



Theodicy

by Steve Hays

Preface

There's some overlap between this book and my book on *Pilgrim through this barren land*. Both address issues in theodicy. The main difference is that this book treats the problem of evil more from the standpoint of philosophical theology whereas the other book treats it more from the standpoint of practical theology. That doesn't mean this book is impractical, but the point is to provide a philosophical buttress for practical theology.

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Over Jordan

Over the years I've done hundreds of posts on the problem of evil. In this post I'd like to summarize some of that material, as well as arranging it in a logical relationship. The purpose of this post is not to reargue all my contentions, but state them in compact, logical fashion. The supporting material is to be found in my many posts on the subject. It's possible that I've forgotten some of my own arguments.

1. THE PROBLEM OF ATHEISM

Before we think about the problem of evil, we need to think about the problem of atheism. Too many atheists as well as Christians get off on the wrong foot by beginning with the problem that evil purportedly poses for the Christian faith. But that's the wrong starting-point.

We need to consider the implications of the alternative. Atheism provides a point of contrast. As some hardy atheists concede, their position conduces to moral and existential nihilism. Human lives are worthless.

The problem of evil induces some professing Christians to renounce the faith. Yet atheism is irredeemably evil. Apostates are siding with evil when they recant Christianity. They decry evil, but throw themselves into the arms of evil by embracing nihilism.

It's crucial to appreciate that atheism can never be a viable fallback position.

2. HOW PROBLEMATIC IS THE PROBLEM OF EVIL?

Evil can be a serious problem without being a serious problem for the credibility of Christian theism. We need to distinguish different ways in which evil is a problem. Evil is a problem in the sense of making life much grimmer. But that's different from claiming that evil is a problem for the truth of Christianity.

We keep reading that the problem of evil is the main intellectual challenge to the Christian faith. But does the repetition of that trope artificially condition people to think that way about evil? Does constantly reading about the problem of evil feed on itself.

Is the trope circular? Does the trope have a cumulative effect? If you hear something a thousand times, you may be more likely to believe it just because you heard it a thousand times. Repetition becomes a specious substitute for evidence—like an urban legend.

3. THE FREEWILL DEFENSE

Not surprisingly, many freewill theists deploy the freewill defense. Obviously, it wouldn't be possible for someone who isn't a freewill theist to deploy the freewill defense. If he was a Calvinist, then that theodicy would be inconsistent with his theology.

However, the freewill defense is independent of freewill theism in the sense that even if libertarian freedom were true, that doesn't automatically mean the value of libertarian freedom outweighs the disvalue of evil. Just because freewill theism is consistent with the freewill defense doesn't entail that the good of libertarian freedom is better than the good of a world without so much pain and suffering. Many freewill theists just assume that the freewill defense is their default theodicy, but the truth of freewill theism is separable from whether freedom in itself makes the existence of evil morally permissible.

4. THE LOGICAL/EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT

The logical argument from evil is internal to Christianity. It attempts to show that some key Christian tenets are mutually inconsistent. In principle, an atheist who denies moral realism can deploy the logical argument from evil.

By contrast, the evidential argument from evil concerns the plausibility of God's existence in light of evil. That can be a worry for Christians. But unlike the logical argument from evil, when an atheist deploys the evidential argument from evil, he may evaluate the issue by resort to his own standards.

Frequently, though, atheists blur these two different arguments. Is the atheist arguing on his own grounds, or is he arguing on Christian grounds? Oftentimes, atheists are so controlled by what they think is rational or ethical that they impugn the coherence of Christian theism when they are covertly interjecting their own criteria into the assessment.

Moreover, if an atheist deploys the evidential argument from evil, then he shoulders a burden of proof to justify his own standards, consistent with his naturalism. He's not entitled to take his criteria for granted.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

The argument from evil typically takes the form of an inconsistent tetrad:

- i) God is omnipotent
- ii) God is omniscient
- iii) God is benevolent
- iv) Evil exists

An atheist then attempts to show that these are mutually inconsistent, thereby generating a dilemma for the Christian. To relieve the inconsistency, a Christian must forfeit at least one of the propositions. If, however, (i-iii) are nonnegotiable, then his belief-system has no give. As an all-or-nothing, take-it-or-leave-it set, if it's inconsistent at any one point, then you must ditch the whole thing. So goes the argument.

But one problem with the argument from evil is that it attacks a very abstract version of theism. Something derived from philosophical theology. Classical theism or perfect being theology.

Typically, the argument from evil isn't formulated in reference to a historic living religion like OT Judaism or NT Christianity.

For instance, it would be much harder to show that the argument from evil disproves the existence of Yahweh since Yahweh isn't "benevolent" in the sense that atheists typically define benevolence when formulating the argument from evil. Indeed, many unbelievers reject biblical theism because they think Yahweh, Jesus, and/or God the Father is not benevolent as they see it. They take umbrage at various divine actions, commands, and prohibitions in Scripture.

But where does that leave the argument from evil? If, by their own admission, biblical theism doesn't comport with their preconceived notions of benevolence, then the existence of evil is consonant with the existence of a Deity like that.

On a related note, the existence of evil is a necessary presupposition of biblical theism. If we were living in a world devoid of moral and natural evil, then the absence rather than the presence of evil would falsify the Biblical depiction of reality. Bible history is replete with evil. Eschatological salvation and judgment are the ultimate remedy.

6. THE PARADOX OF PREVENTION

Atheists allege that if God exists, he'd either prevent evil altogether or at least prevent more evil than he does. However, preemption has the paradoxical consequence of not only preventing an event but by the same token, preventing any evidence that the event was preempted. Since it never happened, it had no discernible effects. A nonevent leaves no trace evidence.

For all we know, God has preempted countless evils, for if he's done so, then in the nature of the case that's something we will never know.

7. NO BEST WORLD

It's easy for us to imagine ways in which the world could be better. But that's a shortsighted perspective.

Take time-travel stories in which the protagonist is living in the aftermath of a global catastrophe. His solution is to avert the catastrophe by changing the past. Changing a key variable in the past so that the future will fork off into an alternate timeline where that catastrophe never happened. And he succeeds, only there's an unforeseen cost. He may simply replace one global catastrophe with another global catastrophe. The alternate future has a different disaster. Or by preventing the catastrophe, he prevents many resultant goods.

So he can never strike the right balance. There's no alternative that preserves all the same goods without the attendant evils. There's no best possible world. Each world may be better in some respects, but worse in others. Short-term improvements at the expense of long-term disasters. Every alternate timeline has tradeoffs.

8. DOMINO EFFECT

Apropos (7), although God can and sometimes does intercede to prevent or halt evil, divine intervention has a disruptive effect on the future. Every divine intervention causes the future to veer off in a different direction than if God did not intercede.

Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes that's a good thing. Yet that's offset by the series of goods which divine intervention eliminated when he diverted the timeline.

Moreover, there's no optimal number of divine interventions. He could always do it one more time or one less time. Each intervention or nonintervention has respective consequences down the line. So the cutoff is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. There's no intrinsic upper or lower limit.

In a cause-effect world, every action has a domino effect. Divine prevention doesn't merely swap out one domino with another, but replaces the entire series of falling dominoes after that point with a different series of falling dominoes.

Atheists act as though God could just rearrange some things to make the world a better place. But in a world with linear cause-and-effect, it isn't possible to rearrange a few things without setting the future on a whole new course.

And every alternate timeline has a different set of winners and losers. People who were heavenbound in one timeline don't exist in another timeline. They miss out on that incomparable opportunity.

Some people respond by appealing to the Epicurean symmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. But that's an intuition which many people don't share. Arguably, nonexistence is a deprivation.

9. SECOND-ORDER GOODS

There are internal relations where you have an effect of an effect. Nested relations where the end-result is necessarily contingent on an intervening event. For instance, a grandfather can't directly father a grandson. Rather, he can indirectly produce a grandson via the medium of his own son. By the same token, some kinds of goods are necessarily contingent on some prior evils. Even an omnipotent God can't bypass those stages to achieve the result directly.

10. SOUL-MAKING VIRTUES

There's a difference between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. A difference between abstract propositional knowledge and firsthand experience.

Experience is transformative as well as informative. It doesn't just add new information, but changes you in the process. Let's take two hypothetical examples:

i) Suppose an athletic boy has contempt for a disabled classmate. He taunts and bullies the boy in the wheelchair.

Then he himself becomes disabled during a sporting event. He now finds out what a struggle it is to be confined to a wheelchair. To depend on the kindness of strangers. He acquires compassion through personal, comparable experience.

ii) Suppose some teenagers go hiking. They're best friends, or so they assume. But that's never been put to the test.

Suppose, due to unexpectedly bad weather, they suddenly find themselves in a survival situation where the odds of their individual survive are greatly enhanced by leaving an injured companion behind. Or by murdering a companion.

That life-threatening situation exposes the depth or superficiality of their friendship. Will they risk their own life and health for the sake of another, or were they fair-weather friends all along?

Now suppose they never went on that ill-fated hiking trip. In that case, they wouldn't need to have those sacrificial virtues. Yet that's a grave moral defect, even if circumstances never force it to the surface.

11. ESCHATOLOGICAL COMPENSATIONS

Compared to eternity, this life is a blink of an eye. However horrifically a Christian may suffer in this life, once that's past, it's forever behind him. After he dies, the afflictions of this life are increasingly distant in his consciousness. Although memory is important, we live in the present, and our mood is powerfully shaped by future expectations.

Indeed, there's a tremendous sense of relief. He made it! The worst is behind him. He's safe now. Out of harm's way. Nothing more to fear. Nothing more to lose. He can't go back. And the way ahead is nothing but good.

Second-order theodicies

What may be the two the best theodicies can be consolidated under a single principle: second-order goods.

What are second-order relations? For instance, you can't die unless you were alive. Jacob can't be Abraham's grandson unless he was Isaac's son.

Even an omnipotent God can't produce a second-order effect directly. For instance, God can create Jacob ex nihilo, but God can't make Jacob Abraham's grandson if Abraham and Isaac never existed.

Or take a second-order evil. Suppose I embezzle company funds, then lie to cover up my embezzlement. I can't lie about my embezzlement unless I was guilty of embezzlement.

Take an example of a second-order good. I can't forgive someone unless I've been wronged. I can't be forgiven unless I've wronged someone.

i) Soul-making

Soul-making virtues are second-order goods. They presume the existence of first-order natural or moral evils.

Suppose it's better to be a redeemed creature than a sinless creature. If so, that's a second-order good.

ii) Domino effect

To take an example, some folks marry people they've known for years. But in other cases, they meet by chance. Some people meet their future spouse because they just happen to be at a particular place at a particular time. Had they gone to the same place at a different time, or gone to a different place at the same time, they would have missed connections.

If you were to change a single variable in the past, that could throw it off. And many different individual variables could have the same disruptive effect. Had the recent past been even slightly different, they might end up meeting a different future spouse, and making a life with that person. A different forking path. A different family tree.

Suppose the weatherman forecast sunny weather, so you didn't dress for rain. But there's a brief rain shower, forcing you to take cover in a bookstore, where you bump into your future spouse.

It may be little things like that. Or it may be big things. Take the Holocaust. About 6 million European Jews perished in the Holocaust.

However, one side-effect of the Holocaust was to create a new Jewish Diaspora. There are Jews living in Israel or America who wouldn't exist if their parents or grandparents hadn't fled Europe, either in anticipation of the Final Solution, or as blighted survivors.

That's a second-order consequence of the Holocaust. They live because some of their Jewish ancestors died. (Indeed, were murdered.)

So there are tradeoffs. The Holocaust is a paradigm evil, yet there are resultant goods that wouldn't have occurred apart from that paradigm evil.

There is no best possible world. There is no single world that combines all the goods of different possible worlds. There might be a best possible multiverse, but not a best possible world—in the sense of one actual timeline to the exclusion of others.

Serrated theodicy

Calvinism sounds bad...until you compare it to the alternatives.

On Facebook, Jerry Walls recently plugged a NYT oped attacking Calvinism: "*Teaching Calvin in California*".

Jerry fancies himself a Wesleyan Arminian, but just imagine teaching Charles Wesley in California. How do you think his sermon on earthquakes as divine judgment would go over in that seismically active part of the world:

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-129-the-cause-and-cure-of-earthquakes/>

Jerry is an Arminian propagandist first and a philosopher second. Always in that order. Jerry is a corruptor of critical discourse. A good philosopher practices critical thinking skills, and cultivates critical thinking skills in his students and listeners. Part of being a good philosopher is to mentally argue both sides of the issue so that you can defend your position in the face of the best the competition has to offer. You anticipate objections. You anticipate counterexamples. In fact, good philosophers will even improve on the arguments of the opposing position, in order to respond to the strongest possible objections to their own position.

Jerry never does that. He always gives a one-sided presentation. He picks on weak opponents. He submits to softball questions by sympathetic interviewers.

I'll be the first to admit that Calvinism has an uncomfortably severe aspect. But I don't think that's a damaging concession. The Bible often has a severe aspect. Take "offensive" passages in the OT. Or the "offensive" doctrine of hell. Or graphic and horrific imagery in the Book of Revelation.

For that matter, extrabiblical historical has an uncomfortably severe aspect. All the horrific events that happen in the world at large, on a regular basis.

It's unintelligent to assess Calvinism merely on its own terms. You need to put Calvinism in context. You need to make a comparative judgment. Comparing and contrasting Calvinism with the alternatives. I'm going to briefly review traditional religious strategies in response to the problem of evil.

I. INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

i) The law of karma is a traditional Hindu and Buddhist explanation for the problem of suffering. Why do the innocent suffer? Hinduism and Buddhism cut the knot by denying the premise. According to Hinduism and Buddhism, there is no such thing as innocent suffering. If a 5-year-old girl is run over by a drunk driver, she's being punished for something she did in a past life.

ii) In one strand of Hinduism, evil exists because good and evil exist in the divine, and every possibility must be realized. In that respect, Hinduism is like Neoplatonism, Manichean or Zoroastrian dualism, the multiverse, and the principle of plenitude.

On that view, evil is just as ultimate as good. Evil is an ineluctable aspect of bedrock reality. On that view, evil is not a declension from the way things are supposed to be. Not a temporary side-effect of something more primary.

iii) Apropos (ii), the solution to the problem of evil is twofold:

a) Cultivate detachment

b) Annihilation. The only escape is to break the vicious cycle of karmic reincarnation by passing into oblivion.

iv) Apropos (iii), detachment has different aspects:

a) In Buddhism, we suffer because we lose what we love. Everything is fleeting. The solution is renunciation of human affections. Of course, one could argue that the cure is worse than the disease. But there are no good options.

b) On a related note, both Hinduism and Buddhism have a doctrine of maya, although the interpretation varies. In general, this involves a distinction between appearance and reality. Between the divine and the world or the self and the world.

In one strand of Hinduism, what is ultimately real is the immutable, eternal, preexistent soul. The world of time and space is illusory. But since that's the world in which evil occurs, evil is illusory. You need to practice meditation to withdraw psychologically from the bewitchment of the phenomenal world.

In Buddhism, maya is a delusion that masks the void. In Hinduism, you practice mediation to realize that your real inner self is untouched by phenomenal evil. In Buddhism, you practice mediation to realize that you have no real inner self to be touched by phenomenal evil.

These are very bleak philosophies.

II. ATHEISM

Atheism has some affinities with Buddhism. Indeed, Schopenhauer's nihilistic outlook is similar to Buddhism.

i) Technically, atheism can't have a theodicy, but it must address the problem of evil. One intractable difficulty with atheism is that if you're cheated in this life, you don't get a

second chance. In a godless universe, many people suffer irredeemable loss. There are no eschatological compensations. No reversal of fortunes.

ii) In addition, there are no objective goods. We value certain things because our evolutionary conditioning has brainwashed us into believing some things are worthwhile, but when you rip away the mask, there's nothing behind the mask. Just a dumb, pitiless, amoral process—much like the Buddhist void.

III. UNIVERSALISM

On the face of it, universalism has the most appealing theodicy. But on closer examination it has some bloody jagged edges.

i) If God is going to save everybody, why put so many people through a hell on earth in the first place? It's like splashing acid in someone's face, then paying for her skin grafts and reconstructive surgery. Does universalism really require God to stand by as Nazis perform human experimentation on Jewish children?

ii) By the same token, the price of universalism is for victims of horrendous evil to share eternity with their tormentors. Mengele and his victims will be neighbors in paradise.

There's a sense in which the purest form of punishment, pure retribution, is to be denied a second chance. You crossed a line of no return. You burned your return ticket. Despair is the truest form of just deserts. The damned have no hope. That's what makes hell hellish. If there's no injustice so heinous that it's unforgivable, then is there any ultimate justice?

IV. MOLINISM

i) Molinism attempts to harmonize freewill with determinism. Possible worlds contain moral evils caused by human agents with libertarian freedom.

If, however, God instantiates a possible world, that's a package deal. Everything that happens in the actual world is bound to happen. Even though alternative courses of action are viable options, those only happen in possible worlds that God did not instantiate. If a possible world is indeterministic, an actual world is deterministic. By instantiating that particular world history, every event must unfold accordingly and inexorably.

It's like a library of DVDs. Some DVDs are unplayable (infeasible). But of the subset of playable DVDs, God chooses which DVD to play. And the plot is predetermined. From start to finish, everything happens according to script.

Compare it to instant replay. Even if the original outcome was indeterminate, the replay is determinate. If we think of possible worlds as abstract objects, then (according to Molinism), the human agents were free, but these aren't real people. In the ensemble of

possible worlds, they can do otherwise. Indeed, there are possible world where they do otherwise. But in the real world, where they are real people, with consciousness and feelings, they can't rewrite the plot. Each possible world has a single history. It can't combine two or more alternate histories from different possible worlds.

ii) In addition, human agents don't get to choose which possible world will be instantiated. Suppose there's a feasible world in which Judas is heavenbound. In that world, he doesn't betray Jesus. That would clearly be a better world for Judas to find himself within, but he gets stuck in the world where he's hellbound. He is fated to betray Jesus the moment God instantiates that particular timeline rather than some alternate timeline. Trapped in a world where he is doomed.

V. ARMINIANISM

Superficially, this seems kinder and gentler than Calvinism. But on closer examination, you will cut yourself on razor wire.

Arminianism has two basic commitments: God's love and man's freedom. These two principles tug in opposing directions. The claim is that for love to be genuine, humans must be at liberty to refrain from reciprocating God's love.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that contention, it's only plausible at an individual level. Problem is, humans are social creatures who interact with fellow humans. As a result, God must respect the freedom of Nazi scientists to experiment on human guinea pigs (to take one example). Protecting the innocent from horrendous harm is less important than creating a theater in which "true love" is possible.

VI. OPEN THEISM

According to open theism, God is in a situation of diminished responsibility for evil inasmuch as God is ignorant of the long-term consequences of his creative actions. But there are problems with that theodicy:

i) If you don't know whether you're inserting innocent people into a dangerous situation, shouldn't you play it safe? When in doubt, is it not morally incumbent on you to avoid exposing people to an unforeseeable, but potentially catastrophic risk?

ii) Moreover, even if God can't foresee the outcome a year in advance or a month in advance, surely he can foresee the outcome a day in advance or an hour in advance. As events come to a head, the future becomes increasingly predictable, even if the outcome is not a dead certainty.

In addition, we don't generally think the bare possibility that something might not be harmful is an excuse to insert innocent people into what is, in all likelihood, a hazardous situation.

VII. CALVINISM

According to Calvinism, God predestines every event, including evil events. Although that's a sobering claim, an implication of that claim is that everything happens for a reason. Indeed, there's a good reason for whatever God ordains.

Especially in cases of evil, we typically demand that there better be a good reason to justify it. And that's precisely what Calvinism claims.

Compare that to the candid admission of sophisticated freewill theism:

According to the story I have told, there is generally no explanation of why this evil happened to that person...It means being the playthings of chance. It means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, and it means something worse than that: it means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly for no reason at all. It means living in a world in which the wicked, through sheer luck, often prosper. But whether a particular horror is connected with human choices or not, it is evident, at least in many cases, that God could have prevented the horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

No appeal to considerations in any way involving human free will or future benefits to human beings can possibly be relevant to the problem with which this case [Auschwitz] confronts.

There are many horrors, vastly many, from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all. P. van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 89,95,97.

Is that clearly preferable to Calvinism? What's disturbing isn't so much the idea that God predestines horrendous evils, but the fact of horrendous evils. The world has exactly the same horrendous evils regardless of your theodicy.

It's just immature, as well as deceptive, for Arminians like Walls to constantly attack Calvinism based on the disagreeable implications of Calvinism while constantly refusing to compare it with the disagreeable implications of every other theodicy. In our fallen world, there are no nice theodicies. Every theodicy has serrated edges. There's no escaping that.

Tooley on evil

Philosopher Michael Tooley has published a new monograph: *The Problem of Evil* (Cambridge 2019). He's arguably the most sophisticated atheist on this particular issue, so it's useful to scrutinize his position. I'll focus on what I take to be his best arguments.

2.6 Allowing Undeserved Suffering Cannot Be Justified by Appealing to the Great Good of the Existence of Laws of Nature

First, it is generally held that an omnipotent deity could miraculously intervene at any time and place to alter what happens in the natural world, and this is surely right, since if God is the creator of everything, all that is needed for God to be able to intervene in the natural world at any time is to create laws...of the 'God willing' variety. Moreover, they need to be of that variety if, as most theists believe, God sometimes intervenes miraculously in the natural world.

Let us turn, then, to a second argument, which is that many evils depend upon precisely what laws the world contains. An omnipotent being could, for example, easily create a world with the same laws of physics as our world, but with slightly different laws linking neurophysiological states to qualities of experiences, so that extremely intense pains either never occur, or else could be turned off by the sufferer when they served no purpose. Alternatively, God could create additional physical laws of a rather specialized sort that could, for example, either cause very harmful viruses to self-destruct, or prevent viruses such as the avian flu virus from evolving into an airborne form that would have the capacity to kill hundreds of million people.

I disagree with the facile way atheists like Tooley posit that God could create different physical laws. There are limitations on what an omnipotent God can do by means of natural media. While he can often bypass natural processes to produce an outcome directly (although there are exceptions to that as well), if God is working by means of a natural cause and effect process, then all laws must be mutually consistent. God can't just create ad hoc laws at odds with a network of physical processes.

To return to the main argument, given 'God willing' laws, God could intervene to destroy the viruses and bacteria that are responsible for diseases that cause enormous suffering and millions of deaths each year. These diseases include, in the case of viruses, AIDS, cervical cancer, dengue fever, Ebola disease, hepatitis, influenza, Lassa fever, measles, Nipah virus disease, poliomyelitis, rabies, rotavirus, viral hemorrhagic fever, and West Nile fever. In the case of bacteria,

they include anthrax, bacterial meningitis, bacterial pneumonia, diphtheria, epidemic typhus, leprosy, leptospirosis, Lyme disease, meningococcal meningitis, necrotizing fasciitis, pelvic inflammatory disease, rheumatic fever, scarlet fever, tetanus, toxic shock syndrome, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and yaws.

Alternatively, if God preferred, precisely the same result could be achieved by God's creating purely physical laws that result in the destruction of harmful viruses and bacteria as soon they come into being. There would never have been, then, the Black Death in the Middle Ages, which is estimated to have killed between 75 and 200 million people, or the 1918 flu pandemic, which killed between 50 and 100 million people.

God could also intervene whenever it was necessary to prevent great natural disasters in the form of earthquakes, floods, tidal waves, hurricanes, and so on. These would include the earthquake in China in 1556 that killed around 800,000 people, or tsunamis, such as the one in 2004 that hit twelve Asian countries and killed over 200,000 people.

Finally, it is not just natural evils that God could have prevented. Consider great moral evils such as the Holocaust. A small intervention by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being could have allowed one of the many failed attempts to assassinate Hitler to succeed, or a small mental nudge could have resulted in Hitler's realizing the error of his deadly anti-Semitism.

The irrelevance of an appeal to the claimed desirability of God's remaining relatively hidden is also now apparent. Natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and droughts all depend upon the weather in ways that involve highly complex causal processes. Would any human conclude that God must be intervening if hurricanes never occurred in human history? Would it not require an unimaginably massive scientific inquiry, if it were even possible, for humans to arrive at the conclusion that some supernatural being must be intervening to prevent such occurrences? Or consider earthquakes, which occur at the boundaries of tectonic plates. If God simply prevented such movement, or allowed it to occur only very slowly, would any human ever be able to discover what was happening?

The same is true with regard to the suffering and deaths that result from diseases, including those listed above, due to viruses and bacteria. An omnipotent and omniscient being would know, as he watched things evolve, when any new virus or bacterium that appeared would harm humans or other sentient beings, and could destroy any such thing immediately. Or he could have created laws that would do that without any intervention needed on his part. If either were the case, would any human ever be able to discover that this was happening?

Finally, the same is true as regards great moral evils. An omniscient being would know when a Stalin or a Hitler or a Hirohito was about to do something that would lead to the deaths of millions. If such people died from a stroke, would anyone know that a deity had intervened?

All that overlooks at least three considerations:

i) Some second-order goods are contingent on evil. The evil can only be eliminated at the cost of eliminating the corresponding good.

ii) Eliminating moral and natural evil generates a radically different world history. There are billions of humans whose existence hinges on a particular world history, containing moral and natural evil. They miss out in a world devoid of moral and natural evil.

Tooley might take a hardline Epicurean view, but it's arguable that nonexistence is a deprivation. Indeed, the most fundamental deprivation of all. So there are tradeoffs. Not all goods are compossible in the same timeline.

iii) Since Tooley concedes that divine preemption of evil might be undetectable, then for all we know, God has in fact preempted evil countless times. However, as I also noted (ii), preempting evil has a disruptive effect on the future. So the value of divine intervention must be counterbalanced by taking the unfortunate side-effects into consideration.

2.8 Part 2 of the Incompatibility Argument from Evil

Condition 2: Allowing the undeserved suffering would lead to an improvement in the life of the individual undergoing the suffering, an improvement that otherwise could not be achieved, and where the improvement would outweigh the badness of the undeserved suffering.

Condition 3: Preventing the undeserved suffering would result in some other sentient being undergoing even greater undeserved suffering.

Condition 4: Not preventing the undeserved suffering would make possible either the existence of some intrinsically good state of affairs, or the prevention of some intrinsically bad state of affairs, which would otherwise be impossible, and which would outweigh the prima facie wrongness of allowing the undeserved suffering of the sentient being.

I think those are all justifications for God to refrain from preventing evil in many situations.

3.3 What Is the Rationale Behind Appealing to Skeptical Theism?

Does skeptical theism at least succeed in refuting incompatibility arguments from evil? This question will be addressed in Section 3.4. First, however, it is worth asking why one would appeal to skeptical theism in order to show that incompatibility arguments from evil cannot succeed. Why not simply appeal to the skeptical thesis that is part of skeptical theism?

It is hard to see what the answer is other than that skeptical theists think that belief in the existence of God is rational at least to some extent, thereby lending weight to the idea that there may be unknown goods that justify the evils found in the world.

If something like this is the skeptical theist's underlying line of thought, it is open to the objection that there is no good reason for believing that theism is true.

Actually, the general principle is independent of theism (considered in isolation). Take the law of unintended consequences. An event may have both beneficial and deleterious consequences, in the short-term or the long-term. And these are ultimately unforeseeable by humans. The future is less predictable the farther out it goes. So skeptical theists are simply applying that general principle to theodicy.

Or consider arguments from claimed miracles. Such arguments typically focus on very limited texts, ignoring miracle claims in other texts in the same holy scripture. For example, in the case of Bible-based arguments, no attention is paid to the stories of Noah and the great flood, or Joshua and the battle of Jericho, where we have excellent evidence that the purported and spectacular miracles in question never took place.

Arguments from miracles also virtually always ignore information both about the dramatic growth of miracle stories in a short stretch of time. This has been set out, in a detailed and scholarly way in the case of Francis Xavier, by A. D. White 1896, as well as about the failure of any recent and present-day miracle claims to survive critical scrutiny – as shown by the work of D. J. West 1957, Louis Rose 1968, William A. Nolen 1974, James Randi 1987, Joe Nickell 1993, and others, as well as by careful scientific studies, such as the 2005 MANTRA II study (Krucoff et al. 2005) and the 2006 STEP study (Benson et al. 2006).

1. His appeal to White's antiquated study is naive. It's been roundly critiqued.
2. I presume that he has a global flood in mind. One problem is that modern readers usually interpret the narrative anachronistically because they construe the descriptions in light of their knowledge of modern geography. But the original audience never had that frame of reference. They had a different sense of scale. The narrator may well intend to describe a flood situated in the middle east. And that's quite realistic. Consider the work of academic field geologist David Montgomery on Noah's flood.
3. What OT scholars/archeologists has he studied on the battle of Jericho? For instance, Richard Hess?
4. His references on reported modern miracles are quite dated. He seems unaware of case-studies amassed by

Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Baker, 2011)

Robert Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lexington Books, 2013), appendix

Robert Larmer, *Dialogues on Miracle* (Wipf & Stock, 2015), appendix.

What about appeals to religious experiences, including ones involving visions and voices, experiences of the 'numinous' (Otto 1958), or theistic mystical experiences? As regards the first, such experiences are strongly tied to the beliefs of the person: Hindu children do not have visions of, nor receive messages from, the Virgin Mary, while Catholic children do not have visions of the Hindu deity, Lord Shiva. As regards the second, numinous experiences do not involve any sense that one is encountering a being that is perfectly good. Finally, as regards theistic mystical experiences, the crucial question is whether theistic mystical experiences have a different ontological basis than the nontheistic introvertive mystical experiences found in Hinduism and Buddhism, and in Plotinus. That question was very carefully investigated by Andrew Robison (1962 and 1973), who examined the descriptions of introvertive mystical experiences given by the monistic mystic Plotinus and Hindu and Buddhist mystics, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the theistic mystics Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. Robison's conclusion was that, unless one is oneself a mystic, the most reasonable conclusion, given the total evidence available, is that the references to God that one finds in the descriptions given by the Christian mystics, rather than reflecting any ontologically fundamental features of their experiences differing from those found in nontheistic introvertive mystical experiences, reflect only the conceptual framework that Christian mystics brought to their experiences.

There's a lot of truth to that, but it's too indiscriminate. Some visions, dreams, and auditions may have veridical elements. Take a premonitory dream. Take a near-death experience where you meet a deceased relative you didn't know had died. Take a crisis apparition where you receive information you didn't know about, which is corroborated by subsequent experience? Same thing with an audible voice.

3.4 Skeptical Theism and Incompatibility Arguments from Evil: New Work for Skeptical Theists

Skeptical theists generally appear to believe that if the skeptical thesis that is part of skeptical theism is true – that is, if probabilities cannot be assigned to certain propositions about goods and evils beyond our ken – then it follows that no incompatibility argument from evil can be sound. That view, however, cannot be correct, since it is not enough to claim that there could be goods that lie beyond our ken, the probability of which is unknown: one must also show that those goods could be connected with the evils found in this world in such a way that an omnipotent and omniscient being could not obtain those goods without allowing the evils in question. No skeptical theist, however, has shown that this is so.

- i)** Many truths that can't be quantified. That's an artificial mathematical standard.
- ii)** Whether or not skeptical theists have shown the connection, other Christian philosophers have shown the connection between certain kinds of evil and soul-building virtues or second-order goods.

4.6.3 Step Two: The Case of Multiple Prima Facie Evils

Next, what happens to the probability that God exists when there is more than one prima facie evil? Since the existence of even a single all things considered evil is incompatible with the existence of God, the probability that God exists cannot be greater than the probability that, of all the prima facie evils found in the world, not even one of those is an all things considered evil. In addition, given that the probability that God exists given a single prima facie evil is less than one-half, and given the extraordinary number of prima facie evils in the world, it would be quite surprising if it turned out that the probability that God exists, given the prima facie evils there are in the world, was not very low indeed.

i) The existence of evil is hardly incompatible with biblical theism or Christian theism. To the contrary, they presuppose the existence of evil. They'd be false if evil didn't exist.

ii) This treats the probability of God's existence in isolation. If we set aside all the evidence for God, then perhaps the conclusion follows, but that's artificial.

iii) It isn't necessary to justify every evil individually. It will suffice if there are enough theodicies to cover all the general kinds of evil.

Where was God?

As I've explained before, the problem of evil in general, in the stereotypical formulation, has no traction for me. But I find certain kinds of examples personally aggravating. Cases like James Younger are examples where the problem of evil has some emotional pull for me.

The dilemma is that, in many situations, God doesn't protect the innocent and he doesn't enable others to protect the innocent. God doesn't use his power to intervene, and he doesn't empower others to take up the slack. Now this particular case may eventually get better, but there are other cases like it without any mitigation (in this life).

But having said all that, it's not as if examples like this drive me into the arms of atheism, or make me even slightly sympathetic to atheism. For one thing, secular progressives are spearheading this atrocity. Evil can't push me into the arms of atheism when atheism is itself a major source of evil.

It boils down to three options: God, Satan, or atheism. But atheism is diabolical. And it hardly makes sense to switch sides from God to the Devil because of evil—when evil is Satanic. So however vexing the problem of evil can be, God remains the only option, the only ultimate solution.

Creation and extinction

The late William Provine was a leading evolutionary biologist. More substantive than Richard Dawkins. Here he explains why he thinks the impression of design in nature is illusory:

Understanding evolution does not undermine many beliefs in god: deism, gods that work through natural phenomena, gods invented from tortured arguments by theologians or academics, and many others. Understanding evolution is, nevertheless, the most efficient engine of atheism ever discovered by humans. It challenges the primary, worldwide, observable reason for belief in a deity: the feeling of intelligent design in biological organisms, including humans.

The feeling of intelligent design disappears in the perspective of evolution...So, of the 50,000 or so species, all but twenty-five went extinct...Even with all the exquisite adaptations that smack of an intelligent designer, these vertebrates were poor survivors.

Natural selection is not a mechanism, does no work, does not act, does not shape, does not cause anything...Natural selection is the outcome of a very complex process that basically boils down to heredity, genetic variation, ecology, and demographics (especially the overproduction of offspring, and constant struggle). The adaptations that evolve we call "naturally selected"...The process also virtually guarantees extinction when the environment changes sufficiently, which it often does. The intelligent design apparent in the adaptations has no inkling of environmental change. The pattern of extinction, however, is precisely what one would expect of the causes of natural selection.

Every organism that has become extinct (about 99+ per cent of all species that have ever lived) was jam-packed with adaptations. Some of those adaptations became detriments to the organism when the environment changed and caused the organism to become extinct. The better an organism is adapted to a particular environment, the more certain it is that it will become extinct when the environment changes. Adaptations are hopelessly tied with extinction. The feeling of intelligent design in organisms must thus be tied to extinctions, too. That is why evolutionists give up on the feeling of intelligent design.

The second reason why understanding evolution precludes the feeling of intelligent design is that evolution also shows no hint of progress.

Each of these infectious agents has evolved as long as humans have existed. I can see no hierarchy whatsoever in the productions of evolution. Any deity that would

work this way seems perfectly awful to me. The process that produced these very different pathogens and humans just happens, and speaking as if evolution "cared" about its production is unintelligible.

These two reasons to reject the feeling of intelligent design in biological organisms are just a sample of compelling reasons. The famous evolutionist George C. Williams has written an essay on the evolution of social behavior, and concludes that social behavior in animals is nothing less than ghastly, and any hope we have as humans to have a decent moral world is to fight fiercely against the selfishness that evolution has produced in us. "Evolution, Religion, and Science" The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science (2006).

i) On thing that's striking about this is how much is just a variation on the so-called problem of natural evil or so-called problem of animal suffering. A standard theodicy which fields that problem will already cover most of this ground. By the same token, most of this isn't uniquely evolutionary.

ii) In YEC, God creates all the nature kinds at the outset. They diversify from thereon out. In OEC, God introduces natural kinds in staggered fashion. YEC is more synchronic, OEC is more diachronic. But in both cases, once made, natural kinds are subject to adaptation. Creationism allows for adaptation and microevolution.

Mass extinction due to overspecialization and environmental change is not at odds with YEC or OEC. Even if organisms are divinely designed, they will be vulnerable to extinction if their environment changes too fast or too drastically. Although evolution implies mass extinction, you can have mass extinction apart from evolution. Absent providential protection, you can have mass extinction even if evolution is false.

iii) To take a comparison, our high-tech civilization is utterly dependent on electricity. Our technology is junk without electricity. A natural disaster could render our technology useless. But it would hardly mean our technology wasn't designed.

iv) It's true that there's a tradeoff between specialization and adaptability. It's unclear why Provine supposes that's inconsistent with design. To be a creature is to have built-in limitations and inherent vulnerabilities. Even omnipotence can't make an unlimited creature.

Different organisms exemplify different possibilities. Each design has distinctive advantages and corresponding disadvantages. That's not a design flaw. That's a necessary tradeoff.

Variety is not inconsistent with divine design. Indeed, theists who espouse the principle of the plenum think variety is a virtue. God creates the greatest compossible variety.

v) Perhaps Provine imagines that mass extinction is inconsistent with divine foresight and/or divine benevolence. To begin with, it is unclear, as a matter of principle, why the extinction of a species is problematic for theism but the extinction of an individual is not. A species is just a collection of individuals.

What if most organisms are temporary by design? God never intended for most organisms to be immortal. And most organisms don't know what they are missing. They lack consciousness. In Biblical theism, immortality was never the common property of most lifeforms.

That's only clearly reserved for humans and angels. It's possible that God will resurrect some animals—perhaps animals dear to sainted Christians.

vi) Perhaps Provine thinks it would be pointless for God to create organisms that become extinct. But isn't there a sense in which everything at present becomes extinct when it becomes history? The past is what was, not what is. There's a sense in which the 19C is now extinct. It went extinct when it slipped into the irretrievable past. It no longer exists—at least not in our current timeframe. (This could also devolve into a debate over the A-theory and the B-theory of time.)

But does that mean history is pointless. It wasn't pointless to people at the time. It wasn't pointless for them.

Is Provine viewing it from a retrospective standpoint? Is he suggesting that looking back on the past from our vantage-point, it is pointless? If so, what makes our perspective normative? What privileges the present perspective? Suppose you were to view it from a prospective standpoint. There's a sense in which the future is irrelevant to me. The year 2100 is irrelevant to me, if I'm dead by then. But the future is hardly irrelevant to people living in the future.

vii) If there was no afterlife, then Provine would have a point. But natural history doesn't speak to that issue.

viii) Provine fails to make allowance for the Fall. Humans are liable to illness, aging, and death due to the Fall. I agree with him that those conditions always existed in nature. The world at large was never Edenic. Life inside the garden was sheltered from those asperities.

Obviously, Provine doesn't believe in the Fall. But my immediate point is one of consistency. The phenomena he documents don't count as evidence against Biblical theism, for that's consistent with life outside the Garden.

ix) Yes, the social behavior of animals is often ghastly by human standards, but that's because different species have different natures. What's morally decent or indecent is, to some degree, indexed on the nature of the creature.

x) I agree with him that the evolutionary narrative is not progressive. But there's a sense in which creationism is not progressive. YEC is essentially cyclical. God creates natural kinds, which thereafter reproduce after their kind. Although there's some progression in the initial series of creative fiats, once that's complete, once the ecosystem is put in place, it continues as is. Periodicity rather than progressivity in the natural order. Yet that's hardly antithetical to divine design.

In OEC, there's some progressivity. Creation occurs in stages. God initiates one stage at a time. After that plays out, that's replaced by the next stage. That's in part because they can't all coexist. Some organisms requires a different biospheric conditions.

In OEC, natural history is analogous to human history. Just as you have distinctive periods in human history, with distinctive successive cultures, natural history is analogous. In OEC, man is phased in late in the curve, as the culmination of the process. After than you have the eschaton. It's like a transgenerational novel. If YEC is more cyclical, OEC is more epochal. In addition, although they diverge on the distant past, they converge on human history.

Premature death

An argument I often use in my overall theodicy is that no possible world is the best possible world. While some are definitely worse while others are definitely better, there's a cut above which no single timeline, no one world history, maximizes all the second-order goods while eliminating all or most evils. And I often use the example of different children conceived in different world histories.

A stock objection is the Epicurean principle. Those who never exist have nothing at stake. You can only exist to have something to lose.

But I've always found that terribly shortsighted. For instance, someone who dies at 40 instead of 60 misses out on an extra 20 years of experience. Someone who dies at 20 instead of 60 misses out on an extra 40 years of experience. We think it's tragic when someone dies at ten because they lost so much of their potential future. It's an a fortiori argument from the lesser to the greater. Missing out on more and more.

Or take someone who's blind. That's a deprivation. Or someone who's deaf. What about someone both blind and deaf? That's a greater deprivation. Or someone with no sense of taste. Or Nathan Wuornos, the character in *Haven* who has no tactile sense. Three sensory deprivations amount to a greater loss than two. They are missing out on sensory opportunities. The more the worse.

But how is the a fortiori argument suddenly nullified when we move it up to those who never exist, which is total loss of opportunity? That's the a fortiori argument taken to the max. How can an argument from the lesser to the greater be solid up to a point, but peter out when it rises from the greater to the greatest? The principle involves a continuum. The force of the principle doesn't cease at the extreme end of the continuum. Rather, that's the limiting case. Other examples implicitly work back from that benchmark.

Living for God

I'm going to comment on this article:

http://philosophy.acadiau.ca/tl_files/sites/philosophy/resources/documents/Maitzen_OG_UP.pdf

Craig never defends his claim that nothing temporary has significance or its implication that all temporary things are equally insignificant. He only repeats it, many times, as if it should be obvious. But is it true that nothing temporary has significance?

Has Craig argued that nothing temporary has significance? Or has he argued that human life lacks significance if we pass into oblivion? I don't see why Craig's contention wouldn't be true unless it's a special case of a general claim about all temporary things. That would only follow if human lives are analogous to everything else. For instance, a human being is not a falling leaf.

Think about great music or drama. Does a world-class performance of Tosca or King Lear lack significance just because it lasts only a few hours? Would it have more significance if it never ended? Hardly. Its significance in fact depends on its having a finite arc; it would lose its significance and become unbearably tedious if it went on forever. Nor does its finite length make it just as insignificant as an equally long nap. Clearly, then, we need a better measure of significance than mere duration.

That comparison is simplistic. What if, an hour after the performance, the audience suffered collective amnesia. No one remembered the performance. What's the point of a world-class performance of Tosca or King Lear if it's instantly forgotten?

There's a reason we invented recording technology. We think it's a waste if a great performance comes and goes without a trace. We try to preserve the past.

Likewise, we record (or photograph) things because we often want to hear or see the same thing more than once.

We know that people often try to make their lives significant by seeking purposes "greater than themselves."...This version of the argument starts with the question "What's so great about feeding starving children?" An answer comes pretty easily: "It relieves suffering by innocents and gives them a chance to flourish." But

notice that we can use our imagination to “step back” from that answer: imagine looking at Earth from a billion miles away or looking back from a billion years in the future. Having stepped back, we can ask: “What is (or was) so great about doing that?” Step back far enough and any purpose can begin to look small and trivial in the vastness of time and space. It’s a familiar enough idea that you can make something look insignificant, or even reveal its true insignificance, by stepping back from it. Think of parents who try to convince their tearful child that an embarrassing incident at school isn’t really a reason to stop living.

The argument exploits our ability to take the long view—to occupy a standpoint that makes any purpose questionable, no matter how significant it seems: Why bother pursuing that purpose? It’s not hard to get going down this path, as we’ve seen, and soon we may find ourselves seeking a purpose that transcends the limits of our earthly existence. “Our lives can’t have significance,” we may conclude, “unless their significance goes beyond our time on Earth.”

Several problems with Maitzen’s objection:

i) It isn’t clear how Maitzen went from ultimate significance to greatness. Something doesn’t have to be great to be good or worthwhile.

ii) Doing something “greater than ourselves” is a way of saying it serves a larger purpose. “Greater,” not in the sense of excellence, but teleology. What makes it important is that it’s part of something important. It contributes to something beyond itself. A part/whole, means/ends relation.

iii) Maitzen overlooks the asymmetry between a secular outlook and a Christian outlook at this juncture. From his atheistic standpoint, taking the long-range view of any particular event dilutes the significance of that event: “Step back far enough and any purpose can begin to look small and trivial in the vastness of time and space.”

But it’s just the opposite from a Christian standpoint: Because our little lives are purposeful in the great scheme of things, the long-range view enhances rather than diminishes the significance of our tiny lives and deeds. Even the lives of the damned are significance.

From a Calvinistic perspective, every life is special, for God wrote the story of everybody’s life. He wrote the story of your life. And my life. Customized. A unique narrative for each and every life. God planned every experience you have, down to the last detail.

And each life-story is part of a larger story. Interlocking stories. Synchronic and diachronic stories.

The smallness of our lives doesn't make them insignificant. There can be meaning in miniature. God made us small. That's good.

God's story for the world is like the Mandelbrot set. There are lower scales of meaning as well as higher scales of meaning. Microscopic meaning as well as macroscopic meaning. Just what happens in one place on one day is packed with meaning. Higher resolution discloses ever more detail.

You can't put an end to those pesky questions, no matter what you do. Any purpose that we can begin to understand, we can step back from and question. Consider what theistic religions offer as God's actual purpose for our lives: glorifying him and enjoying his presence forever. Surely we can ask—I hereby do ask—"What's so great about that?"

i) Even if it weren't "so great," something doesn't have to be the greatest to be significant.

ii) If we were made to glorify God, if our fulfillment lies in doing what we were designed to do, then that's significant.

For instance, a homosexual is physically and emotionally frustrated, for he wasn't designed to find sexual fulfillment in another man.

Now, my opponent might offer this proposal: "Sure, we'd be disappointed to discover that we're mere CO2 factories, so that can't be our ultimate purpose. But if God had made us merely to produce CO2, then we'd find that purpose satisfying and would feel no inclination to question it. God adjusts our intellects and aspirations to fit the purpose he gives us." But this reply is just speculation...

i) There's a sense in which the whole debate is speculative. So what? That's what philosophers do. Maitzen is a philosophy prof.

ii) But what's so speculative? If, in fact, we were merely designed to produce CO2, then we'd find that satisfying. Then again, we might lack the intellect to find it either satisfying or dissatisfying. Does a clam find life satisfying? The question is inapplicable.

Conversely, if we find it boring to merely produce CO2, that's because we were designed to find other things interesting. So Maitzen has postulated a false dilemma.

If we seek an absolute stopping point in our quest for purpose and significance, we'll inevitably come up empty. Ultimate purpose can't exist even if God does; it's a fantasy that shouldn't draw anyone to theism.

If human nature was designed by a wise Creator, then doing what we were made to do is, indeed, ultimately significant.

That's hardly analogous to atheism, where men are the incidental byproduct of a mindless amoral process.

Did God will the Fall?

It's common for freewill theists to deny that God willed the Fall. More generally, it's common for freewill theists to deny that God wills moral and natural evils, viz. war, famine, murder, disease, natural disaster, fatal accidents. Bad events lie outside God's will. Bad events are antithetical to God's will. They think it's blasphemous to attribute bad things to God's will. They think Calvinism is wicked for attributing natural and moral evils to God's will.

I'd like to consider one aspect of that denial. Take the Fall. If Adam hadn't sinned, world history would turn out very differently. You and I exist in a fallen world. You and I wouldn't exist in an unfallen world. You and I are the end-product of a complex chain of events which includes natural and moral evils at various turns. Procreation is about men and women meeting and mating at a particular time and place. Even slight changes in the past ramify into the future so that our would-be ancestors will miss connections. For instance, WWII killed millions of people, but by the same token, millions of people exist as a result of the dislocation caused by WWII—who wouldn't be conceived absent that massive disruption.

So that raises a question: if you're the end-product of an evil event that's inimical to God's will, then doesn't this imply that your existence is inimical to God's will? If you exist as the result of some past evil, and if the historical cause of your existence is antithetical to God's will, then isn't the effect antithetical to God's will?

To put it another way, if you could step into a time machine and erase the results of a past evil, would do so—even if that meant erasing resultant future generations from the space-time continuum? Would you erase your own parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, children, and grandchildren? If the precipitating event that led to their existence was diametrically opposed to God's will, then doesn't that implicate all the consequences?

Dodging a bullet

Atheists make breezy claims about how God could make the world a better place by changing a variable here and there. During this interview, Jonny Somerville illustrates the hairbreadth difference one variable can make to the future:

My great-grandfather was a soldier. He fought in WWI in the Battle of Somme. One of the worst battles of our time. You know...like...if a bullet had gone slightly to the left or right I may not even be here—which is a sobering thought.

<https://www.solas-cpc.org/shortanswers57/>

Tweaking variables to improve the future has humanly incalculable consequences. Glib pronouncements to the contrary notwithstanding, we're in no position to judge what changes would be the world a better, worse, or both better and worse in different ways.

The best of both worlds

1. I assume much of the appeal of time-travel scenarios and parallel universe scenarios lies in the fact that in reality, we can't go through both doors at once. There are unrealized possibilities we wish we could explore.

There are situations where, with the benefit of hindsight, we'd make a different choice. At least if we could hang onto the good things. One of the principles that time-travel stories illustrate is that when you change even one variable, that has a domino effect. By changing one variable, you change the direction of all the succeeding dominos.

2. In addition, there are situations where, if we had the benefit of hindsight, we wouldn't change anything despite having the benefit of hindsight, even if the consequences are, in some respects, undesirable. Because we know the consequences, we'd repeat the same chain of events in spite of undesirable consequences.

For instance, suppose I have a younger blind brother. We're about a year and a half apart. Because he's more dependent on me than a sighted brother, I'm closer to him than if he was sighted. If he was sighted, it would be easier to take him for granted.

Still, there are brotherly things I'd like us to do together that I can't do with him. I can't go hiking with him because he can't see. I mean, I could still go hiking with him, I could take him by the hand. But part of the pleasure of hiking is sightseeing, and that's not something he's in a position to appreciate. So it won't be a shared experience at that level, yet the point of doing things together is for the shared experience. This leaves me with three options:

i) Go hiking with friends, and take him along, even though he won't get much out of it. My friends and I will be talking about things we see on the trail, that he can't see. That's insensitive.

ii) Go hiking with friends, but leave him behind. Yet that would be mean.

iii) Skip hiking to avoid the dilemma. But in that event we both miss out.

3. Suppose I have access to the proverbial time machine. I don't know the night on which he was conceived, but I have a rough idea of the time range, and if I travel back into the past several times, I'll be able to disrupt parental activities on the crucial evening. Would I do it? Should I do it?

i) Even from a purely selfish standpoint, that might backfire. I might get a sister instead of a new brother! Not that there's anything wrong with having a sister, but if the problem is that I'm unable to do the usual brotherly stuff with my blind brother, then I can't very well do it with a sister. And it would serve me right.

ii) Perhaps, moreover, my mother isn't very fertile. She might have a condition like polycystic ovarian syndrome. She only had a few babies on tap. By preempting my blind brother's conception, I don't get a sighted brother in his place—I get nothing. My mother only had two brothers on tap. Once again, it would serve me right.

4. From a Christian standpoint, sacrificial love is a deeper kind of love. Love that's cost-free isn't very loving. That's fair-weather love, which is barely love at all. I don't love you for you, but only for what I might get out of it.

5. Finally, from a Christian standpoint, if my brother and I die in the faith, then in the world to come we'll be young again, and this time around my brother will be sighted. So we'll be able to do the brotherly stuff we missed out on in this life. We'll have our memories from this life, we'll have the special bond that's a carryover from his disability, but without the disability. Truly the best of both worlds. Two kinds of goods that can't happen in the same world history, but are now combined as two different world histories converge in the eschaton.

Treble tradeoffs

I assume most boys naturally look forward to coming of age. At least normal boys who haven't been brainwashed by LGBT propaganda or disoriented by broken homes and separated from their fathers. Partly the desire for adult independence—although that has corresponding responsibilities they may not appreciate at that age. Partly the instinctive yearning to achieve one's natural telos. Although boyhood is a natural good, precious in its own right, it is tending towards a goal. To take a particular example, I assume most boys look forward to the day when their voice breaks and they develop an adult male voice. That's part of manhood.

However, choirboys can be exceptions. I watched a special about the choirboys at King's College Chapel choir. Some of them were apprehensive about their voice breaking. That's because their treble voice makes them special. They get extra attention. It sets them apart.

But once their voice breaks, they aren't special anymore. They revert to being ordinary boys. The garden-variety adolescent boy.

So there's a tradeoff. They are becoming men, but they lose what makes them special in the process.

In the past, some outstanding trebles became castrati. I once read a woman defending the practice. She treated it as a business decision. She felt some boys had the maturity to make that decision. To preserve their gift.

Of course, castrati have no idea what they're giving up until it's too late. And even then, because they don't experience normal manhood, they still lack a full appreciation of what they lost in the process. That's why responsible adults need to act on behalf of children to prevent them from making shortsighted, irreversible, catastrophic choices. But the transgender lobby is doing the opposite.

That invites comparison with other things. There's some correlation between high IQ or artistic talent and depression. Very smart or talented people are less likely to be happy. That's the price they pay for their gift. If they had a choice between happiness and talent, which would they opt for? For instance:

[Jonathan] Winters says he often drew on his Ohio childhood for characters. He says he was often lonely and his parents either ignored him or belittled him, even after his success...At the height of his success, in his early 30s, Jonathan Winters voluntarily committed himself to a private psychiatric hospital...Now he knows his diagnosis was bipolar disorder, but there were no effective medications for it back then. Winters says he declined the electroshock treatment that doctors said

would erase some of the pain he was feeling. "I need that pain — whatever it is — to call upon it from time to time, no matter how bad it was," he says.

<https://www.npr.org/2011/07/30/138822853/jonathan-winters-reflects-on-a-lifetime-of-laughs>

I mention these examples because they illustrate the principle of tradeoffs in theodicy, between incompatible goods.

The wasteful work of nature

This post is primarily about theodical challenges posed by theistic evolution, but I'll use Darwin's statement as a convenient frame of reference:

What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel work of nature!

A. Some apologists respond this type of objection by saying the atheist is illicitly assuming a God's-eye viewpoint. "If I was God, I'd do it this way instead!"

They counter that you're not God, you're not omniscient, so you're not entitled to assume a God's-eye perspective. For all you know, God may have lots of reasons that don't occur to you.

This response is usually deployed in response to the argument from evil. And it has a grain of truth, but it's too lax and facile to be a general principle. The danger lies in defending truth by a principle that shields falsehood from scrutiny. A Christian apologist should avoid recourse to arguments to protect Christianity that have the side-effect of protecting cults and false religions.

For instance, suppose a Christian apologist says Joseph Smith has all the earmarks of a charlatan. Suppose a Mormon counters that for all we know, God might choose someone like Joseph Smith.

Catholics say the church of Rome is the One True Church founded by Jesus Christ. Evangelicals look at Rome and exclaim, "Is that the best God could do?" If that's a church which enjoys special protection from error, what does a church look like that doesn't enjoy special protection from error?

But the Catholic counters, you're illicitly assuming a God's eye perspective!

Suppose a Christian apologist says it would be deceptive for God to save people through divergent religions that make contradictory claims. Suppose a universalist or religious pluralist counters: How presumptuous for you to divine God's mind and speak on his behalf!

I'll have more to say about the principle further down.

B. However, a qualified version of the principle is legitimate. Take the appeal to skeptical theism when addressing the problem of evil. But that's more discriminating than just "You can't assume a God's-eye viewpoint!"

It's a question of where the skepticism is located. It's not located in claiming that we don't have the faintest idea why God allows a particular evil or certain kind of evil. To the contrary, the situation is nearly the opposite: based on human analogies, it's easy to imagine multiple reasons an agent might have to allow the evil in question. The difficulty is that we have no way to narrow down the field of options to one correct explanation. That's where the skepticism is located. So we're not at a complete loss by any means. Rather, there are too many possible reasons to choose from.

C. Moving on to the specifics, what about the "cruelty" of nature. Certainly the animal kingdom often looks cruel to a human observer, but that involves the danger of projecting a human viewpoint onto creatures that do not and cannot share our viewpoint. Likewise, it's necessary to distinguish between the pain threshold and pain tolerance.

In addition, many organisms lack the reflective self-awareness to register pain in the sense: "Ouch! That hurts! I'm in pain!"

Take Darwin's classic, clueless illustration:

I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created parasitic wasps with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.

Except that caterpillars lack the first-person viewpoint to think: "I feel pain!" And the absence of that indexical awareness presumably holds true for lower animals generally. To be conscious of pain in the human sense, where we can objectify the experience, may only be something a few higher animals are privy to.

D. What about "wasteful" nature? Is he using "wasteful" as a synonym for "inefficient"? Poetry is a less efficient means of communication than prose, but that's not an artistic defect. Efficiency isn't a musical value.

The way God fulfills Joseph's dream is inefficient, but intentionally inefficient. If God streamlined the process, there'd be less opportunity for divine intervention, to manifest the God's overruling providence.

E. Then there's "clumsy" and "blundering". Here he may have the evolutionary process in mind.

1. If so, that's a challenge for a theistic evolutionist. It's not a challenge for a young-earth creationist or old-earth creationist inasmuch as they reject the presupposition. They don't think God uses evolution (in the sense of macroevolution and universal common descent). Of course, they exchange one challenge for another. And the naturalistic evolutionist has his own challenges.

2. The issue isn't mass extinction, per se. I've discussed this before:

<https://triabloque.blogspot.com/2015/09/creation-and-extinction.html>

Nearly every position (young-earth creationism, old-earth creationism, deistic evolution, theistic evolution, naturalistic evolution) must accommodate mass extinction. A partial exception is Omphalism, but even that must accommodate modern mass extinction. To avoid that we must resort to Last Thursdayism.

The issue is whether God uses evolution to create human beings. If that's the goal, it seems to be a monumentally clumsy, blundering method.

3. A theistic evolutionist might counter that prior stages in natural history are necessary to develop an ecosystem in which humans can exist. And that might be an adequate justification at a very broad level. But are all, or even most, of the evolutionary dead-ends really necessary to achieve that goal?

4. Another issue is that it's important that we be able to differentiate outcomes by design from outcomes due to dumb luck. That's a way we determine the presence or absence of intelligent agency. If you shuffle a deck of cards enough times, you will get a royal flush. If you spin the dial on a locker long enough, you will accidentally hit on the right combination. If you throw a dart enough times, you will hit the bullseye.

It's theologically important to be able to distinguish random outcomes from intentional outcomes. That's a way we detect special providence.

Or take the case of prayer. Out of the totality of prayers, **(i)** a subset go unanswered. In **(ii)** another subset, the outcome is consistent with the prayer, but not unmistakably an answer to prayer. Some apparent answers to prayer might be things that would naturally happen anyway, given the odds. There there's **(iii)** a subset where the outcome is clearly miraculous or supernatural. Finally, there's **(iv)** a subset where the outcome is so auspicious and antecedently improbable that while it might be sheer luck, that's not the most plausible explanation.

But if we were unable to differentiate outcomes by design from outcomes due to dumb luck, then that would make one skeptical about the efficacy of prayer. Given the number of "misses", did we just get lucky?

5. Apropos (4), a challenge for the theistic evolutionist is whether evolutionary outcomes can be distinguished from chance. What makes it theistic is that it's a guided process—perhaps front-loaded to unfold to a programmed conclusion. If, however, the end-products appear to be the luck of the draw, then where's the evidence that theistic evolution is true while atheistic evolution is false? Perhaps a theistic evolutionist would say there is no direct evidence from evolution itself. Rather, that comes from other theistic arguments.

6. There is, though, a further twist. There's such a thing as programmed dumb luck. Take how dandelions disseminate. Each puff has a flotilla of hang-gliding seeds carried by the breeze in all directions. Multiply that by countless puffs releasing their seeds to the winds, and a fraction are bound to create new dandelions through dumb luck.

However, a human observer can discern a strategy behind that process. So there needs to be evidence to distinguish between sheer dumb luck and programmed dumb luck. Can the theistic evolutionist furnish that differential evidence?

Risk and reality

The problem of natural evil is a perennial issue in theodicy. There are stock responses. I think some of them are good. But I'd like to approach it from a different angle.

A fringe benefit of living in a physically dangerous world is that it forces you to take reality seriously. A hazardous environment weeds out inattentive people.

When life becomes too safe, when people lose their sense of danger because they're used to having buffers that protect them from harm, it's easy to lose touch with reality. It's easy to indulge in make-believe and wishful thinking when you don't have the electric shock of reality to jolt you out of your beautiful delusions and playacting. Take a few examples in our own time and place:

- Into the Wild. The movie about a young idealist who imagines it would be a swell idea to spend a winter in the Alaska outback. He goes there unprepared and dies.
- Egotists who die in accidents by taking selfies in dangerous settings. Precariously perched on a cliff or mountain peak. Or with a rhino, grizzly bear, bison, or bull moose in the background—as if wild animals are stuffed animals.
- Progressives who insist that "transwomen" have a right to access shelters for battered women and rape victims.
- Adults who imagine they are animals. And they demand that everyone accommodate their fantasy.
- The antivaxxer movement
- Open border policies that admit people into the country who haven't been screened for infectious diseases.
- Replacing solid waste disposal with composting leftover food, which is a magnet for rats, which, in turn, invites an outbreak of bubonic plague.
- Hikers who only take a cellphone with them. They don't have extra water or overnight gear. If they get into trouble, they assume they can always call for help and somebody in a chopper will rescue them.
- Hikers who venture into bear country without a high-powered rifle.
- Private pet collectors with dangerous exotic animals that sometimes kill them.
- Immigration policies that induct Muslims into the country, thereby introducing domestic terrorism, honor killings, a gang-rape culture &c. into the host country.

- People who get too close to dangerous animals in zoos and animal parks.
- Gun bans/confiscation that leave civilians defenseless against the criminal class.

A false sense of security fosters moral and spiritual insanity. Living in a dangerous world, where there are no buffers, forces you to be realistic if you expect to survive—much less to thrive. There's no margin for error.

People who become too insulated from danger are apt to be cocky, arrogant, presumptuous, and foolhardy. Paradoxically, natural evil can be a corrective to moral evil. Having beliefs that defy reality is willful lunacy. Real life isn't composed of downy pillows that cushion your fall. False beliefs can hurt you. That's a disincentive to cultivating false beliefs.

To become increasingly detached from reality is a form of moral and intellectual derangement. Natural evil motivates people to take truth seriously. The pain of flouting reality motivates people to take truth seriously.

In Scripture, idolatry is a paradigm-case of those who've lost contact with reality and replace it with imaginary constructs. Although the deterrent value of natural evil is limited—insofar as some people are willfully reckless—it prevents other people from plunging off the deep end. Without that objective stinger, subjectivity takes over.

Blood on my hands

In theodicy, freewill theists lean on the notion that God merely permits evil to happen. The intuition is that if an agent directly causes or determines an event, then that makes him morally complicit in a way that just allowing, or not preventing, an event caused by another agent does not. A cliché comparison is the distinction between killing a patient and letting him die, in medical ethics.

And sometimes that's a morally salient distinction. But sometimes not. Suppose I'm a guard at a Nazi concentration camp. Suppose I secretly despise Hitler and the Third Reich. I'm not there because I signed up. I was conscripted. I'm there against my will. I privately hope the Allies will win.

Suppose the commandant has a plan. If it becomes unmistakable that Germany lost the war, and the Allies are marching into Germany, the prisoners, including Jews, as well as Allied war captives, will be executed so that the Allies can't liberate the camp. After executing all the prisoners, the Nazi personnel will evacuate the camp. Even though the Nazis lost, they will kill as many Jews and Allied war captives as they can on the way out. A final act of spiteful revenge.

Suppose I have a choice: I can stand by and let the prisoners be mowed down, or I can turn my machine gun on my nominal comrades and save the prisoners. Under that scenario, is inaction morally preferable to action? If I do nothing to prevent the massacre, does that let me off the hook? Conversely, if I take direct action by shooting the commandant and his henchmen to prevent them from murdering the prisoners, am I culpable?

Providence and Pointillism

One of the challenges in theodicy is the seemingly arbitrary nature of providence. Why the apparently random distribution of blessing and bane? Why is one prayer answered while another prayer goes unanswered? Why is one person healed while another person is not?

However, the appearance of randomness can be illusory. To take a comparison, consider Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*. Seen up close, it appears to be utterly haphazard. There's no discernible image. But seen from a certain distance, the hidden pattern emerges. Indeed, Seurat was obsessed with composition. An architectural harmony. Far from being random, he made many preliminary sketches and drawings. The painting is the end-result of painstaking forethought. Paradoxically, what seems to be haphazard can be the end-product of minute design. If anything, the painting suffers from static precision. A lack of spontaneity.

Yet there is a sense in which, below a certain threshold, it really is random. That's because the individual constituents weren't meant to be meaningful in isolation. They only become meaningful in their overall relationships, which can only be perceived at a higher scale of organization. The pattern lies in the ensemble. By the same token, the impression that divine providence is arbitrary is in fact consistent with meticulous planning and execution.

Why didn't God create us in heaven?

Some people ask why God didn't begin at the end. Begin with the goal. The question is ambiguous.

1. Technically, "heaven" is the intermediate state, a disembodied, postmortem state between death and the general resurrection. So is the question why didn't God create us after we died? But of course, God can't create us after we die, inasmuch as we must already exist in order to die.

2. Is the question why didn't God create us in a disembodied state? But that's not an ideal condition. There are many benefits to embodied experience.

In that respect, the question suffers from popular confusion by theologically illiterate people who think heaven is the ultimate goal of human existence. You die, go to heaven, and live there forever. But that's not Christian eschatology.

3. Is "heaven" being used as a synonym for the final (earthly) state, i.e. the new Eden/new Jerusalem? But God already created Adam and Eve in an Edenic earthly state. They fell.

4. Perhaps the question is why didn't God create us perfect? Skip the journey and cut straight to the destination.

i) If so, that assumes the process is dispensable. And the end-result is achievable without experience. But is that realistic? Take forgiveness. You can't experience forgiveness without prior wrongdoing. The sense of guilt, gratitude, and relief. So that condition can't be directly created. It's a nested effect, internally related to something prior. An intervening history is necessary prerequisite.

ii) In addition, creating everyone sinless and impeccable would preempt the lives of many people whose existence is contingent on a fallen world. They are products of chains of events involving sinful agents.

God and Corn Flakes

One is the question of free will and salvation. Reformed theology is often identified with determinism—the idea that God determines everything, and we don't really have free choice. From my eating Corn Flakes for breakfast to my having faith in Christ, all of these decisions are determined by God, and if we're not automatons or robots at least, my decisions are only free in some very minimal sense. Well, historical material suggests there is a broader way of thinking about this within Reformed theology.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september-web-only/softer-face-of-calvinism.html>

Critics of predestination use examples like one's choice of cereal to belittle predestination. Does God really predestine what I eat for breakfast? How silly! Surely God has more important things to predestine. He can leave the little choices up to us.

