

# THEODICY

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## 1. Evil and suffering

Not long ago, an issue of my local paper reminded its readers of Susan Smith, the Carolinian mother who rolled her Mazda into a lake, drowning her two little sons strapped inside. It also reported the abduction and gang rape of an eleven-year old girl by eight teenage members of Angelitos Sur 13, and the indictment of the "Frito Man" on 68 counts of sexual abuse, a forty-five year old man who handed out corn chips to neighborhood children in order to lure them to a secluded location. More recently, the headlines announced the untimely death of Ashley Jones, a twelve-year old girl from nearby Stanwood, Washington—she was raped and bludgeoned to death while babysitting her neighbor's kids.

These are particularly disgusting, appalling cases of evil, all the more so because children are the victims. One might think that such cases occur only very rarely. I wish that were so. ABC News recently reported that in the United States a child dies from abuse by a parent or guardian every six hours. One is left with the disturbing thought: if that is how frequently a child *dies* from abuse in the US, how frequently are children *merely* abused? A sinister side-effect of familial abuse is that abused children are much more likely to abuse their own children; and so the attitudes and habits of abuse pass from generation to generation, a cycle of evil and suffering from which it can be enormously difficult to extricate oneself.

Frequently, a child's suffering is unintentionally caused by those who love them most. Alvin Plantinga recalls a story about

a man who drove a cement mixer truck. He came home one day for lunch; his three year old daughter was playing in the yard, and after lunch, when he jumped into his truck and backed out, he failed to notice that she was playing behind it; she was killed beneath the great dual wheels.<sup>1</sup>

And who can forget the scorching summer of 1995, when a Kentucky professor, after dropping off his wife at work, drove to school, parked, and absentmindedly left his children in the car for the day, the windows closed; they slowly baked to death.

Such suffering and evil is wrought by human hands. There are other sources, however. A visit to just about any major hospital reveals children born with grossly debilitating genetic abnormalities that impair them so severely one can't help but think that their lives are not worth living. Moreover, children are not exempt from the horrors resulting from earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, famine and the like. Just last month, a colleague of mine took her little daughter on a walk at one of the local parks; a loose limb fell from one of the tall Douglas firs and struck her daughter dead.

Of course, adults suffer horribly as well. And the numbers of those who suffer—children and adults—are staggering: six million snuffed out in the Holocaust, thirty million in the slave trade, forty million in Stalin's purges, a third of Europe's population during the Plague, several million Africans starved just in my lifetime: the list goes on and on. And what about nonhuman animals?

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<sup>1</sup> "Self-Profile," in Peter van Inwagen and James E. Tomberlin, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 34.

We in the enlightened West like to think we are more civilized than our predecessors in our relations to the beasts. We regard the once common practice of beating animals as barbaric, for example. Nevertheless, we don't think twice about hunting for sport, or how the livestock and poultry we don't need to eat got on our plates, or how the musk got into our perfumes. But that's nothing compared to the suffering doled out by Nature. It boggles the mind to consider the billions upon billions of animals stalked and killed or eaten alive by predators or who died slowly and painfully, decimated by disease, famine, or drought.

So it is that we must face a sobering fact: the history of our planet is a history stuffed with horrific evil, suffering, and pain.

## 2. The argument from evil

According to traditional theism, there exists an unsurpassably powerful, knowledgeable, just and loving creator of the world ('God', for short); thus, according to theism, nothing happens that God does not permit, including the horrific evil and suffering that permeates our world. Theism can be quite perplexing in light of the facts about horrific evil and suffering. After all, it isn't just obvious why God (if there is a God) would permit horrific evil and suffering, or so much of it. And surely he must have a reason. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that, even though a perfectly good being could prevent it, he permits it for no reason whatsoever—which is absurd.

So what *are* God's reasons? What might His purposes be? Such questions naturally lead to a simple line of thought that many honest and reflective people—theists, atheists, and agnostics alike—find compelling. We can't think of any reason that would justify God, so there probably is none; but if there is none, then there is no God; so in all likelihood, God does not exist.

Let's express this line of thought neatly, in the form of an argument. We might do so like this:

1. There is a lot of horrific evil and suffering.
2. If God exists, then there is no horrific evil and suffering, or not so much of it—unless there is a reason that would justify Him in permitting it, and so much of it.
3. There probably is no reason that would justify God in permitting horrific evil and suffering, or so much of it.
4. So, there probably is no God.

4 follows from 1, 2 and 3, and 1 and 2 are true. That leaves premise 3. Is it true? Before we address that question directly, we should note two things about the argument.

First, the argument appeals to two facts about evil and suffering in our world; the fact that there is horrific evil and suffering, and the fact that there is so much of it. Both of these facts are important in assessing premise 3. For even if we can think of a reason that would justify God in permitting *evil and suffering*, it does not automatically follow that there is a reason that would justify God in permitting any *horrific* evil and suffering; and even if we can think of a reason that would justify God in permitting some horrific evil and suffering, it does not automatically follow that there is a reason that would justify God in permitting *so much* of it. A military commander might have a justifying reason to permit thousands of troops to be shot in battle, say for national self-defense; it does not follow that she has a reason that would justify her in permitting them to be tortured by the enemy for decades, or to permit millions of them to be tortured for the rest of their lives.

