In a recent paper, Keith Yandell introduces an argument which seems to make short work of the problem of evil. Unfortunately, this line of argument is radically unsatisfactory, and the problem which the existence of evil poses for theism — whatever that problem is — cannot be disposed of in that ready way.

Yandell begins by calling attention to the following proposition:

\[(N) \text{ Necessarily, if God allows any evil, then He has morally sufficient reason for doing so.}\]

And he goes on to say that if \((N)\) is true then any particular evil has the following property:

\[(P) \text{ If God exists, then He has morally sufficient reason for allowing this evil.}\]

Yandell then asserts the crucial thesis of his argument. He says that “it seems clear that any evil that has \(P\) is not an evil whose existence provides evidence against God’s existence. An evil that has \(P\) is useless for the critic’s purposes ... If \((N)\) is true, then every evil, and all evil together, is critically cancelled.”

Now, it is true that if \((N)\) is true then \((P)\) is true of every actual evil (but it need not be true of every possible, or prospective, evil). This is so because, if God exists, then every actual evil is an evil which is allowed by God (whom Yandell assumes to be “omnicompetent”). But, according to \((N)\), God allows no evil without a morally sufficient reason. Hence, if \((N)\) is true then \((P)\) is true of every actual evil. And no doubt Yandell intended \((P)\) to be construed as applying to actual evils, and not to merely possible evils. So far, so good.

But how does that show that if \((N)\) is true then every actual evil is “critically cancelled”? Yandell provides no argument whatsoever for this claim. He says merely that “it seems clear.” In fact, however, it is not at all clear. But we may hazard a conjecture about how it might come to “seem” clear. What is true is that an evil which
is such that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing it — which is, we might say, morally allowable by God — provides no genuine evidence against the existence of God. And it might be supposed that (P) is the property of being morally allowable by God. If we were to construe (P) in this way, then we would get Yandell’s conclusion and we would put an end to the problem of evil. In fact, however, (P) is not the property of being morally allowable by God. It is, rather, the conditional property of being morally allowable by God if God exists. And that is quite a different property.

Before going into this point somewhat further, we might note that Yandell’s basic line of argument here need not be made to depend on (N), or upon any other theological thesis. This might be of some importance for Yandell himself, because later in his paper he argues that (N) is false. In fact, the status of (N) is inconsequential for the present line of argument, for (N) can be replaced by the following less controversial principle:

\[
(N^*) \text{Any two things which co-exist are logically compatible with one another.}
\]

If (N*) is true, then any actual evil has the following property:

\[
(P^*) \text{If God exists, then His existence is logically compatible with the existence of this evil.}
\]

And if it seems clear that any evil which has (P) is critically cancelled, then it will also seem clear in the same way that any evil which has (P*) is critically cancelled. For if an evil has the property of being compatible with the existence of God, then it does not provide genuine evidence against the existence of God. And (P*) might be thought to be the property of being compatible with the existence of God.

Not only does Yandell’s line of argument here need no theological assumptions, it need not be restricted to any theological context. It can be used to argue that no fact whatsoever provides any evidence against anything at all. Everything is thus critically cancelled.

Think, for example, of a murder. It is widely suspected that the friendly neighborhood hit man, affectionately known as “Shark,” is the murderer. But it is soon established as an undeniable fact that:

\[
(M) \text{Less than half an hour after the murder, Shark was attending a symposium on medical ethics 300 miles away.}
\]

Some people believe that (M) provides evidence, practically conclusive evidence, against the hypothesis that Shark is the murderer. A Yandellian, however, would easily argue that this is not the case. He would observe that since Shark’s attendance at the symposium is an actual event it must have the following property: