evil than good and is worse than God’s preventing the evil for this reason. Because the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not state the required good must be a net good, summed across values and disvalues, or entail no net loss of value across God’s choice alternatives (as the Prevention Offsetting Good interpretation does), permitting an evil may result in an offsetting good in this sense while also resulting in a different evil that makes the resultant combination of goods and evils a net evil.45 If permitting an evil
results in net evil that would otherwise not occur, the occurrence of the permitted evil may seem gratuitous for this reason, even if permitting it is necessary for an offsetting good. For example, if God’s permission of the evil of a person’s illness is necessary for the outweighing good of the person’s gain in mental health, the evil is offset and non-gratuitous according to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. But this illness may also necessitate that many other people contract the disease in ways that are purely destructive for them. So there may be evils whose permission results in both a good that outweighs it and also a greater evil that makes it better for the evil to not have been permitted, in circumstances where there are no divine moral considerations other than maximizing value. Such cases are counterexamples to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis understood as a definition of gratuitous evil. Therefore, satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good requirement is not sufficient for an evil’s being non-gratuitous.

**NBA Construed as a Definition of Gratuitous Evil**

Let us now consider NBA as a definition of gratuitous evil. Why would God prefer a worse balance of good and evil over a better? Since God prefers more over less goodness it may seem *prima facie* plausible that necessarily, when choosing between world B of greater value than world A, God would choose world B. But even if this is correct, this does not mean an evil permitted contrary to this preference is pointless in a sense relevant to the evidential argument. Even if NBA does express a necessary and sufficient moral requirement for God’s permission of evil, this does not mean it expresses a definition of gratuitous evil. It may assert more than what is needed for this, as well as for Rowe’s evidential argument’s theological premise. That NBA is not a necessary condition for gratuitous evil is indicated by the psychological suffering example given earlier. Let us further consider counterexamples to NBA construed as a definition of gratuitous evil.
Non-Gratuitous Sub-Optimal Evils

The distinctive force of Rowe’s evidential argument lies in its appeal to apparent pointlessness and not all examples of preferring what is over-all worse in permitting evil are examples of permitting pointless evil. This may be illustrated by possible divine choices between dissimilar goods of differing value, as mentioned. To illustrate this more specifically, suppose God chooses to permit Kim to suffer for the sake of her greater enlightenment, though He could have chosen to permit Po’s lesser suffering for the sake of Kim’s enlightenment instead. Suppose it would be wrong or morally worse for God to permit Po rather than Kim to suffer involuntarily for Kim, even though the world would contain a better balance of good over evil if God chose the former. God’s permission of Kim’s suffering is clearly not pointless even though His preventing it would have resulted in a better world. Kim’s own suffering serves the purpose of bringing about her own enlightenment. One may question whether it could be morally worse for God to permit Po to suffer for Kim or whether a world in which God did so could be better given the badness of God’s doing what is morally worse. My point here is only that the notion of a gratuitous evil is not obviously the same as the notion of a permission of evil that does not result in an optimal world. In general, for any example of a non-gratuitous evil, we may imagine (in a loose sense) that God could have chosen a better set of goods and evils, without that fact making the given non-gratuitous evil seem pointless.

Non-Gratuitous Sub-Optimal Defeated Evils

This is also illustrated by possible divine permission of defeated evils. There is a clear sense in which evils that contribute to the goodness of the good they are necessary for cannot be pointless. If the evil of Rob’s suffering for his feelings of guilt is defeated by the depth of
remorse that entails that suffering, his suffering serves a purpose. In the context of Rob’s life, it is good that the suffering occurs. This is true even if, had his suffering been prevented, the world would have been better overall due to other goods and evils. If there is no moral reason for God to prefer the less good world containing this defeated evil over its alternative, God’s permission of Rob’s suffering is gratuitous. The evil itself does not seem gratuitous, however. If either the evil or God’s permission of it is necessary for, and brings about, a good that defeats the evil, the evil serves a good purpose. This is true even if it seems God should have chosen a different, better purpose instead. Even if it is true that God would never permit an evil when preventing it would actualize a better world (because He could have no moral reason for doing so) this expresses a different requirement than non-gratuity. An evil can serve a greater good, and hence not be gratuitous in an appropriate sense, even if God could have obtained a better world without permitting the evil.

The Definition of Gratuitous Evil Dilemma

So, though the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may need to be fortified against the charge of not prohibiting clearly gratuitous permissions of evil, NBA does not obviously express the notion of gratuitous evil either. If evils may be gratuitous despite being offset, satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is not sufficient for an evil’s being non-gratuitous. If evils may be non-gratuitous because they are offset even though permitting them is not optimal as per NBA, satisfying NBA is not necessary for an evil’s being non-gratuitous. I have offered reasons to think satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is not sufficient for an evil’s being non-gratuitous. I have also presented reasons to think satisfying the No Better Alternative requirement is not necessary for an evil to be non-gratuitous. The notion of a gratuitous or pointless evil is not obviously the same as the notion of an evil that could have been prevented
by God in a way that would have made the world as a whole better, even if the latter is impossible. So I have argued that both the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis and NBA may not adequately express the notion of gratuitous evil. If neither thesis offers a viable definition of gratuitous evil, this presents a dilemma for taking Rowe’s No Gratuitous Evil Thesis to define gratuitous evil, for these seem to be the only two viable interpretations of Rowe’s greater good requirement. A partial resolution of this dilemma is the subject of the next chapter where I present an approximation to the notion of gratuitous evil. First I raise a different dilemma for NGE.

Rowe’s No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is Not a Definition of Gratuitous Evil

Should the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis be construed as a definition of gratuitous evil? In this section I argue that neither the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis nor the No Better Alternative Thesis needs to express sufficient conditions for non-gratuitous evil or for God’s permission of evil in order to adequately serve Rowe’s Evidential Argument from Evil.

I have argued that because the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not prohibit net losses in divine permission of evil when there is no moral reason for God to choose net losses, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not adequately describe the notion of gratuitous evil. This is not a reason to reject that thesis as an attempt to isolate and articulate a divine moral requirement useful to Rowe’s atheist argument, however. The reasons I have given to think satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is not sufficient for an evil to be non-gratuitous are also reasons to think satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is not sufficient for God’s permission of an evil to be justified or morally best. But even if God might not permit an evil whose permission satisfies the
Evil Offsetting Good Thesis for reasons given in the previous section, this would not mean the
Evil Offsetting Good interpretation should be dismissed.

The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis does not aim to list all necessary conditions for God’s
justifiably permitting evil. The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, as employed by Rowe, attempts to
articulate one requirement for an evil’s being permitted by an omnipotent and perfectly good
being. According to Rowe, if God allows an evil, allowing the evil must be necessary for a
greater good or for the prevention of an evil no better. So for Rowe, an evil whose permission is
not necessary for any greater good or prevention of worse evil may be termed ‘gratuitous’ and
its permission by God would be unjustified. He does not claim this is a sufficient condition for
God’s permitting an evil. He explicitly states the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is only a necessary
condition for God’s justified permission of evil. So Rowe leaves open the possibility that an evil
whose permission is necessary for a greater good may be unjustified because there may be other
moral requirements.

Rowe states his theological premise is not proposed as a sufficient condition for God’s
justified permission of evil. I would argue that, in addition, we need not take Rowe’s No
Gratuitous Evil Thesis to describe sufficient conditions for an evil to be non-gratuitous or not
pointless, only a necessary condition. The requirement of being necessary for a greater good was
identified and employed by Rowe because it specifies a plausible divine moral requirement that
seems violated by many instances of evil. Perhaps this requirement is also basic to our notion of
pointless evil. However, though the notion of evils that contravene this requirement may then be
labeled ‘gratuitous’ for convenience of expression in discussing Rowe’s argument, it should be
kept in mind that the defining feature of this category of evils is simply their violating this one
necessary condition. This notion may correspond to what most theists would consider the general
idea of gratuitous evil but it need not. For an evil to be gratuitous under some common notion its permission must be unnecessary for a greater good (in some sense) or for the prevention of an evil no better, but perhaps more is required. Attempting to capture a notion of gratuitous evil shared by theists may result in a theological premise acceptable to all and an evidential premise both forceful and broad in scope, but attempting to reach consensus on a single necessary condition for God’s permission of evil and for an evil’s being non-gratuitous may sufficiently sharpen focus to achieve these desiderata equally well or better.

There are two main reasons for this. First, it is not obvious that reaching consensus on a notion of gratuitous evil, one that is generally agreed to have no significant counterexamples, is feasible. Philosophers may fundamentally and irreconcilably disagree about what it means for an evil to be pointless or gratuitous and about God’s moral and metaphysical relation to the evils of the world. It would not be surprising to find such disagreement among those who disagree over whether God knows the future, whether or not God determines all events, and over which fundamentally different theory of morality is correct and how it may apply to God. Second, even if there were a sufficiently robust notion of gratuitous evil theists would agree to, this notion may not serve the evidential argument as well as a single necessary condition for an evil’s being non-gratuitous. Both theists and atheists may have a higher degree of confidence in a single requirement for divine permission of evil than in a description of what is both necessary and sufficient for divine permission of evil. If that single requirement also seems clearly violated by many actual instances of evil, it may better present such evil as evidence against theism and therefore serve Rowe’s argument better than a full definition of gratuitous evil or of justified divine permission of evil.
So we may define a “gratuitous evil” as an evil that does not satisfy Rowe’s theological premise or my No Gratuitous Evil Thesis reformulation, but should keep in mind that not violating this thesis may not be sufficient for being justifiably permitted by God nor for being non-gratuitous in some broader, more common, and less technically specified sense. It may or may not be possible to extract or build a definition of a common notion of pointless evil or of unjustified divine permission of evil from Rowe’s theological premise, and doing so is not needed for Rowe’s evidential argument from evil. So the Evil Offsetting Good Requirement’s being necessary but not sufficient for an evil’s being gratuitous in some appropriate sense does not mean it is not a viable interpretation of Rowe’s theological premise.

First Horn of the Premise Dilemma: In Failing to Preclude Clear Instances of Gratuitous Evil, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis Weakens Rowe’s Argument

In the beginning of this chapter I raised the question: Does the requirement that God not make the world worse by permitting an evil serve the evidential argument from evil better than the requirement that God achieve some good that offsets the disvalue of the evil He permits? Let us now address this. Granted the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis need not articulate a common notion of gratuitous evil, and even granting its high plausibility, one may still object that it is simply unhelpful to Rowe’s argument because it does not preclude significant categories of seemingly pointless evil. According to this objection, in not exhibiting the conflict between many apparently pointless evils and reasonable belief in God, this thesis weakens the force of the evidential first premise of Rowe’s argument.

Even if we are looking only for a plausible moral requirement and not necessary and sufficient conditions for God’s permission of an evil, that requirement should be substantive
enough so as to strike the right balance between intuitive plausibility and precluding as many types of apparently pointless evils as possible. The Evil Offsetting Good construal of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis may seem inadequate for failing the latter. Returning to our earlier discussion, what about cases where God’s allowing an evil is necessary for a good that outweighs the evil but which also results in additional evil that makes allowing the evil result in net evil? What about cases where God’s allowing an evil is necessary for a good that outweighs the evil but which also results in the loss of other goods so that it is worse to allow the evil than not? One may argue that, at least for many cases, the net amount of good achieved by allowing an evil is what crucially matters to whether an evil is considered pointless or not. Not labeling such cases gratuitous does not make the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis false, but by inadequately expressing the notion of pointless evil in this way it exempts cases that might contribute to the force of the evidential argument. The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may be true but unhelpful for discussion of the evidential argument from evil. Let us consider this.

If allowing an evil e1 is necessary for a good but also results in evil(s) e2 that outweigh that good and that would otherwise not occur, then allowing the evil e1 seems pointless only if evil e2 seems unnecessary for a different good that outweighs it. So for example if God’s allowing Joe to suffer (e1) is necessary for Joe’s improved character (good g) but also results in Sam’s worsened character (e2) and e1 and e2 outweigh g, then God’s permitting Joe to suffer seems pointless only if Sam’s worsened character is itself not necessary for a good that outweighs it. So although this kind of case where allowing e is necessary for a good that offsets e but results in net evil or net loss of good, is not precluded by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, this fact does not obviously diminish the force of the evidential premise. If Sam’s turpitude is unnecessary for a greater good, then while e1 may be gratuitous it only seems so to the extent e2
seems unnecessary for a greater good. In this sort of case it is e2 that would be appealed to as
evidence, not e1. If it seems that Sam’s depravity is not necessary for any greater good then,
although Joe’s suffering would also be a seemingly pointless evil, its being so depends on Sam’s
depravity’s seeming unnecessary.

However, we must keep in mind that, as noted in chapter one, e2’s not being necessary
for a greater good does not mean e2 is gratuitous. Suppose God’s permission of e1 is necessary
for a greater good but also results in e2 that is not necessary for a greater good though God’s
permission of e2 is necessary for a greater good. That is, permitting e1 makes it necessary for
God to permit e2 for some greater good. So, to take the same example, suppose God’s allowing
Joe to suffer (e1) is necessary for Joe’s improved character (good g) but also results in Sam’s
choosing to worsen his character (e2) and e1 and e2 outweigh g. Suppose God must permit e2 for
the good of humans having significant morality and this makes God’s permission of e2 not
gratuitous. This permission would not have been necessary for this good if Sam hadn’t chosen
badly. In this case, even though God’s permission of e1 is necessary for a good that outweighs e,
namely Joe’s improved character, because God’s permitting Joe to suffer also results in e2,
Sam’s worsened character, which, though it must be permitted for a greater good is not itself
necessary for any good, God’s permission of e1 results in net evil that would otherwise not
occur.

To take another example, suppose God’s permitting a natural disaster is necessary for the
greater good of the opportunity it affords humans to respond with courage and compassion, but
as a result another worse disaster threatens that God must permit only for the uniformity of
nature, a good that only requires that God not prevent that second disaster, not the disaster itself.
God’s permission of the first disaster is not precluded by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, but we may reasonably suppose there may be no moral considerations to justify it.

So it does seem this objection has some merit: the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not forbid some divine permissions of evil that seem gratuitous and unjustified, whose apparent gratuity is potential fuel for Rowe’s evidential argument. These are cases where God’s permitting an evil is necessary for a good that offsets that evil but that also makes it necessary for God to permit further evil (or losses of good) for goods that otherwise would not require them. The potential evidence from gratuitous evil against theism is thereby reduced more than it needs to be by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis.

As stated earlier, I pose a dilemma for the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. This dilemma can now be divided into two, according to what is claimed of Rowe’s theological premise: the Definition Dilemma and the Argument Requirement Dilemma. The former besets the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis understood to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an evil’s being gratuitous; the latter besets the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis understood as filling the role of a plausible moral requirement for God’s permission of evil that seems clearly violated. For both the dilemma is: either an offsetting good is interpreted as a value or value/disvalue sum that offsets the evil permitted or only as a good that offsets the good involved in preventing the evil. The former is insufficiently restrictive and the latter is overly restrictive.

I think the horns of the Definition Dilemma are sharp. How significant is my criticism of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis in this section, signaling a weakness in its adequacy for Rowe’s evidential argument from evil? In my view, in the trade-off between plausibility and usefulness this mark against usefulness in the evidential argument from evil is not a decisive reason to reject
it. This circumstance is not what is appealed to by any of the famous instances of evil appealed to in the literature, such as Rowe’s case of a fawn’s dying in a forest fire or any of the other more horrific examples. In the next section I will dramatically sharpen the second horn of the Argument Requirement Dilemma, arguing NBA is overly restrictive.

In this chapter I posed a dilemma for defining gratuitous evil, specified its source in the different ways an evil may be considered non-gratuitous, and gave reasons for thinking these ways do not admit precise characterization. I presented a new definition of the notion of gratuitous evil and explained the difficulties involved in specifying it more completely. I then argued that NGE need not be understood as definitive of gratuitous evil and pointed out a weakness of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis for serving the role of Rowe’s theological premise. In the next chapter I examine the second horn of this new dilemma for NGE: NBA’s being too restrictive to serve the role of Rowe’s theological premise.

**Second Horn of the Premise Dilemma: The No Better Alternative Thesis Implies the No Surpassable World Thesis**

I will argue that NBA implies that if God exists, this is the most valuable possible world God could actualize. Therefore, NBA is too restrictive to serve as Rowe’s theological premise.

**The No Better Alternative Requirement Must Apply to Divine Permission of Loss of Good**

According to NBA, if an evil is gratuitous, there is a world God could actualize in which the evil is prevented that is better than the (actual) world in which it is allowed. The sense in which the former is better than the latter according to NBA is that the former is more valuable. One possible world is better than another in this sense either because it contains more good or because it contains less evil or both. Now it certainly is true that to actualize a world that is
worse because it contains more evil is to lose the good of a world with less evil. Should we also say that to actualize a world that is worse because it contains less good is to gain the evil of a world with less good? It seems not. Though an improvement is always good, the absence of a possible improvement is not necessarily an evil. As Rowe remarks, the loss of a good is not necessarily the gain of an evil. Not having more of something good is not necessarily to have something bad. So we may say that the gain of an evil is the loss of a good, though the loss of a good is not necessarily the gain of an evil. Initially at least, it may therefore seem that NBA does not imply:

Loss of Good NBA: God would only allow a loss of good if the loss of good could not have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a better world.

In comparing the overall value of two worlds, the distinction between an absence of an evil from the presence of a good and the distinction between the presence of an evil and the absence of a good (a distinction Rowe found relevant) makes no difference: all else being equal, a world that contains a disvalue of amount x is worse by amount x than a world that does not, and a world that lacks a good of amount x is also worse by amount x than a world that does not. This may not seem to entail that the No Better Alternative requirement for divine permission of evil must also be a requirement for divine permission of losses of good (i.e. that NBA entails Loss of Good NBA). One may think that what equivalently satisfies the justificatory condition, the requirement that permitting the evil has no less value than any possible way of preventing it, may not satisfy a description of what is being justified, namely God’s permission of an evil. That is, one might think that though a loss of good in preventing an evil may make permitting an evil no worse than preventing it just as well as an equivalent gain of evil would, this does not mean that what is morally required for God’s justifiably permitting an evil is the same as what is
morally required for God’s justifiably permitting a loss of good. It is natural to think permitting an evil may require a different explanation or justification than not bringing about a good. Most common examples of divine permission of evil seem at least prima facie to most directly conflict with divine compassion or justice, whereas God’s not bringing about a good seems to more directly conflict with divine maximal generosity. However, although in general what is morally required for God’s permission of an evil need not be morally required for God’s permission of a loss of good, I will argue that a proponent of NBA must accept that the No Better Alternative requirement holds for both, that God would only allow a loss of good if the loss of good could not have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a better world (Loss of Good NBA).

A proponent of NBA would be hard pressed to find a rationale for thinking God’s permitting a loss of good does not share the same moral requirement as God’s permitting an evil. If, in choosing whether to permit an evil or not, God necessarily chooses an optimal world, what would warrant a different rationale for God’s choosing whether or not to permit a loss of good? The NBA requirement seems based on the fundamental idea that a perfectly good being would prefer more good over less and less evil over more. This preference applies equally well to a choice to prevent an evil as to a choice to permit a loss of good.

We can demonstrate this reasoning more rigorously as follows. Let us consider only divine choices between better and worse worlds, excluding morally arbitrary choices between (perhaps roughly) equally good or incommensurable worlds.
Let us divide NBA into two more specific theses:

NBA-Less Evil: God would not allow an evil if the evil could have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a world that is better because it contains less evil.

NBA-More Good: God would not allow an evil if the evil could have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a world that is better because it contains more good.

Consider possible world A that includes evil e and possible worlds Cn that do not, where all Cn contain no more evil than A but are worse than A because they contain less good. Suppose NBA’s necessary condition for God’s permissibly permitting e is satisfied; that God could not have prevented e in a way that results in a better world. Now let us consider this: Could God permissibly choose a world Cn? To choose a world Cn rather than A is to choose a loss of good that could have been prevented in a way that results in a better world, namely, A. This is prohibited by Loss of Good NBA, which, again, states that God would only allow a loss of good if the loss of good could not have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a better world. So to think God could permissibly choose a world Cn one would have to deny Loss of Good NBA. To coherently deny this one must think there may be a reason for God to prefer a worse world (Cn) over a better world (A) when the former has less good. (If this reason were to also imply that God could prefer a worse world over a better world when the former has more evil then it would directly contradict NBA (because then God could permit an evil of the worse world that could be prevented in a way that results in better world). So this reason must avoid this implication.) Now if Cn has no less evil than A then, all other morally relevant factors being equal, God’s preferring Cn is to prefer less over more good, which is impossible.49 So let us consider the case where A contains more evil than Cn but is nonetheless of greater value because Cn contains sufficiently less good. To deny Loss of Good NBA and so think God may prefer Cn
over A, a proponent of NBA must think that God may have reason to prefer a loss of good (of Cn) over a gain of evil (of A) of lesser magnitude (lesser disvalue). Since, all else being equal, God necessarily prefers more good over less, a proponent of NBA must also think that God may have reason to prefer a loss of good (of Cn) over an equivalent gain of evil (of A). (If God may prefer loss of good g over e when g has greater disvalue, then God may prefer g over e when g has no greater disvalue.) We may term this the “Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim”

**Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim:** God may have reason to prefer a loss of good over an equivalent gain of evil.

The Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim means that even if a world is worse than another because it contains less good, God may have reason to prefer it because it also contains less evil. This is to hold that the avoidance of evil can carry moral force greater than avoidance of an equivalent loss of good, that the avoidance of evil is a morally relevant factor in addition to comparative goodness or value that may over-ride over-all greater value.

But if the Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim is true then we have no reason to think NBA is true. How can NBA require that there be no better alternative to permitting e if God may have a reason to choose a worse world over a better? By the Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim, world A, in which evil e is permitted, may be actualized by God even though alternative world B in which e is prevented is better. World A may be worse than B because it contains less good than B, but still be preferred to B because B contains more evil. That is, although one who denies Loss of Good NBA could have reason to accept

NBA-Less Evil: God would not allow an evil if the evil could have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a world that is better because it contains less evil
She would have no reason to accept:

NBA-More Good: God would not allow an evil if the evil could have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a world that is better because it contains more good.

Even if e could have been prevented in a way resulting in more good (though not less evil) and a more valuable balance of good over evil, permitting e may be preferred because it brings about less evil. (Recall that preventing an evil may necessitate the occurrence of other evils.) Yet NBA entails NBA-more good.

The denial of Loss of Good NBA implies the Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim. The Good and Evil Asymmetry Claim implies NBA-More Good is false. If NBA-More Good is false then NBA is false. So NBA implies Loss of Good NBA.

The Definition of Evil

The equivalence for NBA of a loss of good with the gain of an evil is suggested by the following definition of evil offered by Alan Rhoda to help clarify NBA:

An evil = def. An event-token which is such that, in relation to the Good, it is objectively better that it not occur, than that it occur.

This definition conveys the reasonable symmetry in application of the NBA moral requirement to both loss of good and gain of evil, suggesting NBA and Loss of Good NBA are equivalent.

This is best shown with a reasonable modification of it. In keeping with the aim of defining gratuitous evil as broadly as possible so as not to unnecessarily exempt classes of potentially pointless evils, it seems evils should be defined as bad states of affairs rather than as

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bad *events*. The examples Rhoda gives of evils such as being ugly and being selfish seem best classified as states of affairs rather than events and God can prevent the existence or occurrence of states of affairs as well as of events. The existence of hatred, people who are unhappy, unjust social structures, etc are evil states of affairs that may have been prevented by God and may be deemed gratuitous. So it seems Rhoda should agree to define an evil as a state of affairs that, all else being equal, is better to not obtain than obtain.\(^50\)

All else being equal, it is always better that a net amount of evil not occur than occur. Likewise, all else being equal, it is always better that a net loss of an amount of good not occur than occur. So on this definition of an evil, an amount of evil, an increase of an amount of evil, and a decrease of goodness are all evils. By this definition of evil, every net loss of goodness across possible worlds is the evil of a worse world. So, by this definition of evil, NBA implies Loss of Good NBA.

Defining evil is difficult, however. Being better to not occur than occur, all else being equal, is necessary for an event to be evil, but perhaps more is required that would distinguish evils from losses of good. Also, even if Rhoda’s definition should be expanded to include states of affairs, it may be argued that only concrete states of affairs and not relations between possible worlds, such as losses of good, should be included. For these reasons I think Rhoda’s definition indicates NBA is naturally understood to imply Loss of Good NBA, but do not claim it constitutes an independent argument for this.
NBA Implies the No Surpassable World Thesis

If a gratuitous evil is an evil God could have prevented in a way that would have made the world better and a gratuitous loss of good is a loss of good God could have prevented in a way that would have made the world better, then there being no gratuitous evil and no gratuitous losses of good means there are no net gains of evil or net losses of good in God’s choice of the actual world over other possible worlds (that God could have actualized instead.) This has two related important consequences.

It implies that in choosing between two worlds A and B where A contains some evil or lacks some good that B does not and B has less value than A (because B still contains less total good, more total evil, or both) God must choose A. That is, there being no optimal alternative to God’s permitting the evil or loss of good of A is both necessary and sufficient for God’s permitting it. This is because in order for B to have less value than A it must contain some evil or loss of good not in A and God’s permission of that evil or loss of good would violate NBA. It would violate NBA because by stipulation there is a better alternative to God’s permitting that evil or loss of good in B, namely A. So in choosing between worlds that differ in total value (so that God’s choice is not morally arbitrary for this reason) NBA implies there being no better alternative to God’s permission of an evil (or loss of good) is both necessary and sufficient for God’s permission of that disvalue.

We may also describe this implication in terms of the loss of the good of a better world involved in God’s permitting a sub-optimal evil. An evil is either gratuitous or non-gratuitous. According to NBA, to prevent a gratuitous evil is to prevent an evil and to actualize a good, the good of a better world. Permitting a gratuitous evil, then, is to permit an evil as well as to prevent
a good, the good of a better world and the good of the world’s not containing an evil that would make the world worse. Preventing a non-gratuitous evil when that choice is not morally arbitrary, then, is to permit a gratuitous loss of good, (by bringing about a world that could have been prevented in a way that results in a better world). This is prohibited by Loss of Good NBA. So by NBA, God must permit all non-gratuitous evil. By NBA a non-gratuitous evil is an evil whose permission is either morally arbitrary or is necessary for an optimal world. If God must prevent all gratuitous evil and must permit all non-gratuitous evil, when that choice is not morally arbitrary, then an evil’s being gratuitous is both necessary and sufficient for God’s preventing it.

This precludes the possibility that a moral consideration that is not entailed by maximizing value may be required for God’s permission of evil or loss of good. So NBA is far more restrictive than what Rowe intended by his theological premise. As mentioned earlier, Rowe explicitly stated his No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition, to allow there may be other moral requirements for God’s permission of evil besides being necessary for a greater good.

Now let us consider the second related implication of NBA, given NBA’s equivalent treatment of an evil and a loss of good. If NBA implies there are no net amounts of evil or net losses of good God could have prevented, then NBA implies God could not have actualized a more valuable world than the actual world. I will call this the “No Surpassable World Thesis.”

No Surpassable World Thesis: God could not have actualized a more valuable world than the actual world

One way to see this is to consider that because NBA implies Loss of Good NBA, the same argument for the first implication must apply to God’s prevention of losses of good. If God
must prevent all gratuitous loss of good and must permit all non-gratuitous losses of good, when that choice is not morally arbitrary, then a loss of good’s being gratuitous is both necessary and sufficient for God’s preventing it. Every choice of a less valuable world over a better world is the permission of a gratuitous loss of good (a loss of good that could have been prevented in a way that would have resulted in a better world), by NBA. Therefore, NBA implies that in any choice between worlds of differing value, God necessarily chooses the better world, which is the No Surpassable World Thesis.

In other words, according to NBA, an evil is gratuitous if it is a component of a net amount of evil or net loss of good that God could have prevented in a way that would have made the world overall better, but to prevent such a net loss of good or a net amount of evil just is to choose a better world over a worse world. So to say that if God exists there is no gratuitous evil is just to say that if God exists God could not have chosen to make the world better by preventing evil. Since NBA implies Loss of Good NBA, according to NBA God also could not have chosen to make the world better by preventing any loss of good. One possible world is only more valuable than another because it contains less evil or more good or both. If God could not have made the actual world better by choosing a world with less evil (by preventing net evil) or by choosing a world with more good (by preventing net loss of good), then there are no possible worlds God can actualize that are more valuable than the actual world.

To clarify, I am not claiming that NBA must say that only amounts of evil or net worsening of the world by greater evil, are evils (and likewise for losses of good). For NBA to be meaningful, evils must be taken to include particular instances and not just relative amounts of evil or “world-worsenings.” If it did not a gratuitous evil would simply be “an amount of evil God could prevent” and NGE thesis would simply be the No Surpassable World Thesis (with
the additional either implausible or poorly worded thesis that there are no evils that God could prevent). What I claim instead is that NBA’s assumption that only the resultant net loss of value is relevant to whether or not an evil is gratuitous implies the No Surpassable World Thesis because it implies Loss of Good NBA.

**The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis Should Not Entail the No Surpassable World Thesis**

NGE appeals to a more specific consideration than the improvability of the world to argue against theism. It appeals to evil whose permission seems to serve no justifying purpose. Though God’s elimination of such evil may increase the total value of the world (though, again, it need not according to the Evil Offsetting Good alternative interpretation), apparently pointless evil is just one reason for thinking the actual world could have been better. Another, different, reason is that God could have created or actualized a world with more good. NGE claims only that God would not permit pointless evil, not that God would actualize the most good. The latter requirement faces the familiar challenge that there may be no greatest possible world. NGE should not be formulated so as to inherit this difficulty, if possible. So one respect in which NGE, as employed by Rowe, differs from the No Surpassable World Thesis is that the former, unlike the latter, concerns only actual evil whose permission by God seems unjustified and not the absence of possible good that may seem incompatible with a maximally generous omnipotent and perfect creator.

NGE should not be formulated so as to imply that God would create the most valuable possible world, if possible. It seems NGE can be coherently stated without implying that God would create the greatest possible world. The requirement that every divine permission of evil must be necessary for an offsetting good need not be interpreted so as to imply that if there is a
greater good God must permit the evil. The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, for example, does not imply that there can be no good reason to prevent an evil whose permission results in a good that offsets it. It only states that if God does permit an evil, there must be an offsetting good. Unlike NBA, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not preclude preventing a non-gratuitous evil when permitting it is necessary for an optimal world. Because NGE can be coherently stated without implying the No Surpassable World Thesis, NBA’s implying the No Surpassable World Thesis is a mark against it.

The Governance vs. Creation Objection

One may argue that another respect in which NGE prima facie differs from the No Surpassable World requirement is in the divine choice context it applies to: the former involves only God’s response to the world He has created, the latter involves both this and God’s choice in the initial act of creation. It is one thing to think that every divine permission of evil must be necessary for a greater good; it is another to think that God necessarily always chooses to bring about the best world He can. NGE concerns God’s choice to prevent or permit an evil, a choice necessarily made in the context of a world that would contain evil apart from divine intervention. It concerns the manner in which God governs or exercises His control over the potential evil of the given created world. Perhaps it requires that God permits or prevents the world’s evil so as to make the world the best it can be or perhaps it merely requires that God’s permission of evil brings about some offsetting good. Both of these requirements are narrower than the requirement that God create an unsurpassable world, which involves God’s choice of which possible initial world state to bring about. On NGE, the alternatives to God’s choice are how the given created world would otherwise be.
One may then object to my claim that NBA implies the No Surpassable World thesis by pointing out that NBA speaks of God’s allowing evil. If God has a choice between creating a world x which will have x1 evil or g1 good (or which has expected value x) and creating a world y which will have lesser x2 evil or greater g2 good (or which has expected value y), it is not accurate to say God allows x1-x2 evil or g1-g2 loss of good by creating x instead of y. The terms ‘allowing’, ‘permitting’, and ‘preventing’ only describe responses to circumstances, in this case to evils that would occur unless God prevents them, and so cannot describe God’s act of choosing to create world x rather than y. One may think of God’s “responses” to evil as components of a single divine timeless creative act, but this is not required of theism. So the distinction between NBA and the No Surpassable World Thesis is built into the wording of NBA, one may argue.

There are three reasons to reject this argument that NBA cannot entail the No Surpassable World Thesis. First, this second prima facie difference is more superficial than the first. One may think some evils are gratuitous by NGE because God could have prevented them by creating a different initial world state, such as a different natural order. Second, distinguishing NBA from the No Surpassable World Thesis by restricting NBA to divine governance of creation rather than to both divine governance and an initial act of creation is ad hoc. This is shown by the irrelevance to NBA of the notions of permission and prevention as opposed to simply ‘choosing’ or ‘actualizing’. Because on NBA what matters is only the comparative goodness of God’s choice alternatives, on NBA permitting net evil implies preventing net good. The same choice may be described as a permission (of evil) and as a prevention (of good), the good of a better world. This indicates the ordinary meanings of permission and prevention are irrelevant to NBA. There is only God’s choice of a better over a worse world. NBA describes a requirement for
God’s choosing between possible worlds. One component of that choice may be described as the permission of an evil but that same choice may also be viewed as the prevention of a good. Neither description plays any role in the content of NBA, which, again, concerns a choice between possible worlds. Though NBA putatively concerns a subset of divine choices between possible worlds, those involving the permission of evil, that appearance dissolves upon closer examination, as I have argued.

Because NBA is not only a requirement for God’s permission of evil, but also for God’s permission of losses of good, it cannot differ from the No Surpassable World thesis in the first respect I mentioned, namely pertaining to actual evil rather than possible good. Similarly, NBA also does not naturally accommodate the second respect in which some may claim NGE prima facie differs from the No Surpassable World Thesis: the distinction between God’s choice to create one world rather than another and God’s choice to allow a given world to contain an evil or not. If by NBA what matters to God’s choice in permitting evil or loss of good, including the evil or loss of good of there being a worse world than there could have been, is only the value permitting the evil or loss of good has relative to the alternative, then NBA applies equally well to God’s decision of which world to create in an initial act of creation. The decision to create one world rather than another less good world is one instance of a divine choice between possible worlds of differing value. The distinction between choosing to create less good and merely to allow less good therefore seems irrelevant to NBA. According to NBA when God is faced with a choice to permit an evil what is relevant to that choice is only the comparative value between possible worlds in which God permits the evil and worlds in which God prevents it. Likewise, according to NBA, when God is faced with a choice to “permit a loss of good” what is relevant to that choice is only the comparative value of those worlds in which the good obtains and those
in which it does not. According to NBA, in both cases God would choose so as to make the world the most valuable it can be. So the choice circumstance NBA applies to is general enough to include the choice of which world to create (if God has such a choice). For in choosing which world to create of worlds of differing value God is choosing between the good of one world and the loss of good involved in creating the less good world. According to NBA God would necessarily choose the former. This is the third reason one cannot argue NBA does not imply the No Surpassable World Thesis on the basis that the former concerns only divine governance and the latter both divine governance and creation.

Finally, even if we restrict NBA to God’s governance of the created world and do not apply it to a possible choice made in the initial act of creation, NBA still implies:

**No Improvable World Thesis:** Subsequent to the initial act of creating the world God could not have actualized a better world than the actual world other than by a new act of creation

The No Improvable World Thesis is still much stronger than Rowe’s theological premise. The No Surpassable World Thesis and the No Improvable World Thesis claim more than NGE needs to and so are open to objections the latter need not incur.
Chapter 3

The Notion of Gratuitous Evil: an Approximation
A Better Understanding of the Notion of Gratuitous Evil

Our discussion has made progress in clarifying the notion of gratuitous (or most fundamentally pointless) evil. This clarification explains why it is difficult to define gratuitous evil precisely. I propose the following imprecise definition, followed by an explanation of the necessity of its imprecision:

*An evil is gratuitous if and only if the occurrence of the evil is not offset by good in God’s choice context.*

First I will explain the inelegant inclusion of the qualification “in God’s choice context”, which is similar to the qualification “given the evil would occur unless God prevents it” (but avoids implying there was an antecedent fact about whether the evil (perhaps a free choice) would occur). I will then explain the imprecision of “not offset by good” and why that imprecision is necessary.

The qualification “in God’s choice alternatives” or “given the evil would occur unless God prevents it” is necessary to avoid misunderstanding. Stating that an evil is gratuitous if and only if God’s permission of the evil is not offset by good suggests that for an evil to not be most basically pointless the net value of God’s permission of it must be offset, which is the prevention offsetting good thesis. What we want, though, is to express the idea of an evil’s being pointless or gratuitous, which may be different, as I have argued. God’s permission of an evil may be pointless if there is no moral reason for God to permit the evil and yet the evil itself may not be, if it is a defeated evil, for example. The added complication is that simply stating that an evil is gratuitous if and only if the evil is not offset by good suggests that the occurrence of an evil that is unnecessary for an offsetting good, that is such that it would have been better if the evil had
not occurred, is necessarily pointless. This is a kind of pointlessness, namely being regrettable, as mentioned in chapter one, but not the kind of pointlessness required of our definition. Our definition concerns the justification for an omnipotent being’s permission of evil. My evil choice may be unnecessary for an offsetting good and so regrettable, yet God’s permission of it may be necessary for an offsetting good, and this latter is sufficient for the evil to be considered non-gratuitous in the appropriate sense. That is, the evil’s occurrence given that I choose it, may be offset by good. The occurrence of the evil in the given divine choice context may have a point and be offset by good, say the good of the existence of moral freedom, though not outside that context or absolutely. An evil’s being necessary for an offsetting good in the given divine choice context is an appropriate sense of having a point or being non-gratuitous in the context of the evidential argument from evil. So the least potentially misleading wording is that given. The existence of gratuitous evil so defined is incompatible with Rowe’s theological premise and the No Gratutitous Evil Thesis formulation of it, given theism.

Now I will explain why I think the notion of gratuitous evil precludes specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for the criterion of not being “offset by good.” What is relevant to whether God’s permission of an evil is offset by good are only the values and disvalues gained by God’s permission of the evil. Values are either goods gained or evils avoided. Disvalues are either evils gained or goods lost. So what is relevant to whether an evil is offset by good is exhausted by the following: goods gained, evils avoided, goods lost, and evils gained by God’s permitting the evil. However, there is not one but (at least) three distinct basic ways these values and disvalues may offset a divine permission of evil by good, and so three distinct ways an evil may be non-gratuitous.
An evil may be non-gratuitous if God’s permitting the evil is necessary for:

1. An Offsetting Value: either a good of no less value than the magnitude of the evil, the avoidance of an evil of no less disvalue than the evil, or a set of goods and avoided evils whose combined value is not less than the magnitude of the evil. ; or

2. An Offsetting Value and Disvalue Sum: a positive sum of values and disvalues not less in magnitude than the evil permitted; or

3. The No Better Alternative circumstance: The summed value of all goods gained and lost and all evils gained and avoided, with the permitted evil included, is non-negative.

(1) An Offsetting Value

An evil’s being necessary for an Offsetting Value (in God’s choice context) is not sufficient for its non-gratuity because God’s permitting an evil that is necessary for an Offsetting Value may also result in a net disvalue, by resulting in worse evils and losses of good, and those resultant disvalues may make the evil permitted gratuitous. This is illustrated by my example of an illness that benefits the sufferer but results in purely destructive suffering for others. However, even if goods lost and/or evils gained by God’s permitting an evil outweigh the value gained, God’s permission of the evil may still serve a good purpose and so the evil may be offset by a good and be non-gratuitous. This may be so if the offsetting goods are not the same as the outweighing lost goods. For example, God’s permitting Kim’s suffering for Kim’s good may be offset by that good of Kim’s spiritual benefit even though God could have permitted Kim’s suffering for Po’s even greater good. Similarly, an evil defeated by good is offset by that good and is non-
gratuitous even if God’s permission of the evil results in evil that outweighs that good. (This is so even if God’s permission of the evil is “gratuitous”. Again, a definition of gratuitous evil need not comprise necessary and sufficient conditions for God’s permission of evil.) So being necessary for an offsetting value is a way of being non-gratuitous distinct from resulting in no net disvalue, which NBA requires.

(2) An Offsetting Value and Disvalue Sum

One may think the notion of an offsetting good should be expanded to include, not only values and sums of values as per 1), but positive sums of values and disvalues. So for example, Dor’s disease whose benefit to Dor outweighs the badness of the illness is not thereby non-gratuitous if Dor’s illness also results in suffering for many others that outweighs his benefit. However, if that resultant additional suffering is also necessary for the well-being of those additional others or some other outweighing good, Dor’s illness is not a gratuitous evil. In this case a positive sum of resultant evils and goods is what offsets the evil of Dor’s illness. The idea here is that God’s permission of an evil’s being necessary for a value that offsets the evil may not be what makes the evil non-gratuitous. If permitting the evil brings about further evils and/or losses of good the evil may be non-gratuitous only because such disvalues, as well as the permitted evil, are offset by goods gained and/or evils avoided.

This circumstance of non-gratuity is distinct from an evil’s (divine permission’s) being necessary for an offsetting value (1). This circumstance is also distinct from there being no better alternative to God’s permission of the evil. That is, it is distinct from an evil’s being non-gratuitous because the sum of all goods and evils gained and lost by its permission by God is non-negative. One may think an evil is non-gratuitous due to an offsetting sum of value and
disvalue even if preventing the evil would have been better (due to relevantly dissimilar goods or avoidances of evils). Suppose God’s preventing Dor’s illness would result in a better world due to the gain of a different set of goods, including goods achieved by Dor’s descendents. Because Dor’s illness is of benefit to Dor and likewise for all others affected by Dor’s illness, for a total positive sum of goods and evils (benefits and illness), the fact that God’s preventing Dor’s illness would have resulted in different and greater goods would not make Dor’s illness itself pointless. So perhaps a sub-optimal evil may be non-gratuitous because permitting the evil results in concrete goods and evils (rather than avoided goods and evils) whose summed value, with the permitted evil included, is non-negative.

Or perhaps there is a non-negative sum of goods and evils gained and lost relative to a way that God may prevent the evil different from an impermissible optimal way. For example, suppose Dor may avoid contracting a disease by missing work and that in this case his work substitute, whose life would be defeated by the illness, would contract the disease. Suppose this person’s contracting the disease would lead to its cure, making this divine option the most valuable, yet it would be wrong for God to allow this person’s life to be on the whole bad for any good purpose. So this way in which God may prevent Dor’s illness is optimal but impermissible. Suppose another way God may prevent Dor’s illness is by miraculously annihilating the virus that would cause the disease, but Dor would in fact benefit spiritually by contracting the disease as would someone else who contracts the disease because of Dor, and so God does not prevent Dor’s illness. In this case God’s permitting Dor to catch the virus is non-gratuitous because and perhaps only because the evil of Dor’s illness is offset by a positive sum of values and disvalues relative to this alternative of God’s annihilating the virus. So a permitted evil may be non-gratuitous then because it serves a good purpose, either an offsetting good or an offsetting sum of
values and disvalues, even though a different greater good (actualizing an optimal world) would be served by its prevention.

It is clear, however, that (2) is not sufficient for non-gratuity. Because (2) requires only a non-negative set of values and disvalues, rather than a non-negative sum of all relevant factors, an evil may trivially satisfy this condition. Losses of good or gains of evil not included in a non-negative set may make the evil gratuitous.

(3) The No Better Alternative circumstance

(3) is sufficient for non-gratuity. If God’s permitting an evil is necessary for an optimal world, the evil is non-gratuitous. But (3) is not necessary because an evil may also be non-gratuitous in ways (1) and (2).

To summarize, an evil may be non-gratuitous because offset by some or all values gained (goods gained and/or evils avoided) (1), by the net good of some of the values and disvalues gained (goods and evils gained and/or lost) (2), or by the net good of all the values and disvalues gained (goods and evils gained and/or lost) (3). Because this exhausts all possible ways of combining all possible factors relevant to the permission of an evil’s being offset by good, we may with confidence propose the following as a necessary condition for an evil’s being gratuitous:

*An evil is gratuitous if God’s permitting the evil gains no offsetting value nor offsetting value and disvalue sum*

(Note that if permitting the evil gains no offsetting value and disvalue sum then permitting it is not optimal.)
Why a precise definition of gratuitous evil is not available

We can see now why, in addition to the problem of avoiding theological assumptions, it is difficult to define the notion of gratuitous evil more precisely. Although an evil must fail to satisfy (1) or (2) or (3) to be gratuitous, only satisfying (3) is sufficient for being non-gratuitous. So to describe sufficient conditions for an evil’s being gratuitous we would need to describe in general terms how an evil that satisfies (1) may still be gratuitous, to preclude those circumstances, and likewise for (2). Our definition would then be as follows:

An evil is gratuitous if and only if:

a) It is not optimal, and

b) It is not necessary for an offsetting value, unless x, and

c) It is not necessary for an offsetting value and disvalue sum, unless y

How can we specify x? Can we characterize in a general way how an evil that is offset by a value may be gratuitous? We could plausibly claim that God’s permission of the evil’s also resulting in outweighing disvalues of evils gained and/or goods lost is necessary for this. But God’s permission of the evil’s resulting in outweighing or net evil is not sufficient. We would then have to claim to exhaust ways of being non-gratuitous despite outweighing evils, to say that being a defeated evil is the only way, for example. To specify the circumstances in which an outweighing loss of good does not make the evil gratuitous we would need a criterion for individuating goods, indicating which outweighing lost goods count as the same type as that gained so as to make the evil permitted gratuitous. This was discussed in chapter two. But, as mentioned, it seems difficult to describe such a criterion objectively and precisely. Specifying y
is similarly complex. If permitting an evil is necessary for an offsetting non-negative value and disvalue sum but this sum is a subset of a sum that is negative, then the evil is gratuitous, unless conditions x are satisfied.

A Reformulation of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis

We may now return to interpreting “an offsetting good”, the subject of chapter two. We may interpret an “offsetting good” liberally as including these three ways in which an evil may be offset, and so expand the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis (in ways not intended by Rowe’s theological premise, for reasons given in chapter two) as follows:

The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis: God would only allow an evil e if God’s permitting e is necessary for goods and avoidances of evil of no less value than e or if God’s permitting e results in a set of goods and evils gained and lost whose sum is not a disvalue

This rendering of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, a formulation of a necessary condition for non-gratuity, incorporates my analysis of the notion of gratuitous evil of this chapter. An evil’s being optimal is one way the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis may be satisfied, so this thesis is broader than NBA.
Part 2

Defense of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis

Chapter 4

Gratuitous Evil and Deontology
**NGE is fundamental to the notion of God’s perfect goodness**

Describing the notion of gratuitous evil, as I have in the last chapter, is important both in itself and for providing a backdrop or frame for our discussion of NGE. It removes potential concerns about the scope and relevance of NGE and about what exactly the broader context of discussion is. The last chapter has also helped us amplify the content of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. It is important to keep in mind, though, that NGE does not serve as a definition of gratuitous evil. I believe that God necessarily prevents all gratuitous evil in the sense I defined, but NGE, whether interpreted as the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis or the No Better Alternative Thesis, only needs to articulate one component of that notion and express one necessary condition on God’s permission of evil. NGE corresponds to an aspect of the prohibition of gratuitous evil. In this way NGE avoids the necessary imprecision of my definition of gratuitous evil to present a clear, precise, and compelling requirement on God’s permission of evil so as to better, though not ideally, serve Rowe’s argument.

I want to anticipate and respond to a possible growing suspicion that may later, in the light of my defense of NGE and subsequent criticism of Rowe’s argument, bud into criticism. A suspicion may arise here and elsewhere that I have contrived a set of distinctions in Part 1 to artificially limit the NGE requirement so as to later accommodate appearances of gratuity and avoid meaningful counterexample. This is not correct. The distinctions I have made in chapter one were well-motivated, as argued there. Rowe allows that God may be indifferent about which evil brings about a greater good, in his elaboration of his theological premise, as also noted. As described in chapter one, showing theists need not believe the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis or the other theses I’ve mentioned is very different from showing NGE is false, which would be far
more radical. NGE is importantly distinct from and more fundamental than the other theses I have articulated concerning providence and evil.

In fact, NGE is most fundamental to our understanding of divine goodness. This will become clearer as I here argue for the compatibility of NGE and a deontological moral perspective. I believe that NGE is based on the view that, all else being equal, a perfectly good being prefers less evil to more. Moreover, I think NGE means God would not prefer more evil over less for no reason at all. How could this view be doubted? Does NGE really mean simply this? The source of possible disagreement is what counts as a good reason. One may think that some reasons God may have for choosing more evil over less, e.g. deontological or benevolence reasons, may not involve outweighing goods. So to make plain why I think NGE is fundamental to our understanding of divine goodness: what I claim is that NGE is simply the view that God prefers less evil over more unless there is a good reason not to, where a good reason must involve some good.

I will argue in this chapter that God’s permitting evil only for the sake of good is a consequence of His being the creator. I think the claim that God’s reason for permitting more evil rather than less must involve some good is the only component of NGE that requires special illumination. It is not necessary to add that the good must be an offsetting good. That the good must offset the evil (in the divine choice context) is trivially true: if the evil is not offset by good then there is by definition net evil that is permitted by God for no reason, the impossibility of which is just what the view as stated states. I don’t see what ‘being perfectly good’ could mean if this view were false. With that said, I turn now to my defense of NGE.
Chapter Summary

Eric Reitan has argued that Rowe’s second “theological” premise assumes a consequentialist morality and that since it is at least an open question whether theists should be consequentialists, this premise should not be employed in atheist arguments from evil. In this chapter I will argue that the relation between Rowe’s premise and deontology is more complex than Reitan’s argument assumes. I pose a non-consequentialist objection to Rowe’s premise, as interpreted by Reitan, that I claim is stronger than Reitan’s. I then respond to both Reitan’s and my own challenge, arguing that possible deontological prohibitions against divine prevention of evil are grounded in created deontological goods that should be considered offsetting goods, in satisfaction of Rowe’s theological premise. I diagnose the failure to consider such deontological goods greater goods as a failure to appreciate that whereas a good’s requiring an evil implies the evil serves a good, a good’s only requiring that God does not prevent an evil does not imply the permitted evil serves a good. I conclude that Rowe’s theological premise does not assume a consequentialist morality.

Reitan’s Intrinsically Immoral Divine Prevention of Evil Argument

Again, I have reformulated Rowe’s second premise as “The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis” or NGE:

The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis (NGE): God would only allow an evil if doing so is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.

