

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL OR THE GOODNESS OF GOD

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The problem of evil is supposed to challenge belief in God's existence by calling attention to the wickedness and suffering in the world. God is wholly good and all-powerful. Thus, according to the argument, He would be both willing and able to put a stop to all evil. Evil exists, however; so, the argument concludes, a wholly good God must not exist. I examine different formulations of the argument from evil and defend their cogency against some of the contemporary responses to these arguments.

On the other hand, the various arguments from evil depend on accounts of God's goodness that turn out to be difficult to justify. Drawing from the work of Christopher Coope, I suggest another way of looking at the problem. If we piously believe that God exists and accept that we experience different varieties of evil, we must reject any belief about God's goodness that in conjunction with our other beliefs entails an inconsistency. In this way, we can rule out accounts of God's goodness that are incompatible with His omnipotent, omniscient character and with the testimony of creation. Using the testimony of creation, we may develop constraints on the ways we are able to understand God's goodness. Any explanation of God's goodness must take these constraints into account if it is to be able to explain the existence of the various kinds of evils we experience.

If God exists then everything, including all instances of sin and suffering, are manifestations of God's goodness. I argue that the accounts of John Hick and Peter van Inwagen fail to give satisfactory explanations for the ways in which sin and suffering are

manifestations of God's goodness, but that St. Augustine's account of evil in *On Free Choice of the Will* successfully explains such evil. He argues that all evil is either sin or the punishment for sin, and that the existence of sinners and the punishment of sinners are each manifestations of God's goodness. He believes that while we genuinely experience evil, evil as such lacks being and thus cannot count as evidence against God's existence.

DEDICATION

To the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

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I would like to thank Dr. Hugh McCann, my committee chair, for working with me and supporting me throughout this project. Without his guidance my work would have been vastly inferior in quality. I am indebted to Dr. Scott Austin for patiently correcting my misunderstandings of Augustine and for helping me to develop my ideas. If I do not accurately represent Augustine's views in this thesis, it is despite Dr. Austin's input. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Boenig for being willing to be on my committee despite his heavy workload.

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Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Kate. Without her love and support, I would have been able to complete my thesis in a more timely manner. I hope she does not regret her decision to marry me when she finally discovers what a mediocre thesis-writer I am.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*'Just one more example, for curiosity's sake. It's very typical.... [T]here lived a certain General, a fabulously rich landowner with connections in high places. He was one of those individuals... who, having retired from active service, were almost convinced that they had earned the right of life and death over their serfs. Such people existed then. Well, this General lived on his estates with two thousand serfs. He considered himself very high and mighty, and treated his poorer neighbours as spongers and made them the butt of his jokes. He had kennels with hundreds of dogs, and close on a hundred huntsmen, all in uniform and all on horseback. Well, a little serf boy, not more than eight years old, threw a stone while playing and hit the paw of the General's favourite hound. "Why's my favourite dog limping?" They explained to him that apparently this child had thrown a stone at it and hurt its paw. "Aha, it was you, was it?" said the General, taking a good look at him. "Seize him!" They seized him, dragged him away from his mother, and locked him up all night in a closet. At dawn, the General emerged all ready for the hunt; he sat on his horse, surrounded by his retainers, his dogs, his servants, and his huntsmen on horseback. All the domestic staff were assembled for their edification, and in front of them all was the mother of the guilty boy. The boy was brought out of the lock-up. It was a dark, cold, foggy autumn day, splendid for hunting. The General ordered that the child be undressed, and he stood there stark naked, shivering and petrified with fear, not daring to make a sound... "Make him run!" ordered the General. "Run, run!" the huntsmen shouted at him, and the boy ran... "After him!" roared the General, and set his whole pack of borzoi hounds on him. Before his mother's very eyes, the child was hunted down and torn to pieces by dogs!'*¹

This world is filled with every sort of the most disturbing wickedness and suffering. One can scarcely imagine any crime so terrible that the magnitude of its cruelty is not surpassed by an even more outrageous villainy that actually happens. Consider the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, during which the Cheka (the Soviet state

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. Ignat Avsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 304-305.

police) instituted a campaign of political killings, torture, and imprisonment. In a startlingly earnest interview in 1918, Martin Latsis – one of Cheka’s chief administrators – described its role in extreme terms to the Bolshevik-sponsored newspaper, *Red Terror*:

We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. During the investigation, do not look for evidence that the accused acted in deed or word against Soviet power. The first questions that you ought to put are: To what class does he belong? What is his origin? What is his education or profession? And it is these questions that ought to determine the fate of the accused. In this lies the essence and significance of the Red Terror.²

Or consider a passage I find by opening an abridged copy of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* completely at random, a passage in which he describes the conditions of a Soviet prison camp in the 1920s:

...And three foppish young men with the faces of junkies (the lead man drives back the crowd of prisoners not with a club but with a riding crop) drag along swiftly by the shoulders a prisoner with limp arms and legs dressed only in his underwear. His face is horrible – *flowing* like liquid! They drag him off *beneath the bell tower*. They squeeze him through that little door and shoot him in the back of the head – steep stairs lead down inside, and he tumbles down them, and they can pile up as many as seven or eight men in there, and then send men to drag out the corpses and detail women (mothers and wives of men who have emigrated to Constantinople and religious believers who refuse to recant their faith and to allow their children to be torn from it) to wash down the steps.³

And, of course, there are so many other accounts of incredible cruelty. The evil deeds of evil people have afflicted humanity throughout every period of history, without respite.

If anything, our technological progress has only made brutality more efficient and pervasive, as seems especially clear when we consider the orgy of murder brought about by both totalitarian and revolutionary movements in the twentieth century. Humanity’s

² Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), 81.

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper, 2007), 186-187.

record of violence fully justifies Hegel's description of history as a "slaughter-bench".⁴ Evil choices and the suffering that results from such choices are *moral evil*.

Alternatively, consider instead the suffering that occurs without human cause. Think of the infamous eighteenth century Lisbon earthquake, the first century destruction of Pompeii by volcanic eruption, or the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Think of the bubonic plague, which reportedly killed over half of the citizens of Constantinople in 541-542 A.D.⁵ and between 25 and 40 percent of Europe's population from 1347-1351 A.D.⁶ We can hardly imagine the despair one would experience while living – and dying – during such bleak moments in history. During the fourteenth century outbreak of the plague, a Sieneese chronicler named Agnolo di Tura wrote,

The plague began in Siena in May, a horrible and cruel event. I do not know where to begin describing its relentless cruelty; almost everyone who witnessed it seemed stupefied by grief. It is not possible for the human tongue to recount such a horrible thing, and those who did not see such horrors can well be called blessed. They died almost immediately; they would swell up under the armpits and in the groin and drop dead while talking. Fathers abandoned their children, wives left their husbands, brothers forsook each other; all fled from each other because it seemed that the disease could be passed on by breath and sight. And so they died, and one could not find people to carry out burials for money or friendship. People brought members of their own household to the ditches as best they could, without priest or holy office or ringing of bells, and in many parts of Siena large deep ditches were dug for the great number of dead; hundreds died day and night, and all were thrown into these pits and covered with layers of earth, so much that the pits were filled, and more were dug.

And I, Agnolo di Tura, known as the Fat, buried five of my children with my own hands. And there were those who had been so poorly covered with earth that dogs dragged them from there and through the city and fed on corpses.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 24.

⁵ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 198.

⁶ Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper, 1994), 563. Other sources estimate that the mortality rate in Europe was as high as fifty percent in those years.

Nobody wept for the dead, since each was awaiting death; and so many died that everyone thought that the end of the world had come.⁷

So, not only do we observe that humanity is prone to constant violence – we also find that nature inflicts tremendous misery on humanity through natural disaster and disease. All evil that is not moral evil is *natural evil*, because it results from something outside of the control of free individuals. Whatever else we may claim of this world, we cannot reasonably dispute the existence of various kinds of evil of incredible magnitude.

The existence of these evils leads some to infer that a good God cannot exist. After all, if He did exist, surely He would put a stop to all wickedness and suffering. As Hume asks (referring to God), “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”⁸ Arguments against God’s existence from evil invoke the properties traditionally ascribed to God. According to the traditional doctrines of Christianity, God is omnipotent and completely good. If He is omnipotent, then He is capable of eliminating any evil He chooses. If He is wholly good, then surely He will not tolerate the existence of evil. But, as anyone can see, not only does evil exist – we can hardly bear to think about the quantity and the magnitude of the evils in the world.

The Logical Problem of Evil

In the twentieth century J. L. Mackie affirms the argument from evil as a decisive defeat for belief in God’s existence. He writes, “I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown,

⁷ George Holmes, ed., *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 249.

⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another....”⁹ If Mackie is correct, then by believing in God Christians are guilty of a fatal inconsistency. Mackie continues:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them are true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.¹⁰

Mackie believes that given the truth of two of any of the three propositions – God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; evil exists – the third must be false. This version of the problem of evil is called the *logical* problem of evil because belief in the existence of both God and evil is supposed to entail a contradiction. Of course, an omnipotent being might be wholly good and yet remain ignorant of the existence of certain evils.¹¹

Perhaps evil exists only because God does not know about it. This possibility will not satisfy the Christian, however. Omniscience is another of God’s qualities, according to traditional Christian theology; God is surely aware of the existence of all evil.

Accordingly, we may restate the argument from evil more fully by taking into account God’s omniscience. Mackie believes that the following two propositions are inconsistent:

- (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.

⁹ J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955): 200.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 18-19.

(2) There is evil in the world.¹²

If Mackie is correct, then, given the obvious truth of (2), Christian belief in God is not merely silly or unwise – it is positively incoherent.

As Mackie himself notes, however, the contradiction is not yet readily apparent. He believes that to make the contradiction manifest, “quasi-logical rules” or additional premises are necessary – such as, for instance: a good being always eliminates the evil it knows about as much as it can.¹³ An omnipotent God can do anything that is not logically contradictory, including putting a stop to any sort of evil; an omniscient God knows about everything, including every instance of evil; and He is wholly good, so if our “quasi-logical” premise is true, God eliminates the evil He knows about as much as He can. God is capable of stopping all evil, knows about all evil, and His goodness (by our proposed quasi-logical rule) entails that He will stop all the evil He can and knows about – from this, it follows that evil does not exist, and yet the honest Christian is committed to believing that it does exist.

Of course, if (1) and (2) are to be shown inconsistent, then the additional premise making the contradiction explicit must not merely be true. It must be necessarily true, as Alvin Plantinga rightly notes.¹⁴ But why think that it is logically necessary that good always eliminates evil as far as it can? Is it even true? Are there no circumstances in which a good being knowingly but rightly allows evil? Consider the possibility of a good parent who allows a child to suffer from the relatively minor consequences of a

¹² These propositions come from Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 165.

¹³ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” 201. I am slightly modifying Mackie’s argument to account for God’s omniscience.

¹⁴ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 17.

poor decision so that the child will learn independently not to make that poor decision anymore. Surely it is not impossible for such a parent to count as good. Finding a necessarily true “quasi-logical” rule that establishes the inconsistency of (1) and (2) is more difficult than one might initially expect.

Plantinga’s Free Will Defense

Plantinga offers a strategy for establishing the consistency of (1) and (2) and thereby defeating the logical problem of evil. If the theist can find a third proposition, consistent with (1), and that in conjunction with (1) entails (2), then he establishes the consistency of (1) and (2).¹⁵ This third proposition need not be true, or even plausible. Its only role is to establish the consistency of (1) and (2) – nothing more. The conjunction of the following propositions is a candidate to play the role of this third proposition:

(3) It was not within God’s power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil.

(4) God created a world containing moral good.¹⁶

The consistency of (4) and (1) is above reproach. A good God would obviously be capable of creating a world with moral good. The question is about whether (3) is consistent with (1). That is, the question is about whether we can coherently claim that it is beyond the power of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God to create a world with moral good and lacking moral evil. If creating such a world is beyond God’s

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 165.

¹⁶ These propositions are taken from Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 54.

power, then God's creation of a world containing moral good entails the existence of evil. From this, it follows that God's existence is consistent with the existence of evil.¹⁷

Plantinga attempts to establish the possibility that God cannot create a world containing moral good and lacking moral evil by offering a form of the *free will defense*. In general, the free will defense attempts to ascribe the source of the existence of evil to the free choices of individual humans, thereby absolving God of responsibility for such evil. According to Plantinga, a world in which people freely choose to do good acts is better than a world without freedom.¹⁸ If God grants people free will, however, He cannot cause or otherwise determine that our choices are morally good.¹⁹ If He could, then we would not really be free. Creatures capable of freely choosing moral good are also capable of freely choosing evil. God has created free creatures and at least some of them have chosen evil – but because they are free, *they* are responsible for the evil they create, and *not* God. After all, according to Plantinga, not even an omnipotent God can grant freedom and yet determine that we only choose good. Furthermore, a good God would want to create a world containing moral good.²⁰ Thus, if some creatures choose evil, then it is beyond even God's power to create a world containing moral good and lacking moral evil. If this conclusion is even possibly true, then God's existence is consistent with the existence of moral evil.

¹⁷ This conclusion holds even if God is actually able to create a world with moral good and without moral evil. Plantinga only needs to establish the *possibility* (and not the actuality) that God cannot create a world with moral good and without moral evil in order to refute the logical problem of evil. Plantinga's argument depends on it not being essential to God's nature that He be able to create a world with moral good and without moral evil.

¹⁸ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 166.

¹⁹ The free will defense depends upon the truth of a libertarian understanding of free will. For the remainder of my thesis I assume that we have free will in a libertarian sense.

²⁰ This general summary of the free will defense comes from Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 166-167.

So far, the free will defense does not account for natural evil, however. God's creation of significantly free beings does not entail the existence of natural evil, and yet there is also natural evil in the world. Plantinga introduces the possibility that what looks to us like natural evil is the result of the free choices of non-human actors, i.e., fallen angels.²¹ If fallen angels are the cause of all "natural" disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis, then all such evil is actually moral evil. Accordingly, it is possible that God's creation of free beings (including both humans and angels) entails all the evil we see in the world. Whether evil occurs or not depends on the free choices of free beings. God is not responsible for such evil because it is impossible for Him to create free beings and force them to choose good without destroying their freedom.

Plantinga's account of the source of apparently natural evil may seem implausible, but it is important to remember that he is not interested in plausibility. He is putting forward a *defense*, not a *theodicy*. A defense merely attempts to establish the consistency of God's existence and the existence of evil; the account used to establish this consistency need not be true. A theodicy, on the other hand, is an attempt to "justify the ways of God to men" by giving a true account of why evil exists in the world.²² Because Plantinga only intends for his account to work as a defense, we need not find his account of apparently natural evil plausible. As long as it is logically possible, then he establishes the consistency of God's existence and the existence of evil.

Most philosophers believe that Plantinga's free will defense successfully rebuts the logical problem of evil. Robert Adams echoes the sentiments of many philosophers

²¹ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 192.

²² John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 11.

when he claims that “it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved” the logical problem of evil.²³ I will challenge the apparent success of Plantinga’s free will defense in Chapter II.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

Even assuming that Plantinga successfully defeats the logical problem of evil, however, other formulations of the argument from evil remain. Even if evil is sometimes necessarily involved with some greater good or other – as may be the case with the existence of moral evil and God’s granting free will to some of His creatures – are there not some instances of evil that have no benefit whatsoever and whose existence is entirely superfluous? Would not the existence of such evil count as evidence against God’s existence? On the basis of this insight, William Rowe offers what is often called the *evidential problem of evil*.²⁴ The argument goes as follows:

- (5) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (6) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore:

- (7) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.²⁵

Let us describe any instance of suffering referred to in (5) as a case of *gratuitous suffering*. According to (6), if there is even a single case of gratuitous suffering, then

²³ Robert M. Adams, "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," *Alvin Plantinga* 5 (1985): 225-255.

²⁴ Hugh McCann notes the potentially misleading nature of this name in a footnote in *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 245-246.

²⁵ William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 336.

God does not exist. The argument is valid, so the only way to undermine its conclusion is to cast doubt on one of its premises. The theist must deny either that God would put a stop to all gratuitous suffering He can or that there are any cases of gratuitous suffering. Rowe thinks that a denial of the former is unpromising because (6) “seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists.”²⁶

If, on the other hand, the theist seeks to deny the existence of gratuitous evil, he is then committed to the claim that every case of suffering is necessary either for bringing about some greater good or for the prevention of some evil that is as bad as or worse. Rowe challenges the plausibility of this claim by offering the hypothetical (but plausible) example of a fawn that gets trapped in a forest fire, suffers horrible burns, and then lies in a state of complete agony for several days before dying from its wounds.²⁷ It is difficult to see how the fawn’s suffering is necessary either for bringing about some greater good or for preventing any other evil as bad as or worse. The fawn’s miserable plight appears completely pointless to us.

Of course, without omniscience, we cannot be absolutely certain that the fawn’s suffering is pointless. Events are connected to other events in subtle and complex ways that are ultimately beyond our ability to trace comprehensively; so *perhaps* in the grand scheme the horrible suffering of the fawn brings about a greater good that would not

²⁶ Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism,” 337. Casting doubt on Rowe’s certainty about the truth of (6), McCann writes, “An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God could easily have aims and values far exceeding any we have ever imagined. How they are fulfilled at all, much less the role sin and suffering may play in their development, could in principle escape us utterly.” *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, 72-73. I will take a closer look at (6) in Chapter III.

