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GOD, EVIL, AND THE CONTEMPLATION OF INFINITELY MANY OPTIONS

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Hume's Troubling Questions

David Hume raises what is usually called "the problem of evil" by asking a series of sobering questions:

> Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?[1]

The believer in a God of infinite love, power, and knowledge cannot but feel the force of Hume's questions. Pain and suffering abound, as do many other apparent "evils" in a broader sense of the word. For Hume's questions can be raised about the occurrence of any seemingly "suboptimal states of affairs", not just pain and suffering. Many situations or circumstances, although perhaps not qualifying as positively evil, are nevertheless not nearly so good as one might have expected, on the assumption that the world is ruled by a beneficent, omniscient, and omnipotent deity. And Hume's questions can be raised about these suboptimal features of the world, as well.

Here is an example of the sort of reasoning that might lead one to believe that there are suboptimal states of affairs of this sort — not exactly what we would ordinarily call "evil", but what must look, to the theist, like God's failure to use the best means available to achieve good ends. A Humean skeptic may grant that it would be worthwhile for a creator to allow for the possibility of human beings who make a selfish choice that harms others; perhaps genuinely moral acts and moral virtues require a kind of freedom that depends upon that possibility. Many theists have made this claim, and thought that a good deal of this world's evil can be seen as necessary in order for there to be creatures who exercise a kind of freedom that matters, morally — freedom to choose between good and evil. But surely we could have been free to choose selfishly while being a little less inclined toward choosing the very bad things we sometimes choose. We could have understood the seriousness of our actions without so many of our fellows having to suffer. The worst of us could have been allowed to make ourselves into moral monsters, if that is really necessary for our freedom to matter; but our Stalins and Hitlers could have been stopped before they destroyed so many lives, without the loss of any discernible good. Furthermore, God could have seen to it that we were always confronted with

momentous choices under less ambiguous circumstances — we could, for instance, have had clearer knowledge of right and wrong than most of us have when facing significant moral choices. So, even if it is a good thing to create free creatures who sometimes choose well and sometimes poorly; nevertheless, the good that justifies allowing such freedom could have been achieved much more efficiently. A truly beneficent deity would not have used the patently suboptimal means one finds in our world. Or so one might come to believe.

My goal here is to spell out the details of the argument that is implicit in Hume's questions — an argument that starts from the existence of evil and leads to the conclusion that God does not exist — and to consider a couple of important criticisms that can be made of this Humean argument. I shall focus especially upon criticisms of the Humean argument from evil that will be appealing to a "garden-variety" Christian theist like myself. I consider distinctively Christian responses because they are most relevant to my own thinking on the subject. Obviously, I should like to know what I should think about Hume's challenging questions — questions that should arise for any Christian who has the time for a little reflection, and that to many of us seem very pressing indeed. The approach can be defended as a matter of principle, too. Often, when philosophers ask whether it is reasonable to believe in God, they consider only an abstract and generic theism — a vague, general belief in God that is neutral when it comes to the doctrines that separate Judaism and Christianity, for instance, let alone the doctrines separating theological schools, such as Calvinism and Thomism. But it is important that philosophers sometimes consider the problem of evil from the point of view of particular religious traditions, with all their trimmings. The problem of reconciling the existence of God with the evident evils of our world will take on a different tenor within different concrete contexts of belief. The varieties of Western monotheism — Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the vast sea of monotheistic sects that draw sustenance from them — agree about God's knowledge, power, and goodness. But, beyond that, there are radical differences in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim conceptions of God; and different theological traditions within each religion paint very different pictures of God's relation to his creatures. And some of these differences have an impact upon the problem of evil. Doctrines peculiar to one or another tradition can make it easier or harder to "build a theodicy".

A theodicy is the spinning of a certain kind of story about God's relations to His creation: a story that includes an explanation of how a perfectly loving and good deity could have allowed the sorts of evils our world actually contains. A theodicy can be put forward in a very tentative spirit; for example, the story might be regarded as quite improbable. In that case, it would only show that there is at least one possible way for God's actions (and God's inaction) to be reconcilable with his other attributes. This sort of theodicy-building

(which is a variety of what Alvin Plantinga calls mere'"defense" against the problem of evil; he reserves the word "theodicy" for stories put forward in a less tentative spirit) might succeed in showing that believing in God in the face of evil is at least not like believing in round squares — it is not believing an outright impossibility. Most theodicy-building is more bold, aiming for a picture of things that both reconciles the ways of God to humanity and also has some plausibility to it. It would be nice, for example, if the assumptions needed to make the theodicy run are at least not known to be false! Ideally, they would be assumptions that are already believed, or that can be added to one's theistic beliefs without thereby significantly lowering the probability of the whole package — the combination of belief in God and the specific details of the theodicy.