The problem with that objection is that it's so shortsighted. Small innocuous changes in the present can generate huge changes in the future. In a case/effect world, changing a variable in the past can snowball.

Corn Flakes is a Kellogg's product. Kellogg's is headquartered in Battle Creek, Michigan. That makes it the largest local employer (in Battle Creek). But the primary production center for Corn Flakes is Manchester, England. In the US, corn production is centered in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Texas. Compare that to Wheaties. That's a General Mills' product. General Mills is headquartered in Golden Valley, Minnesota. In the US, white wheat production is centered in Idaho, Michigan, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

If more people eat Corn Flakes, that benefits the economies of Battle Creek, Michigan, Manchester, England, and corn-producing states. If, by contrast, more people eat Wheaties, that depresses the economies of Battle Creek, Michigan, Manchester, England, and corn-producing states, but benefits the economies of Golden Valley, Minnesota and white wheat-producing states.

If Kellogg's is prosperous, that benefits its employees and shareholders. If General Mills is prosperous, that benefits its employees and shareholders. If Kellogg's does better, it can hire more people. If General Mills does better, Kellogg's has to lay people off.

People usually live within commuting distance of where they work. As a consumer, you will patronize local businesses. The local supermarket will benefit from your presence. And so on and so forth.

Where you live impacts who you meet and mate with. If you grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan, you will probably have kids by someone else from Michigan. If, by contrast, you grew up in Golden Valley, Minnesota, you will probably have kids by someone else from Minnesota. Same thing with corn and wheat producing states.

How many people choose Corn Flakes over Wheaties, or vice versa, affects who will or will not be born. It affects where various crimes like murder will occur. It affects where—or whether—you will attend church. That, in turn, can affect whether you go to heaven or hell.

This generates two diverging timelines. The existence or nonexistence of some humans in relation to other humans who take their place. Increasingly different events the further into the future past changes ramify. Alternate histories. What might seem like a trivial choice in the present has vast, complex consequences down the line—for good and ill.

Reframing the problem of evil

In standard philosophical discussions regarding the problem of evil, the nature and occurrence of evil is typically held to be prima facie evidence against God's existence, although that can be offset by other kinds of evidence for God's existence.

Put another way, God's benevolence and existence are linked. If the problem of evil calls into question God's benevolence, that in turn calls into question God's existence.

It's striking that the stereotypical way of casting the issue is so different from Scripture. In Scripture, God's existence is never in doubt. However, prophets and psalmists sometimes express frustrations or misgivings about God's benevolence. To that extent, God's existence and goodness aren't tightly linked.

To be sure, it's not that God's goodness is questionable from the viewpoint of Scripture. But there are speakers within Scripture that voice a perceived tension between God's existence and his benevolence. So that reframes the issue.

Chronological time

1. Readers might find my title redundant. What other kind of time is there? Isn't time necessarily chronological? Depends on what you mean.

Let's distinguish between chronological time and biological time (or physical time). According to Christian eschatology, God will rejuvenate believers at the resurrection of the just. The saints will have youthful, ageless bodies.

Let's say the optimal age of a human body is 20. Strictly speaking, I'm not sure the human body has an optimal age. From what I've read, different body organs and systems mature and age at somewhat different rates. In glorification, the optimal age would have to synchronize these rates. For convenience, let's stimulate age 20.

So an immortal saint could be a billion years old, but have the body of a 20-year-old. Chronologically he's a billion years old, but biologically he's only twenty years old. Biologically, he stays the same age while chronologically he continues to age indefinitely.

2. That parallels a distinction drawn by Philip Henry Gosse. Normally, physical and chronological time coincide, but Gosse had the insight to appreciate that, in principle and possibly in practice, these can be split apart. It's a profound insight, equal to McTaggart's distinction between the A-series and the B-series. The difference is that McTaggart is hailed as a great philosopher of time because he was an atheist, whereas Gosse is mocked because he was a creationist who devised and utilized his distinction to rescue traditional creationism.

3. Finally, this involves a limitation on divine omnipotence. God can create a father who is biologically younger than his son, but God can't create a father who is chronologically younger than his son. For instance, God could rejuvenate Abraham, but refrain from rejuvenating Isaac. If so, Abraham would be biologically younger than his own son.

However, even an omnipotent agent can't make Abraham chronologically younger than Isaac because chronological time requires relative chronology. A father, to be a father, must preexist his son. It's a cause/effect relation, and the direction of causality, like time's arrow, is linear.

I'd add that it's useful to recognize certain limitations on divine omnipotence because that's an important consideration in theodicy. There are some things even God can't do.

Switched at birth

Suppose I have a 14-year-old son named Jeremy. And he's a really great kid. Then, one fine day, another 14-year-old boy by the name of Josh turns up at my doorstep, claiming to be my real son. He says he and Jeremy were switched at birth. Jeremy's mother found out that her baby had a genetic defect, but it was too late for an abortion. His mother was a nurse, so she and her husband conspired to swap Jeremy for a healthy kid in the same maternity ward. They didn't want to raise a special-needs child.

I have to admit that Josh bears an undeniable family resemblance, whereas Jeremy never did look much like my wife or me. We do a DNA test and confirm that Josh is my long-lost biological son. As it turned out, Jeremy never had a genetic defect. The test gave a false positive.

If I could step into the time machine, would I trade Jeremy for Josh? I'm too conflicted to answer that question. On the one hand I bitterly regret the lost years with Josh. In effect, having my son kidnaped at birth. I yearn for the years we lost. All things being equal, I wish that could be undone.

But it's not that simple. I raised Jeremy for the first 14 years of his life. The belated discovery that he's not my biological son doesn't change my feelings about him. The paternal instinct is broader than biological offspring. That's why many men volunteer to coach junior high and high school sports. They like to mentor young guys. It's a natural extension of the paternal instinct.

I can't stamp "return to sender" on Jeremy's forehead. Although it's not metaphysically too late to turn back the clock, thanks to the time-machine, it's psychologically too late. And since his biological parents didn't want him, what kind of parents would they be to him? I can't do that to him. In all likelihood, he was better off with me. And I can't just tear him out of my heart.

Conversely, maybe Josh would be a worse son than Jeremy. Kids can be a great disappointment. Sometimes they don't turn out the way you hope. Then again, for all I know, maybe the alternate timeline would be just as good.

The point of this thought-experiment is that I don't think there's one best possible world. Indeed, I don't think there's one best possible life.

Moreover, short-term evils can be a source of long-term goods. Goods that never happen in a perfect world.

Is God an evildoer?

In theory, there are different ways in which God might relate to evil:

- i) Allows
- ii) Determines
- iii) Causes
- iv) Commands
- v) Commits

Freewill theists grant that God allows evil. And they say Calvinism makes God "causally determine" evil, which they set in contrast to their own position. However, they rarely define their terminology. Some freewill theists think the OT contains "abhorrent commands" or "texts of terror," and they deny that God issued the commands which the narrator attributes to him.

Normally, both sides (Calvinists, freewill theists) deny that God commits evil. They strive to put some kind of buffer between God and evil. To say that God commits evil is typically discountenanced as wholly unacceptable. On a spectrum from allowing to committing evil, committing evil is the worst. Of all the theoretical ways God might relate to evil, that's off the table. That can't be exonerated. If God commits evil, that makes God evil.

In my experience, that's the usual position. However, in a book review, Michael Almeida makes the following observation:

Since God has the traditional attributes of perfect beings Rowe concludes that it is impossible that God should choose to perform an evil action. But it is not at all clear why Rowe urges that "a being who freely chooses to do what it knows to be an evil deed thereby ceases to be a perfectly good being" (p. 26). Certainly in ordinary moral contexts no one would make such a claim. Suppose a being freely chooses to do what it knows to be an evil deed because it necessarily faces a moral dilemma. If an agent necessarily faces a moral dilemma then there is nothing the agent could have done to avoid the dilemma. Indeed there is nothing that an omnipotent being could have done to avoid the dilemma. The agent must choose some wrong action or other. It is difficult to see how the agent's choice might nonetheless be blameworthy or how that choice might reflect poorly on his character. Since blamelessly choosing to do wrong does not diminish moral

perfection at all, it cannot be assumed that necessarily a perfect being does not choose to do wrong. Almeida, Michael (2006) "Book Review: Can God Be Free?," Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers: Vol. 23 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

And that's of more than hypothetical consequence. For the freewill defense is usually cast in terms of how God's hands are tied. He'd like a better outcome, but he's stymied by the intractable defiance of free creatures. Given the freewill defense, God is routinely confronted with moral dilemmas, because human agents remove the best options from consideration. God stuck with the worst remaining options. So freewill theism leaves God with no choice but to commit evil, and does so on a regular basis.

In Calvinism, by contrast, creatures never back God into a corner. Ironically, then, the Calvinist God is never in a position that requires him to be an evildoer—whereas the freewill theist God often finds himself in that predicament. So their theology and theodicy commits freewill theists to the most odious position along the continuum—one which Calvinism escapes.

Gridlock

Why doesn't God stop evil more often? Why doesn't God answer prayer more often? There's a principle common to the problem of evil and the problem of unanswered prayer.

When I'm driving in town, it would sure be convenient for me if all the traffic lights were green in my direction. That would expedite my trip. But what's convenient for me would be inconvenient for all the drivers waiting at red lights so that I have unimpeded egress.

It would be convenient for me if, instead of waiting for a bus, the bus waited for me. Suppose I could leave the house at any time, and a bus just happened to be at the bus stop. But while that would be convenient for me, that would inconvenience all the other bus riders. It would make the bus schedule totally unpredictable. What's best for me may not be best for somebody else. What's good for me may be bad for somebody else.

Here's the principle: the more agents there are, the more complicated it is to coordinate everybody's interests. Adding agents reduces the number of consistent outcomes. What every agent does must be consistent with every other agent's actions. Only so many outcomes can be crammed into one time and place.

We can see this in the difference between the past, present, and future. 19C New York City can't coexist with 21C New York City. WWI can't coexist with the Napoleonic wars. There's only so much room for different simultaneous events. Everyday may use up all the space for what can happen that day. Agents form a network of interactions. Adding or subtracting agents triggers a chain-reaction.

One reason God doesn't answer more prayers is because all answers to prayer must be compossible. There's potential conflict between acting in the interest of one agent and acting in the interest of another agent, because each agent's life has a longitudinal impact that may counteract what's best for another agent.

That seems to limit what even an omnipotent God can do. Even in the case of Calvinism, where God isn't hindered by the independent freedom of human agents, the feasible options are not unlimited because it's a question of what's mathematically possible in terms of spatiotemporal coherence. Some chains of events are incompatible with other chains of events.

Paradise on earth

Fourthly, what natural evils a world contains depends not just on the laws, but also on the initial, or boundary conditions. Thus, for example, an omnipotent being could create ex nihilo a world which had the same laws of nature as our world, and which contained human beings, but which was devoid of non-human carnivores. Or the world could be such that there was unlimited room for populations to expand, and ample natural resources to support such populations.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#NeeForNatLaw>

Because Tooley's argument is so terse, I'm not sure how he'd develop it, but the thrust of his argument appears to be tolerably clear, so I'll operate with what I take to be the implicit argument.

i) There are limits, even severe limits, on what an omnipotent being can naturally do. An omnipotent being can often circumvent natural processes to produce an outcome directly—although there are some limits on that as well—but when it comes to a world that operates according to physical cause and effect, the finite medium imposes many constraints on what's feasible consistent with natural forces and processes.

ii) I'm struck by how often atheists who pride themselves on their commitment to hard science veer off into superficial and unbridled speculations about how nature could be different. A world with only herbivores would require so many adjustments that it's hard to imagine in detail.

iii) What does he mean by a world with unlimited room? Does he mean something like earth scaled up to the size of Jupiter or the Sun or VY Canis Majoris? What about the Hayashi limit?

Is it naturally possible for a celestial object that size to be a platform for an earth-like biosphere? Likewise, if you scale up the earth, consider all the adjustments to the solar system that are necessary to make earth biofriendly.

iv) Or does he mean a planet that's still the size of earth, but where every region is hospitable? Is it naturally possible for the earth to have a uniformly hospitable climate? Don't differences in altitude and latitude entail climatic differences? Isn't there a necessary interplay between hospitable and inhospitable zones? Take the water cycle. Doesn't that require dramatic zonal contrasts? Take mountain ice caps. What about wind systems?

v) Part of what makes the earth so interesting is the wide variety of landscapes and ecological zones. Some magnificent landscape aren't very hospitable. Take the Alps, the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, &c. Yet these are tourist attractions.

There are people who live in less hospitable regions by choice. Folks who live in Alaskan outback because they like the wild, the challenge, the out of doors.

You have folks like George and Joy Adamson who move to the Serengeti, which is loaded with dangerous animals and diseases, because they love wild animals. They love the out of doors. Take scuba divers. Take mountain-climbers. Take astronauts.

Tooley sounds like a risk-averse city-slicker who spends all his life in climate-controlled buildings. That's not everybody's idea of paradise.

A catalogue of evils

In his written debate with Alvin Plantinga, secular philosopher Michael Tooley has "A brief catalogue of some notable evils", *Knowledge of God* (Blackwell 2008), 109-15. Since Tooley is a high-level atheist, and this is an impressive list, I'd like to interact with his examples.

First, there are extreme moral evils [Hitler, Stalin, genocide].

Secondly, there is the suffering endured by innocent children, including the suffering caused by lack of food in many parts of the world, by diseases such as muscular dystrophy, leukemia, cerebral palsy, and so on, and by abuse inflicted upon children by adults...

Thirdly, there is the suffering that adults endure as a result of terrible diseases—such as cancer, mental illness, Alzheimer's disease and so on.

Fourthly, there is the suffering of animals.

All of the types of evils just mentioned could be prevented by a very powerful and knowledgeable person. But the God of theism, if he exists, is not just a being who now has the power to intervene: he is also a being who created everything else that exists. Consequently, one can also raise the question of how satisfactory the world is. When one does this, it appears, for example, that there are a number of "design faults" in human beings that contribute greatly to human suffering and unhappiness, and where either no benefits at all are apparent, or else no benefits sufficient to counterbalance the negative effects.

(1) The sinuses are misdesigned: the lower sinuses open upward, and thus they do not drain properly, with the result that they may become infected and cause, in some cases, severe headaches.

Evolution, of course, provides an explanation of both good "design" and bad "design". Thus, for example, our sinuses would be fine if we were four-legged animals, rather than two-legged ones. But this explanation is not available to the creationist, and if the theist who is not a creationist attempts to appeal to this idea, he or she needs to say why an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being would employ evolution as a way of designing different species. Why leave things at the mercy of a morally unguided process that has had, as one would have expected, a number of bad results?

(2) As in the case of sinuses, so with the human spine: while its design is not too bad in the case of four-legged animals, it is a very unsatisfactory piece of engineering in the case of two-edged animals. This bad design, in turn, means that many humans suffer from back problems...

(3) Another example of what would seem to be an easily correctable "design fault" is the presence of wisdom teeth...impacted wisdom teeth, by becoming infected, could then lead not only to considerable pain, but to septicemia, and to death.

(4) A fourth illustration is provided by childbirth. The size of the human head relative to the size of the birth canal has three unfortunate consequences. First, humans are born in a much more underdeveloped, and therefore more vulnerable state than newborns of other species. Secondly, childbirth is often a very painful experience. Thirdly, childbirth is potentially a very dangerous event for the woman...In the past, many women died in childbirth and many continue to do so in less affluent countries.

(5) Men and women differ in various ways...women [are] more likely to develop lung cancer than men, without smoking more...So greater susceptibility to lung cancer is programmed into women.

(6). Another striking source of considerable suffering is declining hormone levels as one grows older [osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease].

(7-8) The body is equipped with sensors that detect injury, and announce the presence of bodily damage via painful sensations. these injury-detectors are badly designed, in at least four ways. First, they are not sensitive to the presence of many life-threatening bodily changes [e.g. cancer].

Secondly, these injury-detectors often produce high levels of pain when there is no condition that poses a serious health risk [e.g. migraines].

Thirdly, there is no way of shutting down these injury-detectors in situations where, rather than providing the individual with a useful warning of bodily damage, they only contribute to the person's misery by producing ongoing pain sensations.

Fourthly, the injury-detection system produces levels of pain that are often unbearably intense and that are in no way needed to serve the purpose of alerting one to bodily damage.

When some part of the body is being damaged, the injury-detectors, rather than giving rise to pain associated with that part of the body, could, where possible, immediately generate an automatic withdrawal response...

(9) When people become overweight, there is no reduction in appetite, nor is the mechanism that enables one to make use of stored fat an effective and well-designed one. Nor does the body cease extracting and storing calorie-rich compounds, such as fat, from the food that it is processing.

(10) The body contains a variety of defense mechanisms to deal with the threats posed by bacteria, viruses, toxins, and so on. But viruses are often capable of countermeasures—sometimes of quite a sophisticated sort—that enable them to foil the body's defense mechanisms. A better designed defense system would not be thwarted by such countermeasures.

(11) Malaria, sickle cell anemia.

(12) Humans are sexually mature some time before they exhibit significant emotional maturity, with the upshot that quite young girls can bear children long before they have developed the emotional responsibility and commitment needed to care for children satisfactorily.

(13) The association of intense pleasure with sexual activity also appears to be a design fault. For while sexual pleasure can certainly contribute to human happiness, it appears that when everything is taken into account, the world might well be better off if people reproduced simply because they wanted to have children, and if people were not seduced by the very great pleasure associated with sexual activity into actions that have far-reaching and often quite disastrous consequences.

(14) Conscience seems to be quite a fragile thing, and many people seem to have a very weak sense of right and wrong... Would not such a stronger and clearer sense of right and wrong make the world a better place?

(15) Humans are subject to aging, a decline in physical functioning...arthritis...the deterioration of one's mental capacities, sometimes including the complete destruction of those capacities that make one human.

(16) The mind can be damaged not only by processes connected with aging, but by strokes and other injuries to the brain...If mental faculties, rather than being dependent upon the brain, were instead faculties of an immaterial soul, such unwelcome occurrences would be totally absent from the world.

(17) More radically, embodied persons could be constructed of tougher stuff, so that all bodily injury was ruled out: they could be supermen and superwomen, in a world without kryptonite.

(18) Finally, there is the brief span of human life, and the inevitability of bodily death. This feature of human life seems very unsatisfactory from a moral point of view, as it both places a severe limit upon the possibilities for personal growth and intellectual development, and ends relationships between people that are often deep and enduring. In a well designed world, surely, the lives of people, and the relationships between them, would be completely open-ended, free to develop indefinitely, with no terminus imposed from without.

"Design faults" are not limited, however, to human beings...thus, in the first place, the earth is misdesigned in many ways that give rise to natural disasters resulting in enormous suffering and loss of life, for both humans and animals. This includes earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, tidal waves, and epidemics.

Secondly, the world contains bacteria and viruses that cause very great suffering and death.

Thirdly, there is the enormous suffering that results from the existence of carnivorous animals.

Fourthly, the world is one where the resources that exist are too limited to provide for populations of humans and other animals that are expanding at natural rates. The world could instead have been an infinite plane, or have had inhabitable planets that were easily accessible.

That's quite a litany! I imagine something like that might be devastating to the proverbial young man raised in the proverbial fundamentalist, anti-intellectual church, who's never been exposed to the objections of a sophisticated atheist.

I'll begin by making some general observations, followed by some specific observations.

A. Tooley seems to be attacking generic theism. That's a typical target among philosophical atheists. However, hardly any theist is a generic theist. Theists are nearly always adherents of a specific historical religion. So the custom of attacking generic theism misses the target.

I say that because Christian theism, for one, has explanatory resources lacking in generic theism. Even if generic theism falls prey to some of these objections, Christian theism may not.

B. Apropos (A), Tooley fails to take a doctrine of providence into account. The fact that the human body is vulnerable in different ways isn't ipso facto a design flaw if God protected humans from harm. In other words, Tooley isolates the body from external factors, as if the only consideration is whether the body in itself has the internal capacity to repel pain and harm. But the body needn't be impregnable to avoid physical suffering if God providentially protected humans from physical harm.

C. Apropos (B), Tooley fails to take the doctrine of the Fall into account. An unfallen world might contain many natural hazards, but God could intervene by warning humans of dangers or by directly stepping in to prevent or deflect a looming danger to humans. For instance, take the role of angels in Scripture. And that's in a fallen world. Suppose humans had guardian angels in an unfallen world.

On that view, humans suffer from some physical maladies, not due to design flaws, but because God withdrew his providential protection after the fall. Humans were never designed to have autonomous bodies. In addition to the body's natural defense mechanisms, we'd always need God to look out for us. And such special providences would make us mindful of him.

D. Perhaps Tooley would object that the Fall is in itself part of the problem of evil. The Fall requires special justification. Why would a benevolent God expose us to the perils of life in a fallen world?

No doubt a Christian philosopher or apologist needs to respond to that. One issue is whether an unfallen world is better than a redeemed world. An unfallen world is better in some respects than a fallen world, but a redeemed world is arguably better in other respects than an unfallen world. I've discussed that on multiple occasions.

E. Tooley fails to take eschatological compensations into consideration, like the Christian doctrine of heaven and the resurrection of the just. But that blunts the force of some of his objections.

F. There are standard theodical strategies to address some of Tooley's examples.

G. Assuming that some of his examples are genuine cases of physical defects, why presume that these are design flaws rather than subsequent maladaptations? In other words, he takes for granted that a physical defect must be part of the original design. But does he have any way to distinguish design flaws from maladaptations? For instance, even in an unfallen world, genetic copying errors might still arise. Random mistakes in a natural process. The human organism is fiendishly complex, and so there are many opportunities for genetic defects to creep in.

In an unfallen world, God might prevent these or fix these, but in a fallen world they begin to pile up. Cumulative maladaptations transmitted to humans generally.

Or, to take a different example, suppose, in mate selection, men prefer women who look like Catherine Deneuve. But perhaps that petite face, with a short jawline, is prone to impacted wisdom teeth. Natural selection magnifies mate selection. More offspring by such mothers will inherit a jawline prone to impacted wisdom teeth. That wouldn't be a design flaw, as if Eve was the prototype.

H. There's a certain irony when atheists discuss perceived design flaws. Dysteleology presumes a teleological standard of comparison. But where did atheists derive their concept of proper function in the first place?

I. Another irony is that when atheists attribute purported design flaws to the blind watchmaker, that's a "science-stopper". They give up on looking for a deeper explanation.

Moving from general to specific:

(1) Here's an explanation for sinuses:

<https://evolutionnews.org/2018/05/nathan-lents-science-with-the-parking-brake-on/>

<https://evolutionnews.org/2018/09/nathan-lents-is-back-still-wrong-about-sinuses/>

(2) To my knowledge, backaches are generally due to sport injuries, a sedentary lifestyle, and the aging process.

It's not a design flaw that a body part isn't indestructible. The fact that many humans have an unhealthy lifestyle is not a design flaw. The human spine works just fine in one's physical prime.

Indeed, it's quite impressive what athletes can do. If anything, the spine exceeds design specifications. Athletes often do things that exceed what's required for survival in the wild.

(3) Here's an explanation of wisdom teeth:

<https://creation.com/oh-my-aching-wisdom-teeth>

(4) The size of the human head involves tradeoffs:

i) If humans had smaller heads, we'd be dumber.

ii) Childhood is often a source of joy for kids and parents alike. If humans could fast-forward from birth to adulthood—like the Jem'Hadar, or In Vitros in Space: Above and Beyond—we'd miss out on so many life-enriching experiences and memories.

(5) Yes, men and women are different:

i) If female smokers are at higher risk of lung cancer than male smokers, then that's another reason for women not to smoke. Smoking is an elective behavior.

ii) You can't just assess a particular risk factor in isolation. For instance, women generally live longer than men. So a liability in one respect may be offset in another respect.

(6) Liabilities due to the aging process are not design flaws. Senescence is a consequence of the Fall.

(7-8) Regarding pain receptors:

i) Although life in an unfallen world might not be pain-free, it's quite likely that liability to excruciating pain is a consequence of the Fall. For one thing, we'd be providentially protected from many causes of excruciating pain in an unfallen world.

ii) Prior to advances in medical science, it wouldn't matter if the body could detect cancer at early stages. It would still be untreatable.

(9) Regarding obesity:

i) I believe that's generally associated with a sedentary lifestyle as well as the aging process. That's not a design flaw.

ii) Mild obesity might confer a survival advantage when you can't count on eating every day. Consider hunter-gatherers.

(10) Regarding the immune system:

i) Once again, that's a consequence of a fallen world rather than design flaws.

ii) It may be that in an unfallen world, the body would have greater resistance.

iii) That said, is it even naturally possible for the body to be immune to every possible toxin and pathogen? Seems unrealistic to me. In a cause-effect world, bodies have limitations, no matter how well engineered.

(11) Once more, that's not a design flaw but a consequence of the Fall.

(12) Regarding adolescent moms:

i) That assumes a nuclear family in which mothers raise their young singlehandedly. But traditionally, humans belong to extended families where young mothers had mature female relatives to help out.

ii) To my knowledge, the age at which females reach the childbearing years is variable.

(13) It's funny to see an atheist complain that sex is a design flaw because it's too much fun.

i) The fact that sex is so compelling is what contributed to the historic replacement rate. In the age of abortion and contraception, many countries have fallen below replacement rates.

ii) Physical attraction isn't just what brings couples together but what keeps couples together. If men and women weren't attracted to each other, they'd live apart. Human social life would be radically different. More like bears that impregnate she-bears or leopards that impregnate a leopardess, then the female raises the cubs singlehandedly.

Physical attraction provides an incentive to stick around as well as the opportunity to form emotional bonds that outlast sexual passion. Has Tooley thought through the implications of his alternative?

(14) Many moral dilemmas are artificial, so that even if we our moral intuitions were more reliable or discriminating, we'd still be stumped by hypothetical scenarios.

(15) Yet again, senescence is a consequence of the Fall. This is a systematic failure in Tooley's analysis. It vitiates so many of his examples at one stroke.

That said, it's impressive that humans can still function and live so long after their physical prime. The body has built-in redundancy. That's a tribute to fine engineering. They have so much in reserve.

(16) Regarding traumatic brain injury:

i) Tooley keeps making the same mistake. Liability to traumatic brain injury is a result of the Fall.

ii) Mental faculties are, indeed, faculties of an immaterial soul. However, living humans are embodied souls, so that damage to the brain impairs cognition, just as damage to a receiver impairs communication.

(17) Regarding superheroes:

i) That's science fiction. Superheroes are imaginary characters. All surface. There are no technical schematics for superheroes. There's no reason to think that postulate is naturally feasible. In a cause/effect world, there are physical constraints on what's possible.

ii) Suppose (arguendo) humans were made of "tougher stuff". Is that better or worse? Consider how important the sense of touch is in human bonding. Or walking barefoot on a sandy beach. Or taking a hot bath or shower. Or feeling a warm breeze on your bare back. For that matter, our skin is basically one big erogenous zone.

Would we really be happier or better adjusted if we were made of "tougher stuff"? We'd suffer from tactile deprivation.

(18) Regarding mortality:

i) This goes back to Tooley's central oversight. He fails to take the Fall into account.

ii) Why isn't mortality a problem for atheism rather than (Christian) theism? His objection is a backdoor admission that naturalism reduces to existential nihilism. Ironically, that's a reason he should ditch atheism.

(19) Moral and natural evils are addressed in standard Christian theodicies. In fairness, he wrote the entry on the problem of evil for SEP, so he does attempt to evaluate those responses. And I agree with him that some theodicies are unsatisfactory. However, not all theodicies are susceptible to his formulations, and he neglects some promising theodicies.

(20) Frankly, I can't get worked up over the alleged problem of animal pain. To my knowledge, that's not a traditional element of the argument from evil. Rather, that's something effete pet owners fret over.

I've discussed the issue on multiple occasions. Don't care to repeat myself here.

(21) Regarding natural disasters:

i) Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, tornadoes, &c., aren't design flaws but ways to restore the balance of nature—like safety valves that release pressure.

Does Tooley have any detailed idea whether a world without those mechanisms is naturally feasible? He's mentally removing natural disasters, as if you can leave all the good things in place.

ii) Natural disasters are only disastrous if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Once again, that's a consequence of life in a fallen world.

(22) Bacteria and viruses play a necessary ecological role. They're not gratuitous evils. Insofar as they are harmful to humans, that's due to the Fall.

(23) To postulate that the world could be an infinite plane is science fiction rather than a physically realistic proposal. And even if that's psychically realistic, what makes an infinite plane hospitable to life? Is an infinite plane consistent with all the other requirements for organic life?

(24) In what sense would inhabitable planets be easily accessible? Not naturally. Does he mean supernaturally?

Disarming the warrior-God

In vol. 1, chap. 7 of Greg Boyd's *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, the author catalogues what he takes to be biblical representations of divine violence. That's foundational to his thesis.

1. In his reading of the OT, he explicitly takes the side of militant atheists and outspoken enemies of the faith like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris. He cites them in a footnote, in positive agreement. Boyd is a fifth column within Christianity. An ally with those who seek to destroy biblical theism.

2. His examples aren't all of a piece. On the one hand, I agree with him that some of his examples depict divine violence: holy war commands, the Flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, plague of the firstborn, David's census, God sending "evil/lying spirits". I agree with him on what those passages represent.

3. That said, the specific problem is generated by Boyd's idiosyncratic, "cruciform" pacifism. Divine violence is a problem for his theology. It runs counter to his theological paradigm. He devotes 1500 pages to solving an artificial problem that he created.

If you don't think retributive justice is wrong, then these passages aren't at odds with divine benevolence. A good God is a just God. A just God is a punitive God.

I'm not saying that observation dissolves all the difficulties. But Boyd's objection to the OT (and parts of the NT) is predicated on his preconceived notion that God must be nonviolent. At that level, the contradiction is not internal to Scripture, but superimposed by his eccentric theology. He filters Scripture through his "cruciform" prism. In that respect, the problem isn't located in the text; rather, that's projected onto the text by his theological paradigm.

4. Over and above that are general difficulties not distinctive to his peculiar theology. I've dealt with this before. Because humans are social creatures, collective judgment inevitably harms the innocent as well as the guilty, the righteous as well as the wicked. Collective judgment doesn't imply collective guilt.

There is, however, a sorting out process in the afterlife. God's rough justice in this life is more discriminating in the afterlife. There's a reversal of fortunes. Eschatological compensations.

5. In addition, as I've noted on more than one occasion, everyone dies sooner or later. Whether people die by divine command or divine providence makes no moral difference that I can see. Either both are consistent with divine benevolence or inconsistent with divine benevolence.

6. Moreover, as I've said on other occasions, biblical judgments and atrocities don't create a special problem. They don't really add anything to the theodical issue. That's

because atrocities and natural disasters occur outside the text of Scripture. Even if Scripture didn't record any of this material, the theodical issue would remain because the same difficulties are paralleled in divine providence. Conversely, if we have theodical resources adequate to exonerate divine providence in the face of atrocities and natural disasters outside Bible history, then these are adequate to exonerate divine benevolence in the face of analogous examples within Bible history.

Sure, the OT is full of grisly stuff. But that's true of human history in general. There's nothing in the OT to uniquely shock our moral sensibilities. Nothing that doesn't have analogue in human history generally. Eliminating the horrors of OT history does nothing to eliminate the horrors of secular history. The problem of evil is basically the same inside and outside of Scripture.

A Christian is somebody who already knows that morally hideous things happen in the world, but continues to believe in God in spite of that. Evil is a given, not a newfound discovery. And it's not as if atheism represents an improvement.

7. On the other hand, Boyd includes other examples that reflect a malicious reading of Scripture. It's as though he goes out of his way to make it harder than it really is so that his alternative wins by default. He gerrymanders an intolerable view of divine action in the OT as leverage to his preferred alternative.

i) He says Exod 22:29-30 & Ezk 20:25-26 teach divinely mandated child sacrifice.

a) Regarding Exod 22:29-30, he willfully construes the command out of context. But as the law code already stated, provision is made to redeem firstborn sons (13:13-15).

Likewise, "devoting" someone to God doesn't entail human sacrifice (e.g. Num 8:16; 1 Sam 1:11).

b) Regarding Ezk 20:25-26, I agree with one commentator's observation that:

this whole chapter [is] creating a rhetorical parody of Israel's history in order to highlight its worst side. In a context of such sustained sarcasm and irony, we cannot suddenly take a verse like this as a face-value doctrinal or historical affirmation. It is impossible to imagine, in the light of his overwhelming emphasis on the goodness and importance of God's law and on the horrific evil of child sacrifice, that Ezekiel could have seriously meant that Yahweh himself gave bad laws and commanded human sacrifice. Christopher Wright, The Message of Ezekiel (IVP 2001), 160.

ii) He says some passages (Lev 26:29; Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20; Ezk 5:9-10; cf. Deut 28:53-57) "instigate" parents to cannibalize their kids. But four of the five passages are predictive or descriptive.

Only Jer 19:9 attributes that to direct divine action, but in context that's shorthand for the fact that by withdrawing his protection, God made Israel vulnerable to military deprecation by her enemies.

iii) He says God "caused" soldiers to rip babies from womb, according to Hos 13:16 (cf. Isa 13:16). But that passage is predictive and descriptive. Moreover, Amos 1:13 says that outrage provokes divine judgment.

iv) He cites historical atrocities and massacres (Gen 34; Judges 19-21), yet there's no presumption that narrators condone whatever they record. In his zeal to tarnish Scripture, Boyd commits elementary hermeneutical blunders.

v) He takes offense at the admittedly parabolic depiction in (Ezk 16:39-41), but that's written for shock value.

vi) He trots out Ps 137:9, but even liberal commentators like Goldingay regard that as figurative.

vii) He considers some OT depictions of God to be capricious. He makes no effort to interpret them charitably.

"If everything happens for a reason, then we don't know what reasons are"

In this post I'm going to comment on an essay by Sharon Street: "If 'Everything Happens for a Reason,' then We Don't Know What Reasons Are: Why the Price of Theism is Normative Skepticism." In *Challenges to Religious and Moral Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, eds. Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 9.

Sweet is an atheist philosopher, and her essay is a variation on the argument from evil. Here's a sample:

Given the way atheists are often stereotyped in the culture at large, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that arguments from evil against the existence of God start from a place of moral conviction and moral common sense. More importantly, as I will try to bring out, they refuse to leave that place in the face of skeptical challenges from the theist. In the exact reverse of what is often supposed, it is the atheist who insists on taking moral appearances at face value until given a strong reason to do otherwise, and the theist who pushes a deeply skeptical hypothesis according to which moral reality is very different from what it appears to be.

Let us begin with some moral common sense...One among endless possible examples of horrific real-life evil is a drunk-driving accident...In the crash, a seven-year-old girl, who had been a flower girl at the wedding, was decapitated...The mother picked it up and clung to it, screaming to her husband that "Katie is dead." In spite of repeated requests by emergency personnel, the mother refused to give up her daughter's head, holding onto it for nearly an hour as she watched the rest of her family being cut from the wreckage.

The idea that there was a good moral reason to permit this scene of unimaginable horror to take place defies every last shred of moral common sense. This is so in the sense that if there was such a reason, then the moral reality of the world is very different from what our everyday moral and factual capacities are capable of discerning. I assume that no one among the likely readership of this essay would seriously entertain the thought that any of the parties deserved this. What, then? When we examine the world as we might have thought we knew it, we can find no circumstance—moral, empirical, or otherwise—that would seem to

supply any good reason to permit such an event to occur. Importantly, for our purposes, this is not to say that there couldn't be a morally good reason to permit such an event to occur. Of course there could be. There could be a morally good reason to permit anything. But it is to suggest that cleaving to the view that there was a morally good reason to permit this crash to happen—which, as I will argue, belief in God entails—might come at a very high price. It might come, in particular, at the price of our ability to trust our own faculty of moral judgment going forward. If there was a morally good reason to permit this to happen, in other words, then we are hopeless judges of moral reasons.

Presumably we can all agree that in such circumstance it would be morally depraved not to prevent the accident...Suppose that one day you see the man from across the street standing there and watching impassively while one of his children drowns in front of him in the family swimming pool. The natural response to this factual observation would be to revise one's view that the man from across the street is a good man...Another logically available option is to hold fixed the moral idea that the man from across the street is a good man, and instead revise one's view that "A good man does not stand by and watch while his child drowns." If, for some reason, one was unshakably convinced that the man from across the street was a good man, then even if one had no idea the man's reason for standing there impassively and watching while his child drowned, one might opt to revise one's commitment to the general moral principle about what a good man does, and conclude that "There can sometimes be a good moral reason for a man to stand by and watch his child drown, and this is one of those cases, even though I don't know what the reason was."

But everything we have seen so far is that moral common sense is no guide whatsoever to what God would or wouldn't do with regard to any matter. Moral common sense would have suggested that God would prevent a flower girl's decapitation, that he would not permit tsunamis that kill tens of thousands of innocent people at a time...But in every case without exception, moral common sense has turned out to be no guide at all to what God will or won't do. This assumption is eviscerated on a daily basis by every horrendous evil that God permits to happen for reasons that are completely opaque to us.

If we simply pay attention to how things appear to us—both morally and factually—then the [drunk driver] accident would appear to be an utterly unmitigated evil. It would appear that there is nothing redeeming about its having happened, that there is nothing in the world that makes it okay that it happened. These are appearances that I think we should take at face value until we find an extremely good reason to do otherwise. To go with theism is to deny these appearances. It is to claim that, contrary to how things look, such horrors are not unmitigated after all—that in spite of how it might seem, there is something redeeming about this thing having happened, and there is something that makes it okay that this happened. To my mind, this is not only a radical denial of the appearances, but also a moral disservice to the people who were involved. It furthermore seems to me a disservice to any force at work in the universe that is worthy of the name "God". Nothing makes it okay that this accident happened.

Her argument is powerfully expressed. She makes about as strong a case for atheism (from the problem of evil) as can be made.

1. I take issue with her contention that Christian theism exacts an extra cost on morality. Both Christians and atheists live in the same world. A world where horrendous things happen. In that respect, Christians and atheists have both been dealt the same hand. And it's a hard hand to play, for Christian and atheist alike. If I were the dealer, if I was a cardsharp, my inclination would be to reshuffle the deck, to yield an easier hand.

However, Christian theism doesn't impose a moral surcharge, in contrast to naturalism. To the contrary, Christian theism offsets the moral predicament. By contrast, naturalism is the counselor despair.

2. Her allegation that the atheist takes moral common sense seriously whereas it is the Christian who's the moral skeptic is tactically adroit, but deceptive. For instance, in the very same book, fellow atheist Walter Sinnott-Armstrong mentions that some philosophers are moral nihilists. And, of course, those are naturalists.

Moreover, he discusses psychopaths. These are statistically deviant, standing outside the normal moral community. If, however, their viewpoint is rational, that poses a challenge to moral realism. Here's a precis of his chapter:

Despite disagreements on some moral issues, almost all individuals and cultures agree on certain basic moral judgments, such as that theft, rape, and murder of peers for personal gain are immoral. Psychopaths seem to be an exception. To test this common assumption, this chapter surveys research on moral judgments in psychopaths. The evidence is less clear than many assume, but probably some

psychopaths disagree with our fundamental moral judgments. Does this disagreement support the skeptical conclusion that our fundamental moral judgments are not epistemically justified? Not if psychopaths are irrational, but the argument is that they are not irrational in any way that would justify dismissing their views as irrelevant to moral epistemology. These conclusions have radical implications within many theories, but contrastivist moral epistemology is shown to handle these surprising facts.

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199669776.001.0001/acprof-9780199669776-chapter-3>

So her insinuation that the popular view of atheists is a caricature is misleading.

3. More to the point, the fact that many atheists take moral common sense for granted when mounting the argument from evil doesn't mean their assumption is warranted. Indeed, I'd say that cuts against the grain of naturalism. They lack the courage of their convictions. Many atheists blink at the grim implications of their worldview. And that's not just my opinion. As I've often documented, there are secular thinkers who admit that naturalism conduces to moral and/or existential nihilism.

4. Sweet constantly appeals to taking "moral appearances at face value". But that's a category confusion. Good and evil don't lie on the surface of events. Moral properties aren't empirical properties. You can't directly perceive right and wrong, good and evil. Rather, moral judgments are something we bring to events. We evaluate events in relation to a moral frame of reference that's physically imperceptible. This doesn't mean events lack moral qualities, but that's not something you can simply read off the events, like shapes and colors.

5. In addition, it's demonstrably false that atheists, or at least thoughtful atheists, take "moral appearances at face value". To the contrary, many atheists peel back the moral impressions to explain what lies behind the moral impressions. Take the distraught mother, clutching the dismembered head of her young daughter. From a cold hard Darwinian perspective, that's the conditioned response of a higher mammalian mother. Natural selection has programmed female animals to be protective of their young, and feel distress when their young are killed. That confers a survival advantage. From a Darwinian perspective, maternal instinct isn't moral or immoral but amoral.

Likewise, Sharon Sweet is a higher female mammal, and her reaction to the accident reflects the same evolutionary conditioning. Yet there's nothing objectively moral about it. That's how the mad scientist of naturalistic evolution wired their brains. But while their brains are wired for empathy, the brains of psychopaths are wired for indifference or cruelty.

6. In addition, her appeal to moral common sense is confused. The same event can be bad in one respect but good in another. Take science fiction scenarios where a time-traveler struggles to make the future a better place. And he may succeed in his immediate objective, by eliminating a particular evil. The problem, though, is that changing one variable in the past changes multiple variables in the future. He's unable to control the side-effects. Unable to eliminate the bad variables while leaving the good variables in place. And moral common sense can acknowledge such trade-offs.

7. It's appropriate for human moral agents to prioritize the needs of those closer to us in time and space. Real human beings, whose situations we know best. Compared to hypothetical humans in the future. Real people can suffer real harm, and the future is largely beyond our control. Becomes less predictable the farther out we go.

8. It's a wild overgeneralization for Sweet to claim that:

But in every case without exception, moral common sense has turned out to be no guide at all to what God will or won't do. This assumption is eviscerated on a daily basis by every horrendous evil that God permits to happen for reasons that are completely opaque to us.

To the contrary, many Christians experience tragedies that seem inexplicable at the time, but in retrospect they come to see how good came of it. What appears to be inscrutable when it happens may be seen to have unexpected value in hindsight:

Cardinal Newman remarks, though, that when people argue for atheism from evil, they focus on evil happening to others. When people connect the evil to first-person experience, he thinks they find it much more difficult to argue for atheism, because they see how that evil fits into their life. So if Newman is right, the argument from evil has a certain disconnect from experience, too.

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2017/03/heaven.html?showComment=1489672662565#c8201255170735155270>

9. Sweet's indignant repudiation of Christian theism is ironically subversive to the very thing she cherishes. If naturalism is true, then human lives are worthless. There's nothing of consequence to salvage. Her empathy and moralism are fatally misplaced. Assuming naturalism is true, value is a mental projection on valueless people and things. An illusion foisted on us by evolutionary brainwashing.

God and checkers

One version of the argument from natural evil that I sometimes run across goes like this: since the laws of nature are contingent rather than necessary, God could dispense with natural evils by making a universe with different laws.

There's a grain of truth to that, but the reality is a good deal more complicated and imponderable. It's simpler for God to bypass natural laws than for God to change natural laws. When God circumvents a nature law to perform a miracle, God is accessing his omnipotence to product the result directly.

But if he alters the laws of physics, it's not just a case of changing one law or another law in piecemeal fashion. For in a cause/effect universe, all the laws must be mutually consistent. One law can't be changed while leaving all other laws in place. Rather, changing one law requires a systematic adjustment in other laws, for them to cooperate.

The hypothetical alternative is so different from our own that we have no idea what such a universe would be like. And there may be few coherent alternatives. Compare it to a game of checkers:

Researchers at the University of Alberta in Canada formally announced that they had finally solved the centuries-old game of checkers. Specifically: they had a file which contained full information on every legal position that can arise during the game, and which move, if any, will lead to a win or a draw in that position.

The conclusion to be drawn from the completion of the database: with perfect play by both sides checkers cannot be won or lost. The game will inevitably end in a draw. This means that even the most skilled player cannot beat a computer which has access to the database. The computer can't win either – it can only do so if the human opponent makes a mistake that leads to position that is classified as a loss in the database.

<https://en.chessbase.com/post/500-billion-billion-moves-later-computers-solve-checkers>

Actually, there aren't an unlimited number of combinations. It turns out, there are a mere 500,000,000,000,000,000,000 combinations (500 quintillion) that can be made over the course of a game of checkers...now the system knows the perfect series of plays to win the game at any point. A perfect opponent matched against Chinook can never hope to beat it; even if they play a perfect game, their best result is a draw.

<https://www.wired.com/2007/07/the-game-of-che/>

If God plays by the rules, that imposes a severe restriction on his field of action (a self-imposed limitation, to be sure).

If he plays checkers, he's not assuming the role of an omnipotent player. He's bracketed his omnipotence. He's an omniscient player, but not an omnipotent player, because he's not taking advantage of his omnipotence. That's available, but kept in reserve.

God cannot achieve a result by law without imposing a self-limitation on his field of action. God can achieve a result by acting outside a network of natural laws, but if he's operating within a network of natural laws, if he employs that medium to achieve the result, then there are many things he cannot do.

If God plays checkers with a computer, God can't beat the computer. Even though God is omnipotent and the computer is finite, if God confines himself to the rules of the game, then he can only play to a draw. There are only so many ways to win and lose. The program has that information. That's all it needs to be invincible. God isn't bound by the rules, but it ceases to be a game of checkers if he breaks the rules or overrides the computer.

The invisible security guard

Imagine you are a woman who is told your apartment [is] protected by an invisible security guard. An intruder breaks into your apartment and rapes you. The guard is nowhere to be found. You ask the landlord, "Where is your security guard? Either he doesn't exist or is weak or evil or incompetent."

One of your neighbors studies 'invisible scrutiny guard apologetics'. He overhears your conversation. He says, "But if a-guardism is true, there is no security guard. You can't consistently argue against the guard's existence without presupposing his existence."

If you understood why his answer to you completely misses the point, you'll understand why it misses the point for theists to claim that the atheistic argument from evil presupposes theism".

<https://twitter.com/SecularOutpost/status/999507572947173376>

i) This is a hobbyhorse of Jeff Lowder. His point is that an atheist can deploy the argument from evil even if the atheist denies moral realism. In that case, the argument from evil will take the form of an internal critique. Showing that theism or Christianity in particular is inconsistent on its own grounds.

ii) That's technically true, but there's the question of why a moral nihilist cares about the problem of evil. If there are no epistemic duties, why is it important to disprove Christianity?

iii) In addition, an atheist who deploys the argument from evil assumes a burden of proof. Since he's raising the objection, he shoulders a burden of proof to make an argument. Moreover, he needs to take standard Christian theodicies into consideration, and show how those are wanting. It's up to him to make the first move. It's not incumbent on the Christian to recycle standard Christian theodicies. Since those are already on the table, an atheist needs to build that into his initial formulation.

In fairness, that doesn't mean a Christian apologist has no corresponding burden of proof. But an atheist can't shift the burden of proof onto the Christian by simply exclaiming, "How can an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent God permit evil!" Atheists are often lazy in that regard.

iv) The parallel is ill-conceived. If you posit that the apartment is protected by an invisible security guard, then that's his sole job, so if the tenant is attacked, then on the

face of it "either he doesn't exist or is weak or evil or incompetent." But the comparison breaks down since protecting humans from harm is not God's only job. Unlike the security guard, God may have a number of priorities. So the analogy is vitiated by disanalogies.

v) And even on its own terms, maybe the security guard was sick that day. Maybe his car broke down. Maybe the landlord failed to get a temporary substitute. Or maybe the security guard had a family crisis which took precedence over his day job. Invisibility doesn't make him omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. So that's a very poor example to illustrate the point.

Mind-games

A recent exchange I had with an atheist:

There are a few issues here, first a pedantic one, calling the apparent evils "mysterious" somewhat begs the question, as on many hypotheses said evils are not mysterious at all, but instead exactly what one would expect, e.g. an evil god hypothesis, or an amoral natural universe hypothesis etc.

On your amoral natural universe hypothesis, what's the basis for calling anything morally "evil"?

then Evil doesn't magically become inconsistent with the hypothesis, instead Evil is just the observation of something people subjectively judge as evil, i.e. apparent evil, or evil by convention etc.

i) In which case, atheists can't deploy the argument from evil on their own grounds. At best, they can try to show that it's inconsistent on theistic grounds. But that's the very question at issue.

ii) Since no one believes in a perfectly evil god, whether Christian or atheist, that's a diversionary tactic. Why should we take the evil God hypothetical any more seriously than brain-in-vat hypotheticals? Suppose we couldn't disprove the evil God hypothetical? So what? What makes that any more significant than the inability of philosophers to disprove other skeptical thought-experiments? It's just a mind-game.

how about you engage in the argument/rebuttal

What argument in particular? The evil god hypothesis? That's just a poor man's version of the Cartesian demon. Steven Law didn't bring anything new to the table.

If the evil god existed, that would be a defeater for atheism no less than Christian theism, so assuming we're supposed to take that thought-experiment seriously, the onus lies on the atheist as much as the Christian.

If the evil god exists, there's nothing anyone can do about it. Arguments are futile in that event. If the evil god doesn't exist, arguments are unnecessary in that regard.

God, evil, and illusion

The argument from evil is usually cast in terms of an allegedly inconsistent tetrad:

- i) God is omnipotent
- ii) God is omniscient
- iii) God is benevolent
- iv) Evil exists

One solution is to deny a horn of the proposed dilemma. Some freewill theists tweak (i) by stressing God's self-imposed limitations. But there's not much mileage to be had in tweaking (i). Even if God doesn't exercise his omnipotence, he's capable of stopping or preventing evil. Moreover, even if one denies (i), that hardly refutes the argument. As John Piper noted, in response to Rabbi Kushner:

God does not need to be "all-powerful" to keep people from being hurt in the collapse of a bridge. He doesn't even need to be as powerful as a man. He only needs to show up and use a little bit of his power (say, on the level of Spiderman, or Jason Bourne)—he did create the universe, the Rabbi concedes—and (for example) cause some tremor a half-hour early to cause the workers to leave the bridge, and the traffic to be halted. This intervention would be something less spectacular than a world-wide flood, or a burning bush, or plague of frogs, or a divided Red Sea, or manna in the wilderness, or the walls of a city falling down—just a little tremor to get everybody off the bridge before it fell.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/response-to-rabbi-kushner>

Roger Olson was outraged by Piper's response, but he didn't attempt to directly rebut Piper's observation, which is irrefutable.

Some freewill theists deny or minimize (ii). But that's unsuccessful. Even if (ex hypothesi) God doesn't know the future, a moral agent needn't be 100% certain about a ripening outcome to see what's highly likely to transpire unless he intervenes. Suppose a mother loses control of her baby stroller, which goes careening down the hill, heading straight into a busy intersection. A pedestrian halfway up the hill is in a position to intercept the stroller just in time. All he has to do to ensure a tragic outcome is to do nothing. Inaction, in combination with gravity, terrain, wheels, &c., guarantees the outcome.

The hypothetical pedestrian didn't create the situation. Didn't cause the mother to lose control. Didn't put the baby in danger. He's far less responsible than the God of freewill theism (be it Molinism, open theism, or simple foreknowledge Arminianism). Yet the pedestrian's nonintervention is culpable.

Or suppose the tragic outcome isn't a dead certainty if he fails to intercept the stroller. Suppose there's only a 40% chance the baby will die in a collision. But even so, we'd consider the pedestrian to be blameworthy.

Or a Christian could challenge how the atheist defines (iii). What if God is not benevolent in the way we wish or hope? Isn't Yahweh pretty hard-nosed? And the harsh events we read about in Bible history are no different in kind than the harsh events we read about in the newspaper or secular history books. So why not adjust your view of God's goodness to the Bible and reality?

Finally, a person can deny (iv). And that isn't just hypothetical. Take Mary Baker Eddy or John McTaggart—as well as strands of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy that say the sensible world is Maya (illusory or delusive).

Freewill theists tend to operate with a priori notions of what God must be like. This comes out clearly when attacking Calvinism. So they may appeal to perfect being theology (as they construe it) to preemptively discount Reformed theism.

On a related note, John Wesley famously said that whatever the Bible means, it can't be that!—in reference to Calvinism (specifically, reprobation). Roger Olson takes the position that Reformed theism can't be true because it would make God untrustworthy.

Some freewill theists (e.g. Randal Rauser) take the next step by denying that God did some of the things attributed to him in the Bible, viz. "abhorrent" commands, like the command to sacrifice Isaac or the command to execute the Canaanites. Once again, this conflicts with their preconception of God's goodness.

The pattern here is to begin with a preconceived notion of what kind of evil is permissible in a world made by a benevolent God. But the dilemma for the freewill theist is that given the existence of horrific evil, that limits their explanatory options.

Considering their scruples, if evil didn't exist, it's hard to envision their conceding that a benevolent God would allow such evil to exist. If evil didn't exist, don't you imagine they'd rail against a philosophical theologian who proposed the possibility of God making a world in which atrocities like the Holocaust, child murder, &c., happen? Wouldn't they accuse the philosophical theologian of blasphemy for even entertaining that impious speculation?

But the existence of evil forces their hand. So they struggle, because it stands in deep-seated tension with their moral intuitions regarding what ought to be the case, given

their expectations regarding what a benevolent God should disallow. If they had their druthers, if they were coming to this issue from scratch, in a world devoid of evil, certain evils would be incompatible with the only kind of God that can exist—from their viewpoint. As it is, they are stymied by the horrific and apparently gratuitous evils in the real world. And it makes them resort to hairsplitting distinctions when attacking Calvinism while exempting their own position.

Considering the way in which many freewill theists lay down a priori strictures regarding what a benevolent God would or wouldn't do, it would be more consistent for them to go whole hog with thinkers who say evil is illusory. That really does let God off the hook.

In fact, idealism is making something of a comeback in Christian philosophical circles. For instance, Robert Adams, "Idealism Vindicated," Peter van Inwagen & Dean Zimmerman, eds. *Persons: Human and Divine*. (Oxford, (2007), 35-54; J. Farris, S. Hamilton, & J. Spiegel, eds. *Idealism and Christian Theology: Idealism and Christianity • Volume 1* (Bloomsbury, 2016); S. Cowan & J. Spiegel, eds. *Idealism and Christian Philosophy: Idealism and Christianity • Volume 2* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

Mind you, I find that wholly implausible. But given their theological priorities and moral presuppositions, if they were really serious, the most consistent theodicy for freewill theism is to reclassify evil as a massive illusion. That way they don't have to squirm over God allowing horrors which would be culpable for a human agent in his position.

Is natural evil postlapsarian?

Although Dr. Welty discusses various objections to his theodicy, he regrettably omits any mention its greatest challenge: the widespread conviction that it has been decisively disproven by science.

Mainstream science has no place for the Biblical Adam & Eve in an idyllic Garden of Eden. Allegedly, humans evolved, via a cruel quest for survival, in a group of at least several thousand; there never were two humans from whom all other humans descend.

Even worse, fossils indicating natural evil (animal suffering from predation, disease, etc.) are allegedly dated millions of years older than the earliest humans, in blatant contrast with the notion that natural evil was caused by Adam's Fall.

Clearly, the view that natural evil comes only after Adam's Fall entails rejecting mainstream fossil dates, and thus essentially embracing Young Earth Creationism (YEC).

Unhappily, the bulk of Christian Academia has largely accepted mainstream science, and hence disdains YEC. Some Christian scholars do uphold the traditional natural evil theodicy, while at the same time explicitly rejecting YEC, seemingly unaware of any inconsistency (e.g., Wayne Grudem, Douglas Groothuis). Most, however, embrace alternative theodicies that are more in tune with mainstream science.

<http://bylogos.blogspot.com/2019/01/why-so-much-evil.html>

That raises a number of issues:

1. In historical theology, what phenomena did Reformed theologians classify as natural evils? Natural evil is a very broad category, with many examples.

i) Wildfires are a natural evil, caused by lightning. Does Byl think there was no lightning or fire before the Fall?

Campfires can start a wildfire. Was everything fireproof before the Fall?

ii) Flooding is classified as a natural evil. Does that mean the Nile river couldn't/didn't flood before the Fall? The annual flooding of the Nile river is beneficial to Egyptian farmers.

iii) If a tsunami sweeps over an island that has no fauna, is that a natural evil? It doesn't kill anything. Is a tsunami intrinsically a natural evil, or only in conjunction with other factors?

iv) An avalanche is classified as a natural disaster. Were avalanches impossible before the Fall? If you have mountains and precipitation, that produces snowpacks that produce avalanches.

2. This all goes to the ambiguity of "natural evil". "Natural evil" is a term of art. Many natural evils are natural goods. They are necessary to maintain the balance of nature. They are only evil if a human being is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

3. It's not as if the Bible has a list of labeled natural evils. Is it a biblical presupposition that animal death is evil? Was the sacrificial system evil?

4. I've always thought the YEC claim that natural evil must be a result of the Fall is philosophically and exegetically naive:

i) YECs assume that natural evil is incompatible with the creation as originally "good" or "very good". That, however, is not an exegetical conclusion. Gen 1 doesn't define the goodness of creation in contrast to so-called natural evil. It doesn't speak to that issue one way or the other.

ii) The standard objection to animal suffering is not that it happened before the Fall. What atheist frames the objection that way? If we say animal suffering is a postlapsarian development, that's irrelevant to the argument from animal suffering. Atheists will say animal suffering is incompatible with divine benevolence or wisdom regardless of whether that is deemed to be a prelapsarian or postlapsarian phenomenon. God is still complicit in predation, parasitism, and disease even if that's indexed to the Fall. So it's a failed theodicy.

iii) In addition, Byl is a Calvinist, so he believes that God predestined all natural (and moral evils) and implements his blueprint via meticulous providence.

iv) Even within an Edenic setting, it doesn't follow that there was no predation or animal death. Although the animals are tame in relation to Adam and Eve, that carries no presumption that they are nonviolent in relation to other animals.

v) Apropos (iv), Gen 2-3 implies animal mortality, for the tree of life is reserved for humans. And it only existed in the garden, not outside the garden.

5. YEC, if true, entails the falsity of the evolutionary narrative. However, the converse doesn't follow. The falsity of YEC doesn't entail the evolutionary narrative.

6. Allowing for natural evils before the Fall doesn't mean innocent Adam and Eve were exposed to natural evils. God could providentially shield them from natural evils.

7. Byl is both a geocentrist as well as a young-earth creationist. From his viewpoint, they share a common hermeneutic. The same hermeneutic yields young-earth creationism and geocentrism.

The dilemma that generates is that I don't see how he can draw a hermeneutical line between geocentrism and flat-earthism. He's scornful of Enns' arguing that Scripture teaches a three-story universe, but it sure looks to me like the same hermeneutic that yields a geocentric cosmography yields a flat-earth cosmography as well. And the reasoning is reversible. They rise and fall together.

Explaining evil, part 1

I plan to do a series of posts on yet another book on the problem of evil: W. Paul Franks, ed., *Explaining Evil: Four Views* (Bloomsbury 2019). Here's a description:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRAEEF-2>

I think the problem of evil is overemphasized in atheism and Christian apologetics. If we were starting from scratch, would the problem of evil receive so much attention? I think it's like a social contagion or reinforcing loop where, if you keep saying the problem of evil is the main objection to belief in God, that's the effect of constant repetition. It feeds back into itself in a circular, self-conditioned dynamic.

Strictly speaking, the book isn't about the problem of evil but the preliminary question of how, why, and whether evil exists. For a Christian respondent, that's intertwined with the problem of evil. Christian theology takes the existence of evil for granted, but that's not a given in atheism. Are pain and suffering evil? What is evil from a secular standpoint? Is there such a thing?

I bought the book primarily for the contributions of Paul Helm and Erik Wielenberg. Helm is the preeminent Reformed philosopher of his generation while Wielenberg is one of the best atheist philosophers.

Here is Wielenberg's response to Helm's *felix culpa* theodicy:

(ii) The atonement of sin is so good that it is better that there be atoned-for sin than that there be no sin in the first place (73).

Although that may be how the *felix culpa* theodicy is usually formulated, I disagree that God's permission/ordination of evil is only justified if a redeemed world is better overall than an unfallen world. Suppose there's a better world than the world in which my loved ones exist. If so, it's a cause for gratitude that God created a lesser world in which my loved ones exist rather than an upscale world in which they don't. God isn't elitist. We should be grateful that our existence is not in competition with "the best". What if we wouldn't make the cut? What if God picks losers rather than winners because he loves the underdog? Existence isn't a meritocracy. Salvation isn't theological eugenics.

Accordingly, it seems that atonement can at best cancel the evil of sin, turning the overall balance of good and evil to zero; I don't see a plausible basis for holding that atonement—as distinguished from divine incarnation—could make the overall combination of sin and atonement into good (74).

To be a redeemed creature, to experience reconciliation and restoration, is a richer experience than never failing in the first place. Which Wielenberg considers:

Diller considers the thought that "there is a special excellence to the quality of relationship that can be known by those once lost who are redeemed"...However, it is hard to see how to justify (ii) on such grounds without thereby committing oneself to such implausible claims as "the strongest marriages are those that have involved a period of divorce, or that the deepest mother-daughter relationship is enabled once the daughter commits patricide" (74).

It's not implausible that the strongest marriages are marriages that weather crisis and conflict, but survive the ordeal. There is, moreover, the interesting phenomenon of divorced couples who reconsider and remarry the original spouse. At the time they were too immature to appreciate each other. But in retrospect they came to realize they were right the first time around. The time apart gave them perspective.

Furthermore, such grounds for (ii) suggest that greater degrees of alienation make possible more valuable goods of reconciliation later on. In the case of isn, that line of thinking appears to lead to the following problem: "If sin is the occasioning cause of grace...then shouldn't the upright man try to overcome his repugnance to sin, and commit still more sins?" Acceptance of (ii) and the felix culpa theodicy suggests that more sin enhances the overall value of the world, all things considered—a dubious implication (74).

1. That doesn't follow. For one thing, it's not as if humans are morally pristine agents who must devise creative ways to experiment with evil so that we know what it's like. Rather, we're already born with a propensity for evil, and the question is how to break free. I have plenty of regrets without having to devise and explore novel exercises in sinning.

2. Moreover, it's not as if you need to be repeatedly lost and found to have insight into what it's like to be lost and found. Indeed, if you were constantly rescued, it would become blasé and expected. If a hiker is lost in the forest, part of what makes rescue such a relief is the fear that he may not be found. He's in a state of desperate suspense. Waiting in hope and fear.

Michael Peterson writes, "God's original purpose...[thus the highest good for creation is available without creation's descent into sin and evil" (74).

Is that supposed to mean God was blindsided by events and had to scramble to salvage his nearsighted plans?

"agency that is hardened and biochemically twisted (serial killers, child sex murderers, schizophrenics)"...Adam's worry is that God would be insufficiently loving and merciful toward such wrecked and ruined human agents were he to create them in order to display his perfection through divine atonement.

i) I'll bracket the "display his perfection through divine atonement" for another installment.

ii) What exactly is Wielenberg's responding to? Is he saying that's inconsistent with a felix culpa theodicy? If so, how does a felix culpa theodicy require God to be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers?

iii) Is he saying that's inconsistent with Helm's Calvinism? If so, does Calvinism require God to be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers? In Calvinism God loves the elect. It's not a presupposition of Calvinism that God is merciful to everyone. Indeed, there's a fundamental sense in which God is unmerciful to the reprobate.

iv) Is he saying that's inconsistent with what it means for God to be a benevolent being, from Wielenberg's perspective? Is Wielenberg supposing that to be good, God must be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers? If he's operating from his own standards, then the onus lies on him to make a case for why divine goodness demands that.

Psychopaths lack "the shackles of a nagging conscience"...for psychopaths, "moral...rules are annoying restrictions to be manipulated or ignored. None of these rules have any normative force for them". Psychopaths lack the emotional capacity to grasp the weight of morality and because they are devoid of guilt, see no need for any of their actions to be atoned for. It is hard to see why the existence of a particular sort of damaged agency is necessary for the great good of divine atonement. God could have omitted psychopaths from his grand plan without sacrificing the need for atonement (75).

i) Once again, what exactly is Wielenberg responding to? Since Helm is a Calvinist, he doesn't think everyone is redeemed.

ii) Perhaps Wielenberg would say there's a point of tension between a felix culpa theodicy and limited atonement. If so, it's up to Wielenberg to explain why psychopaths, serial killers, and child sex murders must be redeemed for a redeemed world to be better overall than an unfallen world—even assuming that all psychos, serial killers, and child sex murderers are reprobate.

iii) Finally, if, according to Calvinism, God regenerates, sanctifies, and glorifies a psychopath, then he will come to perceive how his actions were blameworthy and desperately in need of atonement. Perhaps that discernment will be incomplete in this life. It may only be in heaven that his "wrecked and ruined agency" is fully repaired, although grace can enable him to gain some insight even in this life. Christian apologist David Wood appears to be a real-life example.

Explaining evil, part 2

Now I'll comment on some aspects of Helm's presentation.

An important feature of this contribution to the questions raised by evils is that such a theism is monistic....Some contrasting systems are dualistic, positing two equally ultimate sources of good and evil, Light and Darkness, engaged in an everlasting wrestling match, and so on. Judeo-Christianity is not like this. God is the creator and purposer of all that is. So the question, "Why evil?" when posed of this God, becomes at least two questions (50).

In that regard, freewill theism is dualistic. Although the forces of good and evil aren't equally ultimate, they are independent of each other.

"What is God's purpose in permitting/ordaining evil?" The fulfilling of what end or ends required evil?...This is a question that is teleological in character. I don't think an atheist has a place for this question, because any atheistic system has only one set of sources of evil, namely uncreated matter. A theist may reply to our question by recognizing that he does not have a clue as to why there is evil in God's world. But the question nevertheless makes sense: God must have a ground or grounds. The second question is, "Granted that God is the ordainer of evil, how does evil occur?" (50).

In this monism there are two categories of players: God the creator and human beings his creatures, with the use of their own minds and wills...In materialist atheism, there is only one set of players, configurations of matter more or less complicated. Some of these possess agency, others do not (50).

How such configurations get to ask anything is a major problem in such an outlook...Atheists, like theists, may resort to anthropomorphism. Perhaps these evils are bound up with the self-preservation of some species, or of species generally. Maybe evils and pains are spurs to good: to maternal care, or the development of clothing for a covering against heat and cold, or as a sign of the onset of serious sickness...They arise from our penchant for imputing functions or purposes to some of the natural order that does not have anything like human intentions as we experience these...And if we are thorough-going materialists, we

also have the task of explaining how those arrangements of matter that are you and me come to have the capacity to impute good and evil to other chunks of matter. Good and evil are ultimately epiphenomena of physical changes (51).

Useful contrast.

The fault, the incarnation, and the offering of the Incarnate One is needed, for the display of the glory of God in the redemption of men and women. The point here is not simply that the incarnation was necessary, but that an evil world in which God himself came and suffered for us is incommensurably better than one in which there was no evil, but also that there was no incarnation (53).

The problem is that Helm never gets around to explaining what makes a redeemed world incommensurably better than an unfallen world. He never gets much beyond the bare assertion.

In fairness, he isn't presenting a full-blown theodicy since the topic of the book has a different emphasis than the problem of evil. Still, for a Christian, to ask why there's any evil at all is necessarily bound up with the problem of evil and theodical considerations.

The theist must end his explanatory narrative by invoking the will of God; it was the good pleasure of God that this is so. Why is it the good pleasure of God that this is so? This is a question that cannot be answered, not because there is no answer, but that there is no answer apart from the will of God (55).

I don't know what that means. Sure, the answer can't be detached from God's will, but God has reasons for what he wills, so a Christian can explore the possible reasons. God's bare will is not the ultimate explanation. I don't think Helm is a theological voluntarist. God's will is characterized by his wisdom and benevolence. There's a rationale for whatever God wills.

Given the immaculate and necessary perfection of God, moral evil can only arise from the creature. It is a logical consequence of the monistic character of the Creator-creature distinction that God is the only source of good and that moral evil has its source according to orthodox Christianity in the creature (55).

i) I don't think that's an option for a Calvinist. Predestination is the ultimate source of evil.

Now there are different aspects to that. To take a comparison, in *Perelandra*, why doesn't the Queen succumb to the Un-man? At one level, that's because everything that happens was plotted by the novelist, who exists outside the narrative. At another level, the Un-man would eventually wear down her resistance but Ransom finally gives up on trying to outargue the Un-man and kills him. So there's an explanation within the narrative as well as an explanation outside the narrative.

By the same token, there was a plot in God's imagination. In the plot, Lucifer fell, then successfully tempted Adam and Eve to follow suit. God instantiates his mental narrative in real space and time, with conscious agents. Lucifer fell in the real world because that necessarily corresponds to the plot in God's mind.

ii) However, that doesn't rule out factors or motivations within the plot. For instance, although Adam sinned, perhaps he didn't perceive his action as evil. Perhaps he misperceived his action as virtuous.

There is about evil a deficiency or loss of negativity. Augustine, influenced somewhat by the neo-platonists at this point, called evil a privation. Hence it could not be the direct action of God who is only capable of creating not of destroying. Blindness (say) is not a positive property, but a negative property (56).

i) As I understand it, the motivation for the privative theory of evil is that if evil is nothing, then God didn't create evil—since nothing can't be a creative object. An agent, even an omnipotent agent, can't create nothing. Nothing isn't the effect or result of anything. So that let's God off the hook—or does it?

ii) Even if we grant that technical distinction, does it really hold up? For instance, suppose you say the empty spaces in a snowflake are nothing. Yet those specific empty spaces, those particular shapes, are caused by the lattice pattern of the snowflake. The configuration of the empty spaces wouldn't exist apart from the crystalline structure. So even though the empty spaces aren't directly created, they are caused.

Likewise, even if we say blindness is a privative property, blindness is caused by certain factors. Even if you say blindness isn't directly created, it is indirectly created by whatever conditions give rise to blindness, viz. disease, accident, genetic defect. So I don't see how you get any theodical mileage out of that distinction.

In fairness, Helm isn't necessary trying to justify the ordination of evil at this juncture, but explain its origin. How rather than why. But it still reflects the limitations of that theodical strategy.

Someone who is compatibilistically free may go through stages in which, until he makes up his mind, he is as ignorant of his future as is any open theist who hold that God is ignorant of some libertarian future (31).

Corrects the popular misconception that the experience of deliberation implies libertarian freedom. Also, useful comparison with open theism.

Net result

A few comments on this:

<https://selfwire.org/article/explaining-god-evil>

Second, certain heinous evils do not have a “net” good.

On the face of it, even heinous evils can yield a net good. Events are causes of further events down the line. Everything adds up, for better or worse. In principle, that can be good overall. Whether the net effect is better rather than worse depends on whether God has orchestrated history so that countervailing goods offset evils so that on balance, the final result is better.

This is otherwise called “The theological problem of trauma.” There is no “net good” of a little girl being raped. One might contrive a philosophical situation in which one had to choose between one person being raped vs. 1,000 people being raped—in which case the single rape was the relative good.

Not a relative good but a lesser evil.

But there are two problems with this—even if this is conceived as a relative good, it still doesn’t posit a net good. This argument fails to distinguish between what philosophers call the utilitarian good and the inherent good. The saving of 1,000 lives was a utilitarian good, but still failed to undo or justify the inherent evil of the one rape which the saving cost. This leads to the third problem.

i) Christians can only play the hand they were dealt. Any theodicy will be wince-inducing. But if you believe in God and evil, then that severely limits the logical options. Reality dictates the available options. If reality was kinder, we wouldn't have the problem of evil in the first place. So any theistic explanation will have a hard aspect. And an atheistic explanation is harsher.

ii) It's true that if an action is intrinsically wrong, then beneficial consequences don't convert it into something good or moral. Likewise, beneficial consequences can't justify intrinsic wrongdoing.

However, while wrongdoing can't be justified, to permit wrongdoing can sometimes be justified. There is sometimes a morally salient difference between committing evil and

not preventing evil. I might not intervene to preempt an impending evil or step in to arrest an evil in progress if the effect of my intervention is to replace one evil with other evils further down the line, or eliminate some compensatory goods.

Third, this theodicy does not solve the originative problem of evil. Let's take the problem of having to choose between 1,000 people being raped and 1 person being raped. The argument which states that the greatest of all possible worlds necessarily includes the heinous evil of our world silently implies that God was in a Sophie's Choice scenario before he created the world. In the novel Sophie's Choice, the protagonist was sent to a Nazi concentration camp and was forced to choose between the murder of her daughter and her son. She chose her son. She can hardly be blamed for the death of her son.

The Calvinist use of this Leibnizian theodicy attempts to apply the same justification to God by implying that God was in a similar situation before his free decision to create the world. Of course, if Calvin was right, God's hand wasn't forced in any way, and his free decision to create was not in the context of a Sophie's Choice scenario. Therefore, the question, "Why did God allow sin in the world?" remains unanswered, and the place of a successful theodicy for Christian theology remains unanswered.

i) I don't think there's a greatest possible world. There are greater good worlds, lesser good worlds—as well as worlds containing evil with no redeeming values. No single world history captures all the goods. Not all possibilities are compossible. By definition, every possible world has a different world history. Some goods inevitably depend on how a particular timeline unfolds.

ii) Likewise, second-order goods necessarily presuppose evil. You can't have one without the other.

iii) Apropos (i-ii), there are some restrictions on God's field of action. However, I don't think there's any antecedent restriction on God's ability to create more than one possible world. Perhaps God made a multiverse in which some alternate scenarios play out. That will realize a greater number of goods.

iv) Maxwell's retreat into mystery just kicks the can down the street. God can't be absolved of responsibility for evil or complicity in evil, although he can be absolved of culpability for evil.

v) As for Wolterstorff, if you indulge in high-risk behavior and your luck runs out, there's nothing inexplicable about the tragic result. That doesn't require a special explanation. His judgment is understandably clouded by grief, but his reaction is illogical.

Anti-theodicy

I'm going to quote and comment on this essay: N. N. Trakakis, "Anti-Theodicy", *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* (Cambridge 2018), chap 4. Trakakis is a protégé of atheist philosopher Graham Oppy, and they often collaborate. In the essay Trakakis indicates that at one point the problem of evil pushed him into the atheist camp, but he now has an alternative position: anti-theodicy.

I first encountered the anti-theodicy position in Cornelius Berkouwer. David Bentley Hart is another exponent of anti-theodicy:

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/05/tsunami-and-theodicy>

It may not be coincidental that Trakakis and Hart both have a Greek Orthodox frame of reference.

The problem of evil often strikes people as irresolvable. No adequate or convincing solution to the problem seems forthcoming, and this despite numerous and often sophisticated attempts over the centuries and from highly trained and gifted philosophers and theologians. As John Cottingham recognizes, "The opponents of theism may devise ever more dramatic presentations of the problem of evil, and its defenders construct ever more ingenious rebuttals, but one has the sense that neither side in the argument has any real expectation of changing their opponent's mind, and that in the end they are succeeding in doing little more than upsetting each other".

But, of course, that's hardly unique to debates over theodicy. That holds true for the whole range of philosophy. Typically, opposing positions in philosophy are constantly retooled rather than eliminated.

It is also sometimes held that the theodocist's position of rejecting even the possibility of gratuitous evil—of holding, in other words, that every evil is always connected to a greater good and that we ought to believe (or can come to know) this to be so—has the objectionable consequence of reducing us to an attitude of passivity and fatalism in the face of evil. For why fight to eradicate evil if evil is a necessary or unavoidable part or byproduct of God's providential plan for the world.

But that's dumb, for the second-order goods include the defeat of evil. Goods that derive from the struggle against evil. It's like saying that because challenges are built into

sports and games, that reduces players to an attitude of passivity and fatalism in the face of challenges. But the obstacles exist to be overcome. They don't exist for their own sake.

The teleological or instrumentalist conception of evil presupposed in theodicies, where evil is permitted by God for the sake of some higher end, is also open to the Kantian criticism that it negates the inherent worth and dignity of persons by treating them as mere means to some end, rather than as ends in themselves.

i) But Kantian strictures are not an unquestionable given. The onus lies on the Kantian deontologist to argue for his scruples. That's not something he can simply foist on others.

ii) While, moreover, there's a floor to human rights, below which we shouldn't go, that doesn't mean everyone is entitled to the same treatment regardless of their behavior. People can forfeit their presumptive right not to be treated in certain ways. If a suicide bomber has designs on a kindergarten, he ought to be stopped by any means necessary.

I arrived at the conclusion that various recent theistic attempts to resolve the problem—including the skeptical theist response, and freewill and soul-making theodicies—fail to provide a satisfactory answer (at least with respect to certain types of evil). Absent any countervailing evidence in support of theistic belief, or without any good reason for continuing to uphold theism, "the only rational course of action left for the theist to take is to abandon theism and convert to atheism."

i) But there's enormous countervailing evidence.

ii) Evil is only a meaningful category within a Christian paradigm.

iii) Even if some theodicies fail to provide a satisfactory answer to certain types of evil, that hardly means they should be discounted for the types of evil they do explain. And what if a combination of theodicies suffices to cover all bases?

iv) Most philosophical positions face some recalcitrant objections. That's not unique to the problem of evil. If we jettison every philosophical position that has loose ends, there'd be little left to believe. Although it's a bad sign when someone must introduce ad hoc loopholes to salvage his position, if you have good evidence that your position is basically true, you should keep refining it.

[Rowe] In the light of our own experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinary, absurd idea, quite beyond belief.

Rowe's plausibility structure isn't something he can impose on everyone else. If he finds it absurd, beyond belief, that's his opinion, but not everyone shares his impression.

It may not be coincidental that Rowe was an apostate. Ironically, Christian idealism leads some professing Christians to abandon their faith, yet they wouldn't have that idealism were it not for the faith they abandoned. Their conclusion negates their premise. So many apostates are like time-travelers in the Grandfather paradox, who wouldn't exist in the first place because they erase the future in which they originate.

Rowe's almost instinctive reaction of incredulity about the claims of theodocists are wont to make (we might dub it, after Harry Frankfurt, a "bullshit detector") has proven to be an invaluable resource in my journey through the thickets of evil. What Rowe is contesting, and I with him still, is the strategy of reconciling God with evil by making appeal to greater goods, whether known or unknown, said to be yoked some necessary but unfortunate way to the myriad evils of the world. Even if some evils can be accounted for, what almost always gets placed in the mystery category are the "hard cases"...

I, for one, don't think the hard cases must be relegated to the mystery box.

Gerrymandering naturalism

Ultimately, determination of the comparative theoretical virtues of theories is a global matter: what counts is which theory does better overall, on an appropriate weighting of theoretical commitment, explanation of data, predictive accuracy, fit with established knowledge, and so forth. In particular, then, when it comes to questions about data, what matters is which theory does better at explaining total data.

Roughly speaking, it seems to me that, while there are no particular theoretical commitments of naturalism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, there may be particular theoretical commitments of theism that are keyed to data concerning the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe.

On the one hand, there is no natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theory of naturalism that prompts questions, or worries, or issues related to the distribution of suffering or flourishing in our universe. On naturalistic accounts of the origins and evolution of life on earth, there is nothing surprising about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. In particular, there are no theoretical commitments of naturalism—no ontological or ideological commitments of naturalism—that are keyed to the data about the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth; there are no special hypotheses that naturalists introduce to accommodate or to explain the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth.

On the other hand, it is pretty much universally recognized that the same is not true for theism. In this case, there may be natural–non-gerrymandered–sub-theories that do prompt questions, or worries, or issues that are related to the distribution of suffering and flourishing in our universe, and, in particular, to the distribution of suffering and flourishing across the surface of the earth. If we suppose—as theists typically do, that, in the beginning, there was nothing but a perfect being—omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and so forth—and if everything else is the creation of that perfect being, then what explains the presence of evil in our universe? If we suppose—as theists typically do—that God

exercises strong providential control over everything that happens and that God would prefer that we do not suffer, then why is it that we suffer as we do?

*Furthermore, it is pretty much universally recognized that there may be theoretical commitments of theistic worldviews that are keyed to the distribution of suffering in our universe. Some theists suppose that the distribution of horrendous natural evil is a consequence of the activities of demons and other malign supernatural agents; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are demons and other malign supernatural agents is that this supposition explains the distribution of horrendous natural evil in our universe. Some theists suppose that God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil that is found in our universe is, in part, due to God's recognition that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil; and, for these theists, the main reason for supposing that there are goods beyond our ken whose obtaining depends upon there being an at least relevantly similar distribution of horrendous moral evil is that this supposition explains God's permission of the distribution of horrendous moral evil in our universe. Graham Oppy, "The Problems of Evil," N. N. Trakakis, ed. *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue* (Cambridge 2018), chap. 3.*

i) Oppy's basic strategy, which he's expressed in numerous venues, is to use simplicity as a criterion to eliminate philosophical contenders. Yet he admits that while a particular position may be simpler in one respect, the final grade relies on the overall explanatory power of competing worldviews, rather than isolated cases of superior simplicity.

ii) The immediate objection is that naturalism requires no special explanation for the distribution of evil or suffering in the world. Naturalism is, in itself, an explanation. An atheist doesn't believe in naturalism in spite of suffering and evil. Rather, that phenomenon is easily accounted for given naturalism. By contrast, a Christian believes in Christian theism despite suffering and evil. A Christian is forced to posit additional hypotheses to save their religious theory from falsification. Naturalism doesn't need these epicycles. In naturalism, nothing extra is needed over and above naturalism itself to account for the distribution of suffering and evil.

iii) One problem with Oppy's analysis is the way he uses "suffering" and "evil" as synonyms. But "evil" has ethical and teleological connotations that "suffering" does not. For instance, suffering in the sense of "moral evil" is irreducibly ethical or teleological. Something went wrong.

iv) You can take naturalism or atheism as a starting-point, but move to Christian theism from that secular starting-point. Many atheists act as if the world is not the way it's supposed to be. So that's not just a point of tension generated by a Christian outlook. Many atheists are profoundly disturbed by the world as they find it.

Likewise, consider Buddhism. That's a useful frame of reference because Buddhism is pre-Christian and naturalistic. It wasn't influenced by Christianity and Judaism. Yet it reflects a fundamental disaffection with the world as it stands. Life is so irredeemably bad that we must practice radical emotional detachment.

Ironically, most atheists, even though they think this world is all there is, are alienated from the world as it is. And they often turn to utopian schemes to rectify the problem. Therefore, Oppy's contrast between Christianity and naturalism is deceptive.

v) Then there's the question of whether physical organisms are even capable of suffering. Eliminative materialists argue that an arrangement of particles can't generate psychological states. So naturalists like Oppy do posit something extra ("suffering") to accommodate phenomena. That's not a feature of naturalism, but a grudging concession in spite of naturalism. Hence, many naturalists are guilty of gerrymandering to accommodate recalcitrant data consistent with their physicalism.

vi) Which theists attribute natural evils to demonic agency? Unless I'm misremembering, Plantinga floated that in response to the logical problem of evil. But that's a question of consistency rather than plausibility. In folk theology it's common to attribute natural evils to vindictive gods or demons.

However, belief in demonic agency isn't primarily an apologetic postulate to explain the distribution of horrendous natural evil on earth. Rather, many people claim to experience the activity of malevolent spirits. Belief in evil spirits has, in the first instance, an evidential basis. Indeed, that's well-documented. Sometimes it is then pressed into service as an apologetic explanation for certain natural evils—yet theologians don't appeal to demonic agency to explain natural evils in general, but only limited range of natural evils whose specific characteristics invite that supernatural diagnosis.

vii) The reason for believing there are second-order goods is religious in one respect but independent of religion in another. It is dependent on religion in the sense that good and evil are normative concepts which make no sense in a naturalistic paradigm. However, the principle of nested relations isn't essentially religious, but a matter of logically inclusive paired relations, viz. you can't be somebody's grandson unless you're somebody's son.

The absurdity of life in a Christian universe

I believe Erik Wielenberg is regarded as a highly competent atheist philosopher. A few years ago he gave a talk:

<https://ryecast.ryerson.ca/67/Watch/9422.aspx>

"The Absurdity of Life in a Christian Universe as a Reason to Prefer that God Not Exist" is meant to be a parody of an existential argument for God's existence. Many Christian philosophers and apologists contend that atheism entails moral nihilism, and a few atheists admit that or come close to that admission. Wielenberg is laboring to turn the tables on that allegation. Here's "the Absurdity Argument":

Claim C makes life absurd = df. Claim C's truth makes (or would make) true at least one claim C1 such that most (actual) human beings are such that if they were to accept C1 they would experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy (without also failing to accept at least one entailment of C).

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then whenever a person P experiences undeserved involuntary suffering, P is better off overall than P would have been without the suffering.

2. So: Necessarily, if God exists, then whenever a person A causes another person B to experience undeserved involuntary suffering, B is better off overall than B would have been without the suffering (from 1).

3. God's existence makes it true (or would make it true) that each of us is morally obligated to pursue the good of others.

4. Necessarily, if (i) A is morally obligated to pursue B's good and (ii) A's performing act X would make B better off overall, then (iii) A has a fact-relative reason to perform X.

5. So, God's existence makes it true (or would make it true) that C: each of us has a fact-relative reason to cause others to experience undeserved involuntary suffering (from 2, 3, and 4).

6. Most human beings are such that if they were to accept (C), they would experience negative psychological consequences that would make it difficult or impossible for them to be happy (without also failing to accept at least one entailment of (C)).

7. Therefore, the claim that God exists makes life absurd (from 5 and 6)

Let's examine some of the premises:

PREMISE #1

is based on the principle "that a morally perfect God would not permit the existence of any gratuitous evil, evil that is not necessary in order to prevent an equal or worse evil or necessary to produce some great good."

- 1) Of course, that's just the argument from evil. So the onus lies on Wielenberg to demonstrate the existence of gratuitous evil. That requires him to refute theodicies which deny it.
- 2) Even assuming the existence of gratuitous evil, there are Christian philosophers like Peter van Inwagen who argue that gratuitous evil is consistent with God's existence. So Wielenberg needs to refute that as well.

"the further claim that if God permits a certain evil to befall a particular individual, God's moral perfection requires not merely that the evil be compensated for somewhere in the universe but...in the life of the very person who endures that evil...compensated, only if that suffering ultimately makes that person better off overall than she would have been otherwise. To treat the

sufferer merely as a means to an end, which is incompatible with God's moral perfection."

1) Once again, Wielenberg can't just stipulate that to be the case. He needs to argue for his claims. So his syllogism isn't a free-standing argument, but requires subsidiary arguments to justify the premises.

2) Another problem is that Wielenberg has given different definitions of what constitutes gratuitous evil: "undeserved involuntary suffering," "evil that is not necessary in order to prevent an equal or worse evil or necessary to produce some great good."

But those aren't equivalent concepts. Perhaps that's shorthand for: a morally perfect God won't permit undeserved involuntary suffering unless the sufferer is compensated (i.e. ultimately better off than he'd otherwise be). But it's up to Wielenberg to clarify how these claims go together.

1) Is it self-evident that a morally perfect God won't use anyone merely as a means to an end or expose them to uncompensated unmerited suffering?

i) What if there's a prima facie obligation not to be used merely as a means to an end, but an agent may forfeit that immunity through wrongdoing?

ii) What constitutes undeserved suffering? Suppose Pablo Escobar is punished for a crime he didn't commit. Although his suffering for that particular crime is undeserved, he richly deserves to suffer for his many other crimes, so is a morally perfect God required to shield Escobar from unmerited suffering whatsoever? What if Escobar's unmerited suffering in one case makes up for suffering he merits in other cases—which he evaded? Does his general culpability create a liability to suffer justly, even in cases where there's no direct correspondence between his suffering and a particular crime? Does his guilt in general waive the right not to suffer in situations where there's no guilty action in particular?

PREMISE #3

"Love your neighbor as yourself"—an obligation to promote/persue what is genuinely good for others. However, commenting on

PREMISE #4

Wielenberg admits that #3 is a defeasible, prima facie obligation. Other features in the situation may override that obligation, viz. breaking a promise, benefiting one party at the cost of harming other parties. So you have to take the "net benefit" into account.

Suppose you see two neighbors in a violent altercation. You may be obligated to take sides if you know that one is acting in self-defense while the other is an unprovoked assailant.

PREMISE #6

fails to distinguish between making someone suffer and allowing them to suffer. But surely those are morally different in at least some situations. For instance, there's a great deal of suffering I can't prevent. But that's different from the infliction of suffering on my part.

As it stands, Wielenberg's attempt to counter the existential argument for God is grossly underdeveloped and comically tendentious.

Benevolence and reciprocity

The divine hiddenness argument is a newer argument in the atheist arsenal. Atheists don't have many new arguments. John Schellenberg put this on the map in 1993. Other atheists have tweaked the argument, and his argument has undergone various permutations at his own hands. But his core argument remains the "canonical" version, the frame of reference for most discussions. Here's a recent formulation:

Suppose God perfectly loves Anna. That love would minimally involve benevolence, caring for Anna's well-being. But it would also involve aiming "at relationship—a conscious and reciprocal relationship that is positively meaningful, allowing for a deep sharing" between them. Moreover, it would involve valuing that relationship for its own sake, and not merely for the sake of something else. Furthermore, it would never cease, and so God would always value, seek, desire, promote, or preserve personal relationship with Anna, although God would not force himself on her. At the very least, says Schellenberg, all this requires that God will always be open to personal relationship with her...even if one does not actively seek or promote personal relationship with another person capable of participating in such relationship..., one makes sure that there is nothing one ever does (in a broad sense including omissions) that would have the result of making such relationship unavailable to the other, preventing her from being able to relate personally to one, even should she then try. So for God to always be open to personal relationship with a relevantly capable created person such as Anna in a manner expressing unsurpassable love is for God to ensure that there is never something God does that prevents her from being able, just by trying, to participate in personal relationship with God...

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-hiddenness/#ArguNonrNonb>

1. As I've often remarked, the hiddenness argument is primarily an argument against freewill theism. Calvinism isn't committed to the proposition that God aims at having a reciprocal relationship with every human being.
2. In addition, the whole notion of reciprocity between God and man is peculiar given the extreme disparity between God and man. It's not analogous to friendship in the usual sense. God has something to share with us but we have nothing to share with him.
3. Finally, consider the elements of the divine hiddenness argument:
 - i) Love would minimally involve benevolence, caring for another's well-being

ii) Seeking a reciprocal relationship, characterized by mutual sharing

iii) Remaining open and available to such a relationship

But these are separable. As I mentioned in the past, there are two kinds of friendship: unilateral and bilateral. An anonymous benefactor is an example of unilateral friendship. He befriends someone for their own sake. He isn't cultivating their friendship. He seeks nothing in return. That's in contrast to a bilateral friendship, based on mutuality. So (i) is independent of (ii-iii). (ii) and (iii) are not entailed by (i).

Suppose, before the fall of the Berlin wall, parents living in E. Berlin want a better life for their newborn child. So they give their child up for adoption, by entrusting him to someone who has free passage between E. Berlin and W. Berlin. Perhaps that individual is just a conduit who will convey the newborn to a loving but infertile couple in W. Berlin. The child will never know the identity of its biological parents, yet their action was an expression of sacrificial love.

In principle, God could be benevolent towards somebody, caring for their well-being—without aiming to be known or loved in return. After all, God doesn't benefit from such an arrangement. He has nothing to gain by their gratitude. So the syllogism, as it stands, requires more argument for each premise as well as more argument for how (ii) and (iii) follow from (i).

Does life matter?

Does life matter? Surely there's no more important question in ethics.

1. According to nihilism, including antinatalism (which is a paradigm version of nihilism), it's better not to exist in the first place. And that's not just a hypothetical position to fill out the logical continuum of possible views, but a live option. Nihilism regards human existence as irredeemably tragic.

2. According to Epicureanism, existence and nonexistence are equivalent. Prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are interchangeable. Although nominally heathen, the Epicurean view of life and death, as well as the nihilist, are essentially atheistic. We're on our own.

It would be interesting to see a debate between an Epicurean and a Christian annihilationist! An Epicurean doesn't think oblivion is bad.

There are some people who say postmortem nonexistence is significant in a way that prenatal nonexistence is not. They only agree with one side of the Epicurean comparison.

3. Here's one way to view the issue: Suppose you're the proud father of a teenage son. I offer you \$10 million to step into a time machine and contracept his existence. If you take the offer, you will travel back to point shortly before he was conceived, and do something to preempt his conception.

I doubt most fathers would accept the offer. For one thing, they couldn't stand to lose their son. But over and above that, they couldn't bring themselves to do that to their own son. To deprive him of existence.

Yet on the time-travel scenario, by taking that preemptive and retroactive action, the father made it the case that his son had no existence to begin with, for the new timeline replaces the original timeline. It's as if he never existed. He has no counterpart in the new timeline. And the father may or may not remember the original timeline (depending on how we detail the thought-experiment).

On Epicurean grounds, his nonexistence is insignificant. Yet I expect most fathers would balk at the prospect.

And that's germane to the question of whether God, if there is a God, ought to intervene more often to prevent evil. Is that a reasonable expectation?

Problem is, whenever God intervenes, that's analogous to a time-traveler who changes the past to change the future. Which doesn't mean that God never intervenes. But there are tradeoffs. When people imagine a better world, an improvement over the status quo, they men

Distrusting God

I'm going to comment on an essay by the late Richard Gale. He was one of the more competent philosophical atheist. In this essay his primary target is freewill theism: R. Gale, "Evil as Evidence Against God", J. P. Moreland, C. Meister, & K. Sweis eds. *Debating Christian Theism* (Oxford 2013), chap. 15.

What, in general, is an evil and what are the different types of evil? An evil is something that, taken by itself in isolation, is an ought-not-to-be, an "Oh, no!" Examples are physical and mental suffering by a sentient being, including lower animals, immoral action, bad character, and a privation in which something fails to measure up to what it ought to be, such as a human being born blind. The qualification "taken by itself" is important, since some evils are justified because they are so-called a blessing in disguise, being necessary for the realization of an outweighing good or prevention of an even greater evil. As members of such a larger whole, they are not an ought-not-to-be.

In some respects that's a good definition. However:

i) To say congenital blindness is a natural evil is a teleological judgment. But naturalistic evolution rejects final causes. If there's no telos, there's no dysteleology. Congenital blindness is only a natural evil if the eyes were designed to see. But naturalistic evolution is a nondirective process rather than a goal-oriented process. Eyes have no purpose in naturalistic evolution.

ii) How much mental and physical suffering do lower animals experience? And is that a natural evil? Notice how some animals deliberately seek out what looks like a painful experience. Like lions fighting for control of the tribe. If it's excruciating, why don't they avoid it?

Some theists refuse to call anything but moral evil or wickedness evil, thereby eliminating natural evils as challenges to theism. This linguistic maneuver, however, accomplishes nothing, for the problem still remains as to how God could be justified in permitting suffering that is not attributable to the misuse of free will by finite creatures.

While that's ultimately true, it's imprecise when the same word ("evil") is used to cover two very different kinds of phenomena.

According to Alvin Plantinga, God knows in advance of his creating a free person what actions this person will freewill perform; however, he does not determine that they will so act, for, were he to do so, he would, according to the libertarian theory of freedom, render these actions unfree. The problem for this version of the FWT is that by having God act with foreknowledge of what will result from his action, he determines the result. Thus Plantinga's God determines every creaturely free action. and this is freedom canceling.

That's a legitimate criticism of freewill theism.

In his Providence and the Problem of Evil [Swinburne] writes that "fairly clearly to do good out of very serious free will despite strong contrary temptation is the best exercise of choice....The sufferings and deaths in the concentration camps made possible serious heroic choices and they make possible reactions of courage (by the victims), of compassion, sympathy, penitence, reforms...[Slavery] made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture...It would have been our misfortune if there had been no starving...All the ways in which the suffering of A is beneficial for B are also beneficial for A—because A is privileged to be of use".

Van Inwagen adds yet another seeming moral horror to his fundamentalist theodicy...Horrors happen to people without any relation to desert. They happen as a matter of chance.

Although freewill theists routinely castigate the harshness of Calvinism, it's striking how ruthlessly hardbitten the theodicies of high-level freewill theists like Craig, Swinburne, Stump, and Inwagen can be.

Swinburne's theodicies read like a parody of the greater good theodicy, being on par with "if he hadn't burned down his house in a drunken stupor, killing his wife and five children, he never would have given up drinking" ...It is good that there is consumption [i.e. TB], for it there weren't, Verdi never would have written La Traviata and Puccini La Boheme.

That's a witty takedown of Swinburne. But it depends on the example. Consider two brothers, in their upper teens or lower twenties. They don't hate each other but they lack rapport. Don't hang out. Have different interests. Lead parallel lives.

Suppose the older brother is temporarily disabled in a sporting accident. He requires months of recuperation to recover. He's unable to drive, make his own food, feed himself, bathe himself, dress himself, use the bathroom by himself. His convalescent care falls to the younger brother. Because the younger brother nurses the older brother back to health, that cements a bond that didn't exist prior to the accident.

Or take an elderly couple where one cares for the other. The sexual passion is gone. Health is gone. Good looks are gone. All that's left is love. And that shines through in the indignities of old age.

Another misbegotten theodicy is the significant contrast one, according to which we humans would not be able to notice and appreciate good unless we had contrastive experiences for evil...[God] could have satisfied the need for significant contrast by showing us a video of unreal evils.

But he overlooks the conspicuous fact that abstract knowledge isn't the same thing as experience. For many people, it's not until something becomes personal that it sinks in.

The whole idea of a deity who is so vain that if his children do not choose to love and obey him will bring down all sorts of horrible evils on them and their innocent descendants...

That does raise questions about freewill theism.

Because our imaginative and cognitive powers are so radically limited, we are not warranted in inferring that there are not or probably are not God-justifying reasons for evils...The most serious problem for theistic skepticism is that it seems to require that we become complete moral skeptics...should we have tried to prevent it or take steps to prevent similar incidents in the future? Who knows?! For all we can tell it might be a blessing in disguise or serve some "God-justifying reason that is too "deep" for us to access.

i) But I think that's seriously overstated. Not knowing why God permits a particular evil doesn't mean we're clueless about possible reasons. It's easy to come up with hypothetical examples as well as real life examples in which something turns out to be a

blessing in disguise. So it's not totally inscrutable. Although we may be in the dark about the actual reason, many kinds of explanations are available for our consideration.

ii) In Calvinism, what we do or refrain from doing was predestined for the overall good, so the dilemma does not arise. We don't have to know. God knows best, and we do God's will without seeing the big picture.

But that may be a genuine moral dilemma in freewill theism, if everything doesn't happen according to a master plan, or if God is stymied by human intransigence so that he can't achieve a good result.

Another objection concerns whether theistic skepticism allows for there to be a meaningful personal love relation with God. The problem concerns whether we humans can have such a relation with a being whose mind completely transcends ours, who is so inscrutable with respect to his values, reasons, and intentions...We can hardly love someone who intentionally hurts us and keeps his reasons a secret unless for the most part we know his reasons for affecting us as he does and moreover know that they are benevolent...The sort of personal relationship we are supposed to have with God according to theism requires that God does not leave us in the dark with respect to these kinds of evils; for in a personal relationship one person should not bring harm to the other without informing him or her of the reason for doing so.

Whether God is trustworthy and whether we trust him are two distinct issues. To take a comparison, suppose you're the caregiver for someone who's senile or mentally ill. Suppose you're utterly trustworthy. You always act in their best interests. But paranoia is a symptom of their senility or mental illness. They are suspicious of everything you do for them. They mistrust your motives and actions. They assume the worst. But ultimately it makes no difference. You treat them with love and consideration despite their lack of trust.

Likewise, a trustworthy God can provide for people who find it hard to trust him. Those two things are independent of each other. He can still look out for them even if they doubt his benevolence.

It needn't be a two-way relationship. There are bilateral friendships involving mutuality, but in addition, there are unilateral friendships in which a benefactor acts on behalf of another, receiving nothing in return. The whole notion of "relational" theology in freewill theism is overblown.

Christians sometimes exaggerate the importance of faith. Consider an atheist who converts to Christianity as an adult. From a Calvinistic perspective, God was working all

along behind-the-scenes to do him good even though he had no faith in God. God was faithful to the faithless.

If we do not have good evidence that God exists because he has chosen to remain hidden, this constitutes good evidence against his existence.

That's a valid inference, but the conclusion is only as good as the premise.

By not allowing known evils to count against God's existence, not even allowing it to lower the probability that he exists, the skeptical theist might be draining the theistic hypothesis of all meaning. If the known evils are not the least bit probability lowering, then it would appear that for theistic skeptics no amount of evil would be.

i) Except that we live in a world where evil is often offset by good. It's not all barbed wire.

ii) Moreover, the notion of evil is a moral or teleological concept. But how can that count against God's existence if the alternative is a world without a morality or teleology? Before evil can count against God's existence, it must count as evil. What's the frame of reference?

Hallmark flowers

It came not long after Lisa and her husband visited Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp in Poland and were feeling especially aggrieved over the sheer amount of evil in the world.

<https://relevantmagazine.com/issues/issue-94/the-evolving-faith-of-lisa-gungor/>

Did they never read the Book of Judges? Why do they act like encountering evil is surprising?

The OT is a common target for atheists. But one reason Christians need to read the OT is to disabuse themselves of a Hallmark card version of Christianity. Life is not a Disney Princess movie.

It's not as if the Bible presents a sanitized view of the world, then there's the shocking contrast when you compare the Bible to what really happens. There's nothing slightly inconsistent about Auschwitz in light of Bible history. That's to be expected. The world is a jarring mix of awesome beauty and horrifying ugliness.

Freewill theism and induction

A natural law theodicy is a standard theodicy in freewill theism. According to that theodicy, moral agents require a stable environment for their deliberations and choices to have predictable consequences. Absent that, they can't be held responsible for their actions.

I'd mention in passing that Calvinism can use that theodicy, too. Calvinism has a doctrine of ordinary providence. And there's value in having a world where actions generally have predictable choices. That's not unique to freewill theism.

If true, a natural law theodicy has the fringe benefit of grounding induction. On this view, God made a world in which, all things being equal (*ceteris paribus* proviso), the future resembles the past. That makes it possible to justifiably extrapolate from the past to the future.

But here's a snag: a standard definition of libertarian freedom is leeway freedom: an agent can opt for two or more courses of action under the exact same circumstances. So there are ever so many different and divergent ways to complete the future. Given the same past, and billions of free agents, there are countless ways the future might turn out. Moreover, the choices of multiple free agents interact with each other or counteract each other. In addition, this impacts natural events inasmuch as humans often manipulate natural process to yield desired results.

On the face of it, this renders the future utterly unpredictable, and destroys any basis for induction. Anything that's naturally possible could happen.

In Calvinism, by contrast, although God had the freedom to choose between alternate timelines, yet having settled on a particular outcome (predestination), the outcome is fixed. By virtue of the decree, there's only one pathway from past to future.

The avengers

One objection to Calvinism goes like this: the Calvinist God is like a Mafia Don who puts out a hit on a rival. He doesn't pull the trigger. Rather, he hires a triggerman to do it. Yet the Don is just as blameworthy, if not more so, than the triggerman.

And it's true that the distinction between proximate and remote causation isn't necessarily exculpatory, as this example illustrates. So this seems to be the principle: if it's murder for me to kill someone directly, then it's murder for me to facilitate their death. That sounds plausible, but is it true?

As I've often said, what we find intuitively plausible usually depends on the example. Changing the example can change the intuition.

Let's take a morally complex example. After WWII, some Nazi's become fugitives from justice. I don't mean Nazis in the sense of forced conscripts, but zealots who were devoted to the cause, viz. Josef Mengele, Walter Rauff. Some of them fled to Latin America, where they hid out or found safe haven.

This gave rise to Nazi hunters. But some Jews took it a step further, becoming assassins (rather like the OT avenger of blood). They were called the Nakam.

Now, it might be possible to argue that their actions were just reprisal. But for discussion purposes, let's stipulate that assassinating Nazi war criminals is murder.

Suppose I'm living in Latin America. I recognize one of my neighbors as a Nazi war criminal.

Suppose the Nakam are hot on the trail of my Nazi neighbor. They come knocking, show me photos, ask me if I know him by name or by sight.

I realize that these are Jewish assassins. If I give them accurate directions, they will murder him. Does that make me complicit in murder, if I accede to their request?

Although it would be murder if I killed him, surely I have no duty to protect him. I have no duty to lie to the Nakam to shield him from retribution. It's his fault that he's at risk. He brought it on himself.

This seems to be a case where a second party could facilitate murder without his own action being tantamount to murder. Even if their action is blameworthy, and my action wittingly facilitates their action, that doesn't make my action blameworthy in a case like this.

Fork in the road

i) A popular theodicy is the greater-good defense. While that has an element of truth, I don't think there needs to be a greater good to justify the existence of evil.

ii) Suppose a man gets married, fathers two sons by his wife, then she has an affair and leaves him for the other man. In addition, she leaves the kids behind.

Suppose he has a time-machine in the basement. He could travel back into the past and obliterate the original timeline. In the replacement timeline, he has a successful marriage. He has different sons.

In a sense, this is better than the first time around. It has the advantages of the first timeline without the disadvantages of the first timeline. Admittedly, it's not better for the sons in the first timeline, since they don't exist in the second timeline.

However, even though there's a sense in which the alternate timeline is better, it's too late for him to consider that. Although it's possible for him to start from scratch by stepping into the time machine, he is now far too invested in the original timeline to erase it and start over from scratch. He's too attached to his actual sons to trade up for a better life. It's inconceivable that he'd zap them out of existence to be dealt a better hand.

If he was standing at the fork in the road before turning right or left, and if he had foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge of where each led, he'd opt for the greater good. But having already gone down one road, if he had a chance to go back in time, knowing the outcome, he'd decline. Emotionally speaking, he's crossed a line of no return. He can't make a dispassionate choice. Despite the fact that he never wanted to be a single dad and divorcé, that's offset by the actual good of having a life with those two sons in particular. For him, the anguish of marital betrayal is offset by the sons he had by that marriage. Even though the package of a happy marriage is a better good overall, he will opt for the lesser good, because that's what he's actually experienced.

iii) Finally, from a Christian standpoint, there's the hope of eschatological compensation for missed opportunities in this life.

Omniscient chess computer

Freewill theists typically think "theological determinism" (i.e. absolute predestination, meticulous providence) makes God blameworthy and human agents blameless. Many or most freewill theists define libertarian freedom as access to alternative possibilities. Let's go with that definition.

Suppose I'm playing computer chess. Suppose the computer is omniscient. It can predict which move I'll make even before I decided what to do next. As a result, the computer doesn't wait for me to make up my mind. Rather, it moves the chess piece to the square I was going to select.

Once a move is made, it can't be undone. Once a move is made, it's too late for me to make a different move. I now lack the freedom to choose an alternate course of action. The computer took that out of my hands. Yet it always makes the same move I was going to make. If I lose the match, whose to blame—the computer...or me?

Suppose the computer always wins because it knows in advance what I will do in every situation, then takes advantage of that information to stay three steps ahead of me. Is that cheating? Does that nullify the value of my libertarian freedom?

I'm afraid of the dark

One of the challenges of theodicy is that different people seem to be wired differently. Some people take comfort in knowing that everything, including—or especially—the bad things are inside God's will, while other people find that utterly appalling and take comfort in the belief that bad things are outside God's will. Some Christians find Calvinism the most consoling theology while others find it the most repellent. I wonder to what extent that's a temperamental. Take the freewill defense or Boyd's cosmic warfare theodicy. Compare it to this reaction:

My experiences in life and in medicine have not always reinforced religious faith. For many years, I had difficulty believing that God even exists, much less pays attention to the human condition. Although I now believe that it is "more likely than not" that there is a God, my doubts regarding his involvement in the world are legion, often oppressive.

The most serious barrier to belief, for me, remains the problem of pain, especially as I have seen it in the suffering of children. For a long time after my first leukemia patient died—she was a beautiful, frightened, four-year-old redhead named Amy—I had difficulty believing in God. One night in the hospital, she held my hand tightly and asked, "Am I going to die"? Perhaps sensing the affirmative in my hesitation, she added, "But Doctor C., I don't want to die. I'm afraid of the dark".

*The answers of my theologian friends—that freedom is the highest good, that divine self-restraint is of paramount importance in the celestial controversy between good and evil, that it is our response to suffering, not the pain itself, that matters—ring hollow within the echoing walls of a morgue at the autopsy of a child. Donna Carlson, "My Journey of Faith in Medicine", R. Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning* (IVP 2014), 126-27.*

Many freewill theists act as though the assumptions of the freewill defense or cosmic warfare are self-evident, but to outsiders, these are deeply implausible. My point is not that this disproves freewill theism singlehandedly, but it punctures the facile, intuitive appeal. You can see how impatient Dr. Carson is with that those bromides and platitudes.

We also need to distinguish between theodicies which people adopt in the abstract, and what happens when they experience evil and suffering up close and personal. Certain theodicies logically pair off with certain theological traditions. If you espouse that tradition, you automatically espouse the attendant theodicy. But that may be before you've had occasion to put it to the test in your own experience. Some people revise their theology and theodicy when evil comes knocking. They may revise it for the better or the worse.

In some cases, there are knee-jerk objections to a particular theodicy by people who haven't thought it through. If their objections were subjected to probing analysis, they might reconsider.

In addition, people work with what's available to them. Take Rabbi Kushner's finite theism. But he's Jewish, and what is more, he's on the more liberal end of the spectrum, so given his starting-point, does Judaism, or his brand of Judaism in particular, even have the resources to furnish a better theodicy?

Is evil privative?

1. The privative theory of evil used to be a fixture in Christian theodicy, but it's fallen on hard times. A function of the privative theory was to insulate God from complicity in evil by claiming that God didn't create evil, but good. Since evil is not a thing or substance, but the absence, loss, or negation of something, it couldn't be an object of divine creation.

I think the reasoning goes something like this. If you create a donut, you indirectly create a donut hole. But the donut hole isn't a thing. If you create light, you indirectly create shadow. You produce the conditions for the contrast. You make a boundary. But only one side of the boundary has positive existence. Dropping the metaphor, sickness is the absence of health.

2. The privative theory is ingenuous, but unsatisfactory. To begin with, while some evils might be categorized as negations or relations, the privative theory overextends the classification. For instance, pain isn't just the absence of pleasure, but a positive sensation in its own right. It's not a relation between something and nothing.

By the same token, while we might say cancer represents loss of well-being, cancer is very much a thing or substance. It has a real, positive existence. Same thing with pathogens generally.

Likewise, in what sense is the evil of raping a little girl privative or not a thing? That's a real event, not a nonevent.

A malevolent attitude has the same psychological status as a benevolent attitude. If one is real, the other is real.

If we were starting with some paradigm examples of evil, we wouldn't classify them as privations or relations. Rather, the traditional position begins with an a priori theory of evil, then jams everything into that classification. The result is very artificial.

3. Perhaps even more to the point, the privation theory fails to exonerate God. For even if we define evil in privative terms, there's still the question of why God allows that harm. Just to call it privative fails to justify divine permission. Even if evil is a side-effect of making something good, God is responsible for the necessary, albeit incidental, consequences of his creative fiat.

Conversely, if God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil or generating deleterious, but "unintended" side-effects, then the privative theory is superfluous. A morally sufficient reason will suffice with or without the privative theory of evil. If, say, a theodist appeals to the double effect principle, assuming that distinction is an adequate justification, that will suffice independent of any privative theory of evil.

Preempting God

According to open theist William Hasker:

*If we really, seriously believed that God would prevent any evil that did not have a greater good as its result, this would significantly undermine our own motivation to prevent or mitigate such evils. If I prevent some serious evil from occurring, I will actually prevent the greater good that, absent my interference, God would have brought about as a result of the evil in question. If, on the contrary, the evil would have no such good result, then God will not permit it, regardless of what I do or don't do. The failsafe option, then, is to do nothing, C. Meister & J. Dew, eds. *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views (IVP 2017)*, 160.*

i) I don't think God permits evil only for the sake of greater goods. An alternate good will suffice.

ii) If I was a consistent open theist, I'd be more risk-averse. On that view, God is less likely to override the laws of nature or override the freedom of perpetrators. So why should I stick my neck out? The world of open theism is sufficiently hazardous, sufficiently random, without me further endangering myself for the sake of others.

iii) I don't see how Hasker's alternative solves the problem he poses. If an open theist prevents, or endeavors to prevent, an evil that God would otherwise permit, then isn't the open theist acting as though he's wiser or better than God?

iv) From a predestinarian standpoint, if I intervene to prevent an evil, then that didn't frustrate God's plan. To the contrary, God intended me to intervene in that situation. God intended the consequences of my intervention. God intended the goods that flow from my intervention. So there's no tension. No need to second-guess my actions.

God in spandex

William Lane Craig holds Calvinism in great disdain. In light of that it's striking to see how similar their responses are to open theism/finite theism:

PIPER:

There are two reasons why this is pastorally short-sighted and unsatisfying. One is that it is built on a falsehood. God does not need to be “all-powerful” to keep people from being hurt in the collapse of a bridge. He doesn’t even need to be as powerful as a man. He only needs to show up and use a little bit of his power (say, on the level of Spiderman, or Jason Bourne)—he did create the universe, the Rabbi concedes—and (for example) cause some tremor a half-hour early to cause the workers to leave the bridge, and the traffic to be halted. This intervention would be something less spectacular than a world-wide flood, or a burning bush, or plague of frogs, or a divided Red Sea, or manna in the wilderness, or the walls of a city falling down—just a little tremor to get everybody off the bridge before it fell.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/response-to-rabbi-kushner>

CRAIG:

*Some open theists report that certain people find genuine comfort in the thought that God is not providentially in control of the world and so cannot be held responsible for planning the evils that have befallen them. I can understand why some people would be comforted by the thought that there is a cognitively limited Superman on their side who is aligned with them in the struggle against evil and suffering and who cannot be blamed for the bad things that he did not see coming. But I wonder if such people have really thought through the open theist alternative. It doesn't take a genius to see that certain terrible moral or natural evils are about to happen, and a cognitively limited Superman would often seem blameworthy for not preventing or stopping them. C. Meister & J. Dew, eds. *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views* (IVP 2017), 54.*

Craig shoots a hole in the bottom of his boat

Craig reserves his ire for Tom Oord's deism. What's striking is that Craig's objections to Oord's position invite parallel objections to the freewill defense:

Such a view is manifestly unbiblical. To give just one small example of God's apparently nonmiraculous intervention, consider how God prevented Jesus' falling victim to King Herod's murderous intentions following the departure of the magi (Mt 2:13). This was not a miraculous angelic appearance, interrupting or interfering with the law-like regularities of existence. Joseph merely had a dream...God is frequently described in Scripture as interacting with human agents to direct the course of events. If it is not an infringement of human freedom, then Oord's view does nothing to explain why God did not similarly warn the other parents in Bethlehem, whose children perished by Herod's sword or act to prevent innumerable other evils.

As for God's miraculous interaction with human people, consider the following scene from Jesus' arrest in the garden (Lk 22:49-51). Here Jesus interferes with a law-like regularity to undo an evil freely perpetrated by one of his disciples. It would be easy to multiple such biblical examples of God's miraculous activity, with or without human intermediaries.

God, on Oord's view, refuses to get involved in human affairs so as to warn people of impending dangers or to move someone to prevent or rescue another person from suffering. He stands idly by, doing nothing to help, with no good reason for his noninterference.

Even if God is incapable of interfering with nature's law-like regularities, presumably he at least freely chose in the first place the laws of nature that are in force. But then Oord's deity must bear responsibility for choosing laws that would issue in creatures so vulnerable to natural evil, rather than choosing other laws or refraining altogether from creation.

But any deity that is essentially such that it values the regularity of the laws of nature above the well-being of human people cannot in any recognizable sense be called good. Oord's God does not love Amy Monroe enough to interfere with the regularities of nature as she is raped and strangled. In the US criminal justice system Oord's deity, due to his "depraved indifference" and "reckless endangerment," would be guilty of crimes such as manslaughter and even murder, C. Meister & J. Dew, eds. God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views (IVP 2017), 145-47.

It's odd that Craig is oblivious to the fact that freewill theists make all the same appeals. So where does that leave his own theodicy? He's generated a dilemma for his own position.

Hilbert's Hotel

Supralapsarian Calvinism is sometimes classified as a *felix culpa* theology. Conversely, you have atheists who say, Why did God create Satan, knowing what would happen?

Suppose Adam and Eve never fell. What would the world be like? Would it be better, worse, or both better and worse?

Minimally, Adam's posterity wouldn't die of old age. Perhaps, if Adam and Eve ate from the tree of life, their immortality would be transmitted to their posterity. Or perhaps their posterity would need to eat from the tree of life. Or perhaps, as they colonized the earth, they'd take seeds from the tree of life and plant it elsewhere.

Or maybe God would simply confer immortality on Adam's posterity, apart from the tree of life. It's unlikely that fruit from the tree of life had chemical properties that conveyed biological immortality. How is that naturally possible? Rather, it's more likely that God simply attached a blessing to that object.

In theory, Adam's posterity might still be vulnerable to death by causes other than senescence. Perhaps God might providentially protect them from death by other causes. Or perhaps God would let them die, but miraculously restore them to life.

It seems unlikely that an intermediate state would exist in an unfallen world. In a fallen world, the intermediate state exists because people die at different times over the millennia, but at the Parousia, death will cease, and all the dead will be restored to life all at once. (According to amil eschatology. Premil eschatology is more complex, but the net effect will be the same.)

But in an unfallen world, there wouldn't be that cutoff. So there wouldn't be any point in people dying, then passing into an intermediate state.

The upshot is that in an unfallen world, the human race would continue to reproduce until it reached an optimum population level. In theory, that might be confined to the garden of Eden. If so, that would be a small population.

Or perhaps Adam's posterity would outgrow the garden and proceed to colonize the more hospitable regions of the globe. But to avoid the detrimental effects of overpopulation (e.g. famine, starvation), it would have to plateau. Suppose at that point God made the women infertile.

Reproduction would terminate with a stable, unchanging population. However many generations of Adam's posterity until it hit the optimum population threshold. That would be the last generation. Frozen in place. Further procreation would be unnecessary to maintain a replacement rate, since no one would die—or if they died, they'd be restored to life.

That would be a good world. Better in some respects than a fallen world. However, the overall population would be far smaller. An absolutely static, invariant population.

One fringe benefit of mortality is that it frees up time and space for far more humans to exist. Some of them are hellbound but some of them are heavenbound. Yet the heavenbound humans wouldn't exist in a world where there's a final generation once reproduction reaches the optimum population size. There's no more room for additional generations. The cutoff comes early in human history.

In one respect, a fallen world is worse because it contains hellbound individuals. But that's offset by the greater number of heavenbound individuals, since they don't have to coexist at the same time and place. Because they exist diachronically rather than synchronically in the same place, procreation can continue indefinitely.

God might still decree a terminus, but it will be very far out compared to an unfallen world. The cumulative population will be vastly larger. Eventually, they all exist simultaneously, but not at the same location.

Heaven is more capacious than Hilbert's Hotel. Never runs out of guest rooms. Always a vacancy!

Moving goal post

Here's another village atheist question I'll respond to:

Why are there so many starving people in our world?

Doesn't God answer their prayers? God has received uncountably many prayers both from the desperate people in the world and from healthy Westerners who are concerned about strangers in need.

There are different ways of responding:

1. People starve for a variety of reasons. They may live in a part of the world that lacks the natural resources to sustain that population density. Or they may live in a famine prone region. Or they live under an oppressive regime. And so on and so forth.
2. It's not always a bad thing for people to starve to death. Depends on the people. If ISIS fighters were starving to death, good riddance!

Of course, that's an extreme example, but I say it to make a point of principle.

3. Suppose God miraculously fed everyone. Would atheists who pose this accusatory question recant and become devout believers?
4. The basic problem with a question like this is that even if starvation was taken off the table, a militant atheist would then point to something else. Why does God allow natural disasters? Why does God allow people to die in house fires? Why does God allow people to die of cancer? Why does God allow people to die in traffic accidents? And so on and so forth. Every time you kick the football through the goalpost, the very same atheist will move the goalpost.

So the problem with a question like this is where to draw the line. Short of a perfect, ouchless painless world, won't an atheist complain about any remaining evil—or perceived evil?

But in that event, this is really about the problem of evil in general. If God exists, why isn't the current world free of moral and natural evils?

Yet if that's the question behind the question, then Christians don't need to run down a checklist of every kind of evil, offering a specific explanation for each and every kind of evil. Rather, there are preexisting theodicies that cover that ground in general. And it's possible to combine two or more stock theodicies to give greater coverage.

We don't need to give separate explanations for every kind of evil. By providing a theological justification for certain kinds of evil, a theodicy already deals with all the particular evils in kind.

It's not so much a question of why God makes a world containing a variety of evils, but why God makes a world containing any evils. If you have theodicy that can justify evil at all, or paradigm evils, then it isn't necessary to give independent answers for every instance. So long as those are representative examples, the theodicy already provides a general rationale. Different samples don't change the explanation.

5. However, the larger point our atheist is laboring to make is that there's one economical explanation for the existence of all these different kinds of evils: God doesn't exist! But there are two basic problem with that alternative:

i) A Christian doesn't need to "cobble together individual reasons for each of these questions" if it only takes a few theodicies to cover all the bases. We just classify objections by category. Theodicies offer categorical explanations. There's a common type of explanation for a common type of objection.

ii) It's deceptively simple to say God's nonexistence explains them all, for God's existence has enormous explanatory power. God's existence is a unifying principle. An atheist has to cobble together individual reasons to replace the explanatory power of one God.

Jerky theology

An exchange I had with an unbeliever on Facebook:

"I guess I shouldn't have entered this conversation at all, since I don't believe in God or sin ... so your questions don't make sense to me except as hypotheticals."

Since "sin" is a theological category, we could temporarily substitute a generic category like "evil". "Sin" is an interpersonal evil, between creatures and God or creatures and their fellow creatures. Presumably you believe in interpersonal evil.

"God's a jerk for creating the situation that we need to be saved from and then wanting to be adored for offering a rescue to some people and not others."

Even on a merely human level, it's easy to consider a scenario in which a powerful human being puts another human in a situation where the other human then needs to be saved from that situation, if that's a morally enlightening experience. Suppose a teenage boy has contempt for the disabled. Suppose there's a classmate in a wheelchair whom the teenage boy taunts and bullies. Makes his life a living hell.

Suppose the country is run by a benign dictator who finds out. Suppose, as remedial punishment, he has physicians administer nerve blockers, causing the abusive teenage boy to become temporarily disabled. For a year, the teenage boy will be confined to a wheelchair, to find out firsthand what it's like to be disabled, defenseless, and dependent on the kindness of strangers.

After a year, he's restored to normal. But he's now acquired the virtue of compassion, because he knows from personal experience what it's like to be in that trying situation.

"and then wanting to be adored"

God doesn't want to be adored for his own sake. He doesn't need our adoration. It is, however, virtuous to revere what is good.

"for offering a rescue to some people and not others"

i) Actually, the offer of salvation is indiscriminate.

ii) If two people are guilty of evil, there's no obligation to pardon either one, much less both.

"... and I just don't see any reason to believe that this fantastical story is the truth"

What about evidence for the historicity of the Gospels?

"I do think morality can be built around promoting happiness and alleviating suffering, and that makes way more sense than the God hypothesis"

In this life, many people can and do experience irreparable harm. If there is no afterlife, then their situation is hopeless. And even if they have a happy life, that's zeroed out at death. How does that make way more sense than the "God hypothesis"?

"I'm sure some of the events in the gospels actually happened, but that doesn't make them entirely true, or their base hypothesis true. I write fiction myself, expressing things I believe are true in a fabricated story."

To write accurate historical fiction requires one of two things:

- i)** If you're writing about a time and place of which you have firsthand experience. But that would mean the Gospels are based on eyewitness information.
- ii)** If you do extensive research on a time and place in the past. But people in the 1C didn't have our historical reference works.

So it won't work for you to classify the Gospels as historical fiction.

Causing evil

A stock objection to Calvinism goes something like this: it is evil to cause evil. But the God of Calvinism causes evil (or determines evil, which amounts to the same thing). Indeed, the God of Calvinism causes human agents to commit evil. Yet making someone else do evil is at least as bad if not worse than doing it yourself.

Let's examine that objection. Take the ticking timebomb scenario. Many people think torturing a terrorist to find out where the bomb is hidden, to save innocent lives, is immoral.

Why is that immoral? Presumably, they think torture is wrong because they think excruciating pain is evil. If so, then it's evil to cause excruciating pain.

If they don't think excruciating pain is evil, then it's unclear why they think torture is wrong. They might not think that's the only reason torture is wrong. They might think torture is wrong in part because coercion is wrong. But presumably they think the evil of excruciating pain is a necessary condition of what makes torture wrong, in cases where torture utilizes pain. Indeed, pain is coercive. The two are inseparable in that scenario.

The justification for torturing the terrorist is to save innocent lives. But since they regard torture as intrinsically wrong, the goal, however noble, can't justify that expedient. So goes the argument.

But let's vary the illustration. Take a field medic during the Civil War who operates without anesthetic, because none is available. If excruciating pain is evil, then it's evil for the medic to inflict excruciating pain on his patients. Yet most of us think his action is justified. He must amputate the arms and legs of gunshot victims to prevent the greater evil of death by gangrene. Yet in that event, there are situations in which causing evil isn't evil.

In addition, suppose there's a patient he's loathe to save. It may be the enemy. But the field commander orders him to operate on that patient because the field commander wants to pump the enemy soldier for information. He may force the unwilling medic to operate at gunpoint if need be.

That would mean he's causing an agent to commit evil, assuming that pain is evil. If, on the other hand, we grant that it's not inherently evil to cause the evil of inflicting pain, then it's not evil to cause an agent to cause evil, in that respect. At least, that seems to break the chain of inference.

Although that's a hypothetical comparison, it has a real-world counterpart. We experience physical pain because God designed the human body to have that sensitivity. But if excruciating pain is evil, then that means God causes evil by designing and making bodies with sensitivity.

Let's consider some objections to my argument:

i) Pain isn't good or bad in itself. Rather, it's context-dependent. For instance, pain can be a warning sign to avert or avoid greater harm. The painful sensation of burning deters us from taking chances with fire. Temporary pain protects us from greater harm.

One potential problem with that reply is that it makes it harder to oppose torture in the ticking timebomb scenario. In both cases, you have an ends-means justification. If the deterrent value of pain to avoid death or serious injury by fire justifies pain, then why not torturing a terrorist to save innocent lives? Both utilize temporary pain. Both justify harm for a greater good.

ii) We absolve the field medic because he lacked access to anesthetics. But the analogy breaks down in application to God, who doesn't suffer from analogous limitations.

Up to a point that's true, but I'm testing the principle. The objection makes blanket statement: it is evil to cause evil. Or it is evil to cause another agent to cause evil.

If, however, there are exceptions, then that isn't wrong in principle. It depends on the situation. If something is intrinsically wrong, that precludes exceptions. But if in fact it's permissible in some cases, then the objection can't be a special case of a universal principle.

Shooting themselves in the foot

*Here is another way of putting my point. The reply I have been considering, which skeptical theists might make in response to the charge that their skeptical theses undermine ordinary moral deliberation and action, is that “what is wrong for a person depends only on what... she knows” (McBreyer 2010)—or at least, what she thinks she knows. But the divine determinist thinks she knows something that those not committed to divine determinism do not think they know: and that is, that God has determined every event that occurs in the world. But then, this additional knowledge must factor into the divine determinist’s moral deliberation. The divine determinist must reason that if some horrific evil was divinely determined, then it was necessary for some greater good. But then, it must have been good, all things considered, that such an evil occurred. And so it would have been bad, all things considered, if someone had prevented its occurrence. So, no one should have prevented its occurrence. Leigh C. Vicens, *Divine Determinism: A Critical Consideration*. PhD. diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison (2012), 240-41.*

What's ironic about this objection is how it overlooks a parallel objection:

The freewill theist must reason that if some horrific evil was divinely permitted, then it was necessary for some greater good. But then, it must have been good, all things considered, that such an evil occurred. And so it would have been bad, all things considered, if someone had prevented its occurrence. So, no one should have prevented its occurrence.

"A God who accepts there are rapists in his universe"

He'd much rather have a God who sovereignly decrees a person be raped, than have a God who accepts there are rapists in his universe.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/ff171201/>

That comparison is supposed to make Arminianism look good in contrast to Calvinism.

Suppose the alternatives were between an Arminian world in which God doesn't allow rapists into his universe and a Calvinistic world in which "God sovereignly decrees a person be raped". If that was the choice, then Arminianism would certainly be more *prima facie* appealing than Calvinism.

But when it comes to the fact of evil, Arminians are in the same boat as Calvinists.

A God who "accepts" there are rapists in his universe. How euphemistic. The Arminian God has an open border policy on rapists?

In law enforcement, we tolerate a certain level of criminality because we lack the resources to prevent every crime. The best we can do is to keep crime at manageable levels. Keep crime from spiraling out of control. But the Arminian God doesn't suffer from the same limitations.

It's easy for the Arminian God to accept that there are rapists in his universe since the Arminian God will never be a raped. It's a whole lot easier to accept a hazardous situation from a position of safety. When you yourself are invulnerable. But that's sorry consolation to the rape victim. Evils that would be intolerable if they threatened me or my family are not as urgent when we're out of harm's way. And yet it's often virtuous to endanger yourself to save others.

I'm struck by moral smugness of the SEA contributor, as if his alternative is obviously superior.

Silver lining

Jonathan is one of the few truly admirable people in OT history. OT history is full of villains. And even some of those on God's side have glaring character flaws. In one respect, it's tragic that he died so young.

But suppose an alternate history played out. Had he assumed the throne, Jonathan might have been corrupted.

Or if he was David's righthand man, would their friendship sour? Over the long-haul, would he find it grating to play second-fiddle?

And even if that didn't happen, his sons and David's sons would be rivals to the throne. One or more of his sons would probably think David was a usurper. That Saul's lineage was the rightful lineage. I can imagine one of Jonathan's sons murdering one of David's sons to snuff out the competition. Consider the strain it would put Jonathan and David's friendship.

Or what if Jonathan was still alive when the Gibeonites demanded scapegoats to even the score for Saul's effort to extirpate the Gibeonites. Jonathan would be at the top of their hit list. Since Saul was dead, Jonathan would be the next best thing.

Presumably, David would refuse to hand over his best friend. Even so, what would Jonathan's reaction be when David delivered seven of Jonathan's nephews into the hands of the Gibeonites, to play fall guys for Saul's misdeeds? Once again, imagine the strain that would place on Jonathan and David's friendship.

Jonathan died before the friendship had a chance to fall apart.

Moral skepticism and Scripture

From an exchange I had with an unbeliever on Facebook:

I have no theory as to why God predestines a particular hurricane to strike a particular area. In general, hurricanes are natural forces which restore the balance of nature.

It's not as if hurricanes are targeted to hit population centers. That's an incidental consequence of humans living in hurricane zones. In general, humans die in natural disasters as a side-effect of living where natural disasters happen to strike.

God created a world with natural mechanisms. And everything happens according to his master plan for the world. In that respect, even bad things happen for a good reason. And this life is not the ultimate frame of reference.

When men fight with one another and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts, 12 then you shall cut off her hand. Your eye shall have no pity (Deut 25:11-12).

- i) To begin with, who started the fight? Who threw the first punch? Who's at fault?
- ii) You also disregard the nature of the offense. Grabbing the genitals risks rendering the man impotent. A harsh penalty for a harsh crime. The penalty is completely avoidable by avoiding the crime.

18 If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, 20 and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' 21 Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear (Deut 21:18-21).

- i) I didn't say if that was the thing to do now. Not everything that God commanded ancient Israel to do is a direct command to or for Christians.
- ii) You fail to grasp the nature of the Mosaic penalty structure. As various scholars contend, the death penalty was generally a maximum penalty, not a mandatory penalty (first degree murder might be a notable exception).

iii) The fact that the legislator invokes the purgation formula in the case of the incorrigible son indicates to me that in this case (and other cases in kind), the penalty is indexed to the cultic holiness of Israel. If so, that doesn't carry over into the new covenant era. By contrast, the penalty for murder antedates the Mosaic covenant. The penalty for murder is indexed to the image of God rather than holy land.

Deuteronomy has a refrain about "purging evil" (Cf. Deut 13:5/6; 17:7,12; 19:13,19; 21:9,21; 22:21-22,24; 24:7). A dramatic illustration is the ceremony to cleanse the land of blood guilt (21:1-9). These penalties operate within a framework of ritual holiness, where the land is culturally holy, and transgressions defile the land, necessitating punitive actions that reconsecrate the land. But that principle doesn't carry over into the new covenant, because the holy land category is defunct.

iv) Your position suffers from self-referential incoherence. On the one hand, you appeal to stock arguments for moral skepticism. If I was born at a different place and time, I'd have different views.

On the other hand, you attack OT ethics. But your moral skepticism neutralizes your ability to attack OT ethics. You can't say that's wrong. At best, you can only say that's not right—in the sense that nothing is right or wrong.

Ironically, I agree with moral skeptics that moral intuition is unreliable, given the fact that different cultures have different taboos. What's admirable in one culture is abominable in another, and vice versa. So we need something over and above moral intuition to correct or corroborate our moral intuitions.

You attack OT ethics, but obviously the Pentateuchal legislator didn't share your outlook. You have your convictions and he had his. So what brokers the disagreement? Who's the referee? What makes your moral opinion superior to the viewpoint of the Pentateuchal narrator? You're using the same argument John Loftus employs, but it disqualifies you from assuming the posture of a moralist.

If I knew then what I know now

That's a common sentiment. It's good for people to reflect on the wrong turns they've made in life. Sometimes that's due to impetuous, foolhardy choices. This can be a source of contrition. Learning wisdom through sorry experience. But sometimes things turn out badly through no fault of their own. If only we had the benefit of hindsight at the time we were at that fork in the road, we'd opt for the road not taken.

However, we can flip that around. Sometimes we might make the same choice, despite painful or frustrating consequences, even though, or even because we had the benefit of hindsight.

For instance, suppose a man is a conscientious husband, yet in spite of that, his wife deserts him. Suppose the angel Gabriel appears to him and offers him a chance to go back in time and make a different choice. This time around, forearmed with the knowledge of how that marriage would turn out, he now has a second chance to finally have the life he planned and wanted. Wouldn't you jump at the offer?

But let's complicate the offer. Suppose he fathered two sons by that ill-fated marriage. When his wife walked out on the marriage, she left him with his two sons.

Would he still take God up on the offer? Would he exchange his two sons for an alternate timeline with a happy marriage, and, perhaps, sons by a different wife? Let's say he won't even recall the troubled marriage. God will erase his memory. He will start from scratch, as if that never happened.

Yet I suspect most men would refuse. Although that alternative might be hypothetically preferable, you've formed an unbreakable bond with your actual sons, and you wouldn't trade that experience for anything. The ill-fated marriage was worth it on their account.

By the same token, consider mothers who've had abortions. But suppose, instead, that at the last minute, they changed their mind and raised the child. Suppose they decided to keep the child for a perfectly frivolous reason. But having raised the child, suppose Mephistopheles appears to them and offers them a chance to step into the time machine and have the abortion they originally contemplated. I suspect most mothers would refuse. Because they didn't go through with an abortion, they formed a unique maternal bond with their child.

Abortion is like shooting someone with a sack over his head. That makes it easier to shoot the victim. An anonymous victim. Can't even see his face. Can't see his pleading eyes.

But suppose, after pulling the trigger, you remove the sack over their head and see that you just shot your father or mother or brother.

When we say, "If I knew then what I know now," we usually mean that given a chance, we'd make a different choice. Yet there are situations in which we wouldn't make a different choice. For retrospection cuts both ways. Paradoxically, we may come to appreciate the outcome, even though it's not the choice we would have made if, at the time, we were better informed about the consequences of the choice. For the consequences may be both good and bad. The good consequences may outweigh the bad consequences. Depends on whether we're privy to the good consequences as well as the bad consequences. And it depends on actual experience.

Antitheodicy

I'm going to comment on this essay:

Trakakis, N.N. (2013) Antitheodicy, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK.ch25

Trakakis takes the same antitheodical position as David Bentley Hart:

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/05/tsunami-and-theodicy>

Perhaps that's a reflection of the apophatic orientation in Eastern Orthodox theology.

What's interesting about this is how antitheodicy is the polar opposite of Calvinism. In Calvinism, everything happens for a particular reason. Every event makes a contribution to the whole. There's a blueprint for history, where each event is coordinated in a part/whole, means/ends relation.

Even though most freewill theists believe in theodicy, there's a tension in their position, because they wish to avoid making God complicit in evil. Carried to a logical extreme, this results in the antitheodicy.

Although he doesn't mention him, Berkouwer is a good illustration of this outlook. Early Berkouwer was a Reformed theologian, but he drifted. Late Berkouwer was a modernist theologian and antitheodicy. As I recall, Philip E. Hughes reacted in the same way. There are informative parallels between objections to Calvinism and objections to theodicy. The position of Trakakis et al. is a reductio ad absurdum of freewill theism.

Essentially the problem resides with the "teleology of suffering" adopted by theodicy in their justifications of evil. In other words, theodicy invariably propose a teleological framework wherein suffering has some (God-given) point or purpose (a telos)

The teleological justification for evil is problematic for freewill theism because it implicates God in evil, in a way that freewill theism labors to avoid.

Various moral criticisms can be leveled against such a teleological or instrumental understanding of evil. One such criticism concerns the category of unjustified or inexplicable evil. Is such evil so much as (logically or metaphysically) possible, on the theodicy's view? The answer is clearly "no", and this gives rise to the charge of "moral blindness": theodicy turn a blind eye to what seems obvious and clear

to everyone else – that it is at least possible, if not the sad truth of the matter, that there is much evil and suffering in our world that is gratuitous, pointless, or unnecessary with respect to the fulfillment of God’s purposes. One of the fundamental givens of our moral experience, it seems, is that there are evils that strike us as unredeemable, incomprehensible, and inexplicable – not in the (skeptical theist) sense that there are evils that may have some point that we cannot uncover, but rather that many evils are such that they have absolutely no point at all (see Chapter 29). (Colloquially put: “Life is not fair.”) Theodicy, therefore, amounts to the denial of morally surd realities which, as Kenneth Surin puts it, “halt the tongue, afflict the mind with blankness,”³ and which infuse us with the tragic sense of life where notions of “blame,” “responsibility,” and “explanation” are entirely out of place. (This is perhaps why theodicy flourishes in our blame-driven, litigious culture where playing the victim and looking for a scapegoat is commonplace.)

I can imagine, however, the theodicy replying: “Appearances are just that: appearances, not reality. So, although some evils appear gratuitous to us, this does not necessarily mean that they are in fact gratuitous. A good reason is required to support this inference from appearance to reality (this “noseeum inference,” as Stephen Wykstra calls it), and you have yet to produce such a reason.”

i) I disagree with Trakakis. There's nothing probative about people's superficial impressions.

ii) Moreover, people are conflicted on this issue. On the one hand, some events appear to be pointless and unredeemable. On the other hand, people demand a moral justification for the occurrence of evil—which presumes that there is, or ought to be, a rationale for evil. So the appeal of Trakakis is selective and one-sided.

iii) Furthermore, the Bible gives examples of events that initially seem to be chaotic, yet in hindsight the reader can see an emerging pattern.

The first thing to note about such a reply is that it is in effect making the Principle of Sufficient Reason – reformulated as the idea that there is a morally sufficient reason (or cause) for everything that happens (or that there is a theistic explanation for every fact) – the default position. But why should we make this our default position? In light of our moral experience, which (as even the theodicy admits) attests to the seeming gratuitousness of much evil, would it not

be more reasonable to presume that there is in fact gratuitous evil unless we are given good reason to think otherwise? The onus, therefore, may be placed on the theodist, who has the burden of showing that our initial presumptions are misleading.

i) At best, that makes some sense from the standpoint of atheism or deism. It makes little sense from the standpoint of Christian theism. A fundamental problem with the antitheodicy is why somebody who takes that position should continue to believe in God's wisdom and benevolence, or believe in God at all. That issue cannot be evaded. A Christian philosopher or theologian can hardly bypass that pressing question.

ii) Moreover, something may appear to be pointless in the short-term, but purposeful in the long-term. That's something we can only assess in retrospect, as we see how the story plays out. How the story ends. To be in medias res is a poor vantage-point to assess the situation.

iii) Goods and evils are causally intertwined. How can God have a causal or purposive role in the occurrence of good, but no causal or purposive role in the occurrence of evil—when evils generate goods and goods generate some evils? The dichotomy is metaphysically ad hoc.

iv) If evil is pointless, yet human experience is riddled with evil, then doesn't that render much of human life meaningless?

But the real problem with the theodist's reply is not one concerning argumentative strategies and burden-of-proof considerations. The more intractable problem, rather, lies with the consequences of denying gratuitous evil. First, if every evil is somehow connected to a greater good and we believe (or know) this to be so, then would we not be reduced to an attitude of passivity and fatalism in the face of evil and suffering? (see Chapter 30) Why should I fight against the devastating plague if I believe this to be, say, God's just punishment of sin? Why would I fight against a genocidal regime if I held that only by giving humans the freedom to perform these kinds of terrible evils can God secure certain greater goods? Morality, and specifically our motivation to do what is right, would be undermined if we thought that there is no genuinely gratuitous evil.

i) I'm inclined to avoid a greater-good theodicy. I prefer to recast the issue in terms of second-order goods. Goods that are unobtainable apart from evil. Alternate goods. Incommensurable goods. No one possible world contains every good.

ii) Trakakis overlooks the fact that overcoming evil may be one of the major goods which this set-up enables and encourages. Evil is not good in itself, but it can be a source of good. Overcoming evil is good.

iii) Contrary to Trakakis, belief in gratuitous evil logically saps the incentive to combat evil. It makes one cynical. Why should I be that upset about evil if God is so indifferent to evil? Why should I be better than God? Minimally, I'd just do enough to protect myself and my loved ones. If, moreover, God is that indifferent to evil, then combating evil in general is futile. We're on our own, so the best we can hope for is to look out for ourselves. In a dog-eat-dog world, individual self-interest takes precedence.

If we know that no evil is genuinely gratuitous, then when faced with a case of genocide, we would know that it will lead to a greater good whether we intervene or not, and so we are not morally obliged to help the victims. This, in other words, is to say that whatever goods transpire from our intervention in evil, there is no necessary (but only a contingent) connection between these goods and the evil in question.

i) Even on his own terms, there's a problem with his position, for not only is genocide a gratuitous evil, but intervention will spawn gratuitous evils. Attempting to prevent one gratuitous evil may generate another gratuitous evil. Since, on his view, many events are aimless and arbitrary, your well-meaning effort to halt or preempt evil may cause other random evils.

ii) It's just a fact that action and inaction alike will likely have both good and bad long-range consequences. But since that's unforeseeable and uncontrollable, our duty is to act on the best information we have at the time. We leave the end-results in God's hands.

iii) From a predestinarian perspective, when we intervene in some situations, we unwittingly carry out a plan that's wiser than ourselves. Same thing when we don't intervene in other situations. And it's not a choice between intervention or nonintervention in the same situation, for our actions are predestined. We end up doing precisely what God intended for us to do. And so we end up doing what is for the best—from God's viewpoint—regardless of our personal motivations.

O'Connor responds (in O'Connor 1995, 385) by saying that there may be other things that we know that would make it our moral duty to help – as examples, he gives our knowledge that the victims would be happy and less miserable if we helped them than otherwise; our knowledge that a world in which we turn a blind eye to genocide is one that contains more evil overall than a world in which we intervene; and our knowledge that God wishes us to be morally virtuous people

who act charitably and compassionately in circumstances such as those under consideration.

But I wonder how far such knowledge would go in providing strong moral motivation, the kind which would compel someone to lay down their life for their neighbor. For even though we would be naturally disposed to alleviate or end the harm someone is suffering, we would also know (in the theodictist's world) that this suffering is connected (and necessarily connected, not merely contingently) to some greater good – and so to prevent the suffering is tantamount to preventing the greater good. This would at least seriously diminish the force of the reasons O'Connor thinks we would have for acting morally to help such victims. And a morality greatly diminished is not much better than a morality entirely undermined.

Trakakis overlooks the fact that intervention may be instrumental to the good, rather than counterproductive to the good. Intervention facilitates the good rather than circumventing the greater good.

Lerner goes on to argue that even in cases of divinely ordained suffering or punishment, we may have a duty to interfere with God's plans and to help the sufferer.

That's confused. Human intervention wouldn't be interfering with God's plan; rather, that would be a planned intervention. God scripted human intervention into the original plot.

That is why, I might add, the theodictist's teleological framework of goods outweighing evils has been criticized for "not taking suffering seriously": one cannot take horrific evil seriously if one refuses to acknowledge the very qualities that make such evil so repulsive and shocking.

Trakakis needs to turn that into an argument.

Davis makes a similar point in a later paper, where he initially concedes that "the Holocaust of the World War II era was genuinely evil. The world would have been better – much better! – had it never occurred," and then immediately after writes

that “The Holocaust, like all other evils (so I believe), will be redeemed in the sense that some day it will no longer be a source of suffering (even in memory); it will fade away, pale into insignificance” (Davis 2004, 272, emphasis mine).

Actually, I think it's simplistic to say the world would be better had the Holocaust never occurred. It would be better in some respects, but worse in others. That's the necessary tradeoff between evil and second-order goods.

Theodicies of this sort flout the Kantian imperative, even if it is further stipulated by the theodocist that the sufferer in the relevant cases is duly compensated by (e.g.) being granted a heavenly afterlife. And this is because the individuals in question (in this case, the infants) are treated as wholly expendable – their worth and dignity, their well-being and interests, are sacrificed for some greater good that bears no relation to them.⁸

It is for reasons such as this that a consensus has emerged among contemporary philosophers of religion that a theodicy, if it is to be morally adequate, must hold instead that God has the right to allow person A to suffer evil E for the sake of some greater good G only if G is something which A can share or experience. William Rowe (1986, 244) has expressed this view as follows:

Unless we are excessively utilitarian, it is reasonable to believe that the goods for the sake of which O [i.e., the theistic God] permits much intense human suffering are goods that either are or include good experiences of the humans that endure the suffering. I say this because we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary.

If you think this is incorrect and that compensation is sufficient, then the morally counterintuitive result that follows is that God could deliberately inflict serious harm on someone for the sake of some good shared only by others, and yet God, simply by granting the sufferer a heavenly afterlife as compensation, has done all that is required to treat that person with the kind of basic dignity and respect that is consistent with treating them as an end-in-themselves.

To treat an individual as an end-in-themselves is to respect and protect their interests and well-being at all times and at all costs – and this means that the dignity and worth of a person cannot simply be sacrificed or traded off for the sake of some greater good (the “system,” the Cause, God’s master plan, etc.).

For in that case, the individual’s suffering is merely useful, but not necessary, for bringing about the greater good, and so the individual becomes an expendable pawn in a system with goals and purposes larger than and alien to those he has chosen for himself.

i) But he gives no reason to accept the Kantian imperative. And it's simplistic. For one thing, it fails to distinguish between innocence and guilty. Even if it's wrong to treat an innocent person as an expendable pawn, it doesn't follow that it's wrong to treat an evil person as an expendable pawn. Moral agents can forfeit the "dignity" to which they are prima facie entitled. Once they cross that line, there's nothing necessarily wrong with trading them off for the good of others. It is amoral for Trakakis to isolate human dignity from the moral character of the agents in question. Why not sacrifice an evil agent for the sake of the innocent? Take a security guard who kills a schoolyard sniper to protect the kids. The Kantian imperative sounds inspirational so long as you leave it conveniently abstract. But concrete illustrations expose the moral vacuity and fatuity of the principle.

ii) Of course, that doesn't address the case of babies, but that's where eschatological compensations can be germane. He's dismissive of eschatological compensations, but that's due to his amoral absolutization of human "dignity".

iii) I'd also add that in the case of those who die young, we never see how they'd turned out if they had a normal lifespan. But if we were privy to that counterfactual retrospective insight, we might view their fate very differently. Sometimes premature death is for the best. Once again, that's the difference between a God's-eye viewpoint and human shortsightedness.

The greater good in this case is human happiness, and we are asked to imagine that this is a good that could only be achieved through the torture and death of a child. Let us assume also, in line with SCR, that the greater good of human happiness is one that even the child who has been victimized will partake of (even though Ivan himself does not explicitly make this concession). Nevertheless, this remains a cheap-and-easy way of treating the humanity of persons. Even if the

child is compensated in this way for its suffering, we would continue to doubt that the architect of this system is really seeing the child as an end-in-itself, as a human being whose humanity has an unconditional and absolute worth and sanctity. I gather that we would, instead, respond in disgust and revulsion at the way the child is being viewed and treated. This is why Alyosha, a devout monk, answers Ivan's invitation by refusing "to be the architect on those conditions."

Put somewhat differently, the problem lies with the very way in which the objector (like Ivan) sets up his imaginary scenario in terms of a dilemma: either the child suffers and everyone is saved, or the child does not suffer and no one is saved. When Alyosha answers with a "No," he is rejecting the entire setup that Ivan has constructed. Similarly, the objector's dilemma should be rejected as a false one – and it is false because it already assumes what is being contested, namely, the teleological framework wherein God permits or inflicts evils for the sake of greater goods.

It's easy to dream up intractable moral dilemmas where we are at a loss. Hypothetical scenarios that leave us stumped. But it's not our responsibility to answer all those imponderables or act on those artificial predicaments. We can opt-out. Go on strike. It's up to God to make some determinations. That's not our call, one way or the other.

Relevant here is the customary distinction between the "theoretical problem of evil" and the "practical problem of evil," where the theoretical problem is the intellectual matter of determining the rationality or truth of theistic belief in the light of the facts about evil, while the practical problem concerns the existential and experiential difficulties evil creates for love and trust toward God (or the difficulties in combating evil and alleviating suffering). Theodocists tend to uphold a distinction of this sort, and they typically see themselves as addressing the theoretical problem of evil only – the practical problem is regarded as the business of priests and social workers.

Emotion clouds judgment. Moral clarity requires intellectual clarity. Critical detachment or critical sympathy are necessary to properly assess some claims. To adopt the viewpoint of the position under review to assess it on its own grounds.

Another consequence of denying gratuitous evil is that this inevitably leads to the denial of evil per se. This is perhaps most obvious when theodocists say (in

imitation of Romans 8:18; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:17) that the sufferings experienced now are trivial in comparison with the glorification to be experienced in heaven, or when they say that whatever sufferings we undergo in this life will be more than compensated for (or “outweighed”, or “defeated”) in the afterlife. When such things are said – and unfortunately such things are often said blithely and casually without much thought having gone into exactly what is being proposed and implied – a subtle but definite shift in moral perspective is taking place. This is a shift so significant that the very reality or at least the horror of much evil comes under doubt.

i) Is Trakakis rejecting Rom 8:18 and 2 Cor 4:17?

ii) Hope is the basic way people survive horrendous evils. The hope that this will end. They will put it behind them. If they tough it out, the future will be better than the present. Does Trakakis reject that?

iii) He fails to explain how belief that evil can be offset by good leads to the denial of evil per se. He asserts that, but all we get his vague, inarticulate intuition. He gestures at what he feels is wrong with that perspective, but he fails to explicate what, precisely, makes that the case.

Then any such hard-and-fast demarcation between the theoretical and practical problems of evil will seem dubious and artificial.

True, but a clear-thinking theodicy can be of pastoral value. People who suffer want reasons.

Consider, for example, the view (commonly upheld by anthropomorphites) that God shares a moral community with us – which is to say that God’s morality is essentially the same as our morality, and so there are moral principles that are universally applicable, that is, applicable to both human beings and any divine beings there are. But let us suppose that the assumption that God shares a moral community with us is false. Various reasons may be given for rejecting this assumption. One may defer, for example, to the doctrine of divine simplicity, according to which God has no parts or composition, and so is absolutely simple. On this view, God is not so much as good but goodness itself, or the standard of goodness. But in that case, there are no moral standards independent of God that could be relied upon to pass judgment on God, as the theodicy is wont to do. Alternatively, one may argue that God’s goodness is metaphysical and not moral

in nature – in which case, once more, God is not subject to moral evaluation or criticism (see Davies 2004, 226–230). As this indicates, the theodical project can be undermined not merely by exposing its moral failings, but also – and possibly more potently – by questioning its theological foundations.

i) Isn't his explanation a theodicy?

ii) In Scripture, there's a sense in which God is subject to moral evaluation. But he's not subject to humanistic moral evaluation. The God of biblical theism is a God who invites his people to judge him according to his fidelity to his promises.

iii) Trakakis has erected a false dichotomy. It's not a choice between God's morality coinciding with human morality or God's morality having nothing in common with human morality. There can be some universally applicable overlapping points of contact.

iv) His alternative seems to imply that God is so alien as to be beyond good and evil. He could do anything to human beings, and it wouldn't be evil. His antitheodicy devolves into theological nihilism.

The foregoing, however, are only some objections that could be made against theodicy. Other problems, worthy of further exploration, include the difficulty theodicies have in allowing for – and indeed emphasizing the importance of – certain reactive attitudes in the face of great suffering. When undergoing or witnessing a particularly heinous instance of evil or injustice, we assume we have the “right to grieve,” to be sad and disappointed, if not also to be angry and raised to revolt and indignation, even to be angry and cry out against God. But protesting against evil in this way seems to be ruled out in advance by theodicy. For in holding that everything is permitted or ordained by God for a good reason, theodicy recasts reactions such as grief and protest as (at best) natural but short-sighted or (at worst) sinful and blasphemous.

Humans can have feelings that are appropriate to their humanity. We are creatures. Since God isn't human, there's no inherent tension when there's a discrepancy between divine providence and our "reactive attitudes". Providence can be wise and just even if it rubs us the wrong way. It still hurts.

Machine Gun Preacher

I'm going to comment on this essay:

Oppy, G. (2013) Rowe's Evidential Arguments from Evil, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK, ch4.

Oppy's argument centers on this real life example:

The girl's mother was living with her boyfriend, another man who was unemployed, her two children, and her 9-month old infant fathered by the boyfriend. On new Year's Eve all three adults were drinking at a bar near the woman's home. The boyfriend had been taking drugs and drinking heavily. He was asked to leave the bar at 8:00 p.m. After several reappearances he finally stayed away for good at about 9:30 p.m. The woman and the unemployed man remained at the bar until 2:00 a.m. at which time the woman went home and the man to a party at a neighbour's home. Perhaps out of jealousy, the boyfriend attacked the woman when she walked into the house. Her brother was there and broke up the fight by hitting the boy- friend who was passed out and slumped over a table when the brother left. later the boyfriend attacked the woman again, and this time she knocked him unconscious. After checking the children, she went to bed. later, the woman's 5- year old girl went downstairs to go to the bathroom. The unemployed man returned from the party at 3:45 a.m. and found the 5--year-old dead. She had been raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled to death by the boyfriend. (Russell 1989, 123, drawing on a report from the Detroit Free Press, January 3, 1986)

Before delving into the details, I'd like to make some general observations:

i) Cases like this pose a psychological dilemma for Christian philosophers and apologists. A clinically detached philosophical response seems to be heartless. Yet that's the nature of philosophical analysis. It requires critical detachment. If you're going to throw these examples at Christians, don't turn around and blame us for presenting an unemotional analysis of a heart-wrenching case.

ii) In addition, they pose a prima facie dilemma. To present a justification of divine permission might seem to justify the evil itself. Yet condoning divine permission is not condoning the permitted evil.

However, atheism has a corollary dilemma. Atheism must say these things happen for no good reason. Tough luck, kid! That's the kind of world we live in. Deal with it!

iii) A male philosopher or apologist is at a disadvantage when discussing female victims of horrendous crimes. Where the perp is male and the victim is female, it looks bad when a male philosopher or apologist presents a theodicy. It would be better for male philosophers and apologists to substitute male-on-male examples, and female philosophers or apologist to use female examples.

iv) Although Oppy's example is appalling, and intentionally so, it doesn't budge me an inch towards atheism. In a godless universe, human life is worthless. The alternative to Christian theism is moral and existential nihilism. Whatever the difficulties posed by the problem of evil, atheism is hardly the answer. Indeed, atheism is evil.

If there is to be a justification for the suffering of the five-year-old girl, that justification surely must be in terms of goods for her.

As I noted earlier, if there were to be a justification for the permission, by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, of the rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls (if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god), that justification would surely have to be in terms of goods for the five-year-old girls in question.

Unfortunately, Oppy never bothers to explain why any justification must be in terms of goods for the victim. Is that a general principle? Or does Oppy have other, unstated caveats in mind, such as the innocence of the victim?

For instance, suppose Pol Pot was brutally murdered when he was five years old. Would justification for divine permission have to be in terms of goods for little Pol Pot? I'm not directly comparing the little girl to Pol Pot. I'm just probing Oppy's rationale. Is this meant to be a sufficient, universal principle—or does it require other qualifications for the argument to go through?

However, if squaring Theism with the distribution of intense suffering in our universe is taken to require the postulation of an afterlife in which there is compensation for that intense suffering, or the postulation of fallen angels who inflict that intense suffering upon us, or the postulation of goods beyond our ken that provide justification for permission of the distribution of intense suffering in our universe by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good god, or the like, then, the distribution of intense suffering in our universe does turn out to favor naturalism over Theism, since this increase in the theoretical commitments of

Theism merely adds to the initial advantage that naturalism has over Theism on account of theoretical commitments.

It's unclear why Oppy is so dismissive regarding the relevance of eschatological compensations. He's appealing to simplicity. But if eschatological compensations are required for a moral universe, then that's a necessary increase in theoretical commitments. An amoral universe may be ontologically simpler, but that has no category for moral evils.

Yes, we have come to recognize that slavery is intrinsically wrong, and that homosexuality is not intrinsically wrong, and so forth

Does this mean Oppy's argument is predicated on moral realism? If so, the onus is on him to explain how naturalism can underwrite moral realism.

I think that nothing could justify rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls; and I think that nothing could justify inaction in the face of rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls other than inability (on grounds of lack of power, or knowledge, or the like).

i) He's bundled two distinct propositions into one claim, but how does the proposition that nothing could justify rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls entail the additional proposition that nothing could justify inaction in the face of rape, torture, and murder of five-year-old girls other than inability (on grounds of lack of power, or knowledge, or the like)? Or is that meant to be an entailment relation? How are those two propositions logically related? Clearly he thinks they are inseparable in some sense.

ii) On the face of it, it's hard to take him seriously. There are many hotspots around the world where child abuse is rampant. But Oppy isn't jetting around the globe to protect kids from rape, torture, and murder. There are many opportunities for him to do so. Take the movie *Machine Gun Preacher*, based on a true story:

<http://godawa.com/machine-gun-preacher/>

If Oppy really believes that inaction is unjustifiable in the face of horrendous crimes against children, why does he sit behind the safety of his laptop?

iii) Suppose I take the position that the action of the machine-gun preacher was admirable. This doesn't imply that I think it's obligatory for everyone who's able to

intervene in the same way. We have a variety of social duties which must be counterbalanced against each other.

Oppy might object that God doesn't have the same limitations. However, much of his argument is predicated on his presumptive analogy between what's permissible for man and what's permissible for God.

Howard -Snyder says: "Given that intervention and non-intervention have massive and inscrutable causal ramifications, and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones, we have just as much reason to believe that the total consequences of non-intervention outweigh the total consequences of intervention as we have to believe that the total consequences of intervention outweigh the total consequences of non-intervention. Thus, we should be in doubt about whether we should intervene" (Howard -Snyder 2009, 38)

Snyder makes a very important point, although it seems to jumble together considerations that need to be sorted out:

- i)** Divine intervention to prevent evil has massive, causal ramifications.
- ii)** These are divinely foreseeable (unless Snyder is an open theist), but humanly unforeseeable. Therefore, it's reasonable for Christians to make allowance for the fact that God may very well have good reason not to intervene more often, for reasons inscrutable to shortsighted humans.
- iii)** But by the same token, because human agents are necessarily shortsighted, we don't have the same responsibility to take unforeseeable consequences into account. For that matter, both action and inaction have unforeseeable consequences. Our duty is to act on the best available information.

As Howard -Snyder (2009, 43f.) observes, Theists may well suppose, for example, that God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general, and that God permits a lot of it precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it. (So, somehow, I would not stand between the five-year-old girl and her deepest union with God were I to intervene to prevent her rape, torture, and murder.)

There are situations where, if I had foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge, I might refrain from intervention if my action, while beneficial in the short-term, did greater harm in the long-term.

Wheat and tares

A recent exchange I had with an unbeliever on Facebook:

Its impossible to explain away unnecessary suffering like child cancer without appealing to unsatisfying answers like 'its a mystery' or 'child cancer is part of God's plan'. We can all imagine a world in which unnecessary suffering like child cancer does not exist yet freewill does. Thus such suffering is gratuitous and unnecessary.

I don't subscribe to the freewill defense. That said, your objection is superficial. Sure, we can all imagine a world without children dying of cancer. The problem is that people who imagine a better world mentally eliminate the evils while leaving everything else in place, including the goods. But removing some evils removes second-order goods that are contingent on the existence of the underlying evils. So that's the dilemma.

To take your own example, childhood cancer is an opportunity to develop certain virtues which would never exist in an idyllic world.

Likewise, if a couple had a child who dies of cancer, they may have a replacement child to compensate. And the replacement child may have kids of his own, and grandkids.

That compensatory good would not exist if the older child hadn't died. So it's a tradeoff between one life and another, or one set of lives and another. Moreover, the cancer created the opportunity for two children to exist instead of one.

How is it NECESSARY that we need unnecessary suffering to have goodness?

That's a loaded question since you smuggled your own assumption into the formulation of the question. Sure, it's tautology to say unnecessary suffering is unnecessary, but that simply begs the question regarding the existence of gratuitous suffering.

but i'm saying CUT OUT THE MIDDLE MAN. Have the good without the tragedy.

But it wouldn't be the same good. Evil is gratuitous if God could prevent it without losing some distinctive good or permitting some equally grave or greater evil.

Once again, the cancer analogy. You are saying we shouldn't eliminate cancer or polio because of all the secondary good it has. Why can't that good happen without the cancer or polio?

i) The argument from evil is not about what humans should do but about what God (allegedly) should do. God and humans don't have the same responsibilities. God has foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. We don't. Therefore—unlike God—we're in no position to consider long-term outcomes.

Likewise, as social creatures, we have emotional investments that God does not.

There's some overlap between divine goodness and human goodness, but they don't overlap.

ii) Would a world in which children never die be a better world? Better in some respects. But better for whom?

If humans were immortal from the outset, then humans would have to stop reproducing after a few generations. That means most humans who exist in a world with infant morality wouldn't exist. Is it better for them never to have the opportunity to enjoy the gift of life?

It may be better for the children who don't die, but it's hardly better for the children whose existence is edged out under that alternate scenario.

Every child is unique. Those are incommensurable goods.

iii) Moreover, a world in which no one died from illness or senescence would be a world chockfull of selfish people who'd never risk their life or health to save someone else from, say, a house fire. There'd be too much to lose.

iv) A future without childhood cancer might be better, but a past without childhood cancer wouldn't be better for the people you care about, since they wouldn't exist. Better relative to whom? It is better for your loved ones if the past is the same up to their birth and maturity, then diverges after they have their prime of life.

v) Unfortunately, there's a human tendency to take friends and family for granted. We act as though they will always be available. There are so many lost opportunities.

When, however, a friend or family member gets cancer, we make up for lost time. That intensifies the remaining time we have with them.

vi) Regarding polio, many healthy people squander the gift of life. To be disabled can prompt people to make the most of fewer opportunities.

vii) Suppose one teenage boy has polio while another teenage boy from the same general vicinity is a football star. He comes from a dirty poor family. He's counting on a football scholarship to pay his way through college and make a better life for himself.

Now let's change a variable. Suppose the other boy doesn't have polio, and he's a better athlete. The boy from the poor family who was banking on a football scholarship loses that opportunity.

In each of these scenarios, there are tradeoffs. Each scenario has second-order goods. By eliminating the evil, you eliminate a distinctive good. Evil can be both beneficial and harmful.

vii) In general, it's good for humans to work to eradicate polio. But there are situations where we wouldn't eliminate a short-term evil if we knew the end-result. Normal people will avoid actions that harm their loved ones. Yet what is good for my beloved may be bad for your beloved, or vice versa.

I have greater responsibilities for my family than I have for your family. By contrast, God doesn't have greater responsibilities for any particular family.

How God balances out good and evil is different from how a conscientious human might.

You've got a hidden assumption in there. Its like the old cliché of you can't have joy without suffering. Well yes, yes you can.

Since I didn't use that in my argument, you're objection misses the target.

but must appeal to a mystery (God knows all counterfactuals but we don't so it must be hiding in that knowledge!) and have no reason to believe it besides the fact that rejecting it is really damaging to your view on God.

Responsible humans would sometimes make different choices if they knew the long-term consequences of their actions. There's nothing mysterious about that principle. Naturally, God has a different perspective. The proverbial God's-eye view.

Well I can easily imagine a world identical to ours WITHOUT child cancer.

Actually, you can't. A world without childhood cancer would not be identical to ours. A world without childhood cancer would have different genealogies.

It's like the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24-30,36-43). Human lives are mutually entangled. It isn't possible to uproot the tares without uprooting some of the wheat. Pull out the evil and you pull out some of the good that's intertwined with the evil.

From the whirlwind

Preachers and commentators often remark on how Job never got an answer to his question. And that's true.

However, that observation is somewhat misleading. Although his question went unanswered, he had a personal audience with God. An overwhelming token of God's presence and power. A storm theophany. Probably like Ezk 1. As well as an audible voice from God.

Many believers suffer ordeals that seem to be inexplicable. But they'd be comforted to at least have a sign from God that he's aware, that he's there, that he cares. But what they get is...nothing. Nothing at all. Dead silence.

Even though Job got less than he was asking for, he got more than many believers ask for. God came to him. Spoke to him. He knew that God was in control. God had a reason, however inscrutable.

Which brings me to a second point. Consider how little the patriarchs knew about God and God's purposes. King David knew much more than Abraham. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel knew far more than King David. And Christians know far more than Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

We have many unanswered questions about divine providence. Yet we know far more about his designs than OT Jews. Imagine how much clearer things will be in heaven.

Why I Am an Atheist: A Conversation with Dr. Stephen Law

Jonathan McLatchie recently did a webinar with militant atheist philosopher Stephen Law

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8Tp1Gn6Gag>

Some comments I made about Law's conversation:

In his presentation, Law compared theistic explanations to gremlins. That, however, reduces the discussion to hypothetical entities and hypothetical comparisons. It presumes that God is analogous to gremlins. And that's a diversion from having to study or investigate actual, specific evidence for Christianity in particular.

Out of curiosity, what literature, if any, has Law read on miracles? For instance, Craig Keener has compiled many case-studies in his two-volume monograph on miracles (*Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*). Likewise, Robert Larmer has written two recent books on miracles that contain case studies in the appendices (cf. *The Legitimacy of Miracle*; *Dialogues on Miracle*).

How, if at all, does Law propose to address that ostensible evidence for divine action in the world?

Law appealed to the evidential problem of evil as one reason he's an atheist. In particular, he cited human suffering (and animal suffering) on an "industrial scale".

However, his alternative seems to be that those humans (or animals) would be better off if they never existed in the first place. Better not to live at all than have a short, poor, nasty brutish life.

After all, in a nicer world, you won't have the same set of people. Different people will be born into a nicer world than would be born into a harsher world. A world with high infant mortality will have a different history than a world with low infant mortality.

If that's what he means, what's his frame of reference? Is he saying they'd be better off if they never had a chance to live from their perspective or his perspective?

One issue that came up towards the end of the presentation was whether Law can justify objective morality, given atheism. Law said he didn't need to present a secular justification. He could appeal to intuition. He could "feel in his bones" that torturing children for fun is morally wrong.

One problem with his response is that it's not merely a question of not having a secular justification, but whether atheism (or naturalism) generates undercutters or defeaters for belief in objective morality. And that isn't just a Christian view of atheism. Many atheist thinkers reject moral realism.

Another problem is that early in the presentation, Law expressed disdain for Christians who say they cannot or need not provide arguments for their position. They simply know in their heart that it's true.

But isn't that the same appeal to intuition that Law is resorting to? Why is it legitimate for Law to fall back on intuition rather than argumentation in defense of his belief in secular ethics, but illegitimate for some Christians to fall back on intuition rather than argumentation in defense of their faith? Law seems to be operating with a double standard?

Blake Giunta, who was pressed for time, used the following argument. (He has ten theodicies at his fingertips). He said suffering induces humans to seek God while having it too easy breeds religious apathy and indifference.

Parenthetically, that might be why Christian miracles are reported more often in Third World countries. For one thing, places like Africa are very hazardous. Worn-torn areas, famine, tropical disease, many dangerous animals, limited access to good medical care. That's an incentive to prayer!

Law's appeal to the argument from evil appears to be circular. At the outset, he said, first of all, that he doesn't think the theistic proofs are good evidence for God's existence. And he said, secondly, that the problem of evil is good evidence against God's existence.

But towards the end of the presentation, when he was challenged to justify his belief in moral realism from a secular standpoint, he said he didn't need to provide a justification because he'd already ruled out a theistic grounding for ethics, and you don't need to be able to provide an alternative explanation to know that the opposing position is false.

But the only positive reason he's given for disbelieving in God is the problem of evil. If he excuses his failure to justify moral realism on secular grounds because he's ruled out a theistic alternative, and if his rationale for ruling out the theistic alternative is the problem of evil, then his argument appears to be viciously circular. The existence of evil disproves God, and God's nonexistence relieves him of the onus to show that evil really exists!

To take another stab at Law's apparently circular argument: the positive reason he gives for his belief in God's nonexistence is contingent on the problem of evil. And the reason he gives for why he has no burden to prove moral realism on secular grounds is contingent on having ruled out the existence of God, which is, in turn, contingent on the problem of evil, which is, in turn, contingent on the reality of evil, which is, in turn, contingent on moral realism...

So his positive reason for disbelief in God is dependent on the problem of evil, while his reason for not having to justify moral realism on secular grounds is dependent on God's nonexistence, given the problem of evil. So he's spinning in a circle.

Q: Why don't you believe in God's existence?

A: The problem of evil.

Q: How does an atheist justify moral realism?

A: It's not incumbent on me to do so because I've ruled out God's existence.

Q: How did you rule out God's existence?

A: The problem of evil.

He hasn't provided any independent reason to establish moral realism. Yet his appeal to the problem of evil presumes moral realism. He says "It's wrong to make people suffer".

In addition, his argument is a false dichotomy. Even if (ex hypothesi) you can't ground moral realism in God, the logical alternative isn't secular moral realism. The alternative might be nihilism. Indeed, many secular thinkers deny moral realism.

Technically, it's possible for someone who denies moral realism to present the argument from evil. The strategy is to show that Christian theism is internally inconsistent. That the triad of divine attributes (omniscience, omnipotence, benevolence) is mutually inconsistent.

But when he was questioned on his own position, Law said he inclined to moral realism (although there are days when he has serious doubts). He used the example of torturing children for fun.

Mind you, there's a price atheists pay if they go that route. Many atheists derive great satisfaction from indulging in moralistic tirades about Biblical theism. Adopting the viewpoint of moral realism merely for the sake of argument deprives them of that satisfaction.

Generally, atheists want to be able to say that their position is morally superior to Christianity. They have a lot to lose if they ditch moral realism.

Indeed, if an atheist is a moral nihilist, what's the motivation for attacking Christianity? Why would you care what anyone does or believes? Why the passion?

My point is that it's illogical for someone who denies moral realism to attack Christianity. Even though they think Christianity is false, they don't believe people have a duty to believe what is true and disbelieve what is false. So why are they on a mission to dissuade folks from believing in Christianity? It can't be because they disapprove of Christian ethics, for if they deny moral realism, why would they care?

To be or not to be

I've used variations on the same idea in two different contexts (abortion, theodicy). Now I'd like to combine them in reference to theodicy. When atheists raise the problem of evil, the unspoken assumption is that a better world is possible. They can imagine various ways of improving the world we inhabit. If, therefore, an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God really exists, the actual world would correspond to the better world an atheist imagines. Or so goes the argument.

But as I've often pointed out, that's shortsighted. There is no best possible world. For alternate timelines have unique goods. Some goods are contingent on prior evils. Preventing the evil prevents the resultant good.

Just about every human life produces a chain reaction. Whether or not a particular individual exists will affect the course of history in complex ways. If he exists, history will go one way. If he doesn't exist, history will go another way. Time-travel stories illustrate the principle of tradeoffs in that regard. Our individual lives may seem insignificant, but lives have long-range consequences—as does their absence, counterfactually speaking. The upshot is that when an atheist imagines a better possible world, there are losers in that scenario. Indeed, people who are winners in one possible world may well miss out in the "superior" alternative. It's no improvement for them.

One objection I encounter to this observation is that people who never exist in the first place have nothing to lose. That may be true given the status quo, but the objection is superficial and misses the point. Nonexistence is the greatest conceivable deprivation. Every lesser deprivation is a matter of degree. But this is a lost opportunity in the most absolute sense.

If, for some odd reason, it just isn't possible for someone to exist, then there's nothing to lose. There was no alternative. If, however, the alternatives are existence and nonexistence, and those are both live possibilities, then to be denied the opportunity to exist when that was feasible is a genuine loss.

To take a comparison, when a teenager dies, we consider that an "untimely" death. He "died before his time". We lament the death of the young because they had their "whole life ahead of them".

The sense of loss is based on wasted potential. Lost opportunities. The future he never had. He missed out on so much.

But if that's valid for a teenager, we can extend the same principle back in time. If a 16-year-old has so much to lose, doesn't a 6-year-old have at least as much to lose, if not more? What about a 2-year-old? Or a 6th-month old baby? Or a 3-month-old baby in utero? At each stage of premature death, there's lost potential. And the further back you go, the greater the deprivation. The greater the unrealized potential.

What about a minute before conception compared to a minute after conception? If that really different in kind? You may say that prior to conception, he doesn't exist, but isn't one minute's difference either way rather arbitrary? Since the principle concerns potential futures, it ranges along a continuum. There's no intrinsic cutoff at any point along the continuum. Suppose you make the cut at 20. But you could just as easily make cut at 19. You could make the cut a moment earlier, or an hour earlier, or a day earlier, or a week earlier, or a month earlier, or a year earlier. The sooner the cut-off, the more there is to lose. The lost opportunity is that much more extensive.

Notice, I'm not saying that possible people who never exist were wronged or harmed by never existing. But there's a weighty sense in which some people are better off existing than not existing. Given the opportunity, they'd enjoy that.

Before an atheist complains about how God could make a better world, the atheist needs to think several moves deep. Like a chess game, changing one move changes subsequent moves.

For God so loved the worlds

In general, Christian philosophers and apologists are hostile to the multiverse, because that appeal is often used to nullify the fine-tuning argument or the strong anthropic principle. Two notable exceptions are Don Page and Jeff Zweerink.

I don't object to the idea of a multiverse. By that I mean I don't think there's anything antecedently unfitting about God creating an ensemble in which alternate timelines play out.

The problem is when a multiverse is derived from a particular interpretation of quantum mechanics. The theological problem with the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is that rather than having a selection of parallel worlds based on divine wisdom and benevolence, you have an indiscriminate totality based on physical determinism. The result is that many parallel worlds will suffer from pervasive gratuitous evil. If every physical possibility happens, then there will be actual universes in which everybody is damned. Fallen worlds without redemption. Fallen worlds with no compensatory goods. I think that's incompatible with divine wisdom and benevolence.

Why doesn't God do more?

An issue in theodicy is how often God should intervene. In principle, that ranges along a continuum from absolute nonintervention to constant intervention to prevent evil or make the situation better.

Here's the basic argument: if it's not good for God to intervene all the time, then the degree of divine intervention is bound to be arbitrary. Like the sorites paradox. Unless God ought to intervene constantly, he could step in one more time or one less time, and the cut off is arbitrary. Anything short of constant intervention will be arbitrary. Yes, he could have done it one more time, but where does that stop. If he could step in one more time, he could step in two more times, or one less time, or two less times. There is no logical tipping point where a little less is too little and a little more is just enough.

Now, I think that's somewhat simplistic. Just about every intervention or nonintervention will cause a chain reaction. It makes a difference in terms of what future eventuates. It's not arbitrary in that respect. But it is arbitrary in the other respect.

Life is a gift, not a given

Yesterday, on Facebook, Gregory Shane Morris posted the following back to back quotes:

[If I met God] I'd say, bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain?

– Stephen Fry

[When I was an atheist] my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too-- for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist--in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless--I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality--namely my idea of justice--was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.

– C. S. Lewis

To which I responded:

i) Lewis is using a good transcendental argument.

ii) That said, there's a more direct response. It's true that God could eliminate cancer. Problem is, eliminating certain natural evils eliminates certain people in the process—whose existence is dependence on the existence of natural evils.

Just about every life has a snowball effect. Take a child who dies of cancer. Say he goes to heaven. Say the parents create a "replacement" child. The replacement child wouldn't exist if his older sibling hadn't died young. So his untimely death results in two lives—his own life and the life of his sibling. That's a good that wouldn't happen in a cancer-free world. Tragedies can be a source of good.

A child dying of cancer is undeniably tragic, but atheists consider that in artificial isolation, yet human lives aren't compartmentalized. Consider a few alternate timelines. In one timeline a boy doesn't die of cancer. He grows up, marries a girl, and fathers three children by his wife. And they in turn marry when they grow up, and have kids.

Conversely, suppose he dies from cancer at age 10. That girl doesn't marry him. She marries someone else, and has kids by a different husband. So there are winners and losers on either scenario.

Or suppose the boy doesn't die of cancer. He has a great-grandson who kills a pedestrian in a drunk driving accident. Had the boy died in childhood, that person four generations down the line wouldn't be killed by a drunk driver who was the boy's descendent.

In a fallen world, you have goods that are nested in evils. For God to remove that evil removes the attendant good. That may be a better world in one or more respects, but a worse world in one or more respects.

iii) Untimely death underscores the fact, as nothing else can, that life is a gift, not a given.

Would a good God prevent WWII?

As I discuss from time to time, atheists raise contradictory objections to Christianity. Here's another example:

- i) On the one hand, atheists say that if there were an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God, no child would ever die of cancer (or whatever).
- ii) On the other hand, atheists say that if there were an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God, then horrendous evils like WWII would never occur.

But let's think about that for a moment. What would be the simplest way to prevent WWII? If Hitler died as a child, or his would-be mother or his would-be grandmother, then there'd be no Hitler, no Third Reich, no WWII. The death of Hitler as an infant, or any of his linear ancestors as infants, would preempt WWII at one stroke.

So, if you think God ought to prevent WWII, then God ought to let children die of cancer (or whatever). Namely, children whose existence will be a necessary condition for WWII to eventuate. That's the most economical preventive measure. One death to save millions.

(I'm not endorsing consequentialism. I'm just responding to the atheist on his own grounds.)

And while that's just one example, the same can be said for genocidal dictators generally. Therefore, a consistent atheist can't object in principle to the death of children. They can't object to God permitting atrocities whose occurrence depends on the perpetrator or one of his lineal forebears surviving to adulthood while they simultaneously object to God permitting the death of children in principle.

Conversely, we could turn that around. Suppose Hitler (or one of his lineal ancestors) had a life-threatening illness as a child. And suppose God let the child die. That would forestall WWII.

Would the world be better off in that event? That depends. From what I've read, the reason we developed the bomb was fear that Germany would get the bomb first. Indeed, they had a head start. As it turns out, their experiments were a dead-end, but we didn't know that at the time. Because we were afraid they might beat us to the punch, FDR authorized the Manhattan Project.

Suppose, though, Hitler never existed because he or one of his lineal forebears died in childhood. That would sap the urgency for us to develop the bomb. Absent that catalyst, what if Russia or China got the bomb before we did. They could then use that as nuclear blackmail to impose Maoism or Stalinism worldwide. And that would be even worse than WWII.

For atheists, if children die, that's evidence for the nonexistence of God. Yet if some children don't die (e.g. baby Mao, Pol Pot, Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin)—resulting in massive, horrific evils—that's evidence for the nonexistence of God. But in that case, atheists have contradictory objections. Letting children die disproves his existence while not letting children die disproves his existence!

There's the further paradox that if God preempted some massive atrocity by permitting the perpetrator (or a lineal forebear) to die in childhood, there'd be no evidence that God preempted that eventuality. God never gets credit for a nonevent. For all we know, God has, in fact, prevented many a Mao, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot from rising to power because they died in childhood. No one remembers because they didn't live to do anything memorable.

City on the edge of forever

To set the stage, let's begin with a definition:

Skeptical theism is the view that God exists but that we should be skeptical of our ability to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance. In particular, says the skeptical theist, we should not grant that our inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not God might have a good reason for doing or allowing something. If there is a God, he knows much more than we do about the relevant facts, and thus it would not be surprising at all if he has reasons for doing or allowing something that we cannot fathom.

If skeptical theism is true, it appears to undercut the primary argument for atheism, namely the argument from evil. This is because skeptical theism provides a reason to be skeptical of a crucial premise in the argument from evil, namely the premise that asserts that at least some of the evils in our world are gratuitous. If we are not in a position to tell whether God has a reason for allowing any particular instance of evil, then we are not in a position to judge whether any of the evils in our world are gratuitous. And if we cannot tell whether any of the evils in our world are gratuitous, then we cannot appeal to the existence of gratuitous evil to conclude that God does not exist.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/skept-th/#H1>

Now let's quote an atheist:

Jason Thibodeau

We make judgements about the value of things; i.e., that something is good or that it is bad. And we make judgements about the relative value of pairs of things or groups of things; that one thing is better (or worse) than something else.

In this case, I don't see how we can believe that the suffering of a child who is dying of leukemia can be either good or necessary for some greater purpose; a purpose which, incidentally, is unknown to us. One of the judgments that we make is that each human life is of infinite value. What greater purpose could the suffering and death of a child be necessary for the realization of? Our conviction that such suffering would be a tragedy is a manifestation of our judgement that it serves no greater purpose.

Suppose such judgments are by and large accurate. When we judge that suffering is bad, we are correct; when we say that happiness is good, we are correct. When we judge that the loss of a life is worse than the loss of a wedding ring, we are correct.

Suppose, on the other hand, that such judgements are not, by and large, accurate. When we judge that something is bad, we are often wrong; when we judge that something is good, we are often wrong. This might be true because there are valuable things the existence and magnitude of which we are ignorant. The existence of such valuable things might provide God with morally sufficient reasons to allow the occurrence of things that we judge to be horrors (such as a child dying of leukemia). But if this is true, then obviously we cannot trust our judgements about which things are good and which are bad and which things are better or worse than other things. It follows that, for all we would know, the death and suffering of children is good. For all we would know, war is good. For all we would know, famine is good.

<http://randalrauser.com/2016/12/god-answered-prayer-response-justin-schieber/#comment-3066351441>

This goes awry in so many different ways:

i) There's absolutely no basis in secularism for the claim that "each human life is of infinite value". For that matter, I don't think that's true from a Christian perspective, either. You can say each human life is valuable without saying each human life is infinitely valuable. What does that even mean? Moreover, what's wrong with saying some lives are less valuable than others? What about the possibility that some people devalue their lives through their misconduct? Take serial killers.

ii) On the one hand, Thibodeau says "When we judge that the loss of a life is worse than the loss of a wedding ring, we are correct." On the other hand, he said "we make judgements about the relative value of groups of things; that one thing is better (or worse) than something else." Notice that his denial is inconsistent with his prefatory observation. It's not, in the first instance, a question of comparing a lost life with a lost wedding ring, but by his own admission, making comparative judgments about "groups of things." Not an isolated comparison between a life and a ring, but comparing the connected goods and evils between different chains of events. Sure, taken by itself, a wedding ring may be of trivial value compared to a human life, but what other things are linked to the respective chains of events?

iii) And while, in general, a human life is more valuable than a wedding ring, some people can forfeit their prima facie right to life. Take serial killers.

iv) Likewise, it can be simplistic to say something is either good or evil. Sometimes that's a false dichotomy. Once again, we need to distinguish between discrete events and chains of events. A child dying of cancer is generally evil in and of itself. I say "generally" because, if the child is Stalin, we might judge that differently.

However, something evil can be a source of something good. But the fact that it produces a second-order good doesn't make the evil good. Rather, it means we're assessing the good of the whole as well as the good (or evil) of the parts. It's not merely an atomistic assessment of each particular incident, but judging the package. The package may have goods while some individual elements are evil. And some of those goods may be contingent on some of those evils. So you're rendering a collective judgment.

And a collective judgment can be a qualified judgment. The resultant goods don't make the evils good. But it isn't just evil. Rather it's a combination of goods and evils. And their interdependent. You don't say it's better than it is. But it has an overall value that's distinct from the individual elements.

Take marriage. Even in good marriages, bad things happen. Couples say and do inconsiderate things. But that doesn't mean it can't be a good marriage.

v) We can judge a bad thing to be bad in itself. But our judgment may be shortsighted if what's bad leads to a future good, of which we're ignorant. It's possible to have trustworthy judgments about the present qua present, but have untrustworthy judgments about the future in relation to the present.

vi) By the same token, retrospective judgments can be very different from how we viewed events at the time. Take people whose plans fall through. At the time, that may seem to be disastrous. But in some cases, looking back on the incident 10 years later, they realize that it would have been disastrous if their plans hadn't fallen through.

vii) Thibodeau asserts that "Our conviction that such suffering would be a tragedy is a manifestation of our judgement that it serves no greater purpose." But that's a non sequitur. An incident can be tragic for some people, but benefit others.

viii) There's nothing esoteric about the notion that, for all we know, something which seems to have no redeeming value at present may generate unforeseen goods in the future. It's not unique to theodicy or skeptical theism to point out that because we're in the dark about future consequences, we lack the necessary perspective to predict and assess what good may come of some event. It isn't special pleading for a Christian apologist to make that observation, for that's a general truth.

ix) Take a famous episode from Star Trek: "The City on the Edge of Forever". In that episode, the Enterprise investigates a planet that's emitting time waves. One wave rocks the ship, causing Dr. McCoy to accidentally inject himself, making him psychotic. He beams down to the planet, with Spock and Kirk in hot pursuit. But they fail to

intercept him before he steps into a time portal. At that point they lose contact with the Enterprise, because McCoy did something in the past that erased the timeline from which they came. So they step into the time portal, and come out the other end in New York City, during the Depression. They must figure out what McCoy did to change the future, and prevent it, to restore the original timeline.

They go to a soup kitchen and befriend a pretty, idealistic social worker. Tweaking his tricorder, Spock discovers that in the future, she will lead a pacifist movement which will keep the US out of WWII, resulting in the Nazi conquest of the world. In the original timeline, she died before that happened. So they must prevent McCoy from saving her life, to avert that dire outcome, and restore the original timeline.

When Kirk sees that she's about to be run over, not only does he not intervene to stop it, but he prevents McCoy from intervening to stop it. To an onlooker, his behavior is unconscionable. She was an admirable woman. What possible justification could there be for letting her die in a traffic accident? To McCoy, Kirk's behavior is inexcusable. But the audience knows something McCoy doesn't.

x) In attempting to save her life, McCoy did the right thing, given the information available to him. In refusing to save her life, Kirk did the right thing, given the information available to him. McCoy acted on his prima facie duty, but that was morally overridden by Kirk's superior viewpoint.

That principle isn't distinctive to theodicy or skeptical theism. In making morally responsible decisions, we must often take into account the impact of our actions. That interjects an element of uncertainty into decision-making, for the future is unpredictable to some degree, and increasingly unpredictable the further it proceeds.

This doesn't mean results are the sole consideration in decision-making. But it's often a morally salient consideration.

xi) Some time-travel scenarios may seem to be fatalistic. Was it McCoy's temporal incursion that changed the timeline, or was it the temporal incursion of Spock and Kirk that changed the timeline? Should they do something or nothing? If they follow him into the past, is that what changes the past? What if their effort to rectify the problem is the very thing that instigates the problem in the first place? (In the actual episode, that's made clear, but it's easy to imagine a variation in which it's not.)

If they don't know in advance, they must make their decision based on the information at hand. In the nature of the case, we can't take unknown variables into consideration. So that doesn't figure in our deliberations.

That's analogous to the duties of human agents. By contrast, God has the entire context in view. In that respect, what's right for God might be wrong for you and me, or vice versa.

xii) In addition, because God isn't human, he can do some things that might be morally or psychological harmful if humans did it. Suppose a house burglar breaks into my home. I shoot him in self-defense. I can live with that.

By contrast, suppose my teenage son, through no fault of his own, is prone to psychotic episodes. During one of these, he comes at me with a butcher knife. Suppose I'm armed. I could shoot him in self-defense, but I can't bring myself to risk killing my son. I could never live with myself if that happened. So I take the risk of being killed rather than taking the risk of killing him.

Suppose, though, I have a friend with me who's armed. He shoots him instead. Because my friend doesn't have the same emotional investment in my son that I have, he can do something I can't face up to in that situation.

Dual control

I'd like to expand on an illustration that atheist Richard Gale used in his debate with Alvin Plantinga on the problem of evil. Plantinga made a number of good points during the debate, but he's committed to the freewill defense. I think some of his insights are separable from the freewill defense. But I share Gale's view that the freewill defense is implausible.

Before my time, training cars for driver's ed had two steering wheels. But that's an expensive modification, so by the time I took driver's ed, a million years ago, the car had just an extra brake pedal on the passenger side.

Suppose a car had both two steering wheels and two brake pedals. What is more, the occupant in the passenger seat could override the driver. So the car has dual control. Normally, the driver is in control, but the passenger can take control. In that case, the driving instructor shares responsibility for whatever happens.

Now, we could develop that illustration in either a Calvinist direction or freewill theist direction. From a Calvinist standpoint, the driver would be in control in the sense of ordinary providence. Natural agents and agencies doing what they were predestined to do. Natural agents and agencies having genuine causal powers within the world. Intramundane causality. Of course, God would still be ultimately responsible for everything that happens. But God doesn't directly control everything that happens. Rather, he normally exerts control through intervening media.

From a freewill theist standpoint, the driver would either be the ultimate source of his own actions, or able to choose an alternate course of action in exactly the same situation, or both. The future is indeterminate.

(Mind you, I don't think the future is indeterminate on either Molinism or simple foreknowledge versions of freewill theism, but that's an argument for another day.)

Suppose the student is approaching a red light, but he's not slowing down. Maybe he's distracted.

However, because the instructor has an unobstructed view of the intersection, he can see that there are no other cars or pedestrians approaching the intersection, so it's safe to let the student run a red light. He could prevent the student from doing so, but the student needs to learn from his own mistakes, since the instructor won't always be by his side to direct him or warn him.

And that's analogous to God "allowing" evil. If God constantly prevented us from having to experience the consequences of our own actions, we'd be very thoughtless, aimless, and inconsiderate. We couldn't ever be harmed or harm others. That would stultify our moral development. Make life too easy.

And that's consistent with predestination, for predestination isn't fatalism. Humans are genuine agents. We have minds. We deliberate. We made decisions based on reasons and desires. A "deterministic" world is a cause-and-effect world.

Let's resume the illustration. Suppose the student is approaching a red light, but he's not slowing down. Only this time, the instructor can see that pedestrians are in the crosswalk. Yet he lets the student run over a pedestrian.

Although the instructor wasn't technically driving at the time, because he wasn't steering, because he didn't have his foot on the gas pedal, we'd normally say he was blameworthy for his failure to prevent the accident. Indeed, he was more blameworthy than the actual driver, since the driver was an inexperienced student.

Moreover, by failing to intervene, the instructor ensured the accident—just as if he personally took the wheel and deliberately ran over the pedestrian. And even if it wasn't a sure thing, it was highly likely to happen, so he can't use uncertainty as an excuse.

Just to say he let it happen is not a moral justification. Indeed, the *prima facie* problem is precisely that he just let it happen, even though it lay within his power to prevent it. That illustrates the inadequacy of a freewill defense that acts as if permission alone is a sufficient exculpatory condition.

Suppose, though, there was more to his inaction that meets the eye. Suppose the pedestrian was a suicide bomber or a schoolyard sniper, just a block away from his target. That changes everything. Yet to an outside observer, the instructor's failure to stop the car appears to be morally inexcusable.

Dropping the picturesque illustration, the fact that God doesn't intercede to avert some tragedy or catastrophe may be inscrutable and reprehensible to an onlooker. Perhaps he can't imagine what good reason God might have to refrain. Yet that's because the observer is judging the event from his own timeframe, rather than the future.

Can God stop evil?

Christianity teaches that whenever evil is done, God had ample warning. He could have prevented it, but He didn't. He could have stopped it midway, but He didn't. He could have rescued the victims of the evil, but - at least in many cases - He didn't. In short, God is an accessory before, during, and after the fact to countless evil deeds, great and small.

http://www.andrewmbailey.com/dkl/Evil_Freedoms_Sake.pdf

There's a difference between preventing an event and stopping an event in progress. In predestinarian traditions (e.g. Thomism, Augustinianism, Jansenism, Calvinism), there's a sense in which God cannot stop evil midway. In predestinarian traditions, everything happens according to plan. Once God implements a particular plan for the world, the series of events is unstoppable.

In that sense, although God can't stop a chain of events in midstream, God can prevent the outcome by implementing a different master plan. But once that plan is in place, everything happens like falling dominoes. (The same holds true for Molinism.)

This doesn't rule out petitionary prayer, for that, too, figures in the master plan.

Selective intuition

In addition to Jerry Walls, I recently responded to another commenter on his blog. To quote myself:

Although the Holocaust is a cliché, it's a convenient example of a paradigm-evil. But I could easily use a different example. Take a refugee camp for Cambodians. What if Jerry tells that God would not be good unless he loves the Khmer Rouge?

My point is not that this necessarily disproves the universality of God's love. My point, rather, is that Jerry's facile appeal to "fundamental moral intuitions" is context-dependent and person-variable. What seems to be morally intuitive often turns on the particular example we use to illustrate the claim. Change the audience, change the illustration, you may get a radically different reaction.

Jerry himself presumes to speak on behalf of others when he appeals to moral intuition. He acts as though everyone naturally shares his intuition, and it's only prior commitment to Calvinism (why not Thomism?) that forces some people to deny what in their hear of hearts they know to be true. But that's trivially easy to counterexample.

"Let Jerry explain to Orthodox Jews that he believes God did not want the Nazis to do what they did because He loves all people and does not want the Nazis to do evil or their victims to suffer evil."

And let Jerry explain to Orthodox Jews why the Arminian God did so much less than Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stop the Nazis.

"Let Steve Hays then explain to them that God willed that the Nazis should be evil and go to hell, and that they should do to Jews the evil things that they did, and that God also willed those Jews who did not believe in Jesus to go to hell after enduring hell on earth from the Nazis."

i) There are no nice theodicies. The problem of evil isn't, in the first instance, with any particular theodicy of evil, but with the fact of evil.

ii) It's not willing evil for its own sake, as an end in itself. Rather, willing evil to achieve certain second-order goods. Goods unobtainable apart from evil. In a fallen world, just about everyone exists as a direct or indirect result of evil. Remove the evil and you remove everyone whose existence is the side-effect or end-result of some evil or evils in the past. In a sinless world, other people would take their place. So there are tradeoffs.

iii) Your final objection is not to Calvinism in particular, but Christian exclusivism in general.

iv) There's an asymmetry between my position and Jerry's. Unlike Jerry's glib, selective appeal to "fundamental moral intuitions," I haven't predicated my own position on allegedly universal moral intuitions. Therefore, the fact that Jewish listeners might take umbrage at my theological alternative doesn't turn the tables on my own position.

v) We walk a tightrope when we present a theodicy. On the one hand, some theologians like Cornelius Berkouwer and David Bentley Hart find the very notion of a theodicy blasphemous. For them, any justification for the existence of evil makes evil justifiable. There's no evil, however horrendous, that can't be excused. It can't be as bad as it seems. They think that sanctifies evil.

Mind you, the implication of their position renders the occurrence of evil inherently inexcusable. God had no justification for what happened. But the logic of that position is to either deny God's existence or God's goodness. So that's clearly unacceptable from a Christian standpoint. It's a question of locating ourselves on the right side of the knife edge when we formulate a theodicy.

vi) Keep in mind that, in some measure, the complaint cuts both ways. Maimonides thought Christians were heretics and idolaters (due to their belief in the Trinity, divine Incarnation, and deity of Christ). Those are damnable sins. Just as you have Christian exclusivism, you can have Jewish exclusivism.

vii) Although it may offend some listeners to say that everything happens for a reason, the alternative is to say that some things, especially the very worst things, happen for no good reason whatsoever.

Yet that makes the suffering and death of victims meaningless. But if they think about it, how is that any consolation to the survivors?

People are often conflicted about evil. It may seem pointless, yet they want to know why it happened. Well, it can't be both. Either it has some ultimate purpose or not.

God, evil, and evidence

Nick Trakakis and Graham Oppy raise the same objection:

Firstly, the theist may agree that Rowe's argument provides some evidence against theism, but she may go on to argue that there is independent evidence in support of theism which outweighs the evidence against theism. In fact, if the theist thinks that the evidence in support of theism is quite strong, she may employ what Rowe (1979: 339) calls "the G.E. Moore shift" (compare Moore 1953: ch.6). This involves turning the opponent's argument on its head, so that one begins by denying the very conclusion of the opponent's argument. The theist's counter-argument would then proceed as follows:

Although this strategy has been welcomed by many theists as an appropriate way of responding to evidential arguments from evil (for example, Mavrodes 1970: 95-97, Evans 1982: 138-39, Davis 1987: 86-87, Basinger 1996: 100-103) – indeed, it is considered by Rowe to be "the theist's best response" (1979: 339) – it is deeply problematic in a way that is often overlooked. The G.E. Moore shift, when employed by the theist, will be effective only if the grounds for accepting not-(3) [the existence of the theistic God] are more compelling than the grounds for accepting not-(1) [the existence of gratuitous evil]. The problem here is that the kind of evidence that is typically invoked by theists in order to substantiate the existence of God – for example, the cosmological and design arguments, appeals to religious experience – does not even aim to establish the existence of a perfectly good being, or else, if it does have such an aim, it faces formidable difficulties in fulfilling it. But if this is so, then the theist may well be unable to offer any evidence at all in support of not-(3), or at least any evidence of a sufficiently strong or cogent nature in support of not-(3). The G.E. Moore shift, therefore, is not as straightforward a strategy as it initially seems.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/#H5>

...it becomes clear that the vast majority of considerations that have been offered as reasons for believing in God can be of little assistance to the person who is trying to resist the argument from evil. For most of them provide, at best, very tenuous grounds for any conclusion concerning the moral character of any omnipotent and omniscient being who may happen to exist, and almost none of them provides any support for the hypothesis that there is an omnipotent and omniscient being who is also morally perfect.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#AppPosEviForExiGod>

I find their objection rather odd:

i) The argument from evil is primarily an argument against God's existence, not God's benevolence. So evidence of God's existence, apart from the question of evil, certainly seems germane to the overall force of the argument from evil.

ii) Perhaps the objection is that in the argument from evil, the concept of God is the concept of a benevolent God. Therefore, the argument targets that particular concept of God. Unless he's benevolent, he doesn't exist.

a) But although that distinction may be useful for analytical clarity, it artificially separates evidence for God's existence from alleged counterevidence based on evil, as if the latter discounts the former. It's not as if atheists believe in God, only they think he's evil. It's not as if they think there's evidence that counts for God's existence, as well as evidence that counts against his benevolence, so they affirm the existence of a malevolent God. Hence, they can't use the alleged evidence of unjustifiable evils to simply cancel out evidence for God's existence.

b) Assuming that God's existence and benevolence are inseparable, isn't that reversible? If there's evidence for God's existence, then this might indicate that evil, even if it constitutes some prima facie evidence against God's existence, must be counterbalanced by other lines of evidence. Put another way, the incongruity is only apparent.

c) Apropos (a-b), evidence for God's existence could be combined with skepticism theism to circumvent the argument from evil. Even if (ex hypothesi), evil constitutes prima facie evidence against God's benevolence, if there's positive evidence for God's existence, then why not take that to indicate that God is, in fact, benevolent, God has a morally sufficient reason for evil, even if we can't discern it?