²⁷ Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism,” 337.

otherwise have occurred, or perhaps it prevents some worse evil. We cannot state with absolute certainty that it is an instance of gratuitous suffering. We are only able to say that the suffering is *apparently* gratuitous – we cannot be sure that it is *actually* gratuitous. We can make the same point about any case of apparently gratuitous suffering. Thus, we cannot be absolutely certain that (5) is true.²⁸

Nevertheless, to appreciate the full force of the evidential problem of evil we must remember to keep in mind God's divine attributes. He is omnipotent, and thus able to accomplish anything that does not result in a logical absurdity. He is also omniscient, and thus aware of all the possible ways He has available to carry out His will. We read about and otherwise observe an immense number of cases involving incredible and seemingly pointless suffering. Can it really be the case that the best way for God to carry out His good purposes involves permitting every such instance of suffering? Remember, if there is even one case of gratuitous suffering in the world, then the truth of (6) entails that God does not exist. While we may not be certain that any particular case of apparently gratuitous suffering is actually gratuitous, it is extremely unlikely that not a single case of apparently gratuitous suffering is actually gratuitous. Thus, (5) is almost certainly true, and given the truth of (6), the conclusion that God does not exist is also almost certainly true.

Skeptical Theism

The theist might deny that we are justified in believing (5) by appealing to our epistemic limitations, arguing that we are not able to determine whether any particular

²⁸ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism," 337.

case of suffering is gratuitous or not. This approach is called *skeptical theism*.

Whenever one makes a claim about gratuitous evil, it cannot involve certainty; consequently, it tends to be of the form: “x appears to be an instance of gratuitous evil.”

In defense of skeptical theism, Stephen Wykstra offers an epistemic principle that is supposed to be a necessary condition for being justified in saying that something “appears” to be. He calls it the *Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access* (CORNEA):

(CORNEA) 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 discernable to her.²⁹

In other words, in order to be justified in saying that something “appears” to be *x*, it should be discernable from cases in which it is not *x*. Wykstra offers an example that clarifies the role of CORNEA:

Searching for a table, you look through a doorway. The room is very large – say, the size of a Concorde hangar – and it is filled with bulldozers, dead elephants, Toyotas, and other vision-obstructing objects. Surveying this clutter from the doorway, and seeing no table, should you say: ‘It does not appear that there is a table in the room’?³⁰

The fact that we cannot see a table in this scenario is clearly not enough to justify saying, “there does not appear to be a table in here.” We cannot reasonably claim that there does not appear to be a table because we are not in a position to know – there could be a table hiding almost anywhere in the clutter and we would have no idea. From our perspective, the difference between how things look in the hangar with a table and how they would look without a table is nil. According to CORNEA, because the hanger with

²⁹ Stephen J. Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

a table is indistinguishable from the hanger without a table – that is, indistinguishable given our limited perspective – we cannot justifiably claim that the hangar does not appear to have a table in it.

Wykstra takes up the question of gratuitous suffering in light of CORNEA by asking how we would be able to discern pointless suffering from suffering that serves a higher purpose. Consider our ability to discern the kind of goods that could result from suffering. Highlighting the difference between God’s perspective and our perspective, he writes:

A modest proposal might be that [God’s] wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human’s is to a one-month old infant’s. ...If such goods as this exist [i.e., goods resulting from suffering], it might not be unlikely that we can discern some of them: even a one-month old infant can perhaps discern, in its inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him. But if outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents’ purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer – which is to say, it is not likely at all.³¹

Even though we are capable of seeing the good that comes from some instances of suffering, we are not in the epistemic position to know whether or not any good comes from every single case of suffering. According to Wykstra, plausibly it is beyond our power to discern the good that could come of the suffering of Rowe’s fawn, and thus we are not justified in claiming that it appears to be gratuitous suffering. So, the skeptical theist thinks we are not in the epistemic position to claim that any suffering is gratuitous.

Taking the skeptical theist position on suffering has the downside of ruling out our ability to justify happier “x appears to be y” statements, according to Richard

³¹ Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’,” 88.

Swinburne. He asks, “Why should our inadequacies of moral belief lead us to suppose that the world is worse rather than better than it really is?”³² If our epistemic limitations prevent us from seeing the potential good in cases of extreme suffering, do they not also prevent us from discerning possible evil in cases of complete joyousness or peace? The skeptical theist tells us that we may be underestimating the good of the world when we try to discern the good in cases of intense suffering; our efforts to understand such suffering will fail because of our cognitive limitations. This leaves the skeptical theist vulnerable to the charge that he may in fact be overestimating the good in the world. For example, an event that might otherwise seem to us unambiguously good – say, the birth of a child to a young married couple – may yet turn out to involve unspeakable evil, even if no human person ever discerns any hint of this evil. The underlying evil in such a case might be just as mysterious and unobservable to us as the supposed underlying good that might accompany the suffering of Rowe’s fawn.

Can this really be the state of our understanding of good and evil? Hugh McCann writes, “We cannot understand the world in anything like traditional religious terms, much less live the kind of life religion enjoins, if we declare that when it comes to good and evil, understanding cannot be had.”³³ Surely this point is correct. If we cannot know whether certain states of affairs affecting others are ultimately good or bad, then we cannot really know how to work in the service of good or how to fight against evil. We are called upon to relieve the suffering of others. If our epistemic limitations are

³² Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

³³ McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, 73.

such that we never have any idea of the good that accompanies particularly intense suffering, then for all we know our actions to relieve suffering turn out to hinder some higher good – and perhaps our efforts to relieve suffering even turn out to be evil. To the contrary – if a human person has the opportunity to save Rowe’s fawn from the forest fire, then surely it is good for him to do so. The epistemic humility of skeptical theism turns out to be an implausible, *ad hoc* humility that brings with it too many problems to constitute a substantial response to the evidential problem of evil.

The Local Argument from Evil

In fact, there are ways of bringing into sharper focus the argument against God’s existence from the evidential problem of evil. First, I will draw a distinction between *global* arguments from evil and *local* arguments from evil. Global arguments from evil cite the existence of evil in general as evidence against God’s existence, without specifying any particular evil.³⁴ The logical problem of evil is a version of the global argument from evil. Local arguments from evil focus on a particular instance (or particular instances) of evil to make the case against God’s existence.³⁵ We may have a good answer for the global problem of evil and yet find such an explanation inadequate to account for certain instances of evil. Rowe’s argument against God’s existence (as listed in my propositions (5), (6), and (7)) is stated in global terms, but we can articulate it in local terms as well.

³⁴ Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

In order to formulate a local version of the argument from evil, let us consider another case of suffering – that, unfortunately, actually happened – as told by Peter van Inwagen:

A man came upon a young woman in an isolated place. He overpowered her, chopped off her arms at the elbows with an axe, raped her, and left her to die. Somehow she managed to drag herself on the stumps of her arms to the side of a road, where she was discovered. She lived, but she experienced indescribable suffering, and although she is alive, she must live the rest of her life without arms and with the memory of what she had been forced to endure.³⁶

Van Inwagen calls this horrifying incident “the Mutilation”.³⁷ The Mutilation seems to us to be an archetypal example of gratuitous suffering. It is difficult for us to imagine any good in connection with such suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient God could not have brought about by less terrible means. Using the Mutilation as evidence, I offer a local argument against God’s existence in the form of Rowe’s evidential argument from evil:

- (8) The Mutilation occurred.
- (9) God could have prevented the Mutilation without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (10) God would have prevented the Mutilation if He could have, unless He could not have done so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore:

- (11) God does not exist.³⁸

³⁶ Van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 97.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Van Inwagen uses the Mutilation to put forward his version of the local argument from evil in *Problem of Evil*, 97-98. I have adapted his argument to make it simpler.

Unfortunately, the Mutilation actually occurred, so (8) is true. Assuming that (10) is true – which many will see as necessary to safeguard the wholly good nature of God – the defender of God’s existence is committed to denying the truth of (9). He must argue that it is not within God’s power to prevent the Mutilation from occurring without losing some greater good or preventing some other evil equally bad or worse. That is, he must argue that God has some higher purpose in allowing the Mutilation and that there is no less harrowing way to bring about this higher purpose. God is omnipotent, so He can do anything that does not entail a logical absurdity. Thus – again, assuming the truth of (10) – the defender of God’s existence is committed to arguing that the Mutilation is *logically necessary* for the bringing about of a good (or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse) that outweighs the evil of the Mutilation. If the Mutilation is not logically necessary for bringing about such a good then it is a case of gratuitous suffering.

We can give variations of this argument and replace the Mutilation with other examples of horrible suffering. Consider the deaths of the children of poor Agnolo di Tura from bubonic plague, or each of the quarter million people who died in the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Consider also each of the victims of the Vladimir Lenin era Red Terror, or each of the prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps. Assuming that something like (10) is true for each of these cases – that is, assuming that God prevents such suffering if He can without forgoing some greater good or without thereby allowing some equal or greater evil – then each of these instances of immense suffering must be *logically necessary* to bring about some higher purpose. Even considered individually, these are potentially powerful arguments against God’s existence. It is difficult to

imagine what higher good could require any one of these tragedies in such a way that even an omnipotent God could not bring them about any other way. And even if we could show that several such instances of incredible suffering do entail some higher good in this way, considering all of these tragedies together from the perspective of Rowe's evidential argument from evil makes the challenge exponentially more difficult for the defender of God's existence. Can it really be that every single case of apparently gratuitous suffering is logically necessary to bring about a greater good (or to prevent a worse evil)?

As Rowe admits, we are not in the position to know with absolute certainty that any particular instance of suffering is gratuitous. Indeed, it is likely that some instances of suffering that we would ordinarily think of as pointless actually do result in a good that we cannot discern. And it is even possible that not a single instance of apparently gratuitous suffering is actually gratuitous. Nevertheless – given the truth of (6) – we are bound to accept that the case against God's existence is extraordinarily strong, and that in all likelihood He does not exist.

CHAPTER II

USING GOD'S LIMITATIONS TO EXPLAIN THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL

*'But then, what about the children, what shall I do about them? That's the question I cannot answer. For the hundredth time I repeat – the questions are endless, but I am only considering the children because what I have to say in their case is incontrovertibly clear. Listen: if everyone has to suffer in order to bring about eternal harmony through all that suffering, tell me, please, what have the children to do with this? It's quite incomprehensible that they too should have to suffer, that they too should have to pay for harmony by their suffering. Why should they be the grist for someone else's mill, the means of ensuring someone's future harmony? I understand the universality of sin, I understand the universality of retribution, but children have no part in this universal sin, and if it's true that they are stained with the sins of their fathers, then, of course, that's a truth not of this world, and I don't understand it. Some cynic may say that the children will grow up and will in time sin themselves, but he didn't grow up, that eight-year-old torn apart by dogs.... I want forgiveness, I want to embrace everyone, I want an end to suffering. And if the suffering of children is required to make up the total suffering necessary to attain the truth, then I say here and now that no truth is worth such a price.'*³⁹

In the last chapter I sought to consider the quantity and the magnitude of evil in the world with the utmost seriousness, and also how it bears on the question of God's existence. In this chapter I wish to consider the divine qualities of God with the same seriousness, by remembering the following words of St. Augustine: "The truest beginning of piety is to think as highly of God as possible."⁴⁰ The God of traditional Christian theology is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. If there are multiple, competing ways of understanding any of these characteristics, I will adopt whichever understanding that allows me to think as highly of God as is possible without lapsing

³⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, 306-307.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 3.

into incoherence. Any compromise on any of these characteristics constitutes an abandonment of the traditional Christian God; so, if the problem of evil rules out the possibility of a being that has all the traditional divine attributes – and that has each of these attributes in the fullest sense – then it successfully proves that the God of traditional Christian belief does not exist. I will take up and consider different responses to the problem of evil that fail to maintain the highest possible understanding of God’s attributes in order to make clear the challenge that evil poses for belief in the traditional Christian God.

Against Open Theism

William Hasker defends a controversial account of God called *open theism*, which denies that God is a timeless, immutable being. Hasker describes the open theist account of God’s knowledge as follows:

Open theism holds that creatures are “free” in the libertarian sense, meaning that it is really possible, in a given situation, for the creature to do something different than the thing it actually does. Furthermore, the choices of this sort that will be made in the future do not exist now and as such are unknowable for any being, God included. It is not a matter of God’s knowledge being less than perfect; rather, with regard to these undetermined future events, there is simply nothing for God to know.⁴¹

According to Hasker, God’s creation of humanity is a creative and risky endeavor in which we cooperate with God in shaping the future and in which He does not have total control over our future circumstances. He lacks foreknowledge – foreknowledge is impossible in this account – and thus He also lacks the ability to foresee and forestall all future occurrences of evil. It is never God’s intention that evil should occur, but it

⁴¹ William Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 29.

sometimes does occur because God is only one of the agents responsible for shaping the future – our free choices also shape the future in ways God cannot always anticipate.

The open theist account of God’s omniscience differs from that of traditional theology, which holds that God has perfect knowledge of the future. Open theism has difficulty in accounting for the possibility of accurate prophecy.⁴² As Thomas Flint points out, John 6:64 implies that Jesus has foreknowledge: “Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.”⁴³ While Hasker affirms the omniscience of God, he only does so by restricting the bounds of the knowable in a way that excludes future events. There is no contradiction involved in claiming that the future is knowable to God – so, because an account of God’s omniscience that includes perfect foreknowledge is available as a possibility, we must reject open theism as giving an account of omniscience that is too weak to do justice to the traditional God of Christianity.

Against Plantinga’s Free Will Defense

Another account that I argue fails to do justice to God’s divine attributes is Plantinga’s free will defense. My claim here is controversial, because, as Hasker notes, “There is at present a widespread philosophical consensus, shared by atheists as well as theists, that [the logical problem of evil] has been satisfactorily answered by Alvin Plantinga’s free-will defense.”⁴⁴ I believe, however, that Plantinga fails to account for a sufficiently strong enough notion of God’s omnipotence. I will spend the rest of this

⁴² Thomas Flint makes a convincing case that the open theist account of prophecy does not match the Scriptural account of prophecy in his *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 100-102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴ Hasker, *Triumph of God over Evil*, 42.

chapter attempting to prove that it is within God's power to actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil. If true, this claim undermines Plantinga's solution to the logical problem of evil.

As I mentioned in Chapter I, Plantinga defends the possibility that the source of all evil in the world is significantly free creatures that choose wrongly. Mackie objects to this, claiming that introducing free will is not enough to secure God's omnipotence and goodness given the existence of such evil:

[If] God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.⁴⁵

For any human person, significant freedom to make morally significant decisions entails the logical possibility of lifelong perfect moral behavior. If circumstances are ever such that he is incapable of choosing good, then in such circumstances he is not genuinely free. As long as he is free, however, the possibility remains that all of his morally significant choices are good. Thus, the existence of morally perfect people is logically possible. We may go further and note that there are logically possible worlds in which everyone always freely does whatever is right. If God is omnipotent, then He can do anything that is logically possible. This seems to entail that it is within God's power to create a world full of morally good people who never choose evil. Why did God not

⁴⁵ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 209.

create such a world?

The Limit of God's Actualizing Power

Of course, the key to Plantinga's defense is the possibility that God – despite His omnipotence – could not have actualized any possible world containing moral good and lacking moral evil.⁴⁶ Because at least some such worlds are logically possible, Plantinga must show that there are logically possible worlds that even an omnipotent God cannot actualize. There are only two possible ways that a given world can be beyond God's power to actualize. Either there are non-logical limitations that prevent Him from actualizing such worlds or there are logical limitations preventing Him from actualizing such worlds. If there are non-logical limitations that prevent God from actualizing such worlds, then God is not omnipotent, because God's having omnipotence entails that He can do anything that does not entail a logical absurdity.⁴⁷ So, if we wish to preserve God's omnipotence, any limitations that prevent God from actualizing a particular world must be logical. Any limitations of God's ability to actualize worlds would have to take the following form (I call this principle the *Limit of God's Actualizing Power*):

(LGAP) It is beyond God's power to actualize a world *W* if and only if His actualization of *W* entails a logical absurdity.

A denial of LGAP is a denial of God's omnipotence – so if Plantinga is correct in claiming that God cannot actualize some logically possible worlds, then it must be that *His actualization* of such worlds entails an absurdity. Let us consider possible worlds that Plantinga believes God cannot actualize.

⁴⁶ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 184.

⁴⁷ Plantinga seems to agree, at least tentatively: "...God is omnipotent – which means, roughly, that there are no non-logical limits to his power." Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 167.

Consider worlds in which God does not exist, assuming for the moment that God is a (logically) contingent being. According to Plantinga, such worlds are logically possible but clearly also worlds God cannot actualize.⁴⁸ These worlds contain no internal logical inconsistency; but by LGAP, if God cannot actualize such worlds then His actualization of such worlds must entail a logical absurdity. I believe the absurdity here to be as follows: Necessarily, any world in which God does any actualizing is a world in which God exists. If God does not exist then He cannot actualize any world at all, particularly any world in which He does not exist. It is a logical absurdity to claim that God can actualize a world without existing to do the actualizing. Therefore, by LGAP, God cannot actualize worlds in which He does not exist. If God is a contingent being, Plantinga is correct to argue that there are logically possible worlds God cannot actualize.

He gives a more important example that is supposed to establish that there are possible worlds God cannot actualize without the cooperation of another free being. Before considering this example, we will need to understand how Plantinga defines different kinds of actualization. When God causes or otherwise brings about a particular state of affairs to obtain (i.e., to become actual), Plantinga calls this *strong actualization*.⁴⁹ Alternatively, God can bring about a state of affairs such that a human person is significantly free to act in a certain way or to refrain from so acting; Plantinga calls this *weak actualization* (or simply, actualization).⁵⁰ According to Plantinga, God

⁴⁸ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 170.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

cannot strongly actualize a state of affairs such that a person makes a certain decision without thereby abolishing the freedom of the person in question.