Some varieties of Christianity allow for theodicies that others do not. For example, Christians in Catholic and Wesleyan traditions are able to make considerable use of a kind of indeterministic freedom of the will on the part of humans. In fact, I will put the (putative) value of such freedom to work in the present paper. But "evil for freedom's sake" (to borrow David Lewis's phrase[2]) cannot be invoked in a Calvinist's theodicy — at least, not in anything like the same way.[3] The impact of the problem of evil upon theism depends (at least for many believers, much of the time) upon the availability of plausible theodicies[4], and theists who agree about the principal attributes of God may nevertheless have very different tools with which to construct a theodicy. As a consequence, one can only say rather abstract and, I believe, inconclusive things about the problem of evil — unless and until one is willing to consider the more detailed conceptions of God one finds in particular theological traditions.

Relying upon the details of one's own faith can, of course, be a double-edged sword for theodicy-builders — especially for those who believe in hell (and more Americans believed in hell in 2000 than in the 1950s or, for that matter, than in 1990[5]). Many Christians believe in a hell of eternal torment — which sounds like the introduction of a strictly infinite amount of evil crying out for an explanation. Why not mercifully snuff out these lost souls, if they cannot be saved? (Indeed, some theologians interpret the New Testament talk of "eternal destruction" as really a matter of annihilation.[6]) Some Christians also believe that even the noblest "noble pagan" who has never heard of Christ is headed for eternal torment — "born in sin", with no chance to be saved from a fate that is, quite literally, infinitely horrible. Strict adherence to such doctrines makes the theodicist's task utterly intractable — or so it seems to me.

The successful Christian theodicy-builder must, I am convinced, radically reconceive or reject the most problematic elements in conceptions of the afterlife like those I just sketched — and there is a long tradition of Christians doing so.[7] C. S. Lewis famously allowed for "post mortem" conversion and a hell that is of our own making.[8] But even if such changes reconcile the evils of

hell with divine benevolence, a significant residue of evil remains: One must face the fact that God has allowed so many people to believe these doctrines — doctrines that have fostered woefully inadequate conceptions of God in some quarters, and that have been a major obstacle to faith for many people. For those of us who reconceive various aspects of the old-fashioned picture of the afterlife, widespread belief in these doctrines constitutes an important part of the general problem of God's "hiddenness". Christians, and other monotheists, claim that it is extremely important to know the facts about God; but we must also admit that God has failed to make these facts plain to all but a small proportion of the human race — at least, so far as we can tell — and so has remained "hidden" to a surprising degree. The cruelty and unfairness traditionally attributed to God is just one part of the veil that has sometimes hidden his true face.

Divine hiddenness is another example of the problem of the suboptimal. Many of us believe that, somewhere, somehow, God eventually reveals himself in a potentially life-giving way to all rational creatures; anything less would be incompatible with perfect love. But even we must admit that, in most cases so far, God has not seemed to be in any hurry to do this. Although he may seem "slack, as some men count slackness", the delay could turn out, in retrospect, to be relatively short. Still, why delay at all? A successful theodicy must take up such questions as these.

My plan in this essay is, first, to spin out a version of the argument from evil based upon Hume's questions; then to gesture towards the elements in a relatively common sort of theodicy that makes use of the "free will defense"; and, finally, to consider a couple of important themes in Christian theodicy-building in more detail. The strategy upon which I will focus most attention is illustrated in the following exchange.

Skeptic: If there were a God, he would have to create the best world that he could possibly create. Since this world is obviously not the best of all possible worlds, it follows that God does not exist.

Theodicist: Your objection assumes that that there is a best world; but why think that? Is it not more plausible to think that, for every complete world — every complete history of everything that ever did or will happen — there is a slightly better one that would have occurred had a few more good things happened? You cannot blame God for not having created the best of all possible worlds if there is no such thing! No matter what God did, you could point out that he could have added a few more happy creatures or beautiful planets, thereby making the

> complete history of everything a little better. Your complaint is not a legitimate one if you can lodge it no matter what God does, no matter how good the world is.

I shall take the general strategy of this sort of "no best possible world" reply and tailor it to particular instances of evil and the suboptimal — partly because, as I shall argue, it is wrong to think of God's creative act as the selection of an entire world, all at once.

But before going further, I had best explain that the essay is mainly intended as an introduction to the problem of evil for readers with little, if any, philosophical background. Even my more detailed discussion of the "no best world" strategy serves simply to introduce this important move in theodicy-building to those who are relatively new to the subject. To ease my readership into the peculiar way philosophers tend to approach matters of faith, I shall begin by explaining why it is important to clarify the exact structure of the "argument from evil".