Second, suppose that the conclusion is true. In that case, what should we believe? Should we believe that there is no God? It's quite natural to think that we should, but it is important to see why that doesn't follow. There are two reasons. (1) Even if horrific evil and suffering make it

likely that there is no God, they might not make it likely enough. Perhaps the probability is only very slight, too slight for belief. (2) Even if horrific evil and suffering make it likely enough that there is no God, likely enough to believe, we need to take into account our total evidence before believing there is no God. If our total evidence included items that made it *about as likely* that there is a God as not, then perhaps we should withhold judgment on the matter. Alternatively, if our total evidence included items that made it *much more likely* that there is a God than that there isn't, then perhaps we should believe that there is a God.

Still, other considerations aside, it's an interesting question whether horrific evil and suffering make it likely that there is no God. Given the argument we are considering, the answer to that question boils down to whether premise 3 is true. Is it true? Is it true that there probably is no reason that would justify God in permitting horrific evil and suffering, and so much of it?

### **3. It's impossible for there to be a reason that would justify God**

Some people have argued that not only is it probable that there is no such reason, it's *absolutely guaranteed*. It's impossible for there to be a reason that would justify God! After all, the only reason to permit evil is that one was unaware that it would occur or that one was powerless to prevent it. But neither of these reasons applies in the case of God, who is supposed to be unsurpassable in knowledge and power.<sup>2</sup>

As plausible as this line of thought might initially appear, it fails. It is not generally true that the only reason to permit evil is that one was unaware that it would occur or that one was powerless to prevent it. Sometimes it is neither wrong nor unloving to permit preventable evil one was aware of. For example, a mother might know that if she lets her sons wrestle together, they might well get hurt. Still, she lets them wrestle and thereby permits them to suffer injury. Is this wrong or unloving on her part? I wouldn't think so. There's a lot of good that attends rule-governed wrestling even if there is some chance of injury, and that good is worth the risk. (If you think less of the mother for letting her sons wrestle, then substitute some other activity. It's hard to think of one that's worthwhile that doesn't involve the risk of injury, at least hurt feelings.)

The same point applies to God and his creatures. If there's a lot of good that attends what He allows us to do, then, even if there is some chance of suffering and evil, the good might be worth it.

But, it might be replied, even if it is not *generally* true that the only reason to permit evil is that one was unaware that it would occur or that one was powerless to prevent it, it is true in the case of God. After all, while the mother can't arrange things so that the good that attends activities of various sorts can be had without risk of injury, God can. For God is supposed to be unsurpassably powerful and knowledgeable; surely He can figure out a way to bring about whatever greater goods He has in mind without permitting evil and suffering.

But what if there is no such way? What if the goods themselves cannot occur without the permission of evil? In that case, not even God could figure out a way to get the goods while preventing evil. To suppose otherwise would be like supposing that an unsurpassably knowledgeable and powerful being could figure out a way to make a married bachelor, or make a thing exist and not exist at the very same time. So *if* there is some good that absolutely could not occur without the permission of horrific evil and suffering, and *if* it is worth the risk of evil, then it might well figure in God's reason to permit horrific evil and suffering, in which case He would do nothing wrong or unloving in permitting it.

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<sup>2</sup> See Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," in Pike, ed., *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 85-102.

Of course, those are big *ifs*. Can we think of such a reason? Can we think of an outweighing good that could not occur unless horrific evil and suffering were permitted, and so much of it? Attempts to state a reason are called *theodicies*. If we can think of one, then we can conclude that there is a reason that would justify God (if such there be) in permitting horrific evil and suffering, and so much of it—that is, we can conclude that premise 3 is false. In what follows, I'll sketch the more popular theodicies and evaluate the standard objections.

#### **4. Punishment theodicy**

God would be justified in *punishing evildoers* and suffering is a result of His punishing them. You can think of the greater good involved in punishment in whatever way you like, e.g. balancing the scales of justice, or its deterrent effect, or preventing further suffering by the wrongdoer, or some combination of these.

*But what about undeserved suffering?*

While God would be justified in punishing wrongdoers for their wrongdoing, much of the suffering in the world is *undeserved*. And no one can sensibly say that God would be justified in punishing those who don't deserve it.

But might not *all* the suffering in the world be deserved? I doubt it. Nonhuman animals, very young children and severely impaired adults suffer immensely but do not deserve it since they are not morally responsible for their actions. They lack the requisite capacities for moral deliberation and awareness. Moreover, although many morally responsible persons suffer to a degree that is proportionate to their wrongdoing, many more do not.

So, while *some* suffering might be accounted for by divine punishment, it cannot explain the overwhelming majority of it. Most importantly however, it does not even begin to explain why God permitted wrongdoing in the first place. At best, the punishment theodicy is seriously incomplete.

#### **5. Counterpart theodicy**

Good and evil are like pairs of opposites or counterparts. If one exists so does the other. So, if there were no evil, its opposite—moral goodness—wouldn't exist. Likewise for pain and suffering. If there were no pain, there would be no pleasure; and if there were no suffering, there would be no happiness. Thus, God would be justified in permitting evil, pain, and suffering since that's the only way there can be moral goodness, pleasure, and happiness.

*How can theists use the counterpart theodicy?*

One difficulty here is that, according to theism, God is unsurpassably morally good. Moreover, *He* could have existed without there being any evil. After all, what if He had never created anything? Then He would have existed and there would have been something that is morally good, namely God Himself—but there would have been no evil. So, according to theism, it's *false* that if there were no evil there would be no good.