In “Does the Argument from Evil Assume a Consequentialist Morality?” Reitan summarizes Rowe’s premise as follows:
Rowe is roughly saying that the moral status of evil-preventing acts is evaluated by reference to the overall balance of good over evil which such acts produce. If the evil-preventing act improves the overall balance of good over evil, then it is morally better to do than not (the evil in this case would be a gratuitous evil); if it worsens that balance (by producing a greater evil or leading to the loss of a greater good), it is morally better not to do it …

Reitan interprets Rowe’s theological premise as the “No Better Alternative Thesis” (NBA):

**No Better Alternative Thesis (NBA):** God would only allow an evil if the evil could not have been prevented in a way that would have made the world better.

Now, if no world that contains a divine violation of deontological duty can be better than a world that does not, deontology clearly poses no threat to NBA. But we should take the world good-making properties referred to by NBA to all refer to creation. Otherwise, NBA is the thesis that God would only allow an evil if doing so is consistent with moral perfection, which is true but uninformative and unuseful. So I will interpret the ranking of goodness of possible worlds in NBA as determined by the total balance of good over evil of creation in each world, as Reitan does. This also better aligns with Rowe’s formulation.

Reitan argues that the view that the moral status of evil-preventing acts (that is, whether or not they are morally permissible or morally best) is determined by whether preventing the evil makes the world as a whole better than permitting it is not compatible with a deontological moral perspective. According to deontologism, the moral status of an act depends at least in part on the kind of act it is. This is because, according to this view, there are moral rules prohibiting certain kinds of actions, such as torturing innocents for example. So some acts may be wrong because of the intrinsic immorality of the kind of action they are even if the consequences of performing
them are better than the consequences of not. Reitan argues that it may therefore be morally worse for God to prevent an evil than to allow it even if allowing the evil results in a worse balance of good over evil, contrary to NGE.

Although Reitan is not arguing for any particular moral prohibition against divine prevention of evil, he does provide an example in a footnote.\(^{58}\) It is drawn from the theology of Simon Weil. Weil thought that the existence of the independent selfhood of created beings requires the withdrawal of God’s presence from them. This withdrawal is a necessary expression of God’s love for humans and for the goodness of our existence, for to interfere with human free will would be to destroy or damage our independent selfhood. Reitan suggests that on this perspective God’s interference with human freedom may be thought prohibited by the “law of love.” Such a divine moral requirement may be analogous to a perfect duty of nonviolence. Just as an absolute prohibition against violence makes it always wrong to violently bring about a better world, the ”law of love” to honor the independent selfhood of created persons may make it morally best for God to never impinge on creaturely freedom, no matter the cost, Reitan suggests. It may be that the greatness of God’s goodness is shown in that God does not violate the dictates of love even when horrific and gratuitously evil abuses of freedom offer “temptation” to do so.\(^{59}\)

Whether or not there are such absolute non-consequentialist divine moral requirements to allow certain types of evil is open to debate. Reitan is not arguing that there are. He only argues that NGE implies there are no such deontological prohibitions against God’s preventing evil and that this makes the thesis open to question. Again, Reitan is not arguing for the particular example of a divine deontological constraint he describes, only for the claim that NGE requires emendation because it is incompatible with such possible deontological prohibitions.
As Reitan points out, Rowe thought his theological premise does not preclude the possibility that moral rules, such as principles of justice, may prohibit God’s prevention of an evil, thus making His permission of the evil justified. In a footnote of “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism”, Rowe writes:

By “good” I don’t mean to exclude the fulfillment of certain moral principles. Perhaps preventing [evil] s1 would preclude certain actions prescribed by the principles of justice. I shall allow that the satisfaction of certain principles of justice may be a good that outweighs the evil of s1.60

Similarly, in “The Persistent Problem of Evil” Bruce Russell says that the greater goods NGE refers to should be interpreted broadly enough to include deontological considerations in order to account for the possibility that God’s permitting an evil is necessary to fulfill a duty or to satisfy some other deontological requirement.61

These responses are not adequate to allay deontologist misgivings about Rowe’s (or Russell’s similar) formulation of NGE, as Reitan argues.62 On a deontological perspective, it may be wrong to prevent an evil though the consequences of preventing it are worse than those of allowing it even if the goodness of not violating moral principles is included in the consequences of allowing it. For example, Kant thought lying was wrong even if one could prevent a murder by lying. He did not think lying was wrong because the goodness of not lying necessarily outweighed the bad consequences, such as a murder, of not lying. In general, deontologists do not think an action is wrong because not performing it would result in a morally better world than performing it would. Deontologists may think that an action is wrong even if it would prevent many more instances of the same action. For example, it may be thought wrong to torture someone even if one knows that doing so would prevent that person from torturing others.
So including the good of avoiding the violation of moral principles in the goods that may outweigh the disvalue of permitting an evil does not address deontological objections to NGE. Including the good of satisfaction of moral principles among the good consequences of allowing an evil cannot make a consequentialist view of the morality of divine permission of evil compatible with a deontological perspective.

I agree with Reitan that Rowe’s and Russell’s remarks on how their formulation of NGE can accommodate deontological considerations are inadequate and misguided. I also think that current discussion of the problem of evil would benefit from asking whether there may be any such deontological prohibitions against divine intervention, as Reitan recommends. However, I think Reitan is mistaken in thinking that NGE implies a consequentialist morality. Before making this argument I will present a stronger deontological challenge to NBA than Reitan’s.

**The Prohibited Optimal Alternative Permission of Evil Argument**

Reitan assumes that the No Better Alternative Thesis is the only adequate interpretation of NGE, as made explicit in his summary above. This interpretation is more restrictive than what I call the “Evil Offsetting Good” interpretation:

**Evil Offsetting Good Thesis:** God would only allow an evil if allowing the evil is necessary for a good that offsets the evil or for the prevention of an evil no better than the evil.

NBA precludes deontological considerations that the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not. In fact, I will argue that NBA is open to much stronger objections based on non-consequentialist considerations than those Reitan provides. More specifically, I will argue that **commonly held non-consequentialist moral reasons to prevent evil based on justice and**
benevolence, and not only absolute prohibitions against preventing types of evil, provide reason to think that allowing an evil may be morally best even if preventing it may have better consequences than allowing it, contrary to the No Better Alternative interpretation. However, I will also argue that these and possible other deontological considerations against divine permission of evil do not suggest that allowing an evil may be permissible even if no offsetting good requires allowing it and so do not undermine the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. That is, the deontological criticism I present does not challenge the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis interpretation of NGE. So Reitan could have made a much stronger case against his intended target, NBA, though this case does not apply to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis. Later I present a response to both Reitan’s and my non-consequentialist criticisms and argue that NGE, interpreted as either NBA or the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is compatible with a deontological moral perspective.

As mentioned, Reitan did not argue for any particular deontological constraints on God’s prevention of evil. He only argued that NGE, as formulated by Rowe and others, precludes deontological considerations. However, the significance of NGE’s precluding deontological constraints on God’s prevention of evil, if indeed it does, depends on how plausible it is that there are, or could be, relevant such constraints. It is remarkable that Reitan’s essay has not received more attention in the literature on NGE. One would think that such a clearly presented argument that NGE assumes a morality many theists do not accept would be remarked upon in contemporary discussion of the evidential argument from evil based on NGE. Perhaps deontological considerations have been ignored in formulations and discussions of NGE because few, if any, philosophers have thought of plausible and relevant examples of the possible moral prohibitions against divine prevention of evil Reitan appeals to.63
Reitan’s objection appeals to the possibility that moral rules prohibit types of divine prevention of evil, thus making God’s permitting the evil morally better even though permitting the evil results in a worse world. But that God might be morally prohibited from preventing a type of evil though no greater good requires it, no matter what the circumstances, is difficult to make both relevant and convincing. To refer to Reitan’s own example, perhaps we can imagine how God’s acting directly on a person’s heart and mind to prevent the worsening of that person’s will may be prohibited by His love for the person whose selfhood would thereby be diminished or effaced. But the examples of moral evil appealed to by atheologians are typically the horrific evils brought about by abuses of freedom, as Reitan mentions. Even if divine love requires a removal of divine presence in order to allow for independent selfhood and self-direction, as Weil describes, how could this result in an absolute moral prohibition against God’s preventing, through some series of natural events perhaps, a person of evil will’s will from being carried out? After all, a person’s ability to affect his environment is circumscribed by many parameters having some ultimate causal explanation in God, given theism. Independent selfhood and self-direction may entail complete control over the responses of one’s heart but cannot entail unlimited freedom to affect the world. Given that our freedom in this respect is limited and comes in degrees, it is difficult to see how God’s prevention of intended harm, and perhaps the knowledge of the harm one is capable of, would be wrong unless the value of that lost freedom or knowledge (for increased self-direction, perhaps) was worth its cost. To say this is not to assume that only a consequentialist morality can apply to God, only that it is difficult to imagine plausible deontological constraints on divine prevention of these evils at issue in the discussion of the problem of evil. Perhaps this is one reason why the issue of deontologism has been largely ignored in contemporary discussion of NGE.
But this issue of compatibility with a non-consequentialist perspective is in fact crucial to our understanding and evaluation of NGE. There are other significant conceptual connections between NGE and non-consequentialist moral theory that need to be examined. Reitan’s objection to NGE was shaped by his response to Rowe’s proposal to accommodate deontological considerations by including the satisfaction of moral principles as possible “outweighing goods”. Reitan considers the deontological possibility that an evil-preventing act may violate moral principles, as Rowe implicitly does, and contrasts the moral good of not performing such an act over-riding the good consequences of performing it with that moral good’s outweighing those good consequences. To restate Reitan’s argument: even if preventing the evil has better consequences than allowing it, allowing it may be morally better, not because the moral good of satisfying the moral rule has greater value than those good consequences, as per Rowe’s proposal, but because the intrinsic immorality of not satisfying the moral rule by preventing the evil makes those consequences irrelevant. So Reitan’s argument appeals to the possibility of absolute deontological requirements to allow certain types of evils. However, a much stronger case against NBA can be made. It is not necessary to appeal to absolute deontological requirements to allow certain types of evils (absolute moral prohibitions against God’s preventing types of evil), which, as mentioned, are difficult to make both plausible and relevant. NBA faces potential counterexamples based on non-consequentialist moral reasons to prevent evil commonly voiced by both theists and atheists, as I will now argue.

NBA states that if an alternative to allowing an evil results in a better world, then God would not allow the evil. But plausible and commonly voiced benevolence or justice considerations may oppose that alternative. This is because the alternative may itself involve allowing an evil. That is, God may be faced with a choice between evils, with the permission of
the evil that would result in a better world prohibited by justice or benevolence or by the force of any duties that outweigh God’s duty to bring about the better world.

For example, some think it would be unjust or manifest less than perfect benevolence for God to allow one person to suffer for the sake of someone else, even if the beneficiary’s good outweighed the evil of that suffering. This is a common objection to, for example, John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy, according to which God may allow some people to suffer to provide others with the opportunity to respond with generosity or compassion. The belief that God would only allow suffering if the sufferer is the primary beneficiary of the suffering seems to have been held by Thomas Aquinas, is held by Rowe and Michael Tooley, and is a cornerstone of Eleonore Stump’s theodicy in “Wandering in Darkness”. Let us call this claim the “Sufferer’s Good Constraint.”

The Sufferer’s Good Constraint seems at odds with the No Better Alternative interpretation of NGE. The Sufferer’s Good Constraint restricts required offsetting goods to goods that benefit the sufferer, but there may be greater goods that do not benefit the sufferer. Suppose God may permit Kim to suffer for the good of Kim’s conversion or permit Po’s suffering for the same good of Kim’s conversion. Suppose the goodness of Kim’s conversion would be the same in both cases and suppose Po’s suffering would be less than Kim’s. One alternative to God’s permitting Kim’s suffering is His permitting Po’s suffering instead. (God could also prevent Kim’s suffering by foregoing the good of her conversion, but suppose God justifiably aims at Kim’s conversion.) Suppose this alternative actualizes a better world (because it contains less suffering). By the Sufferer’s Good Constraint permitting Po’s suffering is (or may be, if construed as prima facie) morally worse than permitting Kim’s. This means God may justifiably permit an evil (Kim’s suffering) even though He could actualize a better world by
preventing it (by permitting Po’s suffering instead). So, the Sufferer’s Good Constraint gives some reason to doubt NBA. By contrast, the requirement that the offsetting good benefit the sufferer is perfectly compatible with the less restrictive Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, which states only that there must be an offsetting good.

By this same argument other non-consequentialist moral reasons, including considerations less restrictive than the Sufferer’s Good Constraint, also seem incompatible with NBA. For example, William Alston, Robert Adams, and Thomas Tracy have all presented arguments against the Sufferer’s Good Constraint on the grounds that God may not be able to maximize the good of all and so can only achieve the most good by sacrificing the good of some; and that if this is true, one cannot reasonably expect God to maximize one’s own good at the expense of the good of others. So, according to these philosophers, God may justifiably govern the world so as to maximize the goodness of the world at the expense of individual welfare. However, they add the constraint that the diminishment of individual welfare for this reason cannot make a person’s life on the whole bad: God may justifiably allow you to suffer for the good of others provided the life you have been given by God is on the whole good. So these philosophers think that justice or benevolence forbids God’s allowing one person to suffer for the good of others in ways that make his or her life on the whole bad. Let us call this the “Good Life Constraint”.

This constraint may be interpreted in different ways. According to traditional theism one’s existence cannot be on the whole bad involuntarily. Given the goodness and sovereignty of God, whatever horrific evil one suffers involuntarily in his life that makes his earthly life on the whole bad will be compensated for or redeemed in the afterlife, so long as one chooses in a way that makes one capable of receiving such outweighing benefits. The Good Life Constraint may
be interpreted as the claim that God may allow one to suffer for the good of others only because one’s existence cannot be on the whole involuntarily bad. This understanding provides a potential counterexample to NBA only if God could have achieved more good by creating someone whose existence is involuntarily bad (which latter may be a metaphysical impossibility on theism).

However, on theism, one’s earthly life may be on the whole bad involuntarily. Very sadly, this seems exemplified by the lives of many infants, children, and adults born into a life of suffering. Another interpretation of the Good Life Constraint is that God would not allow a person to be born into a life whose unremitting suffering defeats the goodness of that life in a way that person has not chosen unless that suffering is necessary for (or the best available means God has to achieve) a greater good or to avert a worse (spiritual) harm for that person. In other words, on this view, afterlife compensation for a life on the whole bad is not enough: God would not permit a person’s earthly life to be on the whole involuntarily bad. This seems the view of Marilyn McCord Adams in *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God.*67 Let us employ this interpretation.

We can imagine (in at least a loose sense) a circumstance in which a person’s life of suffering is not necessary for a greater good for that person, but God’s allowing the horrific evil of that person’s life is a component of the best available means for God to achieve a good for others. Perhaps a child’s life-defeating suffering through cancer is not needed for the child’s moral or spiritual advancement but would best inspire a cure for cancer, for example. Perhaps horrors inflicted on civilians in a war do not benefit the persons suffering them but would be part of a series of events that lead to the end of the war. In these circumstances, God’s allowing the evil of a person’s on the whole bad life for those goods would be prohibited by the Good Life
Constraint. Suppose now that the cure for cancer or the end of war could also result, though less optimally, from God’s allowing the suffering of others, people whose lives are not defeated by their suffering. All else being equal, in this circumstance God is faced with a choice between permitting an evil that makes a person’s life on the whole bad (through no choice of their own) and permitting an evil that does not, where the former results in a better world than the latter. According to the Good Life Constraint, permitting the latter evil is morally best, contra NBA.

So widely accepted non-consequentialist moral reasons for God to prevent evil (constraints on His allowing evil) provide reasons to think that God may justifiably allow an evil even though He could have prevented the evil in a way that would have resulted in a better balance of good and evil. In considering deontological moral reasons for God’s permission of an evil x, Reitan only considers moral prohibitions against God’s preventing the evil x, but God’s preventing an evil can, and plausibly at least sometimes must, involve permission of other evils. Because God may need to choose between evils, non-consequentialist moral reasons to prevent evils other than evil x may provide reasons to permit evil x. Though the deontological constraints against God’s preventing types of evil that Reitan’s argument requires are difficult to identify, appeals to deontological constraints against God’s allowing evil are familiar in discussions of the problem of evil and are advocated by both atheists and theists. So this “Prohibited Optimal Alternative Permission of Evil” argument is a stronger deontological challenge to NBA than Reitan’s argument based on intrinsically immoral divine preventions of evil.

Must such non-consequentialist moral constraints against divine permission of evil as I have presented be absolute or can they be prima facie duties? It is not clear that prima facie duties can be ascribed to God. If God’s “duties” were prima facie then it may be that although God could be considered completely trustworthy with respect to His goodness, He could not be
considered completely trustworthy for the relational characteristics that goodness is traditionally parsed into, such as loving kindness, faithfulness, keeping of promises, etc. It would be possible for God to not relate in these ways because it would be possible for acting accordingly to be outweighed by other *prima facie* duties. But let us put this objection aside.

Can the Sufferer’s Good Constraint make it morally best for God to choose Kim’s suffering over Po’s (to benefit Kim) if Kim’s suffering is somewhat greater than Po’s but not if it is *many orders of magnitude* greater? Could one’s earthly life be made on the whole bad by evil God has permitted for the sake of the eternal salvation of others even if it is not possible for one’s own ultimate happiness in the afterlife to be thereby increased? If the answer is yes, as seems to me not obviously wholly unreasonable, would these constraints still challenge NBA?

One might think deontological *prima facie* duties pose no threat to NBA because, following Rowe’s proposal, the satisfaction of such moral duties may be considered greater or offsetting goods. Could Rowe’s proposal be satisfactory if restricted to *prima facie*, rather than absolute, duties? Let us consider mundane examples. My duty to be truthful may conflict with my *prima facie* duty to alleviate suffering. If my moral duty to be truthful is not absolute but *prima facie*, the strength of that duty may be said to outweigh, or be outweighed by, the strength of my latter duty. Since the force of my duty to alleviate suffering increases with, among other factors, how much suffering I can alleviate, in such cases we may say that the good of my telling the truth outweighs the evil of the suffering I allow. But this does not literally mean that the value of my being truthful less the disvalue of the suffering is greater than the disvalue of my being untruthful and the value of the suffering’s being removed. The term ‘outweighing’ here refers to a comparison between strengths of obligation, not a comparison between amounts of good. The phrase “the good of my telling the truth outweighs the evil of the suffering I allow” is
only shorthand for the idea that my obligation to be truthful in this case trumps my obligation to prevent suffering. This comparison suggests, to me at least, that prima facie divine moral duties, if possible, may also offer apparent counterexamples NBA.

So to challenge NBA we need not appeal to absolute moral prohibitions against divine prevention of evil, or the intrinsic immorality of preventing evil, so that there is no deontologically sanctioned way that God could prevent the evil. We also need not appeal to prohibitions against preventing certain types of evil. To challenge NBA, which, again, states that God would only allow an evil if there is no way that God could have prevented the evil that would have resulted in a better world, we need only appeal to the possibility that one way that God could have prevented the evil that would have resulted in a better world involves allowing a different evil, and there is some non-consequentialist moral injunction, not necessarily absolute, against allowing that evil.

We can see why this is so in more general terms. NBA describes both God’s actual permission of evil and all possible ways God could prevent the evil. It states that the only way God’s allowing an evil could be morally best is if there is no possible way that God’s preventing the evil could result in a better world. But if there are moral considerations other than the promotion of good and the elimination of evil then it is prima facie possible that these moral factors could in some circumstances make one way God could prevent the evil less than morally best even if it resulted in a better balance of good over evil. So NBA, by making a claim about all possible alternatives to God’s permitting the evil, namely that none have a better balance of good over evil, excludes the possibility that any moral considerations could justify God’s choosing a sub-optimal balance of good over evil (in deciding whether or not to permit an evil).
This seems to preclude all non-consequentialist considerations, not only absolute prohibitions against preventing types of evil.\textsuperscript{69}

To repeat my argument in terms of an application: an absolute moral prohibition against God’s intervening to prevent a certain type of evil based on justice would mean all ways God could intervene to prevent the evil would be unjust. But NBA requires much less for a counterexample. A counterexample would be one way of preventing the evil that is both unjust and results in a better world. So Reitan need not have appealed solely to absolute deontological prohibitions against preventing a type of evil (whose permission is therefore permissible or morally best). He need only have appealed to a non-consequentialist consideration against one way of preventing an evil and stipulated, not implausibly, that that way could actualize a better world than permitting the evil. This seems to be a significant difficulty for the commonly held No Better Alternative interpretation of NGE.

The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, by contrast, does not preclude the possibility that what is morally best and what achieves the best balance of good and evil may not coincide. One reason the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is less restrictive in this way is that it says much less about possible ways God may prevent the evil. It only states that there must be an offsetting good that requires God’s permission of the evil (or one no better) and hence at least one actual offsetting good that all alternatives to God’s permitting the evil (or one no better) do not include. It does not make a statement about all the goods and evils or all other possible moral considerations involved in all the different possible ways God could have prevented the evil.\textsuperscript{70} NBA states that no alternative to God’s permitting an evil could have an optimal balance of good over evil. The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, by contrast, does not imply that no less than morally best option could have better than actual balances of good and evil.\textsuperscript{71}
In still other words, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis states that if God permits an evil there is some good God’s permitting the evil (or one no better) is necessary for. This of course is incompatible with moral views that state its opposite, that there need be no offsetting good. But this is much less restrictive than stating that that good must be the specific good of actualizing a world that is optimal in the divine choice circumstance, as NBA does. The Sufferer’s Good Constraint and the Good Life Constraint both assert there must be offsetting goods (for the sufferer) as per the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis though, as I have argued, they give reason to think God may need to forfeit greater goods to abide by them, contra NBA.

The fact that this deontological consideration does not threaten the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not mean no deontological considerations pose a threat to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, however. If Reitan’s argument is correct, perhaps God must permit an evil even if doing so is not necessary for any good. Let us now more closely consider both Reitan’s argument, which may be applied to both NBA and the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, and my argument, which targets only NBA.

**The Inscrutable Divine Providence Response**

It is important to note that the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not state that if God permits an evil He does so in order to bring about a good that offsets the evil. In a narrow sense then the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis does not assume any moral theory because it does not make any claims about divine moral motivation. It only states there is a *correlation* between God’s permission of evil and the existence of an offsetting good that requires it. If it makes assumptions about moral theory, it only does so in the broader and less direct sense that its plausibility depends on specific views of morality and divine providence. The same is true of NBA. That
thesis states that if God allows an evil, He could not have prevented it in a way that would have resulted in a better world. It does not state that God’s only possible motivation for allowing evil is to bring about the best world He can. So NBA does not logically imply that the only divine moral motivation is improving the balance of good over evil. The issue to be addressed then is whether a consequentialist morality is the only good reason to think there is such a correspondence.

Perhaps belief in a correspondence between God’s justified permission of evil and God’s maximizing the balance of good over evil, as per NBA, or between God’s justified permission of evil and there being an offsetting good that requires that permission, as per the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, may be reasonable without assuming consequentialism. The coincidence of what is morally optimal for God with what is most valuable may be thought to manifest a kind of excellence in the ordering of creation and so be posited as a feature of God’s creation. More specifically, one may hold that God governs the world in a way that both satisfies deontological requirements of justice and also makes the world the best it could possibly be (given the creatures in it and the choices they make), which would mean there is never a conflict between what is morally best for God to do and what divine choice results in the best world. I accept as a tenable position the view that the examples I have given as challenges to NBA are merely abstract possible choice circumstances that God is never in fact in, due to His ineffable sovereignty and wisdom. This possibility also undermines Reitan’s claim that NGE assumes a consequentialist morality.

This seems to be Eleonore Stump’s view. She describes what she calls the “fractal” nature of the world’s story of redemption in reference to the book of Job and other biblical stories. The suffering of Job includes the suffering of Job’s children. Suppose that God’s
permitting this collective suffering results in a better world than His preventing it in large part because Job’s suffering provides Job the best opportunity to be united with God, as per Stump’s illumination of the Book of Job. It may seem to us that what is best for Job and even best over-all may conflict with what is fair or just or benevolent divine treatment of Job’s children. It may therefore seem to us that a compromise between Job’s good and that of his children would be morally best even if that actualizes a sub-optimal world. However, one may also hold, as Stump does, both that the suffering of Job is best for Job, and also that the suffering of Job’s children, a component of Job’s suffering, is also what is best for them (the best means God has to either prevent them from worse (spiritual) harm or for them to be united with God). Again, what may seem an unimaginably difficult feat of coordination to us: that the demands of justice and love are satisfied in such a way that what is morally best for God to do is also what is most valuable, may be attributed to divine providence. Moreover, one may think that divine providence construed in this way better honors God’s unsearchable wisdom and providence. For this reason, and possibly for similar reasons, such as belief in a correspondence between what God desires and what is objectively desirable or valuable, non-consequentialist moral views are not incompatible with NGE. Rather, non-consequentialist moral perspectives complicate our appraisal of NGE, requiring an examination of whether it must assume either consequentialism or something like Stump’s perspective on divine providence.

A Benevolence Objection to NGE?

Could God desire something other than what is most valuable? Could what is good for persons and what is most valuable diverge so that God wills the former over the latter, for example? If so, and only if so, divine benevolence could conflict with NBA. If an evil one person A suffers may outweigh the good another person B gains, even though the evil is not as bad for
A as the good is good for B, and B’s good requires the evil that befalls A, divine benevolence may require the permission of A’s suffering for the good of B, even though the evil outweighs the good. Could the suffering of Job’s children be best for Job, as Stump describes, yet also outweigh the good of Job’s opportunity for union with God? If this is possible it constitutes an additional objection to NBA. (But I do not think this is possible. I think that what is of ultimate value is the person, and so what is really of value is what is good for persons, not their experiences. One may object that spiritual goods need not outweigh physical evils if the former are slight and the latter great, but either opportunities for spiritual improvement are finite, in which case no spiritual good is slight because it has potentially eternal effect or such opportunities will never cease, in which case God’s willing spiritual goods need not trump his desire to prevent non-spiritual evils.)

**The Deontological Goods Response**

I have argued that commonly held non-consequentialist views suggest that by permitting evil, God could justifiably actualize sub-optimal worlds, worlds that have less value than some worlds in which God prevents the evil. Do any non-consequentialist moral views entail, or make plausible, the claim that God could justifiably permit an evil even if doing so is not required by an offsetting good? That is, are there reasons to think the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis assumes a consequentialist morality? Can a deontological prohibition against God’s preventing an evil, or any other non-consequentialist consideration, make God’s permission of an evil justified or morally best without there being an offsetting good that requires that permission, as required by the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis?
There are (at least) two related reasons to think this is impossible. One is that God is thought of as the creator of a world that is on the whole good. The other is the idea that deontological constraints have a metaphysical basis. I will call their joint import my “Deontological Goods” defense. The Deontological Goods defense argues that because every deontological requirement is due to some created good, if God exists, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis is plausible, given any moral theory, consequentialist or non-consequentialist. This defense also refutes Reitan’s deontological challenge to NBA.

According to traditional theism, God has freely chosen to create the world and to keep it in existence for His own good purposes. God’s providence ensures that His ultimate purposes in creating are not defeated by evil and that creation is on the whole good, despite the evil it contains. Also, according to traditional theism all evil in existence is part of creation, not part of God. Any evil God permits would have been avoided by God’s choosing not to create. Let us call an evil that subseuent to creation is morally better for God to permit due to deontological constraints a “required evil”. Why did God allow required evils by creating this world rather than prevent them by not? Evidently, and by tradition, because He judged creation worth all the evils it would (or might) cost. According to traditional theism, the world God has created is a good that offsets and outweighs the evils it contains. Required evils are permitted rather than prevented by God in one way, post creation, for non-consequentialist moral reasons and they, or the risk of them, are permitted in another way, by creating, for the good of the existence of the world. Can the good or goods of creation be considered an offsetting good that God’s permission of those evils is necessary for in a sense that appropriately satisfies the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis? Let us examine this.
On one traditional understanding of God’s goodness, moral requirements are necessarily satisfied by God. On this view God is necessarily perfectly good and this means God cannot be evil or do what is wrong or even choose what is not morally best. The other understanding is that God can do what is wrong and what is not morally best but his perfect goodness consists in His always, in fact, not doing so. On both views God’s perfect goodness, essential to His being the greatest possible being, is a good incomparably greater than any finite good or evil.\textsuperscript{74}

If indeed there is a moral prohibition against divine “interference” to prevent evils, such as Reitan describes, and if God is necessarily perfectly good, then there is one, and only one, way God could have prevented those evils: by not creating the world that gave rise to them. If God, because of His own perfect goodness, must permit an evil, given it would occur subsequent to creation, then the good of that creation, a good that outweighs all evil, makes God’s permission of the evil necessary, given it would occur subsequent to creation, in satisfaction of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis.

If, on the other hand, God is not necessarily good, and there is a moral prohibition against divine “interference” to prevent evils, then God could have prevented those evils either by not creating the world or by forfeiting His own perfect goodness. That is, if God could do what is wrong or less than morally best then deontological prohibitions cannot necessitate God’s permission of evil. But if God were to violate these moral prohibitions, He would not be perfectly good. On any traditional conception of God’s goodness, if God could and did change from being the greatest possible being, of unlimited goodness and deserving of worship, to being a finite imperfect being of limited goodness, the loss of value would be a loss to reality to which no finite evil or good can compare. So God’s being the greatest possible being is a good that
requires God’s permission of those evils whose prevention would violate moral requirements and this good outweighs all such evils.

I had said that the world good-making properties that NBA refers to should refer to creation so as to make NBA informative. This is satisfied here. According to traditional theism, because God is unlimited in goodness, creation does not add to the value of reality. Even if this is not accepted, according to traditional theism creation certainly does not have value that would outweigh the unimaginable disvalue of God’s becoming morally imperfect. It would be better for God not to create than to become imperfect in goodness. So even if God could prevent required evil by violating moral requirements, God’s permitting required evil is necessary for a greater good that refers to creation: the compound good of the existence of creation and the avoidance of the incomprehensibly bad evil of God’s becoming imperfect.

Appeal to the goodness of creation itself and to the unlimited goodness of God may seem a technical defense only, one that does not engage the dialectic of the problem of evil. If one asks, “Why did God allow this instance of innocent suffering?” the view that deontological considerations make it morally better that God permit it makes the pertinent answer (pertinent in the sense of satisfying the questioner): ‘because it would be wrong or morally worse for God to prevent it,’ and not: ‘because the existence of the world is a good that outweighs all evil and God could only have prevented the evil by not creating the world.’ But before examining this criticism in order to continue my argument, I wish to clarify what has been stated so far.

The Deontological Goods Defense does not assume the contingency of creation nor divine middle knowledge. It is important to note that even if this reply did assume one or both of
these the reply, if successful, would still show NGE does not entail a consequentialist morality. (NGE would be shown to entail only either consequentialism or one of these assumptions.)

The argument thus far does not assume that God did not have to create. What if (contrary to tradition) God’s necessary perfect goodness implies God had to create and to continue to sustain the world in existence (because that is morally better than not)? Then, given evil would occur subsequent to creation, including evils it is morally better for God to permit, God’s necessary goodness would imply it is impossible for God to have avoided those evils (though if they are due to chance or free will they might not have occurred).

Perhaps God’s necessary creation and sustaining of the world in which such evils arise and His subsequent necessary permission of them mean that God cannot be said to permit those evils. If so, NGE would not be applicable; it is a moral requirement for God’s permission of evil. So let’s suppose God permits required evils even if He necessarily creates. One may then object that if God necessarily creates and sustains the world in which required evils arise and subsequently necessarily permits them, God cannot be said to permit those evils for the sake of a greater good. This thought is clearly mistaken. The necessity of God’s permitting those evils (for deontological reasons given such evils would occur) is due to an explanatorily prior necessary choice to bring about good. So the permission of those evils, given they would occur, is still necessary for that greater good and God may be said to permit them because He wills that good. Even if God’s necessary goodness implies God must create, the reason it is morally better for God to create is that it is better to produce good than not. It is not morally better for God to create because not doing so would violate justice or any other non-consequentialist moral requirement. So, on the supposition of divine necessary goodness and a consequent necessity of creation, God must permit required evil, given it would occur, for the sake of the greater good of
creation (a good He freely though necessarily has chosen). Moreover, even if deontological requirements constrain which world God had to create (because that is morally best) it still remains true that the specific world God had to create is a good whose existence makes it necessary for God to permit all the evils He is morally required to permit. Furthermore, as mentioned, NGE states there must be an offsetting good, not that God permits the evil for the sake of that good.

My preliminary argument also does not assume God has middle knowledge. It does not assume God knew prior to the act of creating what evil would result from each of His creative options. What if prior to creation God could not, and so did not, base his creative decision on His knowledge that these required evils, evils whose permission is morally best for non-consequentialist moral reasons (i.e. evils He is morally prohibited from intervening to remove), would arise? One might think that if this is the case, God cannot be said to have permitted required evils for the sake of the good of creation itself. He only permits them when He knows they will occur after He has created and He then permits them because it would be wrong not to, even though no good is achieved or evil avoided by doing so.

Although my argument thus far does gain some rhetorical force with the assumption that God knew what evils would result for each of His options in creating, it is not weakened if this assumption is denied. If God did know what evil would result for each of His options in creating, then God knowingly permitted the evils that were to come into existence for the sake of creating the world of His choice. However, even if God does not know which evils or how much evil would occur subsequent to creation, there is still a sense in which God permits the evils of the world in the act of creation. God knew evil of such kind and amount might occur and He also knew that creation will turn out to be on the whole good (because it is impossible for creation to
be on the whole bad). And, His knowing the goodness of this world would outweigh its evil explains why He chose to create the world. The good of creation requires God’s allowing the possibility that evil will occur that He will be required by moral goodness to permit. When those evils occur it may be said that God has allowed them for the greater good of creation. He could have ensured no such evils ever occurred but He chose not to in order to bring about a greater good.

Also, even if God did not in any sense permit the evils of the world for the sake of a greater good, there is still a sense in which God’s permission of those evils is necessary for a greater good. The Evil Offsetting Good Thesis states that for every evil God permits there is an offsetting good that necessitates that permission. As noted, it does not state that every evil God permits is permitted by God in order to bring about, or not lose, an offsetting good. It also does not state that the offsetting good must come into existence subsequent to God’s decision to permit the evils its existence requires. The greater good of the existence of creation makes it necessary, via moral goodness (that is by God’s necessary goodness or in order for God to preserve His own perfect goodness), for God to permit required evils. If the world did not exist such evils would not be possible. The only way God could have avoided such evils (given they occur subsequent to His act of creation), was either by not creating the world or by forfeiting His own perfect goodness. Therefore, God’s permitting such evil (given it occurs subsequent to His act of creation), is necessary for a greater good. So, even if God does not knowingly permit the world’s evils in the act of creation for the sake of a greater good, the existence of creation, a good that outweighs all evil according to traditional theism, given necessary truths about moral goodness, entails or makes it necessary that God permit the evil (either because of God’s
necessary goodness or for God to preserve His own perfect goodness), given the evil would occur subsequent to creation, in satisfaction of the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis.

Let us now revisit the objection that appeal to the goods of creation and of divine perfect goodness is a technical way of satisfying the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis (and NBA) that does not adequately address the implications of deontology for this thesis and for perspicuous discussion of the problem of evil. One way to frame this objection is to point out that the existence of the created world is a necessary condition for there being any divine choice to permit or prevent any evil and that what necessitates God’s permission, as opposed to prevention, of a required evil is the moral requirement to do so, given God’s necessary goodness. This moral requirement is also what makes God’s permission of the evil necessary for God to remain perfectly good. So though the existence of creation is of course a necessary condition for God’s permission of any evil, the moral requirement is more explanatorily relevant.

It may be thought, then, that appeal to the good of creation and God’s goodness does not engage the dialectic of the problem of evil. If one asks, “Why did God allow this instance of innocent suffering?” one is not asking for the circumstance or context required in order for such a divine choice to be possible, but rather why God permitted rather than prevented it in the given context. On the view that deontological considerations require God permit it (such as the non-interference requirement Reitan appeals to) the pertinent answer (pertinent in the sense of satisfying the questioner) is: ‘because it would be wrong for God to intervene,’ and not: ‘because God’s knowingly permitting it or the risk of it was required for God’s creation of the world’ or, as per the denial of divine middle knowledge, ‘because the fact that the world exists makes it necessary for God to permit it.’ So (one may argue) though God’s permitting a required evil is necessary given the greater good of creation, given the evil would occur subsequent to God’s
creative act, and given God’s continued perfect goodness, not adding a deontological clause to NGE would obscure the immediate explanation for why this is the case, namely, the deontological constraint involved.

One response to this objection is that the Deontological Goods Defense need not offer a satisfactory answer to the question “Why did God allow this instance of innocent suffering?” to adequately defend NGE. It defends NGE by demonstrating that NGE is consistent with the supposition that God has non-consequentialist moral reasons to permit evil and so defends NGE without undermining or supplanting the significance of deontological considerations. If an atheologian presents, as evidence against theism, an instance of evil whose permission by an omnipotent being seems to him pointless, one who employs this defense may respond that since God may be morally required to permit that evil, perhaps He could only have avoided it by losing the greater good of creation. Its permission by God would not then be pointless. He may add that pointlessness need not be construed narrowly as only referring to permissions of evil that do not improve the world and so a consideration of deontology may make the evil no longer seem pointless. This response offers no additional insight as to why God allows evil. The only insight it offers is the same as that given by Reitan’s appeal to deontology, which it includes. Reitan states, “in order to fully understand what a morally perfect being would do we would need a moral theory to tell us which deontological principles can and do influence the morality of God’s evil-eliminating acts.” Just as Reitan states that something more specific about divine deontological moral requirements would need to be added to an appended deontological clause to make it helpful for discussion of the problem of evil, this response may acknowledge providing little insight into why God may allow an evil. Reitan is right then that a moral theory is needed to exhaust the full range of informative moral reasons why God permits an evil, and these
may include deontological reasons, but wrong in thinking that the possibility of divine deontological moral reasons undermines the plausibility of NGE. Whatever deontological reasons there may be there must also be the greater good of creation in order for there to be anything for deontological constraints to apply to. So my initial response is that the Deontological Goods Defense as so far presented adequately defends NGE and is no more unhelpful in understanding God’s relation to evil than Reitan’s positing the possibility of deontological constraints on God’s prevention of evil.

With these clarifications, I now more fully develop the Deontological Goods Defense. Although I’ve introduced my argument in the most general terms, namely, the existence of the world, it can be parsed further. The goodness of the world encompasses a variety of goods, some of which are the basis for deontological constraints. For example, a prohibition against God’s interference in human choices, as Reitan describes, is grounded in and explained by the inherent worth and dignity of the human self, a good which is part of Reitan’s description of the prohibition. God could have avoided the evils of the abuse of free will by not creating free creatures, but God judged the existence of created selves worth the cost (or risk). The existence of created independent selves is the good God’s permitting moral evil is necessary for, given the choices people make, the deontological constraint Reitan describes, and God’s perfect goodness.

It is plausible, especially given theism, that every deontological requirement has a metaphysical basis in the sense that the existence of the deontological requirement is explained by some good. How could there be a deontological prohibition against violence if human beings did not have an intrinsic value or sanctity that should be respected? Likewise, the Sufferer’s Good Constraint view that one person should not be used merely as a means to a good end is based on the intrinsic worth of the human person. Although a moral requirement may necessitate
God’s permission of an evil, given God’s necessary goodness, it is plausible that God’s permission of evil is constrained by moral requirements or duties only because of the existence of goods God has created.

Reitan points out that adherence to a deontological constraint may result in violations of that constraint by others and may result in a worse world than violating the constraint would. This is true in the human case but it cannot be that the good that moral goodness requires honoring in ways expressed by these prohibitions, such as the good of the existence of rational free persons, is not worth the costs of its being honored. This would mean that God chose to create a good it was on the whole bad to have created.

Perhaps one who denies divine middle knowledge may say, contra traditional theist opinion, that God’s creating rational free persons was worth the risk of the moral evil the world contains, and so was justified, but not worth its actual cost in moral evil. He may think God is now bound by deontological obligations incurred by His past act of creation, though no good both requires and outweighs the resultant evil that He must now permit. As already remarked, one may respond that God’s permitting such evil is necessary for the outweighing good of God’s continued moral perfection. Putting this aside, a proponent of NGE may simply grant that the denial of this abstract possibility is a newly discovered assumption of NGE. This assumption is benign. Most theists do not share the value judgment contained in this objection. Also, this purported possibility is in direct tension with the view that God’s creation is on the whole good. Of course if the world is on the whole bad either NGE is false or God does not exist, but the goodness of creation is a central tenet of traditional theism. If the goodness of creation is accepted, this objection offers only the abstract suggestion that individual deontological goods may be outweighed by their costs, though other created goods compensate for this deficit. This
Weaker objection is only an objection to my expansion of the Deontological Goods Defense. It does not impugn the core defense appealing to the good of creation itself.

Just as creation is a good that is worth the evils it contains, we have reason to think the goods that comprise the goodness of the existence of creation, such as the existence of beings with reflective self-awareness and the ability to direct their own lives and character, must be worth their net costs. Translated in terms of the metaphysical foundation of deontological obligations, Reitan’s deontological challenge is that because it may be morally best to honor deontological goods by not preventing certain evils, the existence of these goods may morally require the permission of evils even if dishonoring those goods by divine interference to prevent those evils would result in a better world. But the permission of such evils would not be gratuitous in the sense given by NGE, on either the Evil Offsetting Good or the No Better Alternative interpretation. The alternative to permitting these evils is either to not have created the “deontological goods”, which would result in a worse world (since deontological goods are worth their costs) or else for God to forfeit His perfect goodness, which would obtain only in an incomparably worse world. Although reference to the “no creation” alternative to permitting an evil may seem to merely technically evade identifying an evil as justifiably permitted and pointless (due to deontological consideration), the global goods, such as the existence of beings of intrinsic moral worth, that ground divine deontological requirements are clear reasons for thinking God’s permission of required evils is necessary for the existence of greater goods and so not pointless.
Why Aren’t Deontological Goods Generally Recognized as NGE Greater Goods?

Many philosophers, including William Rowe, have not considered the possibility that goods such as the existence of rational agents might necessitate, via deontological constraints, God’s permission of all of a type of evil, in satisfaction of NGE. Why might such “deontological goods”, goods that entail deontological requirements, not be considered as possible offsetting goods? One reason, mentioned earlier, may be that no one has described plausible goods that would make it impermissible for God to prevent common examples of seemingly gratuitous evil, such as the unjust consequences of evil choices. Another reason would be a failure to appreciate a deontological perspective. This obviously is not true of Reitan who has helpfully highlighted the relevance of deontology. So why didn’t Reitan consider the goods that ground deontological constraints to be goods that outweigh the evils God must permit to honor them, in satisfaction of NGE?

Toward the end of his essay, Reitan argues for the relevance of deontological considerations by considering atheist arguments from moral evil. He argues that the consequentialist account for why God permits moral evil acts seems faced with potent counterexamples that deontological accounts are not. He agrees with Bruce Russell that:

while a world where people have significant freedom to act may well be better than a world without significant freedom, it doesn’t follow that a world in which God never intervenes to prevent the evils brought on by human freedom is better than a world in which God does so intervene. … was the free will of the Nazis so valuable that the good of preserving their free will outweighed the evil of the Holocaust?75

Reitan agrees with Russell that though the good of there being moral freedom in general may outweigh the totality of moral evil, in specific cases the value of the freedom inherent in an individual free act does not seem to outweigh the disvalue of the act’s evil consequences. He
then argues that Russell’s taking this to be evidence against theism misses the relevance of deontology to the evidential arguments from evil. According to Reitan, deontology offers an answer not available to Rowe’s (unemended) No Gratuitous Evil Thesis: it may be intrinsically immoral for God to ever interfere in human free choice. Therefore God may justifiably permit individual free actions whose evil consequences outweigh the value of the person’s making the choice.

However, although Reitan’s appeal to a deontological perspective is illuminating, he misidentifies what is at issue. The relevant contrast is not between a consequentialist account and a deontological one but between an absolute requirement and a non-absolute one. A plausible good that requires that God never prevent moral evil would avoid these counterexamples as well as an equally plausible deontological prohibition against God’s preventing moral evil. And, since, as I have argued, the latter cannot obtain without the former, both are available to NGE.

Contrasting the NGE prohibition of pointlessness with deontological moral constraints on God’s preventing certain types of evil, so that the latter must be appended to the former, as Reitan argues, misrepresents the NGE moral requirement. God’s permitting an evil in order to honor a deontological requirement and hence a deontological good makes his permission of that evil non-gratuitous in the sense given by NGE. How do deontological goods differ from other goods requiring divine permission of evil that might make it seem evils permitted to honor deontological goods are gratuitous? Unlike some other goods, deontological goods, issuing requirements to permit types of evil, may not require any specific evils nor any specific amount of evil. A good that requires God never prevent a certain type of evil will be a general good and so may not require very specific evils as opposed to others of the same type. But NGE does not imply that for every evil God permits there must be an offsetting good that requires God permit
that specific evil rather than some other. It states that there must be an offsetting good that requires that evil or some other evil no better. So one reason NGE might falsely seem to preclude deontological considerations is if it is misinterpreted as stating there must be an offsetting good that requires God’s permission of the specific evil under consideration.

Another reason Reitan may think evils God is morally required by deontological goods to permit may be gratuitous is that he thinks of gratuitous evils as evils that are not necessary for a greater good. This is suggested by some of his concluding remarks:

The question most frequently asked in connection with AE is this one: “Is there some outweighing good which justifies God in permitting each of the evils of the world?” And this question amounts to asking whether or not there is some evil in the world which is pointless – which is such that no outweighing good is served by it. Advocates of AE have tended to hold that if we have good reason to believe that there is pointless evil, then we have good reason to believe that there is no God. A deontologist would object to this inference on the grounds that, even if we have good reason to believe that there is pointless evil, there is a further question we need to ask. The question is this: “Is there any non-consequentialist moral obligation which prevents God from intervening to prevent or eliminate the pointless evil in the world?” [my italics]  

Here and elsewhere Reitan thinks that a pointless evil is an evil “which is such that no outweighing good is served by it.” The word ‘served’ suggests Reitan thinks an evil is pointless if it does not contribute to, enhance, or bring about any good. Reitan seems to think that if an evil is not necessary for a greater good it is pointless and that since a deontological prohibition against God’s preventing an unnecessary evil would justify His permission of such evils, deontology offers reason to think God may allow pointless evil, a reason not compatible with NGE. But this is not the notion of pointlessness that NGE describes. NGE is distinct from the following No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, as described in chapter one:

The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis: God would only allow an evil if the evil is necessary for an offsetting good or the prevention of an evil no better.
According to NGE if God exists evils may be unnecessary for greater goods; they would only be pointless or gratuitous in the requisite sense if God’s permission of them is not necessary for a greater good. As described in chapter one, God’s choosing to permit rather than prevent an evil implies the evil occurs, so to say God’s permission in this sense is necessary is, strictly speaking, to say the evil is. But NGE’s referring to God’s permission of the evil rather than the evil itself being necessary can only be charitably interpreted as shorthand for claiming that if God permits an evil, an offsetting good must require God’s permission of the evil, given the evil occurs unless God prevents it. So, given I choose moral evil, God must permit my evil choice for the sake of my moral freedom. Had I not chosen moral evil my having moral freedom would not require God’s permitting my (non-existent) evil choice.

The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis would imply that each amount of evil permitted achieves a good, so that any general good that requires a type of evil could be partitioned into goods corresponding to each permitted evil. The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is incompatible with a good’s requiring that all of a type of evil be permitted without requiring a specific amount of that evil. NGE, which only states that God’s permission of evil is necessary in the divine choice context, in which God must choose whether or not to permit a given evil, allows that there may be goods that require divine permission of a certain type of evil whose magnitude does not correlate with the number of divine permissions of that evil. The amounts of permitted evil the same good may require may depend on how much evil people choose to bring about or how much natural evil indeterministic natural forces happen to produce. If God’s permitting an evil is only necessary for a greater good given God must choose whether or not to permit the evil, the same good may require God permit one amount of evil in one possible world and a different
amount in another, without there being any gratuitous evil in either. For example, if in world A
natural forces produce more natural evil than in world B, the same good of the uniformity of
nature requires God permit more natural evil in A than in B. If natural forces had produced no
natural evil, God would not have needed to permit any natural evil for the good of the uniformity
of nature. The natural evil in A and B is unnecessary but not pointless in the relevant sense.

So deontological goods render evils permitted for their sake non-gratuitous in a
straightforwardly meaningful and familiar sense. Perhaps they differ from other global goods
only in their necessarily absolute character. For example, the good of a highly regular natural
order may incur the cost of God’s permitting a great deal of natural evil, the actual amount of
which may be inherently unpredictable, even by God (if we deny divine middle knowledge). If
we think God can justifiably prevent some but not “too much” natural evil for this good, it
cannot be intrinsically immoral for God to prevent such evil and this good of a highly regular
natural order cannot then entail an absolute deontological requirement to permit all natural evil.
Nevertheless, this good and deontological goods, such as the good of independent selfhood that
Reitan describes as the possible basis for an absolute deontological divine prohibition, render the
evils whose permission they require non-gratuitous in the same sense. If, say, indeterministic
natural forces had not produced certain natural disasters, God would not have had to permit them
or the actual amount of natural evil for the sake of the good of a highly regular natural order, and
if someone had not chosen to harm someone else God would not have to permit the harm for the
good of independent selfhood.

If, then, one were to ask, “Why did God allow this instance of moral evil?” someone
adopting the deontological perspective Reitan describes may answer: “Because God cannot, of
moral necessity, violate the independent selfhood of created beings by intervening to prevent
moral evil, and God judged the existence of this good worth all the moral evil He would (or might) have to permit because of it.” This answer is as plausible as the deontological requirement is. The sense in which NGE rules out pointless evil is captured by this answer. That is, a person who accepts this answer will not judge that God’s permission of the evil is pointless in this sense.

Summary

Reitan argues NGE should be replaced in atheist evidential arguments from evil with:

A morally perfect being would eliminate, as far as He was able, all evils that could be eliminated without producing a greater evil, or losing a greater good, or violating any active deontological moral requirements.  