Calvinism and the God of love

Jerry Walls did a lecture several weeks ago on "Calvinism and the God of Love":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IBUtF8EtAo>

He and I then had an impromptu Facebook debate about his lecture.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, you quoted the WSC, and noted that it omits to mention the attribute of divine love. Why didn't you quote the WCF, which, among other things, says God is "most loving" (as well as "gracious" and "merciful," "abundant in goodness")? I hope you weren't attempting to deceive your audience by selectively quoting from Reformed documents. So how can we account for your conspicuous oversight?

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty (WCF 2:1).

I'm struck by Jerry's insinuation that Calvin can't bring himself to affirm God's love. Certainly that's the impression that Jerry fosters through his selection quotations. Jerry makes a big deal about the fact that Calvin doesn't quote 1 Jn 4:8,16 in the Institutes. Keep in mind that there are about 55,000 verses in the Bible, so it's hardly surprising or suspect if even a systematic theology omits many verses. But in addition, consider what Calvin does say, which Jerry conveniently leaves out:

Thus he is moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace...Therefore, by his love God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ. Indeed, 'because he first loved us' (1 Jn 4:19), he afterward reconciles us to himself.

For this reason, Paul says that the love with which God embraced us "before the creation of the world" was established and grounded in Christ [Eph 1:4-5]...God declared his love toward us in giving his only begotten-Son to die [Jn 3:16]...I shall quote a passage of Augustine where the very thing is taught: "God's love," says he, "is incomprehensible and unchangeable. For it was not after we were reconciled to him through the blood of his Son that he began to love us. Rather, he has loved us before the world was created"..."God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" [Rom 5:8] Institutes 16.2.3-4 [Ford Lewis Battles trans.].

JERRY WALLS

It is not a comprehensive list of all Reformed sources, and I said it is only suggestive. The fact that love did not make the short list is suggestive since the NT explicitly says "God is love," unlike some of the other things that made the list. My claim that it is suggestive of Calvinist priorities is a modest claim, and my case hardly hinges on it.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, you said a consistent Calvinist may only deny #1 or #3 of your six-point argument. But that's not the case. A consistent Calvinist may also deny #5. According to that proposition, "God could (properly) give all persons irresistible grace and thereby determine all persons to be saved."

Problem with that proposition is that "all persons" is indefinite. A world in which everyone has irresistible grace will not have the same set of people as a world in which only some people have irresistible grace. I can spell that out if you need me to.

In that event, "all persons" is an ambiguous or shifting referent. The Calvinist God cannot determine all the same persons to be saved.

So you're implicitly comparing and contrasting two different possible worlds with different sets of people in each. It's not a case of God either saving all the same people or God only saving some of the same people. For if God gives everyone in the past irresistible grace, that will produce a different future than if God refrains from giving everyone in the past irresistible grace.

JERRY WALLS

Did you not listen to the whole lecture before criticizing? I discussed at length the Calvinist option to deny #5.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, the shoe is on the other foot. Note that I'm raising a different objection to #5 that you discussed at length. You discussed Piper's position. I'm not using Piper's argument. The difference isn't hard to see.

JERRY WALLS

I also discussed Hart, who says: "In short, if Calvinism is true, it seems perfectly easy for God to create a world in which universalism is true--a world in which everyone accepts God's offer of salvation and goes to heaven." Indeed, many Calvinists think that is the actual world, that all will be saved, that in the long run God will break the resistance of all persons. No reason God could not give postmortem irresistible grace to those who did not receive it in this life.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry's you're still not following the argument. I didn't deny that God could save "everybody". But it's not the same "everybody".

Suppose God gives everyone in the world irresistible grace. That will affect how they behave. For instance, there will be far less promiscuity, fornication, adultery, war, murder.

Giving everyone irresistible grace begins in the past. That affects who will be conceived. Conception is about who mates with whom. Conception is about timing. A different day or hour, and a different person is conceived. If everyone in the past had irresistible grace, that would impact mating patterns, among other things.

Moreover, little changes in the past generate big changes in the future. Changing past variables has a snowball effect.

Therefore, it's inaccurate to suggest a comparison in which you have two possible worlds with the same set of people, where God saves only some in one possible world but everyone in the other possible world. That's impossible.

JERRY WALLS

My only concern is the actual world, and in the actual world, a God who determines all things and has infinite power and creative resources could eventually determine the salvation of all, in something like the way Talbott or Marilyn Adams have argued. Or if not that, he could have determined a different set of people, all to be saved in the course of this life. Those in this world who are not included in that world would have been none the poorer since they would ever have existed.

STEVE HAYS

You say your only concern is the actual world, but you're comparing alternate outcomes: one in which everybody is saved in contrast to one in which only some are saved. That's not just about the actual world, but which possible world will become actual.

STEVE HAYS

So you take the Epicurean position that nonexistence is not a deprivation?

JERRY WALLS

It is not a deprivation for those who have never existed at all.

STEVE HAYS

If nonexistence is not a deprivation, does that mean a world in which a billion people exist, all of whom are saved, is no better than a world in which only 10 people exist, all of whom are saved?

Given Jerry's Epicurean view of nonexistence, I wonder how, if at all, he'd be able to argue against the antinatalistic position of David Benatar.

JERRY WALLS

Those in this world who are not included in that world would have been none the poorer since they would ever have existed.

STEVE HAYS

i) Once again, Jerry, you seem to have a bad habit of failing to distinguish between an external critique and an internal critique. When you say the Calvinist God could save everyone, that implies that you're attempting to assess Calvinism on its own terms.

But when you turn around and say "it is not a deprivation for those who have never existed at all," or "those in this world who are not included in that world would have been none the poorer since they would ever have existed," you suddenly shift gears to assessing the issue by your own standards. Yet that's confused.

If you going to say the Calvinist God could save everyone, the question at issue isn't, in the first instance, whether you think nonexistence is a deprivation, but whether you've made an accurate statement about the implications of Calvinism.

ii) Apropos (i), let's revert to my illustration. The time-traveler wants to save his contemporaries from disaster, but try as he might, he can't, since changing the past erases the future in which they exist. He can never save just those people. At best, he can takes actions that will replace them. A future without that disaster. A future without those particular people.

By the same token, the Calvinist God can't save everyone in the sense of saving the very same people. Rather, in order for the Calvinist God to save everyone, he must cancel out the world in which he only saves some people, and substitute a different world with different people. For if God grants everyone irresistible grace, that produces a different alternate future. At the very least, you need to introduce that distinction into your argument.

iii) That said, let's consider the issue from your own perspective. Your dismissive attitude regarding nonexistence is odd coming from a proud granddad. Are you prepared to look your granddaughters in the eye and say to them, "If the world didn't include you, if you never existed, you'd be none the poorer!" Are you prepared to tell your mother that?

iv) Likewise, your dismissive attitude is odd for someone who treats divine love as God's most important attribute. Suppose God knows that if he creates this or that possible person, they will enjoy eternal bliss. (And that's a supposition of classical theism.) And no overriding good will be lost if he does so.

Is it not more loving for God to create them so that they will experience eternal bliss that not to create them? If you don't think that's an expression of divine love, why do you think God created heavenbound humans in the first place?

v) One problem with your Epicurean view of nonexistence is your failure to distinguish between the perspective of a nonentity and the perspective of an outside observer. Even though the nonentity has no viewpoint at the time, an outside observer can have a viewpoint regarding what would be beneficial for the nonentity if it were to exist.

To take a comparison: a patient in a coma may have no viewpoint, no awareness of what's good for him, but an outside observer can act in the patient's best interest. Conversely, a rock exists, but lacks even a potential viewpoint. So existence, per se, is not the salient differential factor.

Surely you appreciate the fact that lost opportunities can be a deprivation. Not just losing what you had, but what you might have had.

JERRY WALLS

Yes, lost opportunities for actual people is a deprivation, which is why it makes no sense to be indifferent to the hope of heaven as a future possibility on the ground that there were goods you missed out on before you ever existed. But those who never exist at all cannot regret either missing out on future goods or past ones. Actual people could, in a sense, have regrets on their behalf I suppose, like a married couple without children might mourn children who "might have been." But those possible children themselves suffer no loss because merely possible people suffer nothing.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, a comatose patient may have no regrets. He lacks the presence of mind to entertain regrets. A person with senile dementia may have no regrets for the same reason.

You're confusing subjective awareness of missing out on future goods with the objective fact of missing out on future goods. Those are separate issues. You can't collapse one into the other.

A lost opportunity is a loss. A counterfactual loss. Not to exist in the first place, if existence resulted in eternal bliss, is total loss. Not just a particular missed opportunity, but missing out on any and all opportunities for future goods.

Your position is at war with your claim that God was justified in creating people he knew were hellbound for the benefit of people he knew were heavenbound. Your cost/benefit analysis is based on possible persons and hypothetical outcomes.

JERRY WALLS

Not all possible, all feasible, or creatable....which worlds are feasible depends on which free choices we would make if the world was actualized.

STEVE HAYS

You say it as if that's an established fact. But wasn't the notion of infeasible worlds just a postulate that Plantinga floated to deflect the logical problem of evil? The fact that his postulate is conceivable doesn't make it true or even plausible. It's not entailed by freewill theism.

JERRY WALLS

If Calvinism is true, it seems perfectly easy for God to create a world in which universalism is true."

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, even if (ex hypothesi) some possible worlds are infeasible, yet given the infinite number of possible worlds, it seems antecedently improbable in the extreme that there's not a single feasible world in which everyone freely goes to heaven. So why doesn't your own position suffer from the same objection you raise to Calvinism?

EDWIN WOODRUFF TAIT

Steve Hays, help me out with what you're saying about conception. It sounds as if you are saying that there are some people whom, once conceived, God cannot save. You surely aren't suggesting that whether one accepts or rejects God's grace is determined by genetics, are you? Or do you hold to a libertarian view of freedom--i.e., a kind of Molinist Calvinism in which some people would choose to accept grace in all possible worlds and others would reject it in all possible worlds? (This seems, as far as I understand it, to be Plantinga's position, but Jerry can correct me if I'm wrong.)

STEVE HAYS

No, I'm saying that in a world where God granted everyone irresistible grace, many people won't be conceived in the first place—who'd otherwise be conceived in a world where God withholds universal irresistible grace.

A world in which everyone has irresistible grace has an alternate history. As a result of irresistible grace, people have different motivations. Do different things. That changes who mates with whom. That changes the timing of events. It produces different family trees.

The situation is analogous to time-travel stories. At present, the human race has been decimated by some catastrophe. It might be a natural disaster or man-made disaster. In order to save the human race from this catastrophe, the protagonist travels back in time to change some past variable in order to avert the catastrophe. He changes the past to change the future.

He succeeds, but there are unintended consequences. By altering the past, his action radically alters the future. His action erases the future from which he came. His action erases millions or billions of people at present by erasing the timeline in which they exist(ed).

In one scenario, he keeps returning to the past in a vain quest to fine-tune the scope of his action, but preempting the future catastrophe always has the drastic side-effect of eliminating millions or billions of human lives. The dilemma is that he can't save the same people in the present by changing the past. Rather, he saves the human race by replacing the human race in the devastated timeline by a different human race in some alternate timeline.

That illustrates the equivocation in proposition #5 of Jerry's argument. There's an implicit bait-n-switch in Jerry's scenario about God saving "everybody".

EDWIN WOODRUFF TAIT

This is actually very close to my own thinking on the problem of evil. The question, of course, is what it would mean for there to be people who 'already' exist from God's point of view prior to any decision by God to give or withhold some particular kind of grace or other help. I don't think a traditional Calvinist model--or for that matter a Thomist model--can make sense of that.

STEVE HAYS

It would be a divine ideas model in which possible persons already exist in God's mind in the way fictional characters and alternate plot endings exist in the mind of a novelist. God can imagine infinitely many world histories. They exist as concepts in God's infinite, timeless mind.

If there's only one actual world, God chooses one of those possible world histories to instantiate. Or if there's something like a multiverse, then God chooses to instantiate many different timelines. Some would have some of the same people doing different things. Some would have an entirely different cast of characters.

STEVE HAYS

Another issue: in the lecture you (Jerry Walls) appeal to "fundamental moral intuitions". You said reprobation is nothing like justice".

Let's bracket reprobation for the moment and consider a different example. Suppose you were speaking in an Orthodox synagogue. Suppose Holocaust survivors were in attendance. You say God can't be good unless he loves everybody.

How do you think that would go over with an audience member like Simon Wiesenthal? Would Holocaust survivors share your "fundamental moral intuition" that God can't be good unless he loves Himmler or the Gestapo? Or would they say your position is nothing like justice?

EDWIN WOODRUFF TAIT

Actually, let's not bracket reprobation, or any other relevant consideration.

Do you, Steve Hays, believe that the Jews who died in the Holocaust, who did not believe in Jesus, went to heaven or hell?

If you believe the latter, then how the hell, quite literally, are you in a position to make any argument predicated on what would be offensive to Orthodox Jews?

STEVE HAYS

Would you direct the same question to Messianic Jews like Michael Brown, Steve Schlissel, and Charles Lee Feinberg?

It's possible for Orthodox Jews to be offended by more than one thing. Do I really need to point that out?

The fact that many Orthodox Jews might be offended by Christian exclusivism hardly negates the question of whether they'd be offended at the Arminian stipulation that to be truly good, God must love the Gestapo.

And, yes, I'm entitled to raise the question since Jerry was appealing to "fundamental moral intuitions".

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, You said if Jesus died for everybody, why does anyone need to be punished. Does that mean you're now a universalist?

JERRY WALLS

If you know anything about me, you know I am not a universalist, but I would be happy if it turns out that I am wrong.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, I was pursuing the logic of your statement. You said You said if Jesus died for everybody, why does anyone need to be punished. Since you believe in universal atonement, do you still believe in eschatological punishment? The question follows from the thrust of your own statement.

JERRY WALLS

The atonement makes the forgiveness of sins and the gift of salvation available for all persons, conditional on repentance, faith, and ultimately our cooperation in sanctification. Some, of course, may freely refuse the gift and refuse to meet the conditions.

STEVE HAYS

Didn't you imply that universal atonement renders eschatological punishment unnecessary?

JERRY WALLS

According to the Calvinist view that if Christ died for you, all your sins, past, present and future, are thereby cancelled. On THAT view, if Christ died for all, then all would be saved. But on the conditional view, his dying for all does not entail that. But you already know this.

STEVE HAYS

Jerry, there's an elementary distinction between salvation and punishment. Even if according to freewill theism, God can't save everyone, how does it follow that God must punish the lost? Again, you're the one who raised this point of tension, not me. Punting to Calvinism doesn't resolve the tension in relation to your own position.

JERRY WALLS

Their punishment consists in the misery and unhappiness that is inherent in remaining separated from the only source of happiness that exists. So long as they choose to remain separated from God, they remain unhappy.

STEVE HAYS

Let's briefly comment on some of Jerry's prooftexts.

He cited a verse from Jn 17. But Jn 17 repeatedly refers to those whom the Father chose, and gave to Son, before the world began. And that is set in contrast to those whom the Father never chose.

Jerry cited the following verses to show that God is "working toward the salvation of all"

Ezk 18:23,32; 33:11

But those passages are to, for, and about Israel and not humanity in general. So Jerry is citing them out of context.

2 Pet 3:9

But as Richard Bauckham notes, in his landmark commentary:

God's patience with his own people, delaying the final judgment to give them the opportunity of repentance, provides at least a partial answer to the problem of eschatological delay. The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish thought it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment. R. Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 312-13.

In context, it's not referring to humans in general, but God's people (Jews, Christians) in particular. Members of the new covenant community, as the counterpart to members of the old covenant community.

As, moreover, Jerry's fellow freewill theist, Gregory Boyd points out:

Why would God strive to the point of frustration to get people to do what he was certain they would never do before they were even born; namely, believe in him? Doesn't God's sincere effort to get all people to believe in him imply that it is not a foregone conclusion to God that certain people would not believe in him when he created them? Indeed, doesn't the fact that the Lord delays his return imply that neither the date of his return nor the identities of who will and will not believe are settled in God's mind ahead of time?...If this isn't what 2 Pet 3:9 explicitly teaches, what does it teach? If it is difficult for the classical view to explain why God strives

with people he is certain will not be saved, it is evil more difficult to explain why God would create these people in the first place...why a God who loves all people and who wants no one to perish would give freedom to people he is certain are going to use it to damn themselves to hell. G. Boyd," "The Open-Theist View, Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views, 29.

1 Tim 2:4-6; Tit 2:11

i) Why does Jerry think those are Arminian prooftexts rather than universalist prooftexts?

ii) In addition, consider what these scholars say:

The purpose of the reference to "all people," which continues the theme of universality in this passage, is sometimes misconstrued. The reference is made mainly with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles in mind (v7). But the reason behind Paul's justification of this universal mission is almost certainly the false teaching, with its Torah-centered approach to life that included either an exclusivist bent or a downplaying of the Gentile mission...Paul's focus is on building a people of God who incorporate all people regardless of ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds... P. Towner, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, 177-178.

It may be that they [false teachers] were consumed with genealogies because they restricted salvation along certain ethnic lines (1 Tim 1:4)...When Paul says that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) and that Christ was the ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6), he may be responding to some who excluded Gentiles from salvation for genealogical reasons...Paul counters Jewish teachers (Tit 10:10,14-15; 3:9) who construct genealogies to exclude some from salvation. T. Schreiner, Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ, 184-85.

These problems disappear if we accept the other possible translation, "to be precise, namely, I mean." "All" is thus limited here to believers, I. H. Marshall, Pastoral Epistles, 556.

STEVE HAYS

A final point: you quote Matthew Hart saying the reprobate are instrumentally useful.

But you yourself think the damned are instrumentally useful.

Among feasible worlds, God must accept some hellbound sinners for the benefit of heavenbound sinners. The damned shouldn't cheat others out of the opportunity to go to heaven.

Happy-talk Arminians

I recently got into an impromptu debate with Jerry Walls on Facebook. He and I rarely interact directly:

JERRY WALLS Next thing you know you are going to be telling us God loves all the little children...

STEVE HAYS Well, Jerry, there are countless children around the world who don't have loving parents. So you can't very well extrapolate from happy families to neglected or abused children.

JERRY WALLS Yeah, I don't think God's love is contingent on whether or not parents are loving. I think he desires and will enable their ultimate well being and happiness whether they have warm hearted parents or not.

STEVE HAYS In which case you can't analogize from one example.

It's my impression that Jerry has led a pretty charmed life. So it seems self-evident to him that God loves everyone. He acts as though no one can really doubt God's universal love. If they deny it, they must be faking.

That reflects a profound lack of empathy on Jerry's part. There are countless people whose lives have been devastated by horrendous tragedy. It's not intuitively obvious to them that there's an all-loving God.

Now, I'm not suggesting that that settles the issue. But it certainly figures in one's plausibility structure.

JERRY WALLS Not so on several accounts. I can easily see why some people's experience would make it hard to believe God loves all persons. But what I cannot see if Christ reveals the heart of God, and if God is love in his essential nature, and is perfectly good, how he could not love all the little children, and everyone else for that matter. As John Wesley frankly acknowledged, (and I agree) it is hard to believe that God is perfectly loving to all, based on empirical observation of the suffering in the world. See opening paragraphs of "The General Deliverance."

STEVE HAYS But you always coast along with the same glib happy-talk message, like a motivational speaker. Never once have I seen you seriously attempt to put yourself in the shoes of someone's whose experience is radically different from your own. You presume to speak on behalf of everyone. That deep down, everyone sees things the same way you do ("In your heart you know he's right").

So are you now admitting that your ubiquitous appeals to intuition are bogus? That your real position isn't based on intuition, but your interpretation of the Gospel?

JERRY WALLS And I very much realize Calvinists do NOT see things like I do.

STEVE HAYS Jerry, I'm not just talking about Calvinists.

"But what I cannot see if Christ reveals the heart of God..."

Well, when Christ was here on earth he did a whole lot more for some people than others, so that appeal is a two-edged sword.

BTW, love is not God's only essential attribute.

"how he could not love all the little children."

Stalin used to be a cute little kid. Mao used to be a cute little kid. Attila the Hun used to be a cute little kid. Genghis Khan used to be a cute little kid. Idi Amin used to be a cute little kid. Pol Pot used to be a cute little kid. Ted Bundy used to be a cute little kid. And so on and so forth.

JERRY WALLS And God could have given them all irresistible grace and determined them to have been persons we would celebrate as heroes of the faith..but instead he determined them to be the sort of persons you cite in a litany of humanity at its worst...

STEVE HAYS Jerry, the God of freewill theism could have determined them not to become mass murderers. According to freewill theism, it's not that God is unable to do so, but that he refuses to do so.

So how does the God of freewill theism love everyone when he fails to protect innocent people (including children) from humanity at its worst? If you knew that a psychopath had designs on one of your granddaughters, would you stand by and do nothing to protect her?

STEVE HAYS

"And God could have given them all irresistible grace and determined them to have been persons we would celebrate as heroes of the faith..but instead he determined them to be the sort of persons you cite in a litany of humanity at its worst..."

Jerry, for a philosopher, that's a very shortsighted criticism of Calvinism. If God gave everyone irresistible grace, you'd have a very different kind of world with a different set of people. Your proposal creates an alternate timeline. Suppose, in 5000 BC (to pick a figure out of the hat), God gives everyone irresistible grace. That has a snowball effect. Different people will be born as a result.

All the people who were born as a consequence of living in a world where God doesn't give everyone irresistible grace will be denied existence on your alternate timeline. So there are billions of losers in your alternative. Billions of men and women who miss out because they can only exist in a world where God doesn't give everyone irresistible grace. How would that be loving to the billions of people who never got a shot at existing in the first place?

JERRY WALLS Only actual people can be wronged. A world where everyone loves and honors God would be a good thing.

STEVE HAYS I didn't say that God was wronging them. But unless you're an Epicurean, there's a sense in which deprivation of existence is harm.

Take antinatalists who refuse to have children. That deprives people of the opportunity to exist in the first place. That's the most radical deprivation there can be.

Yes, a world in which everyone is virtuous is a good thing. What you're overlooking is competing goods. A world in which everyone is virtuous comes at the expense of billions of people who don't get to share in the good of existence. It's a tradeoff between one set of goods and another set of goods. Your alternative eliminates some goods to make room for other goods. The winners win at the expense of the losers.

STEVE HAYS I also notice you dodge my point that in Calvinism and freewill theism alike, God could determine humanity at its worst not to commit atrocities. There's no difference between Calvinism and freewill theism in that respect. In both cases, God is able, but unwilling. What's different is the reasons or priorities that God has for refraining to exercise his omnipotence in that regard.

JERRY WALLS Bottom line: on the Calvinist view, God could determine all persons "freely" to love him; on the Arminian view, he could not. Yet God prefers many people "freely" to sin and do treacherous things rather than "freely" to love him and each other according to the Calvinist view. We have fundamentally different views of the love and goodness of God, and it is clear that neither one of us are likely to change our views. So I will leave it at that.

STEVE HAYS Jerry, you're ignoring the fact that it isn't possible to be equally loving to everybody if one person is harming another person. How can the God of freewill theism be equally loving to the murderer and the murder victim? The more he loves the murderer, the less he loves the victim—by failing to protect her. Isn't protecting her from murder the loving thing to do? There are disguised tensions in your position.

JERRY WALLS P.S. No one can refuse to have children on the Calvinist view unless God determines them. On the Calvinist view, God can determine anyone he wants "freely" to have as many children as he wants. And as for the murderer and murder victim: on my view he can give them both optimal grace and every opportunity for final salvation and perfect happiness. On the Calvinist view, he can determine things so that no one ever murders anyone. Rather, all "freely" love and respect each other. But again, we have gone over this all before, and we just have radically different views of love and goodness.

STEVE HAYS

"P.S. No one can refuse to have children on the Calvinist view unless God determines them. On the Calvinist view, God can determine anyone he wants 'freely' to have as many children as he wants."

True, but a red herring.

"And as for the murderer and murder victim: on my view he can give them both optimal grace and every opportunity for final salvation and perfect happiness."

God allowing the murderer to kill her is hardly the most loving option for her. That's not acting in her best interests.

To say we have "radically" or "fundamentally" different views of the love and goodness of God is another dodge. It's also a question of consistency.

Jerry, you're smart enough to realize that your responses are evasive. I find that ironic since you routinely accuse Calvinists of lowballing the unattractive consequences of Calvinism, yet you camouflage the unattractive consequences of freewill theism by staying safely vague.

STEVE HAYS There are several problems with Jerry's postmortem saving grace postulate:

- i)** It has no basis in revelation
- ii)** It bears a startling resemblance to Hick's eschatological verification, which makes it conveniently unfalsifiable in this life. If Jerry's wrong, the lost won't find out until it's too late to do anything about it.
- iii)** It's like seeing a woman in a burning building. I could rescue her, but I don't. She survives, but suffers excruciating chronic pain from third-degree burns. I pay her

medical bills, including years of painful skin grafts. At the end of that process she's finally restored to what she was like before the fire. But surely it would be better not to put her through that agonizing ordeal in the first place.

STEVE HAYS

"Only actual people can be wronged."

I'd like to revisit that claim:

i) Suppose I'm privy to the counterfactual knowledge that if my parents go on vacation at a romantic resort, they will conceive another son. Suppose I'm also privy to the fact that he'd have a happy childhood and a wonderful life.

However, I resent the prospect of having a kid brother. I like being the only child. I like having my parents undivided affection and attention. I don't want to share my bedroom with someone else. I don't want a kid brother making demands on me and co-opting my time. Therefore, I dissuade my parents from taking that vacation, as a result of which that brother is never conceived.

Isn't there something deeply wrong with that? Not just my selfish attitude, but the fact that I denied my would-be kid brother the opportunity to exist and have a wonderful life.

ii) Furthermore, in Jerry's "Pharaoh's Magicians Foiled Again: Reply to Cowan and Welty," he takes the position that would-be hellbound persons shouldn't be in a position to prevent other would-be persons from going to heaven. So Walls does seem to think that would-be saints have a big stake in this issue.

Newtonian fatalism

I'd like to employ another example to illustrate a theodicy I often use. I don't think there's one silver bullet theodicy. But by combining several, we cover most-every situation.

Before getting to that, I often talk about the problem of evil in fairly clinical terms. That's because I'm discussing the intellectual problem of evil rather than the emotional problem of evil. There's really not much you can say about the emotional problem of evil. That's not generally something that can be handled at a distance. It requires face-to-face contact. Grieving with those who grieve (Rom 12:15).

It's like a doctor who has to break terrible news to a patient. Tell the patient that he has terminal cancer or a degenerative illness. Suppose the patient asks why that happened to him? Well, in some cases, the doctor has an answer. He can say that due to your family history, you have a genetic predisposition to develop gastric cancer or Huntington's disease (or whatever). That's the right answer to the question. But, of course, it doesn't make the diagnosis less any less bleak.

Mind you, even that can sometimes be helpful. The patient knows there's nothing he could have done to prevent it. Early diagnosis wouldn't help. Change of diet wouldn't help.

In the nature of the case, an answer to the intellectual problem of evil will be somewhat dry. That's because we're addressing the philosophical aspect of the problem. I myself have seen the problem of evil up close and personal. Although I often write about it with critical detachment, that doesn't mean I'm a brain-in-a-vat. It just means I don't discuss family tragedies in public.

Now for the illustration. To my knowledge, there are two tropes about fatalism in the horror genre:

I. DELAYED FATALISM

According to this trope, you can never cheat fate. At best, you can postpone the inevitable. But sooner or later, fate will find you. It will sneak back around and get you when you least expect it. You may temporarily outwit your fate, but eventually it will catch you off-guard.

II. NEWTONIAN FATALISM

According to this trope, you can cheat fate...but there's a catch! You can cheat fate, but someone else will have to take your place. Fate demands a substitute. In this version, if someone could elude fate, and there's nothing to compensate his evasion, that throws the natural order out of whack. In order to maintain cosmic equilibrium, it's life for life and death for death. You can only escape your fate if that's offset by a fall guy.

This has great dramatic potential in cheesy horror films where you volunteer your best friend. For some inexplicable reason, he suddenly finds himself in near-miss freak accidents. One close call after another. Little does he know you gave him up to save your own skin. And when he finds out...

Although this is fiction, it has a real-world counterpart. In a world that's overwhelmingly governed by cause and effect, every action has a reaction. So Newton's third law has implications for the problem of evil.

If you think about it, it's a sobering fact that saving one life may come at the expense of another life. Someone may die in an accident because of something someone else did a 100 years earlier. A perfectly innocent action in the past may result in future calamity. Thankfully, most of us don't know the future. Even we did, it would be petrifying to see some of the long-term consequences of our benign actions.

Likewise, if your father had married a different woman, or your mother had married a different man, you wouldn't be here. Someone else would be here instead. And so on and so forth.

So when we ask, why didn't God do this instead of that, we need to consider how one thing leads to another. It isn't cost-free. Someone's ill-fortune may pay the price for your good fortune, or vice versa.

Must God make the best?

This post is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/09/is-world-brute-fact.html>

In *Describing Gods: An Investigation of Divine Attributes*, Graham Oppy expands on the question of whether God is a free agent. The motivation is to attack theism by posing a dilemma for the theist, viz. positing tensions between two or more divine attributes. In addition, there's the question of whether God is still praiseworthy if he cannot do otherwise.

To his credit, Oppy realizes that the question is ambiguous. The answer depends in part on whether we define freedom in compatibilist or incompatibilist terms. So he says:

Suppose, first, that motives are causes. In this case, we suppose – at least roughly – that an agent acts freely just in case she acts on appropriate motives in the absence of relevant defeating conditions; and that an agent chooses freely just in case she chooses on appropriate motives in the absence of relevant defeating conditions. On this conception of freedom it seems unproblematic that God's actions and choices will be free: after all, there are no external constraints on God's initial actions and choices, and only irrelevant constraints on God's subsequent actions and choices; and there are no defeating conditions that could apply to God's acquisition of motives; and there can be nothing deviant about the connection between God's actions or choices and God's motives (258).

Clearly, Rowe's argument depends upon the assumption that an agent acts freely just in case she causes her actions, and hence upon denial of the competing assumption that an agent acts freely just in case her motives cause her actions. If we suppose that an agent acts freely just in case she acts on appropriate motives in the absence of relevant defeating conditions (concerning acquisition of motives and external constraint), then we shall have no difficulty with the idea that God acts freely in creating the best possible universe that God can make, or one among the best possible universes that God can make, even if it is true that God could not have had motives other than the ones that God actually possesses. It is only if we suppose that an agent acts freely just in case she is, but her motives are not, the non-deviant cause of her action in the absence of relevant internal and external defeating conditions – and, in particular, if we suppose that it follows from this view that an agent acts freely just in case that agent could have acted differently in the very circumstances in which she acted – that we shall suppose that God cannot act freely in creating the best possible universe that God can make if it is necessary that God should perform this action (261).

However, even if compatibilism is a satisfactory model for creaturely freedom, it is not a good satisfactory for divine freedom. Although Calvinism is deterministic, it is typically defined in terms of conditional necessity rather than absolute necessity. Given predestination, the outcome cannot be otherwise; however, predestination might be otherwise, had God chosen to predestine a different outcome. Typically, Calvinism does grant that God chooses between alternate possibilities. So Calvinism doesn't have that out.

If, for any possible universe that God can make, there is a better possible universe that God can make, then, necessarily, there is a 'cut-off' on the goodness of universes that God can make below which God cannot stray, and necessarily, God creates one of the universes above this 'cut-off' (262).

I think there's some truth to that, although I'd put it differently:

Possible worlds range along a continuum from very good to very bad. For reasons I gave in the previous post, I don't think there's a best possible world. Rather, there are better worlds and worse worlds. A "collection" of better possible worlds from which to choose. A good God will not create a world with no redeeming values. That's the cut off. A wise and benevolent God isn't free to act contrary to his wisdom and benevolence. It would be defect if God were free in that respect. A God who was free in that sense would be imperfect.

[Premise #5] is perhaps not quite so compelling, but there is quite a bit to be said in defence of it. If there is an infinite collection of actions, any one of which God can perform if God arbitrarily selects it from the collection, and the best meta-action that God can perform is to arbitrarily select an action from the collection in question, and God is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and essentially perfectly good, then how could God fail to arbitrarily select one of the actions from the collection, and then perform it? (264).

A problem with that premise is Oppy's failure to explain why God's selection must be arbitrary. Since different possible worlds are different, having alternate histories—like stories with different plots and characters—there's no reason to assume God's selection must be indiscriminate.

Either there is a best possible universe that God can make, or there is a collection of best possible universes that God can make, or for any possible universe that God can make, there is a better possible universe that God can make. If there is a best possible universe that God can make, then God must create it, and hence is not free with respect to creating it. If there is a collection of best possible

universes that God can make, then God must create one of them, and hence is not significantly free with respect to the creation of universes. If, for any universe that God can make, there is a better possible universe that God can make, then, whatever God does, God is not perfectly good. So either God is not perfectly good, or God is not significantly free to create a universe other than ours (260-61).

First, can theists reject one or more of the principles that are assumed in the reasoning?...[Premise #1] seems compelling. If there is a unique best possible action that God can perform, and God is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and essentially perfectly good, then how could God fail to perform that action? (263).

That's the key assumption. Unfortunately for his argument, Oppy fails to defend his key assumption. He gives the reader no reason to believe that God must select a better world rather than a lesser world. He says that seems "compelling". By contrast, I don't find that assumption even plausible. I don't find it theologically or intuitively plausible. Indeed, I find it highly implausible.

i) I think the assumption is persuasive to people like Leibniz, Rowe, and Oppy based on a specious but appealing parallel between divine perfection and his handiwork as a counterpart to divine perfection. If God is perfect, then whatever God does is perfect. I suspect that's the unspoken intuition, but it's vitiated by equivocation. Given the categorical disparity between the Creator and the creature, the world can't be perfect in the same sense, or even similar sense, that God is perfect. Anything God makes will be incomparably inferior to God himself. That doesn't make it morally bad or defective. It's not a flaw for a creature to be creaturely. But there's no parity between the Creator and the creature.

ii) There's another equivocation. Suppose you have two good possible worlds, but one is better overall. Nevertheless, it isn't absolutely better. Indeed, in some respects, the better world is worse than the lesser world. Suppose the lesser world has heavenbound people who don't exist in the better world. So the better world isn't better for them. If God creates the better world, he does so at the expense of people who were left out. So we have to ask, better in relation to whom? And there is no single answer, since that's relative to the winners and losers, depending on the world in question. There's no uniform standard of comparison that's applicable to both scenarios, because different possible worlds have different people with different destinies.

iii) In addition, the whole notion that God must create "the best" is actually inimical to Christian theology. In Christian theology, God deliberately creates messed up people, then redeems them. The notion that a good God must create "the best" reminds me of those utopian science fiction stories about a world populated by "perfect" men and women. In that world, parents don't make children the old fashioned way. For that would run the risk of making ordinary or defective kids. Rather, you have reproductive technologies to ensure the production of kids without congenital disease. Indeed, genetically enhanced offspring. In this utopian world, no one has birth defects. In fact, no one is "ordinary". Everyone is a specimen of physical perfection. Smart. Pretty. Handsome. Athletic. Good at chess. Artistically talented. Everyone has perfect hygiene.

Perfect teeth. Moreover, people are euthanized when they pass their prime, because imperfection is intolerable in utopia.

The notion that God must create "the best" implicitly operates with a eugenic criterion of excellence that's antithetical to Christian theology. Moreover, in utopian stories of this genre, perfection comes at the cost of moral development. You only have to put these "perfect" people in a survival situation to expose their lack of character. Because everything comes so easily to them, because they lead an ouchless, painless existence, they have no altruism. They are selfish spoiled people who can't be inconvenienced by others. They will leave an injured friend behind because he slows them down. The notion of personal sacrifice for the benefit of others is alien to their psychological makeup. It's a perfect world so long as their nonexistent virtue isn't put to the test.

And this isn't just hypothetical. Abortion, "after-birth abortion," euthanasia, and transhumanism reflect this eugenic notion of "the best". Frankly, you have to wonder how people like Oppy would perform in a lifeboat situation.

Is the world a brute fact?

Graham Oppy is a cream of the crop atheist philosopher. His book *The Best Argument Against God* (Palgrave Pivot, 2013) is a state of the art attack on theism. I'd like to evaluate one of his arguments.

...the initial causal state might have been other than it actually was—even though God could not have failed to exist—because God's initial disposition to make other things could have been other than it actually was (either because God could have failed to have an initial disposition to create, or because God could have had initial dispositions to create that differed from the particular initial dispositions to create that he actually had in the initial state.) (13).

The first piece of data that we introduce is the observation that there is a global causal structure: the world is a network of causal relations. One of the standard philosophical questions is, "why is there something rather than nothing?" In the present context we interpret this question to mean "why is there causal stuff, rather than complete absence of causal stuff"?

How Theist answers this question depends upon the view that Theist takes of the scope of possibility. If Theist supposes that every possible world is one in which God engages in causal activity, then Theist can say: it was impossible for there to be complete absence of causal stuff. In other words: there is causal stuff because there had to be causal stuff. If Theist has a more relaxed view of the scope of possibilities—and, in particular, if Theist supposes that it is possible that God might have engaged in no causal activity—then Theist will say: there is no reason why there is causal stuff rather than complete absence of causal stuff—it is a brute fact that there is causal stuff (23-24).

...there is a serious problem for proponents of cosmological arguments that arise with the question "from whence came the causal order?" Once we focus our attention on the global causal order—and not on the question whether the natural causal order itself has a cause—we see clearly that considerations about the shape of the global causal order do not differentially support either Theism or Naturalism (26).

Could God have chosen to make a universe that lasts for less than a second? Could God have chosen to make a universe that blows apart so rapidly that it is mostly empty space? If we suppose that the answer to either of these questions is affirmative, then we cannot also say that God must have all-things-considered reason to prefer a "life-permitting" universe to one of these "non-life-permitting"

alternatives. But, if God needn't have all-things-considered reason to prefer a "life-permitting" universe to one of these "non-life-permitting" alternates, then, on the assumption that God's choosing is a brute fact, it surely does turn out that Theist has no better explanation than Naturalist for why it is that relevant cosmic parameters take the values that they do (29-30).

i) Broadly speaking, I think Oppy is saying both theism and atheism must admit that reality is ultimately arbitrary. You run out of explanations. You bottom out with brute factuality. Therefore, theism has no greater explanatory power than atheism—although it may have less explanatory power, given other considerations. In addition, Oppy is targeting the fine-tuning argument in particular, as well as cosmological arguments generally.

ii) I think that much is clear. However, the detailed reasoning by which he attempts to justify his conclusion is obscure. What makes him think "why is there something rather than nothing?" is synonymous with "why is there causal stuff, rather than complete absence of causal stuff"? The phrase "causal stuff" is hardly self-explanatory. Indeed, that's a good deal less clear than the Leibnizian question.

iii) It's unclear what he means by "every possible world is one in which God engages in causal activity". Does he mean the metaphysical relationship between God and possible worlds? If so, a standard theistic explanation is that possible worlds are divine ideas. God's complete concept of possible world history. Possible worlds are constituted by the mind of God. By God's infinite imagination. And in that respect, possible worlds are necessary ideas.

On that construction, possible worlds aren't brute facts. Rather, there's an underlying explanation for their existence. A dependence-relation. They exist because God exists.

iv) However, the point he seems to be driving at isn't the ontology of possible worlds, but why some possibilities are reified while other possibilities remain unexemplified. Not so much, why are there possible worlds, what's the explanation for possible worlds—but what caused this set of possibilities to be actual rather than another?

That's certainly where Leibniz is coming from. When Leibniz asks, "why is there something rather than nothing," what he has in mind is more specific. Not just in general why is there something rather than nothing, but why does this particular something exist rather than something else. Why does the real world exemplify this set of possibilities rather than an alternative set of possibilities? What selects for that when other possibilities were available?

For Leibniz, this implies personal agency. Someone (i.e. God) had to make that selection. Given the number of possible worlds, God had to choose which possible world to instantiate.

v) Now, Oppy's contention seems to be that if the real world is contingent rather than necessary—contingent because it might have been otherwise—then God's choice (if there is a God) is arbitrary. A brute fact. Like rolling the dice. And in that event, theism has no more explanatory power than atheism.

But if that's what Oppy has in mind, then his comparison is fallacious. God could have a reason for preferring one possible world over another because different possible worlds are...different. Different possible worlds have different histories. God opts for one rather than another because one world history is more interesting than another. Has greater values. The way some novels and movies have more interesting characters and more meaningful plots than other novels and movies.

vi) Perhaps, though, hovering in the background of Oppy's discussion is a point of tension in Leibniz. For Leibniz, God had sufficient reason to instantiate this world because this is the best possible world. That's why God chose this world over some other world. But that seems to be necessitarian. God had to choose the best. His hands were tied.

But of that's what underlies Oppy's argument, I'd make two observations:

vii) We can deny that there is one best possible world. Different possible worlds have different histories. Different histories have different goods. No one possible world combines all goods because no one possible world combines different histories. Each possible world exemplifies a single history. There is no best possible world, for each possible world has some goods absent from another possible world. (There may be some possible worlds devoid of good, but God wouldn't choose one of those.)

viii) In addition, it isn't clear that God is confronted with a binary choice, where he must choose just one option to the exclusion of others. In principle, God could create a multiverse that exemplifies many alternate histories.

Finally, let's consider Oppy's view of what possible worlds are:

*I think that the best position for Naturalist to adopt is one according to which theism is impossible. All possible worlds share an initial segment in the actual world. All possible worlds evolve according to the same laws as the actual world. It is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a purely natural state to a state in which there are supernatural entities. There have never been any supernatural entities. So supernatural entities are impossible; and hence, in particular, gods are impossible. Graham Oppy, "Arguments for Atheism," S. Bullivant & M. Ruse, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (OUP, 2013), 57-58.*

i) I agree with him that "it is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a purely natural state to a state in which there are supernatural entities." But, of course, that only follows from a naturalistic definition of possible worlds.

ii) It's unclear what he means by evolving possible worlds. If, say, we view possible worlds as abstract objects (or divine ideas), then they are static. Each possible world has a complete history. Perhaps, though, Oppy is using "evolve" as a synonym for the succession of events.

It's like shooting a movie. Once you shoot the movie (and edit the movie), the movie is complete. It has a complete plot. But that allows for plot developments within the movie. Likewise, viewing the movie takes time.

iii) Why does Oppy think "all possible worlds share an initial segment in the actual world"? Maybe because, as an atheist, he thinks the physical universe is all there is. That's the whole of reality. So possibilities must be variations on the physical universe or actual world.

Mind you, that fails to solve the problem that possible worlds were invoked to explain in the first place. In the nature of the case, what might have been didn't happen in the actual world. So what makes counterfactuals true? It can't be a fact in the actual world. For that alternate course of events never took place in the actual world.

iv) From the standpoint of Christian metaphysics, the actual world is not the standard of comparison for possible worlds. The actual world is just one possible world among many. It's simply distinguished from other possible worlds by actuality. God chooses to objectify that particular idea in time and space.

Some possible worlds have overlapping histories. Up to a point they have the same past, then split off in different directions. Other possible worlds have histories that don't intersect. A different past as well as a different future. So they have nothing in common.

Treating people as means

I'll respond to a statement by a commenter on my blog:

A related objection that you (and others) might want to respond to is the claim that Christianity (and especially Calvinism) is evil because its God accepts the principle that "the ends justify the means" and that therefore the Christian God apparently practices a consequentialist morality. Finally, it seems to me that as Calvinists we can't evade the conclusion that God purposes to ultimately bless the elect at the expense of the non-elect/reprobate...How can we Calvinists respond to the charge made by atheists and Arminians (et al.) that that's immoral for God to do that?

i) Since many atheists subscribe to consequentialism, it's hard to see how an atheist is in any position to say Calvinism is evil because it (allegedly) operates with a consequentialist ethic. Consequentialism is compatible with atheism. Those are not opposing positions. Peter Singer is a secular consequentialist. Indeed, the most influential secular bioethicist of his generation. Even if an atheist rejects consequentialism, that's independent of atheism. So that goes to an intramural debate within atheism.

ii) Consider some standard definitions of consequentialism:

Consequentialism is the view that morality is all about producing the right kinds of overall consequences [IEP].

Whether an act is morally right depends only on consequences (as opposed to the circumstances or the intrinsic nature of the act or anything that happens before the act) [SEP].

A critic has to show that according to Calvinism, God's actions are solely justified by the consequences. The fact that Calvinism has a teleological component doesn't make that the only consideration in Reformed theodicy.

iii) The onus is on the critic to defend Kantian deontology. We can reject the proposition that the end always justifies the means without taking the polar opposite position that the end never justifies the means. That's a false dichotomy. Surely we can

stake out a mediating position between those two extremes, viz. some ends justify some means.

For instance, suppose I'm morbidly obese. That's detrimental to my health, so I go on a diet. Doesn't the goal of lowering the risk to my health justify dieting as a means to that end?

iv) Perhaps, though, a critic will say he's not objecting to the principle in general, but to the specific case of using people as means rather than ends. But even on that restriction, is there something inherently wrong with using people as means? If I break my ankle skateboarding and go to the doctor for medical treatment, my aim is to repair the damage and receive painkillers, and I'm using the physician as a means to that end. But surely that's not immoral. So the critic will have to present a much narrower objection.

v) Perhaps his objection is that we should refrain from using people merely as means. Or we shouldn't use people without their consent.

If so, why should I accept that claim? For instance, even if (ex hypothesi) it's wrong to use innocent people as a means to an end, what about evil people? What if, by their evil, they have forfeited their prima facie immunity from harm? For instance, suppose a terror master uses couriers to send and receive messages. Suppose, unbeknownst to the courier, a counterterrorist organization plants a remote-control bomb on the courier so that when he visits the terror master, the bomb is detonated, killing the terrorist and thereby saving hundreds or thousands of innocent lives. That's using the courier as a means to an end, but so what? The courier is culpable for working with the notorious terrorist.

Likewise, what if a country is dominated by two drug cartels. The authorities lack the wherewithal to defeat the cartels directly. Instead, they stage a hit on one cartel to make it look like it was attacked by the other cartel. That foments a war between the two cartels. They destroy each other. Although that's a ruthless tactic, since both cartels are evil, what's wrong with using them against each other to destroy each other?

vi) Finally, freewill theists like Jerry Walls and William Lane Craig resort to an end-justifies-the-means theodicy, in which God creates a minority of hellbound humans as a means of producing a majority of heavenbound humans. The salvation of the many comes on the backs of the damned. So they're in no position to attack Calvinism for utilizing a principle which they themselves utilize:

Indeed, God did not have to create and in doing so he clearly thought it was "worth it." So if my view entails that God did not do all he could have done to prevent the damnation of the lost simply because he did not refrain from creating at all, I plead guilty...Given that God does not control the counterfactuals of freedom, perhaps there are no actualizable worlds in which he can save all free

persons. Indeed, if part of our freedom includes the freedom to choose whom to marry, and with whom to procreate, perhaps we play a significant role in determining which persons will be born, and thus which persons God can actualize. In that case, God actualizes the world in which he can save many people while minimizing the number of the damned. Perhaps God was faced with the choice between this sort of world and none at all, and he judged it “worth it” to create. I think this is not merely possible, but plausible.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Walls.-Pharaohs-Magicians.-Response-to-Cowan-and-Welty.pdf>

Moreover, it is far from obvious that God's being all-loving compels Him to prefer a world in which no one goes to hell over a world in which some people do. Suppose that God could create a world in which everyone is freely saved, but there is only one problem: all such worlds have only one person in them! Does God's being all-loving compel Him to prefer one of these underpopulated worlds over a world in which multitudes are saved, even though some people freely go to hell? I don't think so. God's being all-loving implies that in any world He creates He desires and strives for the salvation of every person in that world. But people who would freely reject God's every effort to save them shouldn't be allowed to have some sort of veto power over what worlds God is free to create. Why should the joy and the blessedness of those who would freely accept God's salvation be precluded because of those who would stubbornly and freely reject it? It seems to me that God's being all-loving would at the very most require Him to create a world having an optimal balance between saved and lost, a world where as many as possible freely accept salvation and as few as possible freely reject it.

Read more: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/can-a-loving-god-send-people-to-hell-the-craig-bradley-debate#ixzz4FXAqTPTD>

Is God exempt?

I'll respond to a statement that a commenter left on my blog:

I'm not sure how to answer the atheist objection that it's special pleading and ad hoc to appeal to God's special prerogatives (as God) to get out of the dilemma that the types of evils God allows/permits (and ordains in the case of Calvinism) would be evil on our part if we allowed or planned them but somehow not evil for God if He allows or plans/ordains them.

I believe that by faith, but I'm not sure how to rationally defend that to an atheist (though, it's much easier against an Arminian who accepts Biblical authority). Especially if I include in the problem of evil the uniquely Calvinistic view of reprobation (and pre-damnation as some Calvinists make a distinction).

The atheist question is "How does appealing to God's superior ontology and status as Creator, the most perfect and supreme being and who is allegedly the standard of goodness exempt Him from being guilty of evil for allowing and ordaining such things when of all beings in existence He's the most capable of preventing them?" It's not merely that God is supposed to be guilty, but especially guilty because God, in His omnipotence, can prevent them from occurring.

And in the case of Calvinism, God doesn't passively permit, but actively ordains evils and reprobation. As I've been asked, "How can Calvinists claim God is good with a straight face?" Allegedly, there's cognitive dissonance involved.

Ryan Hedrich already gave a good response. Now for me:

i) It's true that some Calvinists are too quick to invoke divine authority as a solution. Although that response is true at a certain level, it's not an explanation, and it's only persuasive for someone who already agrees with the theological framework—yet that's the very issue in dispute.

In fairness, I've seen Arminians stipulate that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting inscrutable evils. But, of course, that appeal has no explanatory value, and begs the question. Likewise, Marilyn McCord Adams contends that divine and human goods are ontologically incommensurate. So these maneuvers are hardly confined to Calvinists.

ii) Suppose you have a fictional character in a story who enjoys foresight regarding the future. To be precise, he foresees two possible futures: what will transpire if he intervenes and what will transpire if he doesn't intervene. He often finds himself in

situations where he could prevent some tragedy, yet he refrains from doing so. For instance, he sees a house fire. He's in a position to rescue one of the children who's trapped inside. Yet he does nothing. To outside observers, his inaction appears to be reprehensible.

But here's the dilemma: what if by preventing a short-term evil he causes a long-term evil or preempts a second-order good? Whenever he intervenes, there are tradeoffs. By preventing harm to some people, his action has the side-effect of harming others, or eliminating some resultant good.

What if he knows that the child, had he survived, would have a tenth-generation descendent who's a serial killer? Or what if he knows that if the child dies, the parents will procreate another child to take the place of the child they lost in the house fire. If he intervenes, he deprives the replacement child of existence. So which life takes precedence? On either scenario, someone loses out. Someone will benefit from his action or be harmed by his action. There's no timeline that secures all the same goods while eliminating every evil. In each alternate timeline, some evils are offset by some goods while some goods come at the cost of some evils.

A fallen world is a network of good and evil. Some evils cause some goods. Some goods cause some evils. Some goods preempt other goods.

iii) Or suppose you had a video game with artificially intelligent characters. Should the gamer forestall harm to his characters? Well, that depends. The game has a plot. One thing leads to another. Some characters come into existence as a result of what other characters do, including the actions of villainous characters. You might even have the heroic son of a villainous father. By preventing certain harms to certain characters, the gamer is robbing some potential characters of existence. Likewise, by eliminating all the villains, he eliminates some of the heroes, whose existence is contingent on the prior actions of the bad guys. Some good guys wouldn't exist if some bad guys didn't exist. Suppose a bad guy kills the boyfriend of a female character. As a result, she marries someone else, and has a son by him, who turns out to be a hero. (Or has a daughter who turns out to be a heroine.) In this case, preventing one murder takes another life. So eliminating some evils must be balanced off the resultant goods that you thereby eliminate, or alternative evils that take their place.

iv) The fact that humans are related to other humans, whereas God is inhuman, can in some measure justify differential treatment. To take a few examples, suppose a grown son commits a heinous murder. He is sentenced to death. It would be cruel to require his family to carry out the sentence. It's better to delegate execution to a disinterested third-party.

Likewise, suppose you're given a choice between saving your mother's life and saving the lives of fifty innocent people. Objectively speaking, it could be argued that saving fifty innocent lives is better, or more obligatory, than saving one life. But it would be

unbearable for a son to sacrifice his own mother to save fifty strangers. Moreover, it's not even clear that his duty to the common good overrides his filial duty.

There are situations in which it would be right for an angel or an alien from Alpha Centauri to do something which would be wrong for a human to do, precisely because the alien or angel isn't human. He doesn't have the same social obligations or emotional investments where humans are concerned. He can act with greater moral detachment.

v) Finally, everyone who suffers evil is evil in some degree. Take a mob family. Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, husbands, wives, siblings, cousins. Some members of the mob family may be much more evil than others. Still, there's a sense in which none of them deserves to be immune from harm. And some of them richly deserved to be harmed.

Flying blind

1. I've commented on this before, but I'd like to attack it from a new angle. A common plank in the freewill defense is appeal to natural law. In order to make morally responsible decisions, our choices must have predictable consequences. That requires the uniformity of nature. Hence, God can't intervene too often without having disruptive effects.

2. I think there's a grain of truth to this theodicy. And it's hardly exclusive to freewill theism. Popular caricatures notwithstanding, Calvinism isn't fatalism. In Calvinism, it's not merely the outcome, but every step leading up to the outcome that's predestined. Hence, breakfast won't cook itself whether or not you get out of bed.

3. An elementary problem with the freewill theist appeal is that life is often unpredictable. Much of the time we're flying blind. We can't reliably anticipate the end-results of our actions. It's just a guessing game. And even when the consequences are foreseeable, there's a big difference between having a purely intellectual grasp of the consequences, and having to actually experience the consequences.

Many people, including many Christians, if they only had the benefit of hindsight, would avoid making some of the decisions they did. And that isn't merely regret over impulsive decisions. You can make a thoughtful, conscientious decision, with the best available information at the time, only to have that blow up in your face. You can make a reasonable, responsible decision, then helplessly watch it turn out for the worst.

4. According to freewill theism, moreover, a large part of what makes the future so unpredictable is the libertarian freedom of human agents. And the further into the future you project, the harder it is to extrapolate from present trends.

It's like a game of chess. Good players think ahead, several moves deep. But each subsequent move in that calculation is exponentially more complex than the previous move, because each subsequent move is contingent on which of all the possible moves opened up by the previous move the player will opt for. Each player's next move must consider multiple chains or nested outcomes of hypothetical moves and countermoves, branching into infinity.

Nothing could be more destabilizing to predictable consequences than the wave interference generated by so many competing agents. So many countervailing choices by other agents, which neutralize your singular choice.

5. It might be objected that my argument commits a category mistake, inasmuch as the uniformity of nature is categorically different from the libertarian ability of human agents.

But in a couple of respects, that's an arbitrary place to draw the line:

i) If predictable consequences are a necessary condition of praiseworthy or blameworthy choices, then it's ad hoc to insist on the uniformity of nature, while allowing human freedom to run riot. For that undermines the principle at least as much as heightened divine intervention.

ii) Furthermore, the dichotomy isn't nearly that cut-and-dried. Human agents manipulate natural processes to produce outcomes that would not occur if they let nature run its course. Examples are endless. Consider just one: the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. In one sense, that exploited the laws of nature to produce a chemical weapon. However, that combined natural elements in unnatural ways.

In sum, the freewill defense appeals to two divergent principles. They tug in opposing directions.

Changing trains

I'd like to approach the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from a different perspective than is usually considered. When people denounce a past event, they frequently treat the incident and its immediate aftermath as a self-contained event. They act as though you could change that particular event, but leave pretty much everything else in place.

Yet they themselves may be the byproduct of the very event they denounce. They write about the past from the standpoint of the present. They exist in the present. Yet the present is the product of the past. There's a certain paradox when we castigate a past event, for in some cases, by wishing it away, we'd be wishing ourselves away. Were it not for that event, we might not even be here to stand in judgment of that event.

The nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had wide-ranging effects on subsequent history. Had that not happened, the future would have turned out very differently.

It's like taking a long train ride, where you must repeatedly switch trains to arrive at your distant destination. There are so many opportunities to miss connections. And if you miss one train, that throws your entire itinerary for a loop.

If Hiroshima and Nagasaki hadn't been bombed, the railway tracks leading into the future would have gone in a different direction. Even if you could begin your journey from the same point, the original tracks would run out in the middle of nowhere. A deserted train station. The new future would bypass the old future.

The new past wouldn't lead up to the old future, containing the critics of the reviled past event. The future in which they exist would be replaced by a different timeline with different descendants.

Dropping the metaphor, consider how we come to be. If a couple have conjugal relations Monday night instead of Sunday night, and if they conceive, it will be a different person. Or if they have relations 5 minutes earlier or five minutes later, a different sperm may win the race to fertilize the ovum. Not to mention the chain of events that converge on a particular man meeting a particular woman. And their parents. And their grandparents. So many opportunities to miss connections. So many opportunities to take a different train. Even small changes in the past can ramify into huge changes in the future. An unrecognizable future.

Now, I'm not saying this to justify the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If that's justifiable, it will demand a different argument. What I'm saying is equally applicable to large-scale atrocities. So I'm not saying this to retroactively sanctify whatever happens.

But it's good to be mindful of how the invasive root system of historical causation means you can't weed out past evils without uprooting the entire garden. There are always tradeoffs. Winners and losers.

If we hadn't bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that would be better for the victims. But altering the course of history would deprive others.

Lord of the Flies

1. Lord of the Flies is a classic novel about some civilized kids stranded on a desert island. In the absence of adult supervision, social life degenerates into savagery. The treatment is the antithesis of nostalgic novels about boys separated from civilization like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

The story is fictional, but realistic. Many readers find that a plausible scenario of what would happen in that situation.

The novel has lost some of its original shock value in an age when kids the same age shoot each other on the mean streets of the hood.

Tracing the literary allusions in a fictional writer can be tricky because the creative process has both conscious and unconscious dynamics. There's what the author intends, and then there's what may subliminally inform his work. So some of the connections I suggest may be coincidental. But it makes it more interesting to read with those connections in mind (see below).

The novel is, in some measure, a retelling of paradise lost. "Lord of the Flies" (Beelzebub) is a traditional, derogatory epithet for Satan. The "beast from the water" evokes Rev 13, while the "snake-thing" evokes Gen 3, Rev 12 & 20. The "beast from the air" might evoke the outcast, downcast dragon or serpent in Rev 12. In Revelation, the Beast is a Satanic surrogate. An Antichrist figure.

In addition, you have the possession motif. The beast "in us". Idolatry, blood sacrifice, human sacrifice, and a devil's pact with Lord of the Flies (i.e. pig head).

Simon evokes St. Peter. Simon is a seer. A visionary—like St. Peter (Acts 10) The closest thing to a Christian character in the novel. And like St. Peter (Jn 21), he is martyred.

By contrast, Piggy is the rationalist. Some literary critics classify him as a secular humanist. But he's literally a near-sighted rationalist. And figuratively, his rationalism blinds him to the enveloping evil. Piggy's nickname is ironic because his alter-ego is the diabolical pig head which some of the boys worship.

As Golding explains in an interview, the boys are "innocent" in the sense that they are ignorant of their own natures. As a result, they have little resistance to evil. They eventually come to understand themselves, but that's "tragic knowledge".

The topical island is Edenic. The arrival of the boys interjects a seminal evil into this Edenic setting. The lack of external restraint results in moral freefall. However, the story also has Bacchanalian elements. Golding was a fan of Euripides. That's compatible with a Christian interpretation, inasmuch as pagan nihilism is the opposite of Christian grace.

The violence on the island is, of course, a microcosm of world war. Golding's novel was heavily influenced by his experience in WWII.

2. Freewill theists like Jerry Walls attack the "harsh" God of Calvinism, which they contrast with the loving, omnibenevolent God of freewill theism. A God who acts in the best interest of each and every human being.

Yet in reality, our world looks far more like Lord of the Flies. Humans marooned on planet earth, left to their own devices. No significant outside intervention. This is our desert island. Sure doesn't look like the kind of world that the theology of Jerry Walls et al. predicts for. Indeed, Walls is very aware of the disconnect between his utopian narrative and the dystopian reality, which is why, like John Hick, he stipulates an eschatological payoff.

The comparison is accentuated by freewill theists who subscribe to theistic evolution. In that event, there was no historic fall from an original state of rectitude. Rather, our "sins" are really animal instincts. We're direct descendants of animals that had to tough it out in sub-Saharan Africa, long ago. The law of the jungle rather than the law of God was our ordinance. That's even more like Lord of the Flies. They revert to state of nature because they really are little beasts.

3. Now, there are various ways a freewill theist might respond to the comparison:

i) He might agree. He might say libertarian freedom results in a Lord of the Flies world. In order for humans to have morally significant freedom, God can only interfere on rare occasion. But there are problems with that response:

ii) Freewill theists don't typically use Lord of the Flies as an illustration to showcase God's omnibenevolence. Jerry Walls, for one, alleges that Calvinists resorting to deceptive rhetoric to conceal the malevolent character of Calvinism. Yet if freewill theism predicts for a world like Lord of the Flies, then we could rightly accuse freewill theists like Jerry Walls of using deceptive rhetoric to conceal the malevolent character of freewill theism.

There's a generally deistic quality to that scenario. Most of the time, we're on our own. We must fend for ourselves. God doesn't protect the faithful from harm.

That's exacerbated by the fact that freewill theists like Walls are fond of depicting humans as immature kids in relation to God. In attacking Calvinism, they ask how a good parent could treat their young kids that way.

But, of course, we could say the same thing about Lord of the Flies as an allegory for freewill theism. How could a loving, omnibenevolent parent drop their kids into that survival situation. Leave them unattended. Isn't that the definition of child neglect? Is the God of freewill theism a negligent parent?

2. Conversely, a freewill theist might say the comparison is misleading. God is not detached. Consider his redemptive acts in Scripture. Consider answered prayer or modern miracles.

There are, however, problems with that response:

i) It fails to distinguish freewill theism from Calvinism. Presumably, a freewill theist doesn't suppose God answers the prayers of freewill theists at a higher rate than Calvinists (or Thomists or Augustinians). Calvinists have as much or little experience of divine intervention as freewill theists.

Likewise, Reformed theology affirms Biblical miracles and makes allowance for modern miracles, answered prayer, special providence.

ii) The freewill defense is predicated on minimal divine intervention. That's inconsistent with stressing God's regular intercession in answer to prayer, miraculous deliverance from terrible ordeals, &c.

iii) Moreover, this involves, not just Scripture, but a theological interpretation of Scripture, and whether that interpretation is borne out in reality. What's the empirical evidence that God is omnibenevolent? What's the empirical evidence that God is acting in the best interests of each and every person? Does the state of the world correspond to that claim? Or does reality clash with that theological expectation?

iv) One problem is the tension in freewill theism between divine love and human freedom. A loving parent will step in to shield his child from harm, even if that infringes on the child's freedom.

3. A freewill theist might attempt a tu quoque argument. Is the Calvinists saying we're in a Lord of the Flies kind of world? Does he think God takes such a hands-off approach to human interactions? Where we're left to our wisdom and resources?

i) However, a difficulty with that maneuver is that even assuming that's a problem for Calvinism, drawing a parallel doesn't cease to make it a problem for freewill theism. Is freewill theism defensible on its own grounds?

ii) If, moreover, Calvinism has an admittedly "harsher" view of providence, then that scenario is more consistent with Calvinism than freewill theism.

Evil dreams

Peter van Inwagen is a premier freewill theist. I'm going to quote and comment on some of his statements regarding the problem of evil.

*But an omnipotent and omniscient creator could be called to moral account for creating a world in which there was even one horror. And the reason is obvious: that horror could have been "left out" of creation without the sacrifice of any great good or the permitting of some even greater horror. And leaving it out is just what a morally perfect being would do: such good things as might depend causally on the horror could—given the being's omnipotence and omniscience—be secured by (if the word is not morally offensive in this context) more "economical" means. *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 96.*

i) One problem is the distinction between a good and a "great" good. What makes something a great good? "Great" for whom?

For instance, suppose a couple have a child who dies of leukemia. As a result, they have another child to compensate for the loss of the child who died. Is the replacement child a great good? Well, it's great for the replacement child. It gives him an opportunity to exist—an opportunity that would not otherwise obtain apart from the tragic death of his older sibling.

ii) When Inwagen says such good things might be secured by more economical means, that fails to distinguish between particular goods and generic goods. Even if certain kinds of goods could be secured by more economical means (which is far from evident), it doesn't follow that particular goods could be secured by more economic means. Take my example of the replacement child. If you leave out the horror of the sibling that died, you do sacrifice the replacement child.

iii) Invoking omnipotence is not a solution, for omnipotence makes feasible the realization of alternate scenarios. But that involves sacrificing one possible outcome for another. God can do either one, but he can't instantiate both alternatives in the same timeline.