*Difficulties for the Opposites Exist Principle*

Note that the most natural understanding of the claim that if one of a pair of “opposites” or “counterparts” exists, the other exists also is this:

- If there is something that has a certain feature, F, then there must be something that has the opposite feature, not-F.

Call this the *Opposites Exist Principle*, or the *Principle*, for short. It implies that so long as there is something that has the property of being rectangular, there is something with the property of being nonrectangular. Likewise, so long as something has the property of being morally good, there is something with the property of lacking moral goodness, being not-good, you might say.

One difficulty for the Principle is that, even if it is true and even if it did imply that there is something that is evil, it would only require a speck of evil, a smidgen of pain, and a modicum of suffering, not a world stuffed with them like ours is.

We might try to amend the Principle in order to avoid this difficulty. This would do the trick:

- If there is something that has a certain feature, F, then there must be something that has the opposite feature, not-F, *and the quantity of not-F or not-Fs must be about the same as the quantity of F or Fs.*

Unfortunately, the amended Principle has a false implication. It implies that the number of nonhumans must be about the same as the number of humans, and that the amount of unforested land must be about the same as the amount of forested land. So the amended Principle is false.

Another difficulty with the Principle is that just as there are different ways of being nonrectangular (e.g., triangular and circular), so there are different ways of being not-good. One way is to be neither morally good nor bad, just neutral between moral goodness and badness. Hydrogen atoms and mustache hairs, for example, are neutral in this way. So even if the Principle is true, it does not imply that if there is something that is morally good, then there is something that is evil or bad (rather than being neutral).

The most important difficulty for the Principle is that it is false. After all, it is not impossible for there to be a world in which everything was immaterial. Moreover, something has the property of being a nonunicorn, namely you. And what's the opposite of that property? Being a unicorn. So, *if* the Principle is true, then there is something that has the property of being a unicorn, which is to say that there is at least one unicorn. Of course, there are no unicorns; thus, since the Principle implies that there are unicorns, it is false.

#### *What about the Knowledge Version of the Opposites Exist Principle?*

Perhaps those who use the counterpart theodicy mean something very different from what I have been discussing. Perhaps they mean that we couldn't *know* one of a pair of opposites without knowing the other of the pair. Thus, we couldn't *know* something was morally good without knowing evil; and we couldn't *know* evil without there *being* evil; so, to know something is morally good, there has to be evil. Likewise for pain and suffering. We couldn't know pleasure and happiness without pain and suffering. Thus, God would be justified in permitting evil, pain, and suffering because without them we wouldn't know good, pleasure, and happiness.

In this case the underlying principle seems to be that

- If we know something has a certain feature, F, then we know something has the opposite feature, not-F.

Call this the *Knowledge Version of the Principle*. There is an important truth lurking here, I think. And it is easy to confuse it with the Knowledge Version of the Principle. Perhaps that is why so many people find the Knowledge Version so attractive. But before I explain what that truth is, I want to explain my misgivings about the Knowledge Version of the Principle.

I have three misgivings; they mirror the three objections to the original version of the Principle. First, even if the Knowledge Version is true, it only implies that there is some evil, not as much as there in fact is. Second, the Knowledge Version of the Principle does not imply that

if we know something that is morally good, then we know something that is evil, since evil is not the opposite of moral goodness; all that is needed to satisfy the requirement of the Knowledge Version is that we know something that is morally neutral. Third, the Knowledge Version of the Principle is false because it incorrectly implies that if I know you have the feature of being a non-unicorn, then I know something has the opposite feature, namely the feature of being a unicorn, which is to say that I know that at least one unicorn exists (which is false).

There is no doubt that the Knowledge Version of the Principle is false. But why, then, does it seem so plausible? As I mentioned above, I think it strikes us as true because it contains a grain of truth. Let me illustrate that truth. I know the apple in my hand is red. But I know it's red only if I have a grasp of the concept of redness. And I have a grasp of that concept only if I have a grasp of what we might call its "logical complement," the concept of non-redness, which is closely related to knowing the feature of being not-red. Thus, if I know the apple in my hand is red, then I know the opposite feature, not-red. If we generalize from this illustration (and it seems right to me that we should), we will accept the general claim that

- If we know something has a certain feature, F, then we know the opposite feature, not-F.

This true general principle is very close to the Knowledge Version of the Opposites Exist Principle. It differs by just two words. Two words, I guess, can make a big difference.<sup>3</sup>

And it is crucial to notice their differences. Unlike the latter, the former does not say that if we know something has F, then we know *something has* not-F. The former only requires that we know the *feature* or the *concept* not-F. And that is an important difference: we must not confuse a thing that has a feature with the feature that it has; we must not confuse a thing that falls under a concept with the concept that it falls under. If we apply this true general principle to the case of moral goodness, pleasure, and happiness, what we discover is that we can know that something is morally good only if we know the feature or concept of something lacking moral goodness. That seems right to me. It does not follow however, that we know *something that has* this opposite feature.

Let's now consider some theodicies that have a better chance of explaining evil.

