

## A Theist Defense of Natural Evil

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*“Official fears 100,000 dead after Earthquake”*

This headline was plastered on the front page of CNN in the days following the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake (Watson). Headlines of this nature are a common sight. In fact, natural disasters and disease take countless lives everyday, and we often have no foreknowledge of or control over these tragedies. How could a loving God allow us to suffer so unfairly? Can a world full of so much seemingly unnecessary suffering allow for belief in Him? This question is formalized in philosophy as the “problem of evil.” I argue that the answer to this question is yes, and aim to provide concrete rather than skeptical explanations for natural evil. Philosophical discourse on the problem of evil has focused largely on *moral evil*, or evil inflicted by moral agents on one another. As a result, *natural evil*, evil that results from natural processes—has been explored less extensively. In this paper, I will (1) present William Rowe’s basic conception of the atheist argument from the problem of evil, (2) under Rowe’s conception of God, argue in defense of natural evil based on societal progression and natural laws, and (3) defend my argument against three objections, namely,

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David Johnson's argument against the existence of natural evil, Quentin Smith's concern with the law of predation, and Nick Trakakis's defense of moral evil and curiosity in place of natural evil. Through this, I aim to ultimately show the value and necessity of the existence of natural evil.

### **Rowe's Argument for Atheism Based on the Problem of Evil**

In William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," he argues for rational belief in atheism based on the problem of evil (335). Rowe concludes that based on our collective experience of human and animal suffering, it certainly appears unreasonable to believe that every such instance serves some greater good. The argument is as follows:

- (P1) There exist instances of natural suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without losing some greater good or allowing some worse evil.<sup>1</sup>
- (P2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent these instances of suffering if it could.
- (C) Such a being does not exist (336).

Rowe acknowledges that (P1) would be impossible to prove because we cannot know with certainty if any instance of suffering is connected to some greater good beyond our limited comprehension. Nevertheless, we do have rational grounds to believe (P1). Rowe presents the story of a fawn that suffers for days, burning to death in a forest fire. He notes that the fawn's suffering appears to be pointless (337). Rowe concludes that even if we cannot definitively prove (P1), we have grounds to believe (P1) is a reasonable belief. He reasons that (P2) does not require a significant debate considering it is generally agreed upon by atheists and theists alike.

### **Argument from Progression**

I take issue with (P1) of Rowe's argument on the grounds that there are greater goods he fails to consider, and with (P2) on the grounds that God should not necessarily prevent every instance of unnecessary suffering.

<sup>1</sup> Rowe's argument addresses all forms of suffering, but for the purposes of this paper I address only natural forms of suffering. Therefore, I have added "natural" before the word suffering in (P1).

It is important to note that for the purposes of this essay, I assume Rowe's definition of God; that is, a being that is wholly good, omniscient, and omnipotent (336). My justification of natural evil is two-fold: justification for (1) the existence of natural evil, and (2) its apparent excess. Rowe's primary evidential example is a fawn slowly burning to death in a forest fire. This example is one of natural evil (assuming the forest fire was not caused by a human), so (P1) of his argument would necessarily fail if one could present compelling justification for seemingly excessive natural evil. I argue that natural evil exists in the first place because it can and does facilitate essential growth that could not occur by other means.

Just as Rowe marshals our collective experience of suffering to draw certain conclusions about its usefulness, we can similarly draw from our collective experience of disaster and hardship to show that they bring people together in ways that create unique opportunities for society. Not only does natural evil motivate scientific and technological progress, it also fosters a sense of humility and unity that is necessary to make significant progress under dire circumstances. When communities are devastated by natural disasters, they come together to ensure disasters are prevented in the future as much as possible. Natural evil has a unique way of breaking down barriers that usually exist between individuals in a community. For example, during Hurricane Harvey, a hurricane that devastated the Texas coast, extensive humanitarian efforts and preventive infrastructure projects (e.g., artificial coastal banks, stilted housing, and safer transportation routes) followed immediately after the disaster ("Historic").<sup>2</sup> In this way, natural evil both motivates progress and facilitates the social climate to efficiently develop solutions for large-scale problems.

