

The Common Sense Problem of Evil: Experiencing Evils as Gratuitous Even If They Aren't

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The Common Sense Problem of Evil (CSPoE) is just the evidential argument against God's existence except that the premise that a certain kind of evil has occurred (e.g. gratuitous evil) is alleged to be non-inferentially justified.¹ In Tweedt (2015), I argued that for a subject's belief that there is gratuitous evil to receive epistemic support from an experience of poignant evil, a support fact that links the experience to the belief must obtain, and in the CSPoE this support fact does not obtain. I called this support fact "Reformulated CORNEA." To show that Reformulated CORNEA doesn't obtain, I maintained that the subject's experiences of poignant evil would be just as likely if the evils in the world weren't gratuitous as it would be if they were. To defend this claim, I gestured toward Skeptical Theists' general statements about our cognitive limitations without providing my own justification for the claim. Further, in response to Tweedt (2015), Gellman (2017) proposes a new version of the CSPoE in which some experiences of evil are embedded with a feature called "irredeemability" such that no good or reason could possibly make that evil allowable. In this article, I defend the claim that Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain in formulations of the CSPoE, even in Gellman's revised version of the CSPoE.

To show that Reformulated CORNEA doesn't obtain, in Section 1 I set the stage by describing the CSPoE and the support fact, Reformulated CORNEA, that would need to obtain for the CSPoE to succeed. In Section 2, I make the argument that Reformulated CORNEA doesn't obtain in typical formulations of the CSPoE. Finally, in Section 3, I show that Reformulated CORNEA doesn't obtain even in Gellman's revised version of the CSPoE.

1. CSPoE and Reformulated CORNEA

The Evidential Problem of Evil, as formulated by Rowe (1979), (2006) contains the premise that there is gratuitous evil—evil that, I assume here, God is not morally justified in allowing—and this premise is justified on the basis of an inference from the premise that we do not know of any reasons that would justify God's allowance of that evil. This inference has been called the "Noseum" inference, and it has famously been challenged by Skeptical Theists.² One Skeptical Theist attempt to challenge this inference uses a principle, CORNEA, which provides a necessary condition on when Noseum inferences justify their respective conclusions.³ These Skeptical Theists then show why CORNEA does not obtain in Rowe's formulation of the Problem of Evil.

CORNEA is designed for inferences. It provides a necessary condition on certain kinds of inferences, and its failure to obtain blocks justification that the inference would otherwise

¹ The Evidential Argument against God's existence is an argument from a premise that a certain kind of evil (e.g. gratuitous evil) has occurred to the conclusion that God doesn't exist.

² See, e.g., Wykstra (1996).

³ For formulations of CORNEA and the work it does, see Wykstra (1984), (2007), Wykstra and Perrine (2012).

provide. So, one way to try to ensure that CORNEA's not obtaining doesn't block justification for the premise that there is gratuitous evil is to deny that the premise is inferentially justified. To use a metaphor, when there's inferential justification for the premise that there's gratuitous evil, there's a gap between the alleged justifier (the premise that we do not know of any reasons that would justify God's allowance of an evil) and the target belief (that there is gratuitous evil). The gap is bridged by CORNEA, and CORNEA's not obtaining blocks one from epistemically crossing this gap. This inferential gap can be eliminated by denying that there's an inference to the target belief, thus removing the need for CORNEA to bridge the gap and thus preventing CORNEA's not obtaining from doing any justification-blocking work.

The evidential argument against God's existence that contains this inference-removing move is the CSPoE. Advocates of the CSPoE maintain that a subject has an experience of poignant evil and, without any inference, the subject justifiably believes, or has a reason for believing, there is gratuitous evil.⁴ The experience itself provides non-inferential *prima facie* justification (or a *pro tanto* reason) for the belief that there is gratuitous evil.⁵

I argued in Tweedt (2015) that this inference-denying move does not do the work it's intended to do. Even if the alleged justification for the premise that there is gratuitous evil is non-inferential, there's still a difference between the alleged justifier (the experience or seeming of poignant evil, henceforth just "justifier") and the belief that there is gratuitous evil. As long as there's a difference between the justifier and the target belief, there's a need for something *like* CORNEA to connect the justifier and the target belief. And if something like CORNEA is needed to connect the justifier and the target belief, that connection can be severed if the CORNEA-like principle doesn't obtain, thus blocking justification that the justifier would provide for the target belief. What was needed was to demonstrate that there is, in fact, still a gap, even if narrowed, between the justifier and the target belief, that a reformulated version of CORNEA could bridge this gap, and its failure to obtain prevents even non-inferential justification for the belief that there is gratuitous evil.

