

The Context of Suffering: Empirical Insights into the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: While the evidential problem of evil has been enormously influential within the contemporary philosophical literature—William Rowe’s 1979 formulation in “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism” being the most seminal—no academic research has explored what cognitive mechanisms might underwrite the appearance of pointlessness in target examples of suffering. In this exploratory paper, we show that the perception of pointlessness in the target examples of suffering that underwrite Rowe’s seminal formulation of the problem of evil is contingent on the absence of broader context. In other words, we show that when such suffering is presented alongside broader contextual information, the appearance of pointlessness, on average, significantly diminishes. In §1 we briefly elucidate Rowe’s formulation of the problem of evil and the thought experiment that motivates a key premise. In §2 and §3 respectively, we briefly explain our hypothesis regarding Rowe’s case and our methods for testing these hypotheses. In §4, we elucidate our results, and in §5 we explore some of the philosophical implications of our findings and gesture towards some areas for future research. Finally, in §6, we briefly connect our research to some of the established philosophical literature on suffering and narrative before concluding.

Key Words: Evidential Problem of Evil, William Rowe, Religious Psychology, The Problem of Suffering

1. Introduction

“To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.”
Gordon W. Allport¹

Within the contemporary philosophical literature, suffering that appears pointless is often taken to be an evidential challenge for theism. After all, if there is a God (traditionally conceived), then, plausibly, we wouldn’t expect there to be genuinely pointless suffering. But it sure looks like there *are* instances of genuinely pointless suffering in our world, so that seems to give us a reason to doubt that there is a God (so conceived). To be sure, an instance of suffering might *appear* pointless without necessarily *being* pointless, but we might plausibly expect that if something appears pointless that that gives us some evidence for thinking that it *is* pointless; but as such, if we have some evidence for thinking that target suffering *is* pointless, then surely that gives us some evidence against traditional brands of theism.

While such arguments have been enormously influential within the contemporary philosophical literature—William Rowe’s 1979 formulation in “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism” being the most seminal—no academic research has explored what cognitive mechanisms might underwrite the appearance of pointlessness in target examples of suffering.² Does our inability to see a point to suffering really give us evidence for thinking that there is no point?³ Or might the appearances of pointlessness be underwritten by cognitive mechanisms that are far more subjective and ethereal than we might have previously expected?⁴ In this exploratory paper, we show that the perception of pointlessness in the target examples of suffering that underwrite Rowe’s seminal formulation of the problem of evil is contingent on the absence of broader context. In other words, we show that when such suffering is presented alongside broader contextual

¹ From the preface to Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1985, 11).

² Rowe’s argument was, of course, developed further in later work—see for example, Rowe, 1996—but we’re not suggesting that this article is the final word on the problem of evil. Instead, we’re taking this formulation to be one of the most seminal and the most influential variations of the problem in the academic literature, which it surely is.

³ For more on this question, see Plantinga (2000, 465–469).

⁴ For more on how empirical research might be applied to the problem of evil, see Church, Carlson, and Barrett (2020).

information, the appearance of pointlessness, on average, significantly diminishes. In §1 we briefly elucidate Rowe's formulation of the problem of evil and the thought experiment that motivates a key premise. In §2 and §3 respectively, we briefly explain our hypothesis regarding Rowe's case and our methods for testing these hypotheses. In §4, we elucidate our results, and in §5 we explore some of the philosophical implications of our findings and gesture towards some areas for future research. Finally, in §6, we briefly connect our research to some of the established philosophical literature on suffering and narrative before concluding.

2. Rowe's Formulation of the Problem of Evil

In William Rowe's seminal version of the problem of evil, he levels the following argument against theism:

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. [Therefore,] there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. (1979, 336)

Like Rowe, let's use the following shorthand when discussing this argument: an instance of suffering is *pointless* if allowing it to happen doesn't either afford some greater good or prevent some other evil equally bad or worse. And let's just assume that God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. With this in mind, we can roughly rephrase the argument like this:

4. There exists pointless suffering.
5. If there is a God, then there won't be pointless suffering.
6. Therefore, there is no God.