I have argued that deontological reasons for God to permit evil are correlated with goods that are offsetting goods by NGE. So, although consideration of deontological requirements would help to identify possible offsetting goods, no additional clause allowing for deontological constraints is necessary. Emending NGE to include deontological considerations misrepresents NGE’s notion of gratuitous evil.

In conclusion, I have argued that it seems impossible for a deontological requirement or any moral consideration to make God’s permission of an evil permissible or morally best without there being an offsetting good that requires that permission. If God necessarily does what is morally best then any evil that must be permitted for non-consequentialist reasons in order to do what is morally best, though sub-optimal, given God’s creation, is evil whose permission is required by the greater goods of creation that ground the non-consequentialist reason to permit the evil. If God’s perfect goodness consists in His always doing what is morally best though He
could do otherwise, then any evil that must be permitted in order to do what is morally best, though sub-optimal, given God’s creation, is evil whose permission is required by the greater goods of creation and God’s perfect goodness.

To place this point in a larger frame: a deontological objection to NGE overlooks the relevance of the fundamental difference between the context of human moral decision making and God’s. Because humans must choose in a given context we sometimes act so as to achieve what we think is good and sometimes that goal is trumped by the goal to avoid doing wrong in our given circumstances. God, as creator, always acts for the sake of achieving His good purposes. God’s governance of the world He has created and all the decisions that governance comprises are subsumed under His goal of achieving the goods for which He created. This does not mean God cannot be “subject to” deontological constraints, just that those constraints only have application because of the choices God has made in creating. Since God makes the decision to create in order to bring about good, we have reason to understand the ultimate rationality of God’s choices in purely “consequentialist” terms, namely, to produce good, sufficient to safeguard NGE, while accepting deontological requirements as more immediate explanations of God’s permission of evil.

To put this in still other terms: according to tradition, the most basic divine moral motivation is love. Applied to the world the law of love may refract into different dictates, corresponding to different types of moral considerations of the goods there are, such as the “non-consequentialist” honoring of various values as well the “consequentialist” promotion of good. But most fundamentally and primordially divine love aims at and creates goodness. So the ultimate explanation for divine choices may correlate with consequentialist outcomes even though God’s goodness is not fully captured by consequentialism or by any single moral theory.
So although I think Reitan’s recommendation to consider deontological moral reasons in discussions of the evidential argument from evil is important and sound advice, I maintain he is mistaken about the implications of those considerations for NGE. NGE does not preclude deontological considerations. God’s permitting evils whose prevention would violate non-consequentialist moral duties may be necessitated by His goodness and the goods He has created.
Chapter 5

Gratuitous Evil and Chance
Introduction

In distinguishing NGE from various theses concerning divine providence in chapter one, I have argued that NGE is compatible with evil due to chance. As described, God’s permission of a particular evil rather than some other no better may be arbitrary or due to chance in three basic ways: First, NGE allows that God’s purposes may be instantiated in different ways. If different goods requiring the permission of different evils may equally well satisfy God’s purposes, the permission of those evils rather than others may be due to chance, just as the goods they serve may be. For example, if God does not govern the world in accordance with strong meticulous providence, His purpose of teaching someone her responsibility for the welfare of others may be satisfied by her learning from her own personal struggles, the timing, types, and individual lessons of which, may be left to chance.

Second, a good may require the permission of a certain amount of a certain type of evil or, more generally, some number of a set of equally bad evils, rather than specific instances of evil. So God may allow a particular evil to serve a role in His purposes in satisfaction of NGE even if the occurrence of that specific evil rather than another of that type, or common set, is due to chance. For example, one’s beginning a search for meaning may be provoked by any of a variety of afflictions, the permission of any one of which would achieve this purpose. Moreover, NGE allows that the **amount** of evil God permits may be due to chance. This is because different amounts of evil may be offset by corresponding amounts of good in a set of equally good divine trade-offs between good and evil. A chance disturbance of one’s life may be necessary for a deepening awareness of one’s spiritual ill-health and a major life crisis due to chance may be necessary for a profound soul-searching, where these trade-offs have roughly equal over-all
value. So both God’s permission of a specific evil and of a specific amount of evil may be due to chance without contravening NGE.

Third, the distinction between NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis allows for chance instances and amounts of evil. God’s permission of an indeterministic process may be necessary for some good, though the outcome of the process is unnecessary. Moreover, as explored in the last chapter, God's permission of an evil may be necessary for a good that requires God permit all of a type of evil, however much that may turn out to be. If God must never intervene in nature for some good purpose, and nature is indeterministic, then the amount of evil He must permit for that good purpose will depend on the amount of evil nature by chance produces. So NGE is compatible with the existence of pointless and regrettable evil, even in horrific amounts. This is because, again, unlike the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, NGE describes a requirement for God’s permission of evil rather than for the occurrence of evil, and some goods, perhaps deontological goods, may require divine permission of all of a type of evil whose specific amount may be due to chance. (These considerations do not mean NGE is unmotivated so that it should be replaced by the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. As outlined in chapter one, there are reasons for thinking the alternative No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is overly restrictive.)

In general, if the good that requires divine permission of evil is due to chance or if a required divine permission of evil may be satisfied by different instances or amounts of evil, NGE may still be satisfied. In these circumstances, God’s permission of a particular evil may still be necessary for either a greater good, or the avoidance of an evil no better, or for obtaining an offsetting good and also avoiding an evil no better, in satisfaction of NGE, as described in chapter one.
So, why this lengthy chapter? One key issue concerning providence and apparently pointless evil is whether God’s plan can in some sense include contingent events, or, equivalently, whether any contingent events may be permitted by God for no reason at all. In this chapter I further examine the relationship between chance and gratuitous evil by defending my position that considerations of chance are irrelevant to NGE against the arguments of van Inwagen and Daniel Howard-Snyder. I will critique van Inwagen’s widely referenced “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God” and Howard-Snyder’s defense of van Inwagen in “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil”. The difficulties illuminated in this chapter are not solely of interest to an evaluation of van Inwagen’s work. They must be addressed by any attempt to relate chance and divine providence.

Van Inwagen’s early essay does not mention William Rowe’s premise and is in fact ambiguous between targeting NGE or the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. However, because his argument applies to both equally well it is worth considering here. Basically, van Inwagen claims that many evils may be no part of God’s plan because many may be due to chance, and since what lies outside God’s plan serves no ultimate purpose, and perhaps no purpose at all, there may be pointless evils in a world governed by God. This argument applies equally well to gratuitous evil. Because every evil that occurs is an evil permitted by God, if there may be evils that are in no sense part of God’s plan, there may be evils permitted by God that are in no sense part of God’s plan.

This dissertation takes a metaphysical turn for the next few sections in order to follow van Inwagen’s weaving together proposed metaphysical possibilities and his notion of God’s plan and providence. In “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God”, van Inwagen describes his view of God’s causal relation to the cosmos and its history and how this view
leaves room for many events and states of affairs’ being due to chance. He then argues that this understanding undermines the meticulous view of divine providence according to which every event is specifically intended by God. van Inwagen closes his essay with the further thesis that one may consistently believe both that God governs the world with maximal divine loving providence and that humanly significant events, including significant evils, may serve no purpose and be permitted by God for no reason at all. Howard-Snyder’s essay may be viewed as a buttress to van Inwagen’s, directly targeting NGE.

Although van Inwagen’s essay is provocative and important, I will argue on several fronts that his reasoning is flawed and so his thinking about providence and chance does not undermine NGE. My criticisms divide into three categories. I will object to the consistency of van Inwagen’s metaphysics, to the claimed conceptual connection between his metaphysics and the meticulous view of divine providence, and to his arguments that if his view of providence is viable a theist need not believe every specific evil serves a purpose.

Summary of “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God”

I begin with a summary of van Inwagen’s essay. Van Inwagen describes in general terms, through a simplified model of creation in terms of basic particles possessing causal powers in a void, how we should understand both God’s sustaining the created world in existence and God’s special “interventions” in bringing about the miraculous. God creates the universe by bringing into existence its basic constituents (“particles”) and He sustains the universe by bringing about or decreeing their continued existence and the causal powers they have at every moment they exist. A “particle” exists and possesses causal powers at a given moment only because God brings about its existence and its having those causal powers at that
moment (though its effects are its own and not God’s). God may also decree other states of affairs besides the existence and powers of particles, such as events and the existence of things composed of such particles.

Van Inwagen calls all God’s acts with respect to creation God’s “decrees” and holds that God’s decrees are closed under entailment: God decrees whatever contingent states of affairs His decrees entail. For example if God decrees “Let there be rational animals” and this decree entails the existence of neurons, God thereby decrees the existence of neurons (though neither the decree nor neurons are metaphysically necessary). Miracles are departures from God’s ordinary sustaining activity only in that in performing a miracle God temporarily decrees causal powers to some entities that he does not ordinarily decree. So, according to van Inwagen, all of God’s activity with respect to creation can be thought of as His bringing about states of affairs, which include the existence of basic constituents (“particles”), their causal powers, and events, and all the contingent states of affairs such actualizations entail.

Van Inwagen describes three possible sources of chance in such a divinely sustained and directed cosmos, namely: free will, natural indeterminism, and the initial state of creation. He defines a chance event or state of affairs as one which is “without purpose or significance; serves no one’s end; is not part of anyone’s plan; and might very well not have been.” God’s plan is defined as the sum total of God’s decrees, other than decrees made only in response to events He did not decree. Events resulting from free choice then are not part of God’s plan, for if God decreed them they could not be free. The undetermined results of indeterministic natural powers would also not be a part of God’s plan. For example, supposing God did not directly bring about the existence of planet Earth and of humans, insofar as the existence of planet Earth and even of humans was not inevitable given God’s decrees concerning the initial state of the universe and
the laws of nature, their existence is not part of God’s plan. Van Inwagen holds that God may have decreed the existence of rational free creatures without having decreed the existence of the specific kind of rational creatures there are, leaving that to chance. Finally, another source of chance is the initial state of the universe. Van Inwagen argues that if there are alternative possible, equally suitable, initial arrangements of particles, as he finds very plausible, then in order to create at all, God must either choose among them arbitrarily or decree that one of them be actual without decreeing which one. The latter may be termed an indeterminate decree. In either case, the specific initial arrangement of particles and all that follows from there being that arrangement rather than one of the other, equally good arrangements, will be due to chance in van Inwagen’s sense.81

Van Inwagen lists these different possible sources of chance in order to argue against the view that in a divinely governed cosmos the occurrence of every humanly significant event must have a purpose. He illustrates this by considering two specific evils: the suffering resulting from the existence of rabies, and an individual death resulting from a car accident. Putting aside (momentarily) considerations of God’s goodness, it seems that if many events may be due to the above sources of chance in a world sustained and governed by God, we have no reason to think these events are not among them. On his model of God’s metaphysical relation to creation, even if God has created and sustains all things and their causal powers in existence, it is reasonable to suppose the rabies virus might not have evolved. It might not have evolved because the initial arrangement of particles that make up the universe might have been different or because the evolution of indeterministic nature might have taken a different course or both. Rabies may exist without being decreed by God. Therefore the existence of rabies may very well not be part of God’s plan.
The same may be said of a particular person’s accidental death: it may well be no part of God’s purpose. Suppose a woman, Alice, is killed in a car accident because she happened to drive into a street where there was an oncoming car whose driver had neglected to fix his brakes. Perhaps if nature or human freedom had taken a different course this event would not have occurred, and perhaps, even given all of God’s decrees, the combination of nature and human freedom in this case could have taken a different course. In that case this event is not part of God’s plan, happened by chance, and serves no purpose. And in that case, according to van Inwagen, if Alice’s husband were to ask, in desperate grief, “Why did she die?” there is no answer, not even one known only to God.

Taking into account now God’s goodness, this account of humanly significant chance events in a world governed by God prompts the following question, as van Inwagen recognizes: “Even if an awful event such as Alice’s death occurred by chance, musn’t its occurrence serve a purpose in order for God to permit it?” That is, one may think that although God’s goodness is not impugned by God’s plan leaving room for the possibility of evil, God’s goodness guarantees there is a reason God permits the existence of evil that is not part of His plan. (In fact, van Inwagen thinks all evil may be due to chance and therefore not be part of God’s plan.) It is God’s permission of evil that is not part of His plan that truly obscures His goodness.

Van Inwagen responds by making an analogy between reasons for the occurrence of particular events and reasons for God’s permission of particular events. He points out that on his model of God’s relation to creation, even if the existence of certain types of evils, such as agonizing death, are not due to chance, a theist has no reason for thinking an evil as specific as the disease rabies or Alice’s death in a car accident is not due to chance. He then says that likewise, although God must have a reason for permitting evil in general and may have a reason
for permitting certain types of evils, a theist has no reason for thinking God must have a reason for permitting an evil as specific as rabies or as Alice’s death. So such significant particular events may be no part of God’s plan or purpose and furthermore such significant particular events need not be permitted for some purpose for God to be justified in permitting them.

He considers the objection that there could not be a general explanation of God’s allowing a type of evil unless there were, for each such event, an explanation for God’s allowing it, i.e. that a general explanation can only be a summary of individual explanations. He answers this by giving a counterexample. Just as, as most theists accept, God need not have a particular reason for allowing each particular sin to have a reason for allowing humans to sin in general (and hence for God to be justified in allowing particular sins), God need not have a specific reason for allowing particular evils of some other category to be justified in allowing evils of that type.

He also considers the objection that it would violate justice for God to allow someone to die for no reason at all. He answers that just as most theists accept that God justly allows different benefits and harms, disadvantages and advantages, to be unequally distributed and without connection to merit, they should accept that God may justly allow this harm – the chance of accidental and pointless death – to be distributed in different amounts randomly.

Van Inwagen thinks the plausibility of his construal of the relation between divine action, chance, and evil shows that a theist has no compelling reason to suppose there is a reason for the permission of every evil God permits. He concludes his essay:
If what I have said is true, it yields a moral for students of the problem of evil: Do not attempt any solution to this problem that entails that every particular evil has a purpose, or that with respect to every individual misfortune, or every devastating earthquake, or every disease, God has some special reason for allowing it. Concentrate rather on the problem of what sort of reasons a loving and providential God might have for allowing His creatures to live in a world in which many of the evils that happen to them happen to them for no reason at all.\textsuperscript{82}

**Analysis of van Inwagen ’s Metaphysics of Chance and Divine Action**

With the help of some interpretive analysis, I believe the metaphysics of van Inwagen ’s remarks on chance and divine providence may be summarized as follows. A fully adequate sense in which all of creation is completely dependent upon God while still possessing its own nature (causal powers) and order (while being a creation rather than a divine illusion) is its being metaphysically impossible for anything with causal powers to exist or possess its causal powers at any moment it exists without God’s causing it to exist with those powers. This suitably strong sense of created dependence still allows states of affairs and events to obtain without being intended by God. For example, a specific particles’ existence and powers may be willed by God without its specific attributes (such as location) and effects being so willed. Furthermore, this notion of created dependence even allows that a particle may exist by chance. God may cause a particle to exist even if He does not necessitate that the particle exist. He may bring it into existence by decreeing either that particle or some other exist. So a particle may be caused to exist by God without being specifically intended by God. And it follows from these views that a general state of affairs or event may be decreed by God without its specific instantiation being decreed by God: the specific particles and their particular attributes and effects that constitute that instantiation may all be unintended by God.
So because it is metaphysically possible for different effects to result from precisely the same causes and circumstances, including God’s will and agency, and because God has the power to create things with such powers of indeterminate or inherently unpredictable effect, even if all of creation depends on God in the sense defined, at least three kinds of events or states of affairs may obtain that are not decreed by God:

1. choices made by God-given free will,
2. effects of God-given indeterministic powers of nature, and
3. the specific results of God’s exercising His power to decree (solely) indeterminate states of affairs (or, alternatively, of His power to decree determinate states of affairs without having any reason for doing so).83

All three sources of chance, libertarian free choices, natural indeterministic powers, and God’s indeterminate decrees (whereby nothing determines the specific particularities of the results of God’s indeterminate decrees insofar as they are indeterminate), require that different effects may result from precisely the same cause.84 So the implicit general metaphysical claim that precisely the same conditions, even with respect to God’s will and God’s act of making an arbitrary decree (if possible), may result in different outcomes, is the linchpin of his proposal for how the world can be completely dependent on God and yet be permeated by chance.85 This claim may be articulated in terms of two related metaphysical distinctions.

First, van Inwagen implicitly distinguishes two Principles:

**Reason for Existence Principle:** everything that exists has a reason for its existence, and

**Principle of Sufficient Reason:** there is a reason for every state of affairs,
and accepts the Reason for Existence Principle and rejects the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The Reason for Existence Principle is weaker than the Principle of Sufficient Reason in that latter implies the former but not vice versa (because a state of affairs may be the existence of something (with certain causal powers) or something’s having certain properties, such as a specific location or undergoing a kind of change).

Second, van Inwagen allows that the Reason for Existence Principle is not a principle of logically necessitating reason. van Inwagen implicitly assumes the cause for the existence of x may be the complete explanation for the existence of x without necessitating that x exist. When God issues an indeterminate decree that X or Y exist, and that decree results in Y, God must be considered the cause of Y, though God did not decree that Y exist. Y’s existence rather than X is due to chance, but God is the ultimate cause of everything that exists, including Y. The initial state of the universe is solely caused by God’s decree though that decree may be indeterminate and so not necessitate that specific initial state of the universe, for example. Likewise if by my free action I bring about x rather than y, I am the cause of x although there is no reason for x rather than y beyond the fact that I chose it. Similarly for indeterministic causal powers: two different outcomes may result from the same powers so there is no reason why one outcome occurred rather than another but what did occur was caused by the particles involved. So van Inwagen must accept non-necessitating causation for God and free and unfree creation. We may call this his Indeterminate Cause Thesis.

**Indeterminate Cause Thesis:** The complete cause of B may not necessitate B.

This thesis states that the obtaining of all states of affairs causally relevant to B may not provide a complete contrastive explanation for B, where a complete contrastive explanation for a state of
affairs is an unqualified explanation for why that state of affairs obtains rather than any other. An unqualified explanation is an explanation that does not include an unexplained given.

The rejection of Principle of Sufficient Reason also enables van Inwagen to reject B, and so accept A and C, of the following initially plausible yet incompatible triad:

A. There is no best possible specific instantiation God’s purposes.

B. There must be an adequate explanation for why God’s purposes are instantiated one way rather than another.

C. The only adequate explanation for why God’s purposes are instantiated one way rather than another is that one way is better than the other.

In addition to these distinctions a key implicit assumption of van Inwagen’s essay is his rejection (by omission) of the possibility of God determining that an indeterministic process produce a particular outcome, or a free agent a particular choice. This possibility was argued for by Thomas Aquinas (and defended by David Burrell, among others) on the basis of the difference between divine determination or causality and determination by created causes.

So, to summarize, I interpret van Inwagen as proposing the following argument for the possibility of pervasive chance in a world created and governed by God: If every substance or most basic existing thing (“particle”) exists because of God, every state of affairs’ (or accident’s) obtaining because of God, while making for a more meticulous providence, does not make for a “greater” sense of dependence. There must be a reason for the existence of anything that exists, though there need not be a reason why things exist one way rather than another. If every created thing with causal powers (every substance) exists because God causes it to, creation is wholly dependent on God. Yet, given the denial of Principle of Sufficient Reason, many facts about
creation and ways God’s purposes are fulfilled may be left to chance. Given the Indeterminate Cause Thesis, even which particles exist may lack ultimate teleological and causal contrastive explanation, where x lacks ultimate contrastive causal explanation if and only if the unqualified causal explanation of x does not entail x and x lacks ultimate contrastive teleological explanation if and only if the unqualified teleological explanation of x does not entail x (which means God’s purposes do not entail x, and that is narrower than God’s purposes not “including” x, as we shall see). Again, an explanation is unqualified if it does not include an unexplained given.

Further, if it is true that Principle of Sufficient Reason is false and also that there are equally good ways of fulfilling God’s purposes, it is metaphysically necessary that these are true. So it may be impossible for all aspects of creation to be determined or intended by God. Given van Inwagen’s proposed metaphysics, what must be left to chance (in the sense of lacking ultimate teleological explanation) by God is the “choice” of equally good initial or later states of the universe and/or the “choices” of indeterministic nature or created agents. If God has no reason to prefer one possible state of affairs to another or if God has reason to give creation the power to choose, then such “choices” must lack ultimate contrastive teleological explanation and be left to “chance”. Yet, again, a theist may consistently claim this world permeated by chance is wholly dependent upon God in the sense required for God to be the greatest possible Creator, namely: it is absolutely impossible for anything (any substance) to exist without being caused to exist by God (whose existence is uniquely self-explanatory).
Critique

Both van Inwagen’s metaphysics of divine action and his definition of God’s plan are conceptually problematic. This is not solely because of questionable metaphysical assumptions. I will argue that his metaphysical model precludes the possibility of natural causal powers, the inclusion of which was to be a central virtue of his account. Also, his description of the place of chance in the world is unrelated to the main features of his metaphysical model of God’s causal relation to creation. More specifically, his metaphysics offers purely rhetorical support for his main thesis by providing a convenient but problematic and question begging definition of God’s plan. His notion of God’s plan must be revised to avoid self-contradiction, and those revisions point to a more accurate definition that does not support his argument. It is difficult to see how these deficiencies can be remedied to make the case that the possibility of chance in a theistic universe undermines NGE. I will first critique the metaphysics that van Inwagen’s “Chance Argument” for the possibility of pointless evil in a theistic universe is embedded in to uncover its key premises.

No room for secondary causation

Van Inwagen’s identifying God’s purposes with God’s decrees seems to imply that God cannot act to fulfill his purposes in the world through nature. At least it is not obvious that it does not. Let us assume, with van Inwagen, that because the obtaining of any state of affairs God decrees follows with absolute metaphysical necessity from God’s decree, no other contributing cause is possible. So what God decrees God, and nothing else, directly causes. Can God decree that nature cause some effect y? By van Inwagen’s entailment thesis, all that necessarily follows from God’s decrees is decreed by God. Nature’s causing effect y entails y so, initially, it appears
that this decree is impossible. If it were possible, both God and nature could cause the same effect. One may reply that this objection to God’s decreeing nature produce some event $y$ in its history is uncharitable, however. Perhaps God may decree that nature cause some instantiation of $y$. This would mean that what God decrees and directly causes is the existence of a state of affairs type (if that were possible) and what nature brings about, and God indirectly causes, is a state of affairs token. Although one may question the possibility of causing a type rather than a concrete something, this possibility is consistent with van Inwagen’s metaphysics. Perhaps to decree a type is to make an indeterminate decree. But this possibility is still inconsistent with van Inwagen’s account.

Suppose the existence of rational animals is not entailed by the initial state of the universe and there is no truth about whether rational animals will come into existence or not for God to know, as van Inwagen assumes is possible. Can God at some “time” decree that one of the many ways in which the existence of rational animals could be satisfied by causal powers of existing particles is satisfied? On van Inwagen’s account He cannot. This decree must either be that nature brings about rational animals contingently, by miraculous or non-miraculous indeterministic powers, or that nature brings about rational animals determinately, by miraculous deterministic powers (we are assuming that the existence of rational animals does not follow from the initial state of the universe and God’s ordinary sustaining of particles and their powers.) If the former then there is no mystery about how a world pervaded by chance may be governed by God and van Inwagen’s criticism of meticulous providence amounts to the claim that there may be equally optimal possible worlds for God to choose between or leave to chance. If what is decreed by God may be brought about by nature contingently then an effect of nature may be in one sense due to chance – de re – and another sense not – de dicto. van Inwagen assumes God
cannot decree that secondary causes bring about contingent effects. This is at the heart of his view that the possibility of chance undermines strict meticulous providence.

If the latter, then God decrees that one of the many sets of causal powers that determinately bring about rational animals in the circumstances the particles are in be actual. But if so, then in what sense does nature produce rational animals? Either those circumstances the particles are in are decreed by God or not. If they are, the existence of rational animals is metaphysically entailed by decrees God has made and thus is decreed by God. If not, then God decrees that rational animals come into existence by natural deterministic causal powers on the basis of knowing what contingent circumstances there are or will be. If this is the case, then either God decrees all results of natural deterministic powers, for God always supplies causal powers knowing the circumstances they are in (and nature never produces its own effects), or divine decrees are delimited in terms of God’s intention and purpose. The former is the occasionalism he wished to avoid; the latter makes his definition of God’s plan viciously circular, for then God’s purposes are all God’s non-reactive decrees of God’s purposes.

It seems that van Inwagen’s account does not avoid occasionalism. According to the entailment thesis, God decrees all metaphysically necessary consequences of His decrees. Consider God’s decree of the initial state of the universe $U_0$. Whether this decree is determinate or indeterminate, God is the sole cause of $U_0$. In initial circumstances $C$, which include $U_0$ and all God’s decrees at $t_0$, the deterministic powers of those initial particles metaphysically entail certain changes $x$. By the entailment thesis then, God decrees “If $C$, then $x$” (van Inwagen holds that God decrees conditional statements). Now if God causes $C$ and also decrees that if $C$, $x$ will result, how could the particles cause $x$? It seems that God causes $x$. van Inwagen says God only brings about changes $x$ indirectly via his decrees of causal powers, but by the entailment thesis it
seems He does so directly. The same applies to indeterminate causal powers. In initial circumstances C, the indeterministic powers of those initial particles metaphysically entail a disjunction: either changes x or changes y or … (and perhaps also a disjunction of probabilities). So by the entailment thesis God decrees “If C, then x or y”. Suppose y results. A complete explanation for the occurrence of y is God’s causing C and decreeing that in C either x or y will result. What is not explained by God’s direct causation is only C’s occurring rather than some other initial state that was included in God’s indeterminate decree and x’s resulting rather than y, but both these facts have no explanation. They are due to chance. By the same reasoning, the entire history of changes that make up the history of the natural world seems entirely due to God’s decrees and chance. So there seems no room for natural causation in van Inwagen’s metaphysics, despite his claim that on his view God decrees causal powers and so grants nature its own causality.

I repeat this argument as follows:

1. The Entailment Thesis: God decrees all metaphysically necessary consequences of His decrees.
2. Particle X’s having Deterministic Power DP [Indeterministic Power IP] at t metaphysically entails that, for some set of circumstances C (that include God’s decrees):
   if C obtains at t, change Y [change Y or change Z] occurs at t.

Therefore (from 2 and 3):

3. If God decrees “Let Particle X have Deterministic Power DP at t”, God also decrees “If circumstances C, then change Y occurs at t”; and If God decrees “Let Particle X have Indeterministic Power IP at t”, God also decrees “If circumstances C, then change Y or change Z occurs at t.”

And:

4. By decreeing the existence and causal powers of the initial arrangement of particles for time duration t which metaphysically entailed either change x or y or z in C, God thereby decreed that “If C at t, changes x or y or … occur over time t”

5. If God causes C at t and God decrees “If C at t then Y”, then God causes Y at t.
6. God caused (though perhaps did not decree) the initial state of the universe and all His decrees at to
   Therefore (from 4, 5, and 6):

7. God caused the changes x that the initial arrangement of particles caused at time to.
8. For any time t up until the first creaturely free action, all natural state of affairs result from divine decrees and circumstances which are ultimately caused by divine decrees.

So although van Inwagen aims to convey a relation between God and creation that is non-occasionalist, i.e., that accommodates secondary causation, his theses imply that all natural changes are directly caused by God (excepting perhaps free will if probabilities cannot be assigned to free options). van Inwagen’s simplified model of God’s relation to creation does not have the conceptual resources to distinguish God’s causal activity and natural causality.

This argument clarifies the philosophical additions and emendations that could improve van Inwagen’s model to provide a consistent account of God’s relation to creation. The critical junctures are (1), (2), (5) and evaluation of (7). Re: (1) van Inwagen could abandon the Entailment Thesis and the attempt to describe God’s plan in terms of what God decrees, and instead define God’s plan in terms of what God wills. This is independently motivated as I will argue in the next section. Re: (2) The model could divide necessity into two types: absolute (metaphysical) and natural (and restrict the Entailment Thesis to absolute entailment.) This would also require a modification in van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan so as to include what God merely knows will result from His decrees. Re: (7) The model could simply accept the apparent contradiction of (7), allowing that both God and nature causally contribute to the production of the same effect (a version of concurrentism). This would open up consideration of the possibility that God as transcendent cause may necessitate an event that is also produced by
indeterministic natural powers, and so allow God’s plan to include events in some sense due to chance. Re: (5) later, in his discussion of miracles, van Inwagen explicitly lends (5) support.

To summarize, van Inwagen claims to present a consistent non-occasionalist metaphysics of divine action according to which chance and purposelessness may be pervasive in a world governed by God, but his model of divine action does not have the conceptual resources to present such an account and is not internally consistent. Rendering it consistent would require abandoning his definition of God’s plan or making a metaphysical distinction between the mode of God’s causal contribution to events and nature’s. The former would be to abandon the reason he gives for thinking that purposelessness may be pervasive in a world created and sustained by God, as I will later explain. The latter would invite a consideration of whether God’s transcendent causation and creaturely causation can differ in such a way that God can determine that nature produce a specific change contingently. This would allow chance in a world in which all events are decreed by God and are part of God’s plan in van Inwagen’s sense. Perhaps van Inwagen finds this view clearly contradictory, but given the difficulties involved in this subject, made apparent by the above analysis, it merits examination.

The Irrelevance of van Inwagen’s Anti-Occasionalism.

Van Inwagen’s metaphysics of divine action is not relevant to his definition of God’s plan and of chance. Van Inwagen emphasizes that on his model God does not directly move particles, rather God supplies the powers by which the particles affect each other. For van Inwagen this is an important difference. He illustrates it with an analogy: Electromagnets affect each other by the magnetic power given them by an electric current. The current itself does not move the magnets (directly). Rather, it gives the metal the magnetic power of attraction and it is
that power that causes the magnets to move (toward each other). Analogously, God does not
directly affect particles; He gives them powers by which they affect each other.

How is this distinction important for van Inwagen’s depiction of the place of chance in a
universe created and sustained by God? van Inwagen doesn’t make the connection explicit, but
it may seem as follows: If God were to directly bring about the positions and arrangements of
particles, those specific positions and arrangements would be part of God’s plan, whereas, if God
only brings about the causal powers those particles possess, then, the specific effects of those
powers need not be part of God’s plan. If the effects of those powers depend on circumstances
due to chance or if those powers are indeterministic, then the specific positions and arrangements
resulting from the powers supplied by God are instead due to chance and not part of God’s
plan. Since van Inwagen defines God’s plan in terms of what God causes by decree, if God
does not Himself move particles when he gives them causal powers to move each other, then
those movements are not necessarily part of his plan. This may leave much of the specifics of
nature’s causal activity outside God’s plan, as van Inwagen desires.

However, even this loose connection between van Inwagen’s view of God’s causal
relation to creation and the place of chance in creation evaporates on closer examination. van
Inwagen’s distinction between what God causes directly and what He causes indirectly, the main
distinguishing feature of his account, does not mark the distinction between what is part of God’s
plan and what isn’t, nor between what is part of God’s plan and what need not be. Both what
God causes directly and what God causes indirectly may be part of God’s plan and both may be
due to chance. What God causes indirectly may be part of God’s plan because of what we can
call van Inwagen’s “Entailment Thesis”, namely, that whatever is metaphysically entailed by
God’s decrees is also decreed by God. What God causes directly may be due to chance because
of what we can call his “Divine Indeterminate Cause Thesis” namely, that God may be the complete cause of an event without determining that that event rather than some other will occur. Consequently, there is a lack of connectedness between van Inwagen’s remarks on God’s activity in sustaining the world and his remarks on chance, contrary to his claim that the former is a prolegomena for the latter.

Given his entailment thesis, indirectly caused events may be part of God’s plan because events caused indirectly may still be metaphysically entailed by events and circumstances caused directly. Consider the electromagnet analogy van Inwagen uses to illustrate the distinction between God’s actually causing a movement and His doing so only indirectly. The electric current is thought to cause the movement of the metals only indirectly because something (apparently) distinct from the current, namely the magnetic field, is the immediate cause of the movement - by powers that belong to it and not the current. Note that this is not considered an example of indirect causation because that intervening power is indeterministic (which it is not in this case) or because the electric current is not sufficient for the specific form of the magnetic field it generates (ie. because it is only that current in those circumstances that generates the specific attributes of that field). It is not indirect because some element of chance is involved, but rather because there are two levels of power involved – the power that belongs to the metal and the power of the current to produce that power.

Suppose God decrees the existence of planets with water and satellites. Suppose, given God’s non-miraculous decreeing of causal powers to the particles that compose them, it is a metaphysically necessary but not directly intended consequence of this that some specific planets have tides. It seems appropriate to say, and van Inwagen’s remarks would have us say that, as per his illustration, God did not directly cause the tides: the gravitational pull of the satellites did.
Yet, by the entailment thesis, the existence of such tides are decreed by God and hence part of
God’s plan. So what is indirectly caused by God may be part of God’s plan, and if it isn’t part of
God’s plan this is due to either natural indeterminism or indeterminism of divine decree, not
because it was indirectly caused.

One might think that God’s decrees, including those concerning gravity, planets,
satellites, and water, could not metaphorically entail tides because God could always perform a
miracle. That is, natural deterministic causal powers decreed by God entail certain events in
certain circumstances only given God does not cause a miracle, so the existence of planets with
oceans and satellites cannot metaphorically entail the existence of tides. The example that van
Inwagen gives of metaphysical entailment is one of essential composition, namely, the existence
of water’s entailing the existence of protons, and not of natural causality; whereas the
composition relation may be a logical relation, the natural cause-effect relation, in a theistic
universe at least, is not. But this consideration is misplaced. We are not considering what is
entailed by natural powers and circumstances but what is entailed by the sum of all of God’s
(immediate) decrees in a given situation. Divine non-disjunctive decrees of both circumstances
and deterministic causal powers necessitate specific effects of those powers.89 So events only
indirectly caused by God may be part of God’s plan.

As mentioned, one might mistakenly think that van Inwagen’s direct vs. indirect
causation distinction is related to his understanding of chance events as those outside God’s plan
in that only indirectly caused events may be due to chance. That is, one might mistakenly think
that, as a matter of definition, events directly caused by God are part of God’s plan, whereas
events indirectly caused by God may or may not be. This is not the case, given van Inwagen’s
Divine Indeterminate Cause Thesis. Even if all events were caused by God directly, there still
could be chance in the universe by the issuance of divine indeterminate decrees concerning both initial and later states of the universe. Divine indirect causation only makes natural indeterminism possible, and that is only because it is synonymous with natural causation, simpliciter, given theism. If natural powers exist because God causes them to, there is divine “indirect” causation. If they are indeterministic then of course there is chance in the universe, but there would still be chance even if God was the real cause of those undetermined effects – a possibility provided by the Divine Indeterminate Cause Thesis.

So why does van Inwagen emphasize the distinction between God’s issuing causal powers and God’s directly causing the effects of those powers? Does it have relevance to his main thesis? van Inwagen wishes to describe a completely adequate view of created dependence, according to which a particle is completely dependent on God for having the powers it has, that is not occasionalist. Of course if God did directly bring about every change in the universe such that His causality explains why each change occurred rather than some other, even those apparently due to created causes, and there is no other type of causality, there would be no room for chance in the universe. But van Inwagen’s proposed avoidance of occasionalism does not provide him room for chance within divine providence, for given van Inwagen’s divine indeterminate decree thesis, occasionalism is compatible with there being chance in the universe. An occasionalist would replace all reference to natural indeterminacy with indeterminacy of divine causation. Moreover, it is not clear that van Inwagen does avoid occasionalism, as we saw in the last section.

Because of the Entailment Thesis and the Divine Indeterminate Cause Thesis, the direct vs. indirect causation distinction drawn by van Inwagen is not conceptually relevant to the role of chance in the universe. The world is permeated by chance to the extent that what happens is
due to indeterministic causes, whether divine or natural, of both initial conditions and subsequent states, and the existence of natural causality does not in itself make it any more so. Contrary to van Inwagen’s claim of providing a prolegomena to a discussion of chance, there is a lack of conceptual connectedness between his description of divine sustenance and God’s “supplying causal powers” and his main theme of the place of chance in the universe.

van Inwagen’s Chance Argument for the Compatibility of Pointless Evil and Theism

With the help of the above analyses I now more fully and clearly present the logical structure of van Inwagen’s argument for the possibility of pointless evil in “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God”:

[A] In a world sustained by God many significant evils may occur for no purpose or reason at all.

A is implied by:

[B] In a world sustained by God many humanly significant events, including evils, may be due to chance, where being due to chance means being without purpose or reason.

B follows from the following three claims:

[C] A chance event may be defined as an event that a) is without ultimate contrastive causal explanation (without ultimate causal explanation for why it rather than some other event occurred) and b) is not part of God’s plan.

[D] In a world sustained by God, many humanly significant events may be without ultimate contrastive causal explanation

[E] All events without ultimate contrastive causal explanation are outside God’s plan.

D is supported by F and G together:

[F] In a world sustained by God, there are three possible sources of chance: free will, natural indeterminism, and the initial state of creation.

[G] The occurrence of many humanly significant events may be contingent results of free will, natural indeterminism, and the initial state of creation.

(G in turn is supported by the scientific account of how events such as the emergence of the rabies virus and of homo sapiens came about.)
E is the joint import of:

[H] God’s plan may be defined as the sum of all of God’s non-reactive decrees.

[I] All and only events God decrees have ultimate causal contrastive explanation.

H in turn is implicitly supported by the following together:

[J] God’s plan includes all that, and only what, God wills.

[K] God (non-reactively) decrees all that, and only what, God wills.

I is implied by N, O, and P together:

[N] Every event (whether due to determinate or indeterminate causes) is ultimately caused (though not necessitated) by God.

[O] All and only events that are decreed by God are logically necessitated by their ultimate cause (a divine decree).

[P] Only events that are logically necessitated by their ultimate cause have ultimate causal contrastive explanation.

F is supported by:

[L] A theist may accept that the complete cause of an event (whether a material cause, a free agent, or God) need not logically necessitate that event; and

[M] A theist may accept that although the existence of every thing (substance) that exists has an explanation, there need not be an explanation for every state of affairs.

Criticism

“The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God” is an understandably very popular essay. In it van Inwagen artfully and provocatively weaves together the topics of chance, providence, and the problem of evil, a project that is still very much needed twenty years later. Of course, in such a short and wide-ranging treatment overlooked subtleties must abound. It is my contention, though, that a close examination shows the essay is not merely not rigorous, which is to be expected considering its scope, but that it’s conclusions are fundamentally unsupported, so that reaching them requires an entirely different approach. In distilling his line
of argument above I have pointed out a lack of conceptual connectedness and of metaphysical consistency. I now argue that van Inwagen’s essay misrepresents the notion of purposelessness itself and so does not show how the possibility of chance in a divinely governed world supports the possibility of either pointless or gratuitous evil.

Even if van Inwagen’s aim in this essay were only to present a coherent view of providence that allows the possibility of pointless evil, i.e. to argue that meticulous providence is not necessary (rather than that it is false), the set of ideas employed for achieving this are at cross-purposes. His core argument is that just as there may be no reason why one event rather than another occurs, there may be no reason for God to permit one evil rather than another. He may wish to add, though this is not sufficiently made explicit, that also, there may be no reason for God to permit one amount of evil rather than not. This means there may be evils such that God’s purposes could have been just as well achieved without His allowing them. Van Inwagen’s description of the possibility of chance in a world created and sustained by God is a description of the possibility of contingency and arbitrariness in the manner in which God’s purposes are fulfilled. But this possibility only conflicts with Strict Meticulous Providence; it is not relevant to the possibility of pointless evil. The possibility of pointless (though not gratuitous) evil is introduced by the distinction between an evil’s being necessary for a good and God’s not preventing it being necessary. If only God’s not preventing it is necessary and the evil’s occurrence is a matter of chance, then if it occurs by chance, it is a pointless evil in the robust sense prohibited by the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis. If there are great goods that require God not prevent vast amounts of horrific evil whose occurrence is due to chance, then there may be vast amounts of horrific pointless evil. As also described in chapter one, God’s having no reason to allow an evil in the sense that it is morally arbitrary to do so cannot mean the evil is
gratuitous. To be gratuitous an evil must be such that its permission is not necessary for an offsetting good, whether that is the good of an optimal world or some other net offsetting value that results from God’s permission of the evil.

What van Inwagen’s metaphysics allows is that God’s purposes may be multiply instantiated. This only means that God may be morally neutral regarding different instantiations of them. To show that God’s purposes may be instantiated in different ways is not to show that different amounts of evil may equally well serve the exact same good, which is what is required for there to be pointless evil. If God’s purposes may equally well be satisfied by two alternatives with different amounts of evil, one may suppose the alternative with more evil must have more good. Otherwise, they could not satisfy God’s purposes equally well and God could not be indifferent between them. Van Inwagen’s invoking the possibility that God’s purposes may be multiply instantiated does not give any reason to think this may be the case.

**van Inwagen’s Argument Begs the Question against the No Pointless Evil Thesis**

van Inwagen says his model leaves room for three possible sources of chance, but indeed it seems obvious that any model of God’s causal relation to creation must allow for natural indeterminism or indeterminism of initial conditions or undetermined free agency for there to be chance in the natural world. van Inwagen offers an argument for indeterminism of the initial conditions of creation (referred to above), but with respect to libertarian human freedom and indeterministic natural powers, van Inwagen’s assertion that these could be sources of contingency even in a theistic universe seems true by definition. So what is original or distinctive about van Inwagen’s view? To answer this and understand what van Inwagen hopes to contribute to the discussion of divine providence, one must consider his use of the word
‘chance’. Again, by a chance event van Inwagen does not mean merely an event not determined by the prior causal history of the world, what we may call an ‘undetermined event’. He means an event that is also without purpose, one that is unintended, “not part of anyone’s plan”. So van Inwagen seeks to make a conceptual connection between his description of God’s causal relation to the world and the existence of chance events in this sense.

As indicated by my reconstruction of van Inwagen’s extended argument against the meticulous view of providence above, that connection is made by van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan. According to van Inwagen, God’s purposes comprise God’s plan and God’s plan is comprised of God’s (non-reactive) decrees (H). That part of creation that is outside God’s purposes and plan is also all that “very well might not have been” (E). This is because only what God decrees is necessitated by its ultimate cause, i.e. has ultimate contrastive causal explanation, and, given the No Arbitrary Decree Thesis, only what God non-reactively decrees is caused for a complete sufficient reason (because it is best) and so has ultimate contrastive teleological explanation. So only what is not non-reactively decreed by God, i.e. what is outside God’s plan, lacks ultimate contrastive causal explanation and ultimate contrastive teleological explanation, and so might not have been. This is also seen by the fact that all that is not entailed by God’s (non-reactive) decrees, is the result of divine indeterminate cause (God’s indeterminate decrees), of created indeterminate causes, or of created determinate causes in circumstances ultimately due to indeterminate causes. So, though there are different intensional components of van Inwagen’s definition of chance, namely, being without ultimate contrastive causal explanation and serving no ultimate purpose, given van Inwagen’s definition of God’s purposes (God’s plan) as God’s non-reactive decrees, they have the same extension. van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan as all God’s non-reactive decrees identifies chance events in the sense given by his metaphysics of
divine action (namely, events without ultimate contrastive causal and teleological explanation), which his description of divine action makes easy to define, with chance events in the sense of serving no purpose. (Statements I, N, O, and P above).

To make his case against meticulous providence van Inwagen must argue that at least some undetermined events (events that lack ultimate contrastive causal explanation) may not serve God’s purposes. By identifying undetermined events with purposeless events, via his definition of God’s plan, van Inwagen thereby simply assumes meticulous providence is incompatible with the existence of undetermined events. He does not properly address the rationale or possible metaphysical grounding for meticulous providence or a rejection of pointless evil given the possibility of undetermined events. And, as we have seen, van Inwagen’s metaphysics only provides a conveniently simple vocabulary for defining God’s plan in this way, it does not actually support this definition. Even if van Inwagen only aims to present a coherent alternative to meticulous providence and the No Pointless Evil Thesis rather than a direct criticism, the assumptions he makes and their grounds should be noted. That is, to make his case, van Inwagen must argue for the reasonableness of his definition, but he does not.

One rationale for rejecting the possibility of pointless evil despite the prevalence of chance in a world governed by God is that pointless evil seems to impugn God’s sovereignty, specifically His ability to redeem evil and achieve His purposes for creation. Theists may disagree about the sense in which God’s victory over evil in creation and in the lives of each individual person must be complete, but van Inwagen’s argument does not even address this motivation for divine middle knowledge or the No Pointless Evil and related theses. Again, he defines God’s plan and purpose so as to preclude chance events, asserts the compatibility of a denial of a Principle of Sufficient Reason with theism so that evils may be due to chance given
theism, and so makes it a matter of definition that evils may be without divine purpose. In this way, van Inwagen’s argument begs the question against meticulous providence and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis.90

Even before considering the specifics of van Inwagen’s proposal we have reason to suspect he cannot achieve his aim within the limited scope of his model of God’s relation to creation. To be sure, a metaphysical description of God’s causal relation to creation can have implications for providence. For example, if God specifically and solely determines all events then all must be part of God’s plan and none are due to chance in any meaningful sense. But the denial of divine determinism alone does not have implications for how individual events can or cannot fit into God’s purposes. For example, it cannot by itself undermine the view that God determined the states of affairs He did because He knew what undetermined events would or would likely result. It also does not suggest that God does not guide the world’s events through various types of permissions and preventions so that only what He specifically wills is actualized. Minimally, van Inwagen would have to expand his model of providence to include a treatment of divine omniscience and the denial of middle knowledge to achieve this.

To further illustrate, van Inwagen thinks many theists would find his view that the existence of humans was not part of God’s plan shocking, but given van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan, this only means that God’s decrees alone are not sufficient for the existence of humans. This means that natural indeterminism played a role in the historical emergence of humans, and/or that the initial state of the universe and laws of nature did not make the appearance of humans naturally inevitable or that the initial conditions that did make humans inevitable were not entailed by God’s decrees. But many theists accept natural indeterminism and so could accept there is a sense in which humans were contingently produced by evolution,
even though they think (rightly or wrongly) God intended the existence of humans. So the denial of van Inwagen’s notion of God’s decrees seems widely accepted. van Inwagen identifies being non-reactively decreed by God (in his sense) with being intended by God, but this equivalence requires argument.

So, how could the existence of humans be part of God’s plan if the existence of humans is undetermined (lacks sufficient reason)? Because God knew that if He determined other states of affairs, humans would come about, and God determined those states of affairs because He knew humans would come about. Or because the existence of humans is a divine goal and so God timelessly selected our universe’s contingent history out of many others because it satisfied this goal. To get clear on the possible coherence of, or even pre-reflective origins of, views that accept chance and yet think the existence of humans is part of God’s plan would fix the target of van Inwagen’s essay, yet van Inwagen does not do this. ⁹¹

Again, van Inwagen thinks that God can and does issue decrees concerning what happens or comes into being in the history of creation. Some such decrees may have been entailed by His initial act of creation. Perhaps God decreed the initial creation decree, whether determinate or indeterminate, He did because that decree entailed rational animals, for example. Then God decreed “Let there be rational animals” (Decree RA) in decreeing the initial state. But suppose God knows which initial arrangement would produce rational animals, though contingently, and decrees that initial arrangement (in part) because it will produce rational animals. Then, as mentioned above, according to van Inwagen, the existence of rational animals is not part of God’s plan. It is not decreed by God or entailed by God’s decrees. But even on the basic blueprint for creation notion of God’s plan, it should be included. The specifics of how it is instantiated may lie outside God’s plan, but that it be instantiated is a divine objective and the
reason He issued the initial creation decree He did. So, as mentioned, if middle knowledge is possible, this is a basic defect in van Inwagen’s notion of God’s plan, even a technical definition for the specific purpose of delimiting the scope and extent of chance in a world sustained by God.  

As van Inwagen points out, planning to do something is one’s plan in a sense that planning for something (planning for a contingency or having a conditional plan, planning to do something if some possibility occurs) is not. But if one foreknows or at least fore-believes some contingency and decides on a response beforehand then one is planning to make that response (because I believe that if I expose my queen, he’ll take it giving me checkmate, I plan to expose my queen) So the response may be considered part of one’s plan in a less narrow sense. In a footnote van Inwagen says his definition may be called “God’s unqualified or eternal plan” and that a broader notion of God’s plan would include what God decrees in response to contingencies. But this remedy masks a deeper flaw. Van Inwagen must say that all events that are part of God’s qualified but not unqualified plan are without purpose or significance (!) because they are all ultimately due to chance. If what is ultimately due to chance may have purpose in a meaningful sense then van Inwagen’s linkage between chance and pointlessness is broken.

**God’s plan is what God wills, not necessarily what God does**

Indeed, apart from the possibility of divine middle knowledge, we can see that van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan is deficient. If God unqualifiedly wants E and because He knows that in circumstances C, x’s having power P entails E at t, God decrees the miracle ‘x has P at t’ or decrees ‘If C, E’ then clearly E is part of God’s plan, but on van Inwagen’s account it is
not. This shows that God’s plan should be defined in terms of what God wills, not how God
brings about what he wills. Defining God’s plan in terms of one way He may bring about what
He wills, namely by decree, unnecessarily restricts the scope of God’s plan and/or how He brings
it about.

Also, van Inwagen really offers two definitions of an event or state of affairs’ being due
to chance in a theistic universe: its having no ultimate contrastive teleological explanation, and
its not being directly intended by God. But these do not necessarily coincide. If it is better, all
things considered, that event x occur, than not; and, x can only occur if God allows x, then there
may be an ultimate contrastive teleological explanation for the occurrence of x even if x is not
intended by God in van Inwagen’s sense. The teleological explanation for the occurrence of x
would be: it is better that x occur than not and God wants what is best. Suppose x is humanity’s
coming to be: it is better that x occur than not and God wants what is best. Suppose x is humanity’s
falling into sin. If the greatest possible world is one in which humans sin then even though the
fall is not part of God’s plan (eternal or qualified) in van Inwagen’s sense and is not directly
intended by God, there is a teleological explanation for the occurrence of the fall: God’s willing
the best possible world. The fall did not have to occur: it very well might not have been in the
sense that humans did not have to sin. If all possible creatures capable of choosing between
sinning and not would in fact never choose to sin, then the greatest possible world would not
have been a world God could actualize. But given that some creatures would sin if given the
opportunity, sin exists because it is better that there be sin than not, all things considered, and
God wants what is best – a teleological explanation. The distinction between theistic chance
events and those that are not is not the distinction between events God intends and events God
merely allows.
We may also see this by examining the possibility of arbitrary divine decrees. Although van Inwagen favors the view that God makes indeterminate rather than arbitrary decrees, he allows that there may be divine decrees God lacks sufficient reason to make, i.e. arbitrary decrees. But van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan does not permit this. According to van Inwagen, if God makes such an arbitrary decree that decree is due to chance. But van Inwagen defines God’s plan as the sum of His non-reactive decrees, and so the results of the decree are both part of God’s plan and due to chance. van Inwagen cannot then define being due to chance as not being part of God’s (or anyone’s) plan. In other words, God’s plan entails the No Arbitrary Decree thesis so he cannot consistently allow for the possibility of arbitrary decrees.