I make no claim to originality; almost everything I will say has been said by others. My initial presentation of the problem of evil is based on J. L. Mackie's well-known development of Hume's challenge, and Alvin Plantinga's equally well-known responses.[9] The strategies in theodicy that I deploy owe a great deal to the work of Peter van Inwagen, Michael Murray, Richard Swinburne, and Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, among many others[10] — though it should not be assumed that these authors would approve of every use I make of their ideas. For more thorough treatment of the issues broached in this essay, readers are urged to consult these philosophers — who are but a representative sample of a much larger group of important scholars discussing the problem of evil today.

Why Turn the Problem of Evil into an "Argument"?

Like philosophers of earlier eras, today's philosophers (at least the so-called "analytic philosophers"[11], who tend to dominate the Anglo-American academic philosophical scene) are in the habit of demanding: "Give me an argument for that!" Why this fascination with arguments? Are philosophers inordinately argumentative? Perhaps we are — but there is a more charitable explanation. An — "argument" is just a set of statements (or "propositions") that are alleged to support some conclusion — that is, to serve as a reason for believing it. When a philosopher asks "Do you have an argument for that claim?", she is simply asking, "Can you give me a reason to think that it's true?" Some reasoning is fallacious; what seems, at first blush, to be a good reason to believe something can evaporate upon inspection. Putting purported reasons into the form of an argument is a way of examining their logic, which allows us to see whether they hold up.

Consequently, even though simply mulling over Hume's challenging questions may well be enough to shake the faith of someone who believes in a God of perfect love, power, and knowledge; still, the philosophical theist will want to know exactly how this series of questions is supposed to constitute an argument for the conclusion that God does not exist. Perhaps there is a fallacy in it somewhere; perhaps there will turn out to be some hidden premises or assumptions that are questionable. Let's see the argument!

It is most natural to regard Hume's challenge as an implicit "deductive argument" — an argument consisting of premises and a conclusion that have a very impressive logical structure: If premises of that form are true, the corresponding conclusion simply must be true. Simple deductive arguments are easy to recognize.

> Premise 1: "If it's raining outside, the game will be cancelled."
> Premise 2: "It is raining outside."
> Conclusion: "So the game will be canceled."

There is something good about this argument, even if it gets the facts wrong — for instance, even if the people who say these things are right about the rain, but, unbeknownst to them, the game will be played anyway; or even if it is not in fact raining. Here is the good feature the argument has, independently of the truth or falsity of its premises: The first two sentences, if they were true, would require the truth of the conclusion, simply in virtue of having the logical form known as "affirming the antecedent" (the Latin name is "modus ponens"). This logical structure can be seen in all arguments that conform to the following pattern: "If such-and-such is the case, then so-and-so is the case too; such-and-such is the case; therefore, so-and-so is the case". Arguments of this form, along with all other deductive arguments, either have true conclusions, or else there is a falsehood hidden amongst the premises.

Not all deductive arguments are so easy to recognize as modus ponens. Formal logic is the branch of philosophy devoted to the often difficult task of describing and testing the forms of arguments, in order to separate the "valid" deductive arguments from the "invalid" ones (arguments with invalid forms can have true premises and a false conclusion). Fortunately, the most plausible way to spell out the reasoning behind Hume's questions will produce an argument that can be evaluated without serious study of formal logic. The structure of the argument can be laid out in such a way that the individual inferences — the sub-conclusions within the argument — are pretty transparently valid, nearly as unquestionable as — modus ponens.

Hume is suggesting that God's existence is incompatible with the existence of evil; and the line of reasoning that lies behind his skepticism is most naturally spelled out as an instance of the argumentative strategy called "reductio ad

absurdum" — a kind of argument in which a set of assumptions is shown to be "reducible to absurdity", that is, to entail something absurd or contradictory. If some assumption, or set of assumptions, can be shown to lead, by deductively valid intermediate arguments, to something contradictory; then it has been shown that the assumptions cannot all be true. In a deductively valid argument, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be; so, if the conclusion of a deductive argument cannot be true, then at least one premise must be false. The argument, as I will formulate it, begins with three premises or assumptions. Together, they affirm that an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent God exists and evil also exists. Then two more assumptions are made, which the Humean takes to be obviously true, and not open to question. By means of a few simple arguments from these premises, a contradiction is reached. So the assumptions cannot all be true; and, since the skeptical Humean thinks the two added assumptions are safe, at least one of the original three premises must be false — and so, an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent deity cannot co-exist with evil.