Of course, given that such an argument is valid, if the premises are true then the conclusion must be true. But why should we think that the premises are true? Premise 2 (or 5) seems fairly unobjectionable, indeed, as Rowe notes, "This premise (or something not too distant from it) is, I think, held in common by many atheists and nontheists" (1979, 336). And while Rowe gives some good reasons to think that

something like premise 2 (or 5) is true, we don't need to worry about this too much here; for this paper, our focus will be on premise 1 (or premise 4).

So why should we think, as premise 1 states, that there "exists 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"? Here Rowe has us think about an example of what seems like a good candidate for a pointless evil, in the form of a brief vignette:

FAWN: Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. (1979, 337)

According to Rowe, "so far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless" (1979, 337). While an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good being certainly could have prevented such an event, it's extremely difficult to imagine how permitting something like the suffering of FAWN could either prevent a greater evil from occurring or might usher in some greater good. As such, premise 1 looks plausible.

But, as Rowe is quick to note, this doesn't amount to a proof. For all we can tell, there *is* a greater evil that allowing FAWN prevents or perhaps there *is* a greater good that allowing FAWN affords. The problem, as Rowe sees it, is that given "*our* experience and knowledge of the variety and profusion of suffering in our world" it sure seems like evils like those manifest in FAWN are wholly avoidable and more or less pointless; and while the above argument doesn't amount to a proof, it does, according to Rowe, provide "rational support for atheism, that it is reasonable for us to believe that the theistic God does not exist" (1979, 338, emphasis ours).⁵

Critically, it's our intuitions regarding cases like FAWN that are the driving force for thinking that premise 1 (4) is true.⁶ As Alvin Plantinga elucidates Rowe's argument in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), if it *seems* as though the suffering in cases like FAWN are pointless, then that gives us a reason for thinking that the suffering in cases like FAWN *are* pointless; and insofar as we have evidence for thinking that the suffering in cases like FAWN are pointless, then that will give us evidence against theism (given Rowe's argument; 465–466). As such, if we don't think that the suffering in cases like FAWN are pointless, contrary to Rowe, then the evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1 (4) is true greatly diminishes. And if our

⁵ That said, it is somewhat unclear precisely how much evidential weight Rowe ascribes to his argument. For a fuller consideration of the array of possible interpretations, see Wykstra (1996).

⁶ That's not to say that everything hangs on the FAWN case in particular, but that FAWN can serve as an archetypal case of purportedly pointless suffering.

evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1 (4) is greatly diminished, then, as Rowe rightly acknowledges, the evidence the argument generates against theism greatly diminishes too.

3. Hypothesis

We predicted that the way the target example of suffering (FAWN) is presented—namely, in a brief vignette—would have a significant impact on perception of pointlessness. In other words, we predicted that manipulating the *context* (high vs. low) of Rowe’s FAWN vignette will have a significant effect on the participant’s level of agreement with Rowe’s conclusion that the suffering is pointless and no greater evil is prevented and no greater good is accomplished. *Specifically, it is hypothesized that the high context group will show less agreement with Rowe in comparison to the control group.*

We also tested a range of ancillary hypotheses aimed at exploring how agreement with Rowe’s intuitions might vary across demographics and what factors are contributing to the target philosophical intuitions (e.g. the cuteness of the animal, the inclusion of a picture of the animal). For the purposes of this paper, however, we won’t focus on these results; we only mention these ancillary hypotheses to help explain our experiment design.

4. Methodology

To investigate these questions, we developed an experimental study with a 2x2x3 between-subjects factorial design. 1,506 participants were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk online workforce. After completing an informed consent form, participants provided demographic information including: age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, nationality, income, and education level. Participants then read Rowe’s vignette of the fawn from the 1979 paper. Participants were presented with the vignette in one of several manners. To half of the participants the vignette was accompanied by a description of the role of wildfires in a forest ecosystem to provide context to the suffering. This description, approximately a paragraph in length, discussed the role occasional, small forest fires have in the health of the ecosystem by clearing away dead organic material and helping the forest recovery by leaving behind a topsoil dense in organic materials.⁷ The other half of the participants read

⁷ The high context paragraph read as follows:

the vignette without context, just as it appeared in Rowe's 1979 paper. The subject of the vignette varied as either a fawn, a boar, or a vulture. Finally, in half of the cases a picture of the subject of the vignette accompanied the vignette. Thus, this experiment contained three variables: context (high or low), picture (picture or no picture), and animal (fawn, boar, or vulture).