In Tweedt (2015), I modeled the gap between the justifier and the target belief by describing how the proponent of the commonsense problem of evil wants to claim that

E: one's experience or seeming of a poignant evil,

provides *prima facie* justification or a *pro tanto* reason for the belief that

H: there is gratuitous evil.⁶

I argued that not every new experience supports a hypothesis or belief. For a new experience to provide epistemic support for one's belief in a hypothesis, even if that support would be non-inferential, a support fact must obtain. The support fact links the experience and the belief—it

⁴ For defenses of the CSPoE, see Dougherty (2008), Gellman (1992), and Draper (1991).

⁵ If a belief has *prima facie* justification, it is justified but there is, in principle, information I could attain that would make it so that the belief is no longer justified. A belief has a *pro tanto* reason if there is a reason in favor of that belief.

⁶ Tweedt (2015), 397.

bridges the non-inferential gap, as it were—and without the link, the experience does not support the belief.

I then showed that CORNEA was meant to provide such a link, and I reformulated it to bridge even the non-inferential gap between some new experience or evidence and a hypothesis. The reformulation is as follows:

(Reformulated CORNEA) Evidence E that is new to S (incrementally) supports hypothesis H only if it is the case that if H were false, E would more likely be different.⁷

Reformulated CORNEA is not new; it's essentially a Bayesian principle. According to Reformulated CORNEA, new experience or evidence E incrementally confirms H only if $P(E | H) > P(E | \sim H)$. In English, if E is just as likely or more likely on not-H as on H, then E does not even incrementally confirm H. So, to incrementally confirm H, E has to be more likely different on not-H than it is on H.⁸ And if E doesn't even incrementally confirm H, then E doesn't provide epistemic support for H—it doesn't provide *prima facie* justification or a *pro tanto* reason for the belief that H.

Let's now apply Reformulated CORNEA to the CSPoE. Assuming that there are evils in the world (as I do throughout this article), for the experience or seeming of poignant evil to support the belief that there is gratuitous evil, it must be more likely that we would have that same kind of experience if the evils were gratuitous than if the evils were not gratuitous. If we would be just as likely (or more likely) to have the same kind of poignant evil experiences even if the evils were not gratuitous, then our experience does not support the belief that there is gratuitous evil. Of course, we need not be aware of this support fact or whether it obtains when we form a belief on the basis of an experience; the support fact is external, but this does not count against its work in determining whether the belief is supported by the new experience.⁹

In Tweedt (2015), I did not provide any of my own justification for the position that Reformulated CORNEA doesn't obtain in formulations of the CSPoE. To show that we would just as likely have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences we now have if the evils were not gratuitous, I gestured toward Skeptical Theists' general statements about our cognitive limitations:

To skeptical theists in general, we are “in the dark”¹⁰ about God's reasons for allowing poignant evil, the relations between various goods and evils, and so on;¹¹ God's purposes for goods are “beyond our ken.”¹² So even if God had good reasons for allowing the evil that there is in the world so that the evils in the world aren't gratuitous, it's not reasonable for us to believe that likely we wouldn't have the experience of the poignant evil we in fact

⁷ Tweedt (2015), 401. Note that calling an experience “evidence” is not meant to imply that the evidence provides epistemic support. “Evidence” is simply a label to describe some information that allegedly supports a hypothesis.

⁸ Tweedt 2015, 402.

⁹ As described in Tweedt (2015), Comesana (2005) describes support facts as external, and Wykstra endorses external parts to his original CORNEA (Wykstra and Perrine 2012).

¹⁰ See Bergmann (2001), 289, 291, and throughout Bergmann (2008).

¹¹ See Bergmann (2008), (2011) for a list of the relevant areas about which we're ignorant, which he numbers ST1—ST4.

¹² E.g. Wykstra (1996), 139. Wykstra gives reasons for this view in Russell and Wykstra (1988) and Wykstra (1996).

have. So even if there weren't any gratuitous evil, we would be just as likely to have the same experiences of poignant evil.¹³

In this article, I aim to complete the work that was unfinished in Tweedt (2015). In what follows, I provide my own reasons in defense of the claim that whether or not there is gratuitous evil, we would still have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences. Further, Gellman has aimed to reignite the CSPoE by maintaining that the irredeemability of an evil is embedded in the experience of evil itself. I need to show that my reasoning defuses even this new version of the CSPoE.

2. Reformulated CORNEA Does Not Obtain in the CSPoE

I do not argue that if the evils in this world were not gratuitous, then we would *more* likely have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences we now have. Instead, I argue that, holding fixed that there are evils in the world, we would *just as likely* have the kinds of poignant evil experiences we now have if those evils were not gratuitous. My argument for this claim proceeds in two stages. First, I describe the mechanism articulated in Tweedt (2021)—perspectives—and second, I show how this mechanism can be used to show that we'd have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences even if no evils in the world are gratuitous.