I believe that Plantinga's distinction between strong and weak actualization is misleading. Plantinga claims that God cannot cause *or otherwise bring it about* that a creature freely chooses good without abolishing the freedom of the creature in question. Obviously, Plantinga is correct to say that it is impossible for God to *cause* a creature to choose good without nullifying its freedom. An act is not free if it is causally determined by events beyond the creature's control.⁵¹ On the other hand, it is not so obvious that it is impossible for God to *bring it about* somehow that a creature freely chooses good in a particular instance.⁵² Mackie's original claim is that there is nothing contradictory about God's creation of perfectly sinless creatures who are nevertheless free. If Mackie is correct, then by LGAP, God can create such creatures; Mackie's claim is that God can create creatures and somehow *bring it about* that they make morally good choices. Plantinga's definition of strong actualization is too broad to have the intuitive appeal he intends. Plantinga cannot simply assume that every way God could bring about the sinless behavior of a creature nullifies its freedom; otherwise he is simply begging the question, which leaves Mackie's challenge unanswered. Thus, it is not obvious that God's strong actualization of a state of affairs necessarily presents a challenge to freedom.

⁵¹ As I noted in Chapter I, I assume a libertarian understanding of free will for the purpose of this thesis.

⁵² Plantinga admits that he uses "brings it about that" as roughly synonymous with "causes it to be the case that" but why should we think this appropriate? It is not at all obvious that the sense in God "brings it about that" we make choices is incompatible with the possibility of our having libertarian free will.

With this in mind, consider a world W' in which at time t Maurice is to decide whether or not he will eat oatmeal for breakfast.⁵³ In W' there is a state of affairs S' that includes all states of affairs in W' up to t that includes Maurice being free either to accept or reject the oatmeal but does not include his accepting or rejecting the oatmeal. One of two conditionals must be true for Maurice:⁵⁴

(1) If S' were to obtain, Maurice will freely take the oatmeal.

(2) If S' were to obtain, Maurice will freely reject the oatmeal.⁵⁵

Either (1) or (2) must be true, but, according to Plantinga, because Maurice is free to accept or reject the oatmeal God cannot strongly actualize a state of affairs that includes either (1) or (2). The truth of each is contingent on Maurice's free choice at t . Assume that (2) is true in W' and that (1) is true in the actual world (which we may call Kronos, following Plantinga) and that each of these worlds has in common that S' obtains. In W' the truth of (2) entails that Maurice will freely reject the oatmeal. However, because (1) is true in the actual world, God cannot actualize W' – when S' obtains Maurice will accept the oatmeal. According to Plantinga, W' is logically possible but not a world God can strongly actualize because He cannot cause or *otherwise bring about* the truth of either (1) or (2) – the truth of these propositions is contingent on Maurice's free choice at t .⁵⁶

Assume Plantinga is correct in claiming that God cannot actualize W' . If God is omnipotent, then by LGAP *God's actualization of W' must be logically absurd*, despite

⁵³ This example comes from Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 42-44.

⁵⁴ For the purpose of this paper I assume that there are true counterfactuals of freedom. Plantinga defends counterfactuals of freedom in *Nature of Necessity*, 174-180.

⁵⁵ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

the fact W' is logically possible. Now, *if (1) is true* then we can easily see that God's actualization of W' is a logical absurdity, because in W' Maurice rejects the oatmeal. However, this is a misapplication of LGAP. LGAP claims that God cannot actualize a possible world if and only if God's actualization of *that particular world* is logically absurd – so, the logical absurdity must result from God's actualization of W' alone, not from W' and a proposition that is true in another world (e.g., Kronos, even if Kronos is the actual world). It is obvious that there is no logical absurdity in God's actualization of W' if we consider the matter without reference to any other worlds (particularly Kronos). If God actualizes W' , S' obtains, (2) is true, and Maurice rejects the oatmeal. No absurdity results. Thus, by LGAP, it *is* within God's power to actualize W' .

Perhaps Plantinga's belief that God cannot actualize W' is a result of his understanding of God's omnipotence with respect to the past of the actual world. He writes,

...[Not] even an omnipotent being can bring it about that Abraham did *not* meet Melchizedek; it is too late for that. Take any time t ; at t there will be any number of worlds God cannot actualize; for there will be any number of worlds in which things go differently before t . So God cannot actualize any world in which Abraham did not meet Melchizedek....⁵⁷

Keeping LGAP in mind, the only possible reason God would not be able to actualize worlds such that things go differently before t is that His actualization of such worlds is a logical absurdity. Given that Abraham met Melchizedek in the actual world, of course God cannot make actual a world in which Abraham did not meet Melchizedek, but why is this so? Is God somehow not able to “change the past” if He desires?

⁵⁷ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 170.

The idea is strange, but if God is omnipotent then the only reason He must not be able to “change the past” is that doing so must result in a logical absurdity. It is not enough to say that if He actualizes a world such that things go one way before t , He cannot actualize a world such that things go a different way before t . This is only trivially true. Abraham met Melchizedek in the first place because God actualized a world such that Abraham met Melchizedek, and that is why He cannot actualize a world in which they did not meet. If He tries to actualize a world in which they do not meet, He is working against His own “prior” actualization. The sense in which God cannot “change the past” is that He cannot actualize a world such that its past (i.e., its state of affairs before t) contains a contradiction. God cannot actualize a world such that Abraham met Melchizedek and such that Abraham did not meet Melchizedek – but such a world is not logically possible anyway.

According to LGAP, it is within God’s power to actualize a world in which they do not meet because there is nothing logically absurd about His actualizing such a world. The actual world does not limit the worlds God can actualize except in the trivial sense that He has already actualized the actual world. The actual world does determine what God *cannot* do; it reflects what He *did not* do. Knowledge of the actual past does not entitle us say that God *cannot* actualize worlds with a different past – we are entitled only to say that God *did not* actualize a world with a different past. Inferring any more than that is fallacious.

So, Plantinga’s argument that W' is beyond God’s power to actualize is mistaken – it fails to acknowledge that the truth of (1) is an indication that God has already

actualized Kronos and not W' . The only sense in which W' is a world God cannot actualize is that Kronos and W' are mutually exclusive worlds and God *has apparently already chosen* to actualize Kronos (which we know because (1) is true). The example with Maurice only proves that God cannot actualize a world in which S' obtains, (1) is true, and Maurice rejects the oatmeal – it tells us nothing about possible worlds God cannot actualize. Plantinga fails to establish that there are possible worlds such that it is partly up to Maurice whether or not God can actualize them. W' is within God's power to actualize.

Counterfactuals of Freedom as Essential Properties

One may wish to defend Plantinga and object that my account sells Maurice's freedom short. Plantinga thinks that God cannot strongly actualize a state of affairs including Maurice's free actions. God should not be able to choose whether He will actualize either Kronos or W' without Maurice's input if Maurice is to be genuinely free, one may object. Perhaps such an objection is correct, but if Maurice's choice is to provide a legitimate constraint on the worlds God can actualize then we must take LGAP into consideration. The intuition here is that the range of worlds God can actualize must in some sense be contingent on Maurice's free choices. This contingency must be such that whatever decision Maurice freely makes, God is logically limited from actualizing a world in which Maurice freely does not make that decision.

There is one way to secure such a logical limitation. Given that S' obtains, what Maurice freely decides at t (about whether or not to eat oatmeal) either depends on a property *essential* to Maurice's nature or it does not. Roughly, Plantinga holds that a

property P is essential to an object x if and only if x has P in every world in which x exists.⁵⁸ Thus, it is logically impossible for an existing object to lack one or more of its essential properties.

Let us assume that in Kronos (1) is true and that S' obtains. This means that at t Maurice freely chooses to accept the oatmeal. Now, either (1) is an essential property of Maurice or it is not. If (1) is not essential to Maurice, then there are possible worlds (not including Kronos, of course) in which (2) is true of Maurice. Such worlds contain no internal logical inconsistency – but also, more importantly, nothing about God's actualization of such worlds entails a logical absurdity. Thus, by LGAP, it is within God's power to actualize at least some worlds in which S' obtains and Maurice freely rejects the oatmeal at t . (We have already seen that W' is one of these worlds within God's power to actualize.) God is able to actualize such worlds if He desires. Thus, if (1) is not essential to Maurice then God is able to actualize a world in which S' obtains and Maurice freely rejects the oatmeal. However, we want Maurice's free decision to eat oatmeal at t in Kronos to exclude the possibility that God could have actualized a world in which S' obtains and Maurice freely rejects the oatmeal. We have not yet found a way to satisfy the intuition that God is logically limited by human free will.

Let us assume instead that (1) is essential to Maurice. This means that in every possible world, (1) is true of Maurice. Now God cannot actualize any worlds in which S' obtains and Maurice freely rejects the oatmeal at t . He cannot actualize such worlds because if (1) is essential to Maurice then there are *no* logically possible worlds in which

⁵⁸ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 29-32. See also p. 56.

S' obtains and Maurice freely rejects the oatmeal. Maurice's free decision to accept the oatmeal in Kronos means that worlds in which he rejects the oatmeal are logically impossible – such worlds have Maurice doing something that contradicts a property of his essence. Given that *S'* obtains, anyone who would reject the oatmeal simply would not be Maurice. One might object that this seems to destroy Maurice's freedom insofar it is not possible for him to reject the oatmeal. Maurice is incapable of rejecting the oatmeal, admittedly, but this is only because his essence is such that he *freely* accepts the oatmeal. Maurice is free in his choice to accept oatmeal at *t* in Kronos, because (1) is true and *S'* obtains – and (1) cannot be true unless Maurice's choice at *t* is free.⁵⁹ Whether some worlds are logically possible or not is thus at least partially contingent on Maurice's free choices.

Accordingly, the range of worlds God can actualize depends on Maurice's free choices, but only if those free choices are entailed by Maurice's essential counterfactuals of freedom. If his free choices are not entailed by his essence, then, by LGAP, the range of worlds God can actualize is not contingent on Maurice's free choices. Plantinga wants to show that there are possible worlds God cannot actualize without the participation of other free beings; but if the relevant counterfactuals of freedom are not essential to such beings then LGAP entails that God's actualizing power is not limited by the decisions of such beings. Making the counterfactuals of freedom essential to free beings is a drastic move, but intuitively it has promise. Maurice makes his decisions in

⁵⁹ This defense of Maurice's freedom is perhaps insufficient. If Maurice's freedom depends on there being possible worlds in which he rejects the oatmeal, then this account fails to secure his freedom. Nevertheless, I hope the reader will indulge me as I take this account of freedom seriously – I will argue that making counterfactuals of freedom essential to people fails to bolster Plantinga's free will defense for other, unrelated reasons.

response to previous states of affairs, so given a certain state of affairs it does not sound too strange to say that whatever choice he makes, that choice is the only authentically Maurice-y choice to make. In any case, the intuition about freedom – that is, the intuition that the range of worlds God can actualize should depend on the free choices of free beings – only gets traction if the counterfactuals of freedom are essential to free beings. Otherwise, God’s omnipotence rules out our ability to influence which worlds God can actualize.

Transworld Depravity

Keeping these considerations in mind, let us return to Plantinga’s free will defense. Plantinga seeks to demonstrate that the following are consistent:

(3) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.

(4) There is evil in the world.⁶⁰

Remember, his method for establishing consistency is to find a third proposition that in conjunction with (3) entails (4). This third proposition does not need to be true or even plausible – it need only be logically possible and consistent with (3). If Plantinga can find such a proposition then he defeats the argument against God’s existence from the logical problem of evil. To establish this possibility, Plantinga suggests the possibility that every *creaturely essence* suffers from *transworld depravity*. A creaturely essence is just the set of all properties essential to a particular creature. Every human person in the actual world is the instantiation of a creaturely essence. In a recent

⁶⁰ Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 165.

exchange, Richard Otte and Alvin Plantinga agree on the following formal definition of transworld depravity:⁶¹

(TWD) An essence *E* suffers from *transworld depravity* if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* entails the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, there is a time *t* and an action *A* at *t* such that

(a) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in *W* at *t*, and

(b) if God had (weakly) actualized the initial segment⁶² of *W* up to *t*, *E*'s instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.⁶³

Roughly, an essence suffering from transworld depravity will – if instantiated – at some point freely choose evil. So, every significantly free person suffering from transworld depravity will go wrong at some point in any world God can actualize. If every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity, then any world God can actualize that contains moral good – that is, any world with significantly free people who at least sometimes choose rightly – will also contain moral evil. Thus, Plantinga's free will defense depends on the possibility that worlds with moral good and without moral evil are beyond God's power to actualize.

Plantinga needs a proposition that in conjunction with (3) entails (4). He believes he finds such a proposition in the conjunction of the following:

⁶¹ This definition differs from Plantinga's original formulation in *The Nature of Necessity*. Otte finds that Plantinga's original formulation of transworld depravity results in (3) being necessarily false, so he provides a different definition in his "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 165-177. In response to Otte, Plantinga writes, "I have little to say about Otte's penetrating piece but yea and amen (and thanks)." See his "Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, & Uncooperative Essences," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 183.

⁶² Roughly, an initial segment of a world contains all states of affairs in that world until a time *t*, but not including states of affairs that are contingent on events that occur after *t* – e.g., Bob will go fishing at *t + n*. See Otte, "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds," 170.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 172.

(5) Every [creaturely] essence suffers from transworld depravity.

(6) God actualizes a world containing moral good.⁶⁴

Now, (5) entails that it is beyond God's power to actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil; so if it is true, then the truth of (6) – God's actualization of a world with moral good – entails the existence of moral evil. The conjunction of (5) and (6) does not need to be true or even plausible. It only needs to be logically possible and consistent with (3). Clearly (6) is above reproach. Now, (5) is consistent with (3), and also, Plantinga claims, logically possible. Thus, Plantinga argues, the logical possibility of universal transworld depravity – that is, the logical possibility of (5) – establishes the consistency of (3) and (4) and thus defeats the logical problem of evil.

Simple Morally Good Worlds

Otte notes that the truth of (5) entails a strange consequence in any world with a first free choice – i.e., any world in which there is not a retrogressive infinite series of free choices. Imagine such a world in which Adam exists and in which no other significantly free being exists. Assume that a young Adam (who suffers from TWD) freely makes several morally good choices but that, later in life, he makes his first evil choice. Why could God not end the world before Adam makes the evil choice, thereby actualizing a world with moral good and without moral evil? Indeed, why not end the world after Adam's first morally significant good choice?⁶⁵ Otte's answer is that if every essence has TWD, any attempt by God to actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil will always result in the first morally significant choice being decided

⁶⁴ Otte, "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds," 189-190.

⁶⁵ Ibid. I have simplified Otte's example, but hopefully his point remains clear.

for evil. Otherwise God would be able to end the world after a first morally good choice and thereby actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil. If God can actualize such a world, (5) is necessarily false – because we will have found someone who does not suffer from TWD – and the free will defense fails. Thus, the free will defense depends on the possibility that out of all worlds in which there is a first free choice, the only worlds God can actualize are worlds in which the first morally significant choice is an evil choice.

Let us consider a particular kind of world God cannot actualize if (5) is true. A *Simple Morally Good* (SMG) world is any world W such that:

- (a) There is only one significantly free person P in W
- (b) There is only one morally significant act A in W , and
- (c) P goes right with respect to A in W

Clearly, there are logically possible SMG worlds. Nevertheless, if (5) is true then God cannot actualize any SMG world. There is only one morally significant act in such worlds and so if God instantiates any creaturely essence and (5) is true, the essence will go wrong for that act. When the essence goes wrong the world ends up not being an SMG world. SMG worlds turn out to be worlds God cannot actualize. The possible truth of (5) entails the possibility that God cannot actualize SMG worlds. Accordingly, the free will defense depends on the possibility that God cannot actualize such worlds. If God's divine qualities are such that it is within His power to actualize an SMG world, then (5) is necessarily false and the free will defense fails.

Consider an SMG world W^A in which the lone significantly free person Adam goes right with respect to his lone morally significant act at time t . Assume that God actualizes an initial segment $SW^{A/t}$ that includes all states of affairs in W^A up to t such that Adam is free to mistreat a dog or to refrain from mistreating a dog. One of two conditionals must be true for Adam:

(7) If God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$ then Adam freely mistreats a dog.

(8) If God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$ then Adam freely refrains from mistreating a dog.

Let us assume that the former is morally evil and the latter morally good; and let us also assume, for the moment, that neither (7) nor (8) are essential to Adam's nature. Because W^A is an SMG world – and thus a world in which the lone morally significant act is morally good – Adam freely chooses to refrain from mistreating a dog at t , which entails that (8) is true in W^A . W^A is clearly a logically possible world.

If Adam suffers from TWD, however, then when God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$ Adam will choose evil for his only morally significant act and so (7) must be true. The free will defender claims that when God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$, Adam will mistreat a dog (if he suffers from TWD, of course) and W^A will turn out to be a world God cannot actualize. When God tries to actualize W^A He instead ends up with another world, W^B , in which (7) is true and Adam mistreats a dog. Adam's suffering from TWD entails that God cannot actualize W^A .

However, there seems to be no way an absurdity can arise in God's actualization of W^A . Assume that God attempts to actualize W^A but ends up with W^B because of Adam's suffering from TWD. Accordingly, it turns out that God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$

(because W^A and W^B share this initial segment), (7) is true, and Adam mistreats a dog at t . Either (7) is essential to Adam or it is not. If (7) is not essential to Adam, then W^A is a logically possible world – and in this world God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$, (8) is true, and Adam freely refrains from mistreating a dog at t . Furthermore, nothing about God’s actualization of W^A entails an absurdity because (a) W^A is internally consistent and (b) nothing about God’s act of actualizing logically conflicts with any property of W^A . Of course, given that God actualizes W^B He cannot actualize W^A , but that is not the point. By LGAP, God’s actualization of W^A must lead to an absurdity, without reference to other worlds – even the actual world – if it is to be a world beyond God’s power to actualize. If (7) is not essential to Adam then W^A is within God’s power to actualize and (5) – the doctrine of universal TWD – turns out to be necessarily false; Plantinga’s free will defense fails.