After reading the vignette, participants rated several statements designed to assess their degree of agreement or disagreement with Rowe's intuition that the suffering described in the vignette is pointless. These statements read, "The story you just read is an example of pointless suffering," "Some equal or greater evil could have been prevented because of the situation in the story," and "Some equal or greater good could be accomplished because of the situation in the story." Participants responded on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1, Strongly Disagree to 7, strongly agree. We initially intended to measure the degree to which participants shared Rowe's intuitions through an index compiled of the score of these three statements, however, we found that whereas scores of the last two questions were highly correlated ($r = .478, p < 0.01$) the first question was not highly correlated in the expected direction with the last two questions ($r = .071, p < 0.01$ and

Forest fires are often viewed as some of the most dangerous and destructive natural disasters. While some fires of catastrophic size can be detrimental to forests and endanger human lives and infrastructure, smaller forest fires are actually an essential aspect of the forest ecosystem. It may seem counterintuitive that fires could be beneficial to the life of a forest, however, recent ecological research has shown that small burns play a major role in the health of an ecosystem as a whole. Fires, often resulting from lightning strikes, quickly and efficiently clear away thick undergrowth, dying trees, and the dead material that congregates on the forest floor. If left unchecked, dead organic material and undergrowth will prevent new trees and plants from taking root and being able to grow. The burnt organic material such as plants, shrubs, and animals, leave behind topsoil that is rich in nutrients from which new plant life can easily grow. Small forest fires also play an important role in preventing fires from reaching catastrophic sizes. When a fire is small, it is usually confined to burning the undergrowth and dead material on the forest floor and does not burn the tree canopy or kill the large trees of the forest. However, if a forest goes too long without a fire, the undergrowth will become so thick that when it does burn it will easily ignite not only the forest floor but also the trees themselves. Many experts attribute the record-setting fires that have been seen in recent years to decades of fire suppression in forests, which has left entire ecosystems vulnerable to catastrophic fires. Many species of plants have adapted to occasional fires and can quickly regrow burnt branches. Some trees even need fire to reproduce due to seed-cones that will only open when exposed to extreme temperature. Now, suppose in a distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a wild [Insert Animal Here] is trapped, horribly burned, lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

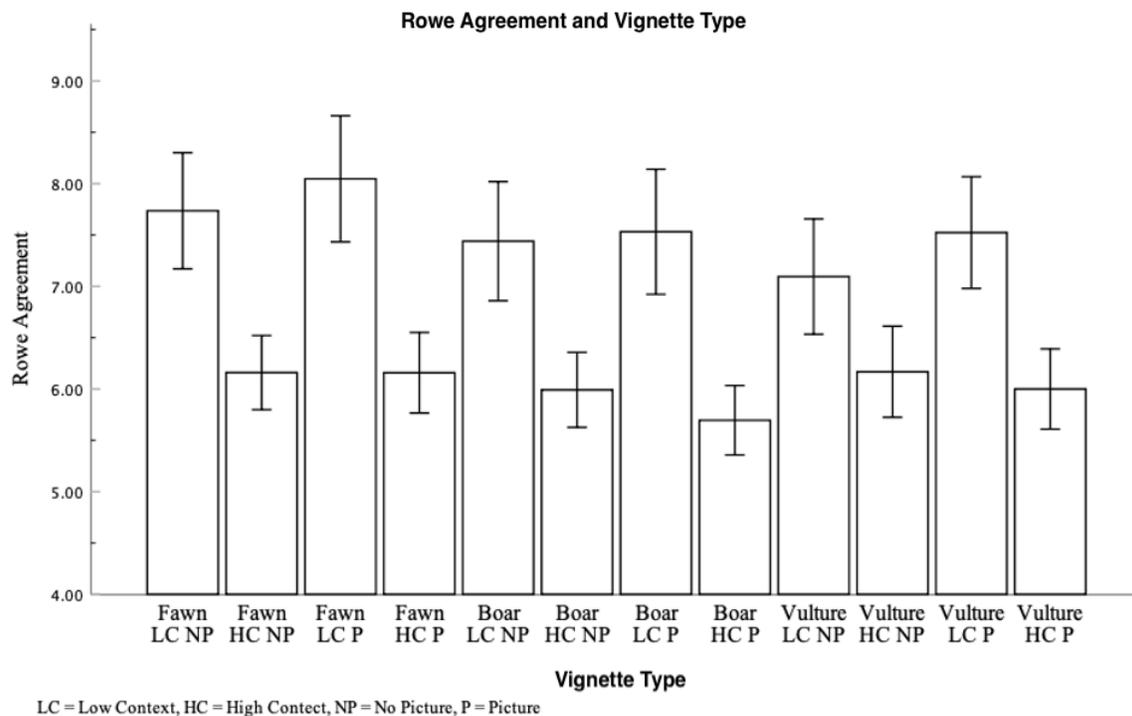
$r = -.171, , p < 0.01$). Therefore, we measured agreement with Rowe through an index of the reverse scored second and third questions.⁸ Finally, the participants answered questions about their intuitions concerning pointlessness and suffering more broadly and about how often the butchered or killed animals for food.