Van Inwagen may respond to this inconsistency by either further refining his definition of God’s plan as God’s non-arbitrary, non-reactive decrees, or by fully committing himself to the No Arbitrary Divine Decree Thesis, emphasizing that he finds it more plausible that God has the power to issue indeterminate decrees than that God’s choice may lack sufficient reason.

Let us consider the possibility of arbitrary divine decrees. If God decrees “Let there be humans”, though He is indifferent between decreeing this and decreeing the existence of some other rational free organism, then since God decrees whatever contingency is entailed by his decrees and the existence of a new species of rational free animal is entailed by this decree, He thereby decrees the existence of a new species of rational free animal. This decree is not arbitrary: it is a good God has a preference for over relevant alternatives and the reason He makes the immediate decree He makes. So the decree “Let there be humans” is not a part of God’s plan but the decree entailed by this: “Let there be a rational free animal” is. Defining God’s plan as God’s non-arbitrary, non-reactive decrees would be more adequate then than including arbitrary decrees in God’s plan.
By instead committing to the No Arbitrary Divine Decree Thesis God’s plan can be
defined as God’s non-reactive decrees unproblematically because it expresses only God’s
unqualified will (parts of God’s perfect will that God can and will bring about). If God only non-
reactively decrees what He has sufficient reason to decree, God only non-reactively decrees what
God views as best. The reason this definition of God’s plan initially seems promising then is that
on this view no part of God’s plan is due to chance and no part of God’s plan is outside God’s
perfect will.

These considerations suggest a more perspicuous and accurate definition. The reason
precluding divine arbitrary decrees or defining God’s plan as God’s non-arbitrary, non-reactive
decrees is more adequate is that it captures more accurately what God wills, in the required
sense. The required sense of God’s will is distinct from the intentional component of God’s
action in issuing an arbitrary decree or in His knowingly permitting a particular instantiation of
His will. If God arbitrarily decrees “Let there be humans” then He wills that there be humans in
the sense that He has the intention that humans come about; but since His having that intention is
arbitrary, it is not part of God’s will in the appropriate sense. Likewise, if God permits a
particular event though He could equally well have permitted another for the same purpose, the
event is in one sense a part of God’s plan, namely considered as the fulfillment of God’s
purposes, and in another sense not. The qualification “non-arbitrary” or asserting the
impossibility of arbitrary divine decrees is helpful because it excludes from God’s plan events
God brings about that are not unqualifiedly willed by God. The disadvantage though, again, is
that by restricting God’s plan to what God decrees or causes, God’s plan excludes what God
unqualifiedly wills but only weakly actualizes. Why not then define God’s plan directly in
terms of what God unqualifiedly wills and not what God does (decrees)? God’s plan is naturally
thought of as what God wants and is expressed by how God brings about what He wants. Such a definition would avoid assumptions about how God actualizes His plan; it corresponds more closely to the idea of a plan as a kind of blueprint for action.

**Does Not Address the Issue of God’s Sovereignty**

Van Inwagen’s chance argument for pointless evil defends the compatibility of pointless evil with creation’s dependence on God, but does not address the compatibility of pointless evil with God’s sovereignty or control over the narrative of creation’s history.

Let us recall the following claims about God’s relation to evil discussed in chapter one:

If God exists:

**Strict Meticulous Providence**: Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a divinely unqualifiedly willed concrete instantiation of a greater good (and so is unqualifiedly willed by God).

**The No Chance Role for Evil Thesis**: Every particular instance of evil serves a greater good that is specifically willed by God.

**The No Unnecessary Particular Evil Thesis**: Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a greater good.

**The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis**: Every particular instance of evil is necessary for a greater good or the prevention of an evil no better.

I recall these theses to point out the complexity of defining God’s plan. Clearly, the accuracy of a definition of God’s plan depends on which of the above theses is correct. So, for example, most safely, we may begin with the claim that out of all (abstract) possibilities, God prefers some above all others. These preferences may be considered God’s perfect will. If one accepts the Strict Meticulous Providence Thesis, and, unlike van Inwagen, does not restrict
God’s plan to what God causes, one’s definition of God’s plan is simple: God’s plan is the actual world. On this view, the occurrence of actual events that are in themselves regrettable is still best, all things considered, and so are part of God’s plan. God wills what is best and the actual world is what is best.  

One may instead think God’s perfect will includes possibilities that are not available to God. For example, the possibility that all free creatures always obey Him. In other words, one may think God may wish He could actualize some possibilities that He cannot. But it would be a misuse of words to define God’s plan so as to include states of affairs God knows He cannot actualize. So, if there are possibilities God prefers but cannot actualize, God’s plan is not simply God’s unqualified preferences. One may therefore think God’s plan should be defined simply as what God prefers out of the possibilities He knows He can actualize.

This definition is not adequate if the No Pointless Evil Thesis is false, however. If there may be pointless evil, God might wish He did not “have to” actualize some states of affairs: He only brings them about because of regrettable circumstances that are no part of His will. (This is why van Inwagen restricts God’s plan to God’s non-reactive decrees.) One may therefore consider God’s eternal plan to be those states of affairs that are part of God’s perfect will that God can (and therefore does) actualize. This rightly excludes entirely regrettable evils from God’s plan. The difficulty with this definition is that it may exclude a great deal of creation, including salvation history, from God’s plan, again depending on whether one accepts the Strict Meticulous Providence Thesis, the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, or only the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis.
It is also noteworthy that this definition of God’s plan may be inadequate even if the No Pointless Evil Thesis that every evil serves an offsetting good if God exists is true. An evil produced by free will or natural indeterminism may be required for a greater good even if more good would have resulted if no one chose the evil or if natural indeterminism hadn’t produced the evil. For example, Jo’s suffering resulting from a rabies infection may lead to Jo’s development of the outweighing good of patience, even if it would have been better for Jo if he had never contracting rabies (because then he would have developed some other virtue). If it is good for God to follow a general policy of allowing natural indeterminism take its course, it may be better for God to allow Jo’s suffering due to rabies than prevent it. It still may have been even better if natural indeterminism hadn’t produced rabies.

Nevertheless, if the occurrence of every evil is necessary for a good that outweighs the evil, then though the occurrence of the evil may not be part of God’s perfect will, the evil may still be in at least one meaningful sense part of God’s plan. Though evil may be regrettable for the loss of good it entails, perhaps God’s plan was to create a world He knew would be (or could be) imperfect in ways beyond his control and turn all its evil to good so as to make the world the best it could be (given its autonomy). As a final proposal, then, we may consider God’s plan to consist of all states of affairs that serve good, i.e. that are good or that are necessary for good, even if, had they not occurred, more good would have been served. These are all willed by God, though whether they are willed in a suitably strong sense is debatable.

Not surprisingly, defining God’s plan is a complex matter. The adequacy of one’s definition depends on which of the above theses one accepts and that in turn depends on how one thinks God’s will may be thwarted, if at all. Perhaps an adequate definition is not even attainable. My point in raising these brief alternative views is to show that the motivations for alternative
definitions should at least be addressed. Otherwise, van Inwagen’s chance argument for the compatibility of pointless evil and theism, even if sound, would demonstrate coherence with only an impoverished set of theistic claims.

**NGE Allows Pointless Evil Due to Chance**

If only the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis and not the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is true, evil in a theistic universe may be entirely regrettable. I have argued for this in chapter five in relation to deontology and in this chapter’s opening paragraph. If it would have been better that x not occur (by chance) than occur (by chance), then even if God has a reason for allowing x, x’s occurrence would only serve God’s qualified preferences and hence be without ultimate teleological explanation. God’s reason for allowing it would not give its occurrence purpose, it would only give His allowing it (given it would occur by chance if He permits it) a purpose. In this sense the event in a significant sense very well might not have been and may serve no purpose. Perhaps God’s allowing an evil, *given it occurs by chance*, is better than not, and perhaps its better that the possibility of x obtain than not, but by NGE no purpose need be served by x’s actually occurring given that possibility. Its occurrence may be just a net loss, period. And, as I have argued, if a sufficiently great good requires that God permit all evils of a certain type and the amount of that type may be due to chance, then even horrific evils, such as the accidental death van Inwagen mentions, may be due to chance, serve no purpose, and happen for no reason that could satisfy the grieving. The existential import of this possibility cannot be underestimated.

What would those who think every evil must have a purpose object to about this abstract possibility of pointless evil? Certainly not the claim that some events may be undetermined,
which van Inwagen’s chance argument relies on. Of course if one had a reason to believe in determinism or the Principle of Sufficient Reason then one would have a reason to believe that every event has an ultimate teleological explanation and purpose. But if all van Inwagen wanted to point out is that you can believe not all events occur for a purpose if you give up determinism, or even that you cannot believe not all events occur for a purpose unless you give up determinism, he has succeeded but achieved little. What a proponent of the No Pointless Evil thesis would dispute is that God’s sovereignty is compatible with the occurrence of any ultimately unredeemed evil in this way. Again, one may think that even if God must allow such seemingly pointless evil, God, by His sovereignty, would then bring good out of the occurrence of the evil, a good that would otherwise not occur. To hold this is to hold the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, held by the trust that God is able to “turn all evil to good”.

As I have argued in chapter four, to deny NGE is to challenge our understanding of God’s goodness in a very fundamental way. The No Unnecessary Evil Thesis offers an additional constraint on God’s providence. As I have also argued, if one rejects this constraint and also accepts the possibility of undetermined events (events without ultimate contrastive causal explanation) in a world created and sustained by God, one may accept pointless evil (evil unnecessary for an offsetting good) in a world governed by God in accordance with NGE. So I have already offered an argument from chance to pointless evil, where pointless evil is evil whose occurrence (not its divine permission) serves no purpose. According to my argument both chance and pointless evil do not undermine NGE. van Inwagen ‘s argument from chance to pointless evil is entirely different. He argues against the No Pointless Evil Thesis on the basis of the possibility that there may be no complete contrastive causal and teleological explanation for the occurrence of evils. But to lack complete contrastive explanation, either causal or
teleological, is not to lack purpose. The distinction between Strict Meticulous Providence and the No Pointless Evil Thesis shows this, as I will argue at length in the next section.

**Lack of Ultimate Contrastive Teleological Explanation Is Not Pointlessness**

Undetermined events in a theistic universe need not also be chance events in the sense of not serving God’s purposes. Events left to chance in the sense of not being determined by God or anything else may be equally suitable alternative ways God’s purposes may be achieved. If God’s purposes may be general, as van Inwagen’s perspective maintains, the specific instantiation of those general purposes by undetermined events necessarily serves those purposes (they instantiate them!) even though they are not required for them. An evil left to chance may serve the unintended instantiation of an intended purpose. In a quite ordinary and unmysterious sense then it could serve a purpose.

Again, on van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan, parts of God’s **actualized** will may be outside God’s plan. That is, the specific concrete instantiation of God’s plan which results from God’s indeterminate or (if possible) arbitrary decrees is not **what** God decrees, which is more general. But, as just mentioned, surely the instantiation of God’s will is in some meaningful sense part of God’s plan. It certainly cannot be said to be without purpose and “serve no one’s ends”. Such events may be due to chance qua token events but considered as the instantiation of a role in God’s plan they are not due to chance.

In still other words, a particular state of affairs may be desired by God **only qua an instance of a more general good** that God prefers over relevant alternatives. That is, God may desire it insofar as it serves one of His purposes. It may lack complete teleological explanation: it occurs not because it is best and therefore God decrees it; it occurs because it **brings about** God’s
preferences but itself is not one of God’s preferences. There is a reason why it occurs but that reason does not explain why it rather than another equally suitable event occurs.

The claim that if God allows an evil, there must be some good that requires that specific instance of evil seems motivated by a meticulous view of providence, according to which all events or at least all humanly significant events are specifically intended by God. NGE allows, and it seems true that, the permission of a specific evil may be justified by that evil’s serving a general purpose. For example, the permission of the evolution and continued existence of the rabies virus may be justified by the good of the uniformity of nature, even if some other natural evil could have been permitted for that good instead. A specific evil’s being due to chance, or being such that God has no reason for allowing it rather than some other equally bad evil, does not mean that God has no reason for allowing it, that it serves no purpose, or that it is gratuitous or pointless in any meaningful sense. If a divine purpose may be brought about by the permission of either of two evils, and which evil occurs is a matter of chance and indifference (because of moral equivalence), then the evil that is in fact permitted serves a role in God’s purposes and hence cannot meaningfully be considered pointless. That purpose would be God’s justifying reason for permitting that specific evil, even if that purpose could equally well have justified God’s permitting the alternative evil instead. Of course, if one defines God’s plan and purpose in such a way that excludes states of affairs due to chance, as van Inwagen does, then the evil will in no such sense be part of God’s plan or purpose, but this just shows that God’s plan should not be defined in this way.

If God has some purpose and decrees that some function or role be filled for the sake of that purpose, then whatever in fact serves that role is serving God’s purpose, whether what serves that role was left to chance or not. To illustrate the mistake of thinking otherwise: if the
fact that which event serves a role is left to chance renders the event serving the role pointless, then if Sol jumps on a live grenade to save his comrades, his sacrificial act is not pointless, but if one of his comrades could have done the same (but perhaps by chance was too late) this fact renders Sol’s sacrifice of his life pointless. In general, serving a meaningful role is meaningful, regardless of how many possible ways that role may be filled. There being no reason why x rather than y does imply that x might very well not have been. It does not imply that x is without purpose, does not serve God’s ends, or is not in some sense part of God’s plan. There being no reason why x rather than y implies only that the fact that x serves God’s purpose rather than y serves no purpose, is not part of anyone’s plan, and serves no one’s ends. The underlined phrase should not be confused with the fact of x’s occurrence. I think van Inwagen misrepresents the notion of ultimate purposelessness itself, which is central to his project, and so fails to show that humanly significant events may be pointless in a world created and sustained by God.

To briefly sum up the last few sections, contra van Inwagen, if God’s eternal plan consists of all the unqualified preferences of God that God can actualize, then some (chance) events may serve God’s purposes without being part of His eternal plan (those that serve a role that could have been served by a different event); and some events not decreed by God may be part of God’s plan (those that God intentionally brings about by decreeing circumstances in which they will occur).

The Chance Argument Applied to God’s Permission of Evil

The above criticisms apply equally well to van Inwagen’s discussion of God’s permission of pointless evil and so also show why considerations of chance are irrelevant to NGE. A purely metaphysical view cannot imply that God may justifiably permit undetermined events that do not
serve His purposes, even if it may imply that God may have no reason for permitting His purposes to be served one way rather than another.

Van Inwagen claims to lay out some implications of his views of providence and chance for the problem of why God allows evil (though his essay is intended only as a “prolegomena” to this problem of evil and not a direct treatment of it). However, his essay does not seem to have any direct implications to this problem; it seems to offer only an important analogy: namely, that just as there may only be general reasons for the existence of particular evils (on a view of providence according to which God leaves much to chance), there may only be general reasons for God’s permission of particular evils. The reason that it offers an analogy and not an implication is that though one may argue for the possibility of various sources of chance in a theistic universe, as van Inwagen does (that God may have no reason to prefer one possible world state over another before either are actualized, for example) whether or not God must have specific benevolence reasons for allowing or preventing evils to befall particular individuals once they exist is a separate consideration.

If van Inwagen’s Chance Argument shows the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is false, then if the same reasoning may be applied to NGE, it also shows NGE is false. But the Chance Argument does not show either are false. van Inwagen holds that there may be no reason, relative to God’s purposes, to allow Alice to die in an accident rather than Phillip, only a general reason for allowing the specific evil of Alice’s death, and of course if there is no such reason than even God can’t have it. But again, showing that the meticulous view of providence may be questioned in this way is not to show that God may permit evil for no reason at all. If the permission of either Alice’s death or Phillip’s is necessary for a greater good, and Alice dies instead of Phillip, then her death is not permitted for no reason, only Alice’s dying instead of Phillip is permitted
for no reason. To show God may permit evil “for no reason at all”, one would need to show that God may permit an amount of evil in a net loss of good for no reason at all.

Now, van Inwagen does not explicitly mention William Rowe or NGE in this essay; so he may be understood to target only the claim that if God allows an evil, there must be some good that requires that specific instance of evil. The difficulty is that this does not have the broad relevance to the problem of evil van Inwagen claims for his conclusions.

In addition, I think van Inwagen misrepresents the judgments that are most likely behind the objections he considers, or at least does not consider related more forceful objections. He considers the objection that it would be unfair for God to allow pointless evil to befall someone for no reason and responds that this should be accepted on the same basis that one accepts God may allow other types of harm to be distributed unequally at random. However, though it may indeed be fair to allow unequal chances of being harmed if no one is given privileged treatment, a more forceful objection is that it seems unjust for God to allow truly pointless harm, no matter what the distribution of probability of receiving such harm. Justice is not fairness. One may treat all others equally unjustly and thus fairly. If God allows someone to be harmed for absolutely no reason at all, then such allowing manifests a complete lack of concern and respect for that person. This complete absence of consideration is not only a complete lack of benevolence; it is also an injustice in the sense that whether one deserves the harm or not is not even treated as a consideration.

Van Inwagen also considers the objection that an explanation for God’s permission of a type of evil in terms of divine general policies must be the sum of explanations for God’s permission of each evil. He responds that just as we think God may have a reason for permitting
sin, without necessarily having a specific reason for permitting every individual sin, we should not think God must have specific reasons for permitting specific instances of other types of evils. Van Inwagen here treats an explanation for God’s permission of an individual evil as necessarily distinct from an explanation for God’s permission of all of that type of evil, and perhaps, then, as an explanation for God’s permission of that evil rather than some other. But if God’s purposes can be instantiated in different ways, as we are assuming, why would someone object that in order for there to be such a divine general policy requiring that type of evil there must be contrastive explanations for every such evil? One reason would be that God’s goodness to each individual sentient being requires this, at least with respect to many evils, as mentioned earlier. This seems a valid objection, though not linked to the possibility of divine general policies. Putting this aside, the objection is weak and unnatural to pose. What one might object instead is that the general explanation for God’s permission of a type of evil is an explanation for God’s permission of each evil of that type, and so its not true that because of general policy and global good considerations God may permit individual evils for no reason, as van Inwagen claims. This is my own view.

**Howard-Snyder’s Chance Argument against the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis**

Daniel Howard-Snyder has defended van Inwagen’s view that God need not have a reason for permitting the specific evils He permits. In “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil” he argues that just as a sport coach does not need to have a reason for permitting a specific injury rather than some other in order to be justified in permitting it, God need not have reasons for permitting the specific evils He permits. Howard-Snyder thinks NGE must be reformulated to accommodate this. Against both van Inwagen and Howard-Snyder I argue now from a new perspective that the distinction between general reasons for general kinds of evil and specific
reasons for specific evils does not carry the weight or import for the problem of evil they think it does.

In the first three pages of “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil” Daniel Howard-Snyder presents a refutation of NGE that elaborates on van Inwagen’s work. He begins his essay with a quote from Dostoyevsky, who raises the inscrutability of God’s permission of evil most acutely by referring to examples of horrifically cruel suffering inflicted on children. I will mention only one such example: a boy’s being hunted and eaten alive by a general’s hounds at the general’s command.

These examples are especially forceful because they focus attention on the suffering of individual persons and the gross injustice done them rather than on abstract and general evils. Considering the individual innocent person who suffers apparently completely debilitating evil at the hands of another raises the issue of divine justice acutely, for even if a great good for others somehow mysteriously depended on that suffering, it may well seem a violation of justice to allow it nonetheless. It also raises the question of how God may be considered benevolent, for again, even if permitting such evil somehow mysteriously increased the total goodness of creation, permitting seemingly utterly destructive suffering for such a purpose may seem contrary to care for an individual as a beloved with inestimable intrinsic value. Just as it seems each child deserves an individual answer for why his or her suffering was allowed, it seems each instance of such injustice must have its own God-justifying reason for its permission by God.

Furthermore, focusing on an individual case of unjust suffering brings to our attention the contingency of such evil: how if perhaps only a few choices or circumstances had been different it would not have occurred and how it seems the world as a whole would have gone on much the same without it. This seeming contingency makes it difficult to see how permitting such evil
could be necessary for some suitably great good. The combination of these factors make such examples seem stridently pointless and therefore offer a good starting point for discussion of the strength of evidence, if any, particular instances of evil offer against theism. Howard-Snyder expresses the force such examples lend atheism in the form of a succinct argument:

If God exists, He must have some reason for permitting, e.g., the boy to be eaten alive by the general’s hounds. But no reason we know of justifies his permitting that evil. So it is very likely that there is no God.

Howard-Snyder’s essay responds to this argument, which he calls “The Appeal to Particular Horrors”, in two stages. First he targets the first claim that if God exists, He must have some reason for permitting, e.g., the boy to be eaten alive by the general’s hounds. He then revises this claim to make it less specific, referring to the permission of that specific evil or some other evil at least as bad, and then claims to cast doubt on the revised claim. He concludes that The Appeal to Particular Horrors fails and spends the remainder of his essay considering the epistemological merits of what he calls The Argument from Inscrutable Evil, which appeals to the enormous total amount of horrific evil that exists but no horror in particular.

The No Contrastive Explanation Argument

Howard-Snyder begins by asking “But must God have a reason for permitting that evil, if He exists?” He answers by making a formal analogy between God’s permitting a boy to be eaten alive by hunting dogs and a coach’s allowing a player to get injured in a game. Just as it would be unreasonable to demand the coach have a reason for permitting that player rather than some other player to get injured, or for allowing the injury to occur at that time rather than some other, or at that place rather than some other, it would be unreasonable to think God must have a reason
for allowing that boy *rather than some other child* to get eaten alive, or for allowing the incident to occur at the time it did *rather than some other time*, etc. Howard-Snyder concludes from this analogy that: “As astonishing as it initially sounds, God need not have a reason to permit that e, in any natural sense in which the demonstrative “that e” might be used.” He then says, “No philosophically sophisticated atheist asserts of any particular e that God must have a reason to permit it, rather than some other particular e. Rather, she will say that if God exists, then some good justifies Him in permitting that e or some equally bad or worse e.” Howard-Snyder then goes on to argue that this “more sophisticated” claim is open to question. Before considering this, let us examine his first argument.

Howard-Snyder thinks the Coach Analogy yields two related lessons:

(1) It is not true that for each particular evil God must have a reason for permitting that evil “in any natural sense in which the demonstrative “that evil” might be used.”, and

(2) One can be justified in allowing an evil even if there is no good that requires the permission of the evil.

Because of this Howard-Snyder thinks the Coach Analogy shows the thesis "If God exists, necessarily, for every particular evil, there is a good that justifies God's permission of that evil." is false.

Consider the following two theses:

**The Exclusivity Requirement**: *For any particular evil, God must have a reason to permit that evil *rather than some other particular evil*. 
Generic NGE: For any particular evil, God must have a reason for permitting that evil (in a natural sense in which the demonstrative “that evil” might be used).

Are these different? Howard-Snyder treats them as equivalent, but they are not. While Howard-Snyder’s coach analogy may illustrate why it is unreasonable to assert the Exclusivity Requirement, his analogy does not carry the lesson for the problem of evil that he thinks it does. Howard-Snyder has not given any reason to disbelieve Generic NGE.

While it is certainly true that no philosophically sophisticated atheist asserts of any particular evil that God must have a reason to permit it rather than some other particular evil, and Howard-Snyder’s analogies illustrate why this is so, it is not natural for even a philosophically unsophisticated atheist or theist to think God must have a reason to permit a specific evil rather than some other particular evil of the same type. This is especially so should a plausible good that requires either evil be proposed, but is so even if none is available. And, although some may believe the Exclusivity Requirement because they think God can leave nothing to chance or make morally arbitrary decisions, this requirement is neither implied by nor a motivation for Generic NGE. Therefore Howard-Snyder has not shown that, and it is not true that, Generic NGE must be replaced by a related but more sophisticated claim that takes the falsehood of the Exclusivity Requirement into account. Furthermore, while it would be “astonishing” to find that Generic NGE is false, it is not at all surprising to realize the Exclusivity Requirement is false.

Typically, and in the sense relevant to the question of whether evil counts as evidence against the existence of God, when someone asks why God has allowed a particular evil the relevant alternative is not God’s allowing some other equally bad evil instead but simply God’s
not allowing this particular evil; and, the relevant state of affairs that could be part of the answer to this question in this context would be the good that this particular evil in fact serves, whether or not another instance of evil could have served equally well (as the Exclusivity Requirement excludes). Having a reason for permitting a specific evil should not be equated with, or be taken to include, having a reason for permitting that evil rather than some other. Here I will disentangle what I believe are sources of confusion in Howard-Snyder’s thinking about what Generic NGE assumes and the alternatives to it.

Let us first consider Howard-Snyder’s concluding statement: “G need not have a reason to permit that e, in any natural sense in which the demonstrative “that e” might be used.” This says that for all senses or uses of “that e”, God need not have a reason to permit that e. His evidence is the analogy given above. Now, what is the relevance of the different senses/uses of ‘that’? They do not determine or describe what needs explaining. They are the means of referring to what needs explaining. There may be reasons answering to each sense and there may not, but the reasons for allowing e that address ways of specifying e do not necessarily exhaust reasons for allowing e. This is clearly seen by way of example. I allow the following event: my daughter’s riding that horse now. I allow it now because the time is convenient; I allow her to ride that horse because it is gentle, etc; but the main reason I allow this is, say, that learning to ride a horse will boost her self-confidence. Likewise, there may be no way to refer to the evil e under discussion without using some adjectives for which no explanation can be given because the available adjectives are very specific, but the correct and fully adequate explanation for e is general. By analogy, if I say “I like the girl in the red coat”, I’m not claiming my liking her has anything to do with the red coat. In other words, reasons for why an event has the features that can be used to individuate the event (or even features that in fact objectively individuate an
event) are neither necessary nor sufficient for satisfactory explanation for why that event occurred.

To illustrate in the present context: suppose we ask for an explanation for God ‘s permitting some instance of evil. In order to specify the evil we describe it as: the killing that took place in Manhattan on January first. This description is the means by which the evil is specified and should not be confused with that which needs to be explained, namely that being specified. What is in need of explanation? God’s permission of the evil just specified. What needs explaining is God’s allowing a particular event, which may be picked out by time and place by saying, e.g., “the January first killing” or “the accident yesterday on 4th St and 2nd Ave”. What needs explaining is the accident that occurred yesterday on 4th St and 2nd Ave, not the accident’s occurring yesterday or the accident’s occurring on 4th St and 2nd Ave.

Now, once picked out, we may want to know: What is it about that event that needs to be addressed to explain why God permitted it? The full answer to this may be: Its being an instance of horrible physical suffering of an innocent, or its being an instance of cruel and callous disregard for human life, or of grossly unjust retribution, or of all of these. If we explain why God permits such evil in terms of a good that applies to all such evil, we have given a reason for God’s permitting that specific instance. (Perhaps one may then ask, why not less evil of that type? or how can God’s permission of that evil be fair to that victim? but those are additional questions.) We have not given a reason for God ‘s permitting that individual evil rather than some other instance of evil that meets those descriptions, but we don’t need to. (Similarly, if I have a reason for allowing Bo to get injured, my reason may have nothing to do with the fact that its Bo as opposed to someone else, but it is still a reason that applies to that particular event.) In general, the reason for x need not address the criteria by which we pick out x. So, the fact that we
can think of no reason, or there being no reason, that answers to the contrast class used in picking out x, in no way implies there is no reason for x. The contrast class used to identify x is not necessarily or typically the contrast class of relevant alternatives the request for explanation seeks to distinguish or to narrow down.

Howard-Snyder often italicizes the word ‘that’ when articulating Generic NGE. I think this is telling. If one enunciates that in saying “that x” one means “that as opposed to some other thing of the same (suitably narrow) category x”. E.g. “Why did you pick that pitcher?” But of course ‘that’ can also be used as ostensive reference: just to pick something out from many other events or states of affairs. Presumably, Howard-Snyder’s italicized ‘that’ means the former. But when someone confronted with some evil asks “Why did God permit this?” he just means the particular instance, not this as opposed to some other evil. And the intuition behind NGE is that if God exists there must be some good that answers this question.

Howard-Snyder’s interpretation of the “unsophisticated” request for explanation misses the question at issue and is unnatural. This is obvious when applied to more mundane circumstances. For example: Why did you throw the ball just now? Now? Because I couldn’t throw it later ... The ball? Because it has a more controllable trajectory than anything else nearby.. Throw? Because I didn’t want to kick it ... These answer all the particularities by which the action may be specified in order for the question to be asked, but of course the fully satisfactory answer to the specific question asked, to have fun, perhaps, need not involve any of them. Howard-Snyder’s Coach Analogy and discussion has given us no reason to doubt Generic NGE, the claim that for each particular evil, God must have a reason for permitting that e (in a natural sense in which the demonstrative “that e” might be used).
So Howard-Snyder’s illustrations are interesting, but they do not evidence the conclusion he draws. The lesson that should have been taken is: a person may be justified in permitting a particular evil by reasons that could just as well have justified permitting some other injury. Just as the coach, God need not have reasons for permitting that specific injury to be justified in permitting it, his reasons may be of a more general sort. That is just the lesson “general policy” theodicies should be taken to teach.

Howard-Snyder thinks that because the Coach Analogy shows it is not true that for any particular evil $e$, God must have a reason for permitting $e$ specifically, it also shows that (lesson (2)) God can be justified in allowing an evil $e$ even if there is no good that requires His permission of $e$.

To begin our critique of this second claim, note that (Generic NGE) For any particular evil, God must have a reason for permitting that $e$ does not deny (2)One can be justified in allowing an evil $e$ even if there is no good that requires the permission of the evil $e$. To assume it does is to assume that a good can only justify God’s permission of an evil if the good requires that permission. Now, if by ‘evil $e$’ is meant a certain amount of a certain kind of evil, this is a plausible assumption. What needs explaining is why God would permit the evil of an evil state of affairs, “the evil” perhaps thought of as the manner in which a state of affairs is evil and the intensity or disvalue of it. The intuition is that if an omnipotent being could have obtained a good without an evil He cannot be morally perfect if He obtains that same good with the evil. However, the plausibility of this is due to the judgment that a morally perfect being would prefer less evil to more and govern accordingly, and so is only clearly plausible if ‘evil’ is taken to refer to a particular amount of evil, not a specific embodiment of evil. Accordingly, the judgment that a good justifies the permission of an evil only if it requires
the permission of that evil is not obvious if 'evil' is taken to refer to a specific instantiation of evil rather than the existence of an amount of a kind of evil. So Howard-Snyder’s view seems reasonable only because of an equivocation of “the evil”.

Again, what requires explanation is the existence of, or permission of, the evil of the evil event, not necessarily the particular embodiment of that evil, which would include features that are not relevant to the manner in which the event is evil or the magnitude of the evil. A good may justify the permission of a particular evil e by requiring the permission of the amount of e without requiring the permission of e. It is ironic that Howard-Snyder assumes that a good could only justify the permission of an evil if it requires that permission of evil, which, when properly understood, is fundamental to NGE, in arguing against that thesis.

Furthermore, this point is illustrated by the Coach Analogy itself. The lesson of the Coach Analogy is, in addition to (2), also that a good can justify allowing a particular evil e even if the good does not require allowing the evil e. That is, the reason one is justified in (2) is that one permits the evil for the sake of a good even though that good does not require the evil. Indeed, Howard-Snyder’s examples illustrate the opposite of the conclusion he draws. The coach does nothing wrong in allowing the player to sprain her ankle just because allowing the possibility of such minor injuries is necessary for the good of allowing the players to play soccer.

My next criticism is that even apart from these observations and the consideration that a good cannot justify God’s permission of an evil unless the permission of that amount of evil is necessary for that good (and apart from Snyder’s thinking the analogy shows (2)) there remain good reasons for thinking Generic NGE is true. Suppose God may justifiably permit an evil without having a reason for permitting that evil rather than some other. What justifies such permission? Certainly there must be a reason of some sort. Even if God can be justified in
permitting an evil that is not necessary for a greater good, it seems that God's being justified must involve a good reason. All of God's choices are justified and all are ultimately related to good purposes and reasons so it seems that for every particular evil, some good purpose must in some relevant sense justify His decision to permit it. Generic NGE does not require that the permission of evil be necessary for the good purpose, just that there be some reason for the permission. Even if God only permits evil e because it is an instance of a type and has no reason specific to e as opposed to some other equally bad evil of that type, the specific divine choice (defined in terms of the individual evil permitted) must be made for a reason and it seems the reason would be whatever reason God has for permitting that type of evil.

Finally, it is not obvious that the Coach Analogy or similar analogies do provide an example in which one is justified in allowing an evil even though allowing the evil is not necessary for a greater good, even if by “the evil” is meant the particular instance or token of evil. This was pointed out in chapter one: if a good implies God allows either evil e or e', then God’s allowing e is necessary for a greater good, namely, the more specific good: (g without e'). If winning the war implies either Joe dies or John dies, then Joe's death is necessary for the unique good of winning the war without the cost of John's life. If allowing all of a type of evil to which e belongs, such as possibilities of minor injuries, is necessary for a good then allowing e is necessary for that good. What if allowing most but no specific number, or specific amount, of a set of evils to which e belongs is required for good G? Is this a case in which allowing e is not necessary for a greater good? No, in this case although allowing e is not necessary for G it is necessary for a greater good. I will argue this at length in the next chapter.
The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis

Much of the above section, arguing that Howard-Snyder has not shown Generic NGE false, also targets his claim that Generic NGE should be replaced by the following:

The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis: *If God exists, for any particular evil, some good justifies God in permitting it or some equally bad or worse evil.*

There are in addition special problems with his formulation of The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis and claim that it is a correction of Generic NGE that are revealing. These problems are: the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is ill-formulated, the implicit reasoning for replacing Generic NGE with it is flawed, and the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is a subspecies of Generic NGE.

The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is ill-formulated

The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is ill-formulated. This is a result of mistaken thinking about God’s relation to evil, chiefly the assumption that a good that does not require a specific evil cannot justify God in allowing that evil or be God’s reason for allowing that specific evil.

The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis: *If God exists, for any particular evil, some good justifies God in permitting it or some equally bad or worse evil* seems to imply:

NGDE1: If God permits some evil then some good justifies him in permitting that evil or else some good justifies him in permitting some other equally bad or worse evil,
NGDE1 seems to say that there need be no good that justifies God’s permitting e; an e God permits need not be connected to a greater good so long as there is a good that justifies God in permitting some other equally bad or worse evil. But of course that absurd claim isn’t what’s meant. So, alternatively, not distributing justification over the disjunction, DC should perhaps be read as:

NGDE2 If God permits e, there must be some good that justifies God’s permitting the disjunction: either e1 or e2 (an evil no better).

NGDE2 expresses the idea that God didn’t have to choose e1 to obtain the justifying good and may seem to express a weaker moral requirement than Generic NGE, in accordance with Howard-Snyder’s strong claim that there need not be a good or reason that justifies God in permitting e. But this effort is self-defeating. NGDE2 cannot express a weaker moral requirement than Generic NGE, as quite naturally understood. For consider: Why must the consequent of NGDE2 hold? Clearly, according to a proponent of NGDE2, because otherwise God would not be justified in permitting e. So God is justified in permitting e because e belongs to a disjunctive set that is required for a good. But if so, doesn’t that good then justify God’s permission of e? And if so then, contrary to Howard-Snyder, NGDE2 simply expresses one way (the only way, according to NGDE2) in which Generic NGE may be satisfied. It seems that Howard-Snyder’s discussion and his rejection of Generic NGE requires that a good satisfying NGDE2 does not justify God’s permission of e. But this is implausible. Of course, on NGDE2 e is not necessary for the good referred to, so if Generic NGE is taken to imply the Exclusivity Requirement that for any particular evil, God must have a reason to permit that evil rather than some other particular evil, then NGDE2 may be true and Generic NGE false. But what NGDE2, if reasonable, indicates, is that Generic NGE should not be taken to imply the Exclusivity
Requirement. After all, why propose or believe NGDE2 if not as a justificatory condition and reason for God’s permitting an evil? So if NGDE2 is true then for any particular evil, if God permits the evil He has a reason for permitting it, namely to actualize a good that requires a disjunction of evils including e. So NGDE2 does not express a weaker moral requirement than Generic NGE, it entails Generic NGE. Also, and ironically, in distinguishing Generic NGE from NGDE2, it seems Howard-Snyder has conflated e’s being permitted for a good reason with e’s being necessary for the good.

But, apart from this incoherence, NGDE2 cannot be correct. Surely no one wants to argue there has to be such a disjunction. That may be true of some evils but is not plausibly or typically a requirement of just any particular evil. To correct this, we may render the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis as:

NGDE3 For any particular horror, if God exists, some good justifies Him in permitting it, and it is possible that if God had chosen to permit some other equally bad or worse evil the same good would have justified Him in permitting that other evil.

Or perhaps:

NGDE4 If God permits e, there must be some good that justifies God’s permitting e and that also justifies God’s permitting the disjunction: either e1 or e2.

But both of these are explicitly perfectly compatible with the Generic NGE claim that he meant to replace; for in both cases, it is required that there be a good that justifies God’s permission of e and this is just what makes NGDE3 and NGDE4 more plausible than NGDE1 and NGDE2. This brings out the absurdity of rejecting Generic NGE. There is no reasonable way to interpret the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis that does not imply Generic NGE. For
how can one state a necessary justificatory condition for God’s permitting an evil in terms of a
good that does not justify God in permitting that evil? And neither NGDE3 nor NGDE4
articulates the lesson of the coach analogy: simply that evil e need not be necessary for g to be
justified by g, all that is necessary is that the disjunction e or e is necessary for g, where e2 is
equally bad or worse. In other words, the permission of an amount of evil, though not a particular
instantiation of that amount, must be necessary for a good for that permission to be justified by
that good.

Generic NGE does not need to be replaced

The difficulty in expressing the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is not a mere
stylistic flaw, but is due to mistaking the relations of necessity between God, goods, purposes,
explanation, justification, and evils. For good g to justify God in permitting evil e, g need not
imply (God’s permission of) e, it need only imply (God’s permission of) e or some evil no better.
It seems that Howard-Snyder has reasoned:

1. Evil e must be necessary for good g for g to justify God’s permission of e.

2. Clearly, God may be justified in permitting evil e even if e is not necessary for any
good. (by the Coach Analogy argument)

   Therefore, 3. God may be justified in permitting evil e even if there is no good to justify
   God’s permission of e.

But the goods that require the disjunction of evils just are God’s justifying reasons for
permitting the particular evils He permits. Howard-Snyder has not so far argued that God may
allow e for no reason at all, only that God need not have specific kinds of reasons. What should
have been concluded is that a good g can justify God in permitting evil e even if permitting e is
not necessary for g, provided permitting some member of a set of equally bad evils that includes e (perhaps an amount of a kind instantiated by e) is required for g.

Consider the following propositions:

Necessarily, if God allows evil e:

i) some good justifies God’s allowing e
ii) some good justifies God’s allowing e or e’
iii) some good explains why God allows e rather than e’ (some evil no better)
iv) God’s allowing e is necessary for good g
v) God’s allowing e or e’ is necessary for good g

Howard-Snyder seems to reason as follows: i) requires iv) and so implies iii). iii) is not necessarily true, as shown by the Coach Analogy, so i) should be replaced by ii). However, the lesson of the coach analogy is just that iv) (interpreted as referring to a particular evil rather than a certain amount of a certain kind of evil) should be replaced by v) because iii) is false. v) is not at odds with i) for the reasons given above. v) is a justificatory condition for God’s allowing e, stating that a good and an evil’s relation to that good, namely, instantiating an amount of a kind of evil the good requires, is required for God to be justified in allowing e.

ii) Necessarily, if God allows evil e, some good justifies God’s allowing e or e’ (some evil no better) is implausible: it does not seem to admit of any unproblematic reading that does not entail i). This misformulation was due to the error of taking i) to entail iii) so as to require a new perspective on the kinds of pointless God may allow. The appearance of being a sophistication of i) is misleading: it is not that rejecting i) in favor of ii) marks the acceptance of a kind of pointless or rejection of an overly specific, though appealing, justificatory
condition. Rather, the consideration that ii) was motivated by, though not recognized, is just the possibility of the multiple realizability of God’s purposes or of chance. That distinction marks the difference between iv) and v). But accepting or rejecting chance in a world created and governed by God has no bearing on the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, as I have argued.

Framing this in terms of our earlier discussion, if the feature of evil e that requires explanation, or if what is referred to by e, is the amount of a certain kind of evil then iv and v are equivalent. iv is distinct from v just if e refers to a particular instantiation of evil, and the possibility that God’s good purposes may be realized in different ways is granted, in which case v clarifies that it is some token of that kind in that amount that is required, not necessarily the particular token of evil itself. In other words, given the multiple realizability of God’s purposes, v, which describes a relation of metaphysical necessity (rather than a causal relation) states that good g requires a disjunction be satisfied. It does not state that either g requires e’ or g requires e’’. But ii refers to God’s being justified, which is an actual state of affairs. So what ii should say is that “some g justifies God’s allowing amount of evil e and so could justify God’s allowing e’ or God’s allowing e’’”. But to say that some good actually justifies a disjunction, some of whose disjuncts are not actual seems to make no sense. The attempt to avoid i. then, necessitated by Howard-Snyder’s discussion, results in incoherence.

**The No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is a subspecies of Generic NGE**

What is the relation between Generic NGE, the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis, and the idea of pointless evil? Howard-Snyder claims that his illustrations and analogies show the “astonishing” fact that Generic NGE is false. However, the ordinary intuition that if God exists He must not only be justified in allowing certain categories of evil but in allowing every particular evil, that He must have a reason for the permission of each instance of evil, and
that there must be some greater good each evil is permitted for is not contravened by these examples. For, again, a reason for permitting an evil may justify God’s permitting that specific evil even if it could have justified God’s permission of some other equally bad evil. Moreover, as I will show, these examples do not show that the NGE claim that for every evil that God allows there is a greater good that allowing that specific evil is necessary for, requires adjustment. But first, in this section, I will argue that Howard-Snyder has not refuted Generic NGE, even on his own interpretation of Generic NGE as implying the Exclusivity Requirement that For any particular evil, God must have a reason to permit that evil rather than some other particular evil.

Howard-Snyder speaks of Generic NGE as a commonly held belief and seems to hold that although it initially seems very plausible, reflection shows it quite implausible. But why does Generic NGE seem so attractive? And how could it be astonishing to find it false, if its falsity is demonstrated by some quite simple, common, and straightforward counter-examples? What is the relation between Generic NGE, the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis and pointlessness?

The main appeal of the atheist arguments from particular horrors Howard-Snyder means to counter is that such evils seem pointless and it seems God would not permit pointless evils. Pointlessness is the central concept. So does the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis correct Generic NGE by better articulating that notion, so that both are formulated to capture basically the same view, with the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis being the more accurate expression of it? We may call this the “Rephrasing Interpretation.” On this interpretation, the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis avoids the possible misinterpretation of Generic NGE as implying the Exclusivity Requirement and Howard-
Snyder’s argument against the Exclusivity Requirement is a prolegomena to the real issue of addressing God’s relation to pointless evil. However, Howard-Snyder’s claim that the falsity of Generic NGE is an “astonishing” result of his philosophical reflection discredits this interpretation. It would hardly count as astonishing to find that a common view can be inaptly expressed for lack of precision. Yet Generic NGE must prohibit some kind of pointlessness. If not, again, what could be astonishing about finding it false?

This seems to leave a “Types of Pointlessness” interpretation, according to which the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis and Generic NGE counter different possible kinds of pointlessness, expressing substantially different views of God’s relation to evil. One way to render this interpretation is to say that rejecting Generic NGE and accepting the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis concedes some measure of pointlessness in God’s providence. The difference here would be that Generic NGE involves a more meticulous providence, one that may seem to accord best with God’s sovereignty but that, on reflection of the kind Howard-Snyder offers, is not necessary for a traditional theist to hold. An instructive parallel here might be articulations of omnipotence constrained by the concept of God as the greatest possible being: in the same way that thinking God can make contradictions true may initially seem devout, but on reflection detracts from rather than enhances our concept of God, Generic NGE may initially seem required of a perfect being, but on reflection is implausibly overly restrictive. Just as it may initially seem astonishing to find a “restriction” on God’s power, though careful reflection shows the appearance of restriction illusory, it may initially seem astonishing to find God may allow a kind of pointlessness, though careful reflection shows the apparent impossibility of that pointlessness given God’s existence illusory. On the “Types of Pointlessness” interpretation
Howard-Snyder views himself as using one argument to remove an overly strict moral requirement and then a different set of reasons to cast doubt on a related less strict requirement.

But against this interpretation, it just does not seem that anyone, naïve or sophisticated, would think that Generic NGE, construed as expressing something at odds with the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis, namely the Exclusivity Requirement, would express a moral requirement. Perhaps it would be astonishing for many to find that simple reflections show the implausibility of a meticulous providence (according to which every event is specifically required for God’s purposes, perhaps as part of the greatest possible world God could actualize). But no one would find it astonishing that, if God’s purposes may be satisfied in different equally suitable ways, what we may call “Multiple Realizability”, as the coach analogy requires, God could have allowed different equally bad evils to achieve the same good purpose. Granting Multiple Realizability, the move from Generic NGE, as construed by Howard-Snyder to imply the Exclusivity Requirement, to the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is a move from prohibiting whatever in fact satisfies God’s purposes if something else could have satisfied those purposes to prohibiting amounts of evil allowed for no reason at all. But, after all, once granting Multiple Realizability, it is of course just the permission of the amount and kinds of evil that require justification. Given Multiple Realizability, the former prohibition is not a moral requirement anyone would think to hold, and is certainly not a prohibition of a type of pointlessness. My dying in your place to save the world is not rendered pointless in any relevant sense by the fact that you could have died instead. So we have here a second reason for denying Howard-Snyder’s reasoning carries a lesson for the problem of evil as he claims: Generic NGE is only plausible as a view distinct from the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis if it is taken to imply both imply the Exclusivity Requirement and the denial of Multiple Realizability, but
Howard-Snyder’s arguments against the Exclusivity Requirement assume Multiple Realizability without argument.

Here is another way to make this point. The Exclusivity Requirement that *for any particular evil* e God must have a reason to permit that e *rather than some other particular evil*, can be trivially satisfied if “some other evil” refers to just any evil, including gratuitous evils far worse than e. So should the underlined phrase be “rather than any other evil”? If Multiple Realizability is possible, this is implausibly restrictive and perhaps impossible to satisfy. How could God have a reason for permitting one evil e rather than another e’ if e’ could equally well take e’s place, for all God’s purposes and intentions?

So my argument against Howard-Snyder’s appeal to chance against NGE is: the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis implies Generic NGE unless Generic NGE is interpreted as the Exclusivity Requirement that for any particular evil e God must have a reason to permit that e *rather than some other particular evil*. Howard-Snyder’s Coach Analogy against the Exclusivity Requirement in favor of the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis assumes Multiple Realizability, that God’s purposes may be satisfied in different equally suitable ways. But if Multiple Realizability is granted as a possibility, the Exclusivity Requirement is uninteresting because obviously false. So, Howard-Snyder has not given reasons for replacing Generic NGE with the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis.

In the second stage of his essay, Howard-Snyder argues that the No Gratuitous Disjunction of Evils Thesis is open to question because it implies that there is a minimum amount of horrific evil whose permission is necessary and sufficient for the realization of God’s purposes. I consider this objection to NGE in the next chapter.
Chapter 6

Gratuitous Evil and Vagueness
If God permits an evil must that permission be necessary for some good? The answer may seem obvious: if permitting an evil serves no good purpose, why would a perfectly good being permit it? However, as we have seen in the last two chapters, some have argued that it is not necessarily true that an omnipotent and perfectly good being would only allow an evil if allowing it is necessary for some good. I have argued that these objections to NGE based on deontology and chance interpret NGE overly narrowly. In this chapter I consider the most influential objection to NGE: an appeal to the purported possibility that God’s purposes may require only vague amounts of evil. I will refer to the family of arguments that make this appeal as the “Vagueness Objection”. Van Inwagen is this argument’s chief explicit proponent, but I will argue in the next chapter that Hasker’s widely discussed argument against NGE based on requirements for significant moral freedom is essentially an appeal to vagueness. I maintain that all arguments against the Vagueness Objection have failed. Philosophers who have aimed to revise Rowe’s argument so as to avoid this objection, such as Daniel Howard-Snyder, Michael Almeida, and Nick Trakkakis, have not safeguarded but instead replaced NGE. In this chapter I analyze and refute this objection and describe why vagueness is irrelevant to NGE.