Alternatively, assume that (7) is essential to Adam. If so, then there are no logically possible worlds such that God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$ and Adam freely refrains from mistreating a dog at t . Naturally enough, God cannot actualize worlds that are not logically possible. W^A is not a possible world because Adam is essentially unable to refrain from poor conduct in W^A , and W^A – an SMG world – cannot contain poor conduct. Thus, if (7) is essential to Adam then God cannot actualize W^A .

Can we replace Adam in our SMG world with someone else who will go right? Consider an essence whose properties are exactly similar to Adam’s except in one respect; rather than having (7) as an essential property, this essence has something much like (8) as an essential property instead. Let us name this essence Johnny Manziel. Of

course, now that we have a new name for this essence, let us restate the (slightly different) relevant counterfactuals of freedom:

(9) If God actualizes $SW^{J/t}$ then Johnny Manziel freely mistreats a dog.

(10) If God actualizes $SW^{J/t}$ then Johnny Manziel freely refrains from mistreating a dog.

Suppose that (10) is an essential property of Johnny Manziel. Roughly, I want to consider a possible person (Johnny) who freely acts exactly the way Adam would act in any situation except one. Roughly, Johnny's counterfactuals of freedom are exactly similar to Adam's except when it comes to how they treat the dog at time t . Let $SW^{A/t}$ and $SW^{J/t}$ be as close to identical as possible except insofar as Adam is the only inhabitant in the former and Johnny is the only inhabitant in the latter. When God actualizes $SW^{A/t}$, because Adam has (7) as an essential property he will mistreat a dog at t . When God actualizes $SW^{J/t}$, Johnny's essence is such that he will refrain from mistreating a dog at t .

Consider an SMG world W^J that is exactly like W^A with the exception that instead of having Adam as the lone significantly free being, Johnny Manziel is the lone significantly free being. In W^J Johnny goes right with respect to his only morally significant free act at time t . Assume that God actualizes an initial segment $SW^{J/t}$ that includes all states of affairs in W^J up to t such that Johnny is free to mistreat a dog or free to refrain from mistreating a dog but does not include either Johnny's freely mistreating a dog or his freely refraining from mistreating a dog at t . If (5) – the doctrine of universal TWD – is true, then W^J , an SMG world, must not be within God's power to

actualize. If it is beyond God's power to actualize, then by LGAP, God's actualization of W^j entails an absurdity.

Johnny Manziel's essence contains no inconsistent properties – his essential properties are all exactly similar to the essential properties of the logically possible essence of Adam except one. For the one exception, (10) is an essential property of Johnny's essence. But (10) is not inconsistent with any of Johnny's other essential properties.⁶⁶ Thus, Johnny is a logically possible essence – that is, his instantiation in at least some world does not entail an absurdity. If God's actualization of W^j is to result in an absurdity, it must involve a logical inconsistency from among the following: one (or more) of Johnny's essential properties; one (or more) of the properties of W^j ; God's act of actualization. But no such inconsistency arises here. W^j is an SMG world with an initial segment $SW^{j/t}$ and in which the only free act is a morally good act. Johnny has (10) as an essential property of his essence, so given that God actualizes $SW^{j/t}$ – which He does in W^j – Johnny refrains from mistreating a dog and thus goes right at t in W^j . No absurdity arises in God's actualization of W^j , so by LGAP, it is within God's power to actualize W^j . Therefore, Johnny Manziel does not suffer from transworld depravity. Accordingly, (5) is necessarily false and the free will defense fails – it fails to establish that it is beyond God's power to actualize a world containing moral good but lacking moral evil.

⁶⁶ We may add, as a harmless hypothesis, that the negation of (10) is not one of Johnny's essential properties.

God's Ability to Actualize a Sinless World Vindicated

Plantinga needs to establish the possibility that the choices of free beings limit the range of worlds within God's power to actualize. A sufficiently strong notion of God's omnipotence makes this project hopeless. The idea is that God is unable to actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil only because of free beings who obstinately choose evil. If it is possible that every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity – as Plantinga contends – then any world with free people will contain moral evil. But, if the counterfactuals of freedom are not essential properties of free beings then it is within God's power to actualize worlds in which free beings only make good choices; God's actualization of at least some such worlds does not entail any logical absurdity. If the counterfactuals of freedom are essential properties of free beings, then God can pick out essences to instantiate that will freely choose only morally good behavior. In either case, it is within God's power to actualize worlds that contain moral good and lack moral evil. I think there are ways for the theist to defeat the logical problem of evil, but if one is committed to a strong notion of omnipotence, Plantinga's free will defense fails. The believer in the traditional God of Christianity will need an answer to the problem of evil that better accounts for God's omnipotence.

CHAPTER III

THE PIOUS APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

'...[T]he price of harmony has been set too high, we can't afford the entrance fee. And that's why I hasten to return my entry ticket. If I ever want to call myself an honest man, I have to hand it back as soon as possible. And that's exactly what I'm doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha; I'm just, with the utmost respect, handing Him back my ticket.'

'That's rebellion,' Alyosha said quietly, without looking up.

'"Rebellion"? I wouldn't have expected to hear such a word from you,' said Ivan thoughtfully. 'Can one live in a state of rebellion? For I want to live. Tell me honestly, I challenge you – answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, whose ultimate aim is to bring people happiness, to give them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one little speck of creation.... Would you agree to be the architect under those conditions? Tell me honestly!'⁶⁷

In Chapter I, I sought to make clear the most powerful articulations of the problem of evil. In Chapter II, I attempted to demonstrate the difficulty of answering the problem without sacrificing or watering down one or more of the qualities essential to God. In this chapter I explore a way of understanding the existence of evil that does not permit the argument from evil to arise. So far, it does not seem likely that an omnipotent God would need the suffering we see in the world to accomplish some greater good that could not be accomplished in some less harrowing manner. Furthermore, as I argued in Chapter II, God's omnipotence is such that He is able to create a world with moral good and without moral evil. It is within God's power to give people free will in such a way

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, 307-308.

that they do not necessarily use it for evil. The existence of so much moral and natural evil in the world seems utterly superfluous, and yet Christians claim that God is good.

The Christian can respond by insisting, despite all appearances, that no evil is truly gratuitous – i.e., that every instance of moral or natural evil is logically necessary for some higher good or the prevention of some worse evil. To understand this response better, let us restate a global version of Rowe’s evidential argument from evil:

- (1) Instances of intense suffering exist which God could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) God would prevent the occurrence of any instances of intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore:

- (3) God does not exist.

Remember that if there is a single instance of gratuitous suffering that is not logically necessary for bringing about some greater good or preventing some worse (or equivalent) evil, then (1) is true. Many theodicies depend upon the denial of (1) to affirm the existence and the goodness of God, but I have argued that (1) is, in all likelihood, true. Given the incredible power that God has as an omnipotent being, and given the quantity and magnitude of evil in the world, the case for the existence of gratuitous suffering seems very strong. The denial of (1) threatens either to diminish God’s qualities or to trivialize the vast quantity of terrible suffering in the world – or both.

An analogy will clarify this point. Imagine meeting someone who believes in the existence of a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and who would not under any circumstances abide the existence of potatoes. This person believes that God is an absolutely anti-potato God. Of course, we know with certainty such a God does not exist, because potatoes clearly do exist. So, the *problem of potatoes* successfully establishes that the anti-potato God does not exist. We would not take anyone seriously who would claim that God is an absolutely anti-potato God.

The defender of the existence of the anti-potato God may wish to modify our initial description of the anti-potato God. Perhaps instead the anti-potato God prefers that potatoes not exist, but He allows their existence because they serve some higher purpose that outweighs the downside of allowing their existence. Perhaps, for instance, potatoes are so integrally connected with Irish culture – which is, of course, a worthy greater purpose – that even though He would not otherwise abide their existence, their role in Irish culture turns out to be worth the downside. In this case, however, any potato that is not logically necessary for sustaining Irish culture turns out to be a gratuitous potato. If a single gratuitous potato exists, then the anti-potato God does not exist. The defender of the anti-potato God is committed to arguing that the number of potatoes in the world is no more than is necessary to sustain Irish culture, and thus that there are no gratuitous potatoes. He must argue that any potato eaten by non-Irish people in a land far from Ireland – and, of course, there are such potatoes – must, despite all appearances, be logically necessary for sustaining Irish culture.

To take this apologetic seriously we must accept the following as plausible: (a) Irish culture – or something near enough to it in value that God would do just about anything to bring it about – logically requires the existence of potatoes; and (b) the claim that all potatoes in the world are necessary to sustain Irish culture. Naturally, we do not take these silly claims seriously. The evidential argument from potatoes leads us to reject the existence of the anti-potato God.

Those who deny the existence of gratuitous suffering in order to defend the existence of God are like the defender of the anti-potato God. They affirm (a) that there is a higher purpose (or purposes) that God cannot bring about unless He allows suffering and (b) that every instance of suffering is logically necessary to bring about this higher purpose (or purposes). Their claims are not any more plausible than are the claims of the anti-potato theologian. Accordingly, we should respond to their claims with the same skepticism we show toward the anti-potato theologian. As for the God described in (2) – the one who “would prevent the occurrence of any instances of intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse” – the existence of such a God is about as likely as the existence of an anti-potato God.

However, this is not the last word on the question of God’s existence. Imagine again meeting with the anti-potato theologian. He fails to convince us that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, hater of potatoes, but we need not walk away from our discussion with him thinking that no omnipotent, omniscient being exists. At most, we are justified in thinking that if an omnipotent, omniscient being exists, He must not be

the sort of being who views the existence of potatoes as evil. If a Christian considers the problem of potatoes, his conclusion will be something like the following: We cannot prove that God is not an anti-potato God with absolute certainty, but far and away the most likely explanation for the existence of potatoes is that potatoes are not a bad thing in God's eyes. If the anti-potato theologian thinks they are, it is up to him to construct an account explaining how potatoes are contrary to God's perfect plan for creation and then to explain why God would allow them to exist despite His perfect plan. The onus is on this theologian to defend his anti-potato intuitions, not on the Christian theologian to make God compatible with the existence of potatoes. In any case, the anti-potato theologian must resolve whatever he says with the existence of God and the existence of potatoes.

Christopher Coope on God's Goodness

Taking our cue from the Christian response to the anti-potato theologian, let us consider once more how we can respond to the evidential argument from evil. Denying the existence of gratuitous evil seems to be a losing strategy, but perhaps the Christian will be more successful in denying the truth of (2) – a proposition that, according to Rowe, “seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared by both theists and nontheists.”⁶⁸ We need not give up believing in God because of the existence of gratuitous suffering if we are willing to revise our beliefs about what constitutes the goodness of God. Of course, such a step will seem drastic to most, and more than a few will endorse the following words of John Stuart Mill: “I will call no

⁶⁸ Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Varieties of Atheism,” 337.

being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures. And if such a being will send me to hell for saying so, to hell I will go.”⁶⁹ But do we have grounds for thinking that the goodness of God is the same as the goodness of our “fellow creatures”? The concept of goodness is difficult enough to pin down, even when we are not talking about God. A good pair of scissors is not so good for driving nails, and a good hammer is not good for cutting paper.

If we are to take seriously St. Augustine’s exhortation to think as highly of God as possible, we must not entertain any account of God that compromises the full extent of His goodness. It is not easy, however, to know exactly what it would be to give such a compromised account. In defending the truth of (2) as being entailed by God’s goodness, Rowe is drawing from an intuition we have about our duty to prevent the suffering of others when we can, unless there are very good reasons for allowing such suffering. Rowe is surely correct that human people have such a duty. Consider the rape victim described at the end of Chapter I. If anyone could easily have prevented her suffering we would rightly condemn him for failing to do so. Following Mill’s lead, we might say that God is under the same obligation to this rape victim as anyone else – and thus that we are only to call Him good if He puts a stop to the rape.

However, as Christopher Coope points out, our specific obligations depend in large part on the context of our circumstances – and God’s circumstances are quite different from ours. One might claim that every rational being nevertheless has the same general obligations; but if this is so, then, as Coope notes, we would have to describe

⁶⁹ J. S. Mill, *An examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 9 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 103.

these obligations in the form of hypothetical statements in order to account for unique circumstances.⁷⁰ He explains how such a description would work:

Let us consider this in regard to rational beings generally. Suppose I ought not to commit adultery. Then we can say of any rational being X, that *if X were a sexual being, and was in other relevant respects similar to me, and if X lived in conditions (a), (b), (c), such as I live under, (these suppositions being perhaps quite absurd), then X ought not to commit adultery. This surely says nothing at all. Anything sufficiently like this rabbit is also a rabbit. But of course!*⁷¹

To reinforce Coope's point – the mailman has the obligation to deliver mail every work day, but I do not have this obligation because I am not a mailman. If the conditions of my life are made similar enough to the mailman's to incur the duty to deliver mail, it will turn out that I have become a mailman, or something close to it. Perhaps human people have a general obligation to prevent suffering – but if we want to claim that this same obligation applies to God, we will have to describe it in hypothetical terms with antecedents affirming that His circumstances are sufficiently like ours. This manner of making obligations general weakens them to the point of uselessness when talking about a being as different from us as God is.

Coope also argues that what is true of obligation is also true of virtue:

The list of virtues will manifestly not be the same for every rational being, for what counts as a virtue can depend upon characteristics which not all rational beings share, or upon the circumstances of life which are not universal among rational beings. Courage can only be a virtue for agents who can be frightened, and we have no reason to think fear universal among rational beings. The devil may be pretty bad, but he cannot be unchaste (as Aquinas observes). Thrift cannot be a virtue among beings who live in a world without shortages.⁷²

⁷⁰ Christopher Coope, "Goodbye to the Problem of Evil, Hello to the Problem of Veracity," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 379.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 380.

Whether we label an action or attitude as good or virtuous in any particular circumstance depends on context. We are not to give the devil credit for refraining from the sins of being unchaste or gluttonous. Nor is it fair to count it against God that He is not thrifty. Thus, we cannot reasonably claim that a being as different from us as God must have the same virtues to be good, or that He has the same obligations we do. His circumstances and nature are simply too different from ours. Our intuition about the moral unacceptability of allowing a woman to suffer a brutal rape is grounded in the expectations we have for *fellow humans in the right circumstances to stop the rape*. One might have the intuition that nobody can allow this kind of suffering and count as good, but such an intuition does not as plausibility apply to God as it does to fellow humans.

One may still object to God's allowance of suffering and claim that all rational beings have the obligation to eliminate evil as much as they are able. We might suggest that – among other things – all rational beings have a duty to prevent suffering whenever possible. If we are to reject (2) – which says that God would prevent the occurrence of any instances of intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse – then it must not be the case that all rational beings have this duty. But, of course, they do not have such a duty. To borrow Coope's examples, good policemen and priests work to eliminate evil, but we are not all thereby obligated to become policemen or priests. We are not violating any duty if we instead become gardeners. And even if we have a vocation in which our role is to work against evil directly, we are not obligated to eliminate evil at

all times. Policemen are not acting immorally when they take vacations.⁷³ So, rational beings do not have a universal obligation to put a stop to all the evil they can. Despite Mill's protest to the contrary, we have no good reason to think that the goodness of God is the same as the goodness of man.

Faith Seeking Understanding

So then, what *is* the goodness of God? We have theological resources telling us about the nature of God's goodness, but we have another resource as well. According to the Christian tradition, God is a personal God who has complete sovereignty over all of creation. If this is true, then creation is a manifestation of His goodness when He allows events – and even brings about events – that seem contrary to our intuitions about what a good (human) person would allow. Thus, the world is itself a resource from which we may learn about the nature of God's goodness.

In order to understand this resource better, let us keep in mind another maxim of St. Augustine's – "Unless you believe, you will not understand."⁷⁴ Let us start by assuming that an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God exists. Furthermore, because piety requires that we think as highly of God as is possible, let us assume the highest understanding of God's divine qualities we can. Given what we know about creation, what may we conclude about the goodness of God? Our knowledge of the world will shape how we are able understand God's goodness, given the sovereignty of God over all creation. With this approach to the problem of evil – let us call it the *pious* approach – we are responding to the argument the way our Christian responded earlier to

⁷³ Christopher Coope, "Goodbye to the Problem of Evil, Hello to the Problem of Veracity," 383.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3

the problem of potatoes. Evil exists in the world, but we need not infer that God does not exist – we must simply revise our understanding of God if anything we believe about Him turns out not to be compatible with His creation. Thus, the pious approach has us engage in what we might call *empirical theology*.

Instead of starting with what we think would be evil for God and then putting God on trial (as would perhaps Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov from *The Brothers Karamazov*), let us start with the firm, pious conviction that a wholly good God exists, and while accepting every relevant observation we see, putting on trial instead our intuitions about the goodness of God. The approach I am talking about is not, strictly speaking, an answer to the problem of evil. It is an approach that prevents the problem ever from arising. Instead of using what we think we know about good and evil and trying to square God's existence with that, we modify our understanding of the goodness of God to fit whatever we know to be true about God and about the real world. The pious approach permits us to admit that there is a great deal of truth behind the argument from evil. There is suffering in the world, so there must not exist a God who would not under any circumstances abide the existence of suffering. The pious approach allows us to follow this up by suggesting that God must not be such that He would not allow suffering to exist. Furthermore, it must be the case that allowing suffering to occur is something a good God would do. If one wants to defend an intuition (e.g., "allowing suffering is evil"), then let him defend it; but what he is really trying to salvage is not God's existence, but the moral intuition as applied to God. And because there are

various forms of the argument from evil, we may use each to rule out accounts of God's goodness that are not consistent with the testimony of creation.