5. Results

Demographics: After excluding participants who failed attention checks, rushed through the survey (in under 90 seconds), or abandoned the survey (left more than 10% of the survey incomplete), we had a sample size of $n = 1,506$. Of these 476 were female, 1,014 were male, 16 had another gender identity. The sample consisted of 846 White participants, 363 Asian participants, 146 Black or African American participants, 105 Hispanic participants, and 46 participants belonging to other ethnicities. 201 participants were agnostic, 161 atheist, 464 Catholic, 261 Hindu, 181 Protestant, 100 were another denomination of Christian, and 138 participants reported another religious affiliation. 4 participants had a 9th grade education or less, 117 participants had a high school education or G.E.D., 158 had some college or specialized training, 82 had associates degrees, 899 had Bachelor's degrees, 246 had a Master's degree or higher.

Experimental Results: A two way ANOVA (analysis of variance) examining the influence of three independent variables, animals on the dependent variable of agreement with Rowe was conducted and yielded significant results ($F(11) = 11.37, p < 0.001$). The main effects of the type of animal or the presence of a picture were not significant, however, the main effect of context was significant ($F(1) = 114.303, p < 0.001$). No interaction effects were statistically significant. A series of one-way ANOVAs were planned if the two-way ANOVA yielded significant results. Among these, two were significant, the comparison between the low context fawn group with no picture, and the high context fawn group with a picture ($t(221.20) = 4.535, p < 0.001$) as well as the comparison between the Fawn low context group with no picture and the fawn high context group with no picture ($t(210.52) = 4.659, p < 0.001$). Consider the following graph:

⁸ Given that Rowe uses "pointlessness" as a shorthand for not bringing about a greater good or preventing a greater evil, it makes sense to prioritize the second and third items on this index, given that the second and third items correlate with each other but not with the first item; however, that said, it's worth noting that using the three item index or the just first item would not radically change our results.



It is worth noting that in the above results, a score of 8 represents a midpoint of neither agreeing or disagreeing with Rowe. Anything above 8 (up to a maximum of 14) represents agreement with Rowe on average. Anything below 8 (to a minimum of 2) represents disagreement with Rowe on average. To be sure, as one referee noted, such a result should be viewed with a proverbial grain of salt; many of the theists (the vast majority of the participants) might be strongly motivated to disagree with Rowe's intuition at the outset, which might skew the average results.⁹ That said, given that studies have shown that nonreligious demographics are generally overrepresented in MTurk (see Lewis et al. 2015), the above results might actually be significantly elevated when compared to the general population. In any case, one of the most striking findings is just how little agreement there was with Rowe's intuitions regarding the target cases, *with or without broader context*.

6. Philosophical Implications and Future Research

As predicted, our empirical research has shown that the perception of pointlessness in Rowe's FAWN case seems highly contingent on the absence of broader context.

⁹ And Church, Warchol, and Barrett did indeed find significant variation in responses to Rowe's case according to subjects' reported religion.

In other words, when the When FAWN vignette is accompanied by a paragraph elucidating broader context—including information about forest fires, when and why they occur, etc.—the appearance of pointlessness, on average, *significantly* diminishes. Such a result might not seem that surprising. Of course an example of suffering will seem pointless in the absence of context—points are found in the context! Such a results might seem exactly right to theists and useful for defusing this seminal formulation of the problem of evil; however, more research is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions.

