CORNEA AND CLOSURE

Andrew Graham and Stephen Maitzen

Could our observations of apparently pointless evil ever justify the conclusion that God does not exist? Not according to Stephen Wykstra, who several years ago announced the "Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access," or "CORNEA," a principle that has sustained critiques of atheistic arguments from evil ever since. Despite numerous criticisms aimed at CORNEA in recent years, the principle continues to be invoked and defended. We raise a new objection: CORNEA is false because it entails intolerable violations of closure.

Could our observations of apparently pointless evil ever justify the conclusion that God does not exist? Not according to Stephen Wykstra, who several years ago announced the "Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access," or "CORNEA," a principle that has sustained critiques of atheistic arguments from evil ever since.[1] Despite numerous criticisms aimed at CORNEA in recent years, the principle continues to be invoked and defended.[2] We raise a new objection: CORNEA is false because it entails intolerable violations of closure.

Wykstra offers CORNEA as a necessary condition for one's being entitled to assert claims of the form "It appears that p." He seeks to retain the virtues of Richard Swinburne's account of "the 'seems so, is so' presumption" while rejecting what he regards as Swinburne's arbitrary distinction between "positive" and "negative" seemings, a distinction he derides as "Swinburne's Slip": "Since the distinction between positive and negative seemings depends so much upon formulation, it is hard to see how it can have the epistemic bite Swinburne gives it."[3] His alternative, CORNEA, runs as follows:

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim "It appears that p" only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.[4]

According to Wykstra, CORNEA applies to the "epistemic" sense of "appears" rather than to the merely phenomenal sense of the word; in the epistemic sense of "It appears that p," he writes, "I take there to be an evidential connection between what I am inclined to believe (namely, that p) and the cognized situation that inclines me to believe it."[5] He concludes that atheistic arguments containing premises of the form "It appears that such-and-such evil is pointless" (such William L. Rowe's well-known

argument from evil) cannot even get started, since CORNEA prevents any human being from properly asserting even the apparent pointlessness of any instance of evil. Why? Because, says Wykstra, the purposes of an omniscient God, if there is one, in permitting evil probably fall outside our limited ken; thus it is *not* reasonable for any of us to believe that we would always see the point of God's permitting evil even if it always had a point. Granted, the agonizing and terminal suffering of a fawn burned in a remote forest fire[6] may seem to serve no greater good, but it would seem that way to us even if it served a greater good that we are too ignorant to detect. So, on CORNEA, we have no business saying it appears to be pointless, in the epistemic sense of "appears," and without even apparently pointless evil to invoke, standard evidential arguments from evil founder.

Critics have raised various objections to CORNEA, but none, as far as we know, have focused adequately on the subjunctive conditional clause in Wykstra's principle: "if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by [H]." This clause closely resembles the well-known subjunctive "sensitivity" condition on knowledge[7] championed by Dretske and Nozick, and its presence in CORNEA therefore poses a familiar problem: satisfaction of CORNEA will fail to be closed under known implication. For instance, a subject H can satisfy CORNEA for "It appears to H that (p & q)" while failing to satisfy CORNEA for "It appears to H that p," even when H knows, as H typically will, that (p & q) implies p. CORNEA thus violates closure, a defect many regard as fatal for those analyses of knowledge on which knowledge must be sensitive.

Let "R" denote the proposition that you are an embodied person who is reading right now, and let "BIV" denote the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, according to which you have recently and unknowingly become a disembodied brain-in-a-vat being electrochemically fed exactly the experiences you are now having. BIV is deliberately designed to make its truth indistinguishable, by you, from its falsity. Presumably, you now satisfy CORNEA for asserting

(1) It appears that (R & ~BIV),

because if (R & ~BIV) were false, R would be the only false conjunct, and you would discern its falsity: in the closest possible worlds in which ~(R & ~BIV), you are an embodied person whose experiences make you aware that you are doing something other than reading right now (maybe you've just put aside this essay). Hence it is reasonable for you to believe that, given your cognitive faculties and the use you have made of them, if (R & ~BIV) were not the case, things would look different to you from the way they now look. However, while you satisfy CORNEA for (1) and also for

(2) It appears that R

(since, as before, if R were not the case, things would look different to you), you *fail* CORNEA for

(3) It appears that ~BIV.

Again, BIV stipulates that you cannot perceptually distinguish worlds where you are a brain-in-a-vat from worlds where you are normally embodied. Apprised of this stipulation, you cannot reasonably believe that,

given your cognitive faculties and the use you have made of them, if BIV were the case then your "cognized situation . . . would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by [you]."