Beyond just situation-specific instances of community progress, natural evil can work to improve the human life on the whole. In response to natural evil, we develop means of preventing or minimizing the impact of future disasters or diseases and disseminate that knowledge to the world. As this occurs, these improvements become an accepted part of our scientific knowledge. Medical advances represent perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Diseases such as smallpox and polio, which once wrought widespread suffering, are virtually nonexistent now. Through the process of eradicating these diseases, we also gained scientific knowledge of how diseases work, and how to vaccinate against them. These medical advances continue to be built upon as we search for solutions to disease

<sup>2</sup>These examples are personal observations on the part of the author; see cited article for additional information.

and other forms of natural evil. Without natural evil and the short-term suffering and loss that it causes, humanity would not possess the many improvements to the human condition that we so often take for granted.

Of course, one might bring up the concern that my argument appears circular, as it places value on types of knowledge that only provide utility when suffering exists. In response to this concern, I argue that the good of societal progress is noninstrumental, and holds value without natural evil to necessitate it. Most humans strive for some sort of betterment in their lives, working towards a human condition that is superior to the one that currently exists. Human betterment can similarly be understood as progress, which can take many forms. For example, gaining knowledge about a given topic promotes mental and behavioral growth. This effort to gain knowledge can be reasonably understood as progression, regardless of whether or not the knowledge provides utility in an obvious or technical manner. The utility of a scientific law does not necessarily determine its value. So, although the knowledge and discovery that natural evil prompts is extremely useful to us, this does not solely instantiate its value.

### **Argument from Natural Laws**

However, even once we have arrived at a justification for the existence of natural evil, we must still confront the question of why it exists to an apparently excessive degree. One might say, "I understand hurricanes exist, but why so many? Surely we do not need every hurricane." Alternatively, one might cite instances of natural evil that clearly provide no benefit, such as Rowe's example of the burning deer. In response, I argue that apparently excessive natural evil is simply a result of the necessary functioning of natural laws in the world.<sup>3</sup> Once we have determined that some natural evil must exist to prompt advances in society, we must then understand why God cannot and should not micromanage how much suffering occurs. When God created the Earth, He also created the natural laws that form the foundation of the sciences, whether it be physics (laws of motion), biology (laws of nature), or others. I could alternatively argue that natural laws exist independent of God and He too is subject to them, in which case my argument still follows. But in this paper, I assume that God's omnipotence indicates He created all laws. These sciences can consistently explain (and predict) empirical phenomena, and the natural laws from

<sup>3</sup>This natural law argument happens to have the same name as Bruce Reichenbach's argument for natural evil, but was formed independently and is argued differently.

which they are formed have been in operation since God created them. Their consistency can be tested and verified by repeated observation and experience; indeed, our most basic understanding of “law” requires them to be generally consistent and predictable. Natural evil follows directly from the functioning of these natural laws.

One might argue that if God truly is *omniscient*, He will know when a natural law will cause suffering; and if He is also *omnibenevolent*, He should intervene to prevent the harm. However, this objection elicits the question of why God created the world in the first place. Because we have determined that it is necessary for some level of natural suffering to exist for society to progress, God has an all-or-nothing decision to make: He must either allow natural evil to follow from natural laws, or craft natural laws in a way that never allows for natural evil. Significant interference beyond these options forces the laws to function in such a selective manner as to undermine the very concept of law. If He intervened every time a cell mutated to cause cancer, biology itself would be an inconsistent science. In any similar scenario, the world becomes a simulation that God micromanages.