To be sure, on the one hand, such a result might raise some important questions about the ultimate success of Rowe’s seminal formulation of the problem of evil, since it *might* suggest that Rowe’s response to FAWN might be underwritten by cognitive mechanisms/influences that are not as objective as we might have previously hoped.¹⁰ What is more, given that the inclusion of context significantly diminishes the appearance of pointlessness, we might think that such a result would reduce our confidence that intuitions regarding a contextless FAWN should be theory-guiding. Insofar as we have no reason to think that we should champion intuitions regarding contextless cases, the theoretical import of Rowe’s intuition regarding the FAWN case would be significantly undermined. Given such a conclusion, the amount of evidence afforded by such an intuition would also be significantly diminished. And if our evidence in favor of thinking that FAWN is truly an example of pointless suffering is significantly diminished, then, as we noted in §1, our central evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1(4) is true would likewise be significantly diminished. And, again, if our evidence in favor of thinking that premise 1(4) is greatly diminished, then the evidence the argument generates against theism would greatly diminish too.

On the other hand, however (as both referees rightly pointed out), we might legitimately worry that the selected “context” (see footnote 7) effectively sneaks in a theodicy—effectively nudging participants away from Rowe’s conclusion. Maybe the context we provided was too positively value laden, and maybe the observed effect would diminish with neutral or even negative context. Similarly, we’ll need to explore what kinds of context are most salient for diminishing the perception of pointlessness. Does context from a proverbial God’s eye or “cosmic” perspective—perhaps suggesting that there’s more to the world than our limited impressions—have a particularly significant impact on reducing the appearance of pointlessness? Or is context of a more “terrestrial” sort every bit as impactful? What about context

¹⁰ Indeed, drawing from additional empirical resources, this is precisely the point that Church, Warchol, and Barrett argue for in, “Pointless Suffering? The Problem of Evil and Experimental Philosophy of Religion.”

that simply highlights all of what we don't know about the situation (as a nod to the skeptical theist)? Along all of these lines, more research is needed.

Additionally, we might have good reason to doubt that intuitions afforded by examples of suffering that include broader context are ultimately veritic; as such, Rowe's argument might not be threatened by the shift in intuitions between cases with context and those without context. Humans seem to be strongly inclined to find patterns in nature, even when no such patterns exist—this is the well-documented phenomenon called *pareidolia*. Perhaps, then, the decrease in perceived pointlessness in cases that are accompanied by context is attributable to people finding “points” or patterns when there are none. Perhaps Rowe's FAWN vignette is intuitively such a powerful example of pointless suffering *because* it doesn't provide much by way of background information or context. Sure as more context is provided—as we talked about the health of forest ecosystems, how occasional, small forest fires often promote a healthier ecosystem by burning the underbrush and delivering nutrients to the soil, how many people groups around the world have used controlled burns to replenish forests for millennia, etc.—then Rowe's FAWN does not seem nearly as pointless to lots of people (as we saw above). But a defender of Rowe might argue that that's *not* because the broader context provided the explanation or the “point” to the suffering; instead, they might argue that the broader context provides the necessary resources *pareidolia* needs to (mistakenly) find patterns and explanations to provide the illusion of a “point” to the suffering.¹¹ If you give people “junk” context that clearly has nothing to do with the target suffering, will we *still* see a marked decrease in perceived pointlessness—perhaps signaling that people are just prone to imagining a point whenever there's a sufficient amount of context (even if that context is irrelevant to the suffering)?

7. Context and Narrative

Interestingly, the importance of context for the problem of evil dovetails nicely with Eleonore Stump's seminal work on the role narrative can play in shaping our knowledge of God and our experience of suffering. In Eleonore Stump's landmark work *Wandering in Darkness* (2012) and her article “The Problem of Evil: Analytic Philosophy and Narrative” (2011), she argues that narrative has an essential role to play in our understanding of the problem of evil. She's critical of overly narrow

¹¹ Alternatively, maybe the contexts simply distract participants from the target suffering. As one referee noted, maybe it's not so much that subjects are finding patterns where there aren't any, maybe it has more to do with swamping participants with information that keeps them from focusing on the suffering in the right way. This is another possibility that further research will need to explore.

conceptions of analytic philosophy—which has, by Stump’s lights, over-emphasized knowledge that can be expressed in terms of propositional content—and she suggests that narrative in particular can be extremely useful for revealing and developing important philosophical insights. In particular, Stump argues that narrative can help us grow in our knowledge of persons in a way that formal discursive writing never could. This puts her view in sharp contrast to Rowe’s two-sentence vignette.