Hume's Argument as a "Reductio ad Absurdum"

The value of becoming crystal clear about the logical form of the individual steps in this argument is that, once the overall form of the argument is seen to be valid, there can be no doubt that, if all the assumptions from which the Humean begins were really true (the three premises about God and evil, and the two additional assumptions), then the conclusion (a contradiction) would have to be true as well. In other words, by finding a truly valid argument form behind Hume's troubling questions, we can see which set of assumptions or premises really would lead to an absurdity, and then focus our attention upon the precise points at which a theist might be able to reply to Hume's skeptical questioning by rejecting one of the argument's assumptions.

Here is a very natural way in which Hume's heirs have turned his questions into a formally valid argument.[12] First, there are the three assumptions about God and evil; these are the premises that are supposed to lead to a contradiction, thereby showing that God, as traditionally conceived, could not co-exist with evil:

1.   God is all-powerful and all-knowing.[13]
2.   God is perfectly good and benevolent.
3.   Evil exists.

But notice that there is no obvious way to deduce a contradiction directly from these three statements alone. If there were no interesting relationships between the concepts used in them — power, knowledge, benevolence, and

evil — there would be no reason to doubt that all three could be true together. Compare 1, 2, and 3, with this benign trio, which look similar, at least on the surface:

> 1*.   Jones is hungry and thirsty.
> 2*.   Jones is tall.
> 3*.   Gold exists.

These three statements do not have the slightest whiff of joint inconsistency about them; one cannot even imagine the beginnings of a plausible argument from 1*, 2*, and 3* to a contradiction. There are no interesting conceptual connections among hunger, thirst, being tall, and gold that could give rise to a contradiction. If 1, 2, and 3 do in fact lead to something contradictory or absurd, it will have to be in virtue of some further facts about these particular notions: power, knowledge, perfect benevolence, evil. And there do seem to be some conceptual connections between them. By adding statements that spell out these connections, perhaps a contradiction can be reached.

Some Humeans (such as J. L. Mackie) have supposed that it is built into the very idea of benevolence that a perfectly benevolent being would want to prevent whatever evil was in its power to prevent; and built into the very ideas of power and knowledge that a being with the power to do anything and knowledge of every truth could prevent anything it wanted to prevent, including the occurrence of all evil. And so Hume's questions have been turned into an argument relying upon the following additional premises:

> 4.   Every being that is perfectly good and benevolent eliminates as much evil as it can.
> 5.   Every being that is all-powerful and all-knowing can eliminate all evil.

If 4 and 5 are really conceptual truths (like "All bachelors are male" or "If something is triangular, then it has three sides") then they resemble logical truths in being necessary. A necessary truth is one that has to be true; it could not possibly have been false. If 4 and 5 have this exalted status, and if they provide the materials for a valid argument from 1, 2, and 3 to a contradiction, then 1, 2, and 3 could not possibly have been true all together. As necessary truths, 4 and 5 would have been true no matter what; so, however things might have turned out, you would still have been able to give an argument from 1, 2, and 3 to a contradiction.

And there is a contradiction in the offing. From 2 and 4, one can readily conclude that God eliminates as much evil as he can. The argument from 2 and 4 to this conclusion has the structure: "X (insert any name in place of

'X') is a such-and-such; every such-and-such is a so-and-so; therefore X is a so-and-so". Similarly, by means of the same form of argument, one can conclude from 1 and 5 that God can eliminate all evil. Putting these together produces the following intermediate conclusion:

> 6.   God eliminates as much evil as He can, and God can eliminate all evil. (from 1, 2, 4, 5)

But 6 says that every evil that God can eliminate is eliminated, and also that every evil can be eliminated by God. It has the form: "Every such-and-such that is also a so-and-so is a whatchamcallit; and every such-and-such is a so-and-so". From this form of statement, as a matter of logic, it follows that "Every such-and-such is a whatchamacallit". If you think about this for a minute you should be able to see that, no matter what you plug in for "such-and-such", "so-and-so", and "whatchamcallit", if the result is a true statement, then the sentence corresponding to "Every such-and-such is a whatchamacallit" must also be true. And so, in particular, if 6 is true, then so is:

> 7.   God eliminates all evil. (from 6)

Now, to reach the absurdity we've been trying to derive from 1, 2, and 3, we simply put this sub-conclusion together with the third of our initial trio of assumptions, and, voilà:

> 8.   God eliminates all evil and evil exists: CONTRADICTION!   (from 3, 7)

A contradiction has been derived from 1, 2, and 3 using only 4 and 5. That shows that, assuming 4 and 5 are true, 1, 2, and 3 cannot all be true together. Furthermore, 4 and 5 are supposed to be necessary truths; and, if they really are necessary truths, then not only are 1, 2, and 3 in fact not all true; but, worse yet, it would be impossible for the three propositions about God and evil to be true together. (Those who want to geek-out on the formal details of the argument will find them in a note.)[14]

The Range of Possible Responses to the Argument from Evil

Now that Hume's challenging questions have been turned into a full-blown argument, and the argument has been seen to be logically valid, we can better

assess its force, and more clearly determine the ways in which a theist might respond while continuing to believe in God — or while still believing in a god of some sort.