The Vagueness Objection as the No Minimum Claim

Peter van Inwagen has argued against NGE as follows. There are various situations in which some evil must be permitted for an end it is morally permmissible to pursue, but in which there is no minimum amount of evil that must be permitted for that purpose. For example, some, but no minimum, fine must be imposed to deter illegal parking. Some, but no minimum, jail sentence must be enforced to deter certain crimes. In these situations, one can prevent an evil (one hour of a jail sentence, say) without forfeiting any greater good or permitting an equal or
worse evil (without loss of deterrent effect, for example), and one does nothing wrong in not doing so. Since there is no precise minimum effective jail sentence for a specific crime, the selection of a jail sentence must be somewhat arbitrary. Because God may be in an analogous situation with respect to the evils of this world, there may be evils that God allows that he could prevent without losing any greater good. In fact, it is likely that God is in such a situation. Therefore we have reason to think NGE is false.99

Van Inwagen thinks that just as it is not plausible to suppose there is a jail term that is optimally effective, such that any lesser term is less effective, it is not very plausible to suppose that:

\[ \text{There is a way in which evil could be distributed such that (i) that distribution of evil would serve God’s purposes as well as any distribution could and (ii) God’s purposes would be less well served by any distribution involving less evil.} \]

100

So van Inwagen thinks it is plausible to suppose:

**The No Minimum Claim**: There is no specific amount of evil that is necessary and sufficient for God’s purposes.

This is one version of van Inwagen’s No Minimum Claim. In “The Problems of Evil, Air, and Silence” van Inwagen provides an illustration of his No Minimum Claim by considering instances of natural evil, such as Rowe’s famous case of a fawn’s suffering burn pains in a forest fire, and the good of nature’s laws not failing on a large scale, of nature’s not being “massively irregular”:
[God] could have prevented any one of them [natural evils], or any two of them, or any three of them … without thwarting any significant good or permitting any significant evil. But could he have prevented all of them? No - not without causing the world to be massively irregular. And, of course, there is no sharp cutoff point between a world that is massively irregular and a world that is not. … There is therefore, no minimum number of cases of intense suffering that God could allow without forfeiting the good of a world that is not massively irregular …

Here the No Minimum Claim is formulated as the claim that there is no sharp cutoff between amounts of evil sufficient for God’s purposes and amounts of evil not sufficient for God’s purposes.

Van Inwagen finds denying the No Minimum Claim as implausible as supposing that if an impressively tall prophet is required for God’s purposes, there is a minimum height such a prophet must have. In “The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils” he compares the necessity of evils for God’s purposes to the necessity of raindrops for the fertility of nineteenth century England. Just as there is no specific number of raindrops required for the latter, no one raindrop cutoff between a fertile England and an infertile England, so we should not suppose there must be a specific number of evils required for God’s purposes.

The No Minimum Claim Objection to NGE essentially involves Vagueness

The implicit reasoning involved above may be abstracted from the use of the concept of a minimum amount: if there is no specific amount of evil necessary and sufficient for purpose G, and it is morally permissible to allow some evil to bring about G, then (because every instance of some amount of evil is a specific amount of evil) there is at least one specific amount of evil sufficient but not necessary for G that it is morally permissible to allow for G. And if that’s the case, there are some evils or quantities of evil God is justified in permitting for G that are not necessary for G.
The distinctive feature of the kinds of cases van Inwagen adduces is they involve vague concepts. The amount of jail time required to deter a certain crime is vague (perhaps because that deterrent effect is vague, perhaps not). Likewise, the concept of nature’s being “highly regular” and the concept ‘tall’, given for purposes of illustration, are vague concepts. A concept is vague if there are cases to which it clearly applies, cases to which it clearly does not apply, and “borderline” cases about which it is unclear as to whether it applies, where there seems to be no sharp boundary between borderline and non-borderline cases. For each of these terms, it seems implausible that there is a unique specific amount to which the term applies such that the term does not apply to any lesser amount (or any amount lesser by an appropriately small magnitude). This would deny the indeterminate range of borderline cases these terms seem to have.

So we may take van Inwagen to claim it plausible that the amount of evil required for God’s purposes is vague, where vagueness is understood in this way. This might be because God’s purpose itself is vague, as suggested by the example of nature’s being highly regular, or because His purpose depends on a vague circumstance, as in the tall prophet analogy. From this we can extract from van Inwagen’s work a more focused challenge to NGE:

1. The analogies and examples given (in section I) are reasons to think the amount of evil required for God’s purposes may be vague and hence that the No Minimum Claim could be true

2. These reasons for thinking the No Minimum Claim could be true are of roughly comparable force to, and are not undermined by (because independent of), the motivation for believing NGE

3. NGE entails the No Minimum Claim is false.

Therefore,

4. NGE is open to reasonable doubt.
Criticism

My response to this argument is threefold: First, re: 1: if the multiple realizability of God’s purposes is denied or if ‘God’s purposes’ refers to the concrete instantiation of God’s will, then the analogies and examples given do not strongly suggest the amount of evil required for God’s purposes may be vague. I will argue that for these analogies to provide reason to think the amount of evil required for (the actual instantiation of) God’s purposes is vague, they must be interpreted in a way that requires the intransitivity of the betterness relation. There are strong reasons for not interpreting them this way. Second, even if the multiple realizability of God’s purposes is accepted, and ‘God’s purposes’ do not refer to the actual instantiation of God’s purposes, there is reason to think God’s purposes, including the permission of evil for the goods God intends, cannot be vague (given the results of free and indeterministic causes). One reason is that God wills the goodness of entire possible worlds, whether thought of as possible world histories or as world-states, and one possible world is either better than or not better than another. This is a reason for believing NGE that indicates van Inwagen’s analogies for divine choice circumstances are incorrect. For these reasons, van Inwagen’s examples do not give good reason for thinking the No Minimum Claim is true, contra 1 and 2. Third, against 3, even if the amounts of permitted evil God’s purposes require could be vague, this does not conflict with NGE, because the vagueness described is really best understood as a vague boundary between optimal and sub-optimal divine options. All of this will be argued at length in this chapter, beginning with van Inwagen’s framing of his Vagueness Objection in terms of morally arbitrary choices. First I must remark on a complication in premise 3 above.
NGE and the No Minimum Claim

The relation between NGE and van Inwagen’s No Minimum Claim is not as obvious as van Inwagen assumes. NGE does not imply there is a minimum amount of evil required for God’s purposes. NGE implies that if God exists every evil is such that God could not have prevented it without losing an offsetting good (or permitting an evil at least as bad), and therefore that for every evil there is an offsetting good that requires that that evil (or one at least as bad) not be prevented. But, as discussed in chapter one, preventing an evil in the relevant sense means the evil would have occurred if one hadn’t acted to prevent it. So what NGE implies is that for any evil, there is a greater good that requires either it’s not true that God is willing to prevent it or its not true that that evil would have occurred but for God’s involvement. In other words, according to NGE, if God exists, every evil is such that, given the evil would occur if God does not intervene, God’s permission of it (or some evil equally bad or worse) is necessary for an offsetting good (or prevention of some equal or worse evil). Accordingly, it is compatible with NGE that a theistic universe contain morally evil choices and harmful consequences of (an indeterministic) nature, as well as amounts of such evils, that are not necessary for any good purpose. It is only God’s willingness to permit them if they should occur that is necessary in all cases, as argued in chapters one and six. NGE describes a constraint on God’s choices and is only awkwardly translated as a constraint on kinds or amounts of evil in a theistic universe.

Because of this, it is not obvious how to state what NGE may entail about amounts of evil required for God’s purposes. This is required to make clear just what the No Minimum Claim should deny in order to challenge NGE. If God’s purposes are construed broadly so they may be satisfied by different combinations of goods and evils, the amount of evil required for God’s purposes may be indeterminate. NGE does not rule this out. Given the denial of divine middle
knowledge, on both NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, what God chooses, i.e. what His specific purposes are, may depend on how nature or creaturely freedom unfolds. On the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, whatever goods God chooses, all possible worlds that contain them also contain no less than a specific amount of evil (because the actual amount of evil is absolutely necessary for those goods by that thesis). In the sense relevant to NGE, what evil is necessary for God’s purposes depends on what evil natural indeterminism or creaturely freedom brings about (or more accurately, what natural indeterminism and creaturely freedom would bring about unless God prevents it). So what NGE implies about amounts of evil required for God’s purposes may perhaps be rendered something as follows: If God exists, for every possible set of goods God may choose (which choice may depend on creaturely free choices or “choices” of nature), only one specific amount of evil is compatible, given creaturely free choices or “choices” of nature in the specific circumstances entailed by God’s choice of goods. So, given NGE, what amount of evil is required for God’s purposes instantiated in non-actual circumstances depends on what would be chosen and what would result from natural indeterminism in those circumstances.¹⁰⁵

But are there facts about what free choices or natural indeterminacy would result in those different possible circumstances? If so, then it seems that God, knowing such facts, would choose goods that are parts of optimal trade-offs between goods and evils so that each set of goods that can satisfy God’s purposes requires a specific amount of evil. (However we must consider the possibility that God may have deontological reasons to prefer sub-optimal trade-offs) But if there are no true counterfactuals of freedom (and of indeterministic processes), then given NGE but not the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, the amount of evil required for God’s purposes is indeterminate. If there are no facts about what choices would be made or what
indeterministic natural forces would bring about in non-actual circumstances, then the amount of evil required for God’s purposes in those circumstances, and the least total amount of evil in all possible circumstances in which God’s purposes are instantiated, is indeterminate.

For the sake of clarity and of space, I will not attempt to specify the relation between NGE and the No Minimum Claim more precisely. We may suppose that van Inwagen’s No Minimum Claim can be understood as implicitly including some suitable additional qualification parallel to the distinction between NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis.

Morally Arbitrary Choices

In his Gifford Lectures Peter van Inwagen also frames his vagueness objection in terms of arbitrary choices. He faults the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis for forbidding the allowing of an evil when one has no moral reason for allowing it, for “forbidding the drawing of morally arbitrary lines”. Van Inwagen thinks there are situations in which one must arbitrarily choose how much evil to permit and so cannot be faulted for doing so, despite violating Rowe’s theological premise. In this section I argue that van Inwagen’s examples do not show that the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis forbids morally arbitrary choices in any questionable sense. If God may make morally neutral choices, as van Inwagen thinks, the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis’s required “greater good” could be a merely offsetting good (as described in chapter one); and though van Inwagen’s examples may illustrate permissible permission of evil when that permission is not necessary for a greater good, they do not obviously illustrate permissible permission of evil when that permission is not necessary for an offsetting good.

The following is one of van Inwagen’s several formally similar proposed counterexamples to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis via this circumstance of permissible morally arbitrary permission of evil: Suppose you are in charge of distributing life-saving medicine
and do not have enough for all the children who need it. After portioning out 100 doses you see you can increase the number of doses one more by very slightly lessening the amount of each dose. You realize that no greater good would be served by not doing so: very slightly lessening the amount of each dose will lessen its effectiveness only very slightly, if at all, and the next potential recipient will certainly die if she does not receive the medicine. Distributing 100 rather than 101 doses of medicine achieves no net good, then, but does result in the unnecessary evil of allowing the next child in need of the medicine to die. Because no greater good is involved in choosing 100 doses rather than 101 and because to make this choice is to permit the evil of a child’s death, this choice is prohibited by the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis (according to van Inwagen).

Yet, in this circumstance, because of the limited supply of medicine, not increasing the number of doses to 101 may be morally permissible. This is because you must stop increasing the number of doses (by slightly decreasing the amount of each dose) at some point and it is implausible that there is one uniquely best stopping point. It seems rather that there is a permissible range of the number of doses between clearly too many (because too small) doses and clearly too few. You must choose some number within this permissible range, and wherever you morally reasonably stop, you will have faced a choice like that between 100 and 101. Therefore, according to van Inwagen, you will have made a permissible yet morally arbitrary choice. So, according to van Inwagen, the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis forbids the drawing of morally arbitrary lines, such as that of stopping the medicine distribution at 100 doses rather than 101, and is mistaken in doing so. 108
Criticism: Types of Arbitrariness

There being no good achieved by choosing 100 rather than 101 doses, no “greater good” that outweighs the additional permitted death, cannot by itself make permitting that evil a gratuitous evil by the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. This circumstance of achieving no net good may obtain even if also no net evil or loss of net good is achieved by choosing 100 rather than 101, making choice 100 (choosing 100) no worse than choice 101 (choosing 101). Though choice 100 seems to involve no more net good than choice 101, no “greater good”, it is not equally obvious that choice 100 involves no offsetting good making choice 100 no worse than choice 101. That is, though choice 100 seems no better than choice 101, it is not obvious that choice 100 is worse than choice 101. After all, by stipulation, they seem equally good stopping points.

It is important to keep in mind that in these examples one is not only arbitrarily choosing between amounts of evil, one is also arbitrarily choosing between balances of, or trade-offs between, goods and evils. One must choose between one trade-off between number of people given a certain probability of cure and number left unhelped and another, for example. One is caught between increasing the number of children potentially helped and not overly decreasing the likely effectiveness of each dose. Although the trade-offs involve differing amounts of evil, it is still possible that they are equivalent in net value.

Also, it is important to note that there are goods involved in these cases that are distinct from, though instantiated by, the specific goods one must choose between. For example, to choose 100 rather than 101 doses is to choose to give 100 children 1/100th of the medicine rather than 1/101th and to give one child no chance of survival rather than that given by 1/101th of the medicine. This option may also instantiate the less specific good of giving a good number of
people a good chance of survival, where goodness is relative to the given possibilities. The relation of different choices to this good may be an additional dimension of comparative value.

So what could make choice 100 no worse than choice 101? This may not be as clear as that choice 100 seems no worse, but we may speculate that perhaps a slight increase in the likelihood of curing a large number of children at this point in the trade-offs involved in securing the (vague) good of giving a good number of children a good chance of cure is a good that offsets the evil of giving the next potential recipient no chance of survival rather than that indicated. Or perhaps there is some other way to construe the goods involved in this choice situation.

In any case, a clear understanding of what could make choice 100 no worse than choice 101 is not needed to make my present point, which is this: Whatever goods and evils are involved, choosing 100 is to permit a gratuitous evil only if choosing 101 is better than choosing 100. Only then is the additional evil of the additional permitted death involved in choosing 100 rather than 101 doses not offset.

So the relevant question is not “Is choosing 100 doses as opposed to 101 morally arbitrary?” Choosing 100 may be morally arbitrary because it is no better or worse than choosing 101. The relevant question is: “Are choices 100 and 101 equally good or is choice 101 better”? (And, if choice 101 is better in what sense could choosing 100 rather than 101 be morally arbitrary?) In other words, it is not enough to point out that permitting 100 is morally arbitrary. To determine whether choosing 100 is to permit gratuitous evil we must ask why or in what sense choosing 100 is morally arbitrary.

Choices between amounts of evil may be morally arbitrary because they are components of (implicit in) choices between equally good sets of goods and evils, in our example: between
equally optimal trade-offs between goods and evils. To choose a particular number of doses is to choose a particular trade-off between permitting a certain number of deaths (rather than a certain likelihood of recovery) and the goods involved in providing a certain likelihood of recovery for a specific number of children. Choosing from the permissible range of choices in our example would be morally arbitrary in this sense if those choices are equally optimal specific trade-offs between goods such as a “good” number of children helped and a “good” likelihood of cure. Choices may also be morally arbitrary because, even though one is only choosing between better and worse sets of goods and evils, one cannot choose an optimal set, because there isn’t one. This would be the case if, for every trade-off you may choose, there is a better trade-off.

**Van Inwagen’s Argument Requires No Optimal Option**

If choice 100’s permission of the death of the next potential medicine recipient is necessary for a trade-off between goods and evils no worse than any other, then permitting the evil involved in it is necessary for some good that makes that particular trade-off an optimal one. That is, if this option involves more evil than an alternative no less valuable (also optimal) option, it must also involve more good that offsets that additional evil. In this case, permitting this evil is not gratuitous by the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis and van Inwagen’s proposed counterexamples to that thesis fails. To make his case, van Inwagen must claim that in choosing within the permissible range of choices one must choose between better and worse trade-offs of goods and evils rather than between equally good trade-offs. That is, van Inwagen must adhere to the “no optimal option” interpretation of the moral equivalence of the choices in his example.

Does the medicine distribution choice circumstance van Inwagen describes compel this interpretation? Do we think that one choice in the permissible range is as justified as another
because, even though there are a finite number of choices, every choice is sub-optimal? That is, do we think that every choice in the finite permissible range is worse than another and so we are justified in choosing any one of them because we cannot fulfill the moral duty of selecting an optimal choice? Or, instead, do we think that choices in the permissible range are equally justified because they are of equally good options? It is at least not obvious that the former interpretation is correct.

The point of this introductory section is that van Inwagen’s move from having “no reason” for permitting an evil to the gratuitousness of the evil is made too quickly. The sense in which there is no reason and the corresponding sense in which the choice is morally arbitrary and the permitted evil pointless in his example is not obviously the sense his argument requires.\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{Emergent Goods: A clarification of van Inwagen’s examples}

Let us now more closely examine van Inwagen’s Vagueness Objection to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis and the implications of the arbitrariness invoked. Here is another of van Inwagen’s formally similar proposed counterexamples to NGE: Suppose you are in charge of a rescue boat from sinking Atlantis.\textsuperscript{111} For every person allowed on the boat the boat’s chance of making it to safety is reduced by some very small amount, say .1 \%. As numbers admitted approach one thousand there is therefore a correspondingly very good chance all will perish. So you should allow some but not too many people on the lifeboat. You should avoid admitting too few but also not overly diminish the boat’s chance of reaching the shore. It is reasonable to think that in this circumstance there is no specific number of people that is the correct number such that one less would be incorrect. This means you must arbitrarily pick some number within a permissible range of choices. In this circumstance, whatever number you decide upon, you could have allowed one more person on the lifeboat. Allowing just one more would not have cost any
good significant enough to outweigh the evil of that person’s being left to certain death. So it is not true that necessarily, if one is in a position to prevent an evil without loss of a greater good then one is morally obligated to do so. In situations such as this, one must arbitrarily choose how much evil to allow and as a consequence no good results from allowing the amount chosen rather than some lesser amount.

To retrace his argument, van Inwagen reasons as follows: the above choice situations have two notable features. First, it is reasonable to think that there may be no specific correct number of people to help. If so, this means that you must decide on that number (within some reasonable range) arbitrarily. Second, whatever number you pick, you could decrease each helped individual’s benefit (chance of survival or medicine amount) very slightly in order to help one more person. This decrease would be so small it would not have a significant effect (on chances for survival or the likely effectiveness of each dose). These features together imply that whatever number you reasonably decide upon, you could have helped one more person without significantly decreasing the good you do for the others you help. For example, whatever reasonable number of doses you choose, you will have permitted a child to die for lack of medicine who you likely could have cured and you will have had no good reason for permitting that child to die. No significant good worth the cost of the child’s death will have been gained. So for any reasonable and moral choice you make, you will have permitted an evil whose permission is not necessary for any greater good. The prevention of gratuitous evil cannot then be a general and absolute moral requirement, for in this choice circumstance to act morally you must permit evil whose permission is not necessary for any greater good.
Illuminating Parallels to van Inwagen’s Cases

Although the choice situations appealed to by the Vagueness Objection may initially appear to be counterexamples to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, close examination shows this appearance is illusory. A proper analysis of the goods and evils involved and their relations shows one does not permit any gratuitous evil in these cases. The greater goods justifying the permission of evil in those cases have been overlooked because the cases have been under described and the goods misidentified. Again, a fuller and more accurate description of the choice circumstances represented by van Inwagen’s examples reveals that the arbitrariness involved in them does not undermine the principle that if one is in a position to prevent an evil without loss of a greater good then one is morally obligated to do so. In what follows I offer a more complete and accurate description of the essential features of the examples van Inwagen offers, a clarification of what the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis does and does not entail, and an analysis of the relations between those essential features and the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. These analyses show van Inwagen’s reasoning is unsound.

I begin by specifying the general features of the kinds of examples van Inwagen appeals to. Here are some additional examples of choice situations that I claim share all essential relevant features with van Inwagen’s, but which I propose are framed more carefully:

The Safe Trench Suppose you are a soldier digging a trench while enemy combatants are near. Roughly one thousand shovels will yield a trench deep enough to be well worth the time spent shoveling. An individual shovelful, however, will not enlarge the trench enough to significantly increase your safety while in it, and, considered by itself, is not worth the time being exposed to potential enemy fire required to dig it. Suppose, as your shoveling approaches one thousand digs, you must decide when to stop.
Certainly this decision may need to be to some extent arbitrary. So, some shovelfuls may be unnecessary, even if you have chosen a perfectly reasonable stopping point. Does this reasonable arbitrariness also imply that some shovelfuls must be gratuitous in the sense that it would have been better if they had not been dug? Because van Inwagen’s examples are formally similar, his argument commits him to an affirmative answer, for unless the unnecessary shovelfuls are uncompensated risks they do not correspond to gratuitous evils. However, this does not seem correct.

Again, the arbitrariness of this choice situation implies that however many shovelfuls you dig, you may have no good reason for not stopping slightly earlier than you did. Does it also imply that you had a good reason for not digging them, namely, that digging each was a net loss? Van Inwagen’s argument commits him to saying you had a good reason (albeit one you could not avoid contravening) for, again, unless the unnecessary shovelfuls are net losses they do not correspond to gratuitous evils. However, these answers seem incorrect.

**Expensive Pain Relief.** Suppose you will be in continuous pain for the rest of your life unless you receive treatment. Being permanently relieved of your pain is well worth more than a million dollars to you. Roughly a thousand daily doses of a drug will significantly and irreversibly relieve your pain. A single dose will not make any noticeable difference, however, and each single dose costs one thousand dollars. Suppose, as you receive doses and begin to feel more comfortable, you must decide how many more doses to pay for.

Again, this decision may need to be to some extent arbitrary, and certainly this arbitrariness implies that some doses may be unnecessary, even for perfectly reasonable stopping points. Does this arbitrariness also imply that some doses must be gratuitous in the sense that it would have been better if they had not been taken, that some dosage payments are net losses? Again, van Inwagen’s reasoning answers affirmatively, but this seems incorrect.
The distinctions drawn by my questions about these parallel cases weaken the force of van Inwagen’s description of his own examples. The parallel strongly suggests that the arbitrariness he refers to is generated by there being equally good trade-offs between goods and evils, and not by every reasonable trade-off’s being worse than another. We may wish to stop here, therefore, and say van Inwagen has misconstrued the implications of the arbitrariness of his examples. This would be premature, though. All these cases share puzzling features that leave room for van Inwagen’s “no optimal choice” interpretation, as I will explain. This alternative interpretation is also compatible with NGE, however.

To bring these examples into the context of NGE, I will focus on two types of theodicies and corresponding theodical goods: “Significant Moral Freedom” theodicies\(^\text{112}\) that explain God’s permission of moral evil by its being required for humans to have significant moral freedom, and “Uniformity of Nature” theodicies\(^\text{113}\) that explain God’s permission of natural evil by its being required for the system of nature to have a consistent and predictable, or highly regular, order. (This stable order of nature may be considered good for a variety of reasons: as good in itself, because an autonomous creation is better than a manipulated façade, or good because required for other goods, such as the possibility of scientific knowledge and human responsibility,\(^\text{114}\) or for keeping God “hidden”, making knowledge of God’s existence a matter of the will as well as of intellect.\(^\text{115}\))

**Emergent Goods**

The relations of these theodical goods to their costs, namely, the permission of evils by God they are invoked to explain, may be thought of as sharing the following general features with van Inwagen’s examples and my opening examples.
There is a good that requires something bad.

A safe trench requires time being exposed to potential enemy fire. A diminishment of pain requires spending a significant amount of money. Alternatively, if the avoidance of something bad may be considered a good, these situations may be described as presenting a choice between two competing goods: the safety of the trench vs. less time being a potential target, the diminishment of pain vs. saving money.

Significant Moral Freedom theodicies propose that the good of humans having significant moral freedom can be had only at the expense of the competing good of God’s prevention of morally bad choices. If God were to adopt a policy of preventing all, or nearly all, significant morally bad choices humans in general would not have significant moral responsibility. Likewise, Uniformity of Nature theodicies propose that the good of the existence of a highly regular natural order can be had only at the expense of the competing good of God’s prevention of natural evils. One way to put this is that, given the system of natural forces required for the evolution of beings like humans, which entails the possibility of pain and suffering and other natural evils, if God were to adopt a policy of preventing all or nearly all natural evils, nature would not possess a stable natural order.

Each single increment of one good, considered in isolation, seems not worth the expense of the competing good.

Each additional increment of one good seems to make no significant good difference. One shovelful of dirt removed from the trench adds virtually no trench safety. One dose gives no noticeable reduction of pain. But each increment definitely comes at a significant cost. Digging even once dangerously exposes one to possible enemy fire. Each dose costs one thousand dollars.
An omnipotent being’s not preventing a particular moral evil, such as a murder, for example, in order to not diminish the good of humans in general having significant moral freedom may seem unjustified. This is because the murder’s prevention would definitely be a significant good, whereas the gain for the good of humans in general having significant moral freedom that is achieved by not preventing it seems negligible or even non-existent by comparison. Likewise, an omnipotent being’s not preventing a particular natural evil, such as a fawn’s suffering burn pains for several days, solely in order to not diminish the good of nature’s being highly regular, of having a stable order, may seem unjustified. This is because the fawn’s not suffering this way would definitely be good, whereas the gain for the good of nature’s being highly regular by not preventing it seems again negligible or non-existent by comparison.

Many increments of one good is worth the corresponding loss of the competing good.

By stipulation, the safe trench is worth the hours spent digging it. Living pain free for the rest of one’s life is worth more than a million dollars.

Significant Moral Freedom theodicies propose that the good of humans having significant moral freedom is worth all the enormous amount of moral evil God permits for the sake of it. One way to understand this is as the view that human moral freedom and its value increases (at least eventually) the more an omnipotent being is willing to permit that freedom by not preventing morally evil choices. The magnitude of the good of humans having significant moral freedom is worth its cost in innumerable individual unprevented moral evils. Likewise, Uniformity of Nature theodicies propose that the good of nature’s being highly regular is worth all the natural evil God permits for the sake of it. That is, the autonomous orderliness of the
system of nature and its value increases (at least eventually) as an omnipotent being is willing to permit increasingly more of the natural evil that issues from it. The magnitude of the good of nature’s being highly regular is worth its cost in unprevented natural evil.

From 2 and 3 we also have:

4 One good seems greater than the sum of its parts.

The value of many repeated slight increases in trench size and of many (properly timed) doses is greater than the corresponding sum of the values of shovels and doses considered individually. The removal of a thousand shovelfuls of dirt creates a trench that decreases one’s chance of being shot while crouched in it by more than a thousand times that of the decreased risk, if any, offered by a single shovelful. The significant and permanent decrease of pain is worth more than a thousand times the good, if any, of a single unnoticeable decrease.

There is a sense in which the good of humans in general having significant moral freedom seems greater than the sum of the values of individual unprevented exercises of moral freedom, considered by themselves. For each of vastly many instances of horrific moral evil, the permission of that individual instance may not seem worth its contribution to the good of humans having significant moral freedom, yet, according to this theodicy, the permission of all of them is worth the measure of this good that would have been lost by preventing all of them. Likewise, for each of vastly many instances of natural evil, the permission of that individual instance may not seem worth its contribution to the good of the existence of a highly regular natural order, yet, according to this theodicy, the permission of all of them is worth the uniformity of nature that would have been lost by preventing all of them.
Finally, it seems reasonable to think:

5 There may be no clear best number of increments of one of the goods, no obvious unique optimal trade-off between the two competing goods.

A safe trench is roughly one thousand shovels in volume and, though some amounts of time spent digging are clearly too little and some amounts clearly unnecessarily long, there may not be one specific obviously best trade-off between dangerous time spent digging and trench size. A comfortable pain level requires roughly one thousand doses. Once one is relatively comfortable it may not be obvious how many thousands of dollars more one should spend for the drug.

A divine general policy of preventing nearly all morally bad choices and of ubiquitous miraculous prevention of natural evil would cost the goods of the existence of significant moral freedom and of nature’s being highly regular, and would not be worth the loss, according to these theodicies. But a theodicist might also think that because significant moral freedom and nature’s being highly regular are vague goods that come in degrees, some divine interventions would not significantly diminish them. Now, God may have special reasons for preventing natural or moral evils, but even given those reasons, whatever they are, it seems reasonable to think that there may be no specific number of divine interventions that is optimal, that strikes just the right balance against these theodical goods such that that number of interventions is better than one less or one more.

I will call goods with the above five relations to the costs required to achieve them “emergent goods”. I use the term ‘emergent’ both because the good seems greater than the sum of the values of its parts considered individually, and because of the related characteristic that increases of (the components of) the good only eventually eclipse in value its increased cost.
Examples of such goods and relations abound. Any good that increases at definite cost increments and that is worth having only if it is sufficiently large in some imprecise sense of ‘large’ can have these features. To offer another example: suppose one has the two goals of increasing income and of having a good family life. If one earns three hundred dollars an hour, working one hour may seem well worth the cost of an hour spent with one’s family, considered by itself (feature 2, above). However, as one approaches, say, roughly sixty hours of work every week, or, say, three thousand hours of work for the year, the value of that income increase may begin to be eclipsed by the cost to the value of a good year of family life. The latter good does not require any specific number of hours. That is, it seems reasonable to think there is no unique optimal trade-off between hours of work and hours of family time (feature 5). Whatever trade-off one chooses, one chooses the corresponding amount of family time because it seems worth the cost to income of all the hours it consists of (feature 3). In this sense, the good of a good year of family time seems to be of greater value than the mere sum of all the individual hours composing it. One hour devoted to family time, considered by itself, may seem outweighed by three hundred dollars income, but the whole year of family time, however many hours that consists of, seems worth the total income one could have had instead, i.e. three hundred dollars multiplied by the number of family time hours (feature 4). (It is not difficult to see why this would be so, as the value of familial bonds does not come in discrete and linearly additive units.)

This parallel between these theodical good relations to evils and ordinary emergent goods relations to their costs is a redescription of the analogy van Inwagen draws between divine purposes and vague goods.

I should note that my purpose in making this parallel is not to defend, criticize, or even to elaborate the mentioned theodicies. Also, I will not argue that the emergent goods understanding
is the best understanding of how the goods of the existence of significant moral freedom and of the uniformity of nature relate to God’s permission of moral and natural evil. I am not arguing for “emergent good theodicy” (though I maintain the coherence of this perspective). I do think that the notion of an emergent good helps explain why non-gratuitous evils may appear gratuitous and this will be argued in chapter seven.

**Puzzling Features of Emergent Goods**

Let us examine the examples I began with and articulate some key aspects of them. The above-described apparently reasonable “emergent good” judgments concerning the relations between certain goods and the costs required to achieve them generate certain puzzles. For example, suppose you see no unique optimal trade-off between trench safety and digging safety or between comfort level and savings as per (5) and so feel you must decide between certain increments, say 1122 shovels or doses and 1123, arbitrarily. Does this choice’s seeming arbitrary imply that neither amount seems better or worse than the other? It may seem so, as mentioned. But how could 1122 shovels or doses not be obviously better than 1123 if each individual extra shovel or dose seems obviously not worth its cost as per (2)? If shovel 1123 adds negligible additional safety of the trench while definitely leaving one dangerously exposed as a target, why wouldn’t it be obviously better to stop at 1122 shovels? If the 1123rd dose of medicine makes no noticeable difference at all, how can it not be obvious that one should not pay a thousand dollars for it? There is also the puzzle of (4) itself. If it is true that every increment is not worth its cost, as it seems, how could many increments be worth their total cost? If it always seems better to choose the lesser of two increments of a first good for the sake of a competing second good, how could it seem better to choose many such increments of the first good?
How can the first apparent conflict, that between judgment (2), that each increment is not worth its cost, and (5), which entails that choices between some increments are arbitrary, be addressed? Could it be that choosing 1123 is worse than choice 1122 if one must choose only between 1122 and 1123 but not if one is considering a wider range of trade-offs? If so, one possible response to the apparent conflict between (2) and (5) then would be to place one’s confidence in (2) and simply say that wherever one chooses to stop in such situations, one could have made a better choice by stopping earlier. This is true of all permissible choices, which is why none are optimal as per (5), and this is why one must choose among them arbitrarily. I will call this the “Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation” because it maintains that every increment of one good not only seems to be but is not worth the loss of the competing good, and so makes things worse, but that many such increments can still be better than the corresponding amount less. This is the interpretation implicit in van Inwagen’s arguments.

But the puzzle of (4) points us in the other direction. As mentioned, one might think instead that some individual increments of one good are worth their corresponding cost despite their initially appearing otherwise. According to this response, although each increment (of chance of cure or trench size, etc.) considered in isolation seems not worth its cost, a wider perspective, perhaps one that takes into account the amount being increased and/or the role the increment plays in the larger good of which it is a part, is required to appreciate the full set of values involved.

Perhaps the full set of values escapes delineation, but we may speculate as follows. For example, perhaps 23 shovels has a value as a necessary component of a good-sized trench, a value that outweighs its cost, if one were to keep digging. This makes it a net gain and so obviously preferable to 22 shovels if one were to rank the goodness of each shovel in digging a
good-sized trench. The underlined qualification is the wider context that reveals the hidden value of being a necessary component of a good sized trench. Perhaps then shovel 1223 is not obviously preferable to 1222 because it does not (clearly) have this value (it is not obviously a necessary component of the good-sized trench) and so is not obviously a net gain. In this way, perhaps the cost of additional digging time begins to outweigh the value of being a necessary component of a good-sized trench as it becomes less obvious increments possesses that value. Choices are then arbitrary because they are between roughly equally good increments. Rough equality is introduced because of the vague (and so indeterminately diminished) good of being a necessary component of a good-sized trench.

I will call this the “Hidden Values” interpretation because it maintains values are involved that may not be conspicuous when only neighboring trade-offs are considered. On this view, hidden values offset costs so that one choice is not definitely better or worse than another, making the choice between them arbitrary. If hidden values offset costs so as to make permissible options equally good, selecting a permissible option cannot violate NGE. (And if hidden values offset costs so as to make permissible options roughly equally good, selecting a permissible option cannot violate NGE, as seen in chapter one.)

The Irrelevance of Vagueness to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis

Let us review what I term the “Optimal Trade-Off Interpretation”, illustrated by the lifeboat case, in a slightly different light. There are a finite number of choices, ranging from clearly impermissible because too few people are rescued (too little of one value) to permissible and then to clearly impermissible because the chances of successful rescue are too slim (too little of the other, competing, value). We can imagine an x axis indicating increasing amounts of people on the lifeboat from left to right and a y axis indicating the goodness of the balance of
goods and evils at each choice. If the situation can be represented this way, the goodness curve goes up from left to right and then down. If there is no best choice, as stipulated, there is no highest point. This would be congruous with God’s purposes requiring some but no specific amount of evil. Here differences in amounts of good (the y axis) supervene on differences of amounts of evil (the x axis). On this interpretation, an evil is permissibly permitted for no reason only in the sense that there is no moral reason to choose the amount of evil that includes it rather than one evil less, and this is just because allowing each such evil is necessary for a good that offsets, but does not exceed, it. One is choosing between equally good balances of goods and evils and so the greater evil in one set must be offset by the greater good it contains. 

One point in favor of the Optimal Trade-Offs Interpretation is that even if it appears as if permitting an evil is not necessary for any offsetting good, we have reason to think there must be such an offsetting good just because the choices between sets of goods and evils also seem equally good. Another point in its favor is that the betterness relation in general seems transitive. This gives one reason to think the values involved have not been tabulated correctly, i.e. that there may be hidden values. I believe the Optimal Trade-Off Interpretation is the most plausible description of the moral choice situation in the examples van Inwagen gives.

In his earliest work on this topic, van Inwagen impugns the moral principle that “if one can prevent an evil without loss of greater good, one should” for leading to absurd conclusions, e.g. that one should let everyone on the lifeboat, thereby virtually guaranteeing a failed rescue. This judgment, implicitly holding that the stated moral principle errs by a failure to appreciate the intransitivity of betterness, actually supports the Optimal Trade-Off Interpretation: I respond to this argument that (in addition to the above considerations), by parity of reasoning, van Inwagen would also have to impugn the highly plausible principle that “if all morally relevant
considerations are the same between two choices A and B except that B results in more net good, then it is morally permissible to choose B rather than A”. For if each increment of evil is not offset by any greater good, then each decrease of evil corresponds to a better balance of goods and evils, and, by stipulation, there is no other consideration to distinguish these choices between increments. I add this criticism only as a coda because it targets only one way van Inwagen has formulated his criticism of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis.

The Optimal Trade-Offs Interpretation and Vagueness

Van Inwagen claims that the amount of permitted evil required for God’s purposes may be vague, and so there is no specific minimum amount of required permitted evil. For his examples to challenge NGE he must hold that this means that for every trade-off God chooses he could have chosen a better trade-off (i.e. the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation). But even if we accept that the amount of required permitted evil may be vague, we need not accept this interpretation. On the Optimal Trade-Offs Interpretation the vagueness van Inwagen refers to implies only that there are a vague number of permissible options. That is, on the Optimal Trade-Offs Interpretation if God’s purposes require only a vague amount of evil, God’s purposes can be satisfied by a disjunction of trade-offs (sets of competing goods, e.g. more people rescued and greater chance of survival) where the boundary between permissible trade-offs and impermissible is vague (on both sides). One may wonder how this boundary can be vague if differences in amounts of one good (chances of cure, e.g.) supervene on differences in amounts of the other good of less evil (number left untreated, e.g.). The answer to this is that the instantiation of hidden values, such as a “good chance of cure for a good number” may be vague. In this case the goodness curve described above is indeterminate before and after its peak.
This place for vagueness is innocuous for NGE. It has no implications for the comparative goodness of neighboring options that are (determinately) within the permissible range. That is, it is not relevant to understanding the arbitrariness involved in selecting a permissible option. That arbitrariness is simply due to all determinately permissible options’ being equally good. So the vagueness invoked by van Inwagen to counter NGE, even if present, drops out of relevance for NGE on the Optimal Trade-Off Interpretation.

**The Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation**

There is an alternative interpretation, however, to which I now turn. Suppose instead that the lifeboat rescue choice circumstance cannot be represented by a continuous goodness curve or even a goodness curve with undefined (vague) segments as depicted above. Suppose for every permissible choice or trade-off within the permissible range, there is a better trade-off. Again, I call this the “Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation” of van Inwagen, for on this interpretation, though, say choice 251 is better than 250, and 252 better than 251, and so on, eventually we arrive at a choice that is not better than 250.

There are two ways this circumstance may be: it may be that there is a good gained for every allowed evil, but that that good does not offset that evil, or it may be that no good is gained by allowing that evil. This latter could mean that amounts of evil can be measured more finely than amounts of good. This would be one explanation of how God’s purposes could require some but no specific amount of evil. In this case, the same good could have been had with less evil than the amount actually permitted, but that is true for every permissible amount permitted. By analogy, suppose sand must be dropped into the Grand Canyon for some good purpose. Dropping too much sand will mar the beauty of the Grand Canyon, but dropping one grain of
sand cannot diminish its beauty at all. Whatever amount of sand we drop for our purposes that is not “too much”, we could have dropped one more grain, and by analogy, that would have been better. We can call this “Apparent Gratuity by Incommensurability” because it is the incommensurability of values that generates the appearance of necessary gratuity.

**Necessary Excess Evil**

Now let’s consider choices involved in cases of Apparent Gratuity by Incommensurability. Following this I will consider the “commensurable” version according to which every allowed evil corresponds to some non-offsetting gain of good (rather than no good at all). Again, there is no optimal choice and for every choice of amount of evil actually made, the good actually achieved could have been achieved with less evil. (If this seems impossible, that seeming strengthens my alternative “Optimal Trade-Offs” interpretation) Let us call the amount of evil that the permitted evil could have been diminished by to achieve the same good “excess evil”. If one choice involves more excess evil than a neighboring choice then it must be worse because that next choice then involves the same good and less unnecessary evil. So a choice that involves more unnecessary evil than its neighbor cannot be permissible. Although every choice is worse than the next, such a choice is “more worse” than others. Since the permissible options all belong to a common (vague) range of neighboring options, the permissible options all must involve the permission of the same amount of excess evil, “EE”. EE may signify a vague amount.

Here is the crux of my argument: if, necessarily, every reasonable choice involves evil that could have been avoided, as van Inwagen must claim to refute the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, can there really be no outweighing good that requires that “unnecessary” evil? The necessity of there being superfluous shovelfuls or unhelped persons or wasteful pain-relief
expense in the given cases only obtains given one aims to dig a safe trench or rescue people or pay for pain relief. Doesn’t that good, the good of digging a safe trench, for example, then require and outweigh such “unnecessary” risks?

On the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation, God’s allowing EE is necessary for a greater good. In order to achieve the good for the sake of which God must allow some amount of evil, that is, in order to allow the specific instantiation of the vague amount of evil required for his purposes, God must allow excess evil EE. If that evil must be permitted for God to realize the good of making some choice, and making some choice is better than making none, then allowing that evil is necessary for a greater good.\textsuperscript{124} So EE cannot be a gratuitous evil. Now, the non-excess evil of any permissible trade-off is clearly also non-gratuitous because by definition it is the amount of evil whose permission is necessary for the good of the trade-off. This evil is part of every trade-off that includes the same amount of good. So, in the circumstances van Inwagen describes, for any specific good g God permissibly, though perhaps arbitrarily, brings about in satisfaction of His good purposes G, His permission of the permitted non-excess evil is required for g and His permission of the permitted excess evil EE is required for G. Having accounted for EE as well as for the non-excess evil involved in bringing about these goods, there is no remaining evil for the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis to account for. So the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation of van Inwagen’s examples is also no threat to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis.

Again, although by definition the particular amount of EE in a given choice is not necessary for the actual specific good achieved, it is necessary for a greater good. This is all NGE requires. Likewise, although the particular non-excess evil need not be necessary for God’s
purposes, it is necessary for the actual particular good achieved, ie. the particular instantiation of God’s purposes, in satisfaction of NGE.

This is a subtle point. What is deemed unnecessary depends on one’s frame of reference in describing purposes and one’s frame of reference determines how goods and evils are identified, individuated, and weighed. If every reasonable choice involves the same (perhaps vague) amount of “unnecessary” shovelfuls then that risk, though gratuitous with respect to the good of the degree of safety offered by the trench you have dug, is not gratuitous with respect to the good of digging a reasonable trench. Since every instantiation of the latter involves that “unnecessary” risk, that risk is necessary for that good.

Perhaps van Inwagen overlooked consideration of EE because it is defined in terms of counterfactuals. For any permissible choice, EE is the (possibly vague) amount of evil by which the actual amount chosen exceeds the (possibly vague) amount whose permission was necessary for the good achieved by that choice. The latter evil is the lesser amount that could have been permitted instead for that same good. (Again, that there is such an amount is essential to the Incommensurable version of the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation. Any seeming incoherence belonging to it belongs to that view). EE does refer to a particular actual amount of evil in a given choice. It may be thought of as a variable whose domain ranges over instantiations of a determinate, albeit (for argument’s sake) possibly vague, amount. As argued in chapter six, section xx, the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis essentially and properly has to do with amounts of good and evil, perhaps of certain kinds, and not with individuated features of evils by which they may be referred to, so use of the notion EE is not suspect in this context. That is, EE refers to a determinate amount of a type of evil whose permission is necessary for the good God intends.
As mentioned, EE and the non-excess evil may both be vague in amount, just as what counts as the same good may be vague. However, the possible vagueness of EE and of the non-excess evil has no bearing on NGE. Whatever their quantification, the permission of both are required for greater goods. Both the permission of the non-excess evil and EE is required for the actual concrete instantiation of God’s purposes, even though (according to van Inwagen) the permission of no specific amount of evil is required for God’s purposes.

To illustrate with the Expensive Pain Relief case, even if the particular reasonable amount paid, say $753,000, is unnecessary for the pain relief actually achieved, as is true of all reasonable amounts paid (on this interpretation), this amount can be divided into the vague amount that is necessary for that relief, say roughly $750,000 and the vague unnecessary amount, roughly $3,000. Every specific reasonable pain vs. expense trade-off must include this same “unnecessary” $3,000. That is, in each case the same good could have been achieved with this much less cost. Again, only trade-offs with the same unavoidable excess cost can be reasonable options. If a trade-off involves more than this $3000 excess expense one should have chosen a nearby option, or option of the same good, with the minimal $3000 excess expense instead. What justifies permission of the excess $3000 is only that it is unavoidable. So, for example, if a different equally good trade-off might be paying $650,000 for less pain relief, necessarily, this equally good trade-off could also have been achieved with roughly $3,000 less expense.

Now, if one pays $753,000 the unnecessary expense may also be described as the additional expense of paying $753,000 instead of roughly $750,000 for the same relief. There is no good that requires one pay $753,000 rather than roughly $750,000 specifically, but this fact does not make this choice irrational. Analogously, NGE does not imply there must be a good that requires an evil under a particular description rather than some other description; only the
amount of permitted evil matters, as argued in chapter six. There is a good that requires one pay
roughly $750,000, namely the amount of pain relief gained, and there is a good that requires one
pay the excess $3,000, namely the good of choosing some desirable trade-off between pain and
expense. If these payments correspond to evils, NGE is satisfied.

The commensurate values version of the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation

Now let us apply this reasoning to the commensurate values version of the Intransitivity
of Betterness Interpretation. According to this understanding of Emergent Good Cases, for every
permissible permission of evil one achieves a unique good but a better trade-off of good and evil
could have been achieved by permitting less evil. (Here it is not the case that one value can be
discriminated more finely than the other, as the incommensurable version may be interpreted as
holding.)

The above reasoning also shows that van Inwagen’s examples construed in this way are
not instances of permitting gratuitous evil. If, for example, one distributes 100 doses of medicine
to achieve the good of giving a good number of children a good chance of cure and one could
have helped a few more children for a better trade-off, but one could have achieved a better
trade-off by helping a few more children for any reasonable number of doses, then the
permission of all the evil involved in this choice is necessary for greater goods. There is a good g
that requires stopping at 100 doses, namely the good of giving 100 children 1/100th of the
medicine. Permitting the evil e of 900 children receiving no medication (rather than one with
1/101th, another with 1/102th, etc) is necessary for that specific good g and is offset by it. Evil e
is not necessary for the good, G, of giving a good number of children a good chance of cure,
however, and, according to the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation, some of that evil e was
unnecessary because a better good than \( g \) could have been gained with less evil, e.g. giving 101 children medication. However, this “unnecessary” amount of evil is not gratuitous because its permission is necessary for \( G \). The amount of the type of evil: permitting some more children to die with no compensating good, which is the “unnecessary” evil, is necessary for the good, \( G \), of giving a good number of children a good chance of cure. The particular actual instantiation of this unnecessary evil, that of \textit{permitting 900 children to die rather than some less}, is not necessary for \( G \), but that is no violation of (the analogous version of) NGE. NGE only requires that the permission of every amount of every type of evil is necessary for an offsetting good. Both the amount of evil \( e \) and the amount of “unnecessary” evil are required for offsetting goods, on this interpretation. So the commensurate values version of the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation does not undermine NGE.

What then is implied by the stipulation that for every permissible option a better good could have been gained by permitting less evil? Note that the better good here is a better trade-off between good and evil. In our example, the good is not a better chance of cure, because that would be slightly worse for each additional evil permitted, but a better combination of number helped and chance of cure (which corresponds to a specific number left unhelped). This does not imply each choice involves gratuitous evil, for, as argued, all permissions of evil in these reasonable choices are necessary for offsetting goods. Only a mistaken individuation of goods and evils lends van Inwagen’s examples the illusory appearance of violating the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis. What is implied by this interpretation is only that for any choice one makes, one could have made a better choice. This is because, on this interpretation, for any permissible trade-off between the good of less evil and another good (perhaps a positive expected value), one could have chosen greater net value, where the greater good of the lesser evil outweighs the
lesser amount of the other good (the positive expected value.) The Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation leaves us then only with an apparent counterexample to a different principle, namely, that a morally perfect being would always choose the better of two options. As argued in chapter three, this principle is not implied by NGE.

**God’s Purposes Cannot Be Vague**

**Vague Choice Circumstances Cannot Apply to God**

There is also another category of reasons for thinking considerations of vagueness are irrelevant to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis: it is not obvious that the circumstances van Inwagen describes in his Vagueness Objection, which essentially involve vague purposes, could apply to an omnipotent, omniscient being. Even if there are circumstances involving vague purposes in which humans permissibly permit gratuitous evil, as van Inwagen’s examples are meant to illustrate, there may be no possible parallel circumstances involving vague purposes in which God permissibly permits gratuitous evil. This is because it seems God cannot have vague (ultimate) purposes. That is, even if the principle that “if one is in a position to prevent an evil one should do so unless preventing it would make things worse” cannot be absolute and universal for the reasons van Inwagen gives, this does not undermine the thesis that God necessarily prevents such gratuitous evil.

There are two main reasons for thinking that God’s (ultimate) purposes cannot be vague: One is that vague divine decrees seem metaphysically impossible. If vague divine decrees were possible, something could exist for absolutely no reason at all (or, more cautiously, it would not be definitely false that something could come into existence for no reason at all, as it must be). The second reason is the seeming impossibility of vague relations between amounts of goodness:
for any two possible worlds, one world is either better or not better than the other. Together these reasons make a strong case that God’s purposes cannot be vague.

**Vague Divine Decrees are Metaphysically Impossible**

We can see this as follows. If a divine goal may be instantiated in many different morally equivalent ways, van Inwagen thinks God would issue a decree involving many disjuncts: either A exists with power y and B exists with power z or C exists with power x, etc. In the case of an indeterminate decree “let x or y be” God is the cause of the outcome. Although there is no explanation for why x rather than y resulted, there is a complete cause of x’s resulting, namely God’s decree. So we may accept that God is the complete cause of an event resulting from a divine indeterminate decree (given van Inwagen’s metaphysics). However, if (per impossible) God makes a vague decree, it is not definitely true that God is the ultimate cause of an event resulting from it. It would not be definitely true that a “resulting” event or substance has a cause of its occurrence or existence. In a divine vague decree God does not specify which particles or events are potentially affected by, or potentially result from, His decree. That is left to chance. Again, what is left to chance here is not which of different involved disjuncts is actual, as per a divine indeterminate decree (that includes each potentially affected particle or event in a disjunct), but which set of disjuncts are possible. If there is no explanation for, or no fact about, which set of possible events or particles could possibly result from God’s decree, then for any disjunct (particle or event circumstance) that is not in all possible sets (i.e any non clear-cut appropriate amount), that becomes actual, there is not only no explanation for why it rather than some other disjunct is actual, there is no explanation for why it results from God’s decree simpliciter.
In the case of an indeterminate decree the reason for its actuality is that it was included in God’s decree. God determined that that result of His indeterminate decree was possible by including it in His decree and is the (non-necessitating) cause of its actuality. By contrast, non-clear cut fulfillments of divine purposes are neither definitively included nor excluded from a divine vague decree. If a divine vague degree is possible, necessarily, a non-clear cut amount may result from God’s decree though the amount was not included in God’s decree. We are to understand that “chance” determined what disjuncts (amounts) were possible; it was impossible for God to do so because which disjuncts are possible is not determinate. If God does not determine whether x could result from His decree or not, that being due to chance, how can He be said to be the explanation for why x in fact is actual? He can’t. And this is incompatible with God’s being x’s complete albeit indeterministic cause as required by traditional theism and by the Reason for Existence Principle.