As a part of the discussion of natural laws, the concept of miracles often arises. Some may consider miracles to indicate that God is willing to violate or suspend a natural law in certain instances. However, I believe that very rarely do miracles actually compromise natural laws, and it is certainly not required of them to do so. In fact, a common atheistic explanation of miracle-like phenomena is that these instances actually do fit within natural laws, and are a mere coincidental functioning of the laws. The rare instances in which miracles definitively violate natural laws are insignificant enough to avoid qualifying as “significant interference.” If God interfered with natural laws to prevent suffering on a regular basis, our world would be fundamentally different, as all of its “laws” would cease to be laws in any meaningful sense. As a perfect being, God’s intentions are naturally to provide largely consistent and clear laws to allow for increased understanding of such laws. Thus, what appears to be excess natural evil is in actuality the natural laws of the world functioning as God intended.

### Johnson’s Objection from Existence

In David Johnson’s “The Failure of Plantinga’s Solution to the Logical Problem of Natural Evil,” he addresses several aspects of Alvin Plantinga’s explanation for natural evil (145). Johnson argues that the mere existence of any natural evil negates the existence of a loving God because God should have created natural laws to avoid natural evil, not enable it. Parts of Plantinga’s argument differ from my own, but we both argue that

natural evil goes hand-in-hand with natural law, so Johnson's refutation, if effective, holds serious implications for my argument. Johnson states that the existence of any natural evil provides grounds for atheism, because if God were truly loving, He would have found a way to create natural laws that never caused suffering. Johnson illustrates his point with an analogy: imagine a dog owner builds a house for her dogs (150). In this house, she installs dog-killing machines that are activated at random times. Of course, the dogs are not guaranteed to die at the hand of one of these machines, but if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, tragedy will strike. It seems that if the owner actually loved her dogs, she would not install killing machines in the home she designed for them. Johnson argues that this owner represents God and the killing machines represent natural disasters (150). He reasons that if God does exist, He does not love us.

In response to Johnson's argument, I first argue that his dog analogy is a false analogy, as it blatantly misrepresents God. In Johnson's analogy, the dog owner has no discernible motive for placing the killing machines around the house. These killing machines will only ever function to kill; they provide no benefit to the dogs. In this way, the owner is quite unlike God, for He has purposes in allowing natural evils to exist, as previously discussed. Second, Johnson's analogy also states that the killing-machines represent natural disasters. If that is the case, where do natural laws come in? The machines do not behave in accordance with any law, but rather, by Johnson's own admission, activate randomly. This inconsistency further weakens the analogy.

My revised and stronger analogy is as follows: there is an owner who wants her dogs to advance in cognitive reasoning. To facilitate this, she installs a shock wire system around her dog house. The wires, if stepped on in a certain pattern, give a painful shock to the dogs. But as the dogs gain more experience living in the house, they begin to understand how patterns of the wires work. In fact, they learn to avoid the damaging effects of the wires almost entirely. In this analogy, the owner has a greater purpose in allowing her dogs to experience this pain: it is only through this experience that can they be motivated to practice cognitive reasoning. The owner does not predetermine a set number of times the wires will give off a shock, but instead allows the dogs to interact naturally with the "laws" of the wire system. With or without the existence of the wires to necessitate it, the dogs' increased cognitive reasoning abilities contribute to their overall betterment.

Now that I have presented a more apt dog analogy, I aim to give an account for why God is unable to create laws with no natural evil. Of course, the suggestion that natural laws exist and behave consistently

is not controversial in scientific circles. However, my connection of societal progression to the consistent function of natural law is unique, and the two parts are both essential. Because of the necessary consistency of natural laws, God must either choose to create laws that never allow suffering or to allow suffering to run its course, without intervention. This all-or-nothing situation necessitates that God create natural laws that are capable of causing natural evil. God cannot and does not curate every instance of natural evil as it occurs. Rather, He understands that some degree of natural suffering is necessary to prompt humans to grow and progress, and so He is willing to let natural laws function independently so that they may facilitate this progress. Since we have determined that some degree of natural suffering is necessary, we know that God could not have logically created natural laws to avoid natural evil entirely.