And while we won’t have time to seriously engage with her view here, it’s worth noting that it certainly seems plausible. As Roald Dahl aptly put it, when describing his character Matilda in the book *Matilda* (originally published in 1988) as a voracious reader:

The books transported [Matilda] into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.” (2016 edition, 15)

This knowledge of persons via narrative is important, according to Stump, because it is through narrative—and not just discursive theological or philosophical writing—that we can have knowledge of God, in particular, knowledge of God in God’s personhood.

According to Stump, we can become more or less adroit at reading and engaging with narratives, we can be better or worse at gaining personal knowledge (that is, knowledge of persons) via narrative. As Stump explains,

How much of what can be known in a second-person experience is made available to others to learn by means of a story depends in part on the artistry of the storyteller. Harlequin romances no doubt give us something; the world’s great literature, drama, and film give us much more. It is, of course, clear that the degree of transmission of knowledge through stories is also a function of the sensitivity of the story reader (or listener or watcher). Some people are more natively gifted than others in their ability to learn from second-person experiences and from narratives. Furthermore, sensitivity of this sort, like perceptual sensitivity, can be trained. The ability to hear a key change in a piece of music is a function not just of native aural acuity but also of musical training. An untrained ear will take in the sounds of Lutoslawski’s Cello Concerto but not hear it. In the same way, native sensibility and training each make a difference to one’s ability to understand and learn from narratives. (2011, 259–60)

If we never engage with great narratives of second-person experiences—in particular, perhaps, great literature that engages the evil that so frequently permeates the human experience—then, on this view, we will be intellectually and perhaps even emotionally impoverished when we experience evil and suffering in our own lives. As Stump notes, “The Book of Job is commonly taken by theologians and philosophers as having the problem of evil as its central concern.” However, (and this is particularly telling) the answer given to the problem of evil in the Book of Job—if you can call it an answer—is notoriously unsatisfying if you’re looking for a response you can easily express in propositional terms or formalize into refutation to the problem of evil as expressed in the contemporary academic literature (2011, 258). That’s not what the Book of Job is meant to give us. As Stump rightly notices, the Book of Job “concludes with the lengthiest face-to-face discourse between God and a human being anywhere in the biblical texts” (2011, 258). As such, she notes that “One way to read the book, then, is to see it as recommending second-person experience as a solution to the problem of evil. On this way of understanding the book, knowledge of a person is also an efficacious way to satisfy the desire to know generated by reflection on suffering” (2011, 258).

This is a revolutionary idea. And while her appeals to narrative are far more nuanced than simply providing more context (as we tried to do in our study), it’s worth noting that Stump’s proposal raises some extremely interesting empirical questions that might build off of our findings. For example, does one’s exposure (or lack thereof) to great literature, or narratives of second-person experiences that wrestle with the problem of evil, provide requisite context for suffering such that it affects how someone understands and perceives the evils they experience in this world. Will someone who has read, say, *The Book of Job*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Moby Dick*, *Paradise Lost*, or William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* process evil and the challenges it poses differently from someone, say, who’s cognitive and contextual resources for thinking about evil primarily came from watching cable news and sitcoms on television. Maybe so. Plausibly, the person who has wrestled with these great works of literature, these great narratives, might be able to imagine that there could be reasons for the evil (or context for the suffering) they experience that are beyond their cognitive reach, or maybe they’ll be able to better imagine how the evil they experience is, in many ways, bigger than themselves. In contrast, however, we might plausibly think that an individual whose conceptual resources for addressing evil were primarily shaped by the narratives afforded by aspirational television, say, will see the evils they experience as more outrageous and unconscionable. Perhaps the relevance of context for suffering extends beyond a

particular vignette; perhaps our ability to see a point to suffering will be provided by the context of one's life, by the contextual richness afforded by narrative from both personal and second-person experiences. This raises additional empirical questions that are certainly worth exploring. Indeed, given that the rise in prominence of the problem of evil within academic literature corresponds with deteriorating engagement with literature and the advent of mass entertainment, such a project could even plausibly explain why the problem of evil rose to prominence when it did.