Again, van Inwagen thinks that God’s purposes may require only a vague amount of evil. He finds it plausible that there is no minimum amount of evil required for God’s purposes and so thinks it likely that God must permit some evil for His purposes even though less evil could have served equally well. If, in many cases, it really makes absolutely no difference to God’s purposes whether He performs one more miracle or not, then according to van Inwagen’s No Arbitrary Decree Thesis, He would have to, in each case, issue an indeterminate decree with a miracle as a disjunct: “Let these particles either have their ordinary powers or have extra-ordinary powers by which this horror is averted.” for example. But then, on van Inwagen’s view, He would have to issue a “meta-decree”, so to speak, that only some and not too many of those miracles occur. And, he would have to leave to chance just how many, within the appropriate range of some and not too many, occur. This is because, according to van Inwagen, precisely how many miraculous
interventions occur may be a matter of indifference to God. Again, according to van Inwagen, in some cases God’s purposes require no particular number of particles or events of a certain sort, only a vague amount. In such cases, God has no reason to favor one specific amount over another, and so it follows from the No Arbitrary Decree Thesis that He must leave the actual specific amount to chance.

This actual specific amount cannot be the result of a divine indeterminate decree, only of a divine vague decree. This is because each indeterminate decree has a definite number of disjuncts and so to issue such a decree is to decide upon the number of numbers of particles or events that can satisfy the “some but not too many” requirement, that is, to decide upon which specific amounts satisfying that requirement are the alternatives whose actualization is left to chance. Since there is no clear-cut boundary between required and unrequired amounts and we are assuming God is not picking one, in such circumstances of divine indifference God cannot specify which amounts are the possibilities included in his decree. This would be to demarcate a clear-cut boundary between required and unrequired amounts. In such circumstances, God must issue a vague decree, such as “Let some of this water turn into wine.” This may perhaps be thought of as God’s leaving to chance which disjuncts of possible particle or event circumstances are included in His indeterminate decree. But, again, this is metaphysically impossible. Creation cannot depend on God in the sense required if God issues vague, as opposed to indeterminate decrees. If God cannot arbitrarily decree a specific amount from within a vague range but must issue a vague decree, the Reason for Existence Principle that everything that exists has a reason for its existence is violated.
Incompatibility of van Inwagen’s Vagueness Objection and Chance Argument

Furthermore, the impossibility of divine vague decrees means van Inwagen’s Vagueness Objection is incompatible with his Chance Argument. If an evil really may be permitted for no reason, and the amount of the evil may be permitted for no reason because God’s purposes only require some but no specific amount of it, yet God cannot make arbitrary decrees, then He must make vague decrees. Since vague divine decrees are metaphysically impossible, one of the foregoing purported possibilities is not really possible. Either God can make arbitrary decrees or His permission of evil for no reason, i.e. the existence of gratuitous evil, is not possible.

To permit an evil for no reason is to make an arbitrary decree(s); it is for God to make decrees entailing an evil’s permission (in the given circumstances) even though He could have equally well, and in equal satisfaction of His purposes, made decrees that entail its prevention. If van Inwagen accepts the possibility of divine arbitrary decrees he cannot define God’s plan as God’s non-reactive decrees, since by his Chance Argument God’s plan must include only events with ultimate teleological contrastive explanation, as argued in chapter five. Due to the impossibility of vague divine decrees, either the Chance Argument, which depends on the prohibition of arbitrary divine decrees, fails, or God’s purposes cannot require the permission of only a vague amount of evil. If God’s purposes cannot require the permission of only a vague amount of evil, the Vagueness Objection to NGE fails.

van Inwagen’s defense of the possibility of gratuitous evil in The Problem of Evil also conflicts with his definition of God’s plan in “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God” in another way. In “The Local Argument from Evil” van Inwagen provides a picture metaphor of how God can remove individual events from the world without cost by “smoothing out the causal lines around them” in the “blueprint” of the world. Although doing so too often
would undermine some goods, such as the autonomy and regularity of the natural order, van Inwagen holds that a single such additional miracle would make no difference whatsoever to God’s purposes (including the good of the world’s being autonomous and not “highly irregular”). So in this and related essays van Inwagen argues that there may be actual events that God could have avoided without in any way sacrificing any of his goals.

Now, if God could have removed one more horror from the world without sacrificing any of his goals, surely there must be at least some isolated events entailed by his actual decrees that He could have removed as well. God could suspend his decrees concerning the causal powers of some particles and then make decrees that remove the consequences of this momentary suspension. He could temporarily suspend tides on uninhabited planets, for example. van Inwagen’s claim that a few more miracles would in no way sacrifice God’s purposes suggests that events entailed by God’s actual non-reactive decrees could also have been avoided by different, miraculous decrees without cost to God’s purposes. Such events are counterexamples to his definition of God’s plan because they are decreed by God (by the entailment thesis) but serve no purpose.

This reasoning concerning the coherence of van Inwagen’s arguments taken together has broad significance because it concerns the relation between NGE and the rationality of God’s actions and providence. Given my argument that non-consequentialist considerations do not challenge NGE, if evil is permitted by God for a less than offsetting good, then God permits net evil for no reason. Non-arbitrary indeterminate decrees that result in the permission of an evil are not illustrations of God’s permitting evil for no reason, only of permitting one evil or trade-off than another for no reason, as argued. Only arbitrary decrees or vague divine decrees could (according to the Vagueness Objection) be examples of God’s permitting evil for no reason. But
vague divine decrees are impossible. So denying NGE, not just because of the Vagueness Objection, but for any reason, implies God can make arbitrary decrees. If arbitrary divine decrees seem implausible this fact gives credence to NGE.

There Cannot Be a Vague Number of Possible Worlds Satisfying God’s Purposes

What if we put aside the No Arbitrary Decree Thesis and hold that “arbitrary” divine decrees are possible (perhaps because free will involves selecting reasons for action), could God’s purposes then be vague? No. Even if God may arbitrarily select how His purposes are actualized, what He selects from must be a determinate set of possible worlds given in the divine choice context, where each world has a determinate, if unquantifiable, amount of goodness. I don’t know how to argue that possible worlds have determinate, even if unquantifiable, value, such that vagueness is a feature of the language we use to describe amounts of goodness rather than a feature of the goodness of possible worlds. This seems true to me, though.

God aims at goodness of various kinds. Suppose we grant that some of His aims involve only certain general kinds rather than specific instances of goods, and these general goods require only a vague amount of evil and/or specific goods. Still, it is reasonable to think that God ultimately wills what is best over-all and so wills entire possible worlds. This distinction between what God ultimately wills (namely, the Good) and how that may be parsed in terms of (possibly competing) kinds of goods is significant, for although terms describing individual aims may be vague, it seems that relations between amounts of good or of net good (good balances of good and evil) cannot be vague, and that relations of betterness between possible worlds cannot be vague. Even if in addition to the relations ‘more than’, ‘less than’, and ‘equal to’, between the goodness of possible worlds there is a fourth relation of ‘rough equality’ or ‘being on a par’, this would not imply vagueness. Vagueness of such relations would mean that it is possible for an
amount of net good or for a possible world to be neither ‘better than’ nor ‘not better than’ another amount or possible world, and this does not seem possible.128

In other words, although our descriptions of God’s purposes may involve vague terms, these purposes are subsumed under God’s willing the Good or, it may be argued, an optimal possible world, and it seems impossible (to me) that two possible worlds may be such that one is neither better nor not better than the other (whether worse, equal, or incommensurable). So it seems reasonable to think that, regardless of whether or not God’s aims may be described in vague terms, there is either a unique best possible world (given the choices of humans and natural indeterminism) in which God’s purposes are satisfied, or there are a determinate number of morally equivalent optimal possible worlds in which they are satisfied (where two worlds are morally equivalent if one is not better than the other) or there are an infinite number of improving worlds. I will consider this last momentarily.

Again, according to traditional theism, God’s purposes are subsumed under God’s willing goodness. That is, God wills what He wills because He wills what is good. So God’s individual purposes may be understood as components of (or perhaps abstractions from) His willing what is best. This means that what ultimately explains God’s will is the comparative goodness of entire possible worlds (whether these are thought of as entire world histories or not). Although our description of individual purposes may involve vague terms, it does not seem that comparative relations between amounts of goodness can be vague. One possible world is either better or not better than another. What could it mean for one possible world to be neither better nor not better than another? If some values are incommensurable, so that one possible world is neither better nor worse nor equal in value to another, it is not better than that other world. If a world with cancer and no war is incommensurable with a world with war and no cancer, to use van
Inwagen’s example, this does not mean one is somehow vaguely better than the other, but that neither is better than the other.

Given my extended argument in chapter four that because deontological goods are the basis of any divine deontological requirements, God’s satisfaction of deontological requirements cannot conflict with NGE, it is reasonable to think God wills what is (axiologically) optimal in His choice context. Because one possible world is either better, worse, equal, or incommensurable in value with another, a possible world in a finite set of worlds is either optimal or not. This means it cannot be that there are only a vague number of possible worlds of a finite set that satisfy God’s purposes; and this means that if there are a finite set of worlds satisfying God’s purposes, God’s purposes cannot be vague, even if God must arbitrarily select which possible world satisfies them.

Van Inwagen writes:

Two patterns of suffering may be morally equivalent even if they are comparable and one of them involves less suffering than the other … It may be, therefore, that God has had to choose some amount of suffering as the amount contained in the actual world, and could, consistently with his purposes, have chosen any of a vast array of smaller or greater amounts, and that all the members of this vast array of alternative amounts of suffering are morally equivalent.

I think this passage does not illustrate how God’s purposes, or the amount of permitted evil they require, can be vague, as van Inwagen thinks. It cannot be that there is no moral reason to choose a lesser amount of suffering over a greater, all else being equal. There is no moral reason to choose a lesser amount of suffering over a greater only if the choice referred to involves unmentioned moral constraints or other gains and/or losses of goods and/or evils. If God cannot choose an optimal amount of evil then God cannot satisfy the moral principle of
choosing the lesser of two evils, all else being equal, but this doesn’t mean there is no moral reason in the relevant sense to choose the lesser amount, just that God is justified in not acting in accordance with that reason. All else being equal, if A has more net good than B, then A satisfies God’s purposes better than B, whether God is obligated (or it follows from perfect goodness) to choose A or not. This may seem paradoxical but we must be careful to accurately identify the source of this seeming paradox, which I now attempt.

Van Inwagen defines moral equivalence between A and B as there being no morally decisive reason to choose A over B and vice versa. But this notion confuses the issue. If by ‘decisive’ is meant compelling or obligatory, then because of the impossibility of satisfying the principle in the entire divine choice context, God is not obligated to choose the lesser over the greater suffering, and so in this sense has no morally decisive reason for doing so. God is justified in not following the principle of choosing the lesser of two evils, all else being equal, in this instance because He cannot do so in the wider choice context. But what is relevant to considering whether God’s purposes may be vague is whether they may involve some but no determinate amount of net good. Again, all else being equal, if A has more net good than B, then A satisfies God’s purposes better than B. This is not indeterminate. If God is not obligated to choose better A over B because He cannot choose an optimal amount of good, then either His purposes cannot be satisfied or His purposes are whatever determinate amount of good He arbitrarily selects. Differing net amounts of good may present a choice in a larger context according to which God may have no obligation to choose one over the other, but this is not because they equally well satisfy God’s purposes.

Introducing the purported possibility that for every good God chooses He could have chosen a better one introduces a new puzzle for the notion of God’s good purposes, so one must
be wary of what this supposedly possible divine choice context implies. One might say that this possibility shows God’s purposes cannot be satisfied because God necessarily wills what is best and there is no best option. This means this possibility shows God cannot exist. Or one might say that whatever possible world God arbitrarily chooses is His purpose, in which case His purpose cannot be vague. Or one might respond that this supposed possible choice circumstance is not possible: a finite set of options must have at least one optimal member and if there are an infinite number of possible options the optimal option is to actualize all the good ones. In all these cases, God’s purposes are not vague.

The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is based on the fundamental moral intuition that a perfectly good being would prefer less evil over more unless He has a good reason not to, where a good reason must involve some good. I acknowledge that we can be mistaken about the applicability of fundamental intuitions in unfamiliar contexts. However, I have argued that considerations of vagueness, as marshaled by van Inwagen, do not provide such a threat to the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis.

**The optimal joint satisfaction of vague purposes may not be vague**

The inter-connectedness of events means that individual evils are likely involved in different types of trade-offs, not because they are evil, but just because they are events. To trace just one thread, consider the exact timing of all the inter-related choices and thoughts of vast numbers of people and of innumerable other types of events necessary for the precise timing of the conception of a particular human being. Clearly, the divine permission of a particular event in such a chain may influence which human beings subsequently exist and so influence the specific satisfaction of diverse divine purposes, such as human moral development and the
existence of parental love. This illustrates how the good that God’s permission of an evil is necessary for may be the good of fulfilling different divine purposes in highly complicated ways. Each such purpose may be describable in only vague terms. But even if each such good requires no minimum amount of permitted evil, so that its particular instantiation seems necessarily arbitrary, this does not mean there is no unique optimal instantiation or total maximal goodness of the satisfaction of all of them. Again, our description of God’s aim to bring about good may comprise different vague general goods, each of which may seem to admit of no optimal instantiation, but this does not mean there is no optimal instantiation of their joint satisfaction. Perhaps this optimization (perhaps constrained by free choices and indeterminism) is the total value of created reality.

**Mistaken Responses to the Vagueness Objection**

Some philosophers, such as Jeff Jordan and Jim Stone, have responded to van Inwagen’s arguments against NGE inadequately because they have not recognized their essential appeal to vagueness. The other philosophers who claim to rebut van Inwagen’s criticism of NGE actually endorse the vagueness objection to NGE. They offer replacements for NGE in new arguments from evil, but these replacements are both unnecessary and entirely different claims rather than revisions of NGE.

Let us look at one example. In “On Evil’s Vague Necessity” Michael Almeida formulates van Inwagen’s No Minimum Thesis as:

There is some i(i > 0) such that for any amount of evil kn, (k ≥ kn> 0) if kn is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes then kn−i is such that any greater amount of evil is unnecessary for divine purposes.
He argues this thesis should be replaced with the “Vague Minimum Thesis” (which he also formulates in supervaluationist semantics):

**Vague Minimum Thesis**: There is no discrete transition from the evil unnecessary for divine purposes to the evil necessary for divine purposes.

Almeida thinks the Vague Minimum Thesis is a plausible thesis that is independent of van Inwagen’s argument. I have argued instead that the Vague Minimum Thesis is a more accurate rendering of what van Inwagen intended by the No Minimum Thesis (which I quoted as “For any amount of evil that would have served God’s purposes, slightly less evil would have served His purposes just as well”). Interpreting the No Minimum Thesis in terms of repeated diminishments of a constant amount of evil is incompatible with the presupposition that some permission of evil is needed for God’s purposes (as it implies no evil is needed), and interpreting it in terms of repeated diminishments of diminishing amounts of evil is incompatible with the finite diminishability of the pain referred to. The former overlaps with some of Almeida’s argumentation.

In any case, Almeida thinks van Inwagen’s arguments fail because the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis may be rendered as the prohibition of amounts of (permitted) evil that are definitely more than what is required by God’s purposes and the plausible alternative to van Inwagen’s mistaken No Minimum Claim, the Vague Minimum Claim, does not impugn this.

But the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, as proposed by Rowe and others, and as I have argued it should be formulated, says more than this. It says that for every particular evil, God’s allowing that evil is definitely required for a greater good. So the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis says that what is definitely required by the goods that instantiate God’s purposes can be measured as
specifically as the slightest evil. If every amount of every evil, no matter how slight, is necessary for an offsetting good, as per NGE, then it seems there must be a discrete transition from amounts of evil required for those offsetting goods and amounts that are not.

Van Inwagen’s analogies are meant to cast doubt upon the existence of such a sharp cut-off between necessary and unnecessary amounts of evil. But these analogies only relate to our descriptions of God’s purposes, which are of course unspecific. I have argued that the plausibility of God’s intended purposes’ not requiring a discrete transition from necessary to unnecessary amounts of required (permissions of) evil does not give reason to think the concrete goods that instantiate them may not. One reason for this is that God’s intended general purpose may be only that some optimal trade-off between a good and evil obtain, not a specific trade-off. Another reason is that we cannot characterize what specific uniquely optimal trade-off God intends and so necessarily conceptualize divine purposes only in general terms. What is unnecessary for God’s general purpose, because that purpose only requires a vague amount of evil, may be necessary for a specific instantiation of that purpose. That specific instantiation is what is relevant to NGE, which states that there must be an offsetting good, not that there must be an offsetting good that God specifically intends or an offsetting good that we can directly conceptualize it in its specificity. Moreover, my analysis of trade-off relations between theodical goods and permitted evils in chapter six shows that the vagueness inherent in a description of a general or global good and its requirements is irrelevant to NGE.

Almeida translates NGE into a claim about sums of evil and God’s purposes. It is understandable then that he thinks the most plausible interpretation of NGE allows that there is no discrete transition from amounts of evil necessary for God’s purposes and amounts of evil
unnecessary for God’s purposes, that is, that the minimum amount required is vague. This is plausible if God’s purposes are understood either

1. according to our (direct or intuitive) conception of them (and hence vaguely), or
2. if it is accepted that God’s intended purposes may be vague (though I have argued that this is impossible), or
3. individually (i.e. parsed by us and therefore vague), rather than collectively (as a total good)

As van Inwagen’s analogies illustrate, these purposes, so construed as global and general and separable (individual), plausibly do not require a specific amount of evil. van Inwagen thinks this means NGE is false. Almeida thinks it means NGE should be translated as only prohibiting amounts of evil that are definitely unnecessary for God’s purposes, and not as prohibiting the possibility of amounts that are neither definitely necessary nor definitely unnecessary. But this is not correct. What about the goods that instantiate God’s purposes? Or God’s purposes considered in total? NGE says of each and every amount of evil that its divine permission is (definitely) necessary for some offsetting good, and not merely that its permission is not definitely unnecessary. By Almeida’s argument, NGE allows that a person’s suffering may be permitted by God even if it is not definitely true that its permission is necessary for an offsetting good, so long as it is also not definitely true that its permission isn’t necessary. I believe a theist should believe that a person’s suffering may be permitted by God only if it is definitely true that its permission is necessary for an offsetting good and that NGE should be taken to imply this.

The generality of God’s purposes as described in our theodicies, and as illustrated by van Inwagen’s examples, makes it seem that God’s purposes, so understood, require only a vague
minimum amount of evil (given the divine choice context). According to Almeida, because NGE remains silent on amounts that are neither determinately necessary nor unnecessary, the plausibility of this vague minimum required amount, rather than a specific minimum, is no threat to NGE. I have argued that even if we accept that there are such vague satisfactions of God’s purposes, however construed, and their requirements, this is irrelevant to NGE. The optimal satisfaction of God’s purposes does not involve vagueness because optimal trade-offs involve definite amounts of evil offset by definite amounts of good even if theodical goods are vague. And, if there are no optimal satisfactions of those purposes because even concrete goods may require only vague amounts of evil (due to incommensurability between goods and evils), the vagueness involved does not imply that God may permit evil that is not definitely required for an offsetting good, just that we must be careful to accurately identify offsetting goods in the divine choice context. So vagueness is irrelevant to NGE, which should be understood to state, as is most plausible, that every single evil is accounted for, because (definitely) required for, the goods that comprise God’s purposes. So Almeida’s version of NGE is unnecessary and also does not include NGE’s essential content, which, by referring to every amount of evil, does imply a sharp cut-off between necessary amounts of (divine permissions of) evil and unnecessary (in the divine choice context). To concede the Vague Minimum Thesis to van Inwagen is to concede too much, though, as I have argued, accurately articulating the precise way in which it is false is a complex matter because what God’s purposes require may depend on what free choices would be made or what indeterminate causes would produce.

Similarly, in order to accommodate vagueness, Nickolas Trakakis, David O’Connor, and Daniel Howard-Snyder argue that the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis should be replaced by the claim that God must have a reason for permitting so much horrific evil rather than a lot less. Again,
because the vagueness objection is mistaken, this “replacement” is unnecessary. Moreover, although the new claim seems reasonable and may serve an argument for atheism with different premises than Rowe’s, it is based on the same fundamental moral intuition as NGE. To think that this claim replaces or corrects NGE is to think that a morally perfect being is opposed to “large” amounts of evil but not “small”, which is absurd and incoherent. God is opposed to “large” amounts of evil because He is, by the notion of perfect goodness, opposed to evil. Howard-Snyder offers his own version of van Inwagen’s No Minimum Claim vagueness objection to NGE to which all the criticisms of the vagueness objection in this chapter and more apply.
Part III.

The Illusory Appearance of Gratuitous Evils

Chapter 7

The Local Gratuity Illusion
Why Non-Gratuitous Particular Evils Appear Gratuitous: A Novel Response to Rowe

I return now to Rowe’s argument:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

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

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.\(^{131}\)

The main current of resistance to this argument, “skeptical theism,” rejects premise one by rejecting the inference from our inability to imagine a greater good to the belief that there is none. My defense of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis yields an alternative response. Whereas a skeptical theist appeals to our ignorance of goods or of how known goods and evils are related, I believe an understanding of how known goods and evils are related undermines Rowe’s first premise. An understanding of trade-off relations between emergent theodical goods and their costs reveals that the way in which the divine permission of a particular evil contributes to the theodical good (that explains it) is necessarily obscure. The degree to which a divine general policy issues in good is unspecifiable and perhaps vague, as are its increments, and analysis shows that the trade-off made with an increment of its cost (a divine permission of an evil) must be either some hidden value related to that good, a value that cannot be directly intuited as offsetting the permitted evil, or else, to me less plausibly, the compound good of that degree of the theodical good and the theodical good’s being realized at all, which also cannot be directly intuited as offsetting the permitted evil (because both are vague). These relations and attendant obscurity provide an explanation for why particular evils appear gratuitous even if their
permission by God is necessary for greater goods we have already thought of. I have separated three inter-related aspects of this explanation under the different sub-headings below.

**Inability to Intuit the Emergent Offsetting Good**

If an offsetting good is an emergent good, weighing the badness of a particular evil against the contribution its permission individually makes to that good will likely make that evil appear gratuitous. This is because the contribution will likely seem both unnecessary and insignificant in comparison with the evil. That is, if a good only requires the permission of vaguely many such evils the particular evil may be part of a set of morally equivalent optimal (or surpassable, as per the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation) trade-offs satisfying God’s purposes; and if the evil is part of a set of such trade-offs then it is not gratuitous, despite appearing so, as has been argued. If strict meticulous providence is not correct, there may well be such a set of multiple optimal trade-offs; and if strict meticulous providence is correct, the evil will appear gratuitous despite being part of a unique optimal trade-off. This is just as, in my opening examples of the last chapter, a single shovel or a single dose, considered in isolation, may seem not worth its cost even though, considered from a wider perspective, as part of a reasonable number of shovelfuls or doses, it does not seem so. This is still true even if there is a unique reasonable number of shovelfuls or doses. Traditional theodical goods are emergent goods, so it is not surprising if individual evils permitted for the sake of them appear gratuitous.

Now, there may be evils whose permission does not seem justified by the fact that they belong to a broad type of evil required by a theodical good. For example, one may think that though God must permit the possibility of significant moral evil for the good of humans having significant morality, humans should not have been given the capacity to choose moral horrors. My argument is not that no evil can legitimately appear gratuitous, but rather that the apparent
gratuity of particular instances of evil, or narrowly defined types of evils, *that belong to a broader type required for an accepted theodical good, but whose severity or other morally relevant features do not put them into a separate category of evil*, is illusory. The italicized qualification is crucial: the illusory gratuitous evils I refer to must be typical or representative instances of a category of evil required for a good. To omit this qualification would be to argue known theodicies adequately explain God’s permission of all evils. I do not claim to silence atheist arguments from evil, only to discredit the commonly perceived distinctive force of Rowe’s version of it. (My use of the plural ‘evils’ in “the illusory appearance of gratuitous evils” is meant to refer to this appeal to individual instances of evil.) I argue that Rowe’s argument is not an improvement on the basic argument that it is reasonable to think God does not exist because theodicies do not account for all evil.

So, for example, if one thinks that the good of humans having significant moral freedom justifies God’s permission of moral evils as bad as unjust killing, the inability to see how a particular unjust killing is necessary for an offsetting good is not a reason to think it is gratuitous, not unless the particular unjust killing is so appalling that it seems the good of humans having significant moral freedom cannot justify God’s permission of moral evil of that type. In other words, though the permission of a particular moral evil may (1) seem, and indeed be, unnecessary for the good of humans having significant morality, and (2) any contribution that permission seems to make to that good seems insignificant or non-existent, and further (3) it seems there is no other type of good God’s permission of it could be necessary for, we nevertheless have reason to think it is non-gratuitous. If the good of humans having significant morality requires God’s permission of evils of that general type and exceeds the total of that evil in value, then there is an offsetting good its permission is necessary for, namely the particular
way the good of humans’ having significant morality is instantiated. The existence of this good, given the theodical good, can be recognized indirectly, through a consideration of emergent goods. On the Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation we must further reason to the realization that the offsetting good may include also the good of God’s permitting humans to have significant moral freedom because the divine choice context may require God permit a certain amount of evil that is not required for the actual instantiation of the good of humans having significant morality for this general good.

What then is the offsetting good that God’s permission of an isolated fawn’s suffering in a forest fire is necessary for? The answer need only involve a general good, such as the uniformity of nature, that requires divine permission of this type of evil, perhaps broadly construed, such as natural evil or animal suffering. It certainly seems as if God’s miraculous prevention of this instance of suffering, in any one of many different possible ways, would not compromise the uniformity of nature in any way that would outweigh the badness of the suffering, or perhaps in any way at all. So, failing to see any more specific good that might require this event, especially as it is stipulated to be relatively causally isolated from other sentient beings, God’s permission of it seems gratuitous. But, provided the evil belongs to a general type whose permission is required by a theodical good, our understanding of the relations between competing goods in an emergent good gives us reason to think there exists an offsetting good, one that we can specify only in general terms.

Again, what that good is depends on which interpretation of emergent goods is correct. On the Optimal Trade-Offs interpretation the good is some degree to which nature is permitted to be uniform. On the Intransitivity of Betterness interpretation, God’s permitting the fawn to suffer, or some other natural evil no better, though not necessary for the specific degree of
uniformity of nature achieved, is a necessary part of the total non-gratuitous natural evil actually permitted for the good of the uniformity of nature, and so is not gratuitous. The permission of that total evil is not gratuitous because it is necessary for two goods: the specific degree of uniformity of nature achieved and the good of God’s achieving the general good of the uniformity of nature. As argued earlier, on this interpretation every amount of the relevant type of evil permitted by God for some emergent good may be divided without remainder into the amount required for some degree of the good and the amount superfluous for that degree of goodness but necessary for the good of achieving the emergent good at all.

One might have thought that the permission of the fawn’s suffering must be gratuitous given incommensurability between the relevant measures of good and evil. One might have thought it cannot be necessary for the degree of uniformity achieved for that could have been achieved with less evil (if evil can be measured more finely than good), and cannot be necessary for the good of God’s making some reasonable choice of permitted natural evils because the amount required for that is vague. But this objection presupposes an ordering of permitted evils that does not exist. It is not meaningful to ask which category the evil belongs to: that necessary for the uniformity or that necessary for a divine choice to be made. Each choice of a total amount of evil may include a vague boundary between the excess and non-excess evil, but the total amount is non-gratuitous and the permitted evil referred to is an amount of evil that is a necessary part of the total amount.

**The Special Case of Emergent Theodical Goods**

Emergent goods, which are ubiquitous, are defined by the fact that attention to the local trade-off context obscures its relation to the global context. Even if we knew the good actualized
by the permission of a specific amount of a competing good to some degree of specificity (the size of the trench, the degree of pain relief), the seeming superfluity of the last increment of the competing good may be mistaken for gratuity, as I have argued. But the obscurity of the existence of the offsetting good and of the non-gratuity is even greater in the case of evils permitted for theodical goods because we cannot know the specific manner in which theodical goods are instantiated.

Theodical global goods suggested as divine purposes are described in necessarily vague terms. They, qua general good, may wholly constitute God’s reason for permitting a particular evil, in the case that God leaves its specific instantiation to chance, or they may not, in the case God intends their specific instantiation, but we cannot know specifically how such goods are specifically instantiated. Although we can know something about individual exercises of moral freedom, for example, we cannot know the specific degree to which humans in general possess significant morality and what that even means in any precise sense. In general, we do not have cognitive access to the global summations of value of instantiations of global goods which would be in fact served by divine permission of evils (if God exists) for their sake. So it cannot appear to us as if the permission of a particular evil is necessary for the theodical good that in fact justifies it.

Part of my explanation for the illusory appearance of the fawn’s suffering then is also this: not knowing what the total amount of animal suffering is or even how to measure it, and not knowing much about the good of the uniformity of nature or how to measure it, the existence of a relatively specific degree of that good, for which an additional evil the size of Rowe’s fawn might be necessary for, is not something we could intuit or form a clear conception of, but can only infer from examination of the divine choice context. Likewise, not knowing what the total
amount of moral evil is or even how to measure it, and not knowing how to measure the total
good of humans in general having significant morality, the existence of a relatively specific
degree of that good, for which an additional evil the size of particular morally wrong choice, is
not something we could intuit or form a clear conception of, but can only infer from examination
of the divine choice context. Though the divine permission of an individual moral choice may
seem to make no significant contribution to the good of humans in general having significant
moral freedom, and though we can’t see that any other good requires this permission, because we
also know that many such permissions are worth their cost in permitted evil for the sake of the
good of humans having significant moral freedom, we can see, after examination of the different
possible interpretations of emergent goods, that this particular moral evil cannot be gratuitous.

A global good may be the only good God permits certain evils for the sake of, but that
intended good cannot be completely described in the specific way(s) it is actualized. God may
not intend a particular instantiation of a general good; he may leave that up to chance, just as He
may leave the amount and occurrence of evils to chance. But an unintended good may be a
justifying good if it is the case that if that good did not occur in the given context God would not
have permitted the evil. Though we may have only general terms with which to describe God’s
possible purposes, the specific unknown way in which those general goods are actualized may
require specific amounts of evil.

Global theodical goods do not show what good is achieved by allowing one amount of
evil as opposed to some other specific amount but this cannot mean they don’t encompass any or
that there are none. After all, how could we describe nature’s being uniform to a certain degree
or value or humans having significant moral freedom to a certain degree or value in a way that
revealed the necessity of God’s permission of the specific amount, kinds, and distribution of evils that actually occur?

Furthermore, to anticipate the next section, these goods supervene on permitted amounts of evil or roles played by permissions of evil, or even permitted amounts of potential evil (given the distinction between NGE and the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis) not necessarily the permission of specific evils themselves. We cannot measure the above goods against the sum of all these roles so as to see that the role of a divine permission of a particular evil is necessary. We don’t even know what that would involve.

Additionally, as described in chapter six, given the complexity of relations between events, and the consequent possible involvement of individual events in multiple trade-offs between different theodical goods and costs, the relation between a particular evil and an optimal satisfaction of multiple divine purposes is especially epistemically distant. Given this complexity, we certainly cannot expect to be able to measure the amount of goodness the role a permission of an instance of evil contributes to the value of an optimal satisfaction of multiple divine purposes nor conclude there is none from our inability to discern it. The familiar appeal to the possibility that an evil is connected to greater goods in ways we cannot discern (because the world is too complicated to know how things would have been if God had prevented it), gains additional force upon consideration of emergent good trade-offs.

**Lack of necessity may be mistaken for gratuity**

The other components of my defense of NGE contribute to this explanation of the illusory appearance of gratuitous evils. The illusion of gratuity present in emergent goods is
compounded by several additional factors in the case of theodical goods. These were described in chapters four and five.

First, NGE is not the Exclusivity Requirement. The permitted evil may be replaceable. The particular instance of natural evil of the fawn’s suffering need not be necessary for the trade-off offsetting good invoked, but that evil or one no better is (if God exists), by NGE. As argued in chapter five, because it is the amount of evil that matters, not its specific embodiment, a specific evil may serve a role in God’s purposes even if its doing so is left to chance. Alternatively put, the good an evil may be necessary for may be the conjunction of a good and the avoidance of an evil no better. The permission of an evil may serve a good by chance because there need be no necessary relation between the evil and the good that is a proper part of the total good the permission of the evil is necessary for.

Second, NGE is not the No Chance Role for Evil Thesis. The amount of the permitted evil need not be necessary for God’s intended purposes. NGE allows that there may be multiple optimal trade-offs with differing amounts of good and evil. This does not mean God’s preferences may be arbitrary for the actual offsetting good may not be the intended good. God may not prefer the actual degree of uniformity of nature rather than one that is part of a different optimal trade-off, for example. The good that requires the evil (or one no better) is an instantiation of God’s purposes, but need not be intended by God.

Third, NGE is not the No Pointless Evil Thesis. As described in chapters one and six, there is the possibility that a good, perhaps a deontological good or a specific degree of a global good, whether part of a trade-off or not, requires all of a type of evil, where the amount of that type, which may be horrific in both kind and amount, is due to chance or free choice. For example, for God to permit humans to have a very high degree of moral freedom, perhaps He
must permit all very significant moral choices (whether good or evil). Though its permission is required for this good, the actual amount of very significant moral evil is pointless in the sense that its actual occurrence serves no good. In this way veridical apparent pointlessness, in the sense that the permitted evil does not serve an offsetting good, is readily confused with apparent gratuity, as I pointed out at the end of my discussion in chapter six.

So, in addition to, and contributing to, our inability to directly intuit the individual offsetting good that requires the divine permission of a particular amount of evil, is the fact that the relation of necessity between the evil and possible general divine purposes (for achieving good) is possibly three steps removed. A non-gratuitous evil may be an unnecessary instantiation of an amount of evil that is unnecessary for God’s intended purposes or for any good at all. It may be difficult therefore to see how, without careful analysis, God’s purposes could require God’s permission of it, making it non-gratuitous. Applying this to Rowe’s example: 1. the fawn’s suffering may be replaceable, so only its role not the instance itself is necessary for the actual good achieved, and 2. the role itself, the additional amount of that kind of suffering added by the fawn’s suffering, may be unnecessary for the emergent (global and general) good that is God’s purpose (because some other trade-off may equally well satisfy God’s purposes), and 3. God’s permission of the type of evil the fawn’s suffering is an instance of, may be necessary for a good though the actual amount of that type of evil may serve no good.

It is not surprising then that God’s permission of an isolated fawn’s suffering seems unnecessary. Given only NGE, and not additional constraints on divine providence corresponding to more meticulous providence, in at least three possible senses, it may well be. And, if we accept those additional constraints, their satisfaction, such as God’s intending the
specific degrees to which global goods are satisfied, will be opaque to us so as to make the fawn’s suffering seem equally unnecessary.

Again, since NGE is distinct from the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis, and also if my claims about NGE’s relation to deontology are correct, a good may require God’s permission of all of a type of evil. This means God’s permission of individual evils and amounts of evil may be necessary for goods they do not “serve”, i.e. increase, by NGE. If my claims about NGE’s relation to chance are correct, NGE allows that a justifiably permitted instance of evil may be replaceable (for God’s purposes) If so, there will be no necessary connection between God’s permission of that instance of evil and any good. It is not surprising then if such tokens of evil seem unnecessary. Only God’s permission of the type or role served by the evil, not the particular instance of evil, must be necessary for an offsetting good, according to NGE. And if my arguments concerning NGE’s relation to vagueness are correct, neither God’s permission of an instance of evil nor an amount of that type of evil need be necessary for God’s purposes for the evil to be non-gratuitous. (Though the amount of that type of evil may be necessary for a particular instantiation of those purposes) None of these ways in which an evil may be unnecessary for God’s purposes indicates the evil is gratuitous.

The only way an evil can legitimately appear gratuitous is if it seems the permission of it is not necessary for an optimal divine trade-off between competing goods. The lack of necessity we often seem to detect by inspecting the local circumstances of an evil is not necessarily relevant to a possible lack of necessity of the permission of a total amount of that type of evil for an optimal trade-off. By referring to local circumstances Rowe’s argument invites a misapplication of NGE in this way. It is easy to mistake the former lack of necessity for the latter, especially if one has not thought through the possible relations between divine purposes,
specifically described, and individual evils. So Rowe’s argument invites a misinterpretation and misapplication of NGE that induces a false perception of gratuitous evil, not because of any lack of clarity in Rowe’s writing, which is exemplary, but because of the complexity of possible relations between God’s purposes and individual evils. The greater specificity of Rowe’s argument, though fruitful for generating discussion, presents illusory evidence for the existence of gratuitous evil.

In the previous section I have argued that our inability to intuit the instantiation of global goods that require the permission of a certain amount of evil, conceptualizing only the general global good’s requiring vaguely many evils, can falsely make an evil permitted by God for the sake of a global good appear gratuitous: its permission seems unnecessary to us. In this section I have drawn on previous chapters to present types of lack of necessity that may be mistaken for gratuity. I think these are not merely additional sources of error but factors contributing to the same illusion of gratuity generated by the fact that general policy theodicies exemplify emergent good relations. To illustrate the difference between these types of errors: if we knew that a specific good required either of two evils, thinking God’s permission of one rather than the other means the permitted evil is gratuitous is simply to be mistaken about what gratuity means or should mean. We can see the relation between the role played by the particular permission of evil and the good but fail to identify it as what makes the evil non-gratuitous. This is different from falsely perceiving an evil as gratuitous. In the next section I will present my view that the different types of contingency, or appearances of them, described here contribute to the illusory appearance of gratuity described earlier. I believe our having no clear conception of what it would be for a global good to have a specific value contributes to our mistaking these types of perceived contingency for perceived gratuity, and our mistaking these types of perceived
contingency for perceived gratuity contributes to our failure to consider how a global good may be specifically instantiated in the world as an offsetting good, so that the two types of errors are mutually reinforcing.

**Mistaken search for explanations of individuating features of instances of evil**

Our mistaking our inability to directly cognize the relevant emergent offsetting good for evidence of gratuity, and our erroneously taking its seeming that the permission of an individual evil makes no correspondingly significant contribution to any known theodical good to be positive evidence for gratuity (in cases where the permitted evil belongs to a type required by an accepted theodical good), is compounded by another intelligible related error.

The possibility that the permission of different evils may equally well bring about some good (even if God specifically wills one of them) means that specific characteristics of a permitted evil need not be explained by the way in which God’s permission of it satisfies NGE. A good may require an amount of a type of evil, or, more generally, an amount of a set of evils; and so a general good may require evil *qua* some general description only and not *qua* some specific or individuating description. As argued in chapter five, a fully adequate explanation for why God permits some evil need not involve those features of it by which we may identify it in contrast to other evils. If the No Chance Role for Evil Thesis and the Exclusivity Requirement are false, as NGE allows, a general good may be the only good God permits an evil for the sake of. So according to NGE an evil may be permitted for the sake of a good even though no individuating features of the evil is required for any good. Confusing the necessity of amount required by NGE with the necessity of an instance required by the Exclusivity Requirement can lead one to think the particularities of an evil’s permission by God’s being unnecessary for divine purposes is an indication of gratuity when it is not. (Furthermore, even if a particular evil...
is required for God’s purposes, these purposes may not be those of the good we think of in connection with that type of evil. This was argued in chapter six) This was the error described in detail in my discussion of Howard-Snyder’s objection to NGE.

By appealing to individual instances of evil Rowe’s argument draws our attention to their individuating features. We naturally then look for explanation of those individuating features to try to understand why those evils occurred or were permitted. But the goods that explain why God permits an evil need not answer to those features by which we refer to the evil. Only the amount of a particular evil need be offset and the offsetting good may only require permission of a broad type of evil to which the particular evil belongs. This offsetting good, again, may be solely the specific instantiation of a global good such as *nature’s being uniform to a certain degree or value* or *humans having significant moral freedom to a certain degree or value*.

In discussing Howard-Snyder’s arguments against NGE I said that providing contrastive explanations for irrelevant individuating features of events is clearly, even humorously, unnatural in contexts of explanation that don’t require them. Stating why you threw the ball rather than the rock when asked why you threw the ball likely mistakes the question asked. How then do we fall into thinking they are required here in the context of the explanation for God’s permission of evil?

I answer that not only should we expect the existence of an offsetting good to only become apparent after careful reasoned consideration of the divine choice context, and not by direct inspection of our ideas of the possible goods and evils and their relations, but that because we lack that context when we attempt to directly imagine the good, the only goods it seems the permission of the evil could be necessary for are those answering contrastive explanations for the occurrence of the evil. But the relevant referent of ‘evil’ here is an amount of a type of evil, not a
specific instantiation of that amount of that type. The appeal to a particular instance of evil leads us to search for goods of irrelevant contrastive explanations that need not exist.

Of course, illustrating a type of evil with an example moves the discussion from the abstract to the concrete, and so more accurately conveys the evidential import against theism claimed for that type of evil. But to do this is to better convey the content of the appeal to that type of evil, not to newly introduce some feature of evil outside its scope.

By appealing to an instance of evil Rowe’s argument invites us to ask: what good could this be necessary for? Lacking a frame of reference of goods of corresponding specificity, and because describing a specific instance of evil introduces a context of particularity rather than of generality, it is not natural for us to take the relevant referent of “this” to be an amount of a general kind of evil. We take it to refer to the particular instance. Rowe’s second theological premise then asks us to consider how the permission of the mentioned evil may be required by greater goods, leading us to consider the necessity, or lack thereof, of the particular example.

So instead of taking NGE to most basically refer to an amount of a type of evil, as it does, we take it to essentially refer to the particular evil, which is to misconstrue it as a version of meticulous providence. Certainly what needs to be justified is God’s permission of the particular instance, but the feature of the particular instance whose permission must be necessary need only be its amount of evil, perhaps also its general type, whose permission we may be able to explain in terms of only general goods requiring evil of that general type. For all three reasons, that what is justified is the particular instance, that a context of particularity is introduced, and that we lack a direct intuition of specific degrees of goodness of various possible instantiations of the possibly relevant general goods, we take the relevant referent of “this” to be the evil considered in its particularity, not qua amount of a general kind. But, as argued in chapter five, that is not the
relevant referent. The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis pertains to God’s preference for good and the amounts of evil whose permission is thereby required, not the specific embodiments of those goods and evils.

Misconstruing NGE in this way makes it impossible to see that the relevant offsetting good may be contained in a considered global good, as a possible optimal instantiation of it. If we are looking for a good that requires a particular, perhaps random, evil, we will pass over global goods. Global goods do not even seem to require particular amounts of (permitted) evil, only vague amounts. Only when trade-off relations between global goods and evils are considered, where differing instantiations of differing amounts of evil may each be required by different equally suitable offsetting goods, could the possible justifying role of global goods be recognized. But that recognition requires a shift of perspective away from the particularities of the evil into its global context and a close analysis of that context that identifies its puzzling features and distinguishes them from gratuity. The surface simplicity of Rowe’s argument obscures the need for this task.

Now, this search for explanations for the permission of the evil in its specificity may also be partially motivated by the requirement that God be good to each individual sentient being, which is essential to God’s benevolence. But the Evil Offsetting Good interpretation of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis is only a requirement that God have a good reason for choosing more over less evil, where a good reason is constituted by its not being the case that a relevantly same offsetting good could be achieved without the evil. NGE is a necessary but not sufficient condition on God’s permission of evil, as Rowe originally stated. So the benevolence requirement may be added to NGE as an additional constraint on God’s permission of evil. One might think these requirements may be in conflict or one might think God’s inscrutably wise
providence rules out such conflict, but in either case, the conditions of their satisfaction are conceptually distinct. How God is good to the suffering fawn may remain unknown, and perhaps this generates a different atheist argument from evil. (Though the permission of its suffering being necessary for an offsetting good may also help explain any appearance of God’s lack of benevolence.)

So why does Rowe’s example of the isolated suffering fawn seem a powerful example of seemingly gratuitous evil? I suggest the following: by pointing to an instance of suffering and invoking the need for greater goods, Rowe’s premises incline us to ask “Why would God permit this suffering? What greater good could this be necessary for?” This is natural to ask because, after all, God must be justified in permitting not just general types of evils but every particular instance of evil. Also, Rowe’s detailed example is taken to only provide precision. So we look for a correspondingly relevant because specific explanation. Rowe’s example is characterized by who it is that suffers, when, and where. We look for a good causally connected to the timing and location of the suffering fawn scenario and find none. We try to connect this particular animal’s suffering with a good that requires it and, barring a fawn soul-building theodicy (that I do not reject but will assume rejected for the sake of argument), again find none. After perhaps a few more imaginative attempts the task then seems transparently hopeless. The stipulated relative causal isolation of the fawn’s suffering from other sentient beings rebuffs these attempts. Any ventured relation to a concrete good or even to expected utility can be reasonably stipulated absent. Perhaps we consider the good of the uniformity of nature or some other general good but note that preventing this particular relatively isolated evil seems to incur no significant cost in this regard. We then think our failure to think of goods that could explain God’s permission of such particular instances of suffering shows that probably no good we can imagine could justify
God’s permission of them. A similar failed investigation attends other proposed examples of apparently gratuitous evils. An appeal to unknown goods or relations between goods and evils follows or it is accepted that the proposed evil seems gratuitous.

But this is all a mistake. We should never have been led down this path. A perfectly adequate explanation of God’s permission of the fawn’s suffering may make no reference to the particularities of it. In general, a global good may adequately explain God’s permission of a particular evil. This is the lesson of global policy theodicies and the real lesson of Howard-Snyder’s Coach Analogy. God’s permission of the fawn’s suffering or a natural evil no better is necessary for the specific instantiation of the general good of the uniformity of nature that God has actualized by permitting it (along with many other natural evils). That good offsets all the evil permitted for its sake, including the fawn’s suffering. If the uniformity of nature requires God’s willingness to permit natural evils, and is a good that outweighs all natural evil, the fawn’s suffering is likely not gratuitous, even if it occurs by chance.

Divinely intended global goods, such as the uniformity of nature or the existence of significant morality, may justify God’s permission of particular evils, such as the fawn’s suffering or an individual misuse of moral freedom, without requiring the permission of those specific evils. Again, such justification satisfies the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis in a way that is not conspicuous in part because the specific optimal trade-off(s) in which those general goods are actualized, which do require the permission of the amount of those evils, are not specifiable by us. 132 If we accept this theodical good, the fawn’s suffering should be regarded as possibly permitted for the sake of a good we can imagine. The lack of necessity of this particular permission of evil for general policy goods, the uniformity of nature, say, is taken to be a
counterexample to NGE by van Inwagen and is taken to be an apparent counterexample to theism because of NGE by Rowe and many others, but it is not, as I have argued.

Of course if we don’t accept the uniformity of nature or any other global good that requires broad types of natural evil or animal suffering as adequate theodical goods for much natural evil then we should regard the fawn’s suffering as gratuitous. But in this case we should regard all or nearly all natural evil as gratuitous and Rowe’s appeal to this instance should no more incline us to doubt theism than an appeal to natural evil or animal suffering in general. This is what I mean by my claim that Rowe’s argument is no improvement on the basic claim that theodicies do not account for all evil.

Again, recognizing the need for a good justifying God’s permission of the particular instance, having available no ready conception of an amount of any accepted general theodical good that would correspond to the amount of the evil, and introduced to a context of particularity, we naturally but erroneously interpret the need for explanation to be a need for explanation of the features of the particular evil that individuate that evil. But, as argued, there need be no divine explanation for the features that enable us to individuate an evil for God to be justified in permitting it in satisfaction of NGE. In this way the apparently distinctive force of Rowe’s appeal, because of its clarity and precision, is a kind of unintended deceptive red herring.

I will call the explanation of the mistaken perception of gratuity due to the puzzling relations between emergent justifying goods and their costs that I have described in this chapter the “Local Gratuity Illusion”. Emergent goods as I have defined them describe general policy theodicies, as introduced in chapter one, and are ubiquitous in other contexts as well. The puzzling feature of these relations is chiefly that optimal trade-offs between global goods and total amounts of evils consist of increments of evil that seem not worth their individual
contribution to the global good, though collectively they must be. This may be compounded by a lack of necessity of the (divine permission of ) specific evils or amounts of evil for those global goods.

I have argued that these puzzling features may be explained either in terms of hidden values or by the intransitivity of betterness, and that on any careful interpretation of emergent goods, the perceived gratuity, or analogue of gratuity, evaporates. Although the appearance of gratuity may persist even after considering my explanation of the Local Gratuity Illusion, that is to be expected on this explanation. So I claim that the persistent sense that representative instances of a type of evil are gratuitous despite recognition of a general good that requires divine permission of (roughly) the actual amount of that type of evil is the unrecognized appreciation of the seemingly paradoxical relations of comparative value of emergent goods. Once light is shed on those puzzling features we see that they were mistaken for gratuity. This doesn’t mean they are no longer puzzling, just that the puzzle turns out not to be about gratuity.

I believe the Local Gratuity Illusion has lent Rowe’s first premise, the empirical claim, illusory force, and has even led some theists to deny NGE. In the next chapter I argue that the two most influential critics of NGE, van Inwagen and Hasker, were unduly influenced by the Local Gratuity Illusion.
Chapter 8

Evidence for the Local Gratuity Illusion:

van Inwagen and Hasker
I have argued that Rowe’s argument from apparently gratuitous evils does not significantly add to the basic view that (1) known theodicies do not account for all evil and (2) this is evidence for atheism, and that this is because its seeming distinctive force is due to the Local Gratuity Illusion. Because of the complexity of relations between emergent goods and their individual costs, Rowe’s appeal to individual evils makes the task of theodicy seem even more difficult than it is. In this chapter I present evidence for the influence of the Local Gratuity Illusion on contemporary discussion of Rowe’s argument. I will argue that the two most prominent critics of NGE, van Inwagen and Hasker, articulate aspects of the problem of evil in inconsistent ways and that the Local Gratuity Illusion explains why.