Stage 1—The Mechanism: Perspectives

In Tweedt (2021), I differentiated between our evidence and what we make of that evidence.¹⁴ There's precedent for this distinction in the epistemology literature. For example, subjects with the same evidence could come to different conclusions based on their epistemic standards.¹⁵ Someone with looser standards might believe a proposition on the basis of the available evidence, whereas someone with more stringent standards might not believe the same proposition on the basis of the same evidence. For another example, subjects might have different prioritization of epistemic goals. Someone who prioritizes the goal to believe truths might believe a proposition on the basis of the available evidence, whereas someone who prioritizes the goal of avoiding falsehoods might not believe the same proposition on the basis of the same evidence.¹⁶ Even if there's only one correct epistemic standard and only one correct prioritization of epistemic goals, the point is that there is still a conceptual distinction between one's evidence and what one makes of it.

In that article, I applied this framework to distinguish between our experiences and what we make of them. I provided an alternative way of making something of our experiences: taking a perspective on those experiences.¹⁷ In many cases, our experiences are interpreted via a

¹³ Tweedt (2015), 400.

¹⁴ This language follows Kvanvig (2011).

¹⁵ See Schoenfeld (2014) for this view.

¹⁶ See Kelly (2013) for this view.

¹⁷ The view presented here is distinct from the "Perspectival Skeptical Theism" proposed by Rutledge (2019). Rutledge's position differs from the one here in that Rutledge does not give an account of what perspectives are, requires that the subject calls his self-trust into question, and assumes that the belief that there is gratuitous evil is epistemically justified on the basis of a poignant evil experience absent a defeater.

perspective, even if we do not choose that perspective, do not intend to take a perspective on the evidence, and are unaware that we are taking a perspective on our experiences.¹⁸ Below are three examples of kinds of perspectives we could take and how these perspectives make a difference to what we believe about those experiences.

Example 1, Story Telling: We take perspectives on events on the basis of what we take the point of a story that involves those events to be. For example, suppose I've had a life in which I've had multiple jobs, each one ending with a layoff. I could tell the story of my life experiences in a way that emphasizes my ability to bounce back and find employment, or I could tell the story in a way that emphasizes my continued failure to maintain longtime employment. The difference is in what I perceive the point of the story to be, where the story emphasizes that point. This point affects my perspective, and the perspective affects what we make of the events interpreted by it, even if I am unaware of my perspective, and even if I am unaware that I have a perspective. This perspective is revealed in some interactions we could have with others. For example, if I were to tell the story emphasizing my failures and you retorted that I bounced back each time, I might reveal my perspective by dismissing your suggestion—after all, your emphasis tells a different story, and it de-emphasizes the point I had tried to make.

To apply this kind of perspective to our poignant evil experiences, if I were to tell the story of the world in which there are many evils and many good things, I might tell the story in such a way that I emphasize God's redemption of, triumphs over, and limitations of the amounts of evil, or I might tell the story in a way that emphasizes the suffering, death, and proliferation of tragedy in the world. The way that we tell the story of the world reveals a perspective that has a point, even if we are unaware of our perspective or the point that affects that perspective. This perspective could be revealed in our interactions. For example, if someone were to tell the story of the world emphasizing suffering, death, and tragedy and one were to retort that the suffering is just part of a redemptive, triumphal story, or that the evil could be much worse but God is limiting it, that retort might be dismissed, because it tells a different story, which reveals one's perspective. Even if each person has the same experiences, each person, on the basis of what they take to be the point of those experiences or the larger story of which they are a part, might make something different of those experiences, and they might be unaware they are doing so.

Example 2, Optimism/Pessimism: Our optimism or pessimism are characterized by different perspectives. For example, an optimist—someone who tends to “look on the bright side” and who is comfortable with risk—might think a risky career path is worth pursuing by assigning a high value to the upsides and a high disvalue to the risk involved. Again, one might assign these values immediately and without awareness either that one is doing so or that those values are determined by one's perspective. However, a pessimist—someone who tends to “dwell on the negative” and who is risk averse—might think the same risky career path is not worth pursuing by assigning a lower value to the upsides and a high disvalue to the risk involved. Given the same data about the career path, people with different perspectives assign different values, so make something different of their imagined new career path, thus arriving at different beliefs about the same experience.

¹⁸ The position described here requires only that we interpret our experiences via perspectives to make value judgments about those experiences. It is a value judgment to conclude that an evil is gratuitous or irredeemable on the basis of an experience. See Tweedt (2021), 50.

Similarly, an optimist might take a world like ours to be worth allowing even if it involves the evils of which we are aware. Such a person might assign a high value to the good aspects of our world and a low disvalue to the suffering involved. The optimist might think the evils are opportunities for something better or the beginnings of a world that will improve. However, a pessimist might think the same world is not worth allowing, given that it involves the evils of which we are aware. That person might assign a lower value to the good aspects of our world and a high disvalue to the suffering involved. And one might do so unaware that one's resulting beliefs are the result of one's value assignments or that those assignments are comparatively low. As a result of the low value assignments, the pessimist might believe the evils could never be redeemed or that they definitely prove that a world containing those evils could never have been created by or allowed by a good God.