One response would be a calculated agnosticism about what is wrong with the argument. You could say: "I do not know which of the premises in the argument is false. Perhaps 1, 2, or 3 is false. In that case, I must have an inadequate view of the nature of God or evil. Perhaps 4 and 5 are not necessary truths after all, even though I grant that they seemed to me to be true, before I considered this argument; and I am not sure it is one of them, rather than 1, 2, or 3 that is false. But even though I cannot identify the problem precisely, I feel more confident that there is a god than that the conjunction of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 is true. And I don't have to be able to pinpoint the false premise or premises in order to be justified in believing that at least one of them is false." Other variations on this strategy are possible, targeting different premises: For example, you might say that you are sure of 1, 2, and 3; but then maintain a studied neutrality about which of 4 and 5 is wrong — "I know at least one of them is false; but they both sound pretty good; so I can't tell whether the problem is with 4, 5, or both."

I grant that it is possible for a person to find himself in this sort of position: You know that a conclusion is false, and that a certain argument for it has a valid form. Because of that, you also know that at least one of the premises in the argument for the conclusion is false. Yet you don't know which one it is. Speaking for myself, however, I should be very uncomfortable if there were nothing more I could say about the argument from evil. So I note this possible response only to set it to one side, hoping for something better.

The theist's more positive options can be divided into two categories: (a) One may accept that 4 and 5 really are conceptual truths governing the notions of benevolence, power, knowledge, and evil; in which case, one of the three initial assumptions has to go. (b) On the other hand, one may hold onto the three assumptions and reject one of the alleged conceptual truths.

If you accept 4 and 5 as necessary truths, you must reject 1 or 2 or 3 — or be forced to accept a contradiction! Let us first consider rejecting 3: Evil is an illusion — what we think is bad isn't really bad. The Christian Scientists (whose name is, by my lights, doubly misleading[15]) sometimes sound as though they are denying 3; but, among the progeny of Western theism, they are the exception. And the position surely deserves its minority status. It would be gross understatement to say that rejecting 3 is not a very plausible response to the argument from evil. Isn't even the illusion of evil something bad? In any case, it is not a route open to the clear-eyed Christian. Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, validates many of the value judgments we all assume to be true: that disease and suffering, even if they may sometimes be endured in ways that ennoble a person, are nevertheless bad in and of themselves; that

separation from our loved ones by death is a terrible tragedy; that health and full stomachs and parties and deep friendships are intrinsically good; and so on. A person who can find nothing deplorable in the prevalence of sickness and pain, friendlessness and despair, is hardly "Christ-like". Christianity, like Judaism, takes the story of the "Fall" of Adam and Eve as expressing some deep truth about our place in the universe. And that story implies that our world is a disaster area. The beauty of the original plan is often hard to detect from our vantage point, amidst the rubble.

Denying 2 should not prove attractive to the Christian theist, either. It requires saying that God, although excellent in many ways, is not exactly what we would call perfectly good, wholly benevolent, or loving. Perhaps he cares more for the aesthetic value of his creation than for the well-being of its inhabitants; perhaps he regards our struggles and tragedies with the detachment of the artist, not the concern of the lover. But again, the Christian cannot very well go along with this. Christianity affirms that "God is love"; that God's real attitude toward us was revealed in Jesus' compassion for everyone — even those who rejected and killed him — and in His express desire that everyone would experience salvation.

Of the three possibilities now being considered, denying 1 has proven most tempting to theists within Christian traditions. Either God is not omnipotent, lacking the power to prevent evil situations from coming about; or he does not know enough about what is going on to prevent evil. For a short time last century, this strategy enjoyed some popularity (in a movement influenced by the metaphysics of A. N. Whitehead, called "Process Theology"). But the God of Jews, Muslims, and Christians has always been thought to have the power and intelligence to create the universe, deliberately; and how could a God with such astonishing abilities be unable to lift a finger to help us now?

The Christian theist should, then, be driven quickly to strategy (b): Deny that 4 and 5 are both necessary truths; at least one of the two is not true at all. Now, denying 5 is not terribly attractive: Why couldn't an all-powerful, all-knowing being eliminate — why couldn't such a being have prevented — any evil from arising? The question is particularly pressing for those in theological traditions that emphasize how utterly independent God is. He didn't have to create anything; and he was not forced, by a necessity of his own nature or by anything else, to create creatures like you and me. To deny 5 is really to affirm a kind of cosmic dualism: Standing opposed to God and the forces of goodness is some form of independent, inevitable evil.