Apparent inconsistencies in van Inwagen’s presentation and criticism of the “Local Argument”, a version of Rowe’s argument, are best explained by the influence of the Local Gratuity Illusion. Similarly, the interesting thought experiments Hasker has introduced, and his understanding of them, are generated by the puzzling features of emergent good trade-offs and are misidentified by Hasker as a puzzle, and a problem, for NGE. If such accomplished and influential theist philosophers as van Inwagen and Hasker have been misled by the Local Gratuity Illusion into inconsistencies unnoticed by the philosophical community, the Local Gratuity Illusion is likely pervasive as a conduit for the near universal perception that Rowe’s appeal to particular evils is distinctively strong evidence for gratuitous evil.

First let us take stock of what is at stake. NGE states that God would only prefer more evil to less if there were a good reason for doing so, where a good reason must involve some good. In my opinion NGE, when properly understood, is clearly fundamental to divine goodness and rationality, perhaps self-evidently so. According to traditional theism, God chose to create because it was good to do so. He therefore governs His creation for the sake of what is good. So
God’s good reason(s) for permitting evil must involve some good (regardless of which theory of human morality is correct), as we have seen in chapter four. That the good must offset the evil seems just trivially true: if it didn’t God would be preferring the disvalue of the amount the evil exceeds the good for no reason at all, which is just to prefer more evil over less for no reason. So we should examine claimed refutations of NGE with caution. Even if rejecting his reasoning were to entail some prima facie implausible alternative views or theses (though I do not think it does) we should keep in mind that denying NGE may be even less plausible or less intelligible.

Van Inwagen’s Presentation of the Local Argument from Evil

In The Problem of Evil Gifford Lectures, van Inwagen presents a debate over the problem of evil that begins with the global argument from evil. The global problem of evil challenges “Theist” to explain God’s permission of the “vast amounts of truly horrendous evil” in the world. Theist offers the following “expanded free will defense”:

When human beings misused their free will and separated themselves from God, the existence of horrors was one of the natural and inevitable consequences of this separation. Each individual horror, however, may well have been due to chance. … Why doesn’t God miraculously prevent each horror? … [this] would have frustrated his plan for restoring human beings to their original union with him by removing an essential motive for cooperating with Him – namely, the realization that there is something horribly wrong with the world they live in.\(^\text{133}\)

Theist also says:

For human beings to cooperate with God in this rescue operation, they must know … what it means to be separated from Him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply “cancelled” all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. … If the story is true, much of the evil in the world is due to chance.\(^\text{134}\)
Atheist then responds to Theist (I have divided and labeled his response):

[A] You, Theist, may have told a story that accounts for the enormous amount of evil in the world … But there is a challenge to theism that is … not simply [based on] what might be called the general fact of evil …

[B] Even if you have effectively answered … the global argument from evil, your response to this argument does not touch … local arguments from evil.

[C] Let us consider certain particular very bad events – “horrors” I will call them … it is evident, at least in many cases, that God could have prevented the [a] horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

[D] If evil can be, even roughly, quantified … it might be that there was more evil in a world in which there were thousands of millions of relatively minor episodes of suffering … than in a world in which there were a few horrors. But an omnipotent and omniscient creator could be called to moral account for creating a world in which there was even one horror.

[E] And the reason is obvious: that horror could have been “left out” of creation without sacrifice of any great good or the permitting of some even greater horror …

[F] Thus, the sheer amount of evil (which might be distributed in a fairly uniform way) is not the only fact about evil that Theist needs to take into account. He must also take into account what we might call … high local concentrations of evil – that is, horrors.

[G] And it is hard to see how the free-will defense, however elaborated, could provide any resources for dealing with horrors.135

There are at least three related prima facie inconsistencies in this exchange between Theist and Atheist:

(1) Atheist introduces horrors (in C and F) as if they had not yet been considered by Theist’s expanded defense, yet an explanation for God’s permission of horrors is the core of Theist’s expanded defense.
(2) Atheist grants the expanded defense explanation for God’s permission of vast
amounts of horrific evil, which is in terms of God’s permission of horrors (A and B),
and then states that the expanded defense cannot account for horrors (G).

(3) Slight evils of an “even” distribution of evil are as open to the objection of seeming
gratuity (that typical instances could be prevented by God without cost to His
purposes) as greater evils of an uneven distribution, yet Atheist presents this
challenge as if it only applied to the latter. (D, E, and F)

I will elaborate on and attempt to explain these seeming inconsistencies below. First let
us complete van Inwagen’s presentation of the debate. Atheist follows the above quoted remarks
with the “Local Argument from Evil,” which parallels Rowe’s argument. I paraphrase it as
follows:

**The Local Argument from Evil**

1. E, an example of a horror, could have been left out of the world by an omnipotent
creator without making the world worse.
2. “If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he
created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been
left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally
perfect creator would have left the horror out of the world he created.”
   Therefore,
3. God does not exist.

Van Inwagen writes, in his own voice:

[H] [The expanded free-will defense] story accounts for the existence of horrors – that is,
that there are horrors is a part of the story. The story explains why there are such things
as horrors, although it says nothing about any particular horror. (It in fact implies that
many individual horrors have no explanation whatever.)

[I] And to explain why there are horrors is not to meet the local argument from evil.
A general account of the existence of horrors does not constitute a reply to the argument from horrors, because it does not tell us which premise of the argument to deny.

In response to the Local Argument, Theist launches van Inwagen’s Vagueness Objection against premise 2, which I have detailed in chapter six. Van Inwagen then continues this criticism of NGE in the context of the expanded free will defense, arguing further and more specifically that premise 2, his version of NGE, should be rejected because there may be no specific number of horrors God must permit for the sake of humans realizing that to live in a world distanced from God is to live in a world of horrors.

**Departure from Rowe**

Van Inwagen’s presentation of the Local Argument is importantly different from Rowe’s presentation in ways that reveal the influence of the Local Gratuity Illusion on van Inwagen’s thinking. The evils the Local Argument appeals to are the same evils the expanded free will defense claims to account for. Van Inwagen’s remarks make it clear that the local argument appeals to a representative example of a horror, not only a representative example of an apparently gratuitous horror. One might survey horrors and pick out some exceptional cases to which known theodicies seem inapplicable as examples of apparently gratuitous evils. Although this seems Rowe’s approach, van Inwagen does not do this. A typical individual horror appears gratuitous, according to van Inwagen, and this is the fact about the actual distribution of evil his Local Argument refers to. Although it could be that divine permission of an individual horror seems necessary for a greater good, this is not typically the case, according to the expanded free will defense and van Inwagen, and so the Local Argument refers to typical or representative horrors.
This crucial departure from Rowe’s presentation is evidenced by several considerations.

1. The expanded defense story about God’s permission of horrors is meant to address all horrors and so the horrors the Local Argument refers to as well. By “local” Atheist presumably means occurring across a relatively narrow stretch of time and space, so Atheist’s definition of a horror as a particular localized event may be narrower than what Theist meant by horrors. Nevertheless, Theist’s expanded defense certainly included all horrors as defined by Atheist. A specific very bad event is certainly a common meaning of a ‘horror’.

2. When van Inwagen says individual horrors appear gratuitous because it seems they could be removed by God without cost to His purposes (in C above), he is referring to typical instances of horrors or high local concentrations of evil. The context of quote C suggests that by “even one” horror Atheist is referring to one representative instance.

3. Likewise when van Inwagen prefaces the Local Argument by asking “Suppose there were an omnipotent and omniscient being and that this being acted just as God has acted in the expanded free will defense. Could any moral case be made against the actions of this being?” he is asking if there is an inherent difficulty with this description of God’s relation to the world’s horrors. He is not asking if there are types of horrors in the world this account fails to mention.

4. That the Local Argument appeals to a particular representative example of the horrors the expanded defense purports to explain (God’s permission of) is also implied by his argument for the relevance of the distinction between even and uneven distributions of evil. God’s permission of the latter faces a moral objection based on gratuity that
the former does not just because the latter consists of horrors, construed as particular localized horrific events, according to van Inwagen. So the existence of horrors in general introduces the problem of gratuitous evil, according to van Inwagen.

5. Van Inwagen’s accompanying visual metaphor for the possibility of God’s removing individual horrors without cost to His purposes is likewise based on very general and universal features of horrors, so defined. Their being individual events that take up relatively small portions of space and time is what makes their uncostly removal seem possible.

For these reasons it is clear that the horrors the Local Argument refers to are not a previously overlooked category. Theist says in his expanded free will defense that the great good of humans recognizing the need for reconciliation with God requires vastly many such horrors.

The dialectic here is very different from that in which Rowe posed his original version of the Local Argument. Rowe begins with what he thinks is an apparently gratuitous evil: the isolated fawn’s suffering burn pains. I have invoked the Local Gratuity Illusion to argue that the good of the uniformity of nature, which previously seemed inapplicable even if acknowledged, could in fact justify God’s permission of this and similar apparently gratuitous instances of natural evil. If Rowe were to accept my criticism and the uniformity of nature as a global good, perhaps he would withdraw his fawn illustration of his first premise. Van Inwagen, by contrast, begins with granting we can imagine a good that justifies God’s permission of all of a type of evil, namely horrors, including random horrors, and then argues that typical instances of that type still pose a challenge to theism. This is quite surprising because it seems clearly inconsistent. I will argue it is in fact inconsistent and that the Local Gratuity Illusion best explains van Inwagen’s failure to see this.
In his presentation, van Inwagen alternates between the global perspective on horrors, considering them collectively, and the local perspective on horrors, considering them individually, in relation to the good of the expanded defense, without recognizing the emergent good relations between these perspectives. He says that the expanded defense accounts for the fact that there are horrors (and also the fact that there are vastly many horrors) (H and I), but that the local argument, which appeals to a representative example of a horror, is still a challenge to theism (J). But one cannot explain God’s permission of a type of evil without thereby explaining God’s permission of a typical instance of that type.

Moreover, the expanded defense explains why there are horrors by explaining why there are vastly many horrors. If it offers an acceptable explanation of the former it also does so for the latter. As atheist grants, the expanded defense explains God’s permission of the total amount of horrors the world contains. But an explanation and justification for God’s permission of a total amount of a kind of evil is also an explanation and justification for God’s permission of each and every typical instance of that kind. So Atheist and van Inwagen’s view that the Local Argument is a challenge to theism, even given the expanded defense is incorrect. I maintain that van Inwagen’s failure to see that God’s being justified in permitting the horrors of the world, considered collectively, means He is justified in permitting each representative example of a horror, considered individually, is best explained by the influence of the Local Gratitude Illusion.

Inconsistencies

Let us examine why van Inwagen does not recognize that a justification for God’s permission of horrors considered collectively is a justification for God’s permission of all typical
horrors considered individually, or the relevance of this, by first reviewing the puzzling aspects of Atheist’s response to Theist’s expanded free will defense introduced above.

(1) Atheist introduces horrors (in C and F) as if they had not yet been considered by Theist’s expanded defense, yet an explanation for God’s permission of horrors is the core of Theist’s expanded defense.

Atheist asks Theist to consider particular very bad events or “high local concentrations of evil” which he defines as horrors. But Theist had just discussed God’s permission of horrors, labeled as such, at length, in presenting the expanded defense, so it is odd for Atheist to now draw Theist’s attention to horrors as a new consideration. Why does Atheist speak as if he is introducing a new category of evil when he is not? Atheist wants to draw attention to the apparent gratuity of high local concentrations of evil. On his view this is a morally relevant feature not previously considered or sufficiently appreciated by the expanded defense. Indeed, if the expanded defense had not considered this feature of some evils, then they might form a category not accounted for by that defense. But, as we have seen, this apparent gratuity is a feature of all typical instances of horrors, according to van Inwagen. Whether Theist explicitly considered this feature or not, if the expanded defense does account for the existence of horrors (which of course includes individual horrific events) as Atheist grants, then it accounts for horrors with that feature.

To make an analogy, consider the following response to John Hick’s soul-making theodicy: “Hick does adequately explain why God permits innocent suffering and harm in general. The fact that God’s permission of innocent suffering makes possible the great (global) good of active human compassion indeed may justify God’s permission of it and the amount of it
that the world so far contains. However, consider the Sufferer’s Good Constraint that any particular suffering endured would be permitted by God only if it benefits the sufferer. Every particular instance of permitted genuine harm violates this requirement. Because Hick’s explanation fails to account for this morally objectionable aspect of an omnipotent being’s permission of innocent suffering and harm it leaves open a new atheist argument from evil based on this constraint, the local argument from innocent harm rather than the global, which he has adequately responded to.” This response is not consistent and it is obvious why. If the Sufferer’s Good Constraint gives reason to think God wouldn’t permit any instance of innocent suffering and harm, despite Hick’s explanation, then Hick’s account does not adequately explain why God permits innocent suffering and harm in general or the actual total amount of it. One could say that Hick’s theodicy would have adequately explained God’s permission of innocent suffering but for the Sufferer’s Good Constraint, but that is something different and is not what van Inwagen says regarding the expanded free will defense. The question we will examine is why van Inwagen (Atheist) didn’t give the consistent response.

(2) Atheist grants that the expanded defense accounts for God’s permission of horrors (A and B), and then states that the expanded defense cannot account for horrors (G).

To make this consistent, the first use of ‘horrors’ must refer to horrors in general and the second to horrors considered individually, which presumably is what Atheist means. However, as already mentioned, the expanded defense explains not only why there are any horrors at all, but also why God allows vast amounts of horrific evil. It explains why there are horrors as part of an explanation of why God allows vastly many horrors, considered collectively. Further, it also explains why there is the total amount of evil of all actual horrors, as required to answer the global argument from evil, as Atheist grants. But, again, to explain why God is justified in
permitting all of a category of evils is to explain why God is justified in permitting all the evils of that category. So the expanded defense cannot adequately explain the former, why God is justified in permitting the vast quantity of horrors that the world contains, without adequately explaining the latter, why God is justified in permitting every typical horror the world contains. Yet Atheist claims it has done so.

Again, the distinction between the category of horrors (the fact that there are horrors) and members of that category (the fact that there are the horrors there are) made here by Atheist and by van Inwagen (in H and I) is not relevant. The expanded defense purports to explain God’s permission of all the horrors of the world, considered collectively. If it does so, as granted by Atheist, then not only does it account for the quantity of evil of all the world’s horrors, it also accounts for every particular typical horror, even if aspects of each particular horror are left unexplained. Again, why would van Inwagen think that an explanation and justification for permission of all of a type of evil is not a justification for the permission of each instance of that total? I will attempt to explain this.

(3) No answer to the global argument and no distribution of evil can avoid the (perceived) challenge posed by the local argument, by van Inwagen’s description of that challenge, but van Inwagen claims there is a way evil could have been distributed that would have avoided the challenge.

The global argument challenges Theist to explain why God permits “vast amounts of horrific evil”. The answer must involve a general good that requires God’s permission of this vague amount of evil. It could not be described so as to require only the exact amount of evil the world contains because that is not even known. So no such answer can explain why God permits
the actual amount of evil rather than one individual evil less. Van Inwagen claims the challenge posed by the Local Argument is posed by the manner in which the vast amount of evil the world contains is distributed. However, so long as that vast amount comes in increments of evil, the question of why God did not permit one less increment, i.e. the “local” challenge, can be posed. In all cases, one increment among vastly many of a vague amount required for a global good will seem unnecessary for that good. The difficulty is that the total amount may be considered as a whole of vague amount, apart from its summed parts or increments, (considered vaguely because that is the only kind of measure of it we have) and also as a precise, albeit unknown, sum. An answer to a question about the former cannot address the latter, whether the vastly many parts of that sum are construed as bigger or smaller. So there being many less severe evils rather than fewer more severe evils does not remove the challenge of the Local Argument as van Inwagen’s thinks. Each slight evil of an “even” distribution will appear unnecessary for the good of the expanded defense, just as each individual horror of an “uneven” distribution will.

So it is not that evil should have been distributed in a better way that poses the quandary that sets the stage for the Local Argument. It is that there are individual instances of evil and the available conceptions of goods require amounts of permitted evil not as finely discriminated as individual evils so that those goods seem to be obtainable with at least slightly less evil. However, the simultaneous plausibility and perplexity of the claim that God must permit individual evils for the sake of goods that do not seem to require them raises the question of whether the (vague) goods that require not so finely specified amounts of evil may themselves be individuated into goods that do. This question is answered affirmatively by the hidden values interpretation of emergent goods. Even if answered negatively, pursuing this question leads to a better understanding of the relation between global theodical goods, evil, and NGE. At the very
least, the paradoxicality of seeming required gratuity should make one suspicious of that seeming.

Although it is morally worse to permit a gratuitous horror than a gratuitous slight evil, whether God would permit any gratuitous evil is the logical point at issue and the point the Local Argument is based on. The distinction between many slight evils and fewer worse evils is intended to buttress the relevance of the distinction between the problem of the amount of evil (which is a problem only if the amount seems gratuitous) and the problem of the apparent gratuity of individual evils, but it does not because the problem of apparent gratuity is the same for both distributions.

Perhaps a contrast between vague amounts of evil required for general purposes, such as that of the expanded defense, and specific increments of evil required for specific goods is really behind van Inwagen’s distinction between “even” and “uneven” distributions of evil (and he only misdescribes this as a distinction between many and fewer but more severe). If so, the mistake is in thinking that general goods cannot fully justify permission of specific evils (because they do not specifically require them). This is to mistake the plausible NGE for the implausible Exclusivity Requirement, as we reviewed in chapter five.

Again, to make logical space for the Local Argument outside the Global Argument van Inwagen divides the problem of evil into the problem of the amount of evil, allocated to the Global Argument, and the problem of the distribution of evil, allocated to the Local Argument. But if general goods do not explain God’s permission of individual evils they do not explain God’s permission of (many general types of) evil at all. All evils are in some sense individual evils and many occupy “narrow” regions of space and time, whether belonging to an even or an
uneven distribution. The distinction between what general goods do and do not require, which
seems the basis for van Inwagen’s distinction between the problem of the amount of evil and the
problem of its distribution, does not divide the problem of evil into two types. As noted in
chapter six, a general good may explain God’s permission of a particular evil without requiring
that specific evil.

The Expanded Defense is a Rebutting Defeater of the Local Argument

As we have seen, van Inwagen’s inconsistent responses to Theist are, knowingly or
unknowingly, attempts to avoid the entailment of God’s justified permission of typical horrors,
considered individually, by God’s justified permission of horrors, considered collectively. But
the latter does imply the former and so van Inwagen’s attempt to argue otherwise can only
consist of misrepresentations to mask inconsistencies. He applies two distinctions to avoid this
implication: the distinction between even and uneven distributions of the same amount of evil,
and the distinction between the fact that there are any horrors at all and the fact that there are the
particular horrors there are. Neither distinction is relevant in the context of the expanded defense.
He incorrectly separates the expanded defense answer to why God permits the amount of “vast
quantities of horrific evil” from its explanation of God’s permission of (individual typical)
horrors, and then (inconsistently) misrepresents the expanded defense as only explaining the fact
of horrors to show it does not explain God’s permission of individual horrors, when its
explanation of both the existence and quantity of horrors means it does explain God’s permission
of every particular representative horror (just not why there is one horror or one amount of
horrors rather than another). The expanded defense explains God’s permission of horrors,
considered collectively, which is the only way it can adequately answer the global challenge, as
Atheist grants. But since it explains God’s permission of horrors, considered collectively, it also
explains why God is justified in permitting every representative instance of a horror, thereby nullifying the Local Argument. This was implicit in my discussion of general policy theodicies in chapter one.

Van Inwagen provides an argument to the contrary. He says the Local Argument presents a challenge to theism even if the expanded defense has adequately answered the Global Argument from Evil because the expanded defense does not indicate which premise of the Local Argument is false. He writes (J), “… A general account of the existence of horrors does not constitute a reply to the argument from horrors, because it does not tell us which premise of the argument to deny.” He is right that the expanded defense fails to address the Local Argument from Evil’s premises, but mistaken in thinking this means the Local Argument remains a challenge to theism even if the expanded defense is correct. Because the expanded defense is a rebutting defeater of the Local Argument it does not need to be an undermining defeater to remove its challenge.

In this debate Atheist explicitly believes the following:

1. The expanded defense shows God is justified in permitting all the horrors the world contains, considered collectively.

2. E, a representative example of a horror, is gratuitous.

3. NGE

Does this constitute a challenge to theism? No. Atheist should infer from 1 that:

(1.5) The expanded defense shows God is justified in permitting E, a typical horror. So he cannot conclude from 1 and 2 and 3 that God does not exist because of E. He must now contemplate which to give up: the expanded defense, the claim that E is really gratuitous, or
NGE. If God is justified in permitting E, as per 1.5, then either E is not really gratuitous or God may be justified in permitting gratuitous evil. That 1 implies 1.5 is far more certain than that the expanded defense is adequate, E is gratuitous, and even NGE.

Atheist could have consistently said that the expanded defense had seemed to be a good explanation for why God permits the world’s horrific evil, but that upon consideration of the gratuity entailed by that explanation, we see that it is not. As a reminder, note that though more consistent, this position is mistaken for reasons already given. Every explanation for why God permits the vague amount of “vast quantities” of evil would encounter this same difficulty; every such explanation entails the occurrence of individual evils that seem removable without cost by God. So if Atheist impugned the expanded defense for this reason, he must hold that answers to the global argument are in principle impossible. This is suspect because the relations between quantities that generate this difficulty have general applicability outside the context of the problem of evil, as I have explained in chapter six. My point here is that Atheist and van Inwagen do not take this difficult and mistaken but more understandable position (that upon consideration of the gratuity entailed by the expanded defense, we see that it is not a good explanation for why God permits the world’s horrific evil). They claim instead the expanded defense is an adequate answer to the global argument but not the local and so make the more obvious mistake of rejecting the inference from (1) to (1.5).

Van Inwagen’s thinking that 2 and 3 constitute a challenge to theism in the context of acceptance of the expanded defense means that he fails to see that the expanded defense does adequately explain God’s permission of particular horrors (qua horror, and this only is relevant) and that if God is justified in permitting the total amount of all horrors, as per the expanded defense, He is justified in permitting every particular typical horror. So, though the expanded
defense does not show which premise to deny, it does show that at least one premise must be false. Again, since the divine permission of the evil E referred to is justified, given the expanded defense, either E is not gratuitous or God may be justified in permitting gratuitous evil. The fact that we cannot see how the permission of an individual horror contributes to the good of the expanded defense cannot be relevant, by the logic of the relations involved: for every typical horror e we cannot see how the permission of e is justified, yet by the expanded defense the permission of all horrors, which must include e, is justified. The fact that we cannot see any explanation for God’s permission of a particular horror rather than some other, or rather than one less of that type, also cannot be relevant, especially given acceptance of an account of why God permits a vague amount of vastly many random horrors.

**The Influence of the Local Gratuity Illusion**

But how could a philosopher as astute as van Inwagen fail to see the relevance of this straightforward relation between justified permission of a whole and justified permission of its parts as I claim? I suggest, with appropriate modesty, this is the work of the Local Gratuity Illusion. Mistaking NGE for the Exclusivity Requirement (that a justifying good must contrastively explain God’s permission of an evil or an amount of evil), as a compelling justificatory requirement is part of that explanation, but there is more. Relations between parts and wholes of emergent goods have paradoxical features, as I’ve described in chapter six. In general, attention to one perspective in a paradox at the expense of the opposing can make denying what would otherwise be obvious seem reasonable. Here, what is true of cost totals, namely being outweighed by good, seems false of the cost increments that comprise it, and this requires rejection of one of the following *prima facie* plausible propositions:
A. There must be one or more optimal choices in a finite set.

B. If a trade-off is optimal, each increment of it is worth its cost.

C. Each increment of one value in an emergent good trade-off is not worth its cost of the competing value.

It seems that (A) there must be one or more optimal choices in a finite set because the only way there could no optimal choice is if the betterness relation is intransitive and the betterness relation seems transitive. It also seems that (B) if a trade-off is optimal, each increment of it must be worth its cost because otherwise slightly less of one value would be a better trade-off. However, as we have seen by different examples, in an emergent good trade-off circumstance involving finite possible trade-offs, it seems (C) for every trade-off, each individual increment of one value seems not worth its cost; it seems only vaguely sufficiently many increments are worth their cost. So one must reject at least one of these *prima facie* highly plausible propositions.

When the complete emergent good trade-off context is kept in mind the force of each of these propositions A, B, and C loses some lustre in the light of the others. (My own opinion, given in chapter six, is that C ‘each increment is not worth its cost of the competing good’ should be rejected in favor of postulating hidden values.) However, if the emergent good trade-off context were wholly unrecognized and so also the relevance of these propositions to each other, the truth of ‘each increment is not worth its cost of the competing good’ (thus considered “locally” rather than in “global” context) may appear almost self-evident. Regarding the pain relief case: how could it be reasonable to pay one thousand dollars for pain “relief” you can’t even notice? So van Inwagen’s belief in the apparent local gratuity challenge to God’s justified
permission of horrors at the expense of belief in the inference from (1) to (1.5) becomes understandable if he failed to recognize the emergent good trade-off context.

Of course, van Inwagen’s expanded free will defense itself says there is a trade-off between the good of humans recognizing their need for God and the amount of horrors God permits. What van Inwagen doesn’t recognize, I claim, is the parallel with the (ubiquitous) emergent good trade-off relations that I have drawn. As a consequence, he misses that there are the above compelling competing claims to the seeming self-evident gratuity that is the focal point and fulcrum of his position. To put it colloquially, I suggest the inference from (1) to (1.5) is overlooked because his conscious or unconscious thought is “Things can’t be that simple! What about this unrivaled challenge to justified permission of an individual horror: its obvious gratuity.” But that challenge is rivaled and with that understanding it is easier to see that the inference from (1) to (1.5) is obviously true.

Another consequence of van Inwagen’s not recognizing the emergent good – cost trade-off relations exemplified by the expanded defense is that he misses that he is implicitly rejecting the transitivity of betterness in his interpretation of his alleged counterexamples to NGE. If this were recognized, he might reinterpret the purportedly necessary sub-optimality as necessary for the good of making a trade-off (rather than not) and so reinterpret the divine choice circumstance he proposes as a counterexample to the principle that God always chooses the better of two options rather than to NGE. In chapter six I argued that van Inwagen did not properly distinguish two ways a choice may be morally arbitrary: because of equally good alternatives, and because one can’t satisfy the principle of always choosing the better alternative. There is further evidence of this in his criticism of NGE. When considering the choice of number of medicine doses across all possibilities in the medicine distribution case (referred to in chapter
six) he speaks of an optimal but unknown number. But when considering the choice of whether or not to increase by one an already selected number he states it is always better to do so, implying there is no optimal choice. I suggest he does not address the tension between these interpretations because he does not identify and analyze the intransitivity of betterness his account requires. And he does not identify this because he does not distinguish the two ways a choice may be arbitrary. He says one has no reason not to increase one’s selected number by one because one’s selected number was only a guess at the optimal number. But if one is guessing at an optimal number then one also has no reason to increase one’s selected number; that would just be another equally good guess. The arbitrariness appealed to is not the kind of arbitrariness his account requires, which shows he did not see the relevance of the distinction between them. So I claim he does not see that the moral principle his account really says the existence of horrors shows God violates is that one should always prefer the better option. He does not see that this is not equivalent to NGE in this case, and that the satisfaction of NGE is what justifies God’s permission of horrors, even if that principle were violated. And I suggest he does not see all this because he does not recognize the relevance of the global context of these choice circumstances, i.e. the emergent good trade-off relations.

To clarify, I should review my argument from chapter six that NGE is satisfied on the intransitivity of betterness interpretation of emergent good trade-offs. On the intransitivity of betterness interpretation it is the emergent good that justifies the choice of the amount within the reasonable range because that good requires the “excess” cost all such amounts possess. This means the total amount of permitted evil is the sum of a required and hence non-gratuitous “excess” amount and “non-excess” (and therefore non-gratuitous) amount. Applied to the expanded defense, the actual amount of permitted horrors, the sum of the “excess” and the non-
excess, is required for our specific instantiation of the good of humans being able to recognize what it means to be distanced from God. Of course, seemingly incongruently, when one considers only neighboring choices of specific goods, and not what is required for the emergent good in selecting a concrete good, that total is not required for that specific amount of that good. Hence, no option is optimal. So on this view there are two distinct competing categorizations of the same permitted evil, one of which, when considered in isolation, appears a violation of NGE: the excess evil involved in any choice from a range of permissible yet sub-optimal options and the excess evil (and its increments) involved in any choice between two options for the (vaguely identified) same good. According to the former categorization the excess evil is not gratuitous given acceptance of global good theodicies, such as the expanded defense, for those global or emergent goods require it. This means the “gratuity” between neighboring options is not real gratuity. What NGE requires is that for every evil there is a good that requires God’s permission of it. It does not require that for every categorization of evil there is a good that requires God’s permission of the evil considered qua that categorization. In any case, what evil is permissible to choose in order to instantiate the emergent good is only what is required for the emergent good instantiation in the given choice context. To select from one of two ways of instantiating the (vaguely) same amount of the same good is not the choice context. So the latter “gratuity” is specious. (Further, it is not a gratuity that can apply to God since God necessarily chooses from the full range of trade-offs options not a restricted pair.)

In light of these subtleties, it is not a mystery that van Inwagen thinks NGE is violated, given his implicit intransitivity of betterness interpretation of the divine choice circumstance involved in general policy theodicies. But my aim in this chapter is not to explain why van Inwagen mistakenly thinks NGE may be violated. My aim is to explain why he (not only
“Atheist”) thinks this violation is a challenge to theism even if God’s choice from the full range of general policy options, his choosing to instantiate the emergent good of humans recognizing their need for God by permitting horrors, is granted as non-gratuitous. He thinks a separate argument against NGE must be added to the expanded defense, when that defense is accepted as an adequate explanation for God’s permission of the total amount of horrors the world contains, in order to defend God’s permission of horrors, considered individually. This means he thinks that warrant for believing that a good justifies God’s permission of the total amount of horrors does not necessarily warrant believing that the good justifies God’s permission of a typical horror or of the specific amount of horrors the world contains. But a good’s justifying God’s permission of the total amount of horrors entails that it, that same good, also justifies God’s permission of every typical horror and of the specific amount of horrors the world contains. Van Inwagen’s failure to see this and its relevance is what requires special explanation.

Putting aside NGE and thinking only about justification, van Inwagen must think that the same general theodical good cannot justify and explain God’s permission of both the total amount of evils and His permission of individual horrors. I have argued that this is a mistake. That the permitted individual evil’s justifying good is an instance of the emergent good is obscured by two mutually reinforcing factors, those described in the last chapter as generating the Local Gratuity Illusion: (a) mistakenly thinking the justifying good must explain apparent contingency of a particular embodiment of evil and/or of amount of evil (the Exclusivity Requirement error), and (b) a failure to properly analyze the global context of emergent good trade-offs.

Re: (a): Van Inwagen’s thinking the justifying good must explain the apparent contingency of a particular embodiment of evil and/or of amount of evil would explain his seeing
the expanded defense explanation of horrors as somehow deficient. This would lead him to think there are two different challenges to theism from evil, one answered (the fact of horrors and the total amount of evil of horrors), one not (the fact that there are the particular horrors there are); and so that there must be different evils or different ways in which an event is evil (the evil of amount and the evil of its distribution), not simply two different ways of referring to the same evil event or the same respect in which an event’s permission is morally objectionable. His mistaking NGE for the Exclusivity Requirement would also explain his conflating the two senses of arbitrariness mentioned above: if there must be an explanation for God’s permission of one evil or one amount of evil rather than some other for God to be justified in permitting it, their being equally good alternatives doesn’t justify the arbitrariness of the choice. (But of course this Exclusivity Requirement is false of equally good alternatives)

This is also suggested by the way Van Inwagen’s version of NGE differs from Rowe’s. van Inwagen’s NGE, as quoted above, is:

If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally perfect creator would have left the horror out of the world he created.

This thesis is accompanied by a loose visual metaphor of God’s inspecting the “blueprint” of the world and noticing he can remove a horror and then do “a little smoothing around the spatiotemporal edges to render the lines of causation in the revised blueprint continuous (or nearly so)” . Despite this visual assistance, van Inwagen’s NGE is difficult to interpret. First, because of the complex inter-connectivity between events the metaphor seems too unrealistic, even for a “rather fanciful” metaphor, as van Inwagen describes it. Second, the world’s being no worse if a horror would have been removed is not sufficient for a morally
perfect being’s removing it, as van Inwagen’s NGE seems to claim, because the world might also have been no better without the horror (and the changes its removal requires). Third, if instead what van Inwagen means by “would have been no worse” is that the world would have been no worse without a horror than the world with the horror considered apart from the horror (minus the disvalue of the horror) then van Iwagen’s NGE states that if the world in which God prevents the horror is better than the world in which God permits it by no less than the disvalue of the horror God would prevent the horror. This is reasonable but narrower than Rowe’s version of NGE. It only prohibits divine permission of horrors that result in no unoffset good rather than an insufficiently valuable unoffset good.

Why would van Inwagen express NGE as prohibiting morally neutral permission of evil? Why would van Inwagen express NGE as prohibiting evils whose permission would make no contribution to God’s purposes, rather than an insufficient contribution? Why would he leave his expression of NGE ambiguous between these two alternative interpretations? One answer to all three questions is that van Inwagen did not properly appreciate the relevance and applicability of the distinction between a choice that is morally arbitrary or pointless in the sense that there is no net good achieved by making it, in which case there may be no reason at all to make it (it is between equally good alternatives), and a choice that is morally arbitrary because there is no good at all achieved by making it, in which case there may be no reason to make it because doing so is “completely pointless” (to refer back to chapter one). There may indeed be no good reason at all why one amount of evil is permitted rather than another, contravening the Exclusivity Requirement, if both are part of optimal trade-offs, but this doesn’t mean there is no offsetting good in violation of Rowe’s NGE.
Re: (b): The analyses of chapter six show that the sense in which cost increments seem to outweigh their trade-offs increments in good does not conflict with NGE. This is because the offsetting good of NGE need not only be the trade-off good gained, as argued. If one does not make this analysis and so correlates apparently costly increments with apparently unjustified permission of cost increments, belief in justified permission of totals, and its implications for total increments, will seem to have a basis distinct from, and as compelling as, belief in unjustified permission of increments, such that answers to questions about the former are not answers to questions about the latter. If one also does not recognize the paradoxical nature of emergent good relations, the seeming unjustified permission of increments will appear to be grounds for a possibly compelling distinct argument. But it can’t be. Whatever seemingly obviously true propositions one must sacrifice regarding emergent goods and their cost increments, i.e. about amounts of good and whether they are offset or not, the proposition that justified permission of all x entails justified permission of each x is not one of them. Only not recognizing emergent good relations and so viewing the apparent gratuity of individual increments of the vague amount of required permitted evil as evidence to be weighed against global considerations, rather than undercut by global considerations, can explain van Inwagen’s judgment that (1) does not imply (1.5) and his efforts to argue for this.

To see how these factors are mutually reinforcing consider the Expensive Pain Relief Case from chapter six:

Expensive Pain Relief. Suppose you will be in continuous pain for the rest of your life unless you receive treatment. Being permanently relieved of your pain is well worth more than a million dollars to you. Roughly a thousand daily doses of a drug will significantly and irreversibly relieve your pain. A single dose will not make any noticeable difference, however, and each single dose costs one thousand dollars. Suppose, as you receive doses and begin to feel more comfortable, you must decide how many more doses to pay for.
This is analogous to God’s decision to permit horrors for the good of the expanded defense. Many permissions of horrors is worth the gain in human recognition of what it means to live in a world distanced from God, though each particular permission of a horror seems not worth its contribution, if indeed there is any, to that good. Similarly, many thousand dollar payments are worth the pain relief gained, though each one thousand dollar payment seems not worth its contribution to pain relief. Now consider someone to whom the expenses of the Expensive Pain Relief Case are all too real, but who has no idea what your payments are for. She may ask “What unknown good could possibly justify your spending one million dollars?” Once this has been answered she may then point to the latest payment and ask, “Why spend this $1000 for no noticeable relief?” This seems to be a distinct challenge to the spending decisions being made. Following van Inwagen, the justified response is “I had to make a cut-off somewhere.” And, as we have seen, van Inwagen thinks this is analogous to God’s need to permit gratuitous evil. So there appears to be two distinct challenging questions in the pain relief case corresponding to two distinct challenges to theism: the global argument question of why God permits so much evil, and the local argument question of why God permits a particular evil.

But if the answer to the first question is accepted, with the understanding that the pain relief consists of one thousand unnoticeable increments, then although the second question, namely “why spend one million rather than $999,999?” has not been answered, it does not need to be. For if spending one million dollars for pain relief consisting of a thousand unnoticeable increments is accepted as justified, the spending of every part of that million dollars has been accepted as justified, despite the remaining perplexities of how that can be, given that each increment seems not worth its cost. Now, because the remaining perplexity seems to involve gratuity and NGE seems quite plausible, it may seem that, in the context of the problem of evil,
this “local question” (Why not one less?) still poses a formidable challenge to theism, even if the ‘global” question has been answered. But this only seems so if the justificatory relation between the emergent good and the particular evil’s permission is not recognized. Van Inwagen does not recognize that the same good that justifies God’s permission of the total amount of evil justifies God’s permission of each evil because he does not see that he is implicitly rejecting the transitivity of betterness (and therefore the principle that God necessarily chooses the better option) rather than NGE. God’s having to choose sub-optimally may be a challenge to the existence of a perfectly rational and good being in other contexts but here, since NGE is satisfied, it is not. (God’s having to choose sub-optimally really challenges the notion of a perfectly rational and good being, which distinction introduces another related line of criticism: van Inwagen treats the perceived deficiency of the expanded defense as an empirical matter when it is not.) NGE does not require the offsetting good to be the trade-off incremental good; it can also be the emergent good, given the intransitivity of betterness interpretation that God must permit “excess” evil for the sake of that good.

The mistaken search for contrastive explanation of God’s permission of evils

If Theist has accounted for the actual existence of horrors (which include all specific very bad events) and of the amounts and kinds of horrors there are, including their apparently random distribution, what is the additional problem raised by the manner in which evil is distributed that is seemingly separate from the problem of the amounts and kinds of evil which has already been addressed?

Well, what is there left to explain? Theist has explained why there are horrors in general but not why there is any particular horror in particular. So perhaps what Atheist is pointing to is
this feature: many evils are such that there seems to be no explanation as to why that particular evil as opposed to some other has occurred. This would be to understand an explanation for why God permits a particular evil as necessarily an explanation of why God permitted that evil rather than some other (as van Inwagen and Howard-Snyder both seem to hold). But there are two things wrong with this suggestion: one is that there is no moral requirement that God have a reason for why this particular evil occurred rather than some other no better (and the Local Argument as described by van Inwagen does not claim there is); second, there being no such reason is just what it means for an evil to be due to chance, and the expanded free will defense has explicitly been designed to account for why there are evils due to chance.

So what else is left to explain? Could the reasons offered by the Expanded Free Will Defense justify God’s permission of the total amount of evil in the world without justifying God’s permission of the specific amount of evil? Could the reasons be deficient because underspecific; because they account for vast quantities of evil but not for the specific vast quantity the world contains? Could Atheist then claim that although the response to the Global Argument, the Expanded Free Will Defense, adequately gives divine reasons for allowing roughly the kinds and amounts of evil the world contains, that looking at specific evils still warrants the belief that God could have and should have removed some evil? But it was granted that this story, the Expanded Free Will Defense, does account for the unimaginably vast amount of evil the world contains and it was supposed that Atheist is bringing up a fact about evil distinct from its quantity. So this can’t be the purportedly new type of evil the Local Argument and not the Global Argument appeals to.

If we have an account for the amount and kinds of horrific evil as well as whatever features might be alluded to by their manner of distribution (considered in itself), such as there
being random and unjust horrific evil, what is left unaccounted for? If it would have been intrinsically better that a certain amount of evil be more uniformly distributed, then that itself is a kind of evil, a greater amount of injustice perhaps. But then this unequal distribution was already part of the expanded defense. Could it be that although the amount of permitted evil was accounted for and the existence of horrors was accounted for, the proportion of permitted evil of horrors was not accounted for by the Expanded Free Will Defense? No, because that defense is very general. It explains God’s permission of vast quantities of horrific randomly distributed suffering. Furthermore, it is not the quantity of horrors or quantity as a portion of the total amount of evil that Atheist points to here, but individual instances.

So what van Inwagen describes in his transition from the Global to the Local Argument is the same evils the Global argument appeals to, only now through the filter of the local perspective, that is, considered individually rather than as a kind. Why does van Inwagen think the Local Argument is not answered by his expanded defense? It must be because the local perspective introduced raises new questions, questions such as: why this evil? and: why not one less of this type? But these questions are not relevant to gratuity. The different types of apparent lack of necessity the local perspective brings to light, which motivate such questions and van Inwagen’s presentation of the Local Argument, are just those described by the Local Gratuity Illusion. Again, a lack of answers to these new questions about evils is not an indication the evils are gratuitous, as I’ve argued in chapter five, six, and seven. The local perspective may bring considerations of divine benevolence into the debate over God and evil, but this is not what van Inwagen argues. Only gratuity is relevant to the debate he describes. Van Inwagen’s own expanded free will defense should have indicated to him that the apparent impermissibility of
God’s permission of individual typical horrors considered individually due to gratuity must be illusory. I suggest that the Local Gratuity Illusion is the best explanation of the fact that it didn’t.

**Hasker’s Significant Morality Argument against NGE**

In *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* Hasker argues that NGE cannot be a divine moral requirement because if it were, God could not achieve a purpose reasonably ascribed to Him, namely, that rational agents (humans) have and value significant moral responsibility. He presents his argument in three stages, each examining the implications of a different divine providential policy for the existence of significant morality.  

First, if God prevents all attempted harm that would not ultimately benefit the victim moral responsibility would be impossible. This is because truly harming someone would be impossible and moral responsibility essentially involves the possibility of harming and helping others, according to Hasker.

Second, if instead God permits harm but necessarily prevents all evil that is not necessary for a greater good, then humans could only harm others if God judges that the harm is worth the good that it brings about. Although humans could unjustly harm in this case, Hasker thinks moral responsibility could not exist because he thinks the notion of moral principles prohibiting what God permits because He judges it best to occur is unintelligible.

Third, if, instead, God may permit evil that is not necessary for a greater good, but necessarily prevents all evil whose permission is not necessary for a greater good (as per NGE), then humans could have some responsibility for the welfare of others but still not significant responsibility, according to Hasker. Humans could have some responsibility because a good may require God’s permission of an evil choice should that possible permission be in the divine choice context, though not require the evil choice itself, such that the evil choice’s actually
occurring (along with its consequences) may be a net disvalue. What good is such that it is necessarily lost if God prevents an evil choice, but not necessarily if that evil does not occur for other reasons? The only plausible good, according to Hasker, is the good of our being able to freely choose between good and evil. This good is forfeited by God’s preventing an evil choice but not by our preventing it by not choosing it. But can the value of an individual exercise of free will outweigh the disvalue resulting from, and/or inherent in, significantly wrong choices, such as murder? This is implausible. So if NGE were true, although we could have some moral freedom, we could not make choices between significant goods and evils and therefore could not have significant moral responsibility.

Hasker forcefully restates his argument against NGE with a thought experiment. Consider an individual contemplating whether or not to choose a severe wrong. If God governs the world by NGE and this individual knows this, then he can reason: Since God will adhere to NGE, the disvalue of the total evil I can bring about cannot be greater than the good that requires God’s permission of my choice. The good that requires God’s permission of my choice is the good of my having moral freedom and any other goods that would not occur if I don’t choose evil. My being allowed to commit this wrong is not of great value and will contribute only slightly, if at all, to the good of my possessing moral freedom. So if I am permitted to choose this evil, other goods that offset or nearly offset the evil must occur that otherwise would not. Therefore I can only negatively affect the welfare of others, or of the world, by committing this act, correspondingly slightly. This understanding would undermine his appreciation for the value of significant morality, which has essentially to do with helping or harming others. So NGE is inconsistent with the following inter-related divine goals: humans having significant responsibility toward others, humans knowing important truths about God’s goodness and moral
responsibility, which would include NGE, and humans reasonably believing their moral choices can significantly harm others.

I do not share Hasker’s view, expressed in stage two above, that moral rules prohibiting actions God permits because those actions result in net good are unintelligible. Hasker says that in this circumstance if a person is harmed “it will be only as a God-approved means to the creation of a greater good”, but ‘God-approved’ carries the connotation of God-condoned and God-permitted does not mean God-condoned. It is intelligible that what is necessary for a greater good may not be condoned by, yet be permitted by, God; and moral rules prohibiting what is necessary for a greater good but not condoned by God are possible. Briefly, justice may be the whole of morality (for example, Aquinas subsumes an ethics of care under an ethic of justice), so if injustice is possible morality is possible, even if God must permit injustice for a greater good.

There are, though, some tensions within traditional theism that Hasker here touches upon. In chapter five I mentioned that belief in God’s sovereignty motivates the requirement that all evil be “redeemed” even if not divinely intended. If the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is false, it is difficult to see how this requirement is necessarily satisfied. If God draws good out of an evil (that He did not intend) and yet that same amount of good could have been had without the evil, the evil is still an unredeemed loss. So the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis has some motivation in this view of the completeness of God’s victory over evil. But if the No Unnecessary Evil Thesis is true, why should we prevent evil? And how can we, or God, be whole-heartedly opposed to evil? (I think this can be answered by distinguishing weakness of will, which is not necessary for a greater good (though its permission is), from all other evil, such as suffering, which is necessary for correcting weakness of will.)
Also, and as a corollary, I think the view that an all-sovereign, omnibenevolent God would not allow anyone to really be ultimately or spiritually involuntarily harmed has merit. However, if I cannot harm anyone spiritually (though they can harm themselves) and spiritual harm is the only harm that matters, then how can I be responsible for another’s welfare? Hasker says if I cannot harm I cannot be responsible for helping, because to fail to help is to harm. He writes, “if it were supposed that we might have an obligation to do something to help another, such a supposition would be self-defeating, since it entails that we would be harming her by failing to fulfill the obligations” But to fail to help is not necessarily to harm and many theists may find that moral responsibility, even warnings against harm, must be translated into injunctions to benefit in the light of this view of what God’s sovereignty and benevolence implies. This also does not seem unintelligible to me.

The Incoherence Objection

There certainly seems to be something correct in Hasker’s argument. His following claims both seem true:

(a) The only good that could be lost by God’s preventing a moral evil that would not be lost by the moral evil’s not occurring for other reasons (such as someone’s choosing differently) is the value of that individual exercise of moral freedom.

(b) The value of the freedom inherent in an individual exercise of moral freedom does not outweigh significant harm.

If (a) and (b) are true, and NGE is true, humans cannot make the world significantly worse, which is at least one kind of diminishment of moral responsibility.
But there are puzzling features as well. Because NGE seems based on the fundamental and compelling intuition that a perfectly good being would prefer less evil over more, all else being equal, arguments against it, to be persuasive, should also help us understand why God need not abide by NGE. Hasker’s argument that NGE is inconsistent with divine aims does offer an explanation and justification for God’s not adhering to NGE, namely: the divine goal of humans having significant morality requires God’s permission of evils whose permission by God is not required for any offsetting good. But, as noted by Rowe, since God’s goals, and this one in particular, are goods, this, at first blush, seems contradictory. And if this is contradictory then what this argument shows is not that NGE is false but that either God cannot have such goals or God does not exist (because given theism, the existence of significant morality requires the impossible).

Indeed, although Hasker’s aim is to argue that theists need not accept NGE, it seems as if instead he has provided reasons for atheism. Hasker’s rejection of NGE is based on its implications not its inherent plausibility. Just as Hasker thinks Rowe’s first premise that there is gratuitous evil lends some credence to atheism if not directly addressed even if theism entails it is false via NGE, by parallel reasoning, if Hasker has shown that theism and NGE and significant morality are incompatible, but has not dimmed the inherent plausibility of NGE, then to the extent we have reason to think we do have significant morality, we have a reason to think God does not exist.

But let us take theism as a given, as does Hasker. Must the theist choose between NGE and significant morality? Let us first examine Rowe’s objection that Hasker’s argument is self-defeating, in which case Hasker has presented a puzzle, but not a solution. I will then argue that my emergent goods analysis resolves this puzzle.
How Can the Incoherence Objection Be Addressed?

Let us call the objection raised by Rowe and noted by Hasker that it is contradictory to claim that the good of significant morality requires the divine permission of evils whose permission by God is not required for any good (and that God and significant morality exist) the “incoherence objection.” I will argue that the most consistent interpretation of Hasker’s view is that he implicitly invokes the possibility that significant morality requires God’s permission of only a vague amount of evil. I will then argue that this response ultimately fails.

The only helpful way to remove the contradiction referred to by the incoherence objection is to distinguish (e1) the “gratuitous” evil God’s goal requires God’s willingness to permit from (e2) the gratuitous evil whose permission is not required for any offsetting good. I will now argue that the only way the incoherence objection can be addressed is if (e1) refers to the class gratuitous evil and (e2) refers to an amount of gratuitous evil. To address the incoherence objection this way is to make an appeal to vagueness.

There are three possible referents of (e1) and of (e2): the class gratuitous evil (the fact that there are gratuitous evils), an amount of gratuitous evil, and a token gratuitous evil. A lack of necessity of a token evil is irrelevant to NGE. NGE states only that God’s permission of the permitted evil or another not of less disvalue must be necessary for an offsetting good. So NGE states only that God’s permission of the amount of evil of the permitted evil, not the particular instance of permitted evil itself, must be necessary for an offsetting good. Taking this into account, the possible referents of (e1) and (e2) are reduced to an amount of gratuitous evil and the class gratuitous evil. (e1) cannot refer to an amount of gratuitous evil because then (e2) refers to the class gratuitous evil and there can’t be a necessary amount of an unnecessary class of evils. So the contradiction can be avoided only if (e1) refers to the class gratuitous evil and (e2) refers
to an amount of gratuitous evil. However, if there must be gratuitous evil but there need not be any specific amount, then there must be some but no specific amount of gratuitous evil, which means only a vague amount of gratuitous evil is required. So to dissolve the contradiction referred to by the incoherence objection Hasker must hold that significant morality requires only a vague amount of gratuitous evil.

Hasker thinks other responses are available. He replies to the incoherence objection with an analogy:

Suppose an excellent musical performance is being rewarded with sustained and enthusiastic applause. Each member of the audience who is applauding is contributing to the enthusiastic reception of the performance. But it is certainly not the case that, had one member of the audience been prevented from applauding, the performance would not have been enthusiastically received. In the same way, any single instance of gratuitous evil is such that God could have prevented that particular instance without undermining morality. If on the other hand God prevented all such instances, morality would indeed be undermined … God could not have prevented that class from having any members at all without losing a greater good.