Example 3, Entitlement/No Benefit: The same event can be taken as a slight or merely as a situation in which no benefit is given.¹⁹ For example, suppose a corporation gives a boss the power to issue \$1,000 at his own discretion, and suppose the boss chooses to use the \$1,000 as follows: an employee receives \$1,000 from the boss if and only if the employee completes a project by a specified deadline. Suppose also that the employer does not complete the project by the deadline. The employee can take his failure to receive the \$1,000 as a slight or as simply not receiving a bonus. In fact, the way the \$1,000 is presented can affect how the employee perceives not receiving the money. As a slight: suppose the boss says, "The \$1,000 is yours unless you do not complete the project by the deadline, in which case it's no longer yours." When the employee does not complete the project on time, the employee might take the boss to be withholding what he took to be rightfully his own. And upon experiencing the failure to receive the \$1,000, the employee non-inferentially believes that he is wronged. Along similar lines, the employee can feel wronged by the fact that the boss is only giving the \$1,000 on the condition that the project is completed on time. The employee might form the following beliefs: *My boss could have just given me the \$1,000. I deserve it. My boss is slighting me by creating a condition for receiving it.*

Alternatively, the employee could take not receiving the \$1,000 as simply not receiving a benefit or bonus. Suppose the boss says, "If you complete the project on time, I'll give you a \$1,000 bonus, but you only get the bonus if you complete the project by the deadline. It is a bonus, after all." When the \$1,000 is taken as an entitlement and it is not given, as it is in the previous paragraph, not receiving the \$1,000 is taken as a slight, but when the \$1,000 is not taken as an entitlement and it is not given, as it is in this paragraph, not receiving the \$1,000 is not taken as a slight. Instead, it is taken as simply not receiving a bonus. The conditions for receiving the \$1,000 are the same. The difference in beliefs about the wrongness of not receiving the \$1,000 is due to whether one has a perspective according to which the \$1,000 is an entitlement or a perspective according to which the \$1,000 is just a bonus (and, of course, a boss' statement can affect an employee's perspective).

To apply this kind of perspective to poignant evil experiences: the absence of non-pained states, lack of safety, and/or not having a (sufficiently) long life can be taken as a slight or simply as a situation in which no benefit is given. One can take a poignant evil to be a slight by taking non-

¹⁹ This is a modification of the example given in Tweedt (2021), in which I distinguished Punishment and No Reward.

pained states, safety, or (sufficiently) long life to be an entitlement, where the absence of these is a slight by God, who, on the assumption of theism, has the power to provide such benefits. Alternatively, one can take a poignant evil as simply not having a benefit or bonus conferred by God. One could take the evil this way if one to take oneself not to be entitled to being in non-pained states, not to have safety, or not to have a (sufficiently) long life. According to this perspective, the goods in life are a bonus, not something to which we're entitled by God.

Readers might think some perspectives to be obviously correct and others to be obviously incorrect. The point here is not to make an assessment as to which perspectives are correct; the point is to show that there is a distinction between our experiences and what we make of them and that, due to our different perspectives, different people can make different things of their experiences and, as a result, form different beliefs about those experiences. The same experience can be taken by each person differently, and one reason for this is that we each have different perspectives, which affect what we make of those experiences.

Stage 2—The Perspectives Mechanism Applied to the CSPoE

I need to show in the rest of this section that we would just as likely have the kind of poignant evil experiences we now have if the evils in the world were not gratuitous. If I can show that, Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain in the CSPoE, because our poignant evil experiences do not epistemically support the belief that there is gratuitous evil.

Some of the perspectives described above are such that they would result in the same kinds of poignant evil experiences even if the evils in this world were not gratuitous. This is because our perspectives affect what we make of our experiences, and, because of these perspectives, we would make the evils in our poignant evil experiences out to be gratuitous even if they were not, in fact, gratuitous.

For example, let's use the Story Telling kind of perspective described above to articulate an evil-emphasizing perspective: I might tell a story of my life, another's life, or the world that emphasizes its badness due to my perspective, which takes suffering and tragedy to be the point of the story. If that's my perspective, I'll emphasize the badness of any poignant evil, gratuitous or not—such is, after all, the point of my story. When I do this, it's not as if I make an inference from the story to the emphasis on evil; I just emphasize the evil of my experience in light of my perspective. If someone tries to tell me about the positives that come from these evils or that the evils could have been much worse but are somehow limited, I might think that the objector is simply incorrect or perceiving incorrectly. If I am sufficiently reflective, however, I might think that the objector is downplaying my perspective; after all, the objection is telling a different story. With such a perspective, I am not in a position to experience poignant evils as non-gratuitous even if they are non-gratuitous. With such a perspective, when one develops the gratuitous-evil belief on the basis of a poignant evil experience, Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain.