*A defense cannot simply take the form of a story about how God brings some great good out of the evils of the world, a good that outweighs those evils. At the very least, a defense will have to include the proposition that God was unable to bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse). *Ibid.* 68.*

One problem with this statement is framing the justification in terms of bringing about a "greater" good, a good that "outweighs" those evils. But why is that a necessary condition? What about an alternate good? A good that would not obtain apart from attendant evil? Why is that insufficient justification?

To recur to my previous example, suppose the replacement child doesn't "outweigh" the evil of his sibling's premature death. But why does the justification for his existence depend on that condition?

If there were no evil, no one would appreciate—perhaps no one would even be aware of—the goodness of the things that are good. You know the idea: you never really appreciate health till you've been ill, you never really understand how great and beautiful a thing friendship is till you've known adversity and known what it is to have friends who stick by you through thick and thin—and so on. Now the obvious criticism of this defense is so immediately obvious that it tends to mask the point that led me to raise it. The immediately obvious criticism is that this defense may be capable of accounting for a certain amount of, for example, physical pain, but it certainly doesn't account for the degree and duration of the pain that many people are subject to—and it doesn't account for the fact that many of the people who experience horrible physical pain do not seem to be granted any subsequent goods to appreciate. If, for example, the final six months of the life of a man dying of cancer are one continuous chapter of excruciating pain, the "appreciation" defense (so to call it) can hardly be said to provide a plausible account of why God would allow someone's life to end this way. Ibid. 69.

i) Up to a point, that's a valid criticism. But it contains some dubious assumptions:

ii) The "appreciation" defense may fail as a stand-alone theodicy. It may, however, make a distinctive contribution to an overall theodicy. There needn't be one uniform reason for every kind of evil.

iii) What if evil is not intended to benefit everyone who suffers evil?

iv) Apropos (iii), the criticism is shortsighted. What if the beneficiary is not the person who suffers, but someone else? In the chain of events, someone further down the line may be the beneficiary. Changing a variable has a domino effect. Every altered variable has a different domino effect. It's not as if one variable can be changed, while leaving everything else in place. Removing the evil removes good side-effects. It changes how all the dominos fall thereafter—for good and ill alike.

v) His example presumes that a person has to let the cancer take its course. But that's subject to debate.

An omnipotent being would certainly be able to provide the knowledge of evil that human beings in fact acquire by bitter experience of real events in some other way. An omnipotent being could, for example, so arrange matters that at a certain point in each persons's life—for a few years during his adolescence, say—that person have very vivid and absolutely convincing nightmares in which he is a prisoner in a concentration camp or dies of some horrible disease or watches his loved ones being raped and murdered by soldiers bent on ethnic cleansing...It seems clear that a world in which horrible things occurred only in nightmares would be better than a world in which the same horrible things occurred in reality... Ibid. 69.

I'm afraid that really isn't clear.

i) There's a sense in which it would be better for your loved ones if they don't actually suffer. If these are merely dream characters.

ii) But would it be better for the dreamer if he's the one who suffers from a horrible disease? Sure, it's only a dream, it isn't real, but since the experience is phenomenologically indistinguishable from reality ("very vivid and absolutely convincing"), how is that clearly better? If it happens to you, and you can't tell the difference, how is that clearly better? Indeed, that would be a very effective form of torture. In reality, you can only die once, however horribly, but in recurring nightmare, that's indefinitely repeatable.

iii) If, conversely, we know it was just a bad dream once we awaken, then we don't take it all that seriously. It's like a video game about combat. An immersive simulation. Because no one is really harmed, it lacks moral weight. It's safe fun.

iv) Inwagen is sketching a scenario in which horrific evil only happens—or seems to happen—in very vivid nightmares. Our waking state is Edenic.

But wouldn't nightmares like that raise doubts about God's benevolence? If these horrors don't happen in the world I inhabit, then where do they come from? Normally, we dream about things that happen in the world we inhabit. If that's not the case, then what's the source of the nightmares? Do they happen in another world? Am I tapping into another world when I dream? Is the fact that I have these nightmares a premonition of what awaits me in the next world? Inwagen's alternative shifts the problem.

v) It isn't clear, moreover, how he can confine moral evil to nightmares. Doesn't that say something about the imagination of the dreamer? How can his imagination be haunted by moral evil without that spilling over into his waking state?

Repeatedly, Inwagen's analysis of the problem of evil, and his objections to proposed solutions, suffer from compartmentalization. The implications of a hypothetical scenario aren't that self-contained.

Are good and evil primary colors or secondary colors?

Here's a sequel to my post in Inwagen:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/04/evil-dreams.html>

Among other things, he says:

*But an omnipotent and omniscient creator could be called to moral account for creating a world in which there was even one horror. And the reason is obvious: that horror could have been "left out" of creation without the sacrifice of any great good or the permitting of some even greater horror. And leaving it out is just what a morally perfect being would do: such good things as might depend causally on the horror could—given the being's omnipotence and omniscience—be secured by (if the word is not morally offensive in this context) more "economical" means. *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 96.*

*A defense cannot simply take the form of a story about how God brings some great good out of the evils of the world, a good that outweighs those evils. At the very least, a defense will have to include the proposition that God was unable to bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse). *Ibid.* 68.*

Inwagen uses some standard categories: greater good, greater evil, countervailing goods (i.e. goods that "outweigh" evils). He also talks about the possibility of particular evils that could have been "left out" without sacrificing any great good or permitting an even greater evil.

One problem with that analysis is his failure to define his terms. What makes something a greater good or greater evil? How is that identified?

Does he mean it in the collective sense of what is best overall? Is it like the common good (i.e. what's good for the most people)? Is it the most goods with the fewest evils?

This raises the question of how we count goods and evils. Are goods and evils discrete items? Can you put them in parallel columns to see that one possible world is better or worse than another?

Seems to me that in a fallen world, good and evil bleed into each other. For instance, there are virtuous parents of vicious kids and vicious parents of virtuous kids. So how do we separate that out in order to tabulate the respective goods and evils? Do they count as two distinct events or one seamless cause-and-effect event?

Let's take a more complex example. Suppose you have a teenager who's a good intramural athlete. When he goes to the shopping center, he always parks in front of the store, if there's an available slot, to save himself a few extra steps. That means he has no compunction about taking a disabled parking slot. He doesn't care about elderly customers with walkers or customers in wheelchairs who might actually need that slot. He's in a hurry, and he can't be bothered to walk a few extra yards from the parking lot to the store.

He has no empathy for the disabled. Indeed, as a natural athlete, he has a certain disdain for the disabled. He's proud of his body. Proud of his athletic prowess. He doesn't relate to the disabled. He's impatient with the disabled. They get in the way. They slow him down. He may even think they'd be better off euthanized.

Until a day when he's crossing the street. He is texting. The driver is texting. He doesn't see the approaching car. The driver doesn't see the pedestrian.

He wakes up in a hospital with spinal chord injury. No more intramural sports. He will be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Of course, now he sees the world from the other side of the wheelchair. Now he resents able-bodied shoppers who take the disabled parking slot. He sees himself, when he was the same way.

His new existence is extremely frustrating. And he becomes socially isolated, because his buddies and girlfriend tune him out of their lives, now that he can't keep up with them. Having him tag along is inconvenient. They'd have to go at his pace. That's no fun.

But there's another side to this. He becomes the caring, considerate, observant person he never used to be. He becomes a good listener. He develops an empathy he never had before, because he is forced to identify with the weak and lonely. He hates it, but it makes him a better person.

How do we count that? In one sense, it's better to be able-bodied than disabled. His physical disability is a natural evil. Yet it becomes the source of moral good. A soul-making virtue. A fallen world is a blended world of good and evil. A world in which the boundaries of good and evil are blurry.

You can arrange possible worlds along a spectrum of good and evil. You can distinguish possible worlds at the extremes of good and evil, where a greater good or greater evil occupy the farther ends of the spectrum. But closer to the middle, it's harder to say what's better or worse overall, because the goods and evils bleed into one another in ways that aren't easily separable. There are centers of good and centers of evil, but the circumference is blended. Primary colors of good and evil inside secondary colors where good and evil mix.

Enter at your own risk

Peter van Inwagen is a leading freewill theist. In his book on *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), he presents a theistic evolutionary version of original sin (85ff.). I'll quote some statements, then comment on them:

Natural evil, according to the expanded free-will defense, is a special case of evil that is caused by the abuse of free will; the fact that humans are subject to destruction by earthquakes is a consequence of an aboriginal abuse of freewill (90).

As regards physical suffering and untimely death, rebelling against God is like disregarding a clearly worded notice, climbing a fence, and wandering about in a mine field. If someone does that, it's very close to a dead certainty that sooner or later something very bad will happen to him. But whether it's sooner or later, when and where it happens, may well be a matter of chance. In separating ourselves from God, we have become, as I said, the playthings of chance (103).

i) I think there's an element of truth to this. Although I think some natural evils are second-order consequences of sin, I don't attribute all natural evils to the Fall. Rather, I think the Fall removes the providential protection from natural evils that humans would otherwise enjoy.

ii) As a Calvinist, I don't think anything happens by chance. That said, Inwagen's position is problematic on freewill theist grounds:

iii) Regarding the metaphor of someone who disregards a warning sign, the problem with that comparison is that it's too individualistic. If, indeed, everyone suffered because each of them disregarded the warning sign, then Inwagen's illustration would be apt. However, Inwagen is moving within a framework where some humans innocently suffer as a result of what other humans did wrong. Everyone doesn't climb over the fence. Rather, many humans are born within the fenced-in minefield. It's not about getting in, but getting out.

And the notion of collective punishment is problematic for freewill theism. How is it fair to suffer for the misdeeds of someone else? I should only suffer the consequences of my own free choices. I should not be made to suffer the consequences of someone else's misguided decisions.

Put another way, if a freewill theist grants the justice of collective punishment, then it's much harder to see how he can attack Calvinism.

iv) It also depends on who climbs over the fence. If an inquisitive 10-year-old boy climbs scales the fence, we don't normally think he deserves whatever he gets. We make every effort to rescue him before he steps on a land mine. So are we comparing the fence-jumper to an adult or a child?

In my experience, freewill theists typically compare humans to children in relation to God.

v) Finally, it's arguable that disclaimers like "use or enter at your own risk" aren't necessarily exculpatory. If an adult disregards the warning, he's responsible for his own actions. That, however, doesn't mean the person who created the hazard is therefore off the hook.

Take human hunting. Suppose an enterprising businessman creates a hunting range in which men pay to hunt one another. Say these are big game hunters who are bored with hunting animals. That's no longer a challenge. They wish to take it to the next level. The fact that it's voluntary hardly exonerates the businessman of wrongdoing.

Last plane out of Saigon

Lotharson: And what about four-point Calvinists rejecting limited atonement?

Jerry Walls: That is only because it is rather embarrassing to admit you don't really believe "God so loved the (whole) world" and gave his Son for all. But that is only a feeble attempt to mask the hard reality that the Calvinist God does not truly love all persons.

Such claims make shambles of the claim that God is love.

Jerry Walls: Calvinists are skillful at employing the rhetoric of love and most people do not really understand what Calvinists are saying. So Calvinism maintains credibility by way of misleading rhetoric about the love of God that their theology does not really support.

Jerry Walls: The idea of unconditional election to salvation and damnation is morally abhorrent, and applying it to your own children only makes it more graphic. But that is Calvinist piety at its best. You sacrifice not only your child but also your moral intuitions in the name of worshiping a God whose "goodness" is utterly at odds with the normal meaning of that term.

<https://lotharlorraine.wordpress.com/2014/06/07/bound-to-eternally-suffer-an-interview-with-philosopher-jerry-walls/>

This is typical of what Walls has said in many books, articles, and live presentations. What's arresting about Walls is his officious self-confidence in his indubitable moral intuitions. He acts as though it's a self-evident truth that God must love everyone. To deny that God loves everyone is morally abhorrent. Unless God loves everybody, God's goodness is "utterly at odds" with the "normal" meaning of the term. Jerry presumes that, deep down, every person shares his moral intuitions. You can only disagree with Walls on pain of sacrificing your moral intuitions.

My immediate point is not to debate the factual question of whether God does or doesn't love everyone. I'm just dealing with Jerry's authoritarian appeal to his unquestioned moral intuitions. It's a kind of natural theology.

Part of the superficial appeal lies in resorting to faceless abstractions or one-sided examples. But let's put some faces on his moral intuitions:

In 1978, Singleton raped 15-year-old Mary Vincent, cut off her forearms and left her naked in a ditch near Modesto to die.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/jan/01/local/me-19534>

According to Walls, to deny that God must love Lawrence Singleton violates our moral intuitions. It would be morally abhorrent for God not to love the man who raped an adolescent girl, chopped off her arms, and left her for dead in a ditch. I wonder if Mary Vincent shares his moral intuitions.

A 9-year-old girl [Jessica Lunsford] was raped, bound and buried alive, kneeling and clutching a purple stuffed dolphin.

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/04/20/prosecutors-lunsford-raped-buried-alive.html>

According to Walls, unless God loves John Evander Couey, God's goodness is "utterly at odds" with the "normal" meaning of the term. If we could interview the dead 9-year-old victim whom he raped and buried alive, I wonder if she'd share his moral intuitions.

Mengele promoted medical experimentation on inmates, especially dwarfs and twins. He is said to have supervised an operation by which two Gypsy children were sewn together to create Siamese twins; the hands of the children became badly infected where the veins had been resected. (Snyder, Louis. Encyclopedia of the Third Reich Marlowe & Co., 1997.)

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/auschwitz_faq_16.html

According to Walls, it would be morally abhorrent for God not to love Josef Mengele. You can only deny God's universal love for men like Mengele by sacrificing your moral intuitions. I wonder if the Gypsy twins who were the guinea pigs in Mengele's experimentation would resonant with Jerry's moral intuitions. Unfortunately, they're unavailable for comment.

Victims were reportedly skinned alive, scalped, "crowned" with barbed wire, impaled, crucified, hanged, stoned to death, tied to planks and pushed slowly into furnaces or tanks of boiling water, and rolled around naked in internally nail-studded barrels. Chekists reportedly poured water on naked prisoners in the

winter-bound streets until they became living ice statues. Others reportedly beheaded their victims by twisting their necks until their heads could be torn off. The Chinese Cheka detachments stationed in Kiev reportedly would attach an iron tube to the torso of a bound victim and insert a rat into the other end which was then closed off with wire netting.

<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cheka>

According to Walls, God isn't good in any recognizable sense unless he loves the men who perpetrated these atrocities. But if you were to interview the victims, would they share Jerry's moral intuitions?

It's striking how Walls arrogates to himself the right to speak on behalf of everyone else's moral intuitions. Although I've read and seen lots of his material, I don't recall Jerry ever making a systematic effort—or any effort at all—to investigate the viewpoint of people who were on the receiving end of hideous evils. He talks like a man who's lived a charmed life. A sheltered life.

Let's compare Jerry's presentation of freewill theism with another freewill theist:

If the story is true, much of the evil in the world is due to chance...It could well happen that a woman was raped and murdered only because she yielded to a sudden impulse to pull over to the side of the road and consult a map. There may be, quite literally, no more to say than that in response to the question, "Why her?"

According to the story I have told, there is generally no explanation of why this evil happened to that person...It means being the playthings of chance. It means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, and it means something worse than that: it means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly for no reason at all. It means living in a world in which the wicked, through sheer luck, often prosper.

But whether a particular horror is connected with human choices or not, it is evident, at least in many cases, that God could have prevented the horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

No appeal to considerations in any way involving human free will or future benefits to human beings can possibly be relevant to the problem with which this case [Auschwitz] confronts.

There are many horrors, vastly many, from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all. Here is a true story. 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 the road, where she was discovered. She lived, but she experienced indescribably 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. No discernible good came of this, and it is wholly unreasonable to believe that any good could have come of it that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without employing the raped and mutilated woman's horrible suffering as a means to it.

If the Mutilation had not occurred, if it had been, so to speak, left out of the world, the world would be no worse than it is. (It would seem, in fact, that the world would be significantly better if the Mutilation had been left out of it...

If the expanded freewill defense is a true story, God has made a choice about where to draw the line, the line between the actual horrors of history, the horrors that are real, and the horrors that are mere averted possibilities, might-have-beens. And the Mutilation falls on the "actual horrors of history" side of the line. And this fact shows that the line is an arbitrary one; for if he had drawn it so as to exclude the Mutilation from reality (and had excluded no other horror from reality), he would have lost no good thereby and he would have allowed no greater even. He had no reason for drawing the line where he did.

*In the bright world of good sense, this is why God did not prevent the Mutilation—insofar as there is a "why". He had to draw an arbitrary line, and he drew it. And that's all there is to be said. P. van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 89,95,97,105,108.*

Inwagen doesn't indulge in Jerry's invidious comparisons between Calvinism and freewill theism. Inwagen doesn't adopt the unctuous tone of moral superiority that Walls constantly resorts to.

But Inwagen's presentation puts freewill theism in a very different light than Walls. Why didn't the freewill theist God intervene to prevent Mengele from sewing the Gypsy kids together to create Siamese twins? Because God had to draw an arbitrary line, and they happen to fall on the wrong side of the line. Don't take it personally! It's just the luck of the draw!

It reminds me of when we evacuated the US embassy in Saigon. Many South Vietnamese were utterly desperate to escape. They were terrified of what awaited them when the Viet Cong took over. But there were only so many helicopters. Only so many seats.

If 9-year-old Jessica Lundsford is raped and buried alive, that's because all the seats were taken. Tough luck, kid!

The freewill theist God could have added more seats, but the number of seats is arbitrary, so the cutoff between that extra seat which would have saved Jessica Lundsford or Mary Vincent or the Gypsy twins is random. A few are rescued, but the rest of left behind—to be scalped, skinned alive, burned alive, boiled alive, buried alive, eaten alive, and so forth, for no reason at all. God had no reason for drawing the line where he did, but hey—he still loves you! He's so good, compared to that awful Calvinist God.

Although I disagree with Inwagen's theodicy, my intent is not to come down hard on his position. He can only play the hand he was dealt, and the problem of evil is a tough hand for any Christian to play. (The problem is much worse for atheists.) I'm simply drawing attention to the contrast between Jerry's rose-tinted commercial for freewill theism, and the far starker, bleaker, franker version of Inwagen. Walls is always defaming Calvinists about our "deceptive" rhetoric, but he's hardly forthcoming in how he packages freewill theism.

The real problem of evil

It's funny how atheist philosophers are unconsciously conditioned by a particular way of viewing issues. Because the problem of evil is conventionally framed in certain terms, atheist philosophers are stuck in that rut. They just keep moving in the same groove.

I've already noted this in reference to the God who's targeted by the argument from evil. Even though atheist philosophers are usually training their guns on Christianity, albeit tacitly, they don't formulate the argument of evil in terms of Yahweh. Instead, it's much more generic.

Part of the reason is that some (or many) atheist philosophers don't take the Bible as their frame of reference—despite the fact that they are usually targeting Christianity.

Now let's consider another example. To my knowledge, the argument from evil is always formulated in general terms. Human suffering generally, or even animal suffering.

It's striking to contrast that orientation with the viewpoint of Scripture. In Scripture, the problem of suffering isn't about human suffering in general—much less animal suffering—but the suffering of God's people in particular. The issue of why God doesn't intercede more often to deliver his people from suffering. From a Biblical perspective, that's the real problem of evil.

To the extent that Scripture indicates a tension between God and suffering, it's not in reference to suffering in general. Moreover, it's not about God's existence, but God's benevolence. Atheists fail to engage the argument where Scripture engages the argument. If you wish to attack Christian theism, you must assume the viewpoint of Scripture for the sake of argument.

Of course, the very fact that Scripture is filled with believers who complain to God about their dereliction goes to show that while the plight of believers may seem inexplicable, it is not unexpected. In that practical sense, it's consistent with God's existence, even if that's not an explanation.

The tension is exacerbated by certain divine assurances that seem to promise more than they deliver, viz. unqualified prayer promises.

Is there any way to relieve the tension? A few suggestions:

i) The soul-making theodicy has something to offer. That's not a complete answer, but it makes a contribution. For instance, suppose you have two high school buddies who go hiking. One of them sprains his ankle. Of course, that will slow them way down. Because we're bipedal creatures, we can barely walk with a sprained ankle. That one injury almost immobilizes a man.

Suppose there's a storm in the forecast. If they are overtaken by the storm, there's the risk of death by exposure. If the uninjured hiker leaves his companion behind, he can make it to shelter in time. But that will mean leaving his companion to fend for himself.

If the injured hiker knew that his buddy was going to abandon him in a pinch, they'd never be friends in the first place. If he had a premonition that this was going to happen if they went hiking that day, he'd never look at his classmate the same way. The crisis reveals something that was always missing, but only came to the fore when their friendship was put to the test.

Conversely, suppose his buddy hazards his own prospects for survival by remaining with his injured companion. That, too, taps into something hidden. Something only a crisis brings out into the open.

ii) When believers and unbelievers suffer alike, when they experience the same kinds of afflictions, how believers cope with suffering can be a witness to the world. And that's a biblical theme. Unless believers and unbelievers were in comparable situations, it would not be possible to compare and contrast how they deal with the same challenges.

iii) You also have the principle of eschatological compensations, viz. *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18); "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17).*

In some measure, promises of divine deliverance are ultimately about what's ultimate. Not about deliverance in this life, but deliverance from this life.

Where is God?

I recently did two posts explaining how special providence is consistent with the apparent randomness of the distribution pattern. Here's one that links to the other post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/03/luck-of-draw.html>

i) However, an unbeliever might raise the following objection: even if special providence is consistent with apparent randomness, that's no reason to believe in special providence. Their abstract mutual consistency isn't evidence for special providence. Indeed, that's just a face-saving distinction, for even if God did not exist, that would be consistent with apparent randomness. That's equally consonant with God's existence or nonexistence alike.

Put another way, to say it's consistent fails to give a reason for apparent randomness. Why would God make the pattern so elusive? What would motivate God to be so inevident? For every apparent answer to prayer, there are so many unanswered prayers. For every divine judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, there's countless cases of divine inaction. For every Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead, you have every so many wrongdoers who prosper.

To use my own example, given the gambler, he has a reason to conceal his telepathy, but what makes that a given? How is that analogous to God?

ii) To that I'd say two things: suppose God routinely answered prayer. Suppose immediate retribution was the norm.

Crooks don't ordinarily commit a crime in full view of the police. They wait until the coast is clear. Likewise, smart crooks evade security cameras. They may wear a mask to disguise their identity.

By the same token, you have people who'd commit atrocities if they thought they could get away with it. They have no conscience. The only thing that deters them is fear of reprisal.

Suppose you have a scrawny high school student who's bullied by a larger boy. A football player sees that, and takes the scrawny kid under his wing. He warns the bully to leave the kid alone. The kid is now under his protection. The football player is bigger, tougher, stronger than the bully, so the bully fears the football player. Not somebody he wants to tangle with.

Problem is, that only deters him from picking on the scrawny student when he's in the company of the football player. But when he's by himself, he once again becomes an easy target. And the bully threatens him (or his relatives) with dire bodily harm if he reports him to the football player.

If special providence was more consistent, many people would be more God-fearing, but for the wrong reason. They'd behave better, but they wouldn't be better. Outer conformity absent inner conviction. The moment they thought they could do wrong with impunity, they'd instantly revert.

iii) In addition, the question of why God doesn't make himself more evident views the issue through the wrong end of the telescope. For the real issue is qualitative, not quantitative. Atheism is a universal negative. If atheism is true, then there can be no clear instances of evidence for God's existence whatsoever.

We can wonder why God doesn't intervene with greater frequency, but that's irrelevant to the case for God's existence so long as there is some unambiguous evidence for his existence. Even if there was scant evidence for his existence, so long as that was unmistakable, a modicum of evidence is sufficient to disprove a universal negative.

My argument takes for granted that there's at least some clear evidence for his existence. And that's a very low threshold to meet. Indeed, that's a very easy threshold to meet.

Yahweh and evil

BART EHRMAN This is obviously a very difficult issue to address in 300 words or less!!! I have devoted a book to the question, God's Problem (HarperOne, 2008), and even that is very much only barely scratching the surface.

So, let me give just a brief background. When I was teaching at Rutgers in the mid-1980s, I was asked to teach a class on the problem of suffering as presented in different parts of the Bible. That was a revolutionary experience for me, as I realized in teaching the class just how many explanations for human suffering can be found in the Bible. Some of them are at odds with one another. I explain all that in my book.

When I taught the class, I was a deeply committed Christian. And I continued to be for years afterward. But I began to wrestle deeply with the problem of suffering. There are some kinds of suffering that make sense (to me): humans do wicked things to one another, involving such awful experiences as incest, rape, torture, mutilation, killing, war, and so on. Those things one can explain on the basis of free will. If we weren't free to do such things, we would not be fully human (I think that explanation is problematic, as I detail in my book, but it would take too long to explain why here).

I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds. Other things are less explicable: famine, drought, hurricanes, tsunamis, birth defects, and so on — all leading to horrible, unimaginable suffering. How do we explain these things? I used to have explanations (based on what I had read in biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, and so on). But I got to a point where I just didn't think it made sense any more. I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds.

I certainly don't buy the Augustine view. It's all well and good to say that suffering makes us better, makes us more noble, brings a greater good. But what about that poor three-year-old child who starved to death since you started reading this paragraph? She had to experience such gut-wrenching agony to make my life, or anyone's life, the world's life better? And that's true of all the children who have starved to death — millions of them, just over the past few

years (not to mention all the years since Augustine was writing). I came to a point where I just didn't believe it.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

This is, of course, well-trodden ground. There's a lot I could say. And I've said it before. But for now one observation will suffice: By Ehrman's own admission, the Bible contains many accounts of moral and natural evil. In addition, Bible writers were undoubtedly acquainted with many other examples of moral and natural evil that they never have occasion to write about in Scripture. It's illogical to say the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of Yahweh when, in fact, the Bible constantly depicts Yahweh coexisting with evil. Indeed, you have unbelievers who think Yahweh commits or commands evil. So how could moral and natural evil even count as evidence for Yahweh's nonexistence?

The argument from evil typically uses an abstract philosophical construct as the standard of comparison, rather than the concrete deity of living religion and historical revelation. Not Yahweh, but perfect being theology.

Falling dominos

I'm going to comment on an article by Louise Antony: "Does God Love Us"? M. Bergmann et al eds, *Divine Evil: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (OUP, 2007), chap. 1.

She's a prominent atheist philosopher. Her article is mainly about Gen 2-3, supplemented by Gen 22, Job, and a few other things.

God, I submit, is a terrible parent. He is, in fact, an abusive parent. God does not love his children, and anyone who suggests that we ought to love him is displaying the psychology of an abused child.

She gets off on the wrong foot with this characterization. To frame the issue that way interjects a systematic error into her reading.

i) Gen 2-3 presents the relation between God and man as a Creator/creature relation or landlord/tenant relation, not a parent/child relation. Antony is superimposing an alien interpretive grid onto the account. There are, of course, Biblical passages that describe God in paternal terms, but that's not how the dynamic is framed in Gen 2-3.

ii) Even if it were a parent/child relation, that's equivocal. Antony constantly conflates two different senses of "child":

a) An immature human being

b) A son or daughter

A "child" can be a grown child. An adult. Middle-aged. In that sense, a "child" can be a parent or grandparent in his or her own right. Even if your parents predecease you, you remain their "child".

iii) Once again, even if we cast it in parent/child terms, the relation between God and humans is only analogically a parent/child relation. That's subject to considerable qualification.

Children are rational-agents-in-the-making, and a parent's role is to guide and support that process of becoming, to provide the child with the physical, emotional, and psychological prerequisites for moral autonomy in adulthood.

Notice the equivocation. The account never presents Adam and Eve as "children" in that sense.

To maintain that God's authority is unconditional is to say that there is nothing God could do to us, his children, which would be morally illegitimate.

I agree with her repudiation of divine voluntarism.

There is no indication that God and his two human creatures form a "family" of any sort.

That's because God isn't human. The garden is not God's home.

On the contrary, God seems to have created Adam to be a worker or rather, since there appears to be no question of securing Adam's consent to the arrangement, a slave. God, the text tell us, simply needs a gardener.

- i) The text doesn't tell us that God needs a gardner. God doesn't live in the garden.
- ii) God put Adam and Eve in a nature sanctuary with some tame animals and wild fruit trees. A startup situation. They have the raw materials they need to survive and thrive. But there are tasks they must perform to maintain or improve on their environment. It's good, but it could still be bettered through human effort.
- iii) Antony is oblivious to the fact that the account uses double entendres to foreshadow the tabernacle. Not only is Eden a garden, but sacred space.

Eve, in short, is created not to relieve Adam's loneliness, but to help him carry out his preordained duties.

That overlooks Adam naming the animals, one purpose of which is to accentuate his isolation. His lack of suitable companionship.

There is, first of all, nothing in the text to suggest that God is thinking about Adam's safety when he issues his command.

True, but that misses the point. One of Antony's problems is her failure to appreciate how the sin dynamic drives the plot. The occurrence of sin isn't a mistake or oversight on God's part. It has a constructive as well as destructive role to play. Other things happen as a result of evil.

Human history is like a row of dominoes. If you flick the first domino, all the other dominoes fall, one after another.

Suppose, though, you flick the fifth domino rather than the first. That changes the outcome. All the dominoes after the fifth domino will fall, but none before the fifth domino. If you prevent a prior domino from falling, that prevents subsequent dominoes from falling.

Although preventing a particular evil is good in itself, that changes the outcome. Some goods result from some evils. By preventing the evil, you prevent the attendant good. Likewise, preventing some evils causes other evils to take their place.

We are never told that God planned for Adam to live forever, and the early imagery of mortality (Gen 3:7) suggests that Adam was doomed to die all along.

That overlooks the role played by the tree of life. Immortality is a missed opportunity.

If the tree has the power to kill, why did God create it in the first place?...Why would he deliberately place within easy reach of his inexperienced children an appalling object that poses a mortal danger?

Once again, she acts as though Adam and Eve are little kids with no sense of danger. But the prohibition, including the death threat, presumes that they are able to perceive the peril.

It doesn't require firsthand experience to avoid certain hazards. If that were the case, the death toll would be far higher since we'd never survive to learn from our fatal mistakes. In principle, and often in practice, abstract knowledge is sufficient to avoid certain dangers. If someone tells you not to eat that mushroom because it's poisonous, you heed the warning—unless you're foolhardily. You don't have to sample the mushroom for yourself, which would be counterproductive.

God never mentions this creature [the "snake"] to Adam, never warns him that there's a liar afoot who'll try to trick him into disobedience...Why doesn't God at least warn Adam not to speak to strangers?

- i) Naturally, since that would thwart the test.
- ii) And the business about not talking to strangers once again miscasts Adam and Eve in the role of little kids.
- iii) For that matter, there's nothing inherently wrong or generally imprudent about talking to strangers.

Indeed, the only thing that would be unusual about God's threatening Adam with death would be the advance notice.

Exactly. And a threat also serves as a warning.

My reason for rejecting the threat interpretation of Gen 3:16-17 is that it doesn't fit the rest of the text. If God had been threatening Adam with death, why didn't he kill Adam as soon as the forbidden fruit was eaten?

- i) She doesn't read the account holistically. God intends Adam to father sons and daughters before he dies. The history of the human race would be abortive if Adam and Eve died prior to procreation.
- ii) Moreover, "on the day" is a Hebraic idiom for "when" (cf. Gen 2:4). It doesn't literally mean on the same day.

As a parent, God is not looking good. If the commandment is a warning, he's a liar; if it's a threat, he's a bully.

She doesn't understand Scriptural usage (see above). And why would a threat make God a "bully"?

But warning or threat, we still don't know the purpose of the prohibition. If it's not to keep Adam safe, what's it for?...One might think that the hypothesis that

God is testing Adam at least answers the question why God put a dangerous tree in the garden. But while it might explain the presence of the tree, it cannot adequately explain its lethality.

The tree of knowledge isn't toxic. The connection between consuming the forbidden fruit and death is indirect. Adam and Eve were created as mortals, but with the opportunity to gain immortality. When they violate the prohibition, they are denied access to the tree of life.

The "testing" hypothesis might also seem to explain, at once, both the presence of the serpent and God's failure to warn Adam about him. The idea would be that God intended for Adam (or Eve) to encounter the tempter—the snake as part of the plan...But if the serpent is really evil, and if there is a substantial risk that Adam and Eve will succumb then there's no difference between the "test" and the danger that's supposed to make the test necessary.

In fact, they were meant to fail, so that the dominoes will fall accordingly. This isn't merely about the fate of Adam and Eve, but the future of the world. If they were to pass the test, the dominoes would fall in a different order.

If God somehow engineered the encounter between Eve and the serpent, he was engaging in entrapment. The reason that entrapment is wrong when human police do it is that it increases the likelihood that a crime will be committed...The point of "stings" is to arrest people who are anyway engaged in criminal activity, not to generate activity that would not otherwise have occurred. We humans all have our breaking points, and it is unjust for people in authority to push until they find them.

It's silly to suggest a prohibition to refrain from sampling one particular fruit tree pressures them to the breaking point. That's hardly acting under duress or undue temptation. Indeed, Eve is pretty indifferent to the tree of knowledge until the tempter singles it out.

Another point: God, should he choose to engage in this kind of entrapment, has significantly more resources at his disposal than do mere human beings. While human beings must rely on fallible empirical knowledge about what people are likely to do in the circumstances they have arranged, God can control minds.

God might have at least allowed that Moses had simply made a mistake about what God wanted him to do...

Notice how her second statement contradicts her first. If God has infallible knowledge of each individual, then it's nonsensical to suggest he should give Moses the benefit of the doubt. For in that event, he knows exactly what Moses had in mind.

It is particularly chilling to think of a parent entrapping a child. Part of the responsibility of a parent is to shield her child from temptation until the child develops the resources to resist it.

Once more, this suffers from her systematic equivocation about "children".

God, however, takes no account of his children's position and limitations. Adam and Eve, although physically mature, appear to be psychological and intellectual infants. They have no knowledge of the world, and no experience to tell them who to trust. They lack "knowledge of good and evil", and so presumably cannot apprehend any duty to God.

i) In the account, Adam and Eve aren't physical or psychological children. Rather, they are created as adults with innate knowledge. They bypass the normal stages of maturation.

ii) The "tree of knowledge of good and evil" is ambiguous—perhaps intentionally so. Because there's not much to go on, scholars disagree on what it means. Exegetical proposals include (a) carnal knowledge (b) a megrims for omniscience; (c) moral discrimination; (d) moral autonomy; (e) moral experience, and (f) divine wisdom.

(a) fails in part because it has no godlike counterpart (Gen 3:22) to carnal knowledge. In addition, that would contradict the command to reproduce in Gen 1. Even if you think these were originally independent accounts (I don't), they function as a conceptual unit when edited into a continuous account.

(b) fails seems to fail because eating the forbidden fruit doesn't have that noetic effect.

(c) fails because it would subvert the verdict. If Adam and Eve were in a state of diminished responsibility, how can their infraction be blameworthy? Yet the account makes them culpable.

(d) If you combine (b) with (d), that might have some merit—to the degree that moral knowledge depends on revealed norms, because infallible moral discrimination requires omniscience.

(e) Another attractive possibility is a combination of (e-f). In the account, Adam and Eve have abstract understanding of right and wrong. They know their duties. And they experience good. But they are morally inexperienced with respect to evil. So they are morally innocent, not morally ignorant. They experiment with evil by breaking the command.

In a sense, the tree represents divine wisdom. They aspire to godlike knowledge. However, the mode of acquisition is different. God doesn't know by learning.

The tree is forbidden knowledge because they can only acquire what it represents through disobedience. The tree doesn't confer knowledge. Rather, their action reflects and effects what the tree represents. Their very action becomes the realization of what it stands for.

How is Eve supposed to know who is lying?

i) She should believe the God who made her and sustains her.

ii) In addition, people can be willingly deceived because their desire overcomes their judgment. They know better than to do something, but do it anyway for instant gratification.

When people do wrong, it's not uncommon for the full significance of their misdeed to hit them only after the fact. "My God, what have I done!" But by then it's too late for them to turn back the clock.

Eve is suddenly transfixed by the forbidden fruit now that she sees it through the rose-tinted lens of the Tempter (Gen 3:4-5). Only after she and Adam go through with the misdeed is the spell broken.

God throws the children out of their home.

i) Antony acts as if Adam and Eve were little kids who can't fend for themselves. These are adults in the prime of life.

ii) There's nothing inherently wrong with evicting a delinquent.

iii) It's not as if Adam and Eve had an inalienable right to live in Eden. God is the landlord and they are tenants.

iv) Even if Adam and Eve hadn't been banished from Eden, their descendants would eventually outgrow the confines of the garden. It would be necessary to colonize other parts of the earth.

Having created beings with the power of reason, God perversely withholds reasons, and delights in setting tests of loyalty that require his children flout logic, prudence, and sometimes even his own laws. The most notorious of these arbitrary tests is, of course, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. This is a monstrous and utterly outrageous order.

i) That's not "perverse" or "arbitrary". Remember that in earlier episodes, Abraham betrayed a lack of faith in God.

ii) This isn't primarily for Abraham's benefit, but for the reader. The unseen audience for this event.

iii) As a noted philosopher observes:

*An elder sister left in charge of her little brother may have to enforce certain restrictions on his behavior; her parents have told her that certain things are forbidden; and the parents, let us suppose, had good reason for their prohibitions. If the young brother now says "Why shouldn't I?" and argues the matter, the sister's attempt to find a rationale for the prohibitions may be a failure, and the young brother may be sharp enough to detect this; but he would be a young fool if on this account he decided to ignore the prohibitions. To use another comparison, there is the familiar story of the wise old Judge telling his younger colleague to begin by not giving legal reasons for judicial decisions; the reason for this was that he thought the younger man had enough knowledge of and feeling for the law to be mostly right in his decisions, but was likely to muddle things if he tried to spell out the reasons for his decisions. P. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 141-42.*

Back to Antony:

And it is not only Abraham who is tortured.

i) There's nothing in the text to indicate that Abraham was in a state of emotional turmoil. That reflects Kierkegaard's influential misreading.

ii) Even if Abraham was distraught, that's not a factor in the narrative. The emphasis in the narrative is not on the conflict between Abraham's religious duty and his paternal duty, but the conflict between God's promise and God's command. How can God make good on his promise to multiply Abraham's posterity if his son dies without issue? The suspense is due to the fact that Abraham won't know how to relieve that conundrum in advance of the fact. It is only relieved after the fact by God's last-minute intervention.

Imagine Isaac's terror as he realizes what his father has in mind.

It doesn't even occur to her that by this stage in the ongoing narrative, Isaac is a strapping teenager. He can easily outrun or overpower his geriatric father. She isn't paying attention to the implicit passage of time.

Imagine Sarah's horror when she learns what Abraham has set out to do.

There's no indication that Abraham tipped her off. What would he? Antony is making stuff up.

According to the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi, Sarah actually dies from the shock.

Once again, that's entirely extraneous to the content of the actual narrative.

God apparently wants Abraham to know that rules are only rules because God says so. If God changes his mind, then the rules change...God's laws really do have a degree of moral arbitrariness to them, he doesn't so much care whether murder occurs as he cares about whether murder is authorized.

i) Which completely ignores the fact that the command is a counterfactual command. God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with the deed. But, of course, Abraham can't be pious to that for it to be a real test.

ii) But as far as that goes, it isn't "murder" for God to order the execution of sinners.

We want our children to internalize the bases of moral judgment, and not just to do what we say because we say it. We want them to become morally independent of us.

i) But humans can't be morally independent of their Creator. For one thing, personal and social ethics are grounded in God's design for human nature.

ii) As an atheist, Antony has no basis for objective moral norms. Furthermore, humans are just fleeting and fortuitous clouds of atoms.

Abusive human parents are also overly concerned with their children's deference. Abusive fathers, in particular...Once again, this "display behavior" of God has a parallel in the behavior of abusive human parents, especially abusive fathers.

Now she's indulging in sexist generalizations about men. Making invidious comparisons between men and women—to the detriment of men.

God takes the bait, and sets out to prove to Satan that Job is perfectly abject...

"Taking the bait" reflects the viewpoint of a hostile reader (Antony), not the viewpoint of the pious narrator.

If there's anything that gets God angrier than disrespect, it's loss of face...Moses understands this: when God threatens to destroy the ever-complaining Israelites, Moses persuades him to relent by appealing to his vanity—what will people think?

The Pentateuch often depicts God in anthropomorphic terms. Since we can't relate to God on his level, he must relate to us on our level. For someone who constantly pushes the parent/child paradigm, it's odd how that frame of reference suddenly deserts her at this point. Parents adapt to the cognitive development of their kids with age-appropriate explanations.

The serpent, on the other hand is not so clearly evil...In contrast, every detail in Genesis, if taken at face value, testifies that the serpent tells the truth.

i) To begin with, half truths are more persuasive than outright lies.

ii) Antony is recasting God as the villain and the tempter as a Promethean anti-hero. That, however, reflects the viewpoint of a hostile reader, not the viewpoint of the pious narrator.

Antony lacks critical sympathy. Her animosity towards the text inhibits her from reading the text on its own terms, as the original audience would understand it. Her interpretations cut against the grain of the text through a moral inversion in which God is evil, the tempter is good, while Adam and Eve are innocent dupes or hapless victims. Although that reaction makes sense from the belligerent perspective of a secular feminist, it's inimical to the outlook of the pious narrator. That's not exegesis. That's not endeavoring to offer an interpretation consistent with the narrative assumptions. Rather, it defies original intent. She lacks the critical detachment to listen to the account from the viewpoint of the narrator and the implied reader.

Mantrap

A stock objection to Calvinism is that it implicates God in evil because God "causes" or "determines" evil. Let's consider natural evil from the standpoint of freewill theism. Now, I think it's reasonable to claim that physical determinism governs nature at the macro level.

Depending on your interpretation of quantum physics, subatomic events are either statistical or deterministic. But even if you think they are statistical, that doesn't seem to transfer to the macro world.

According to Christian theology, there's an interplay between personal agents and natural processes. What the natural order does when left to itself is deterministic, absent outside intervention by a personal agent. (The subatomic order might be an exception.)

In that respect, nature is like a machine. If I create a mantrap, it's the trap that catches or kills the poacher or trespasser. Yet the trap was only doing what I designed it to do. It's not the mantrap, but me, that's responsible for the outcome.

Every so often we read a news report about someone who put a venomous snake in the mailbox of his enemy. When his enemy reaches into the box to get his mail, he is bitten by the snake.

Now, it was the snake, and not the culprit, that bit the man. But, of course, we still hold the man who put the snake in the mailbox responsible for the snakebite.

It isn't even a sure thing that his enemy will die of snakebite. It might be a dry bite. Or he might receive antivenom in time to save his life. Even so, the culprit will be charged with attempted murder.

Suppose it's the enemy's 10-year-old son who checks the mailbox that day, only to be bitten. The culprit didn't intend to harm or kill his enemy's son. But, of course, that hardly exonerates him. "I'm sorry, your Honor. I didn't mean to kill the boy. That was an accident. His dad was my target!"

The divine mind-reader

1. Freewill theism has a generic theodicy: the freewill defense. (That can be supplemented by other theodicies, like the soul-making theodicy.)

According to the argument from evil, an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God is blameworthy for failing to preempt any preventable evil—especially gratuitous evil.

The freewill defense denies this key premise. God is not blameworthy for preempting every preventable evil, because the price of eliminating evil is to eliminate goods that are inseparable from libertarian freedom.

Open theism takes a different tack: God is not to blame because God lacks advance knowledge of evil actions. God didn't see it coming down the pike. That's what is distinctive to an open theist theodicy.

That, however, means that open theism implicitly concedes a key premise of the argument from evil, and thereby rejects the freewill defense: if evil were foreseeable, then God would be blameworthy for failing to prevent it.

2. However, that makes the open theist theodicy implausible. To begin with, the open theist God is like a man in a security room. The world is blanketed by surveillance cameras. Inside the security room are wall-to-wall screens which display what everyone is doing everywhere, at every moment.

So, for instance, God can see Ted Bundy incapacitate a hooker or coed, dump her in the trunk, and drive her to his hideout. Now even if God doesn't know for sure how that will end, isn't it enough for him to see Bundy put a woman in the trunk? How much more do you need to see to intervene?

If a human observer saw that, and he was in a position to intervene, would he not be culpable for failing to rescue the woman? (And keep in mind that freewill theists use human analogies in objection to Calvinism.)

3. But it gets worse. Some open theists are more philosophically inclined while others are more exegetically inclined. The latter pride themselves on their fidelity to Scripture. They consider their interpretations to be more faithful, more straightforward, than classical theism.

Yet Scripture frequently says God is a mindreader. That tends to crop up in reference to God's qualifications as the eschatological judge.

God doesn't simply know what people do, but what they intend to do. But that means God's knowledge of human affairs isn't confined to what he can observe. In addition, God is right inside the mind of the serial killer or the suicide bomber.

Now, according to open theism, God can't know what we are thinking before we think it. God doesn't know what our next thought will be.

But he does know what people are planning to do. He doesn't have to wait and see what Bundy is going to do to that woman. He has direct access to Bundy's mind.

Yet that makes it much harder for open theists to claim that moral evils are unforeseeable. Although there may be a bit of lag time in the sense that God doesn't know what evildoers are plotting ahead of time, his knowledge of their intentions is simultaneous with their intentions. He knows as much as the agent himself. Real time, up to the moment, intel. God is eavesdropping on their thoughts. He knows what they intend as soon as they intend it.

Surely that puts God in a position to head off ever so many moral evils in the making. He needn't wait until the last moment.

What could God do about evil?

Atheist Keith Parsons did a long post on the problem of evil:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/01/20/what-could-god-do-about-evil/>

This included some lengthy comments as well. I'm of two minds about responding to this post. I don't like to repeat myself. But I'll make a few brief observations:

i) One concerns the starting point. The argument from evil typically begins with a definition of God supplied by philosophical theology. The "God" in question is a philosophical construct. Here's a standard example:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. Evil exists.
6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#SomImpDis>

And here is Parsons' version:

P: A perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being will actualize an evil e only if (a) the actualization of e is a logically necessary condition for the prevention (the non-actualization) of an even worse evil e^ ; in other words, necessarily, e^* is actualized if e is not. Or (b) the actualization of e is a logically necessary condition for the actualization of a redeeming good g ; in other words, necessarily, if e is not actualized, then redeeming good g is not.*

ii) This begins by defining God by a set of attributes. (At least, the minimal attributes need to frame an argument from evil.) But suppose, instead of commencing with a philosophical abstraction, we took Yahweh as our starting point. Several things follow:

a) In Scripture, Yahweh isn't merely defined by his attributes, but by his actions. What is meant by the attributes is elucidated by his deeds. You don't begin by consulting a Hebrew lexicon to define justice, mercy, might &c. Rather, you study God in action. Yahweh's behavior in the historical narratives of Scripture explicate his attributes.

b) Bible history is a catalogue of evil. Moral and natural evils. I doubt there's any basic kind of evil outside the Bible that you can't find described in Bible history.

c) In Scripture, Yahweh and evil coexist. In Scripture, Yahweh's existence is consistent with evil's existence.

It would be a peculiar argument to claim the existence of evil is incompatible with Yahweh's existence when Scripture constantly depicts God and evil coexisting.

If you take a concrete example of God, like Yahweh, then it's unclear how the argument from evil ever gets off the ground. The Biblical concept of God is consonant with the existence of evil.

Even if an atheist regards Biblical narrative as fictional, that doesn't change the fact that the Scriptural idea of God is compatible with the occurrence of moral and natural evil. With examples of evil of the same kind that atheists cite to typify the argument from evil.

iii) At the risk of repeating myself, time-travel stories illustrate the fact that if you change the past to improve the future, your action prevents one set of evils at the cost of producing another set of evils—as well as eliminating another set of goods. Indeed, Parsons concedes that very principle:

It is the case that evils and goods are connected in intricate ways so that some goods, indeed, some of the most important ones can only arise in the face of evils, and eliminating those evils would also cost us the related goods.

Given the staggeringly complex effects of changing variables, where even altering a minor variable may snowball over time, I don't see how an atheist is in any position to say a selective improvement here or there would result in a net benefit.

iv) Parsons cites the parable of Roland Puccetti about an absentee landlord who allows the apartment complex to fall into disrepair. But some tenants rise to his defense: For aught we know, he may have good reason for letting this sorry state of affairs transpire.

Sure, it's always possible that there's a reasonable explanation, but that's not a justification to suspend judgment indefinitely.

But that's misleading. This isn't simply an appeal to ignorance. There are many concrete examples where preventing one evil prevents some attendant good or goods, as well as causing a different evil or evils down the line. So it's not just speculation.

For instance, we evaluate the past from the viewpoint of the present. There are cases in which an evil which seemed to be irredeemable to someone living in the past, at the time it occurred, can now be seen to be beneficial in retrospect. So there's ample precedent for taking that long-range view into account.

v) And that's not an appeal to global skeptical theism, but local skeptical theism. It's not sheer skepticism, but, to the contrary, skepticism that builds on knowledge: examples of apparently gratuitous evil which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be seen to be purposeful. To say that divine providence is inscrutable is not to say that it's thoroughly opaque. Rather, it can be shot through with many examples of redeemed evils, second-order goods.

vi) Furthermore, Parsons is addressing the problem of evil in isolation to evidence for God's existence. So it's not just a question of logical consistency, where, for all we know, a Deity could have a reason for not preventing it—and, for all we know, no such Deity exists. We're not balancing two antithetical propositions in abstract equilibrium. Put that way, it may seem like special pleading to hypothesize an ultimate rationale—in the absence of any evidence. Rather, the scales are heavily tipped in favor of God's existence.

vii) Parsons atomizes good and evil as though every individual evil must be offset by an individual good, in one-to-one correspondence. But there's no reason to think that's what makes an evil gratuitous. It's not a matching quiz, but a chain of events. Does a particular evil contribute to a second order good?

This deflates his objection to the soul-making theodicy. It's quite true that for some people, suffering is "soul-destroying" rather than "soul-building." Yet that's only a defect in the theodicy if you imagine that everyone is supposed to be purified by suffering. But what if some justly suffer for the sake of others?

viii) In the prequel post, Parsons said:

Would any decent and sane person who could have thwarted the 9/11 attacks not have done so? The simple and highly intuitive point is that some evils are so heinous and bring about so much suffering, that any decent person would have prevented them.
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/01/11/evil-still-no-good-answers/#comment-2460021899>

a) The question is deceptively simple. Normally, a good person should thwart a humanitarian disaster.

b) But that depends in part on whether we view the event as past or future. Suppose I was born in the 21C. Let's bracket time-travel antinomies. Suppose I can go back in time and prevent WWI by thwarting the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. But if I do so, I will preempt my mother's birth—and, of course, my own birth!

By preventing WWI, I save many lives, but by the same token, I erase many lives. All the men and women to be born as a result of that catastrophe—including my own.

And that's not the same thing as sacrificing my life to save others. Rather, this is sacrificing my existence to save others. That's far more radical. I will never come into being!

But even if I were that altruistic, it doesn't follow that I'd prevent WWI at the expense of my own mother. I'm not prepared to do that.

Conversely, suppose you were the time-traveler. Suppose you could prevent a disaster that would kill your mother (after you were born), but at the expense of killing my mother. If you must choose whose mother to save, you will save your mother rather than mine. And I'd do the same thing in reverse.

We can dilate in the abstract about saving lives, but that ignores the element of personal attachment. When it comes to saving strangers, it may make no difference, but people are connected to other people in complex ways. It's not a game of checkers, with identical pieces. Even if people look alike on the outside, there are hidden affinities between some people.

Now, we might say God has a more impartial perspective. But in that case, the analogy breaks down. If, moreover, God doesn't have the same emotional investment in the lives of any particular individual, then saving every life might not be his priority.

If only I had known

Freewill theists frequently distinguish between "determining" (or "causing") evil and permitting evil. They regard the latter as exculpatory.

Suppose I buy a set of steak knives as a wedding present. A few years later, the couple's 5-year-old son stabs his 3-year-old brother to death with one of the knives. Had I not give the couple that particular wedding present, that tragedy would not have happened. Am I culpable?

We'd say no, because I had no idea my gift would be used that way. Had I known, I would have given them a different (harmless) wedding present instead.

But suppose, when I was in the cutlery store, looking for a wedding present, I had a premonition that if I gave the couple a set of steak knives as a wedding present, that would be the outcome. Would I then be culpable?

Presumably, we'd say yes. Given advance knowledge, that tragedy was easily avoidable, and it's not as if my choosing to buy them a different (harmless) wedding present would violate anyone's libertarian freedom, or destabilize the natural order.

The Final Countdown

The argument from evil presumes a standard of comparison. A better possible world, a better feasible alternative, is the foil in contrast to the real world.

Years ago I saw *The Final Countdown*. It's an alternate history film in which a nuclear aircraft carrier passes through a temporal wormhole and returns to the day before the Pearl Harbor attack.

Once the captain figures out what's happened, he's been given an opportunity to change history. He has advance knowledge of what will happen, absent intervention, and he has advanced military technology to shift the balance of power.

So the film has a great dramatic premise. Unfortunately, the director lacked the interest and imagination to exploit that premise. But it's a useful illustration. Of course, the film raises the usual time-travel antinomies, but as a thought-experiment, we can bracket that.

What should the captain do? Should he take advantage of the situation to avert the Pearl Harbor attack?

There are different ways of developing the film's dramatic premise. The carrier has only so much jet fuel and ordnance. After thwarting the Pearl Harbor attack, should he and the crew focus on the Pacific theater or the European theater? Should he destroy the Japanese navy? Or should he steam off to Europe and attack German assets?

Or what about selective interventions? Do something now, then lay low for a few years before using the carrier to disrupt the Soviet nuclear program?

Should he simply prevent the Pearl Harbor attack, then sink the carrier, while he and his crew melt into the 1940s—with no one the wiser?

The question a film like this raises is, after having done whatever they do to improve the immediate situation, they pass back through the temporal wormhole to the same date in the present, before they were transported into the past, what future awaits them? What will the altered future look like? They won't be returning to the same world from whence they came, that's for sure.

The Pearl Harbor attack gave FDR the pretext he was spoiling for to get both feet on the ground in the war effort. In the attack itself, 2,335 U.S. servicemen were killed and 1,143 were wounded. In addition, WWII resulted in 1,076,245 U.S. servicemen dead and wounded, as well as 30,314 MIAs. So there's an obvious sense in which preempting the attack would be better for those who were directly or indirectly killed or maimed as a result of the attack, not to mention their bereaved or bereft family members.

Likewise, Japan would be spared the firebombing of Tokyo as well as the nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So that would be better for them.

But, of course, there are tradeoffs. Drastic tradeoffs. Dire tradeoffs. Absent the Pearl Harbor attack and the American counterattack and occupation, Japan would remain an aggressive military dictatorship for however long.

England might well fall to the Nazis. That doesn't necessarily mean Hitler would conquer Europe. But there's a difference between winning and losing. The Nazi war machine would be able to do a lot more damage before it ran out of men and materiel. Far more Jews would be exterminated. You might end up with a stalemate between Russia and Germany. Perhaps they'd carve up Europe. Or maybe Russia would overwhelm Germany and take all the marbles. That in turn might give a boost to communism in Latin America.

Consider some of the things that hadn't happened before December 7, 1941. FDR hadn't been reelected to a fourth term. Truman hadn't been picked as his running-mate. Mao hadn't defeated Chiang Kai-shek. The state of Israel hadn't been established. The Manhattan Project was barely under way.

It's very hard to predict what the world would be like had the Pearl Harbor attack been preempted. Certainly better in some ways for many people, especially in the short term. But worse in other ways for many other people in both the short-term and the long-term.

How often does God intervene?

Back to the stable nature theodicy:

i) To take a comparison, it's like healing and prayer. If God always healed in answer to prayer, then medical science would be pointless—and if God never healed in answer to prayer, then prayer (for healing) would be superfluous.

Occasional miraculous healing in answer to prayer doesn't make medical science useless. You don't know in advance which will do the trick, or whether either one will do the trick. Sometimes we pray for healing because medical science failed.

The dilemma for the stable environment theodicy is that it can't explain why God intervenes in some cases rather than others. So that must be supplemented by skeptical theism.

ii) I doubt it's possible to even guess at how often God prevents some natural evils. Physical events leave physical evidence in their wake, but nonevents leave no trace evidence of their nonoccurrence. So what's the evidence that something didn't happen because God preempted it?

To take a comparison, consider those time-travel scenarios in which a Jewish scientist goes back in time to kill Hitler's granddad, thereby erasing Adolf from the space-time continuum. If successful, there will be no evidence that Adolf ever existed, because changing that one variable changes a host of affected variables. To be consistent, there must be corresponding adjustments.

Of course we know that's unrealistic: hence time-travel antinomies. But I'm just using that as an analogy to illustrate a point.

In the case of divine intervention to preempt a natural evil, that doesn't change the past, but prevent that past from happening in the first place—in which case, there's no empirical evidence that God intervened. We have no basis of comparison. We just have what actually happened.

It's not as if there's a gap or hole in the historical record or natural record when God prevents a natural evil. So in that sense, there's no direct evidence for divine preemption. Not like a missing folder in the filing cabinet between the As and the Cs where the Bs ought to be. All the "space" is filled.

So, from what I can see, there's no estimating the frequency of divine interventions in that respect. For all we know, divine intervention to prevent natural evils might be commonplace. It's imponderable.

I'm not saying it's never possible to identify divine preemption. In some cases you have plausible answers to prayer. But in other cases, no testimonial evidence will be available.

Charbroiled Bambi

i) Atheist William Rowe famously cited a fawn dying in a forest fire as a paradigm-case of gratuitous evil. On the face of it, that's not gratuitous evil, because forest fires are necessary to maintain the balance of nature. In fact, animal death is necessary to maintain the balance of nature. So that's purposeful suffering.

ii) Now perhaps Rowe would say it's gratuitous in the sense that an omnipotent God could create a world without predation, forest fires, &c. But there are problems with that response:

a) Yes, God could, but that would be so unrecognizably different from the actual world that we can't even begin to do a comparative axiological analysis. We can't say which is better and which is worse because a world without our type of ecosystem is so far removed from human experience that it's hard to even conceive of what that would be like. Atheists have a bad habit of artificially deleting "bad things" from the world, then leaving everything else intact. But, of course, that requires corresponding adjustments. It's unclear what's left after the dust settles.

b) Moreover, a world without animal suffering might be better in some respects, but worse in others. Even if it's better overall, the goods might not be as good as a world that's worse overall. You could have a world that's worse overall, but the peaks of goodness are higher. So there's no single criterion of goodness.

iii) Furthermore, animals lack our human viewpoint on suffering. Take the somewhat amorphous distinction between lower and higher animals. A continuum of sentience.

A few years ago I read about some men who discovered a rattlesnake pit right by the playground of an elementary school. A communal rattlesnake pit. That posed an obvious danger to the school kids.

So the men poured gasoline down the snakepit and set it afire. End of problem!

I'm sure the snakes writhed about as they were roasting alive. Does that mean they were in pain, or is that a reflexive reaction? For instance, decapitated snakes continue to writhe.

How does a snake brain process or interpret that stimulus? I doubt what it's like for a man or German Shepherd to burn alive is the same for a snake. For one thing, it has a much simpler brain. Does the same stimulus mean the same thing to reptile? Seems unlikely.

Same thing with cooks who put live crabs directly in boiling water. Seems cruel, but isn't that just an anthropomorphic projection on our part?

iv) I don't necessarily mean that's reducible to neurological structures. It's possible that animals have souls. But if they have souls, they have animals souls. If a wolf has a soul, it has a soul specific to the nature of a wolf; a soul with a lupine viewpoint. An outlook in many respects alien to a human viewpoint.

I think it would be cruel to set a dog on fire. But I don't think it was cruel to incinerate the rattlesnakes.

v) To take another comparison, during the Vietnam War, some Buddhist monks protested the war by setting themselves on fire. There are Youtube videos of that horrific scene. Yet, as I recall, they were very stoic about it. They didn't scream or flail about.

If we were just judging by body language, we'd infer that a snake is in greater pain than a man. But, of course, because we're human, we know that's not the case. So body language can be deceptive.

vi) From the standpoint of Christian ethics, given borderline cases, it's best, all things being equal, to allow ourselves a wide margin of error in the avoidance of possible animal cruelty.

Another factor concerns intent. To set a dog on fire is an act of malice. That is done with the intent to inflict pain on the dog. The person who does it takes depraved pleasure in cruelty. Even if, unbeknownst to him, the effect is painless, his motivation is heinous.

Is there gratuitous evil?

i) Evils are rarely self-contained events. It's hard to think of events, even little incidents, that don't cause a chain of events. Even individual evils have a ripple effect. Preventing the evil would prevent some resultant good down the line. Moreover, preventing one particular evil might mean a worse evil would take its place—either the precipitating evil or the resulting evils.

ii) Even reflecting on an apparently gratuitous evil will affect the thinker who reflects on it. And because the thinker is an agent, whatever impacts him will impact what he does. So even if the evil was gratuitous in itself, it can have a purposeful influence on the thinker. It is only gratuitous if considered in isolation. But the very act of evaluating the evil changes the thinker in subtle ways, which—in turn—changes the world based on what he does, and others do in response to what he does.

That's a bit circular, where reflecting on an otherwise gratuitous event makes it non-gratuitous, but it's true nonetheless.

iii) A critic might object that if we all thought that way, we'd never intervene to avert a foreseeable tragedy. But that misses the point. Whether or not we intervene would depend on how farsighted we are. And in fact, God has prearranged things so that what we do is ultimately for the good.

iv) Whether inscrutability is a "cop-out" depends in part on whether that's simply invoked as a blocking maneuver or face-saving exercise to show that, for all we know, any state of affairs is consistent with a hypothetical God's existence, wisdom, and benevolence, absent positive evidence to that effect. But, of course, inscrutability isn't cited in an evidential vacuum. It presupposes multiple lines of evidence for God's actual existence, wisdom, and benevolence.

Is suffering chemotherapy for spiritual cancer?

Eleonore Stump says suffering is chemotherapy for spiritual cancer. But a basic objection to the soul-building theodicy is how it can backfire inasmuch as tragedy makes some people worse rather than better. Makes them bitter, cynical, morally hardened. It can be counterproductive, by driving some people away from God. However, that would only be a defective strategy if God intends all people to benefit from suffering. But if God's aim is not to nurture soul-building virtues in everyone, then it's not a failure if that doesn't transpire in every case.

Unforeseeable consequences

One common plank of the freewill defense is the contention that, to be meaningful, our choices must have predictable consequences. That entails a stable environment. And that means God can't jump in to save our bacon. The laws of nature are the price we pay for responsible decision-making.

This argument was popularized by C. S. Lewis. Although it's common to the freewill defense, a Calvinist can also incorporate the same principle into his overall theodicy. Making choices based on predictable consequences is certainly consonant with compatibilism.

So I think the stable environment theodicy has some merit, but it's inconsistent. Although nature is predictable in some respects, nature is unpredictable in other respects, and some natural evils are among the least predictable features of nature.

We've gotten pretty good at forecasting hurricanes. (Of course, that's useless to our pre-scientific forebears.) But we can't predict earthquakes, mudslides, tsunamis, droughts (and drought-related famine).

If a tsunami occurs, we may be able to predict the trajectory and arrival time. However, that's generally useless because you can't evacuate port cities in a few hours.

We can't forecast tornadoes. If they occur, we can track them, but the lead-time is often down to minutes. There really isn't time for advance warning. (And, of course, our prescientific forbears couldn't even track tornadoes.)

We have a far better understanding of disease transmission, so we can now avoid or reduce some epidemics and pandemics, viz. rat control, draining or spraying malarial ponds and swamps. (Again, that knowhow wasn't available to our prescientific ancestors.)

There are genetic diseases we can now predict, but not prevent. So the patient feels doomed by a dreadful diagnosis and fateful prognosis.

It's hard to protect against venomous snakes. If you see them in plain sight, you can avoid them or kill them with a rock or a stick.

But take Indian farmers who are bitten by cobras when they harvest rice patties. That's predictable in the coarse-grained sense that there's an appreciable risk. But it's unpredictable in the fine-grained sense that you don't know where not to step until it's too late.

Likewise, it's well-nigh impossible to snakeproof a house, especially huts, shacks, and shanties. These are porous. Lots of ways for snakes to get inside.

If it's a nocturnal venomous snake, you may be bitten if you step on it in the dark. Or you may be bitten when it crawls into bed to snuggle up against that nice warm body.

So there's often no way to protect against kraits, mambas, cobras, Russell's vipers, &c. You can't take adequate precautions, or anticipate where they will strike.

The stable environment theodicy is a poor fit with what the natural world is actually like. At best, it intersects with a part of nature.

Is it evil to cause evil

Is it evil to cause evil? That seems transferable. But is it a reliable inference?

This crops up in debates over Calvinism. Mind you, there are various respects in which the God of freewill theism causes evil.

Now, there are certainly situations in which causing evil is evil. Indeed, that may well be typical. I'm just discussing whether, as a matter of principle, it is evil to cause evil.

Suppose torrential rain causes a damed river to become swollen. That accelerates the downstream current. There's a much greater volume of water, moving much faster, resulting in tremendous kinetic energy pounding the dam. The dam operator has a choice: he can release some water to relieve the strain on the dam. If he does so, that will flood riverside towns downstream, causing major damage. That's an evil. That causes an evil state of affairs.

Or he can let the water build up behind the dam. The cumulative force will make the dam lose structure integrity and collapse, causing an avalanche or wall of fast-moving water to wipe the downstream towns off the map. That's a greater evil.

Is it evil for him to cause the lesser evil, by releasing some water to diminish pressure on the dam?

Someone might object that God isn't subject to the same constraints as the dam operator. But even if that's the case, the point of the example is to illustrate a point of principle: it is not necessarily evil to cause evil.

Moreover, even an omnipotent God is under a self-imposed constraint if he uses a natural process to produce a desired result.

Hard truths

1. Recently, the Society of Evangelical Arminians erupted with several indignant, faux incredulous posts regarding the following statement:

God . . . brings about all things in accordance with his will. In other words, it isn't just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory (see Ex. 9:13-16; John 9:3) and his people's good (see Heb. 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God's having even brought about the Nazis' brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child . . .

*— Mark R. Talbot, "All the Good That Is Ours in Christ': Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us," in John Piper and Justin Taylor (eds.), *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 31-77 (quote from p. 42).*

SEA also linked to this statement by Piper:

He works all things according to the counsel of his will. This extends to the details of all existence. Matthew 10:29, "Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven." Proverbs 16:33, "The lot, the dice, are cast in the lap and every decision is from the Lord." In Reno, Las Vegas, Atlantic City, every dice rolled God decides what turns up.