## 6. Free will theodicy

God could have created us so that there was no chance of us going wrong or being bad. If He had done so the result would have been splendid, but we would have missed out on a very great good, namely, self-determination. For one to be *self-determined* is for one to be free to a significant degree with respect to the sort of person one becomes, the sort of character one has—and that requires that one have it within one's power to be both good and evil. Lacking such freedom, we could not be deeply responsible for who we are, who we will become and whether we will manifest and confirm our character through the choices we make. Since the capacity for self-determination is such a great good and it requires that we be given considerable latitude with respect to harming ourselves severely, it is a reason that would justify God in permitting evil.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Alston tells the story of an introductory philosophy student who was marked down on an exam for giving "People bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number" as the answer to the question "What is utilitarianism?" When the student inquired as to why he was marked down, Alston said "Because utilitarianism says people *ought* to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number". To which the student replied incredulously: "*What?* Are you going to mark me down for leaving out just *one* little word?" That's how it is with words. Even one can make a big difference.

*But why not block harm to others?*

One might object that development of my character requires only that my choices affect me, that is, that they serve to develop my character in one way or another. But couldn't God have arranged things in such a way that while my choices have an effect on me and my character, they have no effect on anyone else (or at least none of the bad ones has an effect on anyone else). For example, suppose I choose freely to steal from you. My choice can contribute to my being untrustworthy without my ever actually stealing since God can arrange things in such a way that I believe I stole even though I didn't. In a nutshell, self-determination doesn't account for the bad consequences for others of evil free choices.<sup>4</sup>

There are several replies to this objection, foremost of which are two.

*Reply 1.* If God systematically prevents us from harming others yet permits us to have a significant say about the sorts of persons we become, then it will have to *look* to us as though we can harm others even though we can't. For if I know nothing I do can harm others, then I won't have the same opportunity to develop my character as I would if it seemed that I could harm others. But deception is incompatible with God's goodness, one might urge.

Unfortunately, this reply overlooks the fact that deception is not always wrong nor always unloving. (Just ask as any parent.) Perhaps preventing the horrific consequences for others of our free choices is as watertight a reason for deception as there can be. Then again, perhaps not. Let's look into the matter a little more closely.

If God were to arrange things so that none of the horrific consequences for others of our choices really occurred although they appeared to, then we—each of us—would be living a massive illusion. It would seem as though we were involved in genuine relationships with others, making choices that matter for each other, when in fact nothing of the sort really occurred. Our whole lives would be a charade, a sham, a farce; and we wouldn't have a clue. While such massive deception would not result in an utterly meaningless existence (we would still be self-determining creatures), it isn't obvious that such massive deception about matters so central to our lives would be permissible or loving.

*Reply 2.* A related reply agrees that self-determination does not justify God's permitting us to harm others, even if it does justify God's permitting us to harm ourselves. What other goods, then, would be lost if God were to give us the freedom only to affect ourselves? Well, as indicated in the last reply, we would have no responsibility for each other and we would not be able to enter into the most meaningful relationships; for we are deeply responsible for others and can enter into relationships of love only if we can both benefit and harm others.

This point deserves development. We are deeply responsible for others only if our choices actually make a big difference to their well-being, and that cannot happen unless we can benefit them as well as harm them. This seems obvious enough. Frequently missed, however, is the fact that a similar point applies to love *relationships*, as contrasted with loving attitudes and feelings. Two persons cannot share in the most significant relationships of love unless it is up to each of them that they are so related; this fact can be seen by considering what we want from those whose love we value most. Jean-Paul Sartre expresses the point like this:

The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. He is not bent on becoming the object of passion which flows forth mechanically. He does not want to possess an automaton, and if we want to humiliate him, we need only try to persuade him that the beloved's passion is the result of a psychological determinism. The

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<sup>4</sup> See Steven Boer's "The Irrelevance of the Free Will Defense," *Analysis* (1975), 110-12.

lover will then feel that both his love and his being are cheapened.... If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.<sup>5</sup>

Since those love relationships which we cherish most are those in which we are most deeply vested, in light of love's freedom they are also those from which we can suffer most. It simply is not possible, therefore, for us to be in relationships of love without (at some time) having it within our power to harm and be harmed in a serious fashion.

Something analogous might be said of our relationship with God as well. Suppose God wanted a relationship of love with some of His creatures, and so made some of them fit to be loved by Him and capable of reciprocating His love. Here He faces a choice: He could guarantee that they return His love, or He could leave it up to them. If He guaranteed it, they would never have a choice about whether they loved Him, in which case their love of Him would be a sham and He'd know it. Clearly, then, God cannot be in a relationship of love with His creatures unless He leaves it up to them whether they reciprocate His love. And that requires that they (at some time) have it within their power to withhold their love from Him. But, that cannot be unless they are able to be and do evil.<sup>6</sup>

Deep responsibility for others, relationships of love with our fellows and with God: if these were worthless or even meagerly good things, God would not be justified in permitting evil in order that we might be capable of them. But these are goods of tremendous—perhaps unsurpassable—value. And they are impossible in a world where our choices only have an effect on ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

*Why not create persons who always freely choose the good?*

Another objection is that, since God knows before creating how each of His creatures will act, He can make a world in which everyone *always freely* chooses the good. He is omnipotent, after all, and so He can create any world He pleases.<sup>8</sup> It follows that God can create a world with the great goods of self-determination, deep responsibility for others, and love *without* there being any evil at all. Thus, these goods cannot justify God's permission of evil.

*Reply.* Note that this objection relies on the thought that *if God is omnipotent, then He can create any world He pleases*. This is false. For if God creates free creatures, He must leave it up to them what world results from their choices. Let's develop this point briefly.