In fact, the Framing Effect can affect our perspective as to whether we take goods or evils to be the point of our story of the world. The Problem of Evil literature is rife with this kind of framing.²⁰ In an effort to steelman the Problem of Evil, many academic works on the Problem of

²⁰ See also Tweedt (forthcoming) for this point.

Evil begin with a description of a poignant evil and then issue a challenge: try to explain how a good God could allow such an evil. These works do not begin with stories of the many good things in life (where these stories might also contain descriptions of evils). Even the history of the world is described as filled with suffering rather than as filled with life that flourishes into the present day. Pain is emphasized instead of the fact that we are provided with the physical conditions that would even permit us to experience the pain, and horrendous evils are described instead of the many things that do make life worth living. Of course, it is fitting and important to recognize evils and grieve them. However, if we make the badness of these evils the point of our stories in the context of the Problem of Evil and incorporate that into our perspective, we cannot expect our experiences to provide epistemic support for belief that there is gratuitous evil, given that Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain.

For another example, using the Optimism/Pessimism kind of perspective described above, if I assign a low value to the good aspects of our world and a high disvalue to the suffering involved, it will be difficult for me to think that this suffering can be redeemed, outweighed, or defeated by some good aspect of our world. Poignant evils will be experienced as so disvaluable that perhaps no good could make up for them, and, on the basis of this experience, I might form the belief that the poignant evil is gratuitous. I might have that experience even if there were a good that, on a higher valuation, would provide a reason for allowing the evil, were it assigned a lower disvalue. Given a pessimistic perspective, I might not be in a position to entertain an alternate valuation such that the poignant evil is non-gratuitous. With such a perspective and its resulting valuations, Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain when we develop the gratuitous-evil belief on the basis of a poignant evil experience; we would just as likely have the kinds of poignant evil experiences we now have if the evils were non-gratuitous.

For a last example, using the Entitlement/No Benefit kind of perspective described above, we might take an entitlement perspective. I could have a perspective according to which I am (and others are) entitled to non-pained states, safety, or a (sufficiently) long life were a theistic God to exist. If I have such a perspective, the absence of these states would seem to be a moral slight by God who, given theistic assumptions, could not (due to omni-benevolence) slight me by failing to give me that to which I am entitled. Even if it is in fact true that goods like non-pained states, safety, or a (sufficiently) long life are merely benefits provided to us by God and are thus not goods to which we are entitled by God, if I have an entitlement perspective, I might experience the absence of these goods, or poignant evils, as unjustified rights violations or moral slights. I might thus experience poignant evils as gratuitous even if they are not.

As long as a subject has a perspective described above—an evil-emphasizing, pessimistic, or entitlement perspective—that subject’s poignant evil experiences do not support the belief that those evils are gratuitous, because Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain. This is true even if one does not recognize whether one has such a perspective. From now on, I will call evil-emphasizing, pessimistic, and entitlement perspectives “negative” perspectives, for simplicity.

So far, I have argued that Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain if one has a negative perspective. The proponent of the CSPoE could object by denying that he has a negative perspective. Instead, he could maintain that he has a neutral (feel free to substitute ‘realistic,’ ‘unbiased,’ or ‘accurate’ for ‘neutral’) perspective from which he would not have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences were those evils non-gratuitous. It just happens that from this neutral

perspective, he does, in fact, believe there is gratuitous evil on the basis of a poignant evil experience.²¹ This objection involves reflection on one's perspective. It assumes that one can come to know that one does not have a negative perspective, and if one comes to know that one does not have a negative perspective, then poignant evil experiences can provide *prima facie* justification, or a *pro tanto* reason, for the belief that there is gratuitous evil.

In reply to this objection, let us first consider: could a subject do the kind of reflective work required to ensure that one's perspective is properly attuned to the gratuity, or lack thereof, of the evils in the world? The answer depends on what kind of perspective one is using to do the reflective work. If one has a negative perspective, it is unlikely that one could come to know that one has such a perspective by reflection alone. This is because when one has a negative perspective, the negative valuation of evils in the world are represented as neutral valuations. To realize that one does not have a negative perspective, one would need to acknowledge the difference between a neutral valuation of the evils in the world and the valuations that the subject himself assigns to those evils. If one has a negative perspective, one is unable to access this difference but will instead believe his valuations to be accurate or realistic, and, upon reflection, he will believe his accurate and realistic valuations to be the result of a neutral perspective. So, someone with a negative perspective who does reflective work to try to determine whether his perspective is neutral is thus very likely to come to the belief that he has a neutral perspective even though he doesn't.

