Introduction. Rowe (1931-2015) asks and answers three “interrelated questions” (335). Before doing so, he defines terms and distinguishes (in his first footnote) two “forms” of the problem of evil, viz., the logical and the evidential. The terms “theist,” “atheist,” and “agnostic” have both narrow and broad meanings:

- **Broad theism.** “By a ‘theist’ in the broad sense I mean someone who believes in the existence of some sort of divine being or divine reality” (335).
- **Narrow theism.** “By a ‘theist’ in the narrow sense I mean someone who believes in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, supremely good being who created the world” (335).

Use circular diagrams to show the relation between the two types of theist—and point out that, so defined, one can be both a narrow agnostic (or atheist) and a broad theist, odd as that may sound. Rowe cites Paul Tillich (1886-1965) as an example. Rowe stipulates that he uses these terms in the narrow sense. Here are the three “interrelated questions”:

1. “Is there an argument for atheism based on the existence of evil that may rationally justify someone in being an atheist?” (335).
   a. **Rowe’s answer.** Yes.
   b. **Intrinsic and extrinsic evil.** “What is evil in itself [i.e., intrinsically evil] may sometimes be good as a means because it leads to something that is good in itself” (335). In other words, not all intrinsic evils are evils, all things considered. We might call them “necessary evils.” Ask for examples. Compare punishment, which Bentham and other utilitarians consider a necessary evil. Some punishment is necessary and some is gratuitous/pointless/unnecessary/superfluous/unjustified/pleonastic. “Gratuitous” means uncalled-for, unwarranted, lacking good reason. Rowe does not use the word “gratuitous,” though many others have. Rowe uses the term “pointless.”
   c. **Rowe’s “argument for atheism based on evil” (336).** I switched the premises to make them conform to *modus tollens* (MT):

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2. See the Appendix for some preliminaries.
i. “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” (336). (Paraphrase: If God exists, then there are no gratuitous evils.)

ii. “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” (336). (Paraphrase: There are gratuitous evils.)

Therefore,

iii. “There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being” (336). (Paraphrase: God does not exist.)

The argument is valid (Rowe says), and the conclusion is a statement of (narrow) atheism, so “if we have rational grounds for accepting its premises, to that extent we have rational grounds for accepting [narrow] atheism” (336). Query: Are there rational grounds for accepting the premises? Rowe says “Yes.”

d. How Rowe’s argument (1979) differs from Mackie’s argument (1955). Mackie argued as follows:

i. If God exists, then there is no evil (G ⊃ ~E).
   ii. There is evil (E).
   Therefore,
   iii. God does not exist (~G) (from i and ii, DN and MT).5

Rowe argues as follows:

i. If God exists, then there is no gratuitous evil (G ⊃ ~Eg).
   ii. There is gratuitous evil (Eg).
   Therefore,
   iii. God does not exist (~G) (from i and ii, DN and MT).6

Both arguments are deductive. Contrast them with an inductive argument for the nonexistence of God:

i. There is evil.
   Therefore, probably,

5 Pithy statement: Evil renders God’s existence impossible.
6 Pithy statement: Gratuitous evil renders God’s existence impossible, and there is evidence for the existence of gratuitous evil.
ii. God does not exist.²

Mackie assumed that theists would accept his second premise and reject his first premise. Rowe assumes that theists will accept his first premise and reject his second premise. Mackie’s argument is called the logical argument from evil because it forces the theist to explain how God and evil can coexist. Rowe’s argument is called the evidential argument from evil because it forces the theist to provide evidence for the falsity of the second premise. Rowe discusses Mackie (implicitly) and Plantinga (explicitly) in his first footnote. By calling his argument “valid” on page 336, and by saying that the conclusion “follows from the premises” on page 338, Rowe implies that it is deductive in nature. Some people (wrongly) interpret “evidential” as “inductive.”

e. The first premise. Rowe thinks theists will accept his first premise, since it “seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists” (337).

f. The second premise. Rowe supports his second premise with the case of the fawn (337). Read the marked paragraphs aloud. He admits that the fawn case does not prove the truth of the premise. “Perhaps, for all we know, there is some familiar good outweighing the fawn’s suffering to which that suffering is connected in a way we do not see” (337). But proof isn’t the aim; rational grounds for belief (i.e., rational or justified belief) is the aim, and doesn’t the fawn case (as well as many other cases that could be provided) give us rational grounds for believing the first premise? “Is it reasonable to believe that there is some greater good so intimately connected to that suffering [in every case, not just the fawn case] that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad?” (337). “[S]urely the answer to this more general question must be no” (337).