Out of all of the possible creatures God could create, suppose He aims to create me, and suppose He considers whether to make me free with respect to planting roses along Walhout Way, a little section of my garden. If He did, He would have to place me in a situation in which it is *up to me* whether I plant roses or refrain from doing so. Now, if He placed me in such a situation, either I would freely plant or I wouldn't. For the sake of illustration, suppose I would. Now imagine that God tries to make a world in which I freely *refrain* from planting. Can He? Not if He leaves it up to me whether I plant. For, given our supposition, if He left it up to me, I

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<sup>5</sup> *Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1956), 367, quoted in Vincent Brummer, *The Model of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160.

<sup>6</sup> A question arises: God enters into relationships of love, and yet He is not able to be or do evil; so why can't He make us capable of relationships of love while also making us unable to be and do evil? In response, some deny that God is unable to be or do evil. Others distinguish love at its best *for a divine being* from love at its best *for a human*, and then argue that while the latter requires the ability to withhold love, the former does not. And there are other options as well.

<sup>7</sup> These themes are developed by Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God*, chapter 11, and "Some Major Strands of Theodicy," in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 36-42.

<sup>8</sup> Mackie takes this line in *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), 164.

would *not* refrain; rather, I would plant. So, given that I would freely plant roses along Walhout Way if it were left up to me, God—even though omnipotent—cannot make a world in which I am in that situation and I freely refrain from planting roses. To make that world God would have to *make* me so that I refrain, in which case I would not *freely* refrain.

Therefore, the assumption made by this objection is false. If God creates free persons, He *cannot* create just any world He pleases, even though He is omnipotent. Which world results from His creative activity is, in no small part, up to His free creatures.

We can go further. For we can now see that, for all we know, it was not within God's power to create a world with persons who always freely choose the good. How could this be? Well, as we just saw, if God creates free creatures, then He can't create some worlds. In the example above, God cannot create a world in which I freely refrain from planting roses along Walhout Way. That's because I would freely plant if God left it up to me. Now, what if it were true that for *any* world that has at least as much good as ours and in which every person always freely chooses the good, no matter how God started things off, persons would freely go wrong at least as much as we (actual humans) go wrong? If that were true, then no matter how hard God tried, He simply could not create a world with persons who always freely choose good, at least not one with as much good in it as our world. And here's the rub: for all we know, maybe that's the way things are.<sup>9</sup>

This is a good place to observe that the free will theodicy is *not* to be confused with the cliché, "God doesn't *do* evil, we do. He just *allows* it. So He's not to blame, we are." This cliché, unlike the free will theodicy, assumes that if one does not *do* evil but only *allows* it, then one is not responsible for its happening. That's false. I may not cut off my son William's fingers but only allow his twin Peter to do it; still, if Peter does it, I am at least partially responsible.

#### *What about evil resulting from natural disturbances?*

One might object that the free will theodicy doesn't explain why God would permit *natural evil*, that is, suffering resulting from natural disturbances like earthquakes, disease, and famine--sources of evil other than free persons.

*Reply.* We might try to extend the free will theodicy to explain natural evil. For example, we might say that, contrary to appearances, such evil really is a *direct* result of the activity of free *nonhuman* persons, powerful evil angels intent on destroying God's creation and harming His creatures. Satan and his cohorts crumple the earth's crust causing volcanoes and earthquakes, they twist strands of DNA into destructive forms, they get inside animals and make them eat each other, and so on. This explanation, however, has questionable apologetic value since it presupposes there are angels, a thesis not accepted by most nonbelievers. Moreover, it flies in the face of our understanding of the natural causes of volcanoes, earthquakes, genetic mutation, predation and other sources of natural evil. A more plausible explanation is that natural evil results *indirectly* from free *human* choices. This line of thought has been sketched most recently in the context of the "natural consequences theodicy," which is worth considering in its own right as well. Let's take a closer look.

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<sup>9</sup> A more thorough presentation of this sort of reply is in Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), 32-44. Note that both the objection and the reply I gave presupposes that an omniscient being could know before creation what uncreated (merely possible) creatures would do if he created them and left it up to them how to behave. Many theists deny this. See, e.g., Robert Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1977).

## 7. Natural consequences theodicy

Suppose God created humans so He might love them and they might return His love. In giving our ancestors the power to love Him, God gave them the ability to withhold their love. And that's what they did. As a consequence, they ruined themselves. Having turned from God, they began to harm one another. Moreover, the potentially destructive forces of nature became their foe since a consequence of separating themselves from God was the loss of their special intellectual powers to predict where and when natural disturbances would occur and to protect themselves from disease and wild beasts, powers dependent upon their union with God. The result is natural evil. This condition—their wickedness and helplessness—has persisted through all the generations, being somehow hereditary.

But God has not left us to our misery. He has instituted the means for us to become reconciled with Him and to undo our ruin. Each of us, however, must cooperate in the venture since the sort of regeneration required involves reorienting our deepest passions and appetites away from our own power and pleasure and directing them toward Him. God could miraculously and immediately regenerate us but He doesn't because our love of Him would then be a sham. Unfortunately, our deepest inclinations so thoroughly turn us away from a proper love of Him that we will not fix ourselves without some sort of external impetus.