And SEA linked to a post by Leighton Flowers with the incendiary title "Does God Bring About the Abuse of Children for His Own Glory?"

There's a lot to sort out.

2. SEA acts as if it discovered the smoking gun of Calvinism. I understand how this would be shocking or scandalous to uniformed Christians. But there's nothing new or surprising here. Calvinism doesn't conceal the fact that God has predestined everything that happens.

In addition, I understand how this would be shocking to Christians who never read the Bible cover to cover. Yet Scripture frequently attributes the deeds of wicked men to God operating behind-the-scenes.

That's a hard truth. But, then, there are many things in Scripture that make me swallow hard. There are many things in the world that make me swallow hard.

3. The statement that God brings about something "for his own glory" is misleading without further explanation. In Calvinism, God doesn't act for his own sake, but for the sake of the elect. God cannot benefit from what he brings about, for God is sufficient in himself, apart from his creation.

4. Calvinism didn't create the problem of evil; rather, the problem of evil is created by the fact of evil. The problem of evil is generated by the conjunction of two propositions:

i) God exists

ii) Divinely preventable evil exists

To the extent that that's a theological problem, the challenge is hardly unique to Calvinism. It's a challenge for Molinism, Aminianism, universalism, Lutheranism, Thomism, Mormonism, Deism, open theism, &c. If Calvinism didn't exist, the problem of evil would still exist.

Indeed, it's challenging for atheism. Atheism solves the problem by denying one of the two propositions, but that's a costly solution. It solves the problem of evil by making human life worthless. A tad self-defeating. Like an exterminator who eliminates a roach infestation by burning down the house with the homeowner inside. Effective, but a wee bit counterproductive.

5. In addition, the Reformed position sounds shocking or scandalous to Christian ears that haven't bothered to think through the alternatives. You can't just assess the Reformed position in a vacuum. You need to consider that in relation to proposed alternatives.

In freewill theism, God allows a pedophile to abuse children because there's something more important to God than preventing child abuse. Well, stop and think about that for a while. Let it sink in. After all the outrage directed at Calvinism, what could be more important than preventing child abuse? Yet a freewill theist is forced to admit that preventing child abuse is not a divine priority. After all, God could put a stop to that.

In God's rating system, the prevention of child abuse is not God's paramount concern. A freewill theist must say that in God's estimation, there's something more valuable than preventing child molestation. Some other good that's better than the prevention of child abuse.

So why isn't that shocking to freewill theists? Why isn't that outrageous? Yet the freewill theist is committed to that proposition.

Suppose a teacher at a Christian school was accused of child molestation. Suppose, when interviewed, the principal said he knew the teacher was a convicted pedophile. He knew that hiring him was a risk. But he hired him anyway because some things are more important than preventing child abuse.

You can just imagine the incensed reaction. But isn't the freewill theists forced to say the same thing about God?

6. To say everything event is predestined is to say that everything happens for a reason. Good things happen for a good reason, but even bad things happen for a good reason. Indeed, especially in the case of evil, we usually think an agent had better have a good reason for allowing (or causing) that to happen. If there's a prima facie obligation to prevent evil, then allowing (or causing) evil requires a special justification.

Conversely, to say that God allows horrendous evils to occur for no purpose whatsoever is hardly exculpatory. "I just let it happen. Don't ask me why. There is no why."

7. Not surprisingly, freewill theists usually turn to some version of the freewill defense. For instance, they claim libertarian freedom is a prerequisite of moral responsibility. But is that an adequate response?

i) To begin with, one development in freewill theism is restrictivism. On Facebook, Alan Rhoda recently said that he and many libertarians espouse restrictivism. Take some examples:

Restrictivism is the claim that we have "precious little free will" insofar as there are "few occasions in life on which—at least after a little reflection and perhaps some investigation into facts—it isn't absolutely clear what to do." Kevin Timpe, Free Will in Philosophical Theology (Bloomsbury 2014), 24.

Restrictivism is the view that we are rarely (directly)free, only sometimes, in somewhat unusual circumstances, so our choices and subsequent actions meet the conditions for direct metaphysical freedom. A libertarian restrictionism holds that it is a feature of directly free choices and actions that they were underdetermined by prior events or states of affairs. Daniel Cohen & Nick Trakakis, eds. Essays on Free Will and Moral Responsibility (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2008), 129.

[Van Inwagen] appeals to similar resources in an argument for restrictionism, the view that...rarely, if ever, is anyone able to do otherwise than in fact he does." Joseph Keim Campbell, Free Will (John Wiley & Sons 2013), 52.

But in that event, even many freewill theists no longer think libertarian freedom is a necessary condition of moral responsibility. So that's not a given.

ii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we grant this contention. How would God stepping in to prevent a pedophile from molesting a child nullify moral responsibility? After all, divine intervention didn't override the pedophile's intention to molest a child. It didn't override his plan to molest a child. It didn't override his initial efforts to act on that plan. Rather, it's a last minute intervention that prevents him from executing his plan.

So the pedophile is still culpable for his malicious intentions and designs and abortive actions. The fact that he was thwarted at the last minute hardly absolves him of guilt.

iii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, we grant that divine intervention nullifies his moral responsibility. So what? The problem here is that the freewill theist is attempting to justify God's inaction by making divine respect for moral responsibility a universal principle that supersedes any conflicting duty. But why should we grant the universality of that principle?

Suppose we concede, for discussion purposes, that all things being equal, God should not infringe on our moral responsibility. Suppose, in many situations, that outranks other considerations. But if it's a choice between protecting a child and respecting moral responsibility, what makes moral responsibility a higher priority in that situation? In other words, unabridged moral responsibility might be good in general, but does that make it a greater good in every situation, to which any conflicting obligation must defer?

8. Consider another principle: For love to be genuine, the agent must either be the ultimate source of his love and/or be free to withhold his love. But is that an adequate response?

i) For starters, isn't that empirically implausible? As a matter of human experience, is that a condition of genuine love? For instance, isn't parental love basically instinctive and irrepressible? Sure, there are terrible exceptions, but I'm countering a universal claim.

Or take friendship. In my observation, when two or more people have to spend lots of time together, they either end up liking one another or disliking one another. Each person has a predisposition to either click with someone else or find them aggravating to be around. We may choose our friends, but we didn't choose what made them likable to us in the first place.

ii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we grant the contention. If God steps in to prevent a pedophile from molesting a child, how does that infringe on the pedophile's freedom to love God? If a pedophile is allowed to molest children, doesn't that behavior make him morally hardened? Habitual evil reduces his ability to freely love God. Divine intervention would help to preserve the agent's ability to love God.

iii) But suppose, for discussion purposes, we concede the contention. So what? Suppose repeated divine intervention somehow infringes on the pedophile's ability to freely love God. Why should that take precedence over the safety of an innocent child?

Even if, as a general principle, it is good for agents to be at liberty to freely love God, how does that override all other goods, including the good of the child? Why should the wellbeing of the child take a backseat to the wellbeing of the molester?

Suppose, all things being equal, God should not abridge the spontaneity of love. But as a universal principle, that loses plausibility precisely in cases like child abuse.

9. Freewill theist William Alston said:

A perfectly good God would not wholly sacrifice the welfare of one of His intelligent creatures simply in order to achieve a good for others, or for Himself. This would be incompatible with His concern for the welfare of each of His creatures. "The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition," D. Howard-Snyder, ed., The Evidential Argument from Evil (Indiana U. Press, 1996), 111.

Seems to me that captures a fundamental principle and a priori intuition of freewill theists. Problem is, their a priori proscription collides with a posteriori reality. So freewill theists are forced to qualify their principles and intuitions in the harsh, unyielding glare of various kinds of evils that actually transpire.

It becomes, in part, a question of theological method. Do we begin with the kinds of evils that actually take place, and reason back from that to inform our theological parameters? Or do we begin with a set of stimulative theological expectations, then adapt that as best we can to the kind of world in which we find ourselves?

Artificial reality

Some theologians use the authorial metaphor to model God's relationship to the world. God is like a novelist, the world is like a novel. Humans are like storybook characters. The physical environment is like the setting. History is like the plot.

It's a useful metaphor—but a bit quaint. It could easily be updated to make it more flexible and realistic. I'm alluding to science fiction involving virtual reality and artificial intelligence.

I don't mean that's realistic in the sense that it's possible. I just mean that for illustrative purposes, it is more lifelike.

So let's play along with that scenario. God is like a video game designer who creates self-aware virtual characters. Unlike storybook characters, these characters are endowed with consciousness. They have an actual mental life. They can feel simulated physical pain or pleasure. They can experience the gamut of human emotions. They can reason. Deliberate. Suffer psychological pain.

They are aware of their surroundings. Aware of fellow characters, with whom they interact. They make plans. Experience disappointment, and so on.

Unlike a novelistic plot, which is static, events unfold in the video game in real time. A real past, present, and future. Stream of consciousness.

This can illustrate different aspects of God's economic relationship:

i) The designer exists apart from the game. The designer planned the game. Created the characters. At that level, he caused everything to happen.

ii) Yet the AI virtual characters aren't merely projections of the designer. They have actual, individual mental states that are ontologically distinct from the designer. They experience their world from the inside out.

Each AI virtual character has its own first-person viewpoint, that's not equivalent to God's first-person viewpoint, or God's third-person viewpoint of the characters. These are irreducible perspectives. Each character knows what it's like to be himself (or herself).

iii) They might cause things to happen the way we cause things to happen in dreams, by willing them to happen. Psychokinetic agents. And from their vantage-point, that might be indistinguishable from physical causation.

iv) They could become aware of their designer's existence. Be cognizant of a larger reality, outside the world in which they exist.

v) We can explore both determinist and indeterminist models.

On an indeterminist model, the designer creates the initial conditions, but after that the game may take on a life of its own. Within certain parameters, the outcome is wide-open.

On a determinist (or predeterminist model), the designer plans everything that happens. Every thought, word, feeling, and action. Everything unfolds according to plan.

In principle, characters might become aware of the fact that their actions are predetermined. That wouldn't have much impact on their action, because they don't know in advance what they are predetermined to do. They just do whatever they were going to do. Do whatever they were motivated to do, which turns out to be what they were predetermined to do. To the extent that knowledge of predeterminism affects their action by making them self-conscious about their next move, that is, itself, a predetermined reaction. So it doesn't change the outcome.

This, of course, raises familiar theodical issues. Are they still responsible for their actions?

A stock objection is that they can't be responsible unless they were able to do otherwise. Suppose we grant that contention for the sake of argument.

There are stories with alternate endings. There are stories in which the character did both. In that event, is he blameworthy if, in one case, he does something immoral?

What about the libertarian version? Unlike storybook characters, the virtual characters can suffer actual harm. One character can make another character feel simulated physical pain. Or induce anguish.

Or "murder" the character. Erase him from the game. All his memories and aspirations are extinguished by another, malevolent character.

But that raises questions about the designer's benevolence. Is it proper for him to permit one character to wield that kind of power over another? Is it proper for him to permit one character to harm another? Much less to cause him irreparable harm?

The value of an analogy depends on sufficient similarity to the thing it illustrates to be truly comparable, but sufficient dissimilarity to enable us to see the issue from a fresh perspective. If it's too much like the thing it illustrates, it lacks a point of contrast to contribute any distinctive insight into the original issue.

God moves in mysterious ways

Here is a commonly cited example:

I was healed from cancer by God!

Really? Does that mean that God will heal all others with cancer?

Well... God works in mysterious ways.

A key characteristic of ad hoc rationalizations is that the "explanation" offered is only expected to apply to the one instance in question. For whatever reason, it is not applied any other time or place and is not offered as a general principle. Note in the above that God's "miraculous powers of healing" are not applied to all cancer sufferers, but only this one at this time and for reasons which are completely unknown.

In the above, the idea that not everyone will be healed by God contradicts the common belief that God loves everyone equally.

How could we tell when it is happening and when it is not? How could we differentiate between a system where God has acted in a "mysterious way" and one where the results are due to chance or some other cause?

http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/skepticism/blfaq_fall_adhoc.htm

i) I disagree with the setup. Many atheists, as well as some Christians, routinely recast all truth-claims in terms of evidence and counterevidence. No doubt that's appropriate in cases where there is both prima facie evidence and prima facie counterevidence, but everything shouldn't be hoisted onto that that seesaw.

ii) For instance, we often believe something happened based on direct evidence that it happened. I believe certain things happened to me because that's a matter of personal experience. I don't put that on one side of the scales, put possible counterevidence on the other side of the scales, then see which way the scales tip. That's very artificial. I simply believe it happened because it happened to me, and, in the nature of the case, I have firsthand knowledge of things that happen to me.

Likewise, we believe lots of things based on what trusted people tell us. We don't ordinarily feel the need to counterbalance that belief by considering possible evidence to the contrary, then decide if one outweighs the other. The teeter-totter paradigm doesn't fit our general belief-forming system, or even the justification of beliefs.

iii) Why does God not healing somebody else equally deserving furnish any kind of evidence that God didn't heal me? What's the connection? If there's evidence of divine healing, why isn't the evidence in itself the only salient consideration?

Suppose, unbeknownst to me, cyberterrorists hack into the traffic light system to facilitate a bank heist. On the one hand it gives the getaway car an escape route. On the other hand, it blocks traffic on the same side of the street where the police station is located.

However, that has the fringe benefit drivers in my lane have solid green lights all the way home, while drivers in the opposing lane, and side streets, have solid red lights. In my ignorance, I have no idea how to account for the disparity. Moreover, this is something extraordinary.

Yet that doesn't count against the indisputable fact that, for some inexplicable reason, the traffic lights favor everyone in my lane. They just do! It may cause me to investigate why that's the case. But it's not the phenomenon itself that's in question. That's not a reason to doubt that on this particular day, the traffic lights in my lane stayed green all the way home. And that's not a reason to doubt that it requires a special explanation.

iv) In addition, the objection presumes, without benefit of argument, if God heals people at all, we'd expect him to heal all equally deserving people. But is that a reasonable expectation? What's that based on? Just that it seems arbitrary for God to heal some, but not all, equally deserving people?

But it's not hard to come up with reasons why that might be so. Consider the alternative: suppose God healed everyone who prayed for healing, or everyone who was prayed for. Well, that would change the future, in the sense that the future would turn out very differently in that event than if God didn't heal everyone. Who lives and who dies, where they live and die, when they live and die, affects the future. If more people live longer, that has multiple ramifications.

So one reason God might not answer every prayer for healing is because that's inconsistent with the future he intends. For instance, some people die because other people didn't die. Take a terminal cancer patient who's miraculously healed. A year later, he kills a cyclist or pedestrian while driving under the influence.

It sounds swell to say God should heal everyone, but what is good for one person may be bad for another. Your healing may come at someone else's expense, down the line. Something you do today may unintentionally harm someone tomorrow.

On the other hand, one reason God might heal some people is to furnish evidence for his existence. He performs miracles often enough to maintain a periodic witness to his existence, but he refrains from performing miracles routinely because that would result in a very different future.

v) Incidentally, I, as a Calvinist, reject the premise that God loves everyone.

Soul-making theodicy

1. In the past I've defended a supralapsarian theodicy. I still adhere to that, but I'd like to supplement it by considering the soul-making theodicy.

The basic idea of the supra theodicy is that it's better to be a fallen and redeemed creature than an unfallen creature. But that involves second-order goods, which are contingent on the existence of evil.

There's a difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. You can grasp propositions about sin and forgiveness. That, however, is very different from the experience of sin and forgiveness. Existential knowledge is richer than abstract knowledge. And that's germane to a soul-making theodicy.

A supra theodicy has a subjective dimension: the personal experience of divine forgiveness. However, it's more objective than a soul-making theodicy inasmuch as the frame of reference is divine forgiveness. God is the object of forgiveness, while a Christian is the subject of forgiveness.

By contrast, a soul-making theodicy has a more subjective orientation, inasmuch as it's about the cultivation of certain virtues. Becoming a better person. A wiser person.

2. The soul-making theodicy was popularized by John Hick. In Augustinian anthropology, Adam and Eve were finished products. They fell from a state of moral perfection. Hick contrasted that with his own position, according to which Adam and Eve were created with the potential for moral growth. They were still in the process of creation. They had the potential for moral maturation. (Mind you, Hick denied the historicity of Adam and Eve.)

There's some truth to this analysis, although it suffers from equivocation. To say unfallen Adam and Eve were morally "perfect" simply means they were sinless. It doesn't mean there was no room for moral improvement.

Paradoxically, fallen humans can be both better and worse than unfallen humans. Inasmuch as they are sinners, they are worse. Yet Christians can have a moral grace that surpasses the mere sinlessness of Adam and Eve. Saints have virtues that angels lack.

3. Let's take an example: Suppose you have a family of five. Both parents are social climbers and overachievers. The husband is consumed with career advancement. The wife is a tiger mom. She makes sure the kids are enrolled in all the right student clubs and extracurricular activities that will look good on a college application. The two teenage sons and a daughter are into the usual things kids in their age-bracket are into. At dinner, each member of the family is glued to the display on their smart phone.

The members of the family aren't Christian. Aren't into meaning-of-life questions. They lead superficial lives.

One son starts to forget routine things. At first this is amusing. They think he's absent-minded. Distracted by too much multitasking. But he begins to complain about headaches.

His parents take him to the doctor, and he's diagnosed with brain cancer. Suddenly their priorities come to a screeching halt.

They now have a sick family member who will just get sicker. Their social world contracts. Their center of gravity shifts.

Instead of being frivolous and self-absorbed, they make the most of the remaining time with their dying family member. The wrenching experience changes them. Deepens them. Makes them better people. Develops their unrealized moral potential.

Perhaps, in their distress and despair, they turn to God. They regret the missed opportunities. Regret taking life for granted. Regret taking one another for granted. Regret all the things they should have said and done differently, in retrospect.

That kind of regret can refine character. Moving forward, that prompts them to treat others with greater patience and understanding.

This is hypothetical, but there are real life examples of Christians like Eric Liddell and Ernest Gordon who exhibit moral heroism in the face of extreme adversity.

Let's consider some objections to this theodicy:

4. At best, this theodicy can only justify the existence of certain kinds of evil.

i) However, even if that's the case, that's only a defect on the assumption that a successful theodicy must single-handedly justify the existence of every kind of evil. But what if different kinds of evils lend themselves to different theodicean principles? In that event, a soul-making theodicy can make a necessary contribution. It wasn't meant to cover more than one class of evils.

ii) In the same vein, the ordeal may benefit the caregiver even if it doesn't benefit the patient. Or it may benefit each in different ways. Some short lives are far more meaningful than some long lives.

2. Suffering makes some people worse instead of better. Rather than refining them, their character deteriorates under the strain. They become hardened and bitter.

i) That's a problem for a soul-building theodicy which is predicated on God's omnibenevolence. But if, a la Calvinism, God never intended everyone to benefit from evil, that's not inconsistent with the theodicy.

ii) In addition, the fact that some people fail to take advantage of opportunities for moral improvement doesn't mean the theodicy was a failure. People often blow good opportunities. If there's something blameworthy in that situation, it's not the opportunity but the failure to seize it.

3. Dire conditions aren't necessary for people to express these virtues.

i) That maybe true, but the question at issue is primarily the cultivation of such virtues, and secondarily the expression of such virtues. Does the ordeal foster such virtues in some people? Virtues they'd never develop in the first place absent the ordeal?

The virtues were latent, not in the sense that they were there all along, waiting for an opportunity to express themselves, but because the potential was there all along, requiring a stimulus to develop.

ii) Moreover, this is not about overcoming obstacles and testing yourself against challenges, to build generic traits like strength of character, but specific moral and theological virtues.

4. Terrible evils aren't necessary to develop these virtues.

That objection is circular. The philosophers who raise it have never been in a situation that requires moral heroism. Since they lack heroic virtue, they don't value heroic virtue. They have no firsthand standard of comparison. They haven't had that experience. So they lack the capacity to appreciate their moral deficiency in that respect. They don't know what they are missing.

That's the point of the soul-building theodicy. It's not about abstract knowledge, but the kind of understanding that can only come from personal experience. Like tempered steel, you have to pass through fire to know what it's like and to experience the effect.

They lack the necessary insight to appreciate the theodicy because they lack the necessary experience which confers that insight. The very type of experience which the theodicy concerns.

And from I can tell, critics haven't read accounts of Christians like Eric Liddell and Ernest Gordon. For Liddell, it was a tremendous witness to his fellow captives. For Gordon, it was a transformative experience. Other examples include Christians who care for a disabled family member or family member who suffers from a degenerative illness. It taps into unsuspected reservoirs of forbearance and charity.

5. The theodicy is circular. These virtues are only virtuous in a fallen world. They'd be unnecessary in an unfallen world. They aren't intrinsic virtues. Indeed, isn't the goal to eliminate evil?

i) Once the virtues are developed, it's no longer necessary to have the evils which foster those virtues. But that's like saying the goal of maturation is to outgrow childhood. In a sense, that's true, yet childhood is a necessary preliminary phase.

ii) In one sense I can't prove to you that these are intrinsic virtues. Moral appeals depend on shared intuitions. That's a limitation of any moral argument.

iii) But consider an illustration. Take teen horror flicks about a group of high school students who are friends. You know, the kind in which everyone was perfect teeth.

They go on a trip. But things go terribly awry. They find themselves in a situation where I have a better chance of survival if you don't survive. That suddenly becomes the acid test of friendship. Are they just fair-weather friends? Will they leave you behind? Or will they risk their skin to save a friend?

A crisis brings out the best and the worst in people. To some extent it exposes what was there all along, just beneath the surface. And a prolonged crisis will make people better or worse.

Suppose these "friends" turn on each other. Desert each other. Save themselves at the expense of one another.

Suppose, in an unfallen world, these people have the same character, only their fair-weather friendship will never be put to the test. But surely there's something defective about their character, even if those virtues are unnecessary in an unfallen world. Surely they'd be better persons for having those virtues, even if they never had the occasion to express them.

If the absence of those virtues is morally defective in a fallen world, it's morally defective in an unfallen world. They're the same people (hypothetically speaking). How can they be admirable in an unfallen world if their conduct would be deplorable in a fallen world?

To be good people, they should have it within themselves to rise to the challenge, had the occasion presented itself. If we knew how badly they'd perform in that situation, our opinion of them would plummet. We wouldn't look at them the same way.

Although this is hypothetical, there are real-world analogues. In the past, and in some parts of the Third World today, it is dangerous to nurse the sick. Some diseases are both contagious and life-threatening. If you care for a sick family member, you run the risk of becoming infected and dying. But as a rule, it would be morally derelict to abandon the ailing family member.

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire

There's a blogger who attacks Calvinism from time to time. That's hardly surprising coming from an Arminian blogger. However, he recently defected from the Christian faith. Here's part of what he said:

So why does God not speak to someone crying out, literally, in such pain and desperation? What is the value of God talking to all these people who are well when the sick are ignored? I don't want to broaden this into an argument so much as express my experience so I will ignore the broader questions for now. In my most desperate moments of physical and mental agony, depression, and loneliness God was not there. I was rescued from suicidal thoughts by my family and a very good psychologist. I know some Christians will assert that he was there (in some sense behind it all) but I am afraid he was not there in any proper or real sense of that term for me. So perhaps God doesn't continually chat with these other Christians either and they are projecting onto God what their conscious mind expresses? But even if that is the case that helps very little since God is still silent. It just makes it even more painful to realize that huge numbers of Christians are deluding themselves into thinking God is talking with them continuously when in fact he is not. The companionship which the New Testament appears to talk about was simply not there. So what is the point of all this noetic belief if that's all my Christianity is (was)? What kind of God has no relational component to offer in this life?

Christians love to use the father analogy for God. But what father would do that to his child especially if he has all the means to be alongside them at that moment? Certainly no decent father would distance himself at such a time. I cannot bring myself to believe in a God who is so clearly absent at the moment I needed him most. (And don't get me started on the 'Footprints' poem!!) If the Christian God does exist and he does communicate with people then my spiritual antenna (as one of my Christian friends put it) is clearly broken.

What I do know is that if my son was in unbearable pain and desperation and was sitting begging for me to comfort him in such a moment of desperation, and it were in my power to comfort him, I would!

<https://aremonstrantsramblings.wordpress.com/2015/04/11/my-journey-away-from-christianity/>

i) I think there's extensive, compelling evidence for a God who is active in human affairs. But the pattern of God's activity is perplexing.

ii) Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the God of Arminian theism is nicer than the God of Reformed theism. Problem is, having a nice God on paper doesn't make real life any nicer.

You can say all the warm and winsome things about God that Arminians are wont to say. You can contrast that with the "stern" God of Calvinism. But as this erstwhile Arminian blogger discovered from painful personal experience, the loving, fatherly "relational" God of Arminian theology is a paper God. A God that only exists in the mind of the Arminian. A verbal construct. You can say the Calvinist God is harsh or "morally monstrous." You can contrast the Calvinist God with what you deem to be the superior character of the Arminian God. But switching from Calvinism to Arminianism doesn't make the world any different. Believing in a nicer God doesn't make the world a kinder gentler place than believing in a "harsh" God. Does nothing to sand off the jagged edges.

In the Arminian lodge, you have hot chocolate and chestnuts roasting on an open fire. But when you have to get up and go outside, the dark arctic blast slaps you in the face. The world you must live in everyday is just the same whether you're Arminian or Calvinist. Believing in a softhearted God does nothing to soften the world. It changes nothing. The toasty, climate-controlled environment of Arminian theology doesn't survive exposure to the elements. It fosters expectations that are dashed by brutal experience. The glib, fact-free bromides of a Jerry Walls didn't prepare him for his ordeal. Reality is unforgiving.

Cybernetic theology

How does God know the future—or does he? Some Christians might consider the question presumptuous. That's a mystery!

However, Isa 46:10-11 indicates that God knows the future by willing the future.

Conversely, freewill theism posits a condition (man's libertarian freedom) that poses an impediment to divine foreknowledge. And philosophical theologians of all stripes concede the dilemma. Some freewill theists labor to reconcile divine foreknowledge with libertarian freedom. But that shows they are acutely aware of the tension.

1. To take an illustration, suppose we compare God to a cyberneticist. Suppose a cyberneticist creates 100 robots. Each one has different programming. The cyberneticist knows what each one will do if he activates it.

Likewise, he knows how they will interact with each other. Depending on which robots he activates, the results will be different.

The unactivated robots are like possible worlds. And the cyberneticist is the source of all these alternate scenarios.

That's analogous to Reformed theism.

i) This has significant upsides. It clearly grounds divine foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge.

ii) It preserves the sovereignty of God, as the absolute Creator.

iii) A potential downside is the complaint that determinism implicates God in evil while robbing man of moral responsibility. Of course, that's an ancient, perennial debate. If we stick with the robotic metaphor, that raises to the question of whether androids are personal moral agents. That's a popular topic in science fiction literature, going back to Asimov's *I, Robot*. To insist that a robot can't be a person or moral agent simply begs the question.

2. Contrast that with freewill theism. The cyberneticist dies. Years later, an investigator discovers his secret laboratory.

In Molinism and Arminianism, the investigator knows, by consulting the notes of the cyberneticist, what the robots will do, individually or in combination, if activated.

However, he doesn't know it because he made them. He doesn't know it because he programmed the robots. He is not the source of what they will do, if activated. Rather, what they will do is the source of his foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge.

i) A potential upside is that it seems to diminish the tension between divine agency and sin. However, it has many downsides:

ii) With respect to (i), there are roughly two aspects to the problem of evil: (a) How can God be blameless? (b) How can man be blameworthy? Even if this model explains how man can be blameworthy, it fails to exonerate God from complicity in evil. The outcome is still dependent on something God did. In that respect it's no improvement over the perceived problem of (1).

iii) It fails to explain how God can know the future. Indeed, it seems to remove a necessary condition for divine foreknowledge.

iv) In fact, it fails to explain how God can know all possibilities. He's not the source of these possibilities. On this view, what humans would do is a given. Autonomous possibilities. God must adapt to that framework.

v) If human choices are ultimately uncaused, then how are we responsible for them? In what respect are they our choices if they are ultimately uncaused? If, on the other hand, they are ultimately caused, then isn't that deterministic?

vi) It reduces God to a Demiurge. There's a realm of abstract possibilities independent of God. Equally ultimate. God simply chooses which ones to switch on.

3. In open theism, he doesn't even know for sure what they will do. Their programming is adaptive and stochastic. Once activated, it takes on a life of its own. The end-game is unpredictable from a distance.

i) One upside is that denial of divine foreknowledge is more consistent with man's libertarian freedom—assuming man has libertarian freedom.

ii) A downside is that it makes God a mad scientist who activates robots to find out what they will do.

A freewill theist might exclaim that by comparing God to a cyberneticist, I've just conceded that Calvinism reduces men to robots! But aside from the fact that that my illustration is metaphorical, I'm using variations on the same robotic metaphor for Calvinism and freewill theism alike.

Is it murder?

i) A crucial principle in Arminian theodicy is the distinction between allowing evil and causing, ensuring, and or determining evil. (I'm using "Arminian" as shorthand for freewill theism.)

Mind you, that's a false dichotomy. Passively allowing an event to occur is often a way of ensuring its occurrence. Likewise, on a standard philosophical definition, allowing an event to happen is a way of causing it to happen. Your inaction or nonintervention makes the difference.

However, let's drop that for now and consider the issue from another angle. I'm going to adapt an illustration from William James.

ii) Suppose, during Spring break, I go hiking with a classmate. He's not my friend or enemy. We're not close. But we're both athletic, we both like hiking, and there are certain advantages to hiking with a companion, so I take him along.

The trail is often steep and treacherous, with loose gravel. Suppose he loses his footing and slides over the ledge of a precipitous drop. He manages to grab onto a shrub, which he's clinging to for dear life. I can see the fear in his eyes.

I throw him a rope, which he grabs. But the backpack weighs him down. He lacks the strength to pull himself straight up. Moreover, his weight keeps the rope pressed against the rocky surface. He can't get his hands around the rope to climb all the way—even if he could get to that point.

By contrast, I have the strength and leverage to pull him to safety. But at the last minute I change my mind. I let go, and watch him plunge to his death.

Maybe I find it exhilarating to have the power of life and death over another human being. His life is literally in my hands.

Or maybe I'm an atheist. I'm indifferent to morality. I'm indifferent to human life. I just don't care what happens to him. There's no malice. In the long run we're all dead. Life is fortuitous. It has no ultimate significance. I shrug it off.

Or maybe, if you ask me why I let go of the rope, I couldn't tell you. I don't know why I did it. It was a snap judgment. I may have had some subliminal impulse. Had I been confronted with the same decision a day later, I might have saved him.

iii) In any case, did I commit murder? It wasn't premeditated murder. I didn't plan on that when I invited him to join me. I didn't intend to stage a fatal accident. It's just something I did on the spur of the moment.

Moreover, I didn't create the life-threatening situation. I didn't make him slip and slide. I didn't push him over the ledge. That happened all by itself. A combination of the terrain and something he did. A misstep. Whatever.

I did nothing to endanger him, beyond inviting him to hike with me. He accepted the invitation. And I took the same risk. Neither one of us went hiking with the expectation that one or both of us would die. There was a calculated risk.

I just let nature take its course. Gravity won!

Yet I expect most people, including most freewill theists, would say I committed murder (or the moral equivalent) by letting him fall to his death when I could save him with no risk to myself. And even if it wasn't murder, it was blameworthy. Indeed, reprehensible. So how does the facile Arminian distinction exonerate God?

iv) Roger Olson grudgingly admits that there are situations in which allowing evil is culpable, but he says there are other situations in which allowing evil is inculpable. Problem is, he just leaves it at that. But if he presumes to attack the morality of Reformed theism, then he shoulders a burden of proof to show how the situations in which God permits evil are the kinds of situations where allowing that to happen is blameless. What's the relevant difference?

He can't just stipulate that, in each and every case, those must be the right kinds of situations. That would be special pleading. That would be exempting his own position from the same scrutiny to which he subjects Calvinism. That would be asserting that, by definition, the only evils that God permits are just the very kinds of evils which God is blameless to permit. But if that's a legitimate maneuver, then a Calvinist is entitled to make a comparable maneuver.

Friendship and the freewill defense

According to the freewill defense, God is not responsible or blameworthy for the harmful decisions that humans make. He doesn't "cause" their choices or "determine" their choices.

Suppose I have a college roommate who's a recovering alcoholic. Suppose I take him to a bar. I place him in a tempting situation. I know he has a weakness for alcohol, but I don't know if he will succumb to temptation. Suppose there's a 50/50 chance that he will either succumb or resist.

If he does give into temptation, it's not because I "determined" the outcome. And as freewill theists define causality, I didn't cause him to drink.

Was I blameworthy for exposing him to that gratuitous temptation? Even if, on this occasion, he overcomes the temptation to drink, was I blameworthy for putting him at risk? Was I acting in his best interests? Or was I playing to his weakness, thereby exposing my roommate to harm?

Is it not my duty, as a friend, to protect him? Even if I can't do that all time, isn't that something I could and should do in this situation?

And if he does give into temptation, am I not complicit in his downfall? Was I not instrumental in his downfall?

Open theism and theodicy

According to open theism, God has sovereignly decided to create a world with libertarianly free creatures and, since there are no true (would-) counterfactuals of creaturely freedom for God to know and since, according to open theists, libertarian freedom is incompatible with meticulous foreknowledge, God could not know for sure ahead of time what kinds of choices his free creatures will make. God would seem to be less blameworthy for not preventing evils that he didn't know in advance would happen.

<http://alanrhoda.net/wordpress/?p=102>

i) In human affairs there are situations where ignorance can be an extenuating or exculpatory factor. But that's not a given.

Suppose I leave the house for an hour to go for a walk. I leave my young sons—ages 2 and 3—alone with a space heater running. In my absence the house catches fire and they burn to death.

I didn't know in advance that this would happen. But that misses the point. It was reckless of me to expose them to gratuitous risk. It was wrong of me to take that gamble at their expense. In fact, even if the house hadn't caught fire, I'd still be negligent, still be culpable, for endangering them.

ii) This assumes that God is, in fact, ignorant future evils. But surely that's overstated, even on open theist assumptions. Suppose the open theist God didn't know 3 days in advance that the Titanic was going to hit an iceberg and sink. Maybe that was contingent on a string of unforeseeable human choices.

But did the open theist God still not know 3 hours in advance that the Titanic was going to hit an iceberg? Could he not even anticipate 30 minutes in advance that the Titanic was on a collision course with the iceberg—given the trajectory? How much lead time does it take to swerve?

And even if that wasn't a "sure thing," is it not responsible and prudent to take precautions just in case? Especially when innocent lives are at stake? If God can't know for sure, isn't that all the more reason to leave himself a generous margin of error?

iii) Likewise, didn't the open theist God know that category 4 hurricane was making a bee line for Galveston? Can't the open theist God predict when and where a hurricane will make landfall at least as well as the National Weather Service?

iv) At this point an open theist might counter that even though God can anticipate some (all?) natural disasters, God can't intervene to prevent them. For human choices to be

meaningful, choices must have predictable consequences. That, in turn, requires a stable environment.

However, that reply is subject to multiple objections:

v) To begin with, the open theist is suddenly shifting ground. This argument concedes that divine ignorance is an inadequate theodicy.

vi) A stock objection that open theists raise to Calvinism is that if every event is predestined, then petitionary prayer is otiose, for the future is written in stone.

(Of course, in Calvinism, the stony inscription includes answered prayer.)

If, however, God can't destabilize the natural order by overriding the default setting, then open theist theodicy negates open theist prayer.

vii) Furthermore, the argument backfires. If choices must have predictable consequences, then choices require informed consent: permission granted in the knowledge of probable risks and consequences.

If the residents of Galveston had known that a catastrophic hurricane was going to hit their town on Sept. 8, 1990, many of them would evacuate ahead of the storm. And even if some stubbornly remained behind, that would be their informed choice.

However, the open theist God withheld that information. They had no advance warning, to make preparations.

This doesn't require God to divert the hurricane, but simply forewarn the residents. The natural order remains inviolable.

Suppose I suffer from migraine headaches. I consult a neurologist. He says I'm in luck. He can prescribe a medication that relieves the headache.

However, he neglects to tell me that the medication has a side-effect: it causes brain cancer.

Although I chose to take the medication, I was denied the opportunity to make an informed choice. Had I known the side-effect, I would not have taken the medication. The neurologist was guilty of malpractice by failing to warn me.

Open theism dilemma

Open theism suffers from a major dilemma. On the one hand, in fielding the problem of evil, open theists appeal to divine ignorance as a mitigating or exculpatory factor. For instance:

According to open theism, God has sovereignly decided to create a world with libertarianly free creatures and, since there are no true (would-) counterfactuals of creaturely freedom for God to know and since, according to open theists, libertarian freedom is incompatible with meticulous foreknowledge, God could not know for sure ahead of time what kinds of choices his free creatures will make. God would seem to be less blameworthy for not preventing evils that he didn't know in advance would happen.

<http://alanrhoda.net/wordpress/?p=102>

On the other hand, open theists contend that God can anticipate the future with a high degree of probability. For instance:

*...we would affirm God's comprehensive and exact knowledge of the possibilities of the future—and, as has already been said, of the gradually changed likelihood of each of those possibilities' being realized. And as the probability of a choice's being made in a certain way gradually increases toward certainty, God knows that also, often, no doubt, before the finite agent herself is aware of it. W. Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Cornell, 1998), 189.*

Many prophecies, in fact, have a conditional character, such as "If a nation does not do such and such, then it will be destroyed" (see Jeremiah 18:7–10, for example). Second, many prophetic predictions are based upon existing trends and tendencies, which provide God with enough evidence to foresee the future (Hasker 1989, 195). (Hasker places Jesus' prediction about Peter in this category, by the way.) Finally, some prophecies simply reveal what God has already decided to bring about in the future (Hasker 1989, 195). Since God's own actions in the future are up to God, it is possible for God to know about them even though they are contingent, so it is possible for prophecies to reveal them.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prophecy/#3>

Indeed, it's an essential component of religious devotion to say that God can be trusted to keep his promises.

To the extent that proponents accentuate divine ignorance as a distinctive element and advantage of an open theist theodicy, they undercut the claim that God can accurately anticipate the future and thereby be trusted to keep his promises.

Conversely, to the extent that proponents accentuate God's high probabilistic knowledge of the future, they undercut the appeal to divine ignorance to exonerate God in relation to evil.

Does God play dominoes?

*While God's plan for your friend's parents included the fact that they would die in this airline crash, He did not causally predetermine it. His will for their lives was evidently, not that they should die years apart after lingering battles with illness or pain, but that they should be taken together quickly to His side. Their deaths fit into God's providential plan for human history, which is to establish His Kingdom among men. God has good reasons for permitting them to die in this crash, otherwise He would not have allowed it. But as you know from reading *The Only Wise God*, God's sovereign providence over human history does not imply His causally determining everything that happens. This event was the result of an incomprehensible multitude of free human choices which God did not determine. If her parents had decided not to travel on this flight because of a dream, then God's plan would have taken a different course. His providential planning would have to have taken into account that free choice instead of the choices He did have to work with. God's providential plan does not override human free choices but rather takes account of them.*

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/indonesia-air-asia-qz8501-and-the-problem-of->

That's a strange argument. God cannot prevent a plane crash without overriding our freewill?

Let's grant libertarian freedom for the sake of argument. Let's play along with that assumption. Let's consider some causes of plane crashes:

i) Terrorism would be the most direct example. A passenger smuggles a bomb onboard. A pilot deliberately crashes the plane. A mechanic sabotages the plane. In each case, the agent intends the (dire) outcome. According to the freewill defense, God must respect human choices.

But even on its own grounds, there's a problem with that argument. Take the Air France model of the A1380, which seats 538 passengers. You have one terrorist who wills the plane to crash over against more than 500 passengers and crew who will the opposite. God can't respect everyone's will in the case of conflicting volitions. Why does he side with one terrorist?

ii) A less direct example would be human error (e.g. pilot error, air traffic controller error, a design flaw, faulty maintenance). These involve free choices. However, in this case, the agent doesn't intend the outcome. The plane crash is an unforeseen consequence

of human choices. If the agent knew in advance the end-result of his action, he'd be appalled. He would avoid that error.

How does it violate human freewill for God to correct a short-sighted or uninformed choice which the agent never intended?

iii) Then there are impersonal causes (e.g. metal fatigue, bird strikes, lightning strikes, downdrafts) that don't involve human choice. Why is God not allowed to override metal fatigue or windshear? He's not overriding the freewill of the weather or machinery, is he?

Sure, Craig can say that if passengers hadn't chosen to board the doomed plane, they would not have died. But if God mustn't override human choices at all, then how can he ever answer prayer? Nearly every answered prayer will intersect with a multitude of human choices at the time or down the line. How can answered prayer be consistent with every human volition that's impacted by answered prayer? Isn't Craig's position Deistic? God flicks the first domino (creation), but after that he can't interrupt the domino effect (i.e. actual human choices). Once he flicks the first domino, his hands are tied thereafter. He just watches them fall.

Tug-of-war

Freewill theists typically act as though the distinction between God "causing" evil and God "permitting" evil is morally crucial. I'm going to develop an illustration by philosopher Stephen Mumford which a friend shared with me. Ironically, I like his illustration, but disagree with his interpretation.

Take a tug-of-war. Suppose you begin with two evenly-matched teams. They may be evenly matched because both sides have an equal number of teammates, and each teammate is equal in size and strength to his fellow teammates, as well as the opposing teammates. They are numerically and individually equally matched.

Or they may be aggregately evenly matched. Maybe one side has fewer teammates than the other, but its teammates are bigger and stronger than the opposing side, as a result of which each team pulls with the same amount of force. The qualitative advantages balance out the quantitative disadvantages, or vice versa.

This results in a stalemate. Neither team can win.

So what would it take for one team to win? There are two ways that could happen.

i) By *adding* another teammate to one side. That would tip the balance of power in its favor.

ii) By *subtracting* a teammate from one side. That, too, would shift the balance of power.

We might say adding a teammate causes that team to win the tug of war. Just enough extra force.

But by converse logic, we might say subtracting a teammate causes that team to lose. Indeed, it's hard to see how that inference can be avoided. As philosopher David Lewis once said: "We think of a cause as something that makes a difference."

If a teammate decided to quit, he'd naturally be blamed for causing his team to lose. His team lost when he stopped pulling the rope. It was a group effort which could not afford a single defection.

The opposing team won because his team lost, and his team lost because he gave up. In that respect, he caused the opposing team to win. It couldn't win unless his team lost. His team losing was a necessary and sufficient condition of their winning. He made it happen. His action was the differential factor. The tipping point.

Furthermore, we could recast the issue in terms of rendering an outcome certain. In this case, not pulling ensured defeat. Just as adding a teammate guaranteed (or

determined) victory for one side, subtracting a teammate guaranteed (or determined) defeat for the other side.

Freedom and stability

All these Christian thinkers argue that free will requires an environment of natural laws, predictability, risk and ability to do evil. In other words, even God cannot create a world that includes genuine moral free will and responsibility and constantly interfere to stop gratuitous evils from occurring.

Read more: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/is-there-a-difference-between-permitting-evil-and-doing-evil/#ixzz3OuduGbsA>

Although I commented on this statement yesterday, in connection with his general post, this is worth discussing in its own right. It merits an expanded analysis.

This is sometimes called a natural-law theodicy or stable environment theodicy. C. S. Lewis (in *The Problem of Pain*) helped to popularize it. Here's one formulation:

A final important theodicy involves the following ideas: first, it is important that events in the world take place in a regular way, since otherwise effective action would be impossible; secondly, events will exhibit regular patterns only if they are governed by natural laws; thirdly, if events are governed by natural laws, the operation of those laws will give rise to events that harm individuals; so, fourthly, God's allowing natural evils is justified because the existence of natural evils is entailed by natural laws, and a world without natural laws would be a much worse world.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#NeeForNatLaw>

And this, in part, is how Lewis put it:

But if matter is to serve as a neutral field it must have a fixed nature of its own. If a "world" or material system had only a single inhabitant it might conform at every moment to his wishes "trees for his sake would crowd into a shade". But if you were introduced into a world which thus varied at my every whim, you would be quite unable to act in it and would thus lose the exercise of your free will.

If fire comforts that body at a certain distance, it will destroy it when the distance is reduced. Hence, even in a perfect world, the necessity for those danger signals which the pain-fibres in our nerves are apparently designed to transmit.

If a man travelling in one direction is having a journey down hill, a man going in the opposite direction must be going up hill. If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by a coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this is very far from being an evil: on the contrary, it furnishes occasion for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humour and modesty express themselves. But it certainly leaves the way open to a great evil, that of competition and hostility. And if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of by courtesy...The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbour on the head.

We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free-will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void.

Up to a point, this theodicy has some merit, but it's quite inadequate as a stand-alone theodicy:

i) It doesn't select for freewill theism. For instance, Calvinism refers to this as ordinary providence. It includes second causes. So Calvinism can also invoke the value of "natural laws" as part of a Reformed theodicy. For instance, Calvinists are fond of quoting:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen 8:22; cf. Jer 31:35).

ii) Moreover, the argument either proves to much or too little. Carried to a logical extreme, this is an argument for deism. It precludes the destabilizing principle of miracles or petitionary prayer. For once you leave the door ajar for miracles or answered prayer, that interjects a degree of unpredictability into the outcome.

For instance, when a natural disaster is predicted (e.g. hurricanes, tornadoes), Christians pray that God will avert the disaster. But by Olson's logic, it's misguided for Christians to pray in that situation. Natural evils are an essential part of a stable environment, which is—in turn—a precondition of freedom and responsibility.

iii) That's aggravated by the fact that petitionary prayer is, itself, highly unpredictable. Sometimes God grants your request, and sometimes he doesn't. You never know

ahead of time if he will answer your prayer. And if you did know in advance that your prayer would go unanswered, you wouldn't bother asking in the first place.

It that respect, it's hard to plan for the future based on prayer. Yet prayer is a fixture of the Christian life.

iii) There's an ironic, fundamental tension between the appeal to libertarian freedom and the appeal to the stability of our environment. On the one hand, the freewill theist needs a stable environment to form the backdrop for his choices. To make meaningful decisions, his decisions must have predictable consequences.

On the other hand, the fact that his decisions are indeterminate destabilizes the very environment which forms the backdrop for his choices. Unpredictable choices have unpredictable consequences. There's a circular or dialectical relationship between our choices and our environment. The environment acts on the agent and the agent acts on the environment. By acting on his environment, he changes his environment—which, in turn—affects how the environment acts on him. A mutual alteration.

To the extent that the choices of libertarian agents create the future, indeterminate choices make the future unpredictable. We step into the future we made, by our collective decisions.

That's aggravated by the fact that our environment includes our social environment—and not merely our natural or physical environment. We make choices in large part based on our ability to predict how other people will react to our choices. Our free choices interact with the sometimes countervailing free choices of other free agents, in a vast nexus where the consequences of one agent's choice can neutralize the consequences of another agent's choice. Of course, that raises the question of how people can be so predictable if the outcome is truly open-ended.

Risk assessment is a common feature of decision-making. A cost/benefit analysis. But libertarian freedom introduces unforeseeable consequences, due to the destructive wave interference of competing free agents.

So the freewill theist is caught in a dilemma. If you demand a stable environment, that undercuts the ability to manipulate the environment. If you demand freedom to manipulate the environment, that undercuts a stable environment. The more freedom, the more fluid the environment. These principles tug in opposing directions.

iv) Consider attempted suicide. Some people deliberately overdose on drugs, then regret their rash act. They seek last-minute medical intervention. That makes the consequences of attempted suicide less predictable. By Olson's logic, a world which includes genuine freedom and responsibilities disallows second thoughts about attempted suicide. Once you overdose, no attempt should be made to save your life, for that trivializes the finality of our choices, without which we cannot make meaningful choices in the first place. Examples could be multiplied.

Making the world safe for murder

I'm going to comment on two posts:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/a-problem-in-theology-distinctions-without-differences/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/is-there-a-difference-between-permitting-evil-and-doing-evil/>

I'll begin by repeating a distinction I drew in a previous post:

- 1) I have a one-year-old child. I hold him underwater in the bathtub until he drowns.
- 2) I'm sitting on my chaise lounge in my backyard patio. I watch my one-year-old child fall into the swimming pool. I know he can't swim. I sit there sipping lemonade while he drowns.

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/sins-of-omission.html>

Back to Olson:

Mine remains that in the case of God and the human fall into sin there is a clear difference between God "doing it" (causing it directly or indirectly such that he wanted it to happen and rendered it certain) and "permitting it." (By the way I've explained this distinction-with-a-real-difference here several times before.

- i) There's more to the problem of evil than the Fall (which Olson doesn't believe in anyway). There's the vast range of moral and natural evils.
- ii) According to classical Arminian providence, God is surely the *indirect* cause of many evils. God is not the sole cause, but he is a necessary cause.

And the same holds true for open theism. At best, open theism illustrates the law of unintended consequences. Yet that can also be culpable, viz. criminal negligence, depraved indifference.
- iii) Doing *nothing* is a perfect way of rendering many outcomes certain. If a baby stroller accidentally rolls down the hill, it is inevitable that it will run into a busy intersection unless I step in to prevent it. In many cases, inaction guarantees the outcome.

When Calvinists (or other divine determinists) claim there is no real difference between God doing evil and permitting evil they are usually objecting to free will

theists' (e.g., Arminians') claim that for God to design, ordain, render certain, and govern sin and evil makes God monstrous. The Calvinists making this argument against free will theism say that if God is omnipotent and could stop evil from happening but doesn't he is just as culpable, if at all, as if he designed, ordained, rendered certain and governed evil.

i) Olson is very fond of that "render certain" formula. Evidently, he's never considered what that means. It doesn't occur to him that in Arminian providence, God ensures many evils.

Let's go back to my example: unless the father fishes his young son out of the swimming pool, his inaction ensures that his son will drown.

In many cases, there's nothing an agent needs to do to render the outcome certain. Rather, some outcomes are inevitable unless an agent intervenes.

Nonintervention renders the outcome certain by allowing nature to take its course. Absent divine action to the contrary, the outcome is inevitable.

Therefore, Olson deceives himself by imagining that he's drawn a distinction between Calvinism and Arminianism at this juncture.

ii) What about "design." Once again, let's go back to my example. If the toddler drowns, that wasn't by design. The father didn't plan that outcome.

But how is that distinction exculpatory? Once he sees the toddler fall into the swimming pool, if he let's him drown, that's culpable—even if it wasn't by design.

Suppose that in Arminianism, moral evils don't happen by God's design. But that doesn't ipso facto exonerate the Arminian God.

All one has to do to turn aside the sweeping claim that this is a distinction without a difference is demonstrate that everyone, including the objector himself or herself, knows this to be a difference in at least one case. In other words, if there is even one instance in which everyone, including the objector, must admit that there is a real difference between "doing evil" and "permitting evil," then the claim that this is a distinction without a difference must fail.

That's a confused way to frame the issue. The question at issue isn't whether allowing harm is sometimes exculpatory, but whether allowing harm (in contrast to doing, causing, ensuring, intending) harm is ipso facto exculpatory.

Sometimes permitting evil is culpable. So he can't just resort to that bare distinction.

Since it can either be evil or not be evil to permit evil, a theodicy has to do more than appeal to permission in general to exonerate the God of freewill theism. It must provide specific reasons why permission would be inculpatory in that particular kind of situation.

But, of course, everyone does know that there is a difference between “doing evil” and “permitting evil.” In the one case, “doing evil,” the evil is actually, physically acted out by the doer whereas in the other case, “permitting evil,” the evil is not actually, physically acted out by the permitter. This is why, to the best of my knowledge, no law exists in any civilized society that equates the doing of a crime with the permitting of a crime. True, some societies have criminalized certain behaviors that include permitting a crime without doing it. But the mere permission is never actually equated with the actual doing and that because of two factors: 1) different intentionality, and 2) different physical involvement.

And, of course, everyone can think of instances in which there is a real moral distinction-with-a-difference between permitting an evil to occur and actually doing the evil (or causing it).

One does not have to think hard to come up with numerous examples in which a person with the power to stop an evil but does not stop it is doing something entirely different from the actual doing of the evil.

An obvious problem with that appeal is that even in cases where permitting evil is exculpatory, that typically involves human agents with limited options. But an omnipotent, omniscient agent has resources they don't. What's exculpatory for them isn't ipso facto exculpatory for him, given the range of options at his disposal. The more powerful the agent, the less excuse he has to permit some things. He can prevent things we can't.

A similar, more popularly written, explication may be found in Gregory Boyd's [Is God to Blame?](#)

It's my understanding that Boyd has a view of cosmic spiritual warfare in which God and the good guys eventually get the upper hand. We win.

But according to open theism, isn't the future always indeterminate? There will never be a future time beyond which the future is settled once and for all time. However far into the future we go, it will remain indeterminate.

That means the status quo ante is inherently unstable. There is no final settlement. It's like political maps in which boundaries are continuously drawn and redrawn over the centuries depending on which side won or lost the last border war.

If the future is perpetually indeterminate, then there are no decisive victories and defeats. Even if God annihilated the Devil, there could be another angelic rebellion.

All these Christian thinkers argue that free will requires an environment of natural laws, predictability, risk and ability to do evil. In other words, even God cannot create a world that includes genuine moral free will and responsibility and constantly interfere to stop gratuitous evils from occurring.

i) To begin with, there's an obvious tension between his appeal to libertarian freedom and natural laws. An appeal to natural laws is deterministic. The uniformity of nature. Physical determinism.

But if human agents enjoy the libertarian freedom to do otherwise, then isn't the outcome unpredictable? Isn't the outcome indeterminate?

Perhaps Olson would distinguish between human agency and our natural environment. But since their environment acts on agents and agents act on their environment, that can't be neatly compartmentalized.

ii) By Olson's logic, petitionary prayer has no place in freewill theism. To begin with, Christians sometimes pray that God will prevent nature from taking its course. But to the extent that God answers their prayers, that interferes with natural laws. That destabilizes our environment. Makes the outcome unpredictable.

And that's aggravated by unanswered prayer. You never know ahead of time which prayers God will answer.

iii) By Olson's logic, we should close Emergency Rooms. Take murder. In the past it was easier to kill somebody. But due to those pesky, meddlesome trauma physicians, some gunshot victims (to take one example) who would otherwise die, absent medical intervention, survive.

That makes attempted murder far more unpredictable than it used to be. You now assume the risk of murdering someone without the assurance of success. Genuine moral freewill requires a world in which attempted murder has predictable consequences.

iv) Apropos (iiii), we should fire all the criminologists. In the past, it was easier to get away with premeditated murder. Wipe your fingerprints off the doorknob. Dispose of the murder weapon.

But due to forensic science, it's much harder than it used to be to avoid leaving trace evidence behind at the scene of the crime. That makes premeditated murder far more unpredictable. You now assume the risk of murdering someone without the assurance that your involvement will go unnoticed. Genuine moral freewill requires a world in which it is safe to commit premeditated murder without fear of detection.

v) By parity of argument, it is wrong to post lifeguards at some beaches and swimming pool some of the time, for that makes the decision to swim or surf rest on the unpredictable variable of whether or not there's a life guard on duty. That affects the risk assessment. Genuine moral freedom requires a world in which there are no lifeguards at beaches or swimming pools.

The ability to do great good includes the ability to do great evil.

Does that logic apply to God?

Does that mean the saints in heaven retain the same libertarian ability to do great evil?

Arminianism does not include any particular view of "natural evils." Some Arminians would say SOME are from God; others would argue that innocent suffering is NEVER God's antecedent will and that God always only reluctantly permits it because to always "step in" and stop it would change the nature of free will in this world (Peterson's view). Personally, I do not think we can always know and must remain uncertain of anything but that God can bring good out of any natural evil. Arminianism ONLY claims that God NEVER wills moral evils antecedently (e.g., Adam and Eve's fall into sin) but reluctantly permits them (consequent will).

Notice that Olson doesn't bother to explain how the distinction between God's antecedent will and his consequent will is morally germane. What makes that exculpatory?

The upshot is he appeals to reason (as he sees it) when attacking Calvinism, but he appeals to mystery when defending Arminianism.

A will to damn

I'm going to comment on this:

<https://ochuk.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/two-wills-yes-a-will-to-damn-no-a-response-to-piper/>

i) It may be a mistake for me to respond. I disagree with Piper's position. Someone like Bronn Dominic Tennant, who's more sympathetic to Piper's position, might be better equipped to defend it.

Likewise, I'm not deeply conversant with Piper's theology. My reading of Piper is quite limited. I can't vouch for the accuracy of Adam's interpretation, or whether Piper has said things elsewhere which would bolster his position.

ii) One initial problem is that Adam is basically operating with philosophical theology whereas Piper is basically operating with exegetical theology. For Piper, the two wills of God is a revealed truth. For him it doesn't ultimately matter if that appears to be inconsistent to our finite minds.

iii) Jeremy Pierce has been critical of how Piper parses God's self-glorification:

<http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2006/05/jealousy.html>

http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2008/05/regret_in_heave.html

<http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2009/11/priorities-phil1.html>

<http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2010/03/for-zions-sake.html#more>

iv) Conversely, I've argued that it's not ipso facto incoherent for the Calvinist God to have unrequited desires:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/12/divine-frustration.html>

So with those caveats duly register, let's proceed:

1. If the doctrine of Unconditional Election is true, then God prefers that not all be saved.
2. But the Bible says that God prefers that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9, Ezekiel 18:23, 32).
3. Therefore, the doctrine of Unconditional Election is false.

How might the defender of Unconditional Election respond? One might deny [2] by some method of interpretation that concludes that the verses in question do not really say God prefers that all be saved.

That's my own position.

Piper's response is simple: the argument equivocates the meaning of the word "prefers." In [1] God prefers to actualize states of affairs that do not entail the salvation of everyone; in [2] God prefers that the states of affairs in which everyone is saved were actual. In the first sense, God prefers to actualizes something; in the second, God prefers that something else were actual. A nice way of putting it (borrowed from [Steven Cowan](#)) is that all things being equal, God prefers to save everyone, but all things considered, God prefers not to save everyone. Think of a physician who intends to help people overseas ward off a deadly disease, but upon hearing that his homeland is being impacted by the disease, he decides to stay and help his own people. It is perfectly coherent to understand his conflicting preferences in this way. And it is this sort of "two wills" theology that is unavoidable when trying to answer the problem of evil.

On the face of it, that's a coherent position.

Let us suppose this is right. Then, we have to answer this: what sort of consideration is it that so constrains God from saving everyone? What is at stake for God if he fails to save everyone? Piper's answer is that God's glory is at stake: God would fail to maximize the revelation of his glory to the elect by virtue of failing to send some sinners to hell so that they might bear, and in so doing reveal, the full weight of divine wrath. Piper believes that a world where this sort of wrath is not actualized is on the whole less preferable than a world in which it is actualized (alongside a display of mercy), because it fails to exemplify the sternness of God's wrath.

Hovering in the background of this discussion is the assumption that there's one best possible world. That one possible world is simply preferable to another possible world. And no doubt there are cases where that is true. Some possible worlds are clearly worse than others.

But in other cases, that's simplistic. One possible world may be preferable to another in some respects, but less preferable in other respects. Among the better possible worlds, each has a unique package of goods that isn't captured by the alternative.

I have three objections to this consideration. First, it imposes a rather strong limitation on God's freedom in that He is not really free to show mercy to

whomever He likes. Piper elsewhere assumes that the failure to uphold God's glory is a moral failure (see The Future of Justification, 64).

i) There's a potential equivocation here. Does Adam mean a moral failure on God's part, or on the part of humans?

If the former, then I agree with him that Piper's understanding is flawed in this respect. If the latter, then Adam's conclusion is fallacious.

ii) Keep in mind, too, that if God has a goal that's inconsistent with universal salvation, then God can't save everyone consistent with that goal. That's a contingent limitation. God can save everyone minus the goal. Or God can achieve his goal. It's the combination that's impossible.

To put this in reverse: if it's God's goal to save everyone, then God can't damn anyone. But that's not a strong limitation on God's freedom. That just means God can't perform a pseudotask. Not all possibilities are compossible. God can't pursue contradictory goals, that's all.

A second objection grants the truth of the penal substitution theory of the atonement and argues that the fullness of God's wrath could be sufficiently displayed (if it must be displayed) in the work of Christ. The elect would need nothing more than the cross of Christ to understand the depths of their sin and the severity of God's response to it. But if a populated hell is required to sufficiently display God's wrath to the elect, then the cross of Christ is insufficient to display God's wrath to the elect.

i) That's equivocal. The primary purpose of penal substitution is to make atonement for the sins of the elect. The main purpose is not illustrative. It's not like the moral influence theory, governmental theory, or declaratory theory of the atonement. Penal substitution is mainly about what it does, not what it shows. Its demonstrative value is a beneficial side-effect.

ii) In addition, to say God's wrath is sufficiently demonstrated at the cross renders all historical and eschatological judgments in Scripture gratuitous.

Third, given the sort of sovereignty Piper affirms, it is hard to understand what could be glorious about God's wrath if it is meted out for sins that were causally brought about by God.

That's not self-evident. Suppose a Latin American gov't is attempting to wipe out a drug cartel. To do that, it ambushes the cartel's roving death squads. It lures them into an exposed position, where they fire on gov't soldiers, who return fire.

In a sense, the Latin American gov't "causally brought about" that confrontation. It provoked the confrontation, through a ruse de guerre. Yet the death squads deserved to be mowed down.

The doctrine of divine wrath contains two components. The first is a sense of righteous indignation towards a wrong; the second is a just punishment brought to bear on the wrongdoer. But how does one wrong God and thereby merit his wrath by doing exactly what God determines one to do?

i) There's another potential equivocation here. Notice how Adam elides wrong into wronging God. But must one wrong God to be a wrongdoer? Must one wrong God to do wrong?

ii) Even in freewill theism, in what sense does a human wrong God? A human is in no position to harm God. So it must mean something else.

The picture we are left with is a God who frustrates himself by ordaining states of affairs that he judges to be bad. God's anger and punishment are irrational as they are directed towards objects that do exactly what they are supposed to do.

i) To begin with, there's the danger of framing this in overly anthropomorphic terms. One needn't assume that God is literally angry or becomes angry. We could better recast this in terms of divine disapproval for evil qua evil.

ii) God can disapprove of something considered in isolation, but approve of the contribution it makes to the ultimate outcome. God can disapprove of something that's evil in its own right, but which facilitates a greater good or second-order good.

iii) This doesn't mean God frustrates himself by ordaining events he judges to be bad. To the contrary, these are his appointed means to the appointed end. There's an equivocation here:

a) These are good means in the sense that they facilitate the objective.

b) These are bad means in the sense that they are wicked in their own right.

It's not as if God's means are at cross-purposes with his ends. The means are perfectly adapted to the ends.

We need to differentiate a teleological evaluation of the means from an ethical evaluation of the means, taken in isolation.

For instance, an evil man is evil whether or not he is put in the service of a good goal. It's just that some people are put into arrangements which make them unwitting allies in a cause that's better and greater than themselves.

Adam's animosity towards Calvinism prevents him from exploring or anticipating counterarguments.

How much more irrational and stupid is God's wrath on sinners for sins God causes them to commit?

i) To begin with, there's the question of how Adam defines causation. Take the counterfactual theory of causation:

We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them, at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.

e causally depends on c if and only if, if c were to occur e would occur; and if c were not to occur e would not occur.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-counterfactual/#CouCauDep>

On that definition, God causes sin whether it's Calvinism, Thomism, Molinism, classical Arminianism, or open theism.

Perhaps Adam would take issue with that definition. It is not, however, a Calvinistic theory of causation. It's not special pleading for a Calvinist define causation that way.

Moreover, does Adam have a better theory of causation to offer? Every philosophical theory of causation is open to criticism.

ii) Moreover, Molinism falls prey to parallel objections. Although there are infeasible worlds which God cannot instantiate, God didn't choose to instantiate our world at gunpoint. He had a free hand. He was at liberty to instantiate a different feasible world. So why is he mad at the end-result of his own actions? He initiated this chain of events. He knew what was coming.

Causing evil and committing evil

When attacking Calvinism, freewill theists belittle the distinction between causing evil and doing evil. But isn't there a relevant difference?

For instance, say I get drunk at the bar. I sense that I'm drunk. But I drive back home. Only I'm involved in a fatal hit-and-run accident on the way back.

I *did* evil. I committed evil.

Suppose I have a grown son who gets drunk at the bar. Senses that he's drunk But drives back home, running over a cyclist on the way back.

I *caused* evil.

In the second case I initiated a chain of events resulting in a wrongful death. But I didn't do evil. And I'm not culpable for my son's vehicular homicide.

Now, freewill theists might say the situation is different in the case of God. For instance, if an agent knowing and intentionally causes evil. But for now I'm noting that there's a distinction *in principle* between causing evil and committing evil.

That creates an interesting parallel between human and divine causation of evil vis-a-vis open theism.

As a thoughtful human, I know that whatever I do or don't do will cause some resultant evil somewhere down the line. Being shortsighted, I don't know what the resultant evil will be, but I know that, even with the best of intentions, my actions will cause some resultant evils.

And the same would apply to open theism.

Kinda like: if I throw dice enough times, I know that I will throw sixes. I don't know which throw that will be. But sooner or later, that combination is bound to turn up.

Distraught parents

I'm going to comment on a letter from an allegedly distraught parent to William Lane Craig:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/letter-from-a-grieving-father>

i) To begin with, I don't know that this is for real. It may just as well be an exercise in atheistic sockpuppetry to put a prominent Christian apologist on the spot.

ii) There can be a danger in being too deferential to grieving parents. By that I mean, there's a tendency in the current culture to treat the loss of a child as the worst thing that can possibly happen to someone. Uniquely worse than losing a parent, sibling, spouse, or best friend.

But is that true? I think the major reason is that other kinds of deaths are expected. Therefore, the cultural message is that we shouldn't be as distraught by the death of a parent, sibling, or spouse.

But how is that germane to the sense of loss and depth of loss? Surely that's based on the quality or intensity of the emotional bond, and not whether their death is expected.

I don't think that the death of a child is uniquely painful. It's rather callous to assume that.

iii) Why would the correspondent be reading Sam Harris? Assuming the letter is for real, that's the kind of thing someone does who has lost his faith, and is seeking to justify his loss of faith.

iv) Assuming the letter is for real, this illustrates the danger of false expectations. Child mortality has plummeted in contemporary Western nations thanks to modern medical science. As a result, the death of a child is shocking to parents.