Alternatively, perhaps the rise in prominence of the problem of evil doesn't have anything to do with the advent of mass entertainment, but everything to do with the rise in broad, scientific literacy, or perhaps the proliferation of robust narratives that are less friendly to theism. Charles Darwin's theorizing—telling a new, scientific “story” about the how the diverse array of life we find in the world came to be—seems to lead some people *away* from theistic ways of thinking about evil, because it provided alternative, non-theistic ways of thinking about the apparent order and purpose that people commonly perceive in the natural world. Looking back to a point we made in section 5, what if we provided people with narratives and context that are less friendly to theism (or at least not pro-theism)? Would such context/narratives still reduce the perception of pointlessness? Or might it have the opposite effect? Again, more research is needed.

Relatedly, psychological research has shown that people have strong, natural predilections to view the world as value-laden and full of purpose.¹² At a very early age, children seem drawn to teleological explanations for features of the world. “Why are the rocks pointy? So that animals won't sit on them and smash them!” These teleological explanations are often unreliable, and scientists have to learn how to resist giving teleological explanations in their attempts to better understand the causal nature of the world.¹³ As such, we might wonder if any divergence in intuitions regarding the problem of evil can be at least partially explained in terms of people reverting back to a value-laden, teleological picture of the world as they seek to explain the suffering and evil we find in the world; perhaps scientific training (or scientific narratives) affords people with a more unflinching “context” on the situation and a more sober explanation of the variety of evil and suffering we observe. Again, further empirical research is needed.

¹² See Rose & Schaffer (2017) and Rose & Nichols (2020).

¹³ It is worth noting, however, that even trained scientists will revert to giving teleological explanations when under pressure. See, for example, see Kelemen, Rottman, and Seston (2013).

8. Conclusion

In this exploratory paper, we considered one of the most seminal formulations of the problem of evil within the contemporary philosophical literature—William Rowe’s 1979 formulation in “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism”—and reflected on what cognitive mechanisms might underwrite the appearance of pointlessness in target examples of suffering. We showed that the perception of pointlessness in the target example of suffering that underwrites Rowe’s seminal formulation of the problem of evil seems to be contingent on the absence of broader context. In other words, we showed that should such suffering be presented alongside some broader contextual information, the appearance of pointlessness, on average, seems to significantly diminish. In §1 we briefly elucidated Rowe’s formulation of the problem of evil. In §2 and §3, we briefly explained our hypothesis regarding Rowe’s case and our methods for testing these hypotheses. In §4, we elucidated our results, and in §5 we explored some of the philosophical implications of our findings and gestured towards some areas for future research. Finally, in §6, we briefly connect our research to some of the established philosophical literature on suffering and narrative.

The evidential problem of evil is frequently cited as *the* most serious challenge facing theism in the contemporary philosophical literature. What we’re beginning to see, however, is that it’s not a purely philosophical problem; there are empirical questions that surround the problem of evil that must be addressed. Suffering that is perceived to be pointless is often seen as providing an evidential challenge for theism; however, as our research has shown, the perception of the suffering as pointless seems to be highly contingent upon whether or not the target example of suffering is accompanied with broader context—cases of suffering without context being more likely to be seen as “pointless” than cases that include some background context. Though the ramifications of such a finding are far-reaching, further research is needed before we can determine what final conclusions to draw. As we noted, such a result could significantly undermine Rowe’s seminal formulation of the problem of evil; perhaps the only reason Rowe’s thought experiment seems like a quintessential example of pointless suffering is because it is contextless, perhaps the “points” are found in the context. That said, such a result might also force us to inquire further into *why* context plays such a profound role in the appearance of pointlessness; is it because “points” are genuinely found in the context or is it only because humans are wired to find explanations and causal connections and, if given enough context, will imagine a connection or a “point” even when one isn’t there?

This paper has taken an important step in paving the way into these new areas of research.

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