The problem God faces, then, is to get us to turn to Him for help while leaving us free in the matter. We will freely turn to Him, however, only if we see our wretched condition and become dissatisfied with it. There is no better way for us to come to see our condition and to grow dissatisfied with it than to permit its natural consequences, the pain and suffering and wrongdoing that our separation from Him has led to, and to make it "as difficult as possible for us to delude ourselves about the kind of world we live in: a hideous world, much of whose hideousness is quite plainly traceable to the inability of human beings to govern themselves or to order their own lives."<sup>10</sup>

An essential part of God's plan of reconciliation, therefore, is for us to perceive that a natural consequence of our attempting to order our lives on our own is a hideous world, a world with evil, including natural evil. Were God to intervene, He would deceive us about the hideousness of our living unto ourselves and He would seriously weaken our only motivation for turning to Him.

*What about the suffering of nonhuman animals?*

While the natural consequence theodicy may well account for God's permitting natural evil to befall human beings, it provides no reason for Him to permit natural evil to befall nonhuman animals.

*Reply.* To fill the gap, one might offer the "natural law theodicy".

## 8. Natural law theodicy

In order to have a world with creatures who can choose freely, the environment in which they are placed must be set up in certain well-defined ways. One of these environmental requirements is that the world be governed by regular and orderly laws of nature. Why is this a requirement?

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<sup>10</sup> Peter van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* (1988), collected in his *God, Knowledge and Mystery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 110. My presentation follows his closely. See also Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* (1985).

Well, imagine a world in which nature was not governed by such laws. What would it be like? Simply put, there would be no regular relationship between the occurrence of one sort of event and another. Let go of the ball and sometimes it drops, sometimes it flies straight up, sometimes it does a loop and crashes through the window. Things would happen haphazardly. The world would be quite chaotic.

But why would this disrupt our ability to choose freely? Because without a great deal of order and regularity in nature we could not predict the effects of our choices, even in the slightest; but we can choose freely only if we can predict the effects of our choices, specifically their most immediate effects. To see the point here, imagine a world in which, despite our best efforts, things just happened haphazardly. Suppose I chose to give you a flower and a big hug to express my affection, but my limbs behaved so erratically that it was as likely that my choice would result in what I intended as that I would poke you in the eye and crush your ribs. Or suppose you were very angry with me, but the air between us behaved so irregularly that any attempt on your part to give me a piece of your mind was about as likely to succeed as rolling a pair of sixes twice in a row. If that's how things worked, then our choices would be related to the world in the way they are related (in this world) to the results of pulling a lever on a slot machine. How things came out would be completely out of our control. They wouldn't be up to us. So we cannot be free unless we are able to predict the (immediate) effects of our choices. And that requires an environment that allows our choices to have predictable effects, that is, an environment that behaves in a law-like, regular, constant fashion.

But now the downside. The very laws of momentum that enable you to give and receive flowers will also cause a falling boulder to crush you if you happen to be under it. The same laws of thermodynamics and fluid dynamics that allow me to talk via air causing my vocal chords to vibrate also cause hurricanes and tornadoes. In general, the sources of natural evil which afflict nonhuman animals, and us—disease, sickness, disasters, birth defects, and the like—“are all the outworking of the natural system of which we are a part. They are the byproducts made possible by that which is necessary for the greater good”.<sup>11</sup>

#### *What about worlds with different natural laws?*

The most wide-ranging objection to the natural law theodicy is that there are worlds God could have created which operate according to different laws of nature, laws which do not have sources of natural evil as a byproduct of their operation but which nevertheless provide a sufficiently stable environment in which we could reliably predict the effects of our free choices. Thus, God could have made free creatures without permitting natural evil, in which case we can't say that God might justifiably permit natural evil for the sake of freedom.

*Reply.* This objection presupposes that there are worlds with the requisite sort of natural laws, those that would provide a stable environment for freedom but which don't have natural evil as a side-effect. But no one has ever specified any such laws. Furthermore, the very possibility of life in our universe hangs on "a large number of physical parameters [that] have apparently arbitrary values such that if those values had been only slightly (very, very slightly different) the universe would contain no life," and hence no free human persons.<sup>12</sup> For all we

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 101. See also Richard Swinburne, "Natural Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1978), 295-301, and *The Existence of God*, chapter 11. C.S. Lewis takes this line in *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978, 21st printing), 30ff.

<sup>12</sup> The point here is Peter van Inwagen's. See his "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 160. For more on the physical parameters in question, see John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989), chapters 1-3.

know, the laws that govern our world are the only possible laws; alternatively, for all we know, there are very tight constraints on what sorts of adjustments in the laws can be permitted while retaining life-sustaining capabilities. Thus, for all we know, there *couldn't* be a world of the sort the objector appeals to: one suitable for free creatures to relate to each other but governed by laws which have no source of natural evil as a byproduct.

*Couldn't God prevent a lot of natural evil without undermining freedom?*

Suppose we distinguish (i) cases of natural evil where God's interference would contribute to the weakening of our ability to predict the consequences of our choices from (ii) cases of natural evil where God's interference would have no such effect at all. Clearly enough, there is a lot of natural evil where God's interference would have no ramifications for our freedom—indeed, mind-boggling much when we take into account evolutionary history or predation. Thus, the only reason given in the natural law theodicy for God's permitting natural evil fails to justify His permitting (ii)-type natural evil, cases where His interference would have had no effect on our ability to predict the consequences of our choices.<sup>13</sup>

*Reply.* One might say that justice requires even-handedness. In that case, if God—who is perfectly just—intervenes to prevent the pain of this or that nonhuman animal in isolated circumstances, He would be obliged to act similarly in all cases of similar suffering. So, for example, if He were to prevent a squirrel deep in the Cascades from feeling pain as it hit a limb on its way down from the top of a towering fir, even-handedness would require Him to prevent me from feeling pain when the wind blew the car door shut on my thumb. But if God prevented the pain of *every* nonhuman animal in isolated circumstances, then even-handedness would require the same intervention for humans; such massive intervention would severely undermine the regularity of the laws of nature and hence eliminate our freedom.