### Smith's Objection From Predation

I have now argued that natural evil is justified because it functions through natural laws to benefit society. But what if a natural law exists that provides no benefit to the world? In "An Atheological Argument from Evil Natural Laws," Quentin Smith argues that predation—the act of creatures preying on others for nourishment—is an inherently evil natural law and provides no benefit to the world (160).<sup>4</sup> Smith begins by recounting a disturbing experience he had that served as the catalyst for his argument: he was spending the night in a mountain cabin and woke up to the sound of flesh being torn from limbs and bones snapping (159). He soon realized there was an animal right outside his window killing and eating another. Smith declares that a law where animals must savagely kill and devour each other for survival is obviously an ultimately evil law and alone is sufficient evidence that God does not exist (161). He argues that the evil of savagely killing another animal outweighs the objective good of being nourished. He envisions an alternative world in which every predator in our world has a vegetarian counterpart. In this argument, he refers to the law of predation as *E*, and the law of vegetative-nourishment as *V*. Smith then argues that all causes and effects of *E* and *V* in the actual world are inferior to the instances of just *V* in the alternative world (164).

The notion that our world would not be harmed by a complete removal of predation ignores centuries of ecological science and well-understood

<sup>4</sup>Charles Darwin presents a similar concern to Johnson's addressed in "Solving Darwin's Problem of Natural Evil" by James Sterba.

food webs and chains. Predators higher up on the food chain for a given ecosystem expend more energy per day and are often larger in size, so they need higher levels of energy and calories that only come from meat. Of course, Smith may submit that plants in his alternate world be altered to have higher caloric and protein content. Suggesting that God should have made this change implies not only changing fundamental laws of biology, but also changing the size, shape, and behavior of virtually every living thing on earth, so the argument is not truly just an argument against predation, although it is misrepresented as if it is. However, even if I were to concede this point, Smith's argument still fails once ecological balance is taken into account.

When one looks further into Smith's claim, it becomes clear that he glosses over the extensive effects that a removal of predation would actually cause to the recognizable world. This is not to say that God could not create an alternate world that would be entirely unrecognizable to us; rather, it is to say that the burden of proof is on Smith, or any other atheist, to show why such an upheaval of the world's current systems is warranted. Every ecosystem on Earth has a complex and uniquely organized food web. All the way from apex predators to the smallest herbivore, every organism falls into place. These webs are not organized randomly, but rather function to balance the populations and dominant traits of each organism. For example, in many ecosystems, mountain lions prey on deer. The mountain lions serve the ecosystem by ensuring the deer do not overpopulate the area and also aid natural selection in selecting traits that allow future generations of deer to be stronger and faster. If the mountain lions did not prey on deer and instead were vegetarians, the deer would become too great in number and vegetation for other species in the area would dangerously diminish as a result. Additionally, if there was no way to further natural selection, negative/unhealthy traits would propagate among all species and they would inevitably become weaker. Overpopulation and the weakening of organisms as a whole are objectively negative outcomes.

Furthermore, predation promotes diversity between species. Predators and prey differ in their physical features because of their diets. Sharp teeth, lean bodies, and strong claws have developed because they are necessary for predation. On the other hand, herbivores tend to have smaller, more rounded teeth and less apparent claws. They also sometimes develop unique defense and camouflage characteristics. None of these traits would exist without predation: the unique array of organisms that Earth has would be reduced to a homogenous population of organisms with similar diets and daily functions. I argue that preservation of biodiversity has objective value, regardless of whether God could alter ecosystems to survive without it. Biodiversity increases and motivates the studying of animal behaviors,



appreciating natural beauty, and significantly increases the prosperity of our physical world. Considering this, a perfect God would not deprive His animal population of such diversity both in characteristics and functions in a given ecosystem. Johnson's argument is actually an argument against creation masquerading as an argument against evolution. A world without predation would require the wholesale upheaval of many of the world's natural systems. Thus, as aforementioned, the burden of proof would be on the atheist to show why avoiding predation provides more value to the world than the high functioning systems of ecology and biology already in place. Even though predation may seem evil at first glance, a world with predation may very well be the best possible world.

### Trakakis's Objections from Moral Value & Curiosity

Philosopher Nick Trakakis expounds on Rowe's argument in his book *The God Beyond Belief: In Defense of Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (275). Although the book offers an expansive treatment of Rowe's argument, I am primarily concerned with Chapter XI, "Theodicies for Natural Evil," in which Trakakis argues that Rowe's argument stands the test of several theodicies in defense of natural evil, in particular, the "soul-making theodicy" (275). The soul-making theodicy states that natural evil is essential to "make" (i.e., foster growth and development in) our souls so they exist at a higher level. Trakakis objects to the soul-making theodicy on the grounds that *moral evil* provides sufficient evil for soul-making, so *natural evil* is excessive and unnecessary. To illustrate his point, he creates a hypothetical "Twin Earth" that is identical to our Earth, other than its complete lack of natural evil (277). On Twin Earth, there are no diseases, no natural disasters, etc. Trakakis asserts that individuals on Twin-Earth would be no worse off than us in terms of moral development (278). They would still have to confront death and tragedy caused by other humans.

Thus, one might take issue (as Trakakis does) with the notion that we need natural evil to grow *morally* on the grounds that the world has adequate *moral evil* to facilitate such growth. If individual moral growth was the only purpose furthered by the existence of natural evil, Trakakis's argument might hold merit. However, my argument from progression differs from the soul-making theodicy in that I argue for natural evil because of the *societal* progress it prompts, rather than for the moral progress it prompts in the life of any one particular individual. If no one had ever been adversely affected by a disease, the medical field would not have ever developed advanced surgeries and medication. Or, if no one had ever died from an earthquake, cities would not have prioritized foundationally strong infrastructure, nor

discovered methods of predicting such disasters. This knowledge represents progress towards an improved human condition which itself is objectively valuable. These kinds of scientific and technological discoveries result from the strong motivating factor of natural evil. Moral evil is not capable of producing the same kind of motivation or reactions. Of course, natural evil also prompts moral growth in that it brings people together and fosters humility on an individual rather than societal basis, but even without these aspects, natural evil would still hold unquestionable value. Moral evil does not promote societal advances in the same way natural evil does.

Trakakis raises another objection: Why did God not create mankind to be more naturally scientifically curious so as to eliminate the need for suffering-based motivation (286)? In Trakakis's ideal world, humans would already possess consistent motivation to research every possible scientific advancement out of sheer curiosity. However, this question fails to account for the vastness of scientific inquiry. Trakakis's objection would require that we live in a world of extremely finite scientific discoveries, as he expects humans to randomly stumble upon all of the important ones with curiosity alone driving them. On the other hand, natural evil allows humans to specifically pursue aspects of science that most improve the human experience. Additionally, by acknowledging that scientific progress is objectively valuable to human life, even in a world without suffering to necessitate it, Trakakis validates the argument from progression.

### Conclusion

If one adheres to the account of God that Rowe espouses, as I do, one can also come to understand that the existence of excess natural evil is an essential feature of the best possible world. If Rowe or his defenders cannot prove that natural evil is unnecessary, the atheist argument based on the problem of evil crumbles. The atheistic arguments I have discussed fall victim to false notions of natural laws and misunderstood morals. My argument for natural evil avoids these faults and exposes key weaknesses in the atheistic arguments given by Rowe, Johnson, Smith, and Trakakis; these philosophers all rely on a similar conception of God, so other similar arguments also fall victim to my rebuttals. The proposition that natural evil is necessary to preserve natural laws and advances in society is just as plausible as Rowe's original claim. He claims it is "reasonably clear" that suffering occurs in a degree "far beyond" what is required (338). However, Rowe's assertion is not "reasonably clear" after all; it is an unsubstantiated value judgment about how much God should or should not interfere with a naturally functioning world.

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