The pious approach to the problem of evil lets us discover the constraints we have in constructing a coherent and satisfactory account of God's goodness. It makes clear from the outset all the options the traditional believer has available. Additionally, this approach is a useful contribution to theological debates that involve competing accounts of the goodness of God. Theological discourse draws on revelatory sources such as the Scriptures, traditions, and ecumenical councils, among other things – but when there are multiple, conflicting accounts of God's goodness that are each apparently compatible with the wisdom derived from these resources, we can turn to the pious approach to the problem of evil and thus provide a basis for potentially resolving such disputes.

Such an approach to evil is not without risk for the Christian. If it turns out that the constraints of God's goodness – as dictated by the testimony of creation – are such that His character cannot line up with the teachings of the Christian religion, it follows that one cannot hold consistently that God has the divine qualities traditionally attributed to Him and that Christianity is correct in its account of God's goodness. We cannot dissolve the problem of evil by fiat, but those who seek to challenge God's existence will have to search for an inconsistency that depends upon specific Christian teaching about God rather than a more general account of divine goodness.

I will attempt to explain in more detail the method I am suggesting for better understanding God's goodness. Consider the following:

(4) God exists, and He is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.

(5) Evil exists.

As we noted in Chapter I, there is no explicit contradiction between these two propositions. To deny (4) is impious, and to deny (5) is an unacceptable trivialization of the wickedness and suffering we observe in the world. Let us affirm the truth of each. We are thus committed to denying the truth of any third proposition that in conjunction with (4) and (5) would entail an inconsistency.⁷⁵

We may consider propositions that are particularized versions of (5) that we know to be true (or at least probably true) based on what we observe in the world. For instance:

(5a) There exist instances of suffering.

Because we are affirming (4), we must therefore deny the following:

(6a) God would not allow suffering.

As we admitted earlier, assuming that God exists and given that suffering occurs, it follows that it must not be contrary to God's goodness that He allows suffering to occur. Any account of God's goodness that depends on the truth of (6a) is therefore not available for the traditional believer. Let us consider a yet more specific version of (5):

(5b) There exist instances of gratuitous suffering.

⁷⁵ If any such proposition is necessarily true then the logical argument from evil succeeds, and we may be certain that God does not exist. As Plantinga points out, however, finding such a third proposition seems to be a futile venture. See Chapter V of Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

From our earlier discussion of Rowe's evidential problem of evil, we must conclude that the truth of (5b) is virtually certain. We are therefore committed to denying the following:

(6b) God would not allow the existence of gratuitous suffering.

If we have hitherto had the intuition that God's goodness entails (6b) we must adjust our beliefs, or we risk finding ourselves either trying to scale down the full measure of God's qualities or trying to deny the obvious about the state of evil in the world. Our account of God's goodness must not invoke an affirmation of (6b).

Remember once more van Inwagen's example of intense suffering – the instance in which a poor woman was raped and then mutilated with an axe – which he called the Mutilation. We used this example to construct a local version of the argument from evil against God's existence in Chapter I. Let us consider a local version of (5):

(5c) The Mutilation occurred.

The truth of (4) entails that God knew about and could have stopped the Mutilation, so we must deny the following:

(6c) God would not allow the Mutilation to occur.

Thus, by our pious hypothesis, a good God would allow the Mutilation to occur. But why would He? The idea that God exists and allows such events is hard for many of us to accept. Do we have any way of understanding why He would allow such events? We can point to numerous instances of evil and wonder if they constitute unacceptable constraints on how we can understand God's goodness. If God is a loving God, one might ask, why does He allow so much evil? In the next chapter, I will consider

theodicies that attempt to explain such events as the Mutilation as compatible with God's goodness.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLAINING THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL

Be courageous, and go on believing what you believe. There is no better belief, even if you do not yet see the explanation for why it is true. The truest beginning of piety is to think as highly of God as possible; and doing so means that one must believe that he is omnipotent, and not changeable in the smallest respect; that he is the creator of all good things, but is himself more excellent than all of them; that he is the supremely just ruler of everything that he created; and that he was not aided in creating by any other being, as if he were not sufficiently powerful by himself.⁷⁶

Approaching the problem of evil from the assumption that a wholly good God exists does not prevent us from making use of the existing literature on the problem of evil. With the pious approach to the problem, we may understand each argument defending the consistency of God's existence with the existence of evil – such as, for instance, the free will defense – as defending a set of claims about God's goodness. If such an argument fails, instead of counting it as a failure to rebut an argument against God's existence, we can instead count it as a failure to establish as true certain claims about God's goodness. For instance, consider Plantinga's free will defense. His defense commits him to defending the *possibility* that God valued (a) giving free will to certain creatures over (b) preventing the suffering that occurs as a result of the evil decisions of freely acting creatures. He essentially argues for the possibility that God was justifiably willing to tolerate the latter in order to achieve the former. What God values in creation is surely a manifestation of His goodness. So, Plantinga defends the possibility that our

⁷⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3-4.

suffering from the wicked decisions of others is a manifestation of God's goodness insofar as He gave us free will. I argued in Chapter II that it is necessarily within God's power as an omnipotent being to create a world with moral good and without moral evil, and thus that Plantinga's defense fails. If I am correct, then Plantinga's argument fails to establish that it is possible that God values the existence of free creatures more than He values avoiding the suffering that results from wicked actions. Therefore, we may understand Plantinga's argument as a (failed) attempt to establish a claim about God's goodness, given what we know about the world.

In the last chapter I noted that we must understand God's goodness in a way that accounts for the existence of various forms of evil. I noted the Mutilation in particular as an instance of evil that many of us find difficult to resolve with God's goodness. In this chapter I will consider popular theodicies as attempts to give explanations of God's goodness that can account for the existence of such evils. I will judge the success of such explanations based on how well they allow for the pious approach to the problem of evil. Before considering the implications of the Mutilation for God's goodness, however, I would like to argue against the usefulness of the popular distinction between moral evil and natural evil.

Moral Evil and Natural Evil or Sin and Suffering

Moral evil is supposed to include the immoral decisions of free beings and also any other evil that follows from such decisions; natural evils are all evils not included in moral evil, which includes the suffering caused by earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, etc. Consider the case of a rock that just happens to fall – from the weight of the latest

snowfall, let us say – from a mountain and break a man’s arm. This is supposed to be an example of a natural evil. Now let us change the example so that the rock actually falls because an angry mountain man pushes the rock over, knowing that there are people below who will be endangered. In this second case, the man with the broken arm suffers because of the evil decision of the angry mountain man. However, the suffering of the man with the broken arm is not a *logically necessary* result of the actions of the mountain man. The mountain man’s decision is no less immoral even if the rock fails to hit anyone. He has committed an evil act in any case and is thus guilty of *sin*. God can prevent the suffering of the man with the broken arm by (for a few examples) shifting the path of the rock, by causing it to evaporate, or by turning it into a butterfly. God can use His omnipotent power to prevent any suffering that would otherwise be the result of sin. Sin alone is not sufficient to bring about suffering. As for the man with the broken arm, his suffering is the same, whether it is the result of too much snow on the rock or the sinful actions of the mountain man.

Accordingly, accounts that use free will as an explanation for moral evil leave unresolved the problem of the suffering that results from sin. Even if the world is better for having creatures with the ability to choose evil freely, it does not follow that the world is better for their evil intentions being efficacious. The suffering of the man whose arm is broken is not only caused by the mountain man; the laws of nature governing the rock are a necessary part of the cause of his suffering. In fact, if God institutes the laws of nature or in any way sustains them – as it seems He must, if He is sovereign – then He is also at least partly responsible for the suffering that occurs as a

result of the free will actions of His creatures. Thus, the most useful distinction for accounting for the different kinds of evils is not moral evil and natural evil – the more useful distinction is the one between *sin* and *suffering*.

To bolster the case that our having free will can explain what he calls *extrinsic moral evil* – i.e., the harm and suffering that are the result of the evil choices of free beings – Hugh McCann argues that the natural laws that allow free creatures to harm others are a necessary component of freedom:

[I]t is true that without God’s cooperation in sustaining the world, the evil designs of the sinner could not come to fruition. The bullet could not find its mark or the poison be effective unless the relevant natural laws stayed in place. But freedom would mean nothing if an evil intention could never be carried off. Meaningful autonomy can only be exercised in a setting where one can do genuine harm; without that, moral issues become moot.⁷⁷

But is this correct? We can imagine cases in which someone is unable to do genuine harm and who is nevertheless meaningfully free. When a wicked Pharaoh decides that he wants to destroy the people of God, he is surely a fully autonomous agent as he musters his fighting men with murderous intent. He is surely responsible for wanting to slaughter the people of God as they are trapped between the armies of Egypt and the Red Sea. His responsibility is not in any way diminished when the Red Sea opens up and provides a way of escape for the Hebrews, and then closes behind them, overwhelming and crushing the Pharaoh’s army. It was not within the Pharaoh’s power to harm Israel and yet the moral issue is *not* moot for him. His actions are evil. Our bad intentions need not be carried out to be genuine instances of wickedness. McCann even seems to agree with this, writing,

⁷⁷ McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, 77.

Suppose that, knowing it is wrong to do so, Smith decides to kill Jones – by shooting him, let us say – and then engages in the volitional activity needed to carry out his intention: Smith wills the movement of his finger on the trigger of a gun he has pointed at Jones. Smith will have sinned in this case even if no harm comes to Jones – if the gun fails to fire, say, or if Smith is suddenly afflicted by paralysis, so that he cannot even move his finger. Smith is still guilty, by virtue of his decision and volition alone. By contrast, were Jones to die as a consequence of some innocent act on Smith’s part – in an unavoidable auto-pedestrian accident, perhaps – there would be no sin in the strong sense, though Smith would still have killed Jones. The lesson of such examples is that the true home of moral evil is in the operation of the will through which we exercise moral agency. ...[T]he true locus of the sin is not in the harm caused to Jones or even in Smith’s causing it, but rather in Smith’s malicious will.⁷⁸

But if it is the will that has power over good and evil, then surely our freedom is substantial whether we are able to carry out our intentions or not. The point of us having free will is supposed to be that it allows us to bring about moral good, and the downside is supposed to be that it often results in moral evil. However, our acts of the will can be good or evil even when our intentions are not efficacious. The essence of freedom is the free exercise of the will, not the ability to manipulate and change the physical world. Our having autonomy thus does not require that God sustain natural laws in such a way that we can perform evil actions.

One might object to this conclusion by reasoning as follows – perhaps if God always prevents our wicked actions from causing any suffering, we end up lacking the capacity to choose evil in any genuine sense. To reiterate McCann’s claim, “...freedom would mean nothing if an evil intention could **never** be carried off.”⁷⁹ For example, say that Smith chooses to injure Jones because he is jealous of Jones’ new car. He has the idea that he is capable of hurting Jones because he has hurt others before – or, at the

⁷⁸ McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, 114.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 77. Emphasis mine.

least, he has seen someone hurt others before. If, on the other hand, no one is ever able to cause anyone any suffering, then Smith would not think of hurting Jones, and thus loses even the ability to wish such ill upon Jones. Neither would it occur to our angry mountain man to push a rock over in order to hurt other people below. And why should it occur to him? In such a world there would be no reason for him to associate his actions with any negative consequences for anyone else. Causing suffering in such a world is simply not a live option, and not something that anyone can rationally desire to accomplish. So, if God prevents all occurrences of suffering that would otherwise follow from the evil decisions of free beings then He diminishes the moral significance of our choosing to harm or to refrain from harming others – and thus He also diminishes our freedom.⁸⁰

I do not believe this objection substantially weakens my contention that suffering need not occur as a result of evil choices. There are many immoral acts that do not involve causing anyone to suffer. Several of the Ten Commandments prohibit behavior having nothing to do with suffering. One may, for instance, be guilty of using the Lord's name in vain or creating a graven image. Furthermore, God need not have put humans in an environment in which we are to interact with each other freely. A figure stranded alone on an island – like Robinson Crusoe – is still a free moral agent. God could have put each of us in a fantasy world in which we are free to interact with our environment in both good and evil ways. There would be no one else to harm in such an environment, but God could develop for such a world a suitable set of moral laws that we would be

⁸⁰ I am indebted to Dr. McCann for pointing out this objection. If there is any weakness in my presentation of this objection, then the fault is mine and not his.

obliged to follow.⁸¹ One might claim that God has other good reasons for putting (most) humans in a communal environment in which it is possible for each of us to cause suffering. In fact, He surely does have such reasons – after all, we are assuming that God is good, and our environment *actually is* communal – but accounting for our environment requires an explanation that goes beyond God’s merely granting us free will. Finally, if we accept the Christian doctrine proclaiming the existence of heaven, we are committed to defending the existence of an environment in which we are free and in which no suffering occurs. Our having freedom is compatible with our living in a world without suffering. So, our having freedom can never be a sufficient explanation for the suffering that is the result of sin. Such suffering must be a manifestation of God’s goodness in some other way. Any explanation will have to account for God’s role in bringing about and sustaining our suffering, given that He is responsible for the laws of nature.

Explaining God’s Goodness Piously

Now that we are in a position to perceive the two distinct components of evil involved in the Mutilation – the sin of the rapist and the suffering of the victim – let us consider the implications of this melancholy example for an accurate account of God’s goodness. God is sovereign, so all of creation is a manifestation of His goodness, *at least* insofar as He is good and He allows whatever happens. It must therefore be in some way a manifestation of God’s goodness for Him to allow every instance of suffering – either because the suffering is, in and of itself, an immediate manifestation of

⁸¹ I am assuming a roughly divine command account of morality here – but various imaginary scenarios are conceivable for just about any account of morality.

God's goodness or because despite the fact that it is not such a manifestation in and of itself, it is logically necessary for some other such manifestation. For the latter option, the connection must be one of logical necessity because God is omnipotent, and thus can do anything that is logically possible. Furthermore, what is true of suffering is also true of sin. Every act of sin is, in and of itself, an immediate manifestation of God's goodness or it is logically necessary for something else that is. Let us formulate these constraints as follows:

- (1) For any instance of suffering *s*, either (a) *s* is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness or (b) *s* is logically necessary for some other manifestation of God's goodness, *m*.
- (2) For any act of sin *t*, either (a) *t* is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness or (b) *t* is logically necessary for some other manifestation of God's goodness, *n*.

Christian tradition teaches that God is a loving God (1 John 4:8). If God loves at least some of us and yet all of us suffer to some extent, then it seems unlikely that every instance of suffering is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness. If the suffering involved in (for instance) the Mutilation is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness then God seems to be sadistic – and this is incompatible with traditional Christian teaching. It is preferable to explain the Mutilation as being logically necessary for some other manifestation of God's goodness. As for the sin involved in the Mutilation, we may make the same point. Because sin is an act of disobedience to God and so by definition a kind of evil, let us look for explanations that do not view sin as an immediate manifestation of God's goodness. Let us consider potential accounts of

God's goodness – drawn from existing literature on the problem of evil – with the hope of addressing both the sin and suffering involved in the Mutilation.

One obvious candidate for explaining the Mutilation is some form of the free will defense. After all, the Mutilation involves the free act of a human being – the rapist. Of course, as I have already argued, our having freedom is not sufficient to explain the occurrence of suffering because it does not necessarily entail suffering. As an explanation for the existence of sin, however, freedom seems more promising. Perhaps sin is a manifestation of God's goodness insofar as it is the result of His gift of free will to us. Of course, as I argued in Chapter II, God could have created a world in which humans had free will and in which no one chose evil. So, we cannot claim that His giving us freedom logically entails the existence of sin.⁸² Indeed, freedom does not entail even the possibility of sin – remember that God is free and that, because He is essentially good, it is not within His power to sin.

It is within God's power to create a world in which everyone is both sinless and fully free, but Christians are committed to arguing that it is no less good of God for Him to have created our world, sin-filled though it is. Given that free will alone is apparently insufficient as an explanation for the existence of sin, why invoke it at all? As our sovereign creator, God is in some sense responsible for our existence and actions, including our sinfulness – but He is even more responsible if we lack freedom. It is impious to say that God is the cause of sin, however. Our having free will allows *us* to

⁸² In the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary – that is, the *Theotokos* – is said to have been sinless. So, Orthodox Christians have even more reason to affirm that God is capable of creating free, sinless people.

take on responsibility for our sinful actions and thus mitigate His responsibility for our sins. While it is perhaps not impossible to construct an account of God's goodness without invoking free will, such an account would threaten to conflict with Christian teachings about the wickedness of sin. The Scriptures proclaim that God does not tempt us with evil (James 1:13).⁸³ So, there seems to be promise in the idea that freedom has something to do with our sin. If we are not to lay responsibility for sins at God's feet then we must lay them at someone else's, which means that creatures other than God must be capable of bearing responsibility. Freedom seems to us to be necessary for genuine responsibility. So, while free will does not constitute a sufficient explanation for the existence of sin – because God could have created free creatures who did not sin – it plausibly seems to be a necessary component of any such explanation.⁸⁴ Thus, in accounting for the existence of the Mutilation, we can lay the responsibility for the sin on the rapist and not on God. We still need an explanation for the suffering involved; and also for God's willingness to grant free will to someone who would misuse it so badly.