There is much pressure, then, to deny 4 — theists trying to remain faithful to the central tenets of Christianity will find themselves pushed in that direction, many of us inexorably. To reject 4 is to insist that a being can be perfectly good and benevolent without preventing every evil that it is within its power

to prevent. Before considering the plausibility of denying 4, I will say a few words about what sorts of things are good, bad, or evil in the most fundamental sense; and the ways in which evils may be outweighed or —"defeated" by greater goods — and vice versa.

Defeating Evil

Evil surrounds us — though goodness does, too; and not all evils are equally bad. But what is evil? Although we talk of it as present in some places and times, and not others, evil is not a substance like water or jam, spread over certain parts of the universe, forming a thick layer of horror in some places, and a thin film of dissatisfaction or disappointment in others. But what is evil, then; and what things have it, most fundamentally?

We say that Hitler and Stalin were evil. But it would be a mistake to think that the basic facts about evil can all be captured by ascribing evil to individuals. After all, Hitler and Stalin were not simply evil, period. They were not always evil. As babies, they were innocent enough, and perhaps still relatively harmless as children. They became evil, and it was something about the way they were and the ways they acted in their adult years that made them evil. Even as full-blown adult monsters, they were not simply evil, period. They were evil in virtue of some of the ways they were — in virtue of some of their aspects or characteristics or actions — but not in virtue of others. Hitler's callousness to the deaths he ordered was evil, but his tenderness towards puppies was not, in itself, evil; it was a flicker of goodness in an otherwise dark character.

So an individual is good or bad in virtue of a "way it is" or a "way it acts". A "way a thing is", or a "way a thing acts", is a characteristic or property of the thing. That thought might lead one to say that it is properties or characteristics that are evil, in the most basic sense. But that does not seem quite right, either. Suppose that some evil characteristic is never actually had by anything, that nothing ever displays the characteristic. Suppose, for instance, that there is some degree of hatred that could have been exemplified by someone but that, fortunately, never is — no one ever manages to hate anyone else quite that much. The world is not a worse place for the mere existence of this property, the property hating someone to such-and-such extreme degree. Indeed, the property might seem to be contributing goodness to the world, if it figures in intrinsically good circumstances, such as someone's contemplating that property and trying successfully not to hate anyone that much. (I am assuming that properties and characteristics are existing things; if they cannot properly be said to exist, that makes them an even worse candidate for evil-in-the-most-fundamental-sense.) What would make the world a worse place would be someone's actually having the property — someone's actually hating someone to that degree. It is, then, neither an individual nor a property that is evil, per

se; but, rather, an individual-with-a-property. The individual is evil in virtue of some properties or characteristics it has, and the property is evil in virtue of the fact that, if something had it, there would be more evil in the world. It is natural to use terms like "fact" or "state of affairs" to refer to a thing's exemplification of a property — e.g., Jones's feeling pain — or to several things' standing in some relation — e.g., Smith's pushing Jones into Robinson. Many philosophers have been led by these considerations to say that the primary "carriers" of goodness and badness are states of affairs.

The problem of evil, then, is the problem of reconciling the existence of God with the existence of bad states of affairs. I take it that the extremes of badness are what we call "evil" — that evil is on a continuum with lesser degrees of badness. Evil states of affairs are simply bad states of affairs on steroids. And if any badness exists, whether extreme or mild, Hume's questions can reasonably be asked about it, leading to an analogue of the argument we're examining.

States of affairs can be good or bad in different ways; and some kinds of goodness and badness are not relevant to the argument from evil. Some states of affairs are good or bad as a means to achieving some end — good or bad relative to some goal or purpose. My walking backwards down the stairs is not a good idea, if my goal is simply to descend the stairs; but if I am trying to win a prize that requires walking backwards down the stairs, my doing so is a good thing. In and of itself, however, the set of motions involved in my taking the stairs backwards would seem to be neither good nor bad, but "neutral". The goodness or badness of a state of affairs as a means to some particular end is often called its "instrumental value". Being instrumentally good is a merely relative kind of goodness — goodness for a certain purpose, which is compatible with being bad for other purposes. Other uses of "good" and "bad" also seem to refer to merely relative qualities; I say sauerkraut is good and tripe is bad, and you say the reverse. But all of us — if we have been properly brought up, and if we have not been "corrupted by vain philosophy" — believe in a further kind of value: the "intrinsic value" of a state of affairs. Some situations, circumstances, or states of affairs are good "in and of themselves", and others are bad "in and of themselves", regardless whether they serve someone's purposes or are liked or disliked by someone.

A few philosophers have been known to deny that there is such a thing as intrinsic value; what is good and bad, they say, is always good or bad relative to particular ends, or relative to the tastes and preferences of a person or group. Just as tripe is bad, to me, but good, to someone else, and there is no real dispute here; so unmitigated pain, or death in one's prime, or self-hatred, are bad according to the majority of humanity, but could be good, according to some very alien standard; and there would be no dispute, no more to be said, between a normal human being and a being who said, with Milton's Satan, "evil be thou my good". One often hears an easy-going value-relativism espoused, whenever controversial cases arise; but I suspect that few, when pressed, would

be willing to apply it consistently and generally — for instance, to extend it to someone who adopted the Satanic credo.

However popular or unpopular belief in intrinsic value may be, it seems perfectly appropriate to assume that there is such a thing as intrinsic value in the context of the problem of evil because: (a) theists tend to believe in objective goodness and badness, and (b) it is hard to make out any serious problem of evil without the assumption. If all value is instrumental, and no state of affairs is good or bad, period, but merely good or bad relative to this or that end, then the states of affairs we call evil may simply be bad relative to us and to our aims, but good relative to God's purposes. The connections between the goodness or badness of the consequences of an action, and the rightness or wrongness of the action, are complicated and a matter of controversy. But I feel confident that it will be hard to press the problem of evil without the conviction that some things are intrinsically good and others intrinsically evil.

Consider the way a bored child might treat the ants on the sidewalk — he helps some of them gather food, and burns others with a magnifying glass. Both actions are instrumentally good — good, relative to the purpose of breaking the child's boredom. If the ants can say no more than, "Burning us with a magnifying glass is bad, relative to our goals!", they cannot really indict the child for treating them in this way. At least, they cannot accuse the child of doing something he should not do because of its bad consequences — for the consequences are also very good, from the child's point of view.

Premise 4 in the skeptical Humean's argument should, I think, be taken to have intrinsic evil as its subject. Suppose someone's being benevolent only requires that she eliminate states of affairs that are evil, from her perspective, given her likes, dislikes, goals, and purposes. So far as this principle goes, benevolence is compatible with the infliction of pain that is, from everyone else's point of view, gratuitous.

Here is a ham-fisted, ultimately implausible way of turning 4 into something with intrinsically evil states of affairs for its subject matter:

> 4*.   Every being that is perfectly good and benevolent prevents every evil state of affairs that it possibly can.

The basic problem with 4* will turn out to be that an intrinsically evil state of affairs can be a crucial part of an intrinsically good state of affairs, and in a way that justifies allowing the evil to occur.

Good States of Affairs that Essentially Involve Bad States of Affairs

We have seen that Christians (along with many other theists in Western religious traditions) are under tremendous pressure to deny 4: "Every being

that is good and benevolent eliminates as much evil as it can". Clearly, there must be some conceptual connection between being benevolent and preventing evil when you can. But perhaps 4, at least when construed along the lines of 4*, is too strong. After all, would a perfectly benevolent being really want to eliminate an evil state of affairs if, by doing so, she would block the occurrence of some overall good state of affairs? And couldn't a perfectly benevolent being sometimes confront such a situation?

Suppose one of my children wants to take up rock-climbing, but also likes to go to the movies. I know that she'll experience blisters and scrapes and bruises in the course of learning to climb; and that she would spend the same time simply enjoying the innocent pleasures of the cinema if she doesn't. But I might well encourage her to take up rock-climbing, not because I think that becoming a fan of the movies would be a bad thing; and not because I think the pains she will suffer as a climber are good-in-themselves; but rather because there is a greater good of which they are an essential part: the fortitude, patience, and, ultimately, exhilaration and confidence that result from the sometimes painful process of becoming a climber.

So 4* is not nearly subtle enough to describe the relationship between benevolence and preventing evil. One might try replacing 4* with 4**:

> 4**.   Every being that is perfectly good and benevolent eliminates every evil state of affairs that it can, unless it is an essential part of an overall good state of affairs.

4**, though vague (or perhaps because it is vague), sounds like something closer to a necessary truth — though shortly I shall find reason to weaken it even further.

The notion of "essential part" in 4** deserves some comment. Suppose, to switch examples, that I make my child walk to the movies when I could easily drop her off there (I'm driving past the theatre anyway, say). And suppose I know that she has a twisted ankle that will hurt while she's walking, but that the pain will soon be forgotten in the theatre. You might well accuse me of cruelty. Would it help, would it make me appear more benevolent, if the movie were better? How good would the movie have to be, to make me no longer seem cruel? The answer is: It doesn't matter how good the movie is; deliberately causing her this needless pain would still have been cruel — even if watching the film were to prove to be the greatest experience of her life!