While some people are happy with this reply, I am less sanguine. First, it seems that principles of justice do not require even-handedness—or that if they do, they can be trumped by other considerations in some cases.<sup>14</sup> Second, even-handedness requires treating like cases alike. But the cases at hand are not alike. God's systematic prevention of natural evil in the human domain would result in a loss of human freedom and all that such a loss entails. If God systematically prevents humans from harm when they collide with solid objects, their freedom will be undermined. Similar intervention in the animal kingdom would have no such effect, provided it didn't happen around us. If God regularly prevents nonhuman animals from harm when they collide with solid objects, nobody's freedom will be undermined. Certainly this is a relevant difference, a difference a just God would take into account.

One final, general observation. In my reply to the objection that God could have created another world with different laws, I expressed skepticism about our ability to tell whether any such laws would result in a world that was hospitable to life. This reply is a double-edged sword. For, just as we cannot confidently affirm that there are hospitable worlds with different laws that would have no source of natural evil as a byproduct, so we cannot confidently deny it. My sense is that we have no idea how God would be justified in permitting the suffering of nonhuman animals at Nature's hand, especially suffering unrelated to human society.

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<sup>13</sup> See William Rowe, "William Alston on the Problem of Evil," in Thomas Senor, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 84-87; also see Quentin Smith, "An Atheological Argument from Evil Natural Laws," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* (1991), 154-74.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus arguably taught that God does not always treat us even-handedly. See the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

## 9. Higher-order goods theodicy

Certain goods require evil: "higher-order goods," they are called. These include showing sympathy, compassion and generosity to the sick, the poor, and the marginalized. It is not merely *having* these virtues that is good. Developing, exercising, and confirming them is of immense value, especially when it is difficult to do so since, in that case, a certain sort of courage, self-sacrifice, and fortitude is displayed. Likewise, forgiving wrong done to us, making compensation for having wronged others, showing gratitude for help received, and rewarding those who have done well through serious adversity all require evil. Unless there is evil, there cannot be such higher-order goods. Since these goods are of such tremendous value and they require evil, they justify God's permission of evil.<sup>15</sup>

### *Higher order goods don't require real evil*

True enough, we cannot respond with compassion *to the poor* unless there *are* poor people. We cannot exercise fortitude *in the face of hardship* unless we *are* going through rough times. We cannot forgive *another* unless another *has* wronged us. However, we can develop, exercise, and confirm such character traits in response to *simulated* poverty, hardship, and wrongdoing, "illusory evil," we might call it. There doesn't have to be *real* evil for that to occur. To see how this is possible, imagine a world in which persons were, unbeknownst to them, plugged into "experience machines," complex devices programmed to simulate reality perfectly (as in the popular Hollywood flicks, *Total Recall* or *The Matrix*). Even though the poverty, hardship, wrongdoing, etc. that they "experienced" while on the machine was only illusory evil, they would still be able to respond to it in a virtuous fashion. And we can imagine the machine's program being sensitive to their responses. In that way, they would be able to develop, exercise and confirm their characters without there being any *real* evil to which they are responding. In general, only illusory evil is required for there to be higher-order goods; real evil is unnecessary. So God could have created a world with higher-order goods but without (real) evil.

*Reply.* The objection correctly states that higher-order goods only require illusory evil. However, if God were to set up a world in which there was only illusory evil to which we could respond in the formation and confirmation of our character, something of immense value would be missing. No one would in fact help anybody else; and no one would be helped. No one would in fact be compassionate and sympathetic to another; and no one would receive compassion and sympathy. No one would in fact forgive another; and no one would be forgiven. No one would in fact make compensation to another; and no one would receive compensation. No one would in fact praise or admire their fellows for pursuing noble ends in the face of adversity; and no one would receive such praise and admiration. No one would in fact satisfy their admirable aims and desires; and no one would be their recipient. No one would in fact generously give of their time, their talents or their money to the poor; and no one would receive generosity from another. In short, if every opportunity for a virtuous response were directed at illusory evils, each of us would live in our own little "world," worlds devoid of any genuine interaction and personal relationships.

It seems, then, that if God were to fit us with a capacity to develop, exercise, and confirm our characters *in the context of persons forming relationships with each other*, He must permit evil and suffering.

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<sup>15</sup> See Swinburne, "Some Major Strands of Theodicy," and *Providence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); also see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978, rev ed).

## 10. "The Big Reason"

Let's take stock of where we have come so far. Recall premise 3 of the argument from evil found in section 2 above. That premise states that there probably is no reason that would justify God in permitting horrific evil and suffering, or so much of it. Our question was whether this was true. One way to answer this question is to try to think of a justifying reason, a theodicy. That's what we've been doing. It's now time to assess our efforts.