Hick's Soul-Making Theodicy

How else can we explain the Mutilation? In a different kind of attempt to explain evil, John Hick offers what he calls a *soul-making* theodicy that he takes to originate in the teachings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. He suggests that instead of humans having been created by God in a state of perfection, they were created in an imperfect and

⁸³ One might respond that tempting us to sin is different from causing us to sin – so, even if God is the author of all of our evil decisions, He nevertheless acts in accord with the Scriptures. Perhaps so, but this hardly seems to be compatible with a plausible reading of the verse in question.

⁸⁴ Strictly speaking, what seems to be necessary is a way to separate God from responsibility from our sinful choices. Free will seems far and away the best candidate for creating this separation.

undeveloped state.⁸⁵ Hick's account of human goodness is teleological. According to Hick, we are in a continuous state of spiritual development that includes conflict, suffering, and redemption, and it is beyond God's power to create us as good beings without such development.⁸⁶ Because God is omnipotent, Hick is committed to arguing that for God to create a good human being without such spiritual development entails a contradiction. So, this world must contain suffering so that we will have the tribulations that we need to become good. He believes the only way we can become good is by a "hazardous adventure in individual freedom."⁸⁷ Hick seems to deny that God can create a world with moral good and without moral evil – hence his emphasis on our lack of moral goodness in our initially created state – so he views sin as entailed by our "hazardous adventure in individual freedom." So, in Hick's account, sin is a manifestation of God's goodness insofar as it is necessary for our spiritual development. Suffering is also a manifestation of God's goodness by its power to shape us spiritually so that we may become good. Hick writes, "[T]his world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making."⁸⁸ Thus, according to Hick, God's goodness is manifest in creation insofar as all the sin and suffering we observe are necessary for the development of our souls. Hick is thus committed to the belief that every instance of evil is for the benefit of our souls. If we are to judge the world by its fitness for soul-

⁸⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 214.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 259. My summary of Hick's theodicy is too brief to do it justice. For his full account see chapters twelve through sixteen of his *Evil and the God of Love*.

making, however, then any instance of evil that is not necessary for soul-making is superfluous, and therefore counts against the following claim:

(3) God would not allow any instance of evil that is not necessary for soul-making.

We may understand the soul-making theodicy as defending an account of God in which He exhibits goodness by creating the best environment for our spiritual and moral development.

Hick argues vigorously against the possibility that we could become morally good in a world without suffering:

We can at least begin to imagine a world custom-made for the avoidance of all suffering. But the daunting fact that emerges is that in such a world moral qualities would no longer have any point or value. There would be nothing wrong with stealing, because no one could ever lose anything by it; there could be no such crime as murder, because no one could ever be killed; and in short none of the terms connoting modes of injury... would retain its meaning. If to act wrongly means, basically, to harm someone, there would no longer be any such thing as morally wrong action. ...Not only would there be no way in which anyone could injure anyone else, but there would also be no way in which anyone could benefit anyone else, since there would be no possibility of any lack or danger. It would be a world without need for the virtues of self-sacrifice, care for others, devotion to the public good, courage, perseverance, skill, or honesty. It would indeed be a world in which such qualities, having no function to perform, would never come into existence.⁸⁹

So, because our world contains suffering, it offers the possibility of developing the virtues that make us good. Without suffering we could never become good, and so it is good for God to allow suffering and even to sustain the conditions – such as the laws of nature – that are necessary for suffering. By incorporating God's sovereignty over the

⁸⁹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 324-325.

established order of creation, Hick's account of suffering proves to be an improvement over a naïve version of the free will defense.

Contra Hick

Unfortunately, however, Hick's theodicy depends on a claim about what it is not within God's power to do. I have argued that it is within God's power to create a world with moral good and lacking moral evil, but Hick is committed to denying this. Hick's developmental account of our goodness precludes God's having the power to create people that are initially good, but the plausibility of such an account is questionable. In response to Hick's developmental account of human goodness, G. Stanley Kane considers in turn three factors concerning the qualities that soul-making is supposed to bring about: "(a) the acquisition of these qualities, or the process involved in developing them, (b) the having and possessing of these qualities, or (c) the actual use of these qualities or their manifestation in action."⁹⁰ As for (c), Kane notes that the performance of virtues Hick believes are essential for our goodness (e.g., courage, perseverance, etc.) are logically impossible in a world without suffering.⁹¹ So, the performance of these virtues cannot be a necessary component of our goodness unless we are to reside permanently in an environment filled with evil – and this would be utterly unlike anything taught in the Christian tradition. Surely the saved will be good and perfected when they reside in heaven. As for (b), the importance of our virtues cannot be that we simply possess them, or else God would have been able to create us with the disposition

⁹⁰ G. Stanley Kane, "The Failure of Soul-making Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (1975): 8. Kane numbered these factors, but I have replaced his numbers with letters in this quotation so that there is no confusion with my numbered propositions in this chapter.

⁹¹ Kane, "Failure of Soul-making Theodicy," 8-9.

to be virtuous, and He would thus have been able to create wholly good people.⁹² Hick's theodicy depends not simply upon our demonstrating or possessing virtuous traits, but also upon our developing them in a world filled with strife and suffering. Kane points out that this account of the development of human goodness means that as soon as we become fully good (as Christian tradition teaches that we do in heaven) we no longer have any use for our virtues. There are no opportunities for courage or perseverance in heaven. As Kane asks, "Is heaven to be a place where the redeemed are loved and respected by God primarily for what they would and could do if only they were some place else? Does God esteem as great intrinsic values what the redeemed could and would do if only they were not in heaven?"⁹³ Hick's account seems to be an *ad hoc* endorsement of the development of goodness that does not require anyone to do anything with his virtues once he is fully developed. The idea that the acquisition of virtue is the essence of human virtue – over and above possessing virtue or demonstrating virtuous behavior – seems implausible. We have little reason to think that Hick's account of human goodness is correct.

So, is there any real reason to believe that God cannot create a person who is morally good from the start? Remember Coope's point that what counts as virtuous depends on context. We are not to give Satan any credit, for instance, for his refraining from the sin of gluttony. Can there be physical courage without physical danger? Apparently not, yet we have reason to believe that physical courage is merely good in certain contexts. Hick is correct in noting that the reason physical courage is a good is

⁹² Kane, "Failure of Soul-making Theodicy," 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

that we live in an imperfect world – consider the case of a man hunting for food in a dangerous environment, or soldiers battling for some worthy cause. In a maximally safe world physical courage is superfluous. Let us turn Hick’s argument around, however. Is there any reason to think physical courage virtuous but for the fact that it is necessary in our dangerous world? It does not count against God’s goodness that He cannot exhibit the virtue of thrift – because He is never subject to limited resources, of course – so why would a lack of the virtue of courage count against us if we never faced danger? Hick is correct to note that in a world without suffering many of the virtues we value would have no chance to develop, but it does not follow that our situation would be such that we lack the opportunity for the exhibition of *any virtue whatsoever*. We live in a world of danger and suffering, so the virtues we are familiar with respond to the reality of danger and suffering – but why should there not be other virtues tailored for perfectly peaceful and safe circumstances? We have no basis for valuing – or thinking that God values – the virtues of a dangerous environment over the virtues of a peaceful and safe environment other than in the contingent sense that we happen to be in a dangerous environment. It would be strange, for example, if it turns out that we are unable to behave virtuously in heaven.

The toughest tests for Hick’s soul-making theodicy are the local arguments from evil. If Hick is right, then every instance of intense suffering contributes to our spiritual development. But who is the spiritual beneficiary of the Mutilation? Is the rape victim in need of a more drastic kind of spiritual development than other women? Perhaps the one who is to develop from suffering is the subject of suffering. This seems wildly

implausible at best. Many of the most wicked people experience a life filled with only a limited amount of suffering, even though they would presumably need more soul-making than the rest. Furthermore, even when wicked people suffer, they often seem not to learn any positive lessons from it. On the other hand, many of the most virtuous people experience a vastly disproportionate amount of the suffering in the world, despite the fact that they presumably require less development than the rest of us. Furthermore, sometimes people who are virtuous before a great instance of suffering are often broken down to the point that they reject God and live more selfishly thereafter. In other cases, the subject of intense suffering dies without even the opportunity for development in this life.⁹⁴ If the subject of suffering is supposed to develop, we would expect to see a better track record for the soul-making power of suffering. In any case, it is difficult to see how allowing the Mutilation is supposed to be the best way for God to bring about the spiritual development of the maimed rape victim.

Perhaps events such as the Mutilation are supposed to help the rest of us to develop spiritually. Maybe all instances of horrendous suffering are necessary for the spiritual development of those who are not the subject of suffering, possibly (for instance) by humbling us. This unsavory explanation of suffering also seems unlikely. If such an account is correct, then it entails that the way for God to develop us morally and spiritually is to allow all of the examples of intense suffering that we observe. While we should appreciate the considerable difficulty involved in attempting to bring about the moral development of free creatures, it is implausible that God's best efforts at

⁹⁴ Perhaps such individuals reap the soul-making benefits of suffering in the next life; but for all we know, it makes them more embittered and less prepared to experience the perfection of heaven.

bringing us to moral goodness should be so ineffectual. The reason that the problem of evil has such rhetorical force is that the horrendous suffering of others drives many to question the goodness of God's sovereignty. We do not, for example, find many accounts of people reading about the Holocaust and then finding themselves spiritually edified. The idea that every event like the Mutilation is logically necessary for the soul-making of the rest of us strains credulity.

To be sure, suffering does sometimes result in positive moral development for the subject of suffering, and also for others who observe instances of suffering. I do not mean to deny either that there is a great deal of truth to what Hick says about the role suffering often plays in the development of our virtue or that God can and does use it for such purposes. As a comprehensive account of the existence of sin and suffering, however, soul-making is a failure. Surely there are instances of evil that do not bring about soul-making. Surely also it is within the power of an omnipotent God to bring about our development in other ways – that is, if a developmental account of our goodness is even correct, which is itself a dubious proposition. Clearly, then, (3) ends up being false and thus cannot be the basis for God's goodness. Hick's soul-making theodicy fails to account sufficiently for both God's omnipotence and the existence of instances of gratuitous evil.

Van Inwagen's Free Will Defense

The accounts we have considered to this point have particular difficulty accounting for the local argument from evil. Specific, horrifying instances of suffering are – as we would expect – by far the most difficult for us to understand in terms of

God's goodness. One account that handles such cases better than most is Peter van Inwagen's version of the free will defense. In his account – which attempts to answer both the global and local arguments from evil – God grants humanity free will so that we are capable of loving Him genuinely.⁹⁵ Love is not genuine unless it is freely given, and so the possibility of our genuinely loving God entails the possibility that we can choose not to love Him. Unfortunately, according to van Inwagen, humanity chose to rebel against God, and in so doing we lost the chance for the perfect communion we were to have with Him.⁹⁶ Our lives had been wholly without evil, but upon sinning we found ourselves outside of the conditions for which we were perfectly designed.⁹⁷ Naturally, we began to suffer and choose evil more and more. In response, God set in motion a plan for reconciling humanity to Himself. This reconciliation involves us learning to love God again as we were originally intended to, so His plan cannot include infringing upon our freedom. Reconciliation with God requires humanity's free cooperation.⁹⁸

Thus, van Inwagen writes,

[Human beings] must know what it is to be separated from [God]. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply “cancelled” all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. If he did that, we should be content with our lot and should see no reason to cooperate with him. ...[God] must leave in place a vast amount of evil if he is not to deceive us about what separation from him means. The amount he has left us with is so vast and so horrible that we cannot really comprehend it....⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 85.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

This version of the free will defense is superior to the one offered earlier in this chapter because it offers an explanation of God's participation in the suffering we experience as a result of the sin of others. According to van Inwagen, this suffering provides the opportunity for us to understand our great need for reconciliation with God. Van Inwagen also improves on the previous free will defense by refraining from explaining sin as merely the inevitable result of our freedom. Free will does not entail the possibility of sin – otherwise, we would have to say that God, because He is free, is capable of sin. Van Inwagen explains the possibility of sin as instead the result of our ability to love God genuinely. The ability to love God requires more than freedom; it also requires the ability to reject God, which is sinful. So, the ability to love entails the ability to sin. Furthermore, because the “horrors” of this world include sinful acts, then instances of sin also serve as warnings to us that we need God in our lives.

Van Inwagen's free will defense is an improvement over the soul-making theodicy because it does not attempt to explain all evil as necessary for furthering our spiritual development. We are free to reject God, on van Inwagen's account, so there are possibly instances of suffering that fail to draw us closer to God. Thus, van Inwagen can account for the failure of individual people to respond to suffering in a morally beneficial manner.

If we take van Inwagen's free will defense as a positive account of the existence of evil, sin is a manifestation of God's goodness because its possibility is entailed by our ability to love God and because instances of it serve as a warning to us about our need

for reconciliation with God.¹⁰⁰ Suffering also serves as such a warning. Reconciliation is important because it involves us being able to love God once again. So, according to this account, God's intention in allowing the existence of evil is to provide us with both the ability to love Him and the encouragement to reconcile with Him. This suggests that we may try to establish God's goodness by affirming the following:

- (4) God would not allow any instance of evil that is not necessary for either (a) our being capable of loving Him or (b) our being encouraged to reconcile with Him.

As we shall see, however, van Inwagen denies the truth of (4).

As we have seen, van Inwagen's account attempts to account for the occurrence of instances of horrendous evil – i.e., “horrors” – as necessary for getting our attention about our broken state without God. In response to this, the skeptic motivated by the local argument from evil might ask – is it not the case that God could have made this same point to us without allowing the Mutilation to occur? Let us grant that many horrors are necessary to make clear to humanity its need for God. Surely God can make that point to us just as clearly if we subtract just one instance of such evil. So far, nothing about van Inwagen's account specifically requires that the Mutilation occur. How then is it a manifestation of God's goodness? If the explanation for the existence of horrors is that they are to get our attention about our need for God, then the quantity of suffering should be no more than is necessary to get our attention.

¹⁰⁰ Of course, van Inwagen is offering a defense and not a theodicy, which means that he is not claiming that his account is true. He claims only that it is possibly true. This distinction will not matter if his defense turns out to be necessarily false, which is the stance I will take.

To answer this kind of objection, van Inwagen invokes the concept of vagueness.¹⁰¹ To understand vagueness, consider how many grains of sand are necessary to constitute a heap of sand. Let us start with 100,000 grains of sand. Surely that many grains is enough to constitute a heap. Let us remove a single grain from this heap. With 99,999 grains of sand we still have enough to make up a heap. We may continue to remove single grains of sand over and over again. The removal of a single grain at any point is relatively insignificant, given the number of grains of sand we have left, so it cannot make a difference about whether we still have a heap or not. Yet if we continue long enough, we will find that we are left with only one grain of sand, and surely one grain is not enough to constitute a heap. We may add another grain of sand to our one, and still we cannot legitimately claim that two grains of sand constitutes a heap. And so on, and so forth. The point of this example is to make clear that we do not know how to determine how many grains of sand is the minimum necessary to constitute a heap. If we are to declare some number of grains to be the minimum – say, two hundred – then we are committed to saying that one less than the minimum is not a heap. It strikes us as silly for anyone to claim that one hundred and ninety-nine grains is not a heap but that two hundred grains is. Any sharp division we attempt to draw between a heap and a non-heap is arbitrary. There can be no explanation that clearly shows that n grains of sand is a heap and that $n - 1$ grains is not.

¹⁰¹ Van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 100-111.

Van Inwagen claims that considerations of vagueness apply to the number of horrors God requires to make clear to humanity its need for reconciliation with Him.¹⁰² Let us say that if God allows n horrors then He allows a sufficient number of such evils to send the message to humanity that it needs Him. Yet, one might claim, surely God can send the message He wants without allowing the Mutilation to occur. God can reduce the total number of horrors by one without diminishing His message to humanity; and then perhaps He can reduce the total number again. And so on, and so forth. If He allows only a few instances of such suffering, however, His message will be too weak to get across to humanity. In all likelihood, however, there is no minimum number of horrors necessary to get our attention, just as there is no minimum number of grains of sand necessary to constitute a heap. As van Inwagen writes,

Now God perhaps does act to prevent any number of horrors. For all we know, he reduces the number of horrors in our world to some very small fraction of what it would have been if not for his specific and local miraculous action. Still, he has to leave the unredeemed world a horrible place or his plan for the redemption of humanity will fail.¹⁰³

So, according to van Inwagen, God did all He could do – He picked an arbitrary number of horrors to allow, sufficient for accomplishing His purpose.¹⁰⁴ We must deny the truth of (4) because there are evils that God could have prevented without harming His plan for reconciliation with us – but this does not count against God’s goodness because there is no absolute minimum number of evils He could allow to carry out His plan.

¹⁰² Van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 104-108.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

So, the Mutilation simply happened to be one of the evils God allowed in order to convince humanity of the need for reconciliation. According to van Inwagen, the only way God could send the message He wanted was to allow an arbitrary number of horrors; and God sends that message because of His desire for our reconciliation with Him. It is in this manner that van Inwagen's free will defense attempts to reconcile God's goodness with specific instances of horrendous evil. Taking his explanation as a positive account of God's goodness, we may consider the following:

- (5) God only allows the existence of evil as a means for bringing about (a) our being capable of loving Him or (b) our being encouraged to reconcile with Him.

So, we can understand van Inwagen's account as attempting to establish God's goodness through His desire to reconcile with us.¹⁰⁵ That is, perhaps His goodness entails that His actions toward humanity will make possible and then encourage reconciliation.

