Rowe’s Argument from Evil
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Here is a streamlined version of William Rowe’s argument from evil:¹

1. Pointless evil exists.
2. If God² exists, then pointless evil does not exist.³
   Therefore,
3. God does not exist (from 1 and 2).

Rowe’s argument is an instance of Modus Tollens,⁴ which is a valid argument form. A valid argument form is one in which the truth of the premises is logically incompatible with the falsity of the conclusion. Rowe is therefore claiming (at a minimum) that the following three propositions are inconsistent:⁵

a. Pointless evil exists.
b. If God exists, then pointless evil does not exist.
c. God exists.

To say that these propositions are inconsistent is to say that they cannot all be true. At least one of them, therefore, is false.⁶ But which one? Everyone, theist and atheist alike, accepts (b).⁷ Rowe rejects (c). The theist rejects (a).

Look at it this way. Rowe thinks that (a) is more likely than (c) to be true, so, since he can’t accept both propositions, he rejects (c). The theist thinks that (c) is more

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² Let “God” be the name of the (supposed) being who is omnipotent (i.e., all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), and omnibenevolent (perfectly good).
³ A pointless evil (sometimes called a gratuitous or superfluous evil) is an evil that is not necessary either to produce a greater good or to prevent a worse evil.
⁴ Modus Tollens (Latin for “denying mode”) has the form, “If p, then q; not q; therefore, not p.” It is not to be confused with “If p, then q; not p; therefore, not q,” which is the Fallacy of Denying the Antecedent. The order in which the premises are presented has no bearing on the validity of the argument. I present them in the order in which Rowe presents them.
⁵ Rowe is claiming—to use Alvin Plantinga’s terminology—that the propositions are formally (as opposed to explicitly or implicitly) contradictory. See Appendix 1.
⁶ Take a moment to satisfy yourself that the truth of any two of the propositions entails the falsity of the third. If (a) and (b) are true, then (c) is false. If (a) and (c) are true, then (b) is false. If (b) and (c) are true, then (a) is false. See Appendix 2.
⁷ Actually, not quite everyone. Peter van Inwagen, a theist, rejects (b).
likely than (a) to be true, so, by the same reasoning, he or she rejects (a). Put differently, Rowe’s confidence that (a) is \textit{true} is precisely his confidence that (c) is \textit{false}. The theist’s confidence that (c) is \textit{true} is precisely his or her confidence that (a) is \textit{false}.

\textbf{APPENDIX 1}

According to Alvin Plantinga, “a formally contradictory set is one from whose members an explicit contradiction can be deduced by the laws of logic.” Let me prove that the set consisting of (a), (b), and (c) is formally contradictory in this sense. Let “G” be the proposition that God exists and “E” the proposition that pointless evil exists. Here are the three propositions:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a. E
  \item b. G \supset \neg E
  \item c. G
\end{itemize}

Here is the deduction:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item E \hspace{1cm} \text{this is proposition (a)}
  \item G \supset \neg E \hspace{1cm} \text{this is proposition (b)}
  \item G \hspace{1cm} \text{this is proposition (c)}
  \item \neg E \hspace{1cm} 2, 3, \textit{Modus Ponens}
  \item E \cdot \neg E \hspace{1cm} 1, 4, \textit{Conjunction}
\end{enumerate}

Since \textit{Modus Ponens} and Conjunction are laws of logic (i.e., valid argument forms) and since proposition 5 is explicitly contradictory, the set consisting of (a), (b), and (c) is formally contradictory in Plantinga’s sense.

\textbf{APPENDIX 2}

Here is the first proof:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item E \hspace{1cm} \text{this is proposition (a)}
  \item G \supset \neg E \hspace{1cm} \text{this is proposition (b)}
  \item \neg \neg E \hspace{1cm} 1, \text{Double Negation}
  \item \neg G \hspace{1cm} 2, 3, \textit{Modus Tollens}
\end{enumerate}

\footnote{I thank William Rowe (1931-2015) for helpful comments on this handout. He is not responsible for any errors or infelicities that remain.}
The conclusion, 4, is the denial of proposition (c). Here is the second proof:

1. \( G \supset \neg E \)  
   this is proposition (b)
2. \( G \)  
   this is proposition (c)
3. \( \neg E \)  
   1, 2, Modus Ponens

The conclusion, 3, is the denial of proposition (a). Here is the third proof:

1. \( E \)  
   this is proposition (a)
2. \( G \)  
   this is proposition (c)
3. \( G \land E \)  
   2, 1, Conjunction
4. \( G \land \neg \neg E \)  
   3, Double Negation
5. \( \neg G \land \neg \neg E \)  
   4, Double Negation
6. \( \neg (\neg G \lor \neg E) \)  
   5, De Morgan’s Theorem
7. \( \neg (G \supset \neg E) \)  
   6, Material Implication

The conclusion, 7, is the denial of proposition (b). Q.E.D.