P1: If gratuitous evils probably exist, then an all good, omnipotent God probably doesn’t exist.

P2: Gratuitous evils probably exist.

C: An all good, omnipotent God probably does not exist.

Zagzebski claims that it is improbable that an all good, omnipotent God exists if gratuitous evil exists. According to Zagzebski, a gratuitous evil is any evil that is not necessary for bringing about “countervailing goods,” or goods that counteract the evil in question (Zagzebski p. 161). For example, a fawn that burns to death in a forest fire is considered to be a gratuitous evil since the fawn’s suffering does not seem to bring about any good greater than the evil of the fawn’s suffering (Zagzebski p. 160-161). Some may argue that there is a possibility that the fawn’s suffering may produce some good, but Zagzebski points out that the premise hinges on probability, not on possibility. While it may be possible the fawn’s suffering produces good, Zagzebski argues it is not probable, considering that the fawn’s suffering seems isolated and void of any direct, good effect on anything or anyone. If an all powerful, all good God exists, then, Rowe would argue, He would most likely be able to and would want to prevent the fawn from dying. Cormac McCarthy captures the contrapositive of Rowe’s reasoning in his play Sunset Limited where a suicidal professor sarcastically states, “The clamor and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to [God’s] ear” (McCarthy, p. 58). If such unnecessary evils exist, the professor believes, God is probably not all good, but is rather cruel, delighting in suffering for the sake of suffering itself.

Zagzebski then argues that gratuitous evils probably exist. According to McCarthy, noticing the world contains gratuitous evils is as easy as the professor glancing out of a window into his rescuer’s ghetto neighborhood. Near the beginning of the play the professor views the neighborhood as a “cesspool” of “unsalvageable” people living in a “moral leper colony” (McCarthy p. 34). The professor, using the observations of the neighborhood and his own experiences, reasons that God probably doesn’t exist, since the world is “a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed” (McCarthy p. 52). However, just as his rescuer was skeptical that the professor was rightly viewing the world, Stephen Wykstra points out that, even though one might not see evidence of good in what seems to be a gratuitous evil, that doesn’t necessarily mean there is no good (Zagzebski p. 161). In the case of the fawn, Wykstra would question the ability to determine whether or not there is any good that comes from the fawn’s suffering, such as the death combating deer overpopulation. However, Zagzebski argues that such a response is weakened by the way it makes theism unfalsifiable (Zagzebski p. 163). For example, if God didn’t exist and an evil genius existed instead and the world was the same, no one could tell a difference since, according to Wykstra, no one could be sure if he or she is able to see all the evidence (Zagzebski p. 163). As a result, one could come to false conclusions with the “requirement of detectability” since theism, being unfalsifiable, would never be technically false for any possible situation (Zagzebski p. 162).

Zagzebski presents an unsound argument, since the second premise, as pointed out by Wykstra, relies on the ability to determine whether or not good can come as a result of evils. Even though Wykstra’s argument could lead to theism being falsifiable, Wykstra’s argument is nevertheless valid. In the case of the fawn, one can not definitively point out that the fawn’s suffering is a gratuitous evil, since he or she cannot know that he or she would be able to detect evidence for good to come from the evil. Whether or not this leads to theism being falsifiable has no bearing on the fact that Wykstra’s point is true and shows that one cannot be sure of the conclusion of the evidential problem of evil.