Contra van Inwagen

Unfortunately, van Inwagen does not provide a reason why God would have to use horrendous suffering to make clear to us our need for reconciliation with Him. Surely it is within the power of an omnipotent God to make us aware of our need for Him in a way other than by such great suffering. (Indeed, we may even ask if such suffering is all that effective a way of getting our attention.) Van Inwagen therefore does not provide an account that demonstrates the logical necessity of suffering for some manifestation of God's goodness. Furthermore, if God can create a world with moral

¹⁰⁵ Of course, we must remember that van Inwagen is offering a defense, not a theodicy; so he defends the possibility – and not necessarily the truth – of his account. He does not claim that we must understand God's goodness in the way affirmed by (5). If we take his account as true, however, (5) seems to be the claim that helps us to understand how we may understand the existence of evil in light of God's goodness.

good and without moral evil – as I argued in Chapter II – then God could have created a world in which everyone freely chose to love Him. The possibility that we can reject God does not entail the actual rejection of God by anyone. God could have brought about a loving relationship between Himself and humanity in another, less horrific manner. So, (5) is too weak a claim to explain the existence of evil. Allowing the existence of terrible evil may be one way to get our attention, but there is little reason to suspect that it is the best or only way He can do so. Furthermore, it leaves unanswered the question of why He would allow sin to exist in the first place. There would have been no need for reconciliation if humanity had never chosen rebellion in the first place.

As for attempting to account for God's goodness by His love for us – we must remember that love is supposed to be voluntary, which means that it cannot be necessary. Therefore, God's love for humanity cannot be necessary. On the other hand, God's goodness *is* necessary because it is essential to His nature. Thus, God's goodness does not logically entail His love for us or His desire for reconciliation with us. An accurate account of God's wholly good nature cannot depend on His love for us without making His love for us necessary; and the moment love is necessary – and thus not free – it is not genuine love. God is good whether He loves us or not; and so He is good whether He desires to reconcile with us or not. This means that instances of sin and suffering must turn out to be manifestations of God's goodness whether it helps to bring about reconciliation or not.

In summary, the challenges for explaining God's goodness in light of the existence of evil are too great for many popular theodicies – assuming, of course, that sin

and suffering are not immediate manifestations of God's goodness. Hick's soul-making account and van Inwagen's free will defense each fail to offer a convincing case that such instances of evil as the Mutilation are manifestations of God's goodness. The pious approach to the problem of evil rules out each of these approaches as insufficient to explain evil, especially in light of God's omnipotence. Furthermore, given the necessity of freedom for love, it follows that any account of God's goodness must be such that His love for us is merely contingent. Thus, we cannot appeal to His love for us or His desire to reconcile with us as a way to ground His goodness. A different kind of theodicy is necessary to provide an account of God's goodness if we are to explain the existence of both sin and suffering.

CHAPTER V
THE AUGUSTINIAN ACCOUNT

...I think the only reason that most people are tormented by this question is that they do not ask it piously; they are more eager to excuse than to confess their sins. Some people gladly believe that there is no divine providence in charge of human affairs....

Others, however, are not impertinent enough to deny that the providence of God rules over human life; but they prefer the wicked error of believing that it is weak, or unjust, or evil, rather than confessing their sins with humble supplication. If only they would let themselves be convinced that, when they think of what is best and most just and most powerful, the goodness and justice and power of God are far greater and far higher than anything they can conceive; if only they would consider themselves and understand that they would owe thanks to God even if he had willed to make them lower than they are.¹⁰⁶

The pious approach to the problem of evil does not allow us to construct a complete account of God's goodness. It only allows us to formulate constraints on the ways we are able to understand His goodness. In the last chapter, I sought to consider the ability of contemporary accounts to explain the existence of sin and suffering in the light of the following constraints:

- (1) For any instance of suffering s , either (a) s is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness or (b) s is logically necessary for some other manifestation of God's goodness, m .
- (2) For any act of sin t , either (a) t is an immediate manifestation of God's goodness or (b) t is logically necessary for some other manifestation of God's goodness, n .

We do not want to defend instances of sin and suffering as immediate goods.

Accordingly, we must seek to explain all such instances as logically necessary for other

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 73-74.

manifestations of God's goodness. In this chapter, I will argue that an Augustinian account of evil successfully provides such an explanation of sin and suffering without sacrificing any of God's divine attributes. The account I defend as sufficient to explain evil comes from St. Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*.

The Augustinian Account of God's Goodness

As one might surmise from the title of Augustine's dialogue, he invokes human free will to explain the existence of sin. Throughout the text, Augustine seeks to show that we cannot trace human sins back to God.¹⁰⁷ He argues that "inordinate desire is what drives every kind of evildoing."¹⁰⁸ Inordinate desire is, according to Augustine, the love of anything contrary to the eternal law according to which everything is rightly ordered. He believes that a human is rightly ordered when the "impulses of the soul are ruled by reason" – that is, when our desires are in accordance with the eternal law.¹⁰⁹ One mind cannot cause another mind to sin, because any such mind is itself not rightly ruled by reason (having fallen from justice) and is therefore weaker than a mind that wills the good.¹¹⁰ A weaker mind cannot force a stronger mind to succumb to inordinate desire. Thus, only the mind itself can give itself over into inordinate desire. Those who pursue and love eternal things – i.e., whatever is in accord with the eternal law – have a good will; and those who pursue and love temporal things more than the eternal law are

¹⁰⁷ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

guilty of having inordinate desire.¹¹¹ The faculty that allows the mind to choose one or the other is the will.¹¹² Thus, the source of sin is the free will of evil humans.

This account of sin is a version of the free will response to the problem of evil. As discussed in the last chapter, however, we will need more than just free will to explain the existence of sin. God is able to create free creatures who are sinless – a fact acknowledged by Augustine in his discussion on angels¹¹³ – so why did God not make humanity sinless? We may even ask why God would give us free will. To the latter question, Augustine responds, “If human beings are good things, and they cannot do right unless they so will, then they ought to have a free will, without which they cannot do right. True, they can also use free will to sin, but we should not thereby believe that God gave them free will so that they would be able to sin.”¹¹⁴ So, he thinks that free will is necessary for humans to be able to choose rightly; but even though freedom makes sin possible, we are not to infer that God intends for us to use it for sin. Humans may sin or not sin, and God’s goodness is secure either way. So, not only must Augustine explain why God did not create only sinless free creatures – he must account for the goodness of God in creating people who can either sin or refrain from sinning.

Augustine believes that everything that has being comes from God – including sinners – and furthermore that everything that comes from God is good.¹¹⁵ God creates all beings and sustains the being of all beings; and because everything that comes from God is good, all of His creation is good. Augustine’s ontological views are heavily

¹¹¹ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 27.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-64.

shaped by Neo-Platonism's hierarchical account of being – an account that identifies goodness with being. For Augustine, to exist is to have the “good qualities of ‘measure, form and order’; and everything has them in its own appropriate manner and is accordingly located at a certain point in the rising scale of goods.”¹¹⁶ Accordingly, for Augustine, animals are more excellent than inanimate objects because they are animated beings, and humans are in turn superior to animals because they have minds. Even better than humans are angels, which are incorporeal beings; and above the angels is God, the most excellent of all beings. Whatever is more mutable or otherwise less eternal is lower in the hierarchy of goods – so the human body is inferior to the human soul. Nevertheless, both the soul and the body are good, as are all other created things, such as mice and cabbage plants. God gave us free will – and so it is good as well, even when we fail to use it properly. Augustine defends the goodness of such goods, writing,

...[T]he nature of the body is at a lower level than the nature of the soul, and so the soul is a greater good than the body. But even when we find good things in the body that we can use wrongly, we do not say that they ought not to have been given to the body, for we admit that they are in fact good. So why should it be surprising that there are also good things in the soul that we can use wrongly, but which, since they are in fact good, can only have been given by him from whom all good things come?¹¹⁷

One can use the human hand to accomplish any number of good things but one can also use it for evil, as when one chooses to strike someone else unjustifiably. Even though we are able to misuse our hands they are nevertheless gifts from God, and in any case good things. Analogously, even though we are able to misuse our free will by choosing evil, our will is nevertheless a good gift from God. Augustine uses the example of eyes

¹¹⁶ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 65.

to reinforce his point. Any person lacking eyes is missing out on a good thing – certainly no one contests the goodness of eyesight. Free will is even better than eyesight, however, because while we can live rightly without eyes, we cannot live rightly without free will.¹¹⁸ So, Augustine concludes, our having free will is a good thing, despite our sinfulness.

We do not yet have any answer for why God would not simply create free creatures who do not sin. According to Augustine, a man who chooses evil is a good work of creation because he has understanding. He is not as good as a man who chooses rightly, but he is nevertheless good.¹¹⁹ The worst man is nevertheless better than the best dog because humans are of a higher order of being. Augustine thinks it no strike against God that He creates some things which are more excellent than others – any good makes the universe more excellent. He explains,

Therefore, if you take delight in a creature whose will is so perfectly steadfast that he does not sin, it is by right reason that you prefer this creature to one that sins. And just as you give it a higher rank in your thinking, the Creator gave it a higher rank in his ordering. So be sure that such a creature exists in the higher places and in the splendor of the heavens, since if the Creator manifested his goodness in creating something that he foresaw would sin, he certainly manifested his goodness in creating something that he foreknew would not sin....

But God, in the bounty of his goodness, did not shrink from creating even that creature whom he foreknew would not merely sin, but would persist in willing to sin. For a runaway horse is better than a stone that stays in the right place only because it has no movement or perception of its own; and in the same way, a creature that sins by free will is more excellent than one that does not sin only because it has no free will. I would praise wine as a thing good of its kind, but condemn a person who got drunk on that wine. And yet I would prefer that person, condemned and drunk, to the wine I praised, on which he got drunk. In the same way, the material creation is rightly praised on its own level, but those who turn away from the perception of the truth by immoderately using the

¹¹⁸ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 65-66.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

material creation deserve condemnation. And yet even those perverse and drunken people who are ruined by this greed are to be preferred to the material creation, praiseworthy though it is in its own order, not because of the merit of their sins, but because of the dignity of their nature.¹²⁰

Thus is the existence of sinners a manifestation of God's goodness, according to Augustine. Sinners have a lower position in the hierarchy of good things than sinless creatures, but they are nevertheless in their nature better than inanimate objects or animals and are thus praiseworthy. So, Augustine's explanation for the existence of sin goes beyond invoking our having free will. He argues that it is good for God to create people of varying degrees of holiness – and the creation of sinful people logically entails the existence of sin. The universe is better for having more good things in it, even if many of these things are not as good as others. About the attitude of one who thinks that the world might be better without sinful people, Augustine writes that it is “grudging weakness, to will that nothing lower had been made, as if you looked upon the heavens and wished that the earth had not been made.”¹²¹

To explain the existence of suffering, Augustine appeals to God's justice. While he does not want to explain sin in such a way that God causes it, he believes that God *does* cause suffering. As Augustine writes, “But if you know or believe that God is good – and it is not right to believe otherwise – then he does no evil. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that God is just – and it is impious to deny it – then he rewards the good and punishes the wicked. These punishments are certainly evils for them who suffer

¹²⁰ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 81.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

them.”¹²² Any suffering that God brings about as punishment for our sins is just, and so all such suffering is entailed by God’s good act of punishing us. Augustine has his interlocutor, Evodius, claim, “It may be that goodness confers benefits on those not committed to its charge, but justice does not punish those not in its jurisdiction. So it is obvious that we belong to God, because he is not only most generous in conferring benefits but also most just in punishing.”¹²³ We are all in God’s jurisdiction, so to speak – thus, any suffering we experience must be punishment for our sins. There is no other source of suffering than this, because, as Augustine writes, “No unjust man could secretly usurp God’s dominion over human beings (as if God were unaware of what was happening) or wrest them away against his will (as if God were so weak that he could be overcome by fear or force) so as to torture them with an unjust penalty.”¹²⁴ As we concluded in the last chapter, God is ultimately involved in every instance of suffering. By virtue of His omnipotence and His sovereignty, He can forestall any instance of suffering He wants. Augustine believes that the cause of justice allows God to punish all evildoers under His authority – so all instances of suffering are manifestations of God’s goodness insofar as they are to punish us for our sins. We cannot undergo punishment without suffering, so this account is sufficient to explain the existence of suffering.

So, to sum up Augustine’s answer to the argument from evil: all apparent evil is either sin or the just – and therefore good – punishment of the sinner, and God is not the source of the former. In fact, according to Augustine, sin comes from nothing at all, and

¹²² Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

is merely the voluntary turning away from the eternal law.¹²⁵ Sin, as such, has no being – it is only the corruption of a being whose nature is good. If we had been sinful by nature, then, according to Augustine, we would not be blameworthy for our sins.¹²⁶ We are blameworthy, however, and we sin not because it is in our nature – we sin voluntarily. So, Augustine holds that sinfulness has no positive ontological status; he is committed to the claim that evil has no being. All of God’s creation is good and all of His punishment is just – thus, in his *Confessions* Augustine writes, “To thee there is no such thing as evil, and even in thy whole creation taken as a whole, there is not.... But in parts of the creation, some things, because they do not harmonize with others, are considered evil.”¹²⁷ For Augustine, evil is simply a privation of the good; and good turns out to be harmony with the divine law.

So, evil has no being as such, but Augustine is not claiming that we do not experience evil in a genuine sense. He notes that punishment is an evil *for the one who is punished*.¹²⁸ Remember – from God’s perspective suffering is good insofar as it is just punishment. Accordingly, suffering is not evil, because it is entailed by His justice. In any case, however, John Hick rightly notes, “As an element in human experience, evil is positive and powerful.”¹²⁹ Phenomenologically, we experience evil in the forms of both sin and suffering – often in great quantities. Nevertheless, our phenomenological experience of evil does not entail that evil as such has any positive ontological status.

¹²⁵ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 69.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 130. (Book 7, Chapter 13, Section 19)

¹²⁸ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 1.

¹²⁹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 55.

Hick rightly argues that we should understand Augustine's account as defining evil as the *metaphysical* but not the *empirical* privation of the good.¹³⁰

Hick Objection to the Principle of Plenitude

Hick challenges Augustine's basis for the belief that the universe is better for God having created sinners. As I noted, Augustine believes that the universe is better for having a diversity of goods in it, even if some are not as good as others. He believes in what Hick calls the *principle of plenitude*. Roughly, the principle of plenitude says that the greatness of the universe depends on the exemplification of a diversity of kinds of goods that includes all different orders of being.¹³¹ Augustine believes that God acts in accordance with the principle of plenitude in His creation of sinners – and so on this basis Augustine believes that the existence of sinners is not a blot on creation.

The principle of plenitude derives from a Neo-Platonist account of ontology; but as Hick points out, Neo-Platonism is not a widely held view these days.¹³² In any case, Hick argues, we can make an independent argument against the principle of plenitude:

The logic of the principle of plenitude demands that there be creatures of every conceivable kind above the lowest. But while the world contains an immense abundance of species, so that we are not at all inclined to complain of nature's poverty, yet it still does not by any means contain every possible form of life. It does not, so far as we know, contain mermaids or unicorns or griffins or centaurs or winged horses or talking cats or elephant-like animals with camel-like humps or trees that grow a fruit yielding a full and balanced human diet, or an indefinitely large number of other conceivable animals, vegetables, and minerals.¹³³

¹³⁰ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 55-58.

¹³¹ For a more full definition, see Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 73.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 74-79.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

God is omnipotent, so it is clearly within His power to create and sustain such beings as Hick suggests. Obviously there could have been different beings having a finite measure of excellence that no being in our universe has. If the principle of plenitude entails that God must create a being corresponding to every possible intermediate measure of excellence, then clearly the principle is wrong. Augustine seems committed to the principle – he writes that “it is not possible for something you can conceive by right reason not to exist.”¹³⁴ He holds that anything God ought to have made, or whatever would have been good for Him to make, He did make. Such a view seems to strip God of His freedom in His creative acts. It is, in any case, a false view, so if we are to rescue Augustine’s position we must find another way to explain the existence of sinners.

Augustine himself provides a way to bolster his explanation for the existence of sinners. Remember that for Augustine, our suffering comes from God’s justice – He punishes us for our sinfulness. With this in mind, Augustine writes, “When those who do not sin are happy, the universe is perfect; but when those who sin are unhappy, the universe is no less perfect.”¹³⁵ This suggests that the goodness of creation is fully preserved whether or not we choose to sin. Augustine explains how the existence of sinners is good:

The fact that there are souls that will be unhappy if they sin and happy if they do not sin means that the universe is complete and perfect with respect to every nature that it contains. Sin and the punishment for sin are not natures, but characteristics of natures, the former voluntary and the latter punitive. The voluntary characteristic that comes about when one sins is disgraceful, so the punitive characteristic is used to place the soul in an order where it is not disgraceful for such a soul to be, forcing it to conform to the beauty of the

¹³⁴ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 80.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

universe as a whole, so that the ugliness of sin is remedied by the punishment of sin.¹³⁶

If this is true, then no special explanation for the existence of sinners is necessary – God’s goodness is equally manifest in the existence of both the sinful and the sinless, albeit in different ways. Everyone’s existence is in perfect harmony with the eternal law – either through one’s holy actions, which are obviously good, or through one’s evil actions which will be rewarded with just punishment. The existence of sinners is a manifestation of God’s goodness because they are punished for their wickedness; through their existence God demonstrates His justice. The existence of sinners would count as disharmonious without punishment, but their punishment resolves the harmony. So, each sin is a manifestation of God’s goodness insofar as it is logically necessary for God to enact divine justice.