He says that the purpose of this illustration is only to demonstrate the coherence of the idea that gratuitous evil is necessary, and that this distinction between a necessary class of gratuitous evil and the gratuitous evil members of that class is not essential to his argument. But, again, a token of evil is gratuitous only if its amount is gratuitous. So if this illustration demonstrates the coherence of necessary gratuitous evil, it does so only by distinguishing the necessary class of gratuitous evil from the unnecessary actual amount of gratuitous evil. I have argued, contra Hasker, that this distinction, and hence an appeal to vagueness, is necessary to dissolve the contradiction invoked by the incoherence objection. Thinking the above analogy provides an alternative possibility is to miss what is implied by Rowe’s inclusion of the avoidance of an evil of no less disvalue as a possible offsetting good, namely, that it is the amount of evil that must be offset, not a particular instantiation of that amount.
A Second Argument that Hasker Must Appeal to Vagueness

The need for an appeal to vagueness can also be seen by an examination of Hasker and Rowe’s discussion of the incoherence objection. Rowe suggested the above token vs. class of gratuitous evil response, but does not think it is ultimately helpful. Hasker quotes Rowe:

Consider E, a particular instance of Hasker’s class of gratuitous evils … Now if Hasker is right, a perfect being cannot prevent every evil like E, for then it would lose the greater good of significant morality. But could this being have obtained the greater good of significant morality without permitting E? As we’ve seen, Hasker’s answer is yes. For E could be deleted from the class without in any way undermining morality, so long as the rest of the class is left intact. How far could the class of gratuitous evils be depleted without undermining significant morality? I would think a great deal.  

Rowe thinks God would necessarily eliminate those evils like E that could be removed without in any way undermining morality so that “eventually” a point would be reached where no further evils could be eliminated by God without undermining morality. But since all of the remaining “gratuitous” evils must be permitted by God for the sake of significant morality, there really can be no gratuitous evil after all. Only the “gratuitous” evils needed for preserving significant morality would be permitted by God, but then they cannot really be gratuitous. So the incoherence objection survives the non-gratuitous class vs. gratuitous token distinction, according to Rowe.

Hasker replies that Rowe’s assumption that God would necessarily eliminate those evils like E that could be removed without in any way undermining morality is based on NGE and that it is instead his own reflective agent argument against NGE that survives these considerations. He writes:

… consider the situation of an agent who is contemplating the commission of a serious moral fault, given the state of affairs described by Rowe … [where] all of the evil that exists is non-gratuitous … it is still true that whatever harm and suffering may result from a serious moral offense she might commit, the greater part of this evil (and perhaps all of it) is compensated by good results which could not have been obtained had she chosen a morally acceptable course of action instead.
Hasker continues in a key passage worth quoting at length. I have divided it below:

[A] Can God permit “just enough” evil? … So long as we are assuming NGE, the answer to the question has to be that God cannot permit “just enough” evil. For whatever amount of evil we assume to be “just enough”, and so the exact right amount that God should allow, turns out not to be enough after all, so that God must allow still more evil if morality is not to be undermined.

[B] But once we abandon NGE (as the preceding argument shows that we should), another possibility arises. It is conceivable that there is a precise minimum amount of evil that is required to maintain the significance of morality, and God does indeed permit just that amount, preventing all evil in excess of the minimum. Morality would still not be undermined, so long as God does not tell us he is doing this! But of course, we cannot say that God must do this, or that he morally ought to do it, or that God would be morally better if he were to operate in this way, for this would imply that we are accepting NGE after all.

[C] Furthermore, this possibility [Rowe’s] depends on the assumption that there exists a precise amount of evil that is needed by God. If however this is not so, if the amount of evil required is inherently vague and to some degree indeterminate, then God could not permit “just enough” evil, for there is no such thing as “just enough” evil. I am strongly inclined to think that vagueness does obtain here, and that God really does need to permit gratuitous evil. But nothing in the main argument for this chapter depends on this point.145

I will argue Hasker must claim significant morality requires gratuitous evil, not only its possibility, and must reject Rowe’s supposition of a minimum amount of permitted evil required for significant morality, contra B. This means he must accept that significant morality only requires a vague amount of permitted evil, contra C.

**Is God’s unnecessary permission of gratuitous evil possible?**

Hasker may respond to the incoherence objection that he does not claim significant morality requires the necessity of God’s permission of gratuitous evil (given it would occur unless God prevents it), only its possibility. As quote C above indicates, Hasker thinks he, unlike Rowe who believes NGE, can accept the possibility that there is a minimum amount of evil
necessary and sufficient for significant morality, and that God permits only that minimum amount, because he holds that neither God’s permission nor prevention of gratuitous evil is necessary (quote B above). Presumably, if God need not prevent gratuitous evil and the agent of Hasker’s thought experiment does not know that in fact he does, the agent cannot reasonably believe that he will not make the world worse by his choices. Also, presumably, if God need not permit only that minimum amount it is really possible for the agent to make the world worse.\textsuperscript{146}

However, if God need not permit gratuitous evil why would He? There doesn’t really seem to be a remaining alternative to the (supposed) necessity and the impossibility of God’s willingness to permit gratuitous evil, despite the availability of the label. Hasker’s agent argument requires God’s willingness to permit gratuitous evil, but it is not obvious that God’s willingness to permit gratuitous evil given this is not necessary makes sense.

Before elaborating, I should make a point of clarification. Hasker says his argument requires only the possibility not the necessity of gratuitous evil because God’s willingness to permit it does not entail it actually occurs.\textsuperscript{147} This is correct: Hasker’s argument requires only the possibility not the necessity of gratuitous evil because the actuality of gratuitous evil depends on free choices or possible indeterministic outcomes. To avoid confusion I wish to point out that this is different from requiring the possibility and not the necessity of God’s willingness to permit gratuitous evil. The incoherence objection claims it does not make sense to say evil is gratuitous even though God must permit it in the divine choice context (i.e. given it would occur unless He prevents it) (the incoherence objection). In this section, we are considering whether it makes sense to say God could permit gratuitous evil in the divine choice context if He need not.

If God’s willing gratuitous evil is not necessary, then, because, all else being equal, it is better for gratuitous evil (or any evil) to not exist, God would necessarily choose its being merely
possible but not actual, which means it is not really possible. It may be countered that God’s necessarily choosing its being merely possible but not actual is not possible because that is the same as God’s necessarily preventing gratuitous evil. But this is not a criticism of my reservation. It is a criticism of the claim that only God’s willingness to permit gratuitous evil is required and not the necessity of God’s willingness, which is equivalent to the claim that gratuitous evil must be possible but not necessary, given the divine choice context (i.e. given the evil is chosen (or indeterministically produced) unless God prevents it). It seems that if it’s not necessary it’s not possible because if it’s not necessary (given the evil would occur unless God prevents it) there is no reason for God to permit it. No reason has been given to think gratuitous evil is possible if not necessary (again, given the evil would occur unless God prevents it) and there is good reason to think it is not. The fact that Hasker’s arguments require this is not a reason. So Hasker cannot assume, and I think he should deny, that it may be possible but not necessary for God to permit gratuitous evil. This way of avoiding the incoherence objection is not available, at least not without argumentation for it.

A minimum amount of permitted evil required for significant morality

Let us now consider Rowe’s assumption that if significant morality requires gratuitous evil, there is a specific or minimum amount it requires. The supposed minimum amount required that Rowe refers to must depend on how much moral evil humans choose. It does not make sense to suppose there is a minimum amount of moral evil that must exist in order for humans to have significant morality regardless of how humans choose. As Hasker notes, humans could have significant morality without there being any gratuitous evil if humans did not choose evil. So an agent who knows there is a minimum amount of moral evil God must permit (in order to preserve significant morality), given the choices humans actually make, cannot reason: because
my evil choice is part of an amount necessary for the great good of significant morality and/or other outweighing goods, by choosing evil I cannot make the world worse. If he chooses good instead of evil he changes the divine choice situation, lessening the minimum amount of moral evil that God must permit, possibly by the amount of moral evil he chooses. So Rowe’s supposition that there is a minimum amount of permitted gratuitous evil required for the great good of significant morality does not reinstate Hasker’s reflective agent argument; rather, it is incompatible with it.

Hasker notes that he thinks it implausible that there is such a minimum amount of evil God must permit in order for humans to have significant morality. I agree, provided the good of humans having significant morality is construed generally, rather than as the good of humans having significant morality to some unknown specific degree. But if the implausible thesis were true, that is, if God must permit an individual increment of significant moral evil, should a particular choice be made, in order for there to be significant morality at all, then not only does God’s doing so not violate NGE, but the reflective agent has no reason to think it does. The agent contemplating that choice cannot reason that if he does not choose it, some great good must be lost. This is because significant morality requires its permission only if he chooses it. He also cannot reason that if he does not choose it God will have to permit some other instance of no less disvalue, because if he does not choose it God may not need to permit that (additional) amount of moral evil.

Only if the good of significant morality comes in degrees requiring different amounts of permitted evil, given the divine choice context, could the reflective agent’s reasoning be prima facie sound, for only then could an instance of moral evil outweigh its permission’s contribution to the good of significant moral freedom. But if significant morality comes in degrees
corresponding to different amounts of permitted evil, all of which are morally permissible for God to permit, Hasker must maintain that no minimum amount of evil is the unique amount morally permissible for God to permit for the sake of significant moral freedom.

Suppose that Rowe, in his contemplation of the gratuitous class vs. gratuitous token response to the incoherence objection, assumed that if significant morality requires gratuitous evil it requires a minimum amount of gratuitous evil, regardless of how humans choose. In this case, if either significant morality, NGE, or this assumption must be rejected as Hasker argues, it is clear that it is the possibility of such a required minimum that should be rejected. NGE is far more plausible.

There is an additional reason to think Hasker must deny there is a minimum required amount of gratuitous evil: the version of NGE Rowe assumes in his thought experiment is unquestionably correct. In the context of Rowe’s thought experiment, if there is a minimum amount of “gratuitous evil” required for humans to have significant morality (on either interpretation) then Rowe is certainly right to assert that necessarily, a perfectly good being would not permit any gratuitous evil above this amount. The class of “gratuitous” evils Rowe refers to is by stipulation not permitted for any reason at all except the preservation of significant morality. Not only are no other goods relevant, no other moral reasons are relevant, by stipulation. If amounts of this category of evil are not necessary for this good, then for God to permit them is for God to permit evil for absolutely no reason of any kind at all. Rowe only assumes here that a perfectly good being will not prefer more evil over less evil for absolutely no reason.

Hasker thinks to assert this is to assume NGE. He says in response to Rowe: “as soon as NGE returns, so does the undermining of morality!” But NGE so construed is indeed beyond all
possible doubt. For what Rowe assumes here is far more basic to goodness than even my opening defense of NGE as a candidate self-evident truth. Whereas one may reasonably question whether Rowe’s or Hasker’s or my formulation of NGE conceals avoidable commitments to certain relations between God, evil, and good or to specific moral theories (especially if one mistakes NGE for more restrictive views of divine providence), there really is no room for reasonable questioning of this assertion. If a perfectly good being may prefer more evil over less for no reason of any kind then a perfectly good being may not be opposed to evil considered in itself. What could ‘being good’ mean then? What could God’s being rational mean?

Rowe’s assumption that a perfectly good being will not prefer more evil over less evil for absolutely no reason is a necessary condition for God’s being good that any characterization of God’s goodness must include. So if Rowe’s assumption that there is a minimum amount of gratuitous evil necessary for significant morality, and his assertion that God would not permit the class of gratuitous evil permitted solely for the sake of significant morality to contain more evil than necessary for significant morality together do necessarily and incoherently undermine significant morality as Hasker thinks, then it is again clear that Hasker must reject Rowe’s first assumption, that there is a specific minimum amount of gratuitous evil required for significant moral freedom. Again, if significant morality, the supposition of a minimum amount of “gratuitous evil” required for significant morality, and this “NGE” claim are incompatible given theism, then significant morality, the supposition, and theism are together incoherent. The thesis that God acts for reasons when He has reasons is basic to theism. So, given the incompatibility Hasker argues for, the supposition of a minimum amount, not the “NGE” of Rowe’s thought experiment, should be rejected by theists. This means Hasker must hold that significant morality
requires some but no specific amount of gratuitous evil (given the divine choice context), and so requires only a vague amount of gratuitous evil.

**Rejecting Rowe’s Thought Experiment**

One may object that I have overlooked an alternative. I pointed out that the class of evils Rowe refers to is stipulated to be permitted by God for no reason other than the preservation of significant morality. In arguing against Rowe, Hasker terms these “ostensibly gratuitous evils.” Although he does not do so, Hasker may reject the possibility of there being such ostensibly gratuitous evils, evils permitted by God solely for the sake of significant morality, and so simply reject Rowe’s thought experiment for assuming this possibility. He could then say that though Rowe’s “NGE” is correct, NGE is not because God may have some other reason, besides preserving significant morality, for permitting those “gratuitous” evils whose permission is required for no other good than significant morality.

This response would be unacceptably ad hoc, however. Hasker’s challenge to NGE is that it conflicts with significant morality. Responding to the incoherence objection by stating that there may be some other reason, a reason that does not involve some other good, for God to allow gratuitous evil is unhelpful. This response would attempt to safeguard theism from Hasker’s significant morality challenge to NGE by simply asserting that God may have a reason for allowing gratuitous evil. Worse, it suggests theists do not have a concept of divine goodness at all, for what is this other reason?

After the above quoted passage C, Hasker says that though his arguments show God’s goodness should not be characterized so as to entail utility maximization, he has left anew the task of articulating necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of “God is good”. This comment suggests Hasker thinks that NGE entails a utility maximization or consequentialist
view of God’s goodness. But NGE does not. Even if there were deontological constraints on God’s actions, such that God must permit an evil even if doing so does not (in some sense) result in the most good, this would not violate NGE. In this case, God could have avoided the evil only by either not creating the good whose existence entails the deontological constraint (such as human freedom), or by not creating at all, or by forfeiting His own perfect goodness (if that were possible). In each case, God’s permitting the evil is required by an offsetting good: the created good grounding the deontological constraint, creation itself, or the inestimable good of God’s perfect goodness. So NGE does not assume a consequentialist moral perspective; it is compatible with a deontological moral perspective according to which God’s honoring goods may conflict with His promoting of goods. To say NGE should be rejected (rather than the claim that significant morality requires divine permission of a minimum of moral evil) because God’s moral goodness may consist in something other than the production of good or the honoring of good is in my view equivalent to saying NGE may be rejected because we may have no idea what God’s goodness consists of. What could God’s moral motivation be that is neither the production of good (a “utility maximization” consideration) nor the honoring of good (a deontological consideration)?

Earlier I noted that there is no room to question the prohibition of irrational divine permission of evil that Rowe’s thought experiment invokes, though questioning NGE may be understandable. Nevertheless, in my view, NGE, properly analyzed, is close to self-evident. I think that viewing it as debatable must be based on interpreting it overly narrowly. It does not imply the divine permission of every instance of evil must be necessary for an offsetting good, only that the divine permission of every amount of evil must be. It also does not imply the divine permission of every amount of evil must contribute to an offsetting good, only that the divine
permission of every amount of evil must be required by some offsetting good. And, as just noted, it is compatible with both consequentialism and deontology. Surely responding to Rowe’s thought experiment by saying God may have a reason for permitting gratuitous evil that involves no greater good is a less promising interpretation of the implications of Hasker’s significant morality considerations than the alternative, which I have argued is an appeal to vagueness.

I conclude that Hasker’s criticism of NGE is best understood as follows: God must have reasons for permitting evil as Rowe assumes, but NGE is false. God’s reason for permitting gratuitous evil is simply that He must, given He wants humans to possess significant morality. Significant morality requires humans have the capacity to significantly worsen the world. Because the value of an individual exercise of significant moral freedom does not outweigh the significant evil it brings about, an individual exercise of significant moral freedom may be (and typically is) a gratuitous evil. So God must permit gratuitous evil in order for humans to have such freedom. Of course, the existence of significant morality is a great good, so God does permit gratuitous evil for the sake of a good, but this does not mean the permitted moral evil cannot really be gratuitous. What significant morality requires is that there be gratuitous evil, given the divine choice context, not that there be a particular amount of gratuitous evil, given that context. In other words, God must permit gratuitous evils because significant moral freedom requires God’s permission of some, but no specific amount of gratuitous evil, given the choices humans make. If God and significant morality exist, the amount of gratuitous evil is gratuitous and the existence of gratuitous evil is not.

**Hasker’s Significant Morality Vagueness Objection to NGE**

I have argued that the coherence of Hasker’s presentation of his Significant Morality Objection to NGE crucially depends on the claim that the good of humans having significant
morality requires a vague amount of gratuitous evil, given human choices. In this sense, the unrecognized core of Hasker’s argument against NGE is the same appeal to vagueness made by van Inwagen. Hasker says that humans’ having significant morality consists of our having all the innumerable free choices we actually have. On Hasker’s view, our having significant morality must be a good that is worth all the moral evil of the world. Otherwise, why would God act so as to preserve significant morality? If he is correct then in thinking that individual exercises of free will contribute only slightly to the value of significant morality and that in general the individual disvalue of morally wrong choices exceeds the value of their contribution to significant morality, then his argument requires that the sum of the values of individual choices for moral evil is less than the value of God’s permission of all morally evil choices, which is a net good. This means that the good of significant morality, or of God’s permission of all moral evil is greater than the sum of its parts, which in turn means that although individual additions to the number of permitted free choices result in no net good, large numbers, say on the scale of human history, do. This corresponds to what I have called the “Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation” of emergent goods of van Inwagen which I have argued is not at odds with NGE.

**Responding to Hasker’s reflective agent who knows NGE is true**

So what should we respond to Hasker’s reflective agent who knows NGE is true and considers that the value of his individual exercise of moral freedom cannot outweigh significant moral evil? First, it does indeed seem that the value of someone’s being able to make a particular moral choice does not outweigh a very significant moral evil, such as murder. In fact, it seems absurd to think otherwise. However, significant morality is an emergent good, and so we should expect non-gratuitous particular moral evils permitted for its sake to seem to make at best a negligible contribution to it. So I would respond just as I have to van Inwagen: in general, what
is true of emergent good cost **totals**, namely being outweighed by good, seems false of the cost **increments** that comprise it, and this requires rejection of one of the following *prima facie* plausible propositions:

A. Each trade-off increment is not worth its cost of the competing good.

B. There must be one or more optimal choices in a finite set.

C. If a trade-off is optimal, each increment of it is worth its cost.

D. The betterness relation is transitive.

If the emergent good trade-off context were wholly unrecognized and so also the relevance of these propositions to each other, the truth of ‘each increment is not worth its cost of the competing good’ (thus considered “locally” rather than in “global” context) may appear self-evident. This certainly seems true of the contribution to human moral freedom made by God’s permission of an individual horrific moral evil, such as murder. But when the complete emergent good trade-off context is kept in mind the plausibility of each of these propositions is undermined. My own opinion, again, is that ‘Each increment (divine permission of significant moral evil) is not worth its contribution to the good of significant morality’ should be rejected in favor of postulating hidden values. So my first response to Hasker’s reflective agent is to review the merits of the Optimal Trade-Off Interpretation of emergent good puzzles.

But even if we suppose, along with Hasker, that there are no optimal trade-offs between the good of humans having significant morality and permitted moral evil and so no hidden values, such that the divine permission of a typical significant moral evil is a net loss, we have no reason to question NGE. As argued earlier, this Intransitivity of Betterness Interpretation implies every instance of moral evil permitted by God must be part of a non-gratuitous amount that may be divided without remainder into a (possibly vague) amount necessary for the good of humans.
having significant morality to a particular degree (given human choices) and a possibly vague amount unnecessary for that good but necessary for God to permit humans to have significant morality at all.

So I would respond to Hasker’s reflective agent as follows:

Though it does seem that the good of your being morally free in this instance is not significant enough to outweigh significant evil, the apparent conflict between your capacity to bring about significant evil and NGE is illusory.

First, if God did not in general allow humans to make significantly morally wrong choices, humans in general would not possess significant moral freedom. So the good of significant morality requires God’s permission of vastly many of typical instances of significantly wrong moral choice. So you should expect your own choice to be permitted by God despite the significant evil you will very likely be able to bring about. Most likely, it will be one of the vague vast amount God must permit for this greater good.

Second, though it does seem that God’s permission of slightly fewer morally evil choices would not entail a correspondingly significant diminishment of the great good of humans possessing significant moral freedom, this seeming does not impugn NGE. A consideration of the relation between emergent goods, such as the existence of significant morality, and their costs shows that each such permitted evil must either be part of an optimal trade-off (between permitted moral evil and the degree to which humans possess moral freedom) or part of an amount of evil whose permission is necessary for humans to possess significant moral freedom (though unnecessary for a specific degree of that freedom). Though each individual choice of significant evil may seem gratuitous, just as, in the Pain Relief Case, each individual pain relief payment seems to be, my above analysis shows it isn’t. So NGE does not conflict with your ability to choose significant evil.

I maintain that the persistent sense that representative instances of significant moral evil are gratuitous despite recognition of this general good that requires and justifies divine permission of significant moral evil is the unrecognized appreciation of the seemingly paradoxical relations of comparative value of emergent goods and their costs. Once light is shed on those puzzling features we see that they were mistaken for gratuity. This doesn’t mean they are no longer puzzling, just that the puzzle turns out not to be about gratuity. A careful analysis
of the divine choice context shows there is no conflict between the existence of significant morality and NGE. This is a happy result for the theist, who is hard pressed to deny either.

Conclusion

My aim has been to clarify the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, defend it against all challenges, which I claim are based on deontology, chance, and vagueness, and show that this defense provides an undercutting defeater for an evil’s seeming gratuitous because its permission by God seems to contribute insignificantly, or not at all, to a good it may otherwise be permitted for the sake of. So my clarification and defense of NGE undermines the evidential force of Rowe’s appeal to the seeming gratuity of instances of evil by identifying pervasive illusory appearances of gratuity.

Again, this does not mean the seeming gratuity of all instances of evil is illusory. Instances of evil may seem gratuitous because we cannot imagine any offsetting good that would require God permit the actual amount of that type of evil. So there remains untouched the traditional question of theodicy: are there goods that justify God’s permission of the kinds and amounts of evil that exist? My thesis does aid the project of articulating possible divine reasons for permitting evil, however. This is because my defense of NGE, by explaining why particular evils may appear gratuitous even if they are not, undermines (though does not entirely remove) the force of Rowe’s first premise.

My defense also shows that Rowe’s appeal to seemingly gratuitous particular instances of evil (his “evidential” first premise) is (inadvertently) a kind of red herring. It invites misinterpretation and misapplication of NGE. The ostensive clarity and precision made possible by the simplicity of Rowe’s premises conceals an underlying complexity which requires further analysis. So Rowe’s first “evidential” premise is not as forceful as it seems, at least for the kinds
of examples Rowe adduces for it. By NGE an evil can only veridically appear gratuitous if it seems that it is not part of an optimal trade-off between amounts of that kind of evil and goods; only if we cannot imagine an offsetting good that might require God’s permission of the actual total amount of that type of evil. The type of evil may indeed be narrow and some horrific evils may be *sui generis*. What I have argued is that the apparent gratuity of a particular evil can be illusory because the local perspective in which it is viewed obscures the global context of the offsetting good and the fact that it is only the permission of the amount of that evil that need be required by that good.

The notion of an emergent good that is key to my arguments is not esoteric. As mentioned, examples of what I call emergent goods are clear and abundant. Explanations invoked by familiar theodicies, especially general policy theodicies, readily fall under this description. It is their proper analysis, and so their definition and identification as such, that escapes common recognition, perhaps because of their puzzling features. The emergent good explanation just is an unpacking of the conceptual content of the appeal to familiar general policy theodicies, exhausting the alternatives of that unpacking. So I am not defending an idiosyncratic philosophical position to undermine the appearance of gratuity. I am pointing out that general policy theodicies, if accepted, are sufficient to explain why apparently gratuitous particular evils appear gratuitous without being so. Perhaps the generality of our description of God’s general policies may in part correspond to different ways God’s purposes may be equally well satisfied or perhaps God selects a unique optimal choice in His choice context. In either case, the illusion of gratuity will appear for the reasons I have described.
I believe I have exhausted candidates for proper analysis of emergent goods in chapter six, but note that even if my emergent goods account is not correct or exhaustive, its viability by itself undermines the evidential import of an evil’s appearing gratuitous.

In my view, the fact that such capable philosophers as van Inwagen and Hasker reject the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis for reasons tied to the local perspective corroborates my claim that a powerful illusion is at work. Upon clarification of what NGE does and does not entail, as made in chapters one through three, it becomes hard to believe NGE could be false, not because these clarifications render NGE less substantive, but because clarification reveals the centrality of NGE to our notion of God’s goodness as creator.

A consequence of this clarification is the understanding that for certain specific examples of evils, such as Rowe’s fawn, nearly universal judgments that we cannot imagine any good their permission by God could be necessary for arise from failure to carefully consider the possible complexity of relations between specific evils and global goods (though that appearance may persist despite its recognition as illusory). If my analyses correspond to reality, we can explain why, upon attending to the specifics of a particular evil, it will seem that the goods we know of cannot justify God’s permission of it by understanding the way in which they do. Because the goods general policy theodicies appeal to are emergent goods, we should expect non-gratuitous particular evils to seem to make at best a negligible contribution to those goods that justify God’s permission of them. If we can explain why a particular evil likely seems gratuitous despite not being so, then its seeming gratuitous is not evidence that it is.
Though Rowe has revised this argument to bypass disagreements over what would count as evidence for the first premise, the second premise, or one similar to it, is implicit in these reformulations. See Trakakis (2006)


Reitan (2000)

Ibid

Van Inwagen (2006)

Ibid

Howard-Snyder (1996)

Rhoda (2010)


This is because, in general, having a reason to do x may mean having a prima facie reason to do x or having an ultima facie reason to do x, where a prima facie reason is a reason that can be outweighed by other considerations and an ultima facie reason is the combined total of all reasons. Prima facie reasons to not do x may simply offset or counterbalance prima facie reasons to do x, with the result that there is no ultima facie reason to do either x or not x. Likewise, having a reason that is opposed to, and perhaps cancels, the presumption in favor of eliminating an evil does not entail having an ultima facie reason for allowing the evil.

The relevance of the notion of rough equality is discussed in the next section.

More exactly, if permitting the evil is necessary to achieve net good.

One may argue that if all God’s actions are praiseworthy, none can be morally neutral.

van Inwagen (1988)

Rowe (1996)


Ibid

Ibid

Ibid

In this section I refer to offsetting goods as goods that require and offset the permitted evil for simplicity of expression. As we shall see, an alternative interpretation is that offsetting goods offset the good that would have resulted from God’s preventing the permitted evil.


There are important ambiguities in the expression “making the world worse”. This could mean worse than the world was before the evil, worse than the world would be had God prevented the evil, or worse than the world would be if the evil had not occurred for some other reason. A further complication is the badness of a world may be taken to include its likelihood of future (concrete) evils.

Rhoda (2010, 281-302)

Stump (2010)

Rhoda (2010, 281-302)

Chisholm (1990)

Ibid

Rhoda (2010)

Ibid
This value and the good that offsets it is indeterminate for reasons I will explain.

Again, in order for the world in which God permits an evil to be good, there must be goods or avoidances of evil or a combination of both that at least offset that evil, but a set of goods sufficient to offset the evil are not necessarily what makes the set no worse than the alternative to permitting the evil.

So, to use my earlier example, God’s permission of Lor’s illness results in Lor’s conversion, a good whose value outweighs that evil. This good is not what makes God’s permission of Lor’s illness no worse than His preventing it, however. Only the comparative goodness of Lor’s conversion and illness to that of the net value of the avoidance of Lor’s illness and Sam’s increased commitment makes it so.

The good permitting e must be necessary for is just the “good” of resulting in a world not worse than any world in which God prevents e. A world in which God permits an evil may differ with respect to multiple specific goods and evils from a world in which God prevents it. On the No Better Alternative Thesis what must be counterbalanced by the sum of all the goods (and avoidances of evil) that would occur if God permits evil e is all the goods and avoidances of evils that would only occur if God prevents it, not only the avoidance of e itself.

It may equally well be described as a set of goods, forfeited goods, avoided evils, and evils which include e that offset some other evil gained by this choice, or as a set of goods, forfeited goods, avoided evils, and evils which include e that offset some loss of good gained by this choice. Of course, the circumstance of God’s permitting an evil necessarily includes the evil and does not necessarily include other evils and losses of good, but this does not mean that mean the requirement is best expressed as the permitted evil’s being offset by good.

It may seem that the Evil Offsetting Good interpretation is at odds with my previous assertion that according to NGE God may be justified in permitting an evil if preventing the evil is not better than permitting it. There is no conflict, however. My earlier point was that the NGE should not require that if God permits an evil, God’s permitting the evil is better than preventing it. It may also not require that if God permits an evil, preventing the evil is not better than permitting it, as the Evil Offsetting Good interpretation allows.

This perspective allows an evil’s gratuitousness to be as vague as degree of sameness among goods. One may think this cannot be correct because divine permission of a particular evil must be either morally best or not. Though the notion of an evil that is impermissible or not morally best for God to permit is not the same as the notion of a gratuitous evil, in some cases an evils’ being gratuitous may be the only reason God’s permission of it is impermissible, so the vagueness of the former infects the latter, which seems unacceptable. This issue will be addressed in chapter six on NGE and vagueness.

This construal of “offsetting good” could then be modified to rule this out by defining an offsetting good as any total of all the goods and evils that result from God’s permission of the evil, provided that total does not have a negative value.
I have called Rowe’s theological premise his “No Gratuitous Evil Thesis”, but must acknowledge that, for reasons given in this section, this name is misleading. I retain this title for convenience because so much contemporary discussion of Rowe’s argument labels evils forbidden by his theological premise ‘gratuitous’.


God’s choice here is between A and all worse worlds, not between any two of an infinite hierarchy of worlds.

This, of course, is not the same as defining an evil as any state of affairs that is better that it not occur than occur, simpliciter, because, as previously mentioned, something intrinsically bad may be necessary for a greater good in a particular context, so that its non-occurrence makes things overall worse rather than better in that context.

But if NGE refers to instances of evil and not simply comparisons of possible worlds, then perhaps this is an indication that relations between those instances and specific goods may be relevant and that the distinction between the absence of an evil and the presence of a good may be relevant.

The necessity of the permission of the evil for the good is implicit: if God’s permitting an evil results only in a good that could have been had without the evil or with less evil, then no good is gained by God’s permitting that evil or that additional evil.

More conservatively, the rejection of any one of these ways is open to reasonable doubt, so NGE should allow for them.

God’s permission of such evil may be gratuitous, but this needs to be argued. To briefly mention a consideration to be examined more thoroughly in chapter four, there may be deontological reasons for God’s permitting an evil. Perhaps God could obtain a better world by preventing an evil, but this would involve permitting someone’s life to be on the whole bad, for example. If the latter is impermissible God will permit the sub-optimal evil. This sub-optimal evil may still be non-gratuitous and not just because this deontological reason may involve an offsetting good. There may be an appropriate subset of all the goods and evils gained and lost making the evil non-gratuitous. For example, permitting the evil may bring about more good than evil, as in the example of Dor’s illness.

Reitan (2000)

Reitan (2000, 310)

Rhoda (2010, 281-302) defends this formulation of Rowe’s second premise

Reitan (2000, 318, footnote 32)

Reitan (2000, 313)

Rowe (1996)

Russell (1989, 121-39)

Reitan (2000, 311-12)

Reitan’s analogy with a perfect duty of nonviolence, rather than underscore a possible parallel, seems to mark the disanalogy between the divine and human case. Perhaps we have no right to take another’s life. Perhaps we are morally obliged to leave justice in “God’s hands.” Perhaps we cannot use a person merely as a means even for very good ends. But God may possess such “rights” because He created us and His providence aims at the eternal fulfillment of each individual person.

Adams, R. (1972) affirms this more modest constraint along similar lines, as does William Alston in his criticism of the Sufferer’s Good Constraint. This constraint is central to the theodicy of Adams, M (1999)

If one’s existence is on the whole bad voluntarily, this means one has decisively chosen evil over good, a possibility denied by universalists.

Adams, M (1999)

Since NBA entails the No Surpassable World Thesis, as argued below, the qualification in parentheses is not necessary.

I only claim it seems to preclude non-consequentialist considerations. I think this seeming is illusory.

Of course, the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis implies that if God had not permitted the evil a good would be lost, but this counterfactual is about the actual good and no others. It is not a claim about the value of that good relative to other possible goods or any comparison across possible worlds.

It only entails that the alternatives to God’s permission of an evil include all possibilities in which there is no offsetting good. This is because, according to the Evil Offsetting Good Thesis, an alternative in which there is no offsetting good is less than morally best and so cannot be actual.

This would be an illustration of the views of Tracy and Adams mentioned above.

Stump says the permitted suffering must primarily benefit the sufferer. If the sufferer’s benefit defeats his suffering I don’t see why an even greater benefit may not accrue to someone else as a consequence of this suffering.


Reitan (2000, 314-15)

Ibid, p. 314

Ibid, p. 316

This is so whether God necessarily creates or not.

Van Inwagen writes, “I shall suppose that whenever God brings about some state of affairs involving created beings, His doing this is the same action as His issuing a certain decree – a pronouncement of the form ‘Let such-and-such be’ or “Let the following be so: …’ The most straightforward construal of van Inwagen’s notion of a divine decree is to equate God’s decrees with what God (immediately or mediately) brings about or causes. But the Divine Indeterminate Decree Thesis conflicts with this interpretation. If God decrees ‘X or Y’ and X comes into existence then God’s decree that X or Y is his directly and immediately bringing about X, but though God caused X God did not decree X, on van Inwagen’s understanding. Only if God caused X as the complete explanation for X does God decree X. We may then wish to say that according to van Inwagen, what God decrees God directly causes but not all states of affairs God causes are decreed by God. This is also not without difficulty, however. If God decrees ‘X or Y’ and X results then God causes X by his decree. Does God also cause the state of affairs ‘X or Y’? This seems problematic because a disjunction is an abstraction, not a concrete reality.

Also, suppose x obtains as the result of God’s decree “let x or y be at t”, where x is the existence of a particle or a particles existing with specific causal powers. In what sense is state of affairs x wholly dependent on God’s action? That decree is not necessary for x. The decree “let x
be at t”, could have brought about x. Given God has no reason to prefer x over y, if we grant God cannot decree ‘let x be’ without sufficient reason, we might think God’s decreeing “let either x or y be” is necessary for x. However, couldn’t God have chosen different goals so that He might have preferred x over y or have decreed ‘let x or z be at t’? If so, then although x could not be without God making a decree involving x, the action God actually made was not necessary for x. Nor is that decree sufficient for x. Given that decree, x may not obtain: y might exist instead.

Perhaps van Inwagen holds that just as a natural indeterminate power may be the complete cause of its effect without there being a complete explanation of why that effect rather than some other occurred, God may be the complete cause of x without there being an explanation for why x resulted from God’s act rather than y. But if van Inwagen tries to cohere complete dependence on God with there being no reason for preferring x over y in this way – it seems there is an alternative to saying God would not subject himself to chance. God chose x because God valued x is the complete explanation for why God chose x. If God had chosen y it would have been because God valued y. (See Pruss (2006)) There is no reason for choosing x rather than y and there doesn’t need to be. We have an explanation for why God chose what He in fact chose.

It is odd to describe events resulting from free choice as events due to chance, for presumably, they are due to the agents power to bring about the event. And there may be a teleological explanation for these events in terms of the motives of the agent. The point would be that there would be either no complete explanation of why a particular choice was made (rather than another) or at least none in terms of the prior causal history of the world, and that God did not directly intend that event.

In a way then van Inwagen thinks God is subject to a principle of sufficient reason because according to van Inwagen, the alternative is to be subject to chance. Van Inwagen (1988, 235)

In the case of God’s bringing about the cosmos itself or its most fundamental nature and parameters, a divine indeterminate decree would require the (according to van Inwagen, epistemically possible) absence of a unique best possible - for God’s chosen purposes - initial state of the world. Also, van Inwagen leaves open the possibility that free will is compatible with determinism. If there is only one possible future, given the initial state of the universe, then, since according to van Inwagen the implications of God’s decrees are part of God’s plan, for a result of free will to not be part of God’s plan the initial state of the universe would have to be due to chance. This would undermine the motivation for determinism, of course.

Although van Inwagen labels the three sources: free will, natural indeterminism, and equally suitable initial states of the universe, the last seems to be a necessary condition for a special use of God’s power to decree indeterminate states of affairs (3). God’s power to bring about states of affairs without directly bringing about their specifics may be exercised regarding the universe’s initial conditions as well as regarding what the universe itself produces in the course of its history, given those initial conditions.

It is initially surprising that van Inwagen describes libertarian free will as a source of chance, but libertarian free will is clearly a source of contingency, which is what van Inwagen means by chance here.

Of course, our descriptions of how God creates are metaphorical at best, as van Inwagen notes, but unless the initial state of the universe is the result of all of God’s decrees concerning the universe, the existence of equally good (for the sake of God’s purposes) initial states of the
universe do not play a role in all of God’s decrees concerning the universe. So the above
categorization is more complete.

There are also the following tensions in van Inwagen’s account: van Inwagen himself rejects
or disfavors the idea that God may make arbitrary choices because that would seem to make God
subject to the “god of chance”. But if God’s decree’s being “the result of chance” is repugnant to
van Inwagen because that would seem to make God dependent on something other than
Himself, then by parity of reasoning shouldn’t a natural outcome’s being “the result of chance”
also seem to make nature dependent on something other than God? Also, there is a difficulty for
his notion of divine indeterminate decrees: a disjunction does not seem to stand in causal
relation. There is also a tension between his libertarian freedom view and his finding arbitrary
divine decrees implausible. Perhaps a reasonless choice model of freedom would suit his
purposes better. (see Pruss (2006)) Also, the feature that no new basic constituents come into
existence helps him circumvent rather than address one motivation for an alternative conception
of divine providence, namely, concurrentism. van Inwagen asks whether a natural cause is
responsible for its effects or not. We may ask if a natural cause can produce a novel substance or
causal powers. If it cannot, creation seems diminished. If it can, what of dependence on God in
the way van Inwagen describes? His simplified model seems simplified at just those junctures of
interest.

van Inwagen’s model invites many metaphysical questions that can only be addressed with
subtle medieval scholastic metaphysical distinctions and that cannot even be properly framed in
a short essay. For example: Is it really metaphysically possible that nothing at all, neither God
nor nature, explains why one possible event or state of affairs rather than another occurs? If the
existence of a particle is inherently unpredictable, does God’s sustaining that particle the first
moment it exists require middle knowledge? If God causes the existence and powers of
everything that exists can any causal powers be produced by created casual powers? On this
model how is God’s sustaining the universe different from God’s continuously re-creating the
universe? Van Inwagen reasons that since it seems implausible that there be a unique optimal
way of fulfilling God’s purposes in creating, unique to the precise amount and distribution of
every particle and power, God must have the power to bring about indefinite states of affairs
without bringing about their specifics, to create “incomplete” states of affairs. But it also may
seem simply metaphysically impossible that there be no sufficient reason for some states of
affairs, no reason at all for why A occurs rather than B, for any A and B. Of course, in an essay
of such broad sweep, overlooked distinctions must abound. However, for van Inwagen’s model
of providence to serve as a “prolegomena” to his discussion of the problem of evil, as he claims,
we should at least be able to extract from his essay answers to the following very general
questions: What is the conceptual connection between his remarks on the way in which creation
depends on God and his remarks on the possible sources of chance in creation? How does van
Inwagen’s picture of how God relates to the created world leave room for chance in a way that
alternative construals do not?

If the specific effects are metaphysically necessary given divinely decreed powers and
circumstances, they are part of God’s plan. Also, if we say that what God causes need not be
what God decrees but must be included in God’s decrees, then it seems that in a parallel sense
the results of at least one source of chance, God’s indeterminate decrees should be considered

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included in God’s plan, which is the sum of God’s non-reactive decrees. This would undermine the crux of van Inwagen’s argument against the Meticulous view of Providence.

90 This is the misleading rhetorical relation: his model provides a convenient way of defining God’s plan, a definition that leaves events due to chance in the sense of lacking complete contrastive causal explanation outside the scope of God’s plan - in van Inwagen’s restrictive sense - and thus be due to chance in the sense of lacking purpose should his notion of plan be accurate. But the convenience of defining God’s plan in the way he does should not obscure the many difficulties and inconsistencies it involves.

91 Every actual state of affairs that is part of God’s eternal plan has a complete teleological explanation – namely it obtains because it is best that it does. But God brings about what God prefers in the way He is able to. Perhaps some state of affairs that are part of God’s eternal plan can only be weakly actualized by God, but they are part of God’s perfect will nonetheless. So van Inwagen’s definition of God’s plan excludes states of affairs from God’s eternal plan that it should not. Such states of affairs may lack complete causal explanation, but their occurrence is not due to chance in a sense that makes them bereft of purpose or significance – nor the kind of purpose that would sufficiently justify and explain why God allowed that particular evil rather than some other.

92 Should the existence of rational animals be considered due to chance in such a case? Yes in one sense and No in another. It is not by chance just because it is a basic divinely freely chosen desiderata for any created world: it is because God intended there be rational animals that there are. It is by chance relative to the actual created world, however. That this creation produced rational animals is contingent. This is a distinction between de re and de dicto contingency. (Necessarily, rational animals emerge in the history of creation, and not: rational animals emerge of necessity in the history of creation.) This distinction is one way of describing God’s relation to chance. Again, on one notion of divine providence, God atemporally selects one among many possible contingent histories of the world.

93 Strong actualization or decree is one way God may bring about his preferences, but His eternal plan should be identified with the unqualified preferences that God can and therefore does bring about, not with one way in which He may bring them about. For God may also make a decree to bring about a particular state of affairs that is only desired by God qua an instance of or a means to what He prefers. Such states of affairs lack complete teleological explanation.

94 Many such states of affairs will be conditional if there is no divine middle knowledge. (If God has this knowledge these conditionals describe God’s order of preferences but not His actual plan.)

95 Again, since one may hold this view and think that some events are due to (libertarian) free will and natural indeterminism, van Inwagen’s excluding events due to chance from God’s plan by defining God’s plan as what God decrees begs the question against the meticulous providence view.

96 Howard Snyder (1996)
97 Ibid
98 Rowe (1979, 335-41)
100 Van Inwagen (1988, 161-87)
101 Van Inwagen (199164, n.11)
104. Note, however, that although the evil is not necessary for G, God is justified in permitting those evils for the sake of G.
105. Which counterfactuals of freedom (and of indeterministic events) are true at those possible worlds is also relevant to what purposes God would choose.
107. Ibid
108. Ibid
109. (Choices between amounts of evil may be morally arbitrary because they are components of (implicit in) choices between roughly equally good sets of goods and evils.) By an optimal option I mean an option than which there is no better. An option may be optimal without being uniquely optimal.
110. In chapter one I argued that the “greater good” phrasing of Rowe’s No Gratuitous Evil Thesis obscures the compatibility of a kind of pointlessness, namely moral arbitrariness, with that thesis, and that this misrepresentation is significant enough to warrant replacing the term ‘greater good’ with ‘offsetting good’. This section illustrates this significance. I have drawn attention to that permissible type of pointlessness to undermine the coherence and therefore persuasiveness of van Inwagen’s “permissible moral arbitrariness” criticism of the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis and his related purported counterexamples to it.
111. This is an example van Inwagen uses in footnote 11 of “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence” The Evidential Argument From Evil, chpt. 8
113. Such as those offered by Peter van Inwagen (2006) and Bruce Reichenbach (1976)
114. Swinburne (1998)
115. John Hick (1967)
116. So, for example, I will not argue this understanding is more plausible than either of the following versions of those theodicies, which may be offered in response to Rowe’s Gratuitous Particular Evils Claim: “All or Nothing” God must permit all moral and all natural evil for the goods of human moral freedom and the uniformity of nature. This may be because of moral principles of fairness whereby it would be unfair for God to be selective in his preventions of human suffering or perhaps because of a deontological constraint of respect for persons whereby it would be wrong for God to ever remove free will once given, no matter what the consequences. “Evils as Components of Goods” Goods requiring significant moral freedom, such as eternal union with God, and requiring the uniformity of nature, such as the autonomy of creation, defeat rather than offset moral and natural evil. On this view the optimization of trade-offs described above is not a divine motivation because every individual evil is an essential part of a good whole and is permitted for that reason. Perhaps only the purposes of creation could justify exceptions to preserving the autonomy of the natural order. I will not argue for or against any of these possibilities.
117. Rather, I will later argue that if the goods of significant moral freedom and the uniformity of nature may be considered emergent goods, a particular evil’s seeming gratuitous because its permission seems either unnecessary for, or not worth its contribution to, those goods is not evidence it is gratuitous. In this way I offer an alternative to the currently popular Skeptical
Theist answer to atheist arguments based on the Gratuitous Particular Evils Claim that appeals to unimagined goods.

This is a version of the sorites paradox.

Of course the same would have to be said of choices 1122 and 1121 and so on, but perhaps one can find some way to adhere to both (2), individual increments are not worth their cost, and (4), many increments are worth their cost, with an untainted philosophical conscience by accepting some corresponding answer to sorites paradoxes.

Again, we should be careful in tabulating the goods and evils involved. Choosing to stop at putting 250 people on the lifeboat rather than 251 is to choose the good of 250 people having a 75% chance of making it rather than 74.9% and for person number 251 to have a 0% chance rather than 74.9%. So we may call the choice that between balance of goods and evils (75% for 250) + (0% for 1) and (74.9% for 251). If choosing 250 over 251 is to allow a gratuitous evil, then 74.9% for 251 is a better trade-off of goods and evils (for then there must be additional evil in choice 250 that is not offset by a good) than 75% for 250.

This interpretation still leaves the puzzle of why vague hidden values offset costs when the trade-offs compared both instantiate them. For example, what is the hidden value involved that makes it seem that tradeoffs including 800 (doses or shovels) and 801, both of which instantiate the desired good of having an adequately safe trench or a comfortable level of pain, roughly equally good? So what value does # 801 have that could overturn its otherwise net cost to make it not obviously worse than 800? If 800 clearly instantiates that vague good it is necessary for it and the good of increasing within amounts required for that good trumps their costs.

It should be noted that the good that offsets the evil need not be intended by God, as God may have no reason to prefer one instantiation of His purposes (one trade-off) over another, and that that is in harmony with the No Gratuitous Evil Thesis, which only states that there must be a good, not that the good is specifically intended by God.

Notice that this is unlike the case of incommensurable goods requiring the permission of different amounts of evil in chapter one because here the goods are of the same type and are stipulated to be the same in amount. And, even if they were not determinately the same amount, as per the commensurable version, a greater excess evil by definition makes the choice worse, because the excess is the evil beyond what is necessary for the good.

More precisely, though (even) less eloquently: “… if making some choice is no worse than making none, then allowing that evil is necessary for an offsetting good.” Also, to allow for the view that God cannot make arbitrary decisions, we can replace “making some choice” with “having chance determine some amount”.

Furthermore, although one might attempt to answer this objection by saying that God’s doing so would be to perform an unnecessary miracle and so would not be as good as the otherwise morally equivalent alternative, van Inwagen’s arguments concerning God’s possible removal of horrors strongly militate against this as well.

Take for example, van Inwagen’s own illustration of God’s miracle of turning water into wine. Consider a small subset of those particles that were given the special causal properties required for the volume of water to turn into wine. Even if their specific locations were not decreed by God, their having special causal properties at that time were, and so the event of those particles having those properties at that time is part of God’s plan. It seems God could have issued different decrees concerning them – continuing to decree normal powers, for example – and then made compensating decrees to set things back to what they would have been without
the changed decrees, or at least to a state of affairs equally good as far as God’s purposes are concerned. If there could have been a miraculous intervention to prevent the events constituting a particular horror without cost to God’s purposes, including that of preserving the autonomy of the natural world, then it seems God could have performed a miracle to prevent some such events that are entailed by His actual decrees without cost. So it seems that among the events constituting the changing of water into wine, there are some events that are entailed by God’s actual decrees which God could have avoided by making different decrees, without cost to his purposes.

127 The No Gratuitous Evil Thesis only requires God’s allowing an evil is necessary for a good that is not less in value than the disvalue of the evil or for the prevention of an evil that is not better than the evil permitted.

128 Also, God is either indifferent (morally neutral) or not regarding a choice between worlds, and indifference is either due to equality, rough equality, or incommensurability, and preference is either due to one world’s being better, or, depending on one’s understanding of freedom, due to a free choice between equal, roughly equal, or incommensurable words. What third attitude could God have besides preference and indifference so as to include some other relation? So God’s permitting an evil so as to actualize one world rather than another must be either a matter of indifference, due to axiological equality or incommensurability between the worlds, or of preference, due to its being over-all better to do so or due to free choice. If every world of a finite number of worlds is related to every other in that set by one of these relations, one or more of these worlds must be optimal. To think God may be in a circumstance of having to choose a non-optimal world from a finite number of worlds is to think that there is another comparative goodness relation in addition to equality, incommensurability, incomparability, better than, and worse than, but it seems there is none.

129 Almeida (2008, 56) points this out.


131 Howard-Snyder (1998)

132 Rowe (1979, 335)

133 As mentioned, because NGE does not entail the No Chance Evil Thesis, the permission of the fawn’s suffering may seem unnecessary for any good, including the good of the specific degree of the uniformity of nature if that were somehow known, because it is unnecessary, in the sense that it is replaceable. In addition, the permission of this evil’s contribution to a global good it is permitted for the sake of, which may simply be nature’s being highly regular may seem unnecessary because permitting the amount of evil of the fawn’s suffering is unnecessary for that good (though not for its specific instantiation).

134 Van Inwagen (2006)

135 Ibid

136 Ibid

137 Ibid

138 Ibid

139 Ibid


141 Hasker (2004, chapter five “Can God Permit “Just Enough” Evil?”)

142 Hasker (2004, 89)
This is questionable because it is not possible for the agent to make the world worse, given God’s commitment to, or reason for, following His policy of keeping to the minimum.

Hasker (2004, 76)

I argued this at length in chapter four.

Bibliography