In fact, a subject's reflection upon his negative perspective is likely to lead him to believe falsely that his perspective is neutral, because a negative perspective can initiate and perpetuate a spurious evidential feedback loop that increases the subject's confidence that he has a neutral perspective. Here's how: Suppose a subject with a negative perspective believes an evil to be gratuitous on the basis of a poignant evil experience. As the subject continues to form gratuitous-evil beliefs on the basis of poignant evil experiences, the gratuitous-evil beliefs seem even more justified—not only on the basis of the experience but also on the basis of induction (even if the subject is unaware he is performing the induction). The subject thinks previous poignant evil experiences have all been experiences of gratuitous evil, and on that basis the subject thinks he is reliable in forming gratuitous-evil beliefs on the basis of poignant evil beliefs. As a result, the subject believes he is even more justified in believing that the poignant evils of his experience are gratuitous. The subject's confidence can increase in this way even if all the instances of belief formation that are used for the inductive inference are unsupported by their respective experiences; they are unsupported because the subject would have those same kinds of poignant evil experiences even if the evils of those experiences are not gratuitous. The subject's increasing confidence is entirely unfounded, as is the subject's increased confidence that his perspective is neutral.

Of course, one can recognize that there are different, opposing perspectives. Someone who has a negative perspective could realize he does not have a "positive" perspective (a goods-emphasizing, optimistic, or no-benefit perspective) by contrasting the valuation of evils from

²¹ Alternatively, a proponent of the CSPoE could object by acknowledging that he has a negative perspective but affirm that if there were no gratuitous evil, he would not have such a perspective. So, the fact that he has a negative perspective is evidence that there is gratuitous evil. This objection is more difficult to maintain than the objection mentioned here, since it is difficult to establish why it would be true that if there were only non-gratuitous evil, then one would not have a negative perspective. For that reason, I do not address this objection in this article.

those perspectives with the valuations he assigns. However, nothing about this contrasting work supports the belief that one has a neutral perspective or that one's perspective is sufficiently far away from the negative perspectives described above to make it so that Reformulated CORNEA obtains when one forms a belief that the evils are gratuitous on the basis of a poignant evil experience.

Let us assume that the reply to the objection so far is correct: if a subject has a negative perspective, that subject is, on reflection, unable to come to know that he has such a perspective but is instead likely to believe his perspective to be neutral. However, it is also true that if a subject does *not* have a negative perspective and instead has a neutral perspective, the subject *is* able to come to know that he has a neutral perspective upon reflection. So, in order to determine whether the objector's belief that he does not have a negative perspective is justified, we need to figure out the prior probability that the subject has a negative perspective. If that prior probability is high, then the objector's belief that he does not have a negative perspective lacks epistemic justification—there's not enough evidence for the subject to justifiably believe that his perspective is the neutral one, so not enough evidence that he is correct about not having a negative perspective.

What, then, is the prior probability that a proponent of the CSPoE has a negative perspective, even despite the subject's belief to the contrary? We have two reasons to think this probability is high. First, we would expect that someone with a negative perspective would, on the basis of a poignant evil experience, believe that such an evil is gratuitous. The probability of forming that kind of belief on the basis of one's experience alone is much higher if one has a negative perspective than if one has a non-negative perspective. One's gratuitous-evil belief formation on the basis of a poignant evil experience is thus evidence that one has a negative perspective, which makes it so that one's poignant evil experience does not support one's belief that there is gratuitous evil.

Second, that a subject has a negative perspective is made likely by others' indication to the subject that the subject has a negative perspective. The probability of being told that one has a negative perspective is much higher if one has a negative perspective than if one has a non-negative perspective. And skeptical theists and theodiscists are telling proponents of the Problem of Evil (including the CSPoE) that they have a negative perspective, even if indirectly, by providing theodicies and indicating to proponents of the Problem of Evil that they are "in the dark" about God's reasons.

To summarize this section, I have given examples of perspectives one could have that would make it just as likely for that person to have the poignant evil experiences of the kind we now have if the evils in the world were not gratuitous. If a subject has one of these perspectives, Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain, so the subject's poignant evil experiences do not support the subject's belief that those evils are gratuitous. One might maintain that one does not have such a perspective. However, as argued above, it is unlikely that one could come to know that one has such a perspective by reflection alone, and if a subject has a negative perspective, the subject is likely to believe he has a neutral perspective even when he does not. Further, if a subject believes evils are gratuitous on the basis of poignant evil experiences and has been told by skeptical theists or theodiscists that he is overreaching by describing the evil in the world as gratuitous, that makes it likely that the subject has a negative perspective, which, as shown above,

makes it so that the subject's poignant evil experiences do not support the belief that the evil is gratuitous.