Original Sin

One might object that punishment seems to fall on the innocent and the guilty alike, and point to instances of apparently unjust suffering. Perhaps the woman who suffered the Mutilation was a sinner, but what about children? The age at which humans are first responsible for making morally significant decisions is difficult to determine – but whatever age it is, certainly there are children under that age who suffer. In response to the difficulty of infant suffering, Augustine writes, “As if there were merit in the innocence of someone who could not yet do any harm!”¹³⁷ Innocence, for Augustine, seems to require not just a lack of sinfulness; one must refrain from sin in a circumstance

¹³⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

in which sinning is possible to count as innocent. Thus, children younger than the age at which they are first able to make morally responsible decisions cannot count as innocent, for Augustine. Such children are not full moral agents, and so their treatment is not subject to the law of justice under which the innocent are rewarded and the guilty punished. Augustine softens his view by suggesting that we cannot know the rewards that God has in store to repay the infants who suffer. He also notes that the Church considers the children killed by Herod to be martyrs.¹³⁸

Inasmuch as such martyrdom is praiseworthy, however, there must be a sense in which children are moral agents – even if only in a very limited sense. Accordingly, for Augustine’s account to explain the suffering of infants, it will have to be the case that there is a sense – even if it is just a limited sense – in which infants are guilty of sin. There is an Augustinian answer to this problem as well: original sin. Augustine gives a brief description of the fall of man as part of his theodicy:

For ever since the devil deceived the woman and through her the man, he laid claim to all the offspring of the human race and made them subject to his laws of death, because they were sinners. He did this out of a malicious desire to do harm, but it was sanctioned by a most equitable law.¹³⁹

When Adam sinned he brought sin into the human race so that we are all under punishment. According to Augustine, we justly suffer death because of Adam’s original sin. We are prone to sinful behavior even from birth so that sometimes we do not know how to act rightly, and other times we know what is right but find ourselves unable to act rightly. As Augustine explains,

¹³⁸ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 117.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

But it most justly pleased God, the Governor of all things, that we who are born of that first couple should be born into ignorance, difficulty, and mortality, since our first parents fell into error, struggle, and death. In this way his justice in punishing was manifested at the birth of the human race....¹⁴⁰

So, God justly punishes all those who are descendants of Adam, and no one is genuinely innocent – not even infants who are younger than the age at which they first make morally significant decisions. As Hick notes, describing Augustine’s theodicy, “the sufferings of the apparently innocent are met by the doctrine that, properly speaking, no one is innocent – for no one, not even a new-born child, is innocent in respect of Adam’s crime.”¹⁴¹ When infants suffer, their punishment is just because they are stained with Adam’s original sin.

Hick gives two arguments against Augustine’s account of the fall of man. First, Hick argues that the appeal to the historical fall is an appeal to obscurity. The doctrine of the fall claims that God created a finite, but nevertheless perfect creature who He then placed in a finite but nevertheless perfect environment – Eden. Next, this creature sins of his own free will; Hick writes that he becomes “the locus of the self-creation of evil *ex nihilo*.”¹⁴² Hick thinks that this is utterly mysterious. He writes, “To say that an unqualifiedly good (though finite) being gratuitously sins is to say that he was not unqualifiedly good in the first place....”¹⁴³ If Hick is correct, then it is incoherent to say that a unqualifiedly good being could ever sin.

But why should we think this is so? The Bible records that after God’s creation of Adam and Eve, but before the fall, He saw all that He made and that it was “very

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 108.

¹⁴¹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 173.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

good”.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps God did not mean for this to apply to Adam and Eve, or perhaps He qualified this declaration of goodness secretly – but the straightforward reading of the creation account is just that Adam and Eve were good, sinned, and were thus less good than before. If Hick is correct, then a man with the ability to sin but who never chooses to sin is not unqualifiedly good. For Augustine, however, to be “unqualifiedly good” for humans is to have a will and to submit this will to the eternal law. Presumably Adam submitted his will to the eternal law before falling – and if so, he was as good as he could be. Having a will, however, he had the potential to reject the eternal law and to succumb to inordinate desire. This potentiality did not make Adam any less good before he actualized it by sinning. From an Augustinian perspective, Adam was perfectly good before the fall. There is nothing incoherent about Augustine’s appeal to the fall of man, at least not in this respect.

Hick’s second argument attacks a literal interpretation of the Genesis account of God’s creation of Adam as incompatible with our modern, scientific understanding of our evolutionary origins. He writes,

For the past century evidence has been available concerning the earlier states of mankind, before the brief span of recorded history, and none of this evidence lends any support to the theory that the human race is descended from a single original pair, or that mortality and liability to disease and disaster are other than natural to the human animal in his place within the larger system of nature. On the contrary, the hypothesis of a pre-fallen paradisaical stage of history in which man enjoyed a serene consciousness of God and in which, but for some first sin, he would have remained in perfect peace both with his own kind and with the other species, conflicts so much with our modern scientific understanding of the

¹⁴⁴ Genesis 1:31

structure and unity of nature that it is no longer possible to combine biblical literalism with a responsible attitude to scientifically acquired knowledge.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps my own attitude to scientifically acquired knowledge is a bit irresponsible, but I think Hick overstates his case. Even if we concede that the contemporary scientific account of the evolutionary origin of all life is substantially correct – a concession that I do not agree with – there is no reason to suppose that God could not have created Adam and Eve relatively recently, after allowing the rest of the animal kingdom to evolve over the course of millions of years. Perhaps it would require some imagination, but there is no reason to suppose that we could not construct an account of original sin that is more or less substantially compatible with the modern scientific consensus on the theory of evolution. The tricky part would involve the origin of the first humans as full moral agents; but given God's omnipotence, surely we must grant that He would be able to create a first pair of full moral agents roughly within the process of evolution without messy transition figures who are neither full moral agents nor without moral agency altogether. Perhaps such an act of creation would require that God act supernaturally and thus not entirely in accordance with the process of evolution, but this would be no difficulty for an omnipotent God. Furthermore, such an act need not leave behind evidence that would differ substantially from the evidence left behind had the evolution of man occurred by entirely natural means. Given the existence of God, the scientific account of the evolutionary origin of life is not enough to rule out the real possibility that the historical fall of man actually occurred.

¹⁴⁵ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 175.

Animal Suffering

Another objection to Augustine's account of evil involves the suffering of animals. Animals are not descendants of Adam and are thus not stained with original sin, so in what way is their suffering a manifestation of God's goodness? Augustine brushes this question aside, saying that those who ask it are "slanderers" and "mere windbags"; he believes that the question itself reveals a "skewed view of the world."¹⁴⁶ All material objects, for Augustine, are subject to change and decay, so to demand that animals not suffer from death and decay is to forget their material nature.¹⁴⁷

Additionally, to bolster his claim that there is goodness even in such suffering Augustine writes,

The pain beasts feel reveals a power that is amazing and praiseworthy in its own way, because it shows that even the souls of beasts have a strong drive toward unity in governing and animating their bodies. For what is pain but a sense of resistance to division and corruption? Thus, when the soul does not willingly or indifferently give into the physical suffering that threatens its unity and integrity, but instead faces it reluctantly and struggles against it, we see all the more clearly how eager and determined the soul is to preserve its unity.¹⁴⁸

The claim here seems to be that the suffering of animals is good insofar as it demonstrates their souls' struggle for the sustained integrity of their material bodies. Augustine goes on to claim that if we did not see animals face this struggle, we would not be as aware as we should be of the fact that everything is a creation of the "supreme, sublime, and ineffable unity of the Creator."¹⁴⁹ Even if we grant Augustine this claim, however, he cannot explain instances of animal suffering that humans do not observe –

¹⁴⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 117.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

consider, for instance, the case of Rowe's dying fawn. Such an instance of unobserved suffering fails to "reveal a power that is amazing and praiseworthy" because there is no one to observe the fawn's struggle. Furthermore, the fawn's suffering is not logically necessary for God to make clear to us the fact that everything is a creation of the unity of the Creator. Augustine's attempt to explain how animal suffering is a manifestation of God's goodness is insufficient.

As I noted earlier, for Augustine, all evil is either sin or the punishment for sin. Animal suffering is neither, so an Augustinian account of evil will simply have to exclude understanding animal suffering as a kind of evil in any sense in which God has any obligation to prevent its occurrence. Such a conclusion would explain Augustine's impatience with the objection from animal suffering. Just as no one thinks to question God's existence because trees decay and die, so Augustine believes that animals are to suffer and die without casting any aspersions on God's goodness or existence. Animals are simply material creatures whose nature is such that they decay and die, like other, more primitive life.

One may object by claiming that animal pain is intrinsically bad, and that the existence of gratuitous animal suffering is thus a blot on creation. Someone making this objection might claim that God has an obligation to animals that He fails to uphold if He allows them to suffer gratuitously. Remember, however, that Augustine does not count anyone – or in this case, *anything* – as innocent if he (or it) is not a moral agent. Augustine believes that justice requires that God reward the innocent and to punish the guilty, but animals are neither innocent nor guilty. To be sure, pain is intrinsically bad,

but only in the sense that it is bad for the creature in pain.¹⁵⁰ Why think that such evil has any positive ontological status, however? Pain is a sign of the breaking down of the unity of the animal, but for Augustine this is simply a function of the material existence of the animal. Animal suffering is not, as such, an evil that a good God has any obligation to prevent. Indeed, Augustine himself writes, “God, on the other hand, owes nothing to anyone; he gives everything freely.”¹⁵¹ Animals are not moral agents, so there is no injustice in their suffering; God owes animals nothing, so He has no obligation to prevent their suffering. Taking Augustine’s account seriously precludes seeing animal suffering as evil in a positive, ontological sense.

A Just and Loving God

The reader may recall from Chapter IV that the point of explaining suffering as logically necessary for *some other* manifestation of God’s goodness rather than *simply being* such a manifestation was that we wanted to account for God as a loving being. The idea that human suffering as such is good seems incompatible with the idea that God is a loving being. Augustine’s account explains suffering not as an immediate manifestation of God’s goodness, but as logically necessary for the punishment for sin. While it is plausible to see punishment for sin as an immediate manifestation of God’s goodness, such an explanation does not take us any closer to understanding God’s love.¹⁵² Remember that love by its nature is never necessary, but rather is always free. Because God’s goodness is necessary, we cannot *explain* His goodness by appealing to

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Coope, “A Good God and a Bad World,” *Philosophical Books* 49 (2008): 46.

¹⁵¹ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 102.

¹⁵² Such an explanation need not help us understand God’s love, of course. We were seeking to explain God’s *goodness* as it relates to suffering, even though it was His love that gave us our reason for rejecting suffering as an immediate manifestation of God’s goodness in the first place.

His love. Thus, we must understand God as good whether He is loving or not.

Nevertheless, Christianity declares that God is loving, so any account that leaves out His love risks misrepresenting how we are to understand His goodness at work in creation.

Our topic is mainly about God's goodness, so I will not attempt to give a full account of His love. Nevertheless, a word is in order about Augustine's account of redemption. He writes,

...God's justice in punishing was manifested at the birth of the human race, but in the fullness of time he showed his mercy by setting us free.... [I]f anyone was willing to turn back to God so that he might overcome the penalty that had been imposed for turning away from God, it was right for God not to hinder him, but indeed to help him.¹⁵³

Showing mercy is an act of love, so if God is merciful to those who deserve punishment He is a God of love. Christ's redeeming sacrifice in the fullness of time is, according to Christian doctrine, just such an act of mercy. The question remains whether it is just for God to refrain from punishing the guilty, but Augustine thinks that it is right for God to help sinners to overcome the penalty of sin.

Indeed, Augustine believes that it is entirely in accord with the law of justice that God was able to free us from our bondage to the devil: "Thus the Word of God, the only Son of God, put on our human nature and brought the devil, who always was and always will be subject to his laws, under subjection to that human nature. He did not wrest control from the devil by violence, but overcame him by the law of justice."¹⁵⁴ He goes on to note that those who believe in Christ and receive salvation "live in him who on

¹⁵³ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 108.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

their behalf paid what he did not owe.”¹⁵⁵ So, some who are guilty do not receive the punishment that is their due. Christ is able to take on human form and receive the punishment that would otherwise belong to the guilty entirely in accordance with the law of justice. Thus, according to Augustine, justice does not necessarily require that the guilty are punished – the law of justice also allows for someone innocent to receive the punishment owed to the guilty.

God’s goodness is secure whether He is loving or not. On the Augustinian account, He need not have provided a means for redemption and He would nevertheless have been fully just in punishing our sins as they deserve. Still, in His mercy, He provided a means for our redemption. Thus, the Augustinian account provides an explanation for God’s goodness in any case, but also explains a way in which we may understand God as a loving God.

The Augustinian account of God’s goodness successfully accounts for the evils we observe in the world without attenuating any of His divine attributes. Because of his careful adherence to a pious approach to the question of evil, Augustine is able to construct a viable explanation that succeeds where many of the contemporary accounts fail. I have not demonstrated the truth of Augustine’s account of God’s goodness; nor have I done more than outline the beginning of an account of God’s goodness. More work – work drawing from both theological and empirical resources – is necessary to fill out this account. Nevertheless, I believe that the Augustinian account shows great promise as a starting point for the pious investigator.

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 93.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

What account then can we give of God's goodness? ...[W]e might be inclined to say that a good God would be all manner of things. Avuncular perhaps. Utilitarians might think of Him as a happiness maximizer. Those who are ecological might suppose that He would never harm a fig tree or pig. Egalitarians might say that He cares for everyone's good equally. But all these conceptions are very evidently incompatible with the picture the Bible gives. God is to be feared. God destroys the fig tree. God 'unfairly' chose the Jews, and then smote their enemies. Jesus loved one of the disciples more than the others. And he said 'I came to bring not peace but the sword'. It would be very simple-minded to sit down in a sulk and say 'Very well then, God cannot be good!' The Bible seems to teach us, if we are to trust it, that we make these protests under an incorrect conception of God's goodness. And we should be the first to admit that our ideas in this matter could be faulty. ...Anyone who is inclined to confuse their dream God with the God of the Bible should be warned by Nietzsche: 'You all fear the conclusion: "From the world that is known to us quite a different God would be demonstrable, such a one as would certainly not be a humanitarian"'.¹⁵⁶

I have attempted to approach the problem of evil in a way that takes seriously both a commitment to explaining the existence of what we take to be evil and a commitment not to attenuate the traditional attributes of God. Given certain initially plausible beliefs about God's goodness – for instance, the belief that God's goodness entails that He will prevent suffering when He can without forgoing some greater good – the argument from evil against God's existence becomes especially powerful, particularly in local formulations of the argument involving instances of horrendous suffering. Attempts to address such arguments that depend on attenuating God's divine attributes are unsatisfactory for the traditional believer. He cannot, for instance, deny

¹⁵⁶ Coope, "Goodbye to the Problem of Evil, Hello to the Problem of Veracity," 384-385.

God's ability to prevent suffering to explain the existence of suffering, because this entails denying God's omnipotence.

The traditional believer must also be wary of attempts to answer the argument from evil that claim to secure God's divine attributes but at the same time depend on claims about what God *cannot* do. Plantinga's free will defense depends on the claim that God cannot actualize a world with moral good and without moral evil – but there is nothing about God's actualization of such a world that entails a contradiction. God is omnipotent; so He is able to do anything that does not entail a contradiction, which includes creating a world with free, sinless creatures. Attempting to explain the existence of evil by appealing to God's limitations, such as they are, is an unpromising endeavor.

Given the existence of the evils we observe in the world, we are simply unable to justify belief in the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God whose goodness depends on His preventing suffering whenever He can do so without forgoing some greater good. However, there is no basis for grounding God's goodness in His prevention of suffering. We have no reason to believe that God's obligations mirror our own. If we investigate the existence of evil *piously* – that is, with a firm belief that an omnipotent, omniscient God exists who is wholly good – we are able to use the existence of evil in the world as evidence that helps us understand the nature of God's goodness. We may use instances of evil to develop constraints on the ways in which we may understand God's goodness. If we can develop an account of God's goodness that is compatible with the Christian tradition, then for Christianity, there is no problem of

evil. The various problems of evil instead serve as ways of ruling out false conceptions of God's goodness. About one such conception, Coope writes, "The problem of evil was meant to show that there was no God. What it really shows is the misleadingness of Kant's leading thought: that there is something called morality which is the same for all rational beings."¹⁵⁷ The pious approach makes real progress in understanding the nature of God's goodness possible.

Because God is sovereign, everything in creation is either a manifestation of His goodness or logically necessary for some other manifestation of His goodness, including each instance of sin and suffering. Accounts of God's goodness that attempt to explain suffering as necessary for human moral development or for making evident our need for reconciliation with God fail to demonstrate that the necessity in question is logical necessity. Indeed, God's omnipotence is such that He would be able to accomplish such ends without allowing suffering. Thus, such accounts of God's goodness are, at best, incomplete explanations of suffering. As for sin – free will can explain sin in a way that removes God from culpability for our sins, but it cannot explain why God did not create a world with sinless free creatures.

The pious approach to the problem of evil cannot by itself provide a complete account of God's goodness, but any such account must be compatible with the constraints such an approach uncovers. I have argued that the Augustinian explanation of evil is one such account. According to Augustine, all evil is either sin or the punishment for sin. The latter explains the existence of suffering, given the universal

¹⁵⁷ Coope, "A Good God and a Bad World," 46.

reach of Adam's original sin. Sin is a manifestation of God's goodness insofar as it is the occasion for God to demonstrate His justice. Of course, because God is a loving God, it can also be the occasion for Him to demonstrate His mercy. While the Augustinian account may yet turn out to be incomplete, it compares favorably to the many contemporary accounts that fail to provide sufficient explanations for the existence of sin and suffering.

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