Thus you satisfy CORNEA for asserting a conjunction even when one of its conjuncts does not—indeed, cannot—epistemically appear to you to be true. This result is bad enough by itself, especially in light of the *evidential* sense of "appears" that Wykstra invokes: how could your total evidence support a conjunction while failing to support one of its conjuncts? How could you be evidentially better-off with respect to (p & q) than you are with respect to p?[8] But this particular defect betokens a quite general failure of closure. Every rational person who understands the relevant concepts *knows*, at least tacitly, that a conjunction implies each of its conjuncts; thus satisfaction of CORNEA violates closure not just under implication but also under known implication: you satisfy CORNEA for "It appears that (p & q)" while necessarily failing it for "It appears that q" even though you know that (p & q) implies q.

Similarly implausible results are not far to find. While you satisfy COR-NEA for "It appears that R," you cannot satisfy CORNEA for "It appears that I am not mistaken in now judging that R," since it is not reasonable for you to believe the following: "Were I mistaken in now judging that R, things would look different to me." On the contrary, if you *were* mistaken in that occurrent judgment, your mistake would arise from a cognitive situation relevantly *like* the one you are now having, namely, one causing you now to judge that R.[9] In general, you can satisfy CORNEA for asserting "It appears that p" even when you fail the condition for asserting "It appears that I am not mistaken in now judging that p," a damning result given that "p" obviously implies the wide-scope negation "I am not mistaken in now judging that p." Nor, finally, can Wykstra exploit the difference (if there is a principled difference) between the "positive" appearance-claim "It appears that p" and the "negative" appearance-claim "It appears that I am not mistaken in now judging that p" without by his own lights committing Swinburne's Slip.

One might respond by emphasizing that CORNEA is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient condition, for being entitled to assert appearance-claims: being so entitled may require the fulfillment of further conditions as well. But our argument never assumes otherwise. We need not assume that CORNEA by itself entitles you to assert "It appears that (p & q)" while it precludes your asserting "It appears that p," for some p and q. Nor need we assume that CORNEA by itself entitles you to assert "It appears that p" while it precludes your asserting "It appears that q" for some q you know is implied by p. In its present form, CORNEA certainly does nothing to discourage those two assumptions, but it does not imply them either.[10] Instead, we urge the rejection of any *evidential test* which (i) you can pass for a conjunction while failing—indeed, necessarily failing—for one conjunct and (ii) you can pass for p while (necessarily) failing for some q you know to be implied by p. CORNEA is such a test. If atheistic arguments from evil fail, it is not because they violate Wykstra's false constraint on the assertion of appearance-claims. Alas, a sensitive CORNEA is a major disability.

Acadia University

NOTES

1.   See Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Evil: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73–93. Wykstra's original target is William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335–41.

2.   Critical treatments include Keith Chrzan, "Debunking CORNEA," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21 (1987), pp. 171–77; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 32 (1992), pp. 25–49; and Jim Stone, "Evidential Atheism," *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003), pp. 253–77. For further invocation and defense of CORNEA, see Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra, "The 'Inductive' Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), pp. 133–60; Stephen John Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 126–50; and Stephen Wykstra, "Stone-Ground CORNEA: A Rebuttal," presented at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, 24 April 2004.

3.   Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle," pp. 83, 84.

4.   Ibid., p. 85.

5.   Ibid., p. 87.

6.   See Rowe, "The Problem of Evil," p. 337.

7.   According to the sensitivity condition, roughly, you know that *p* only if you would not believe that *p* if it were false that *p*.

8.   This point is not to be confused with the harmless Bayesian result, apparently overlooked by Stone ("Evidential Atheism," p. 264), that a given piece of evidence can *increase* the probability of a conjunction without increasing the probability of each of its conjuncts and even while decreasing the probability of each of its conjuncts. We thank David Anderson for drawing our attention to the latter result.

9.   In the closest possible worlds *in which* you genuinely but mistakenly now judge that you are reading (these worlds need not be close *tout court*), you are, say, dreaming or hallucinating that you are reading, and the illusion is evidently good enough to fool you. In claiming that you now judge that R, we presume that our merely broaching the topic suffices to induce in you that occurrent judgment.

10.   Wykstra himself sometimes leaves the impression, presumably unintended, that satisfying CORNEA is sufficient for legitimately asserting appearance-claims: "Seeing no elephant in a normal room, after looking hard, *gives us good reason to believe no elephant is in the room*" (Russell and Wykstra, "A Dialogue," p. 143, emphasis added); "Looking around my garage and seeing no dog *entitles me to conclude that none is present*, but seeing no fleas does not." (Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments," p. 126, emphasis added).