I have now completed the work that was unfinished in Tweedt (2015)—I have defended the claim that Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain in formulations of the CSPoE. However, there may be some hope for proponents of the CSPoE. Gellman (2017) proposes a new version of the CSPoE in which some experiences of evil are embedded with a feature (“irredeemability”) such that no good or reason could possibly make that evil allowable. In the following section, I argue that Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain even in Gellman’s revised version of the CSPoE.

3. Embedded Irredeemability?

In Section 1 of this article, I described the CSPoE as a way of closing the gap between the belief that there is gratuitous evil and its alleged justifier. When the gap is an inference, CORNEA can block the inference. The CSPoE narrows that gap so that CORNEA can’t do any blocking work—there’s no inference to block. I then described Reformulated CORNEA, which can do that blocking work, which I showed is enabled by the perspectives mechanism in Section 2. Gellman attempts to narrow the gap even further so that even Reformulated CORNEA cannot do any blocking work.

According to Gellman, there is no experience that is interpreted as gratuitous. Instead, there is a feature—irredeemability—that is embedded in the very perception of a poignant evil. An irredeemable evil is, according to Gellman, “one that by its very nature is so deeply and utterly evil that there is no possible world in which its existence should be allowed.”²² Gellman elaborates on the feature Irredeemability: “An irredeemable evil is evil all the way down to rock bottom, as it were, so that *no good or other reason could possibly go any deeper, as it were, to undercut it and make it allowed.*”²³ If there ever was an extreme attempt to close the gap between a belief and its justifier, Gellman has articulated it—the very perception of the evil itself makes it impossible for there to be any way to block justification for the corresponding belief on the basis of that perception! That’s not just narrowing a gap; it’s insisting that there isn’t one.

How does this gap-closing move work? Gellman states that Irredeemability is “phenomenologically immediate, arising non-inferentially within a perceptual experience.”²⁴ Irredeemability not only has perceptual content (badness) but two modal implications:

- A. “There is no possible world in which [the evil’s] existence should be allowed.”²⁵
- B. “No good or other reason could possibly...undercut it and make it allowed.”²⁶

These implications make it so that the perception itself guarantees the corresponding belief’s standing in the CSPoE. Because of A., the evil could not possibly be allowed by a good God, since its existence should not be allowed in any possible world, and because of B., it is immune to objection, since no good or any other reason could possibly make it allowed. So, in short, a

²² Gellman (2017), 84.

²³ Gellman (2017), 85, italics mine.

²⁴ Gellman (2017), 87.

²⁵ Gellman (2017), 84.

²⁶ Gellman (2017), 85.

subject immediately and non-inferentially perceives, embedded within a poignant evil, the feature Irredeemability, and Irredeemability ensures that there is no objection to forming the belief that the evil is irredeemable.²⁷ The perception of Irredeemability itself ensures that one cannot be mistaken about believing that the evil is irredeemable.

It is, however, a mistake to believe that poignant evils have Irredeemability as an embedded feature. I agree with Bergmann (2011) and Hendricks (2023) that one cannot see directly that no possible evil could make up for an evil in our experience.²⁸ In fact, Gellman's position seems indicative of what I have called a "pessimistic" perspective above. As described above, if I have a pessimistic perspective and thus assign such a high disvalue to the suffering I experience, it will be difficult for me to think that this suffering can be redeemed, outweighed, or defeated by some good aspect of our world. Poignant evils will be experienced as so disvaluable that perhaps no good could make up for them... Given a pessimistic perspective, I might not be in a position to entertain an alternate valuation such that the poignant evil is non-gratuitous. (Section 2)

Gellman seems to have integrated this perspective into his experience. Upon perceiving an evil, Gellman finds it not only difficult but impossible to think that the evil could be defeated or redeemed. Further, the fact that Gellman holds such a position is, in fact, evidence that Gellman has a negative perspective, since, to apply to reasoning from Section 2, the probability of forming an irredeemable-evil belief on the basis of a poignant evil experience is higher if one has a negative perspective than if one does not. In fact, the probability of forming an irredeemable-evil belief on the basis of a poignant evil experience is high if one has become susceptible to the spurious evidential feedback loop described in Section 2: as one has experiences of poignant evil and forms the belief that the evils are gratuitous, one becomes even more confident that one is perceiving correctly, even if one is not. Gellman's report of his perception, then, seems to reveal his perception of evils via a pessimistic perspective.

What is Gellman's argument that Irredeemability is embedded in perceptions of poignant evil? Gellman doesn't offer one, but he does give other examples of some features embedded in perceptions: anger, wickedness, kindness, and beauty. Gellman's examples of features that are embedded in perceptions all seem to be examples of interpretations of one's experiences. Here are Gellman's examples:²⁹

1. "I can be said to see that you are angry, immediately and non-inferentially....I see your anger, as perceptually embedded content."
2. "A person can perceive as embedded perceptual content that an act was wicked or kind."
3. "A person can see the beauty of a painting, as a perceptually embedded content."