But in the past (as well as Third World countries), parents never expected most of their children to reach maturity. Siblings were used to losing brothers and sisters in childhood.

Although that's emotional shocking, that wasn't intellectually shocking.

By the same token, child mortality was high in Bible times. Take references to stillbirth in Scripture.

Child mortality is not inconsistent with Biblical theism. God didn't promise to protect Christian children from fatal illness. This doesn't call God's existence into question. In terms of Biblical theism, there's no presumption that you children will be exempt from fatal illness.

We may still ask, "Why does God allow it?", but this doesn't contradict Christian theology. There's no logical tension between what Christian theology says can happen and what (allegedly) happened to this parent.

v) Apropos (iv), for too many people, something isn't real until it happens to them. Unless they personally experience some tragedy, that's just an abstraction which they don't incorporate into their outlook.

vi) Rejecting God if you lose a loved one trivializes the life and death of your loved one. In a godless universe, life is cheap. You cheapen the value of your loved one by rejecting God in anger over the death of your loved one.

Because your loved one meant so much to you, you reject God for taking your loved one from you. But in so doing, you make your loved one worthless. You reduce your loved-one to driftwood in the sea of cosmic indifference. They were just a little flicker of consciousness between the dark and silent stretches of infinite time and space.

vii) If your loved one is born or diagnosed with a terminal illness, that's tragic, but it's an opportunity as well. It gives you the lead-time to make the most of the remaining time. You know the time is short. So you don't take them for granted.

That intensifies the bond. You learn to get more out of less. The time is very concentrated. The less time remaining, the more precious the remaining time.

So there's a tradeoff. If you think someone will always be a part of your life—you have time to burn, you can call them or see them whenever you want—there can be long stretches when you treat them as if they don't exist. There's no urgency.

viii) Let's play devil's advocate. Suppose someone says, "Why should I be grateful to God that something even worse didn't befall my loved one? If a mugger knocks out my front teeth, should I thank him because he didn't set me on fire?"

a) If your loved one was spared a worse fate even though they deserved a worse fate, then that's reason for gratitude.

b) There's more to it than God protecting your loved one from an even worse fate. There's the compensations of heaven.

Heavenly rewards

But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish (Lk 16:25).

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:17).

The reversal of fortune is a common biblical motif. The aforementioned verses scratch the surface. However, I'm going to briefly consider an objection to eschatological compensation from a prominent atheist:

Keith Parsons

In one of my two debates with William Lane Craig I addressed his claim that heavenly bliss will compensate for earthly suffering. I used the example of an eccentric billionaire who would randomly choose victims, beat them bloody, but then compensate them with a ten million dollar check. My point was that even if the victim later agreed that he was better off after the beating plus the ten million than he would have been with no beating and no ten million, the beating was still, obviously, unjustified. My point was that future rewards, however lavish, and however deserved, do not make an injustice right...In principle, NO degree of compensation can make a wrong right. To think otherwise is like thinking that a lie can be made true if the liar is perfectly honest the rest of his life.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/02/05/youre-just-being-obstinate-no-you-you/#comment-1238460373>

There are several glaring problems with this argument:

i) He's using an example of gratuitous evil. A sadist who chooses innocent victims at random because he gets his kicks by inflicting pain on others. But that's disanalogous to Biblical theism. In Scripture, the suffering of the innocent has a worthy purpose in the plan of God. And God is well-motivated, not ill-motivated.

ii) There's a failure to distinguish between being wronged and suffering wrong. Even if I am wronged, that doesn't entail that God wronged me. Joseph's brothers wronged him by selling him into slavery. Their motivation was sinful. They resented him. But God's motive in orchestrating the chain of events was quite different than theirs.

iii) I can imagine situations where compensation is a justifying factor. Suppose a hostile state launches an unprovoked war of aggression against a neighboring state. The neighboring state has a right, indeed, an obligation, to defend itself. A duty to protect its citizens against attack.

Suppose a citizen of the neighboring state has a strategically valuable property. The neighboring state seizes his property, both to keep it out of enemy hands, and to use it as a base of operations. The value of the property is degraded due to warfare. However, after the neighboring state wins the counteroffensive, the citizen is generously compensated for his loss.

It was unjust, yet justifiable, to seize his property, then compensate him. Seizing his property was necessary to defend the country against the aggressor. So even though the citizen suffered an injustice by losing his property, the seizure was justifiable under those circumstances. Even so, justice demands restitution for his loss.

I'm not saying that's exactly parallel to eschatological compensations. Rather, I'm using this to illustrate the fact that, as a matter of principle, heavenly rewards can rightly compensate for earthly suffering or injustice.

The problem of evil is trivial

The problem of evil is an abject failure. Don't take my word for it. Just ask militant atheist Richard Dawkins:

I have never found the problem of evil very persuasive as an argument against deities. There seems no obvious reason to presume that your God will be good. The question for me is why you think any God, good or evil or indifferent, exists at all. Most of the Greek pantheon sported very human vices, and the 'jealous God' of the Old Testament is surely one of the nastiest, most truly evil characters in all fiction. Tsunamis would be just up his street, and the more misery and mayhem the better. I have always thought the 'Problem of Evil' was a rather trivial problem for theists...

<http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/127-the-theology-of-the-tsunami>

Mercy-killing and Arminian theodicy

The distinction between God "causing" or "ensuring" evil and "letting" evil happen is crucial to Arminian theodicy. Roger Olson, for one, constantly resorts to this distinction. It's striking, therefore, that in his sympathetic exploration of physician-assisted suicide, he erases the distinction between killing and letting die:

Some patients simply choose to forego all treatments for their terminal disease and die naturally. Usually this also involves gradually starving to death or dying by dehydration. It can take weeks. Few people blame them or even call it "suicide." And yet, in a way, it is suicide.

Some years ago I had the privilege of teaching nurses in several cohorts in a "degree completion" program. My course, which they were required to take as part of their studies, was called "Developing a Christian Worldview" and included a unit on Christian ethics. We talked about the ethical issues surrounding death including suicide. One thing that struck me was that almost all the nurses who worked in hospitals agreed that PAS is quite common. They said that in many terminal cases a doctor will order pain medicine in gradually increasing doses that eventually suppress breathing. And that so long as the doses are necessary to alleviate pain, even if they result in death, most district attorneys will not prosecute the doctors or nurses involved. They said it is one of the best kept secrets in the medical profession—given how common it is.

Were my nurse students right? Is it fairly common practice for a doctor to increase a dying patient's pain meds to the point where they suppress breathing with the inevitable result of death?

To me, the line between choosing to forego all medical treatment with the certain result of death and choosing to end one's own life to end extreme suffering is blurry at best.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/10/can-a-christian-support-physician-assisted-suicide/>

Living death or merciful death?

At the risk of exhuming a horse carcass to flog it some more, I'd like to make a further observation. Some critics of the OT say it was unnecessary to execute the Canaanite kids along with the adults. Adoption was an alternative. They assure us that that would be more merciful than mass execution.

I have to wonder how much thought they've given to that. Imagine you're a Canaanite child of 7, 8, 9. You watch an Israelite soldier put your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings to the sword. He then adopts you.

Is it really more merciful for a 9-year-old (give or take) to witness his whole family cut down while he alone is spared, to be raised by the executioner? Not just being the sole survivor, but being raised by the very person or people who did that to the rest of your family?

From time to time the news reports an accident which killed the parents, leaving their children orphaned. I can't help thinking that in many cases it would be more merciful for families to die together, rather than being torn apart like that.

I'm not saying that's the ipso facto justification for the OT commands. I'm just responding to critics on their own grounds, when they say the OT commanders are "merciless," and when they offer a more merciful alternative. I don't think they've made a serious effort to project themselves into the mind of a child. Sometimes death is more merciful than life.

Fact is, it's not hard to destroy a person by killing the one person (or persons) they can't live without. They linger on. But at that point it's a living death.

Saving God from himself

I think there is an important apologetic aspect to this whole issue of whether God ordered the slaughter of the Canaanite infants...We cannot invite men to the source of all goodness and then play a bait and switch. We cannot turn around and say, "Oh, by the way, I told you that God is the source of love, mercy, pity, and the laughter of children. But actually, I also believe firmly that God commanded men to be pitiless upon little children and to cut off their laughter forever by putting them to the edge of the sword. And they carried it through, too. And in the end, I'm okay with that."

Which is why I cannot sit down and simply accept God's ordering the slaughter of the Canaanite children by the Israelites.

http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2014/08/on_paul_copans_attempted_solut.html#comment-294835

One problem with Lydia's position is the notion that she can erect a high wall between God and natural or moral evil. But even if she succeeded in that implausible exercise, it would relocate rather than resolve the problem of evil. It's like a black market arms dealer for a drug cartel who says he's not responsible for the cartel assassinating a prosecutor because, once the buyer takes receipt of the weapons, what's done with them is out of his hands. But, of course, we wouldn't accept that excuse.

Is God too pure to look on evil?

The Bible is very clear that God has nothing to do with evil. There is “no darkness” in God (1 Jn 1:5). Far from intentionally bringing about evil, God’s “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Hab. 1:13). All evil, therefore, must be ultimately traced back to decisions made by free agents other than God. Some of these agents are human. Some of these agents are angelic. Either way, evil originates in their willing, not God’s.

<http://reknew.org/2014/05/romans-828-what-does-it-mean/>

It's striking to see how badly Gregory Boyd quotes Hab 1:13 out of context. Let's begin by quoting a larger sample of the passage in question:

3 Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

12 Are you not from everlasting,

O Lord my God, my Holy One?

We shall not die.

O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment,

and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

13 You who are of purer eyes than to see evil

and cannot look at wrong,

why do you idly look at traitors

and remain silent when the wicked swallows up

the man more righteous than he? (1:3,12-13, ESV)

Here's how Richard Patterson renders the Hebrew in his commentary:

Why do you make me look at iniquity while You behold oppression?

O Lord, You have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, You have established them to reprove. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You cannot behold oppression. Why do You behold the treacherous and keep silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves (pp129,143).

And here's how F. F. Bruce renders the Hebrew in his commentary:

You have appointed them for judgment, O Lord; you have established them for punishment, my Rock. You are too pure of eyes to behold wrongdoing, you cannot look on evil; why do you look on treacherous people and remain silent when the wicked swallows up one more righteous than himself? (p852).

i) Contrary to Boyd's denial, it's very clear from Habakkuk that God does have something to do with evil. He is behind the Babylonian resurgence. He uses them as executors of divine judgment against wayward Israel. As Bruce observes, commenting on v12:

The prophet goes on to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty over the nations; he ordains or overrules their actions for the furtherance of his purpose in the world. The Chaldean invaders have indeed been raised up by him for the punishment of the ungodly—this the prophet accepts without question (p853).

ii) Habakkuk makes formally contradictory claims about God. He says God both does and does not "look on" evil. So he resorts to paradoxical formulations.

There's a sense in which God does look on evil, and another sense in which God does not. A double entendre. Presumably, Habakkuk means God doesn't look on evil with favor or approval.

iii) Yet God is using evil to punish evil. Poetic justice. Indeed, the Babylonians are even worse than apostate Israel.

Habakkuk senses a tension between the means and the ends. God goes on to explain that having punished apostate Israel by the Babylonian scourge, God will punish Babylon for its own iniquity.

Boyd's description conjures up the image of a king who is pure because he lives within a walled city, surrounded by beauty. There's no crime within the walled city. No moral ugliness.

But outside the walled city is physical and moral squalor. Utopian conditions inside the walls. Dystopian conditions outside the walls.

The king retains his stainless purity because he never leaves the royal city to see the rest of his kingdom. The royal city is walled off from the evil outside the walls, so the king never sees it. He retains his innocence by averting his eyes. By shielding his gaze from the sight of evil. The king can't bear the sight of evil, so he looks away.

There are freewill theists like Boyd who act as if God would be morally tarnished if he even beheld evil. Like some Christians who defined holiness by never watching an R-rated movie. Of course, that's not a position which Boyd can consistently maintain.

Dying young

I'm posting my side of a little impromptu debate between Lydia McGrew and me:

STEVE SAID...

Thanks for your intellectual honesty. Sometimes we have to eliminate bad answers before we can explore better answers.

I'm glad I'm not in a position where I have to carry out those commands.

That said, I don't think death by divine command is worse than death by divine providence. I don't see that death by God's command presents a special theodicean problem in contrast to death by ordinary providence. Either both are morally problematic or neither is.

I think the efforts by Copan, Hess, and Matt Flannagan are shortsighted in that regard.

Same thing with more liberal theologians. If there's a problem, it's not with God's word but God's world. Even if one denies the inspiration of Scripture, that just relocates the problem to real-world atrocities, for which God remains ultimately responsible.

Conversely, if we have an adequate theodicy for real-world atrocities, why is that inapplicable to Biblical holy war?

STEVE SAID...

Why do you think the death of an infant by divine command presents a special problem, but his death by natural evil does not? Your distinction is not self-explanatory.

Yes, my Calvinism may make a difference, but every theistic tradition (e.g. Thomism, Arminianism, Molinism, open theism) must grapple with parallel issues.

On just about every alternative, God is the ultimate cause of natural evil.

Sorry, but I'm still unclear on why you think death resulting from a divine command is problematic in a way that death resulting from a divine action is not. Take two scenarios:

- i) Ed dies because God ordered Ted to kill Ed
- ii) Ed dies because God made a mantrap to kill Ed

Does (i) present a special theodicean problem, but (ii) does not?

(I'm using the mantrap as a metaphor for death by some natural evil.)

Yes, you're focussed on the specific issue of babies, but you're combining two issues: who dies and how they die. My question is why the mode of death is especially problematic in one case, but not the other.

STEVE SAID...

i) I'm afraid I don't see from your explanation why the mode of death is morally germane. Your key contention is that killing a baby is wrong. So it's still the who rather than the how.

ii) Also, do you really mean that killing a baby is intrinsically wrong, or generally wrong—absent extraordinary mitigating circumstances? What about terminating ectopic pregnancies? What about the double effect principle, viz. if the enemy uses human shields?

"In the second case, a fortiori, God has a right to permit a death by way of the natural laws which He has put in place and which He preserves."

Isn't "permission" a bit weak or euphemistic in that context? Does God merely permit the outcome of natural forces he himself put in place?

To take a comparison: Suppose a car is parked uphill with a wheel chock behind the right rear tire to prevent it from rolling down the hill. Suppose I kick the wheel chock aside, as a result of which the car rolls downhill. I didn't push the car downhill. I merely removed an impediment. Gravity did the rest.

Yet even that action on my part is more than permitting the car to roll downhill. I caused it to roll downhill.

If, moreover, I foresaw that by kicking the wheel chock aside, the car would run over a 2-year-old playing in the cul-de-sac at the bottom of the hill, I did more than permit his death. I engineered his death.

So I fail to see a morally salient difference between death by divine command and death by divine providence. Adding buffers between cause and effect doesn't avoid divine agency or divine intent.

One could imagine Rube Goldberg machines in which the effect is far removed from the cause. Yet the outcome would still be traceable to God.

(At the moment I'm discussing natural evils, not moral evils.)

STEVE SAID...

Several issues:

i) Seems to me you're taking a harder line than you did in the body of the post. There you framed the issue in terms of a prima facie conflict between two sets of divine commands. Now, however, you're saying it's intrinsically wrong to kill babies/children.

ii) If, on the one hand, Scripture unmistakably contains commands in God's name to kill babies/children—while, on the other hand, killing babies/children is intrinsically wrong, then either the God of biblical theism doesn't exist, or else he permitted Bible writers to misrepresent his true character. If the latter, this would mean that even though Scripture presents itself as a corrective to false views of deity in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion, in fact the Bible cannot be used as a standard of comparison.

iii) It isn't quite clear to me whether or not you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child. When you say that's intrinsically wrong, do you mean in reference to human agents, or do you include God in that prohibition? You've said God has a general right to take life, as well as acting in the best interests of the baby/child, but unless I missed something, there's a remaining ambiguity regarding your position on God's prerogative in taking the life of a baby/child.

iv) If you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child, then I don't see why it would be intrinsically wrong for God to command someone to take the life of a baby/child. That would not be a case of the human agent "playing God" by making life-and-death decisions which only God is entitled to make. Rather, the human would be divinely tasked to carry out a divine decision. Are you saying it would be illicit for God to delegate the implementation of his decision to a second party? Or is the decision itself illicit, even for God?

v) I'm studiously striving to avoid turning this thread into a debate over the freewill defense, but since you keep introducing that consideration, I have to say something about it. I mention natural evils because that would be a case of babies/children dying as an end-result of a chain of events initiated by God. God taking life through intermediate agencies, which is analogous to human agents who carry out divine commands.

Yes, there are cases in which natural evils are partly brought about by the choices/actions of free agents, but surely there are many exceptions. Take miscarriage. Although the pregnancy was partly brought about by human free agency, the miscarriage was not.

Whether a natural disaster kills humans (including babies/children) may be contingent on "where a family chooses to live in a certain year," but God could avert their death by giving them advance warning of an imminent natural disaster. That wouldn't destabilize the natural order or infringe on their freedom. Far from violating their freedom of choice, advance warning would expand their freedom of choice by giving them another, better option. More opportunities to choose from. So I don't see how invoking the freewill defense, even if we grant its key assumptions, will salvage your position.

vi) No, the double effect principle does not apply in this particular case. The question, though, is whether, in principle, it is always wrong to take the life of a baby (or innocent life). If not, then that's not intrinsically wrong.

STEVE SAID...

Thanks. A few final points. I'll leave the last word to you:

i) I don't think the Fall accounts for natural evils, per se. Just human death by natural evil. Actually, natural "evils" are often natural goods. They preserve the balance of nature. I have no reason to think that's a result of the Fall. They only become "evil" in relation to us if humans happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

ii) You seem to be suggesting my response is inconsistent. Keep in mind that I was responding to you on your own terms, as you chose to frame the issue.

iii) To speak of advance warning as "interference" with "free human day-to-day decisions" strikes me as special pleading. Enabling people to make informed decisions about their future is hardly equivalent to interfering with their libertarian decision-making process. To the contrary, that enhances their freedom of opportunity. So I think there's a tension in your appeal which you are reluctant to acknowledge.

Notice I didn't use suggest God suspending the laws of nature. Freewill theists sometimes argue that we need a stable environment with predictable consequences to make free decisions. But even granting that assumption, advance warning is a different principle.

iv) Finally, many kids/babies die every year from natural causes. Death by natural causes can be more painful and prolonged than death by a sword or spear. Although you can say free choices figure in some of the deaths, I don't think it's plausible to universalize that claim.

Discovering God's goodness

Why trust Scripture to be a true revelation and guide if God is not good in some way analogous to our best ideas of goodness?

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/03/whats-wrong-with-calvinism/>

You sacrifice not only your child but also your moral intuitions in the name of worshipping a God whose "goodness" is utterly at odds with the normal meaning of that term.

<http://lotharlorraine.wordpress.com/2014/06/07/bound-to-eternally-suffer-an-interview-with-philosopher-jerry-walls/>

i) Walls and Olson routinely make statements like this. It's part of their stereotypical case for Arminianism. They begin with their preconception of goodness, which they self-servingly equate with the "normal" understanding of goodness. They don't cite any polling data to back up their sweeping claim. Instead, it's just a circular exercise in defining "goodness" by reference to Arminianism.

ii) But there's another flaw in their methodology. Necessary, the very existence of evil should affect our understanding of what God is prepared to do or allow. Necessarily, the kinds of evils we observe in the world or see narrated in Scripture should inform our understanding of what God is willing to do or allow.

Therefore, this topdown methodology, in which Arminians begin with pious abstractions, with their preconceived idea of what a good God would tolerate, is an artificial postulate that fails to connect with the facts on the ground. What a good God would do, permit, or prevent, is something we must learn from revelation and experience. That's something we discover, not something we intuit.

Sins of omission

Arminians like Roger Olson place enormous stock in the distinction between God allowing an evil to occur, and God intending, causing, determining, and/or rendering it certain to occur. Let's consider two hypothetical examples to illustrate the alleged distinction:

- 1) I have a one-year-old child. I hold him underwater in the bathtub until he drowns.
- 2) I'm sitting on my chaise lounge in my backyard patio. I watch my one-year-old child fall into the swimming pool. I know he can't swim. I sit there sipping lemonade while he drowns.

i) I assume Arminians would classify (1) as murder. What about (2)?

ii) I didn't create the circumstances leading up to my one-year-old falling into the pool. I didn't anticipate his falling into the pool. I didn't push him into the pool. And I didn't cause his lungs to fill with water.

So, by Arminian logic, I didn't murder him. Indeed, by Arminian logic, I'm not even culpable for his death.

iii) Some philosophers would say that by my failure to interrupt that chain-of-events, I did cause his death.

But even if I didn't technically cause his death, how is that distinction exculpatory?

iv) It could also be argued that by my failure to interrupt that chain-of-events, I rendered the fatal outcome certain. All I had to do was do nothing to ensure the outcome.

v) But suppose it wasn't quite a sure thing. Suppose there was a chance my one-year-old would find a way to climb out at the last minute. If I wait and see whether or not he will drown, does that let me off the hook, so long as his drowning was not inevitable?

vi) Since his death by drowning is a foreseeable consequence of my inaction, did I not intend the outcome?

vii) Keep in mind that in a classical Arminian model of divine creation and providence, God is far more involved than (2). So (2) is a limiting case.

Did God will sin?

There are some scrupulous Christians who think the very effort to develop a theodicy is unseemly or even blasphemous. To justify the existence of sin makes evil disguised good. And it makes God complicit in sin. By the same token, freewill theists wax indignant when Calvinists say there's a qualified sense in which God willed sin.

Now imagine if Adam never fell. Imagine if Lucifer never fell. Imagine having a scholastic debate about whether God would allow evil into our morally pristine, unfallen world. The same people who revile theodicies, the same people who revile Calvinism, would consider it unthinkable, indeed sacrilegious, to suppose a holy God would ever permit evil to exist. God is too pure to allow impurity to sully his world. They'd carry on like Abdiel lecturing Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*. We'd be regaled with inspiring speeches.

But, of course, that train already left the station. So freewill theists can't fall back on a priori arguments about how a holy God would never let evil happen. For we confront the a posteriori reality of evil everyday.

Hence, every Christian philosopher and theologian must begin with that unsavory starting-point. Every Christian philosopher and theologian must take that as a given. We commence with the factuality of evil, and work back from there. Indeed, evil is a presupposition of Christianity. Like it or not, you can't avoid saying that, in some sense, God willed sin. It's too late in the game to shout "Sacrilege!" "Blasphemy!" The very existence of moral evil means God has taken certain theological options off the table. We must deal with what's left. Seek the wisdom in what is—or will be. Not what might have been.

Is it evil to decree evil?

One of the stock objections to Calvinism goes like this: If it's wrong to do wrong, then it's wrong to cause or determine someone else to do wrong.

No doubt this has a certain facile appeal. It seems to be logical. But is it really? One way to test naive intuitions is to consider counterexamples.

i) Suppose a motorist is driving along a lonely backroad. Suddenly a 10-year-old boy emerges from the tall grass, waving his hands.

The motorist stops. The boy explains breathlessly that he and his little brother were playing in the field when his brother fell into an abandoned mine shaft.

Normally, the motorist would park his car on the shoulder and check it out. It's his duty to render assistance in that situation.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, the motorist hesitates, then drives away, leaving the frantic boy behind. He feels guilty.

Unbeknownst to him, this was a trap. The father uses his son to waylay unsuspecting drivers. When they follow the boy into the field, the father emerges from the tall grass, shoots them in the back, and steals their wallet.

On this occasion, God suppressed the motorist's altruistic urge. Although the motorist did wrong by failing to heed his conscience, this saved his life.

ii) Let's consider a variant on the same story. A motorist is driving along a deserted road at night. Up ahead he sees a woman by the side of the road. The hood of her car is raised.

He knows he has a moral obligation to come to the aid of a vulnerable woman, yet from some inexplicable reason he continues driving.

As it turns out, this was a trap. The woman is the girlfriend of a sociopath. Her sicko, psycho boyfriend hides in the backseat while she plays the stranded motorist and flags down well-meaning drivers. When a good Samaritan tries to help her out, the boyfriend emerges from the car, kneecaps the good Samaritan, tosses him in the trunk, drives to their lair, and proceeds to vivisect his latest victim.

On this occasion, God suppressed the motorist's altruistic urge. Although the motorist did wrong by disregarding his sense of duty, this saved his life.

iii) Perhaps a freewill theist would say that because God caused or determined the motorist to ignore his conscience, the motorist didn't do wrong. Didn't sin.

But in that event, in what sense did God make him do wrong? And if (ex hypothesi) the motorist didn't sin—because God determined his inaction—then in what sense did God do wrong by determining his inaction?

Doesn't the original objection generate a dilemma for the objector?

iv) A freewill theist might object that these are unrealistic scenarios.

a) That's generally true, although I'd venture to say there must be real-life situations in which a Christian was subconsciously dissuaded from taking a particular action by God because God was protecting him from harm. I expect some Christians have discovered, in hindsight, that God intervened to protect them, even though they were unaware of the fact at the time.

b) A fixture of philosophical analysis is to consider counterexamples. This isn't just an intellectual game. Philosophers want to produce generalizations. The way to test a generalization is to consider counterexamples. If there are exceptions, then does the principle still hold true? This is important in ethics.

v) But let's consider a more realistic scenario. Suppose predestination is true. Historically, many people died in childhood. That's still the case in the Third World.

Some children die of neglect. They had neglectful parents or guardians. Some died in orphanages.

I'm sure the cumulative number of neglect fatalities is high. If it's wrong to cause a child to die of neglect, is it wrong to cause someone to cause a child to die of neglect?

Normally, we'd say that's true. But aren't we making tacit assumptions about how the child would turn out had he grown up?

Odds are, some children who died of neglect would become violent criminals if they survived. Of course, you and I aren't privy to those counterfactual outcomes. But we're considering this from a divine perspective.

If God causes or determines a parent or guardian to cause a child in their care to die of neglect—a child who, had he survived, would grow up to be a serial killer—did God do wrong by causing (or determining) the parent or guardian to do wrong?

Although it may seem counterintuitive to say so, in this situation, God is inculpable for causing a second party to do something culpable.

vi) A freewill theist might object that even if it wasn't wrong for God to do that, this won't suffice for other situations which lack those mitigating circumstances. But even if that's the case, I'm probing the question of whether, in principle, it is intrinsically wrong for God to cause or determine a human to do wrong. If there are exceptions, then a freewill

theist can't object to Calvinism on those grounds as a matter of principle. He must downshift to a case-by-case analysis.

vii) Apropos (vi), according to skeptical theism, there may often be extenuating circumstances which mitigate an apparently gratuitous evil, but we're in the dark. Moreover, freewill theists resort to skeptical theism when they posit that God always has some morally sufficient reason for permitting horrendous evil, even if we can't imagine what the reason might be. So it's not as if the Calvinist is guilty of special pleading at this point. Or if he is, the freewill theist is equally guilty.

Arminian eugenics

Roger Olson

You leave out that the Calvinism I am arguing against claims that this whole world and everything in it was designed, ordained and is governed by God. If God is perfectly good in any sense meaningful to us and exercises that kind of providential control, then, yes, he would have to create the best possible world. To say otherwise is to slide into nominalism and voluntarism--that God is only freely good. I think that is what most Calvinists believe (without being fully aware of it).

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/06/is-this-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds-what-i-would-think-if-i-were-a-calvinist/#comment-1443691864>

Problem is: Olson never gives us a reason to accept his claim. Even assuming that there's a best possible world (which I deny), why is God "only freely good" if he made a world that falls short of the best possible world?

We'd only "slide into voluntarism" if we said God made an irremediably evil world. Olson fails to distinguish between good and evil, on the one hand, and good, better, or best, on the other hand. A good God can't make an irremediably evil world. But what prevents a good God from making a good world, although he could make an even better world?

Olson has a eugenic outlook. Take natural evils. For instance, is a world without Down Syndrome better than a world with Down Syndrome? Suppose we figure out how to eliminate Down Syndrome. In so doing we pre-emptively eliminate people with Down Syndrome. They are no longer allowed to begin to exist.

Is that an improvement? Improvement for whom? You might say someone with Down Syndrome would be better off without Down Syndrome—but would he be the same person? Or is something lost in the process? Not just losing the syndrome, but losing the personality. Losing character traits associated with the syndrome.

From what I've read, people with Down Syndrome can be exceptionally loving and caring. More so than many "normal" people. A world with Down Syndrome has virtues, has a quality of goodness, that's absent in a world without Down Syndrome.

Even if the less-than-the-best possible world is less good overall than the best possible world, the less-than-the-best possible world may include a better good than the best possible world, which achieves its best status by evening out the disparities to secure a smooth, uniform consistency of goodness.

Is the best possible world a world devoid of evils? Or is the best possible world a world in which evils are offset by second-order goods? Goods unobtainable apart from evil?

God and Auschwitz

I'm going to comment on a new post by Roger Olson:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/06/is-this-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds-what-i-would-think-if-i-were-a-calvinist/>

Most Calvinists I know believe in meticulous providence.

Agreed.

Recently I posted an essay here in which I talked about my penchant for seeing the logical outcome of everything.

His penchant fails him whenever it comes to seeing the logical outcome of Arminianism.

We should not believe in ideas whose good and necessary consequences are unbelievable or objectionable (to ourselves). In other words, if idea A leads inexorably, by dint of logic, to idea B and idea B is something I do not believe in, I ought not to believe in A either.

What about revealed truths? If God discloses something to us whose good and necessary consequences are objectionable to us, does that mean we should reject revealed truth? If it leads to something we don't believe in, then we should realign our beliefs to match reality.

However, the point I want to make here is that I believe divine determinism and meticulous providence, idea "A" that God plans, ordains and governs everything without exception, leads inexorably by dint of logic to idea "B" which is that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Saying it leads to that logical outcome doesn't begin to show that it leads to that logical outcome. Where is the logical argument for his conclusion?

The one and only issue I'm raising here is whether a God who is perfectly good, omnipotent, and all-determining would plan, ordain and govern anything less or other than the best possible world. I cannot imagine that he would.

i) To say he cannot "imagine" that is not a logical argument.

ii) He seems to be suggesting that if God is good, then there must be parity between the goodness of God and the goodness of the world. The world must be as good as God. But no creature can be as good (i.e. excellent) as God.

One problem may be an equivocation on the meaning of "goodness." Does he mean moral good or excellence?

If this world is the best world on the way to the best of all possible worlds, then it is, for now, in the interim, the best possible world.

That's simplistic. The best means to an end doesn't make the means good in itself. Take amputation to prevent death by gangrene.

I simply don't understand why people who believe God plans, ordains and governs everything don't also believe that this is the best of all possible worlds. I think they should.

One reason I don't believe it is that Olson has yet to give a supporting argument for his key contention. In his post, he never gets around to making a logical case for why, given Calvinism, this world must be the best possible world. He keeps asserting what he needs to prove.

I can only attribute that they often don't to either 1) lack of logic in their thinking, or 2) fear of having to explain how this is the best of all possible worlds in light of the Holocaust and events like it.

It's amusing to see the gaping chasm between Olson's intellectual pride and his intellectual performance. He makes self-congratulatory claims about his logical acumen, and makes demeaning comments about his Calvinist opponents, yet he fails to demonstrate his operating assumption.

I agree with the theologian who said that no theology is worthy of belief that cannot be stated at the gates of Auschwitz.

It takes real guts to say that God planned, ordained and governed the Holocaust. I admire and respect those Calvinists (and other divine determinists) who do it—for their logical rigor and courage.

Yes, God "planned, ordained, and governed" the Holocaust, just as he "planned, ordained, and governed" the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Babylonian Exile, and the Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD).

The problem that immediately jumps up is that if this is the best of all possible worlds then nothing can really be irreducibly evil. If this is the best of all possible worlds then I must say even of the Holocaust "It is a necessary part of the greater good." Then I cannot consider it truly evil. I would have to redefine "evil" far away from what I and most people mean by that term.

i) You simply distinguish between whether something is good in itself and whether it can have beneficial consequences down the line. For instance, it isn't good to be congenitally blind, but in this case, that had good results:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (Jn 9:1-3).

Likewise, the death of Lazarus wasn't good in itself, but it was a source of good:

But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (Jn 11:4).

ii) Since Olson has failed to discharge his burden of proof, there's nothing more I really need to say. It's not incumbent on me to refute a nonexistent argument. But let's examine his illustration:

Why did the Arminian God allow the Holocaust? After all, the Arminian God had the power to prevent it. So isn't the Arminian committed to saying God allowed the Holocaust for the best? Presumably, an Arminian will justify God's nonintervention on the grounds that it would be even worse for God to prevent the Holocaust than to allow the Holocaust. Had it been better for God to intervene, but he failed to do so, then in what sense is the Arminian God "perfectly good"?

So how does Olson escape the logic of his own framework?

iii) Olson is assuming there's a best possible world for the Calvinist God to predestine. But why should we assume such a thing? Take the Holocaust. Is an alternate world in which the Holocaust never happened better than our world? Better in what respect? Better in every respect?

To begin with, a world in which the Holocaust never happened would have a different past and different future. The historical conditions leading up to the Holocaust wouldn't exist. And the historical consequences of the Holocaust wouldn't exist.

But, among other things, that requires the elimination many people from the past, and replacing them with a different set of people. Likewise, that requires the elimination of all the people who were born as a result of the Holocaust. In a way, that would be a different kind of Holocaust.

Would that be better for the people who never existed in this alternate world? What if some of them were heavenbound? By creating the alternate world, God deprives them of that incomparable blessing.

Some goods result from a world where the Holocaust occurred which would never result absent the Holocaust. So a world in which the Holocaust occurred is better in some respects, but worse than others. Better for some people but worse for others.

There are even Jews—many Jews—who benefit from the Holocaust. There are Jews who are born as a result of the Holocaust who would never exist apart from that horrific event. For instance, some Holocaust survivors married people they would never have occasion to meet in a world without the dislocations of the Holocaust.

Child mortality

"Progressive Christians" labor to relativize "divine violence" in the Bible—especially the OT. For instance, they find it morally problematic that God would command the death of children.

As I've noted on various occasions, their solutions fail to solve the problem they pose for themselves. If it's morally problematic for God to command the death of children, then it's morally problematic for God to allow millions or billions of children over the millennia to die from preventable causes. If the divine commands are morally problematic, they don't pose a special problem, over and above problem of child mortality in general. So it's illusory to imagine that domesticating the OT solves the problem which they raise.

But let's approach this from another angle. Suppose there was no child mortality. Suppose no one died of natural causes. Everyone stopped aging after reaching 18 (give or take).

If, however, humans continued to reproduce, at some point that would lead to overpopulation. And, of course, that expands exponentially. If you have 5 kids, if each of your kids has 5 kids...

Overpopulation would lead to mass starvation as well as warring over scarce resources.

In theory, God could prevent that if, after human population reached an optimal sustainable level, God rendered humans infertile.

Mind you, children contribute a great deal to the quality of life. A childless world would be a diminished world.

But let's play along with the hypothetical. I don't know how long it would take, but wherever the cutoff occurred, there'd be no future generations. No more children.

Human mortality, including child mortality, creates room, both in time and space, for more children to be born. Children will be born further down the line who would not be born in a world without child mortality—or human mortality. Once the population becomes static, there's no more room for new children.

Child mortality results in the existence of heavenbound children down the line who'd never exist in a deathless world.

In Biblical eschatology, the collective saints in glory, who comprise a subset of the human race, will be restored to the new earth. The saints in every generation, who go to heaven when they die, will resume life on earth. And the latter-day Christians have human mortality, including child mortality, to thank for that.

One could also speculate on how many humans the earth can sustain at optimal levels. Technology can make a larger population feasible.

Doing v. allowing harm

Freewill theists typically contend that Calvinism makes God complicit in evil (or "the author of sin") because God is said to "cause" sin according to Calvinism, where's freewill theism let's God off the hook because God merely permits evil. I'm going to excerpt some passages from an article which illustrate how often and easily that facile distinction breaks down. After that I will add an illustration of my own.

Is doing harm worse than allowing harm?

James Rachels (1975) provides a classic example of the first approach.[2] He offers us a pair of cases—in one, Smith drowns his young cousin in the bathtub; in the other, Jones plans to drown his young cousin, but finds the boy already unconscious under water and refrains from saving him. The two cases are exactly alike except that the first is a killing and the second a letting die. Rachels invites us to agree that Smith's behavior is no worse than Jones's.

It is arguably true that you can be morally responsible only for what you are causally responsible for. So, if you cause a bad state of affairs, you've probably done wrong; whereas if you don't cause a bad state of affairs, you haven't. In choosing between killing and letting die, you are choosing between doing wrong and not doing wrong. (Of course, this doesn't apply to non-harmful cases of killing, such as, arguably, some cases of active euthanasia.) The question of what you ought to do is then tautologically easy.

This argument begins to get into trouble when we reflect on the fact that we are often responsible for upshots we allow: the death of the houseplants or the child's illiteracy. When we notice that, in these cases, the plants die or the child remains uneducated because of some failure on the agent's part, it becomes clear that the agent does, in some sense, cause the upshots. Moreover, most widely accepted contemporary accounts of causation imply that some event or fact involving these agents causes the deaths or illiteracy. For example, the counterfactual account of causation—according to which (very roughly) event E causes F if and only if had E not occurred F would not have occurred either—implies that it was the agent's failure to water the plants that caused the deaths.[7] John Mackie's INUS condition—according to which E causes F if and only if E is a(n insufficient but) necessary part of a(n unnecessary but) sufficient condition for F—implies that the fact that the agent failed to water the plants causes the plants to die.[8]

Suppose, for example, the victim dies because I push his head under water. He wouldn't have died if I had been absent. On the other hand, suppose he is in deep water and cannot swim and I don't save him. He would have drowned anyway if I had been absent. In these two cases, the counterfactual account draws the line in the intuitively correct way.

This account is sometimes used to support the claim that doing harm is worse than allowing harm, on the grounds that, on this account, allowing harm is simply a matter of letting nature take its course, which, other things being equal, is good, or at least permissible. There are two or three quick objections to this argument. Firstly, it assumes that acting (such as killing or saving lives) is a matter of interfering with the course of nature—in other words, that human action is somehow outside of the course of nature. This is extremely controversial. Secondly, even if human action is outside the course of nature, if the agent is faced with a choice between killing one and allowing two to die at the hand of some other agent, this argument would favor neither option since neither involves letting nature take its course. But, as traditionally understood and used, the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing is supposed to favor letting die in this case just as much as in others. Thirdly, interfering in the course of nature is sometimes obviously the better course of action—to stop the bleeding, restart the heart, and so on.

The key difference here is between cases where the agent produces the result by an action and cases where she produces it by an inaction—pushing the head under water or refraining from throwing a life preserver. There's an extra complication here, however. Sometimes, Quinn says, your relevance to a death can be positive, you can kill, in other words, even though you don't act. This happens, for example, when you are on a train headed towards some drowning victims you wish to save when you notice someone tied to the tracks ahead of you. You can stop the train but you choose not to in order to reach your destination. Quinn believes that you kill in this case, because the train acts as your agent, taking you where you want to go, and crushing the person tied to the tracks in the process. On the other hand, if you had chosen not to stop the train for some other reason but you would have not minded had someone else stopped the train, then your failure to stop the train would not have constituted a killing.

A puzzle remains. What about cases where the agent removes a safety net from beneath a falling victim, unplugs a respirator, kicks a rock out of the path of the runaway vehicle, and other similar cases? No physical forces run from the agent to the victim. So, by the account under discussion, they are cases of negative relevance, and yet many of them, at least by many people, are confidently judged to be cases of positive relevance.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/doing-allowing/>

Suppose a drug dealer recruits adults or teens with Down syndrome to work as couriers. They are easily duped into working for him since they fail to appreciate the significance of their actions.

The dealer can't be arrested for dealing drugs since he didn't actually deal the drugs. If his couriers are apprehended, that can't be traced back to him since they lack the mental competence to testify against him in a court of law.

Question: is it better or worse for him to peddle drugs directly or exploit individuals with Down syndrome to do it for him?

An Arminian bedtime story

Jerry Walls

A CALVINIST BEDTIME STORY

“Imagine a parent who is able to control each and every action of his children, and furthermore, is able to do so by controlling their thoughts and inclinations. He is thus able to determine each and all actions taken by those children. He is also able to guarantee that they desire to do everything that they do, and this is exactly what he does. He puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches, and then gives them explicit instructions (with severe warnings) to avoid touching the gasoline and matches. Stepping out of sight, he determines that the children indeed begin to play with the matches. When the playroom is ablaze and the situation desperate, he rushes in to save them (well, some of them). He breaks through the wall, grabs three of the seven children, and carries them to safety. When the rescued children calm down, they ask about their four siblings. They want to know about the others trapped inside, awaiting their inevitable fate. More importantly, they want to know if he can do something to rescue them as well.

“When they ask about the situation, their father tells them that this tragic occurrence had been determined by him, and indeed, that it was a smashing success—it had worked out in exact accordance with his plan. He then reminds them of his instructions and warnings, and he reminds them further that they willingly violated his commands. They should be grateful for their rescue, and they should understand that the others got what they deserved. When they begin to sob, he weeps with them; he tells them that he too has compassion on the doomed children (indeed, the compassion of the children for their siblings only dimly reflects his own). The children are puzzled by this, and one wants to know why such a compassionate father does not rescue the others (when it is clearly within his power to do so). His answer is this: this has happened so that everyone could see how smart he is (for being able to know how to do all this), how powerful he is (for being able to control everything and then effectively rescue them), how merciful he is (for rescuing the children who broke his rules), and how just he is (for leaving the others to their fate in the burning playroom). And, he

says, 'This is the righteous thing for me to do, because it allows me to look as good as I should look.'"

From Thomas H. McCall, "We Believe in God's Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper" Trinity Journal 29NS (2008): 241-242.

It's hard to imagine a better story for Piperian Calvinists who have a passion for their theology and want to convey its true glory to children and other neophytes in the faith.

i) To begin with, this trades on the emotional connotations of small, clueless, helpless children. That triggers our protective instincts. Yet that's hardly analogous to adults or sinners.

ii) Perhaps even more to the point, it's striking that Arminians like Walls and McCall find this persuasive when it's trivially easy to tell a parallel bedtime story by substituting Arminian assumptions.

Assuming divine foreknowledge or middle knowledge, God knowingly puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches. God knows that by putting them in that situation, they will set the play room on fire. God knows that by putting them in that situation, some of them will burn to death. God could prevent that tragic outcome by not putting them in that situation in the first place. And that wouldn't violate their freewill.

Even assuming that God doesn't know the outcome, a parent is negligent for placing small children in a play room with matches and gasoline. Indeed, the legal term is "depraved indifference." If they die in a house fire as a result of those initial conditions, the parent is culpable for exposing them to such a risky situation.

Riddle me this!

Antony Flew penned a famous parable about the invisible gardner. His parable is somewhat self-defeating. After all, since gardens don't prune or weed themselves, even if the gardner was empirically indetectable, we'd be required to infer a powerful intelligence who was acting as a gardner behind-the-scenes. Left untended, gardens revert to the wild.

Perhaps, though, Flew intended the identity of the garden to be ambiguous. Was it really a garden, or a meadow with wildflowers that looked like a garden?

Be that as it may, Basil Mitchell countered Flew with a little parable of his own. Mitchell was a Christian philosopher and apologist. Here's his counter parable:

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a Stranger who deeply impresses him... The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him. They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side.' Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handling over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side.' He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him... Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer.

i) Although it's hypothetical, it would have some concrete resonance for Mitchell and Flew, as Englishmen who lived through World War II. That's clearly the tacit background for the parable. Even though it's fictional, it's realistic. Things like that probably happened during the war.

ii) What's interesting about Mitchell's parable is that the Stranger is morally ambiguous. His actions are open to two opposing interpretations. Whose side is he on? He is trying to infiltrate the resistance or the occupation force? Is he a bad guy impersonating a good guy, or a good guy impersonating a bad guy?

Suppose you had a Jewish scientist or military intelligence officer serving in the Third Reich or the Vichy regime. That might seem counterintuitive, but not necessarily.

Perhaps he can pass for an Aryan. They don't suspect he's Jewish. He can do more damage on the inside than the outside. He can be an informant to the allies or the resistance.

But there's a catch. He must be a convincing Nazi. So he has to go through the motions. Feign enthusiasm for the cause.

iii) This is a common plot motif in police dramas. An undercover cop tries to infiltrate the mob. But there's a catch. The rite of initiation involves having the new recruit carry out a hit. That's a test of his bona fides.

The new recruit is brought to an abandoned warehouse or industrial garage. The Don is there with his goons. There's a blindfolded man kneeling on the floor. Turns out, he's a snitch. A police informant. The Don orders the new recruit to cap the snitch.

That's a dilemma for the undercover cop, but a win-win for the Don. If, on the one hand, the cop refuses, then the Don has blown his cover. If, on the other hand, he caps the snitch, then he's crossed over. He's become one of them. He can never go back to being a policeman. They have the goods on him. He's morally and legally compromised.

How far is the cop prepared to go to maintain his cover? This is usually where you have a commercial break, to keep the audience in suspense. How will the screenwriters extricate their character from the bind they put him in?

There are two conventional solutions. One is the deus ex machine. They have a timely intervention. Perhaps, at the very last moment, just before the cop has to refuse or pull the trigger, the Don receives a phone call requiring his presence elsewhere. Or perhaps the cop is wearing a wire. His team comes storming in right in the nick of time.

The other solution is for the cop to say, "No, boss, he's more useful to us alive. The police don't know we know he's a snitch. So we can use him to feed them disinformation. Throw them off the scent."

The Don nods at this ingenious plan.

Screenwriters typically won't allow the hero to cross that line of no return. What made 24 bracing in the first season or so is that Jack Bauer played against the conventions. He was idealistic, but a ruthless idealist. A utilitarian. He was prepared to do whatever it took for the common good. Defeat the enemy by any means necessary.

TV viewers weren't use to that. After a while, they come to expect it—but not at first.

iv) What's interesting about Mitchell's parable is that you can have a good guy who appears to be morally ambiguous. By analogy, God could do things which seem to

make him morally ambiguous, even though he's benevolent. Do things which are obviously benevolent, but do other things which call into question his benevolence.

Of course, God is in a very different situation than a double agent. So we'd have to consider what, if anything, would be analogous.

v) In the argument from evil, atheists typically cite large-scale events to illustrate moral or natural evils, like the Holocaust or the Boxing Day tsunami. However, it's pretty easy to come up with a theodicy to account for such events. Precisely because they are such massive events, their occurrence or nonoccurrence has enormous consequences for good or ill. Both good and bad consequences ensue as a result of their occurrence. Both good and bad consequences would ensue as a result of their nonoccurrence. That's the stuff of alternate histories. Preventing the moral or natural evil would eliminate the evil at the cost of eliminating some resultant goods as well as causing some other evils in its place.

What's harder to account for are little evils. Private evils. Self-contained evils that seem to have no beneficial consequences. They appear to be truly gratuitous.

Mitchell's parable, and variations thereon, does illustrate the principle that an agent can appear to be morally ambiguous even when he's acting morally.

vi) Of course, even if we don't have a theodicy, the argument from evil is toothless. Absent God, there is no evil. Absent God, we feel compassion for victims because natural selection conditions us to feel that way. But humans have no objective value.

Since there's abundant evidence for God's existence, what we have is, at most, a riddle.

It may be that some evils need to be humanly inexplicable to furnish a test of faith. If we could explain every evil, then we wouldn't need to trust God. That, itself, may be the explanation.

For better, for worse

Many Christians take the position that God is responsible for all the good things that happen to us, but not for any of the bad things that happen to us. Indeed, their primary objection to Calvinism is that Calvinism makes God responsible for the bad things as well as the good. From their viewpoint, that's self-evidently wrong. They can't think of a worse thing you could say about God. They can't imagine how some Christians actually believe that.

Because this is so obvious to them, they don't give it a second thought. Or if they do give it a second thought, they spend their time elaborating how unspeakably abhorrent that would be. They never stop to question their assumption.

Speaking for myself, I have just the opposite instinct. Of course, I believe that God is responsible for everything that happens. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that I had a choice: either God is only responsible for the good things that happen to me or else he's only responsible for the bad things that happen to me.

If push came to shove, I'd opt for the "evil" alternative. Given a choice, I'd rather that God be responsible for the bad things rather than the good things.

Where the good things are concerned, I have nothing to fear. Nothing to lose. I'm safe. They pose no threat to me or my loved ones. The good is risk-free.

But evil can do me harm. Evil can harm my loved ones. Where evil is concerned, I'd have everything to fear, everything to lose—unless God is behind the evil. Unless God limits the evil. Unless the evil serves an ulterior good.

If God is responsible for the evil that befalls me or my loved ones, then no matter how bad it gets, it will never get as bad as it could. It will never involve irreparable harm or irremediable loss. If God is responsible for the evils in my life, then there's a floor beyond which it won't go. If everything, including every evil event, unfolds according to God's wise, beneficent plan and providence, then evil is not a bottomless pit. Not for his children.

Every evil that befalls me as a Christian, however horrible, will be a redeemable evil. There is hope. There is good awaiting me on the other side of the ordeal—in this life or the next.

Many of us come to a point in life, sooner or later, where life closes in on us. Where, despite our best efforts to avoid it, our worst fears come true. Sometimes we can see it coming, and we feel helpless to stop it. We hope and pray that it will turn aside at the last moment, but it doesn't.

Instead of waking up from a nightmare, you wake up to a nightmare. That awful sinking sensation. To know you're cornered. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. All the dice line up against you.

It's in times like these, as we cling to a windswept rock, that knowing God is behind our ordeal is a source of hope and strength and consolation. Indeed, the only source of hope and strength and consolation. In knowing this, we know that this is not the end. This is not the epitaph. If God is behind it, then God is also in front of it. To bless us. To do us good.

For better and for worse. But not for the worst—but for the best.

Good-bye to God

I don't watch Supernatural very often. It was never great drama. For the most part pure entertainment. But it started going downhill after Eric Kripke decided to introduce the war-in-heaven plotline.

The show's theology embodies finite godism. There's not much difference between angels and demons. "Heaven" is a cross between a broken, blended family and a cutthroat firm where job promotion involves ambitious, backstabbing executives who betray one another to please the boss. Imagine Gregory Boyd as a screenwriter, and you get the general idea.

It soon became so campy that I only tune in now and then to sample the latest downturn. But it does unintentionally illustrate a neglected truth.

In Supernatural, there is no Christian God. There's no assurance that in the long run the good guys will win and the bad guys will lose.

As a result, everyone is insecure. You don't know who you can trust. Since no one is safe, even your best friend might turn on you at any moment to get ahead or save his skin. Loyalties are fickle. The players keep changing sides.

So you have Castiel, an angel who wants to do the right thing, but he's thwarted by hopeless moral dilemmas. He has to compromise. Has to be ruthless. Has to cut a deal with the devil.

And when you think about it, this is, unwittingly, a parable of atheism. A godless world is a friendless world. A Machiavellian world. A world where everyone is always at risk. A world where everyone is dangerous to everyone else.

In a risky random world, where everyone is threatened, where there's no certainty--or even probability--that virtue will be rewarded or vice be punished, that's a fundamentally friendless world. In a ruthless world, only the ruthless survive or prosper.

That's why our pagan forebears practiced witchcraft and divination. It wasn't superstition. It was fear. Anxiety.

And secular science tells the same story--the story of a pitiless world, indifferent to human existence. Where a stray asteroid may suddenly extinguish life as we know it.

Like movies in which the villain arranges for friends to be in a situation where there's not enough to go around. Not enough food, or water. No enough room in the boat. In that situation, friends turn on one another.

Like totalitarian regimes where wives spy on husbands while husbands spy on wives. Where, at any time, or any place, the authorities may seize you for unspecified crimes,

due to the anonymous tip of your coworker. Where everyone is on the take. Where every man has his price, or has a price on his head. Like banana republics where nepotism, assassination, and bribery are the common currency.

Kill the Indian, save the man

Christians sometimes defend the OT holy war commands on the grounds that some cultures are so depraved that you have to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. The culture is corrupt from top to bottom.

Some critics of the holy war commands counter that Israel could have adopted Canaanites babies. That would break the cycle.

I've discussed this before, but now i'd like to approach it from a different angle. As a matter of fact, this isn't purely hypothetical. That's been tried in the past. Beginning in the late 19C, there are off-reservation Indian boarding schools. Indian children were taken from their families and put in boarding schools, far from home. Physical separation was considered essential to deprogram the children and acculturate them to white society. The Carlisle Indian School is a famous (or infamous) example.

This was sometimes done with the best of intentions. Yet, not surprisingly, it has been denounced. I daresay the same people who find the holy war commands objectionable would find this form of assimilation equally objectionable. We generally think it's wrong to break up families, unless the children are in a gravely abusive situation.

"God can't stop it!"

rogereolson says:

April 25, 2013 at 12:29 pm

I think our disagreement must lie in our perspectives about divine permission. I see God as sometimes (perhaps often) permitting evil because he cannot stop it—not due to any lack of power but due to what I can only call (for lack of a better term) rules that only he knows.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/comment-page-1/#comment-41500>

rogereolson says:

April 25, 2013 at 12:43 pm

*But, speaking only for myself now, I agree that “all this is inexplicable” except by appeal to 1) the fallenness of the world due to sin (Romans 8), 2) rules God knows, understands and abides by, and 3) the particularities of situations that no one but God fully understands (that determine when God can and cannot intervene). Again, I’ll suggest a good book for you to read: *Evil and the God of Love* by Christian philosopher Michael Peterson. Philosopher Keith Ward has also written much on this subject. C. S. Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain* is also helpful.*

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/comment-page-1/#comment-41503>

rogereolson says:

April 23, 2013 at 12:21 pm

*Imagine a world exactly like ours except that God gives clear warnings to everyone who might be affected by evil or calamity. Then read C. S. Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain*. Also, stop thinking of God’s foreknowledge as providentially advantageous—as if foreknowing something is going to happen makes it possible for God to change what is going to happen.*

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/comment-page-1/#comment-41413>

rogereolson says:

April 25, 2013 at 12:39 pm

Well, we see things differently. What else is there to say? We've discussed this here many times. I'm not sure you understand what is meant by a "non-whimsical world." It's a world where human actions have somewhat predictable consequences. Where, for example, gun don't turn to putty every time someone aims one at an innocent person. It's a world where moral actions, including incompetent ones, have consequences.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/comment-page-1/#comment-41413>

rogereolson says:

April 25, 2013 at 12:46 pm

Well, you already said what you think. If you ask me, the "cause of the curse" is not God but, as you imply throughout, us. It is the natural consequence of our racial disobedience (distancing ourselves) from God.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/comment-page-1/#comment-41505>

There are three fundamental problems with Olson's theodicy of natural evil.

i) On the one hand, Olson invokes a natural law theodicy, of the sort popularized by C. S. Lewis. According to this argument, God can't routinely interfere with the laws of nature because human existence requires a high degree of stability and predictability.

If, however, accidents and natural disasters are intrinsic to the natural-law structure of the physical world, and God can't meddle with the uniformity of nature, then in the world to come, humans will continue to die from accidents and natural disasters. Yet that conflicts with the eschatology of Scripture, according to which the saints will not be subject to death and in the world to come.

Perhaps Olson would postulate that the world to come may have different natural laws, but in that event, it isn't naturally necessary for people to die from accidents and natural disasters here and now, if God can coherently change the laws of nature.

ii) On the other hand, Olson also attributes accidents and natural disasters to the fall. But if accidents and natural disasters are due to the fall, then that's not intrinsic to the natural law structure of the physical world. If accidents and natural disasters are the result of the fall rather than creation, then God can prevent accidents or natural disasters without suspending natural laws or destabilizing the natural order.

iii) Apropos (i-ii), Olson is trying to ride two horses at once. He can't consistently say accidents and natural disasters are built into the physical, causal structure of the world and also attribute the same phenomena to the fall.

Is the Arminian God a cosmic terrorist?

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/>

If what many Christians believe about God is true, then the West, Texas disaster (like every disaster) was actually good—"designed, ordained and governed by God" necessarily means "good" in a Christian worldview.

According to predestination, the explosion was "designed, ordained, and governed by God." To say it's good, without further ado, is simplistic.

Something God designs, ordains and governs (the key is 'designs') has to be good in the larger scheme of things.

That qualification is more accurate than the first statement. However, it's still misleading.

It's not the explosion that's good. Rather, the explosion contributes to something else that's good. A good that wouldn't eventuate apart from the explosion.

This isn't a difficult concept to grasp. Olson prides himself on being a deep thinker, but he's really quite shallow.

Suppose I plan to marry my high school sweetheart. We've been going steady since junior high.

Suppose she'd killed in a traffic accident during our senior year of high school. I'm devastated. She will always hold a special place in my heart.

Still, I don't wish to be a childless bachelor for the rest of my life, so I marry another classmate. We have a good marriage. Our kids turn out well.

Does that make the death of my high school sweetheart good? No. Rather, it makes possible an alternate good. It's not her death that's good, but the resultant alternative. The alternate good is contingent on the tragedy of her premature demise. My marriage is good. My kids are good. None of that would have happened had I married her.

So we're dealing with impossible goods. One set of goods excludes the other set of goods.

Other Christians mean that God is eternally, immutably good in himself and his good character governs what he does. He can't lie, for example. It's not that he just chooses not to; he literally can't because he is truth itself. Whatever God does is good because he is good; he cannot do wrong. However, some who hold this view ("realist" with regard to God's nature) believe that things we perceive as disasters and evils are designed, ordained and governed by God. To them, the West fertilizer plant explosion (which devastated a nursing home and killed several first responders and injured children and wiped out a large portion of a town) was from God in the sense that it was designed, ordained and governed by God. God didn't just know it was going to happen and didn't just permit it; God planned it and wanted it to happen (even if he regretted its necessity) and directly or indirectly caused it.

i) I don't think God regrets his plan.

ii) Predestination renders the outcome conditionally necessary. Given predestination, the outcome is necessary. But the given is not a necessity. Nothing necessitated God.

iii) How does Olson's permissive approach exonerate God? Did God permit the explosion because that's good in the larger scheme of things? Or did God permit the explosion even though there is nothing to mitigate that evil in the larger scheme of things? If the explosion has no redeeming value, then what was God's justification for allowing it happen? Why does Olson think permission let's God off the hook?

iv) Apropos (iii), I don't see that Olson can invoke the freewill defense.

a) I haven't studied the details of the accident, but presumably the factory exploded because fertilizer is combustible (due to methane gas/ammonium nitrate). Well, it's not as if God would violate the fertilizer's freewill by preventing that accident.

b) Suppose human error was a factor. Maybe factory workers were careless about safety protocols. Even if that's the case, God wouldn't violate their freewill by preventing the accident. After all, they didn't intend the accident. It's not like they sabotaged the plant. Indeed, if they could have foreseen the outcome, they would have taken precautionary measures to avoid the accident. So divine intervention would honor their implicit intentions.

At best, Olson could only invoke the freewill defense if a factory worker deliberately tampered with the equipment. Of course that seems like a rather perverse impediment

on divine restraint—where it's only permissible for God to intervene if the agent did not intend to do harm.

c) Maybe Olson would invoke a natural law theodicy, which he links to the freewill defense. Perhaps he'd say a stable environment with predictable consequences is necessary for making morally responsible choices.

But even if we accept that argument in principle, that has to be balanced against the collateral damage which Olson himself is quick to accentuate: “devastated a nursing home and killed several first responders and injured children and wiped out a large portion of a town.”

Once again, why does Olson think divine permission ipso facto excuses God for letting that happen? Isn't the very question at issue whether God had good reason to let that happen? To cite divine permission as the justification is circular when it's divine permission that demands justification.

Many would say God didn't cause it because they appeal to secondary causes, but if one asks about it's ultimate cause they will explain that God is the ultimate cause of whatever happens.

If that's a problem for Calvinists, then Olson is sitting in the same leaky boat. Isn't the Arminian God the ultimate cause of that accident? The factory is not a personal agent that willed its self-destruction.

Or take catastrophic accidents due to metal fatigue. Isn't the Arminian God the ultimate cause? Even if we grant the existence of libertarian freewill, that doesn't extend to inanimate objects.

Now, to my point about the West, Texas explosion (and all things like it): IF meticulous providence is true (viz., that God designs, ordains and governs whatever happens), then God was orchestrating it and rendering it certain (necessary) for a good purpose.

Agreed. I accept that implication.

What I have found in my (now becoming rather) long life is that many people who say they believe that falter in that belief when they mature and experience really bad things in their own lives—especially happening to loved ones.

I've experienced "really bad things" happen to three of my loved ones. My faith in predestination and providence hasn't faltered. To the contrary, that's what makes it bearable: knowing that this is part of God's wise and benevolent plan. No matter how bleak things seem, that gives you something to hope for.

It's easier to believe that when it's not your town, or your race, or your family it happens to.

Olson is such an arrogant, conceited little twit.

But I've also noticed that few, if any, of those who believe that actually follow through with that belief.

Unlike Olson, I follow through on my beliefs.

Instead of celebrating what happened because God designed it, ordained it and governed it they express grief and sorrow and regret over it (especially when it happens to someone they know and love or their own town or family or whatever).

That piggybacks on the simplistic way he framed the issue at the outset, which I already corrected.

If I were a believer in meticulous providence, divine determinism (and still a Christian) I would feel duty-bound to thank God for whatever happens.

I do.

I might feel great grief and sorrow, but I would follow through the logic of what I believe and say, publicly, that "This is from God and therefore good and I thank and praise him for it."

i) We should always thank God for whatever happens.

ii) Of course, people can be overwhelmed by emotion. Does Olson think Arminians are magically exempt from that psychological response?

iii) There's a difference between praising God and praising an event. The factory is just a thing. The explosion is just a thing. Praise and blame attaches to the personal agents. Events are only praiseworthy or blameworthy by extension. A personification.

I suspect, however, that IF more consistent Calvinists and others who believe in meticulous providence/divine determinism actually did that, many people moving toward that view would turn away. Is that why they don't? I can only suspect that's a reason why they don't. (Some do and I give them credit for it.)

Keep in mind that Olson is an intellectual coward. He picks on the laity. He doesn't seek out the most sophisticated proponents of Calvinism.

Another reason many don't is because they know some people would ask them "So what good purpose can you imagine for such a disaster from God?" Of course, they can always appeal to mystery and just say they don't know. That's respectable. Still, "inquiring minds want to know" what are some possible reasons why God would design, ordain and govern (render certain, cause, make necessary) something like what happened in West, Texas two days ago. I suspect that deep in the recesses of their minds some believers in meticulous providence who live within a 100 miles radius of West, Texas are thinking it might have something to do with the annual "Czechfest" which is like an "Octoberfest" held in the Czech-settled town. Lots of drinking goes on there. Or they might know something else about the town that they think justifies such an act of God.

The problem with such explanations (and a reason people who think them often draw back from saying them) is that so often, as in West, the brunt of the disaster affects the weak and those trying to help the weak (e.g., nursing home patients

and first responders trying to put out the fire). Frankly, to put it bluntly, if meticulous providence is true, God would seem to have bad aim (e.g., the hurricane and flood that devastated much of New Orleans left Bourbon Street in the French Quarter almost untouched!).

He imputes to Calvinists the notion that the only good reason for this accident would be divine judgment, then proceeds to burn the straw man he erected.

Again, though, it's easy to imagine how disasters have good consequences as well as bad consequences. We're dealing with alternate futures. Alternate histories.

History is complex. Most events have ripple effects. Change one or more variables, and that will make some things better while making other things worse. This is a popular theme in SF movies, viz. *Frequency*, *Looper*, *Mr. Nobody*, *The Butterfly Effect*.

So where does a believer in relational sovereignty think God was when the fertilizer plant exploded? Many will simply say "We can't know—unless God gives a revelation explaining his 'place' in it EXCEPT that God was and is there among the suffering offering grace, comfort, strength, pardon, hope."

It's a tribute to Olson's hidebound insularity that he considers that a plausible theodicy.

At best, that's like a mechanic who knows the factory is going to explode in a few hours, keeps a safe distance, waiting for that to happen, without preventing the accident or even warning anyone, then comforting the survivors after the fact. At worst, that's like a terrorist who sabotages the factory, then comforts the survivors.

Canaanite babies

i) Some Christian apologists defend the OT holy war commands by appealing to universal infant salvation. I'm skeptical about that postulate. However, it's pretty speculative either way. Certainly Calvinism has the internal resources to make that possible.

Keep in mind that denying universal infant salvation doesn't preclude God from saving some Canaanite babies. It's not necessarily an all-or-nothing proposition. (I'm using "babies" to cover anyone below the age of reason.)

ii) One objection to this appeal is that it's ad hoc. It superimposes on the texts something that isn't even hinted at. I'd like to comment on that objection.

iii) To begin with, suppose God planned to save Canaanite babies through the retroactive merit of the atonement. Would we expect Deuteronomy to say babies are saved by Jesus dying on the cross? Clearly that would be quite anachronistic. Indeed, it would be unintelligible to readers in the 2nd millennium BC.

iv) In addition, the retroactive merit of the atonement is the way anyone was saved before the death of Christ. That's the way all OT saints were saved. To suggest that that's how Canaanite babies were saved is not carving out a special exception in their case. It's not concocting a mechanism just for them. Rather, that's a general principle.

v) In considering the silence of Scripture regarding the eternal fate of Canaanite babies, that silence isn't confined to them. What do the holy war commands say about the eternal fate of Jewish soldiers who die in battle? Precisely nothing. The holy war passages don't speak to that issue in reference to anyone. Not just Canaanite babies, but Jewish combatants. But surely some Jewish soldiers were devout Jews. Surely some of them were heavenbound.

Indeed, it's a bit surprising that doesn't offer Jewish soldiers any hope beyond the grave. Perhaps that's to discourage belief that death in battle is a ticket to heaven.

There are some OT texts that explicitly or implicitly teach the afterlife. But they don't figure in the conquest narratives or the holy war commands. So I don't think the silence of Scripture regarding the eternal fate of Canaanite babies is prejudicial. If so, that would be equally prejudicial to Jewish combatants who perish in holy war.

vi) Finally, there's nothing about Canaanite babies qua babies that essentially distinguishes them from other dying babies. So there's no antecedent reason, that I can see, why God would save non-Canaanite babies but not save Canaanite babies.

For further reading

Greg Welty, *Why is There Evil in the World?* (Christian Focus 2018)

John S. Feinberg, *When There are No Easy Answers* (Kregel 2016)