2. “How can the theist best defend his position against the argument for atheism based on the existence of evil?” (335).

a. Rowe’s answer. By using the “G. E. Moore shift.” George Edward Moore (1873-1958) was a British analytic philosopher who taught at Cambridge University for many years; he was the author of Principia Ethica (1903) and Ethics (1912), among other works.

b. Three theistic responses to Rowe’s argument for atheism.

i. The “modest response”: we have no good reason for accepting the premise that there is gratuitous evil. The strategy here is to show that Rowe’s reasoning in support of the second premise is “defective” (338). This doesn’t show that the premise is false, or even that it is reasonable to believe that it is false; what it does is undermine the reasoning in support of its truth. It shifts the burden back to

² Pithy statement: Evil renders God’s existence improbable.
Rowe to support it. Rowe says the theist has to do more than this, because if you *reject* the conclusion of a valid argument, you are committed to *rejecting* at least one of its premises. (Is this correct? Isn’t it enough for the theist to say, “I don’t know that the second premise is true, so I’m not committed to accepting the conclusion.”)

**ii. The “direct attack”: it is false that there is gratuitous evil.** Greater-goods defense. Moral and spiritual development; free will. Rowe says that it’s “doubtful” that this can succeed, especially since theists believe that “it is not given to us to know God’s purpose in allowing particular instances of suffering” (338-9). There is more evil than is necessary for the former; not all evil is brought about by free human choices. The fawn’s suffering and death is a *natural* evil. The theist must show the point of each instance of evil, including the fawn’s suffering and death.

**iii. The “indirect attack”: it is false that there is gratuitous evil.** The G. E. Moore shift. Here is the skeptic’s argument to which Moore replied:

1) If the skeptic’s principles are correct I cannot know of the existence of this pencil.
2) The skeptic’s principles are correct.
Therefore,
3) I cannot know of the existence of this pencil (from 1 and 2, MP).

Here is Moore’s “shift”:

1) If the skeptic’s principles are correct I cannot know of the existence of this pencil.
2) I do know that this pencil exists.
Therefore,
3) The skeptic’s principles (at least one) must be incorrect (from 1 and 2, MT).

The conclusion of the theist’s argument (the argument is set out below) constitutes a denial of the second premise of Rowe’s argument. If Rowe’s argument is valid, then so is the theist’s. The first premise is the same in the two arguments. “One person’s modus ponens is another person’s modus tollens.” Here’s an alternative explanation of what Rowe is saying. Suppose person S argues that propositions p and q entail r. S is asserting that the truth of p and q is incompatible with the falsity of r. Put differently, S is asserting that the following set of propositions is inconsistent: {p, q, ~r}. But this just means that it’s not the case that all three propositions are true. At least one of them, therefore, is false. In effect, S is asserting the following: either ~p, ~q, or r. But while S may affirm r, T (the interlocutor) may affirm ~p (or ~q). There is a stalemate. Here is the theist’s argument (an instance of the G. E. Moore shift):
i. If God exists, then there is no gratuitous evil ($G \supset \sim E_g$).
ii. God exists ($G$).
Therefore,
iii. There is no gratuitous evil ($\sim E_g$) (from i and ii, MP).

3. “What position should the informed atheist take concerning the rationality of theistic belief?” (335).

a. Rowe’s answer. Friendly atheism.

b. Truth versus rational (or justified) belief. For any proposition $p$, it cannot (logically) be the case both that $p$ is true and that the denial of $p$ is true. This is the law of noncontradiction. But can’t it be rational for one person to believe $p$ and another to believe its denial? Rowe thinks it can. “[S]urely the truth of a belief is not a necessary condition of someone’s being rationally justified in having that belief” (340). (Suppose it were. Then anyone who ever believed that the earth is flat, even if he or she had the best available instruments, was irrational, or at least nonrational.)

c. Varieties of atheism. There are “three major positions an atheist might take” (340) concerning the rationality of the theist’s belief:

   i. Unfriendly atheism. “[N]o one is rationally justified in believing that the theistic God exists” (340).

   ii. Friendly atheism. “[S]ome theists are rationally justified in believing that the theistic God exists” (340).

   iii. Indifferent atheism. “[T]he atheist may hold no belief concerning whether any theist is or isn’t rationally justified in believing that the theistic God exists” (340).

Note that there are three varieties of theism as well: unfriendly theism, friendly theism, and indifferent theism.

d. Rowe’s Hawaii case. Read and discuss the case. It shows that the following state of affairs is possible: $S$ is rationally justified in believing that $p$, while $T$ is rationally justified in believing that non-$p$.

Conclusion. “I’m aware that the central points of the paper are not likely to be warmly received by many philosophers” (341). Which point in particular does Rowe think will be rejected? (Answer: his “friendliness.” He will be seen by unfriendly atheists and agnostics as “going over to the enemy,” or as “giving aid and comfort to the enemy.”) Query: Hasn’t Rowe built a bridge between theists and atheists (and might that not be his intention)? Both can be friendly, even if their beliefs differ. That is, each can believe that the other is rationally justified in believing what he or she
believes, even if each believes that the other’s belief is false. Compare political liberalism, which endorses tolerance of those with whom one disagrees. (“You’re wrong, but I respect you and I’ll defend to the death your right to believe and say what you will.”) By contrast, the totalitarian (unfriendly theist/atheist/agnostic) says that there is only one acceptable way of life (rational belief) for everyone. What’s the analogue of anarchism?

Appendix.

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1 = Theism.
2 = Atheism.
3 = Agnosticism (from Gk gnosis, knowledge).