When one is "said to see that you are angry," one has that perception via a perspective, or an interpretation. One sees a scowling face, for example, and interprets that as anger—and one can be mistaken, especially if one has a perspective that makes one prone to interpreting faces as angry. The same is true of perceiving wickedness and kindness; one sees an act and interprets it as wicked, for example. The perception as of wickedness in the act can also be mistaken,

²⁷ By arguing that Irredeemability gives him knowledge that all defeaters to his belief on the basis of his experience are false, Gellman is claiming to acquire what Cohen (2002) calls "easy knowledge."

²⁸ Bergmann (2011), 19; Hendricks (2023), 240-269.

²⁹ All of the examples are on Gellman (2017), 87.

especially if one has a perspective that makes one prone to interpreting acts as wicked. Finally, one might perceive a painting as beautiful by, for example, interpreting the shapes and colors as beautiful even when the painting is not, in fact, beautiful, especially if one has a positive perspective in which one is prone to interpret objects as beautiful. If this is correct, then anger, wickedness, kindness, and beauty are the results of (perhaps correct) interpretations in which our perspectives affect our perceptions.

If we are to liken Gellman's examples—anger in a face, wickedness in an action, beauty in a painting—to Irredeemability in an evil-experience, as Gellman himself does, then we have a reason to think that the irredeemability of an evil is likewise the result of an interpretation via one's perspective. One experiences an evil and interprets it as rock-bottom-bad, or as unable to be redeemed. And one can be mistaken, especially if one has a perspective that makes one prone perceiving evils as very disvaluable.

If Gellman perceives a poignant evil via a negative (e.g. pessimistic) perspective and, on that basis, forms the belief that the evil has Irredeemability embedded in it, the experience does not support the belief. In order for the belief that the evil has Irredeemability embedded in it to receive epistemic support from an experience of poignant evil, Reformulated CORNEA must obtain, but it does not, because someone with a negative (e.g. pessimistic) perspective is as likely to believe that the evil has Irredeemability embedded in it whether or not it does. Similarly, if Gellman perceives a poignant evil via a negative perspective and, on that basis, forms the belief that the evil is irredeemable, once again Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain, and Gellman's poignant evil experience does not support Gellman's belief that the evil is irredeemable.

To summarize, Gellman seeks to eliminate the gap between the belief that there is irredeemable evil and its justifier by maintaining that the very perception of the evil itself makes it impossible for there to be any way to block justification for the corresponding belief on the basis of that perception. This does not seem to be a belief that one can support merely by having an experience. And such a position is indicative of a pessimistic perspective, as described in Section 2. Gellman's other examples of perceiving embedded content also seem to be examples of interpretations of experiences, which further supports the position that Gellman's perception of Irredeemability is the result of an interpretation of an experience via a perspective. If Gellman perceives evil via a pessimistic perspective, and, on the basis of that experience, forms the beliefs that the evil has Irredeemability embedded in it and that there is irredeemable evil, then those beliefs are epistemically unsupported, because Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain.

Conclusion

I have argued against the CSPoE by arguing that we would be just as likely to have the kinds of poignant evil experiences we have even if the evils in the world are not gratuitous. If we are just as likely to have the kinds of poignant evil experiences we have even if the evils in the world are not gratuitous, then our poignant evil experiences do not epistemically support the belief that there is gratuitous evil—Reformulated CORNEA does not obtain.

To show that we are just as likely to have the kinds of poignant evil experiences we have even if the evils in the world are not gratuitous, I described various perspectives we could have according to which we interpret our experiences. I then applied these perspectives to experiences of evil to show that certain kinds of perspectives would lead us to have the same kinds of poignant evil experiences we have even if the evils of our experience were not gratuitous. These perspectives are affected by the point of our stories (which are affected by framing effects), valuations of goods and evils, and whether one takes us to be entitled not to experience the poignant evils we do, in fact, experience. In fact, the facts that a subject 1) believes evils are gratuitous on the basis of a poignant evil experience and 2) is told by others that those poignant evil experiences are not to be interpreted as gratuitous are both evidence that the subject has a negative perspective—a perspective that would make it just as likely for one to have the kinds of poignant evil experiences one has even if those evils were not gratuitous.

Finally, I addressed Gellman's position, according to which some poignant evil experiences have an embedded feature that guarantees that those evils are irredeemable. I showed that such a view is indicative of a kind of negative perspective such that even if evils were redeemable, one would have the same experience as of embedded irredeemability. Gellman's position is an attempt to close the gap between a belief that constitutes a premise in the CSPoE and its justifier, but the very attempt to close the gap reveals that there is a gap in which Reformulated CORNEA once again blocks the support that the experience of poignant evil would provide to the belief that there is gratuitous evil. The CSPoE, then, remains defused.

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