What we have seen so far, I submit, is this: each of the reasons sketched above helps us to see how God would be justified in permitting *some* evil and suffering, even a great deal of it. But at least two questions remain. For even if these reasons would justify God in permitting a great deal of evil and suffering, it doesn't follow that they would justify God in permitting any *horrific* evil and suffering. And even if they would justify God in permitting some horrific evil and suffering, even a good deal of it, it does not follow that any of them would justify God in permitting *as much* as there in fact is.<sup>16</sup> So, do these reasons help us see how God would be justified in permitting horrific evil and suffering, and so much of it?

In answering this question, we need to remember that even if none of these reasons *by itself* would justify God, *taken together* they might. Too often when people reflect on our question, they approach it in a piecemeal fashion, arguing that this reason doesn't work, that reason doesn't work, and so on, only considering each reason in isolation from all the others. We need to be alive to the possibility that these reasons can be *combined* into a single reason that would help us see how God would be justified.

So suppose we lump together all the different reasons sketched above, and let's add any we know of that have been left out, even those that are distinctive to a particular theological perspective, e.g. sympathetic identification with Christ's suffering, or the great goods of Incarnation and Atonement.<sup>17</sup> Call the result *The Big Reason*. And let's focus on the really difficult part of our question, the part about the amount of horrific evil and suffering: Does The Big Reason allow us to see how God would be justified in permitting *so much* of it?

Suppose *one instance* of horrific evil or suffering had not occurred. Just to focus our reflections, note that hundreds of thousands of human beings have undergone extreme torture throughout human history. Suppose that just one of those cases had not occurred. Suppose that fourteen-year old Motholeli had lost consciousness after being gang-raped and beaten on March 25, 2004, and that her attackers had left her for dead, instead of burning and then dismembering her while she was fully conscious, which is in fact what happened. Could God have prevented the burning and dismemberment, and just allowed the rape and beating? Of course He could have. Is it apparent to you that, had He prevented the burning and dismemberment, and just allowed the rape and beating, the great goods involved in The Big Reason would either fail to

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<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, none of the reasons we've canvassed seem to do justice to the phenomenon of nonhuman animals undergoing pain and suffering at times (e.g., pre-human history) and in locations (e.g. the wilderness) far removed from human concern. In the latter connection, we might consider an argument from evil that appeals exclusively to this phenomenon. For a consideration of other theodicies about nonhuman animal pain and suffering generally, and during pre-human evolutionary history in particular, see Michael Murray, *God, Darwin, and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> On identification with the suffering of Christ, see, e.g., Marilyn McCord Adams, "Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), and "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989), 297-310. On the great goods of Incarnation and Atonement and their potential role in theodicy, see Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," in Peter van Inwagen, ed., *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 1-25.

obtain or be objectionably reduced? (Think through each of the goods carefully in this connection, and their combination.)

Some people say that we should not expect to be able to see how each particular instance of horrific evil and suffering must be permitted in order for the goods in question to be achieved. Rather, they say, we should expect to see how horrific evil and suffering in general must be permitted; and we should expect to see how the permission of so much rather than a lot less is required. Suppose they are right. What would count as a lot less? A world without extreme torture would do, I would think. Or how about a world in which genocide didn't occur? Or perhaps a world in which the eboli virus never evolved. Take your pick. God could have easily prevented any of them. Suppose He had. Then *a lot* less horrific evil and/or suffering would have occurred. In that case, is it apparent to you that the goods involved in The Big Reason would have been lost or objectionably reduced?

Suppose God had simply prevented us from ever having genocidal thoughts. Would we then have been unable to perceive the hideousness of living unto ourselves? Would we have lacked the requisite incentive to turn to God? Presumably not: our hideousness would still have been apparent in the vast panoply of non-genocidal activities we engage in.<sup>18</sup> What about self-determination, deep responsibility, relationships of love, higher-order goods, punishment, union with God, sympathetic identification with Christ, the Incarnation and Atonement, and so on, and their combination into one colossal good? Would any of them, by themselves or in combination, have been lost or significantly diminished if God had systematically prevented genocide or torture or the eboli virus? (Think through each of the goods carefully in this connection, and their combination.)

We each need to answer this question for ourselves, but for my own part, on careful reflection I can't see how any of them by themselves or in combination would have been lost or diminished if God had prevented Motholeli's burning and dismemberment. Nor can I see how any of them by themselves or in combination would have been lost or reduced if God had prevented genocide, or extreme torture or the eboli virus. Thus, I can't see how God would be justified in permitting so much horrific evil and suffering rather than a lot less.

If I'm right—that is, if we really can't think of a reason that would justify God in permitting so much horrific evil and suffering—does it follow that premise 3 is true? Not at all. That would follow only on the assumption that if there were a God-justifying reason, we would probably be aware of it and see how the goods involved in it required the permission of so much horrific evil and suffering. And it is by no means clear that this assumption is true. Still, it seems that an important basis for thinking that premise 3 is false—the way of theodicy—is not available to us.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> But wouldn't God be deceiving us about the natural consequences of our ordering our lives on our own? Perhaps. But *some* deception may be worth it. Think of it like this: Suppose that unbeknownst to us, God would not allow an all-out global nuclear war even if a natural consequence of our miserable condition included an ability to do it. Should we accuse Him of wrongful deception upon learning this? Hardly. I should think that we should be grateful.

<sup>19</sup> This essay is largely based on some material from my chapter, "God, Evil, and Suffering," in Mike Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within*, Eerdmans 1999, 76-115