In the rock-climbing case, the pains associated with learning to climb seem closely tied to the goods achieved; while the pains from walking to the cinema are not essential to the goods experienced in the theatre. For one thing, there is no other way to become a rock-climber; the only physically possible route to acquiring the needed skills involves aches and blisters. But, more deeply,

one has not developed virtues of fortitude and patience unless one has learned to take a difficult and sometimes painful path when it is necessary to achieve some worthwhile goal. And in the cinema case, there was a painless way to get to the theatre (in my car), and nothing good would have been lost by her taking that route (since catching a ride wouldn't detract from her experience in the theatre, and I was driving there anyway). The intrinsic goodness of the movie experience merely outweighs the pain she experiences on the way there. But the intrinsic goodness of the experience of becoming a climber seems to involve certain kinds of pain in a more intimate way — they are essentially bound up with the goods achieved.

Now, in cases involving God, it will do no good to point to the fact that some pain or suffering is physically necessary for some good — i.e., that there is no other way, given the laws of nature, and our limitations, for the good state of affairs to come about. If blisters and sore muscles were merely physically necessary for the positive features of learning to climb, God could instantaneously and painlessly give my child all the goodness associated with rock-climbing skills, bypassing the laws of human physiology and psychology. But the pain involved in learning to climb seems a necessary part of some of the goods achieved in a deeper way. One might think (indeed, I do think) that there is a special value in hard-won skills, and a moral aspect to the strength of character they engender, that would not be there if they were easily or forcibly acquired. It seems to me that there is something especially valuable in someone's fortitude if it is the result of many small choices to persevere, in circumstances in which the possibility of giving up was a real one. If this is so, then, even if God could directly give my daughter climbing skills and directly make her the sort of person who doesn't easily give up in the face of difficulties, the resulting state of affairs would not be as good as the one in which she acquires these in a way that involves difficult choices on her part to endure some pain and discomfort.

Although I have provided nothing close to a precise definition of what it is for a bad state of affairs to be an essential part of an overall good state of affairs, I hope I have said enough to convey the idea.

"Libertarian" Freedom

Shortly, I will consider some good states of affairs that might be well worth being brought about by God, even though they seem to have bad states of affairs as essential parts in the way just indicated. But first, I want to describe the kind of freedom that we "libertarians" take to be essential for moral responsibility and the morally praiseworthy virtues, and a further modification of 4 that "libertarianism" engenders.

In metaphysics, libertarianism is not a political philosophy, but a position with respect to the question whether we are in fact free, and whether freedom is incompatible with determinism. The libertarian answers "yes" to both questions. She thinks that, at least sometimes, we choose courses of action freely; and she thinks this requires that our choices were not "already settled" by the way the universe was long ago. If we are really free, she thinks, then what we do cannot be the result of conditions that obtained before we were even born — for instance, my choice cannot follow inevitably from the distribution of matter billions of years ago plus laws of nature working together in a deterministic way; nor can it be the inevitable outcome of God's decree.

For libertarians, it is a very important fact that contemporary physics is thoroughly indeterministic — a deterministic physics would imply that we are not free to change the course of things in the physical world. But many philosophers are "compatibilists" about freedom and determinism. They think that it does not matter whether nature turns out to be governed by deterministic or indeterministic laws — either way, we could still be free.

Here are the relevant contrasting positions, in a nutshell:

> Libertarianism: Agents do sometimes act freely; no action or omission is free unless the agent could have done otherwise; and being free to do otherwise requires that nothing outside the agent's control makes it inevitable that the agent do what she does — neither earlier states of the universe plus the laws of nature, nor the action of a supernatural being like God.

> Compatibilism: An action is free so long as it arises out of the motivations of the agent, and the agent is not being coerced in some way; the desires and intentions that generate the action may be deterministically caused by earlier factors outside the agent's control without the agent's freedom being undermined.

Christians believe that God created human beings in his image, to freely love him and one another — not just to serve him, slavishly. They believe that freely entering into fellowship with God is a great good— one that cannot meaningfully be compared to more mundane good states of affairs such as a child's enjoying a ride on a roller coaster. Christians also tend to believe that lots of other types of moral behavior and moral virtues could not be displayed, were we not free agents. A theist like myself, who is a libertarian and who also ascribes high value to these ends — loving friendship with God and with others, and moral action and virtues — has the materials for what Plantinga calls "the free will defense". If this defense is successful, it requires amendment of 4**.

Theodicies often distinguish between "natural evil" and "moral evil". An

instance of moral evil is a bad state of affairs that occurs as a result of the action or inaction of some agent or group of agents, and for which the agent or agents are responsible (so the action or inaction must have been freely chosen, and some of the bad consequences or wrong aspects of the choice must have been foreseen or foreseeable). Natural evil is all the rest. The free will defense helps explain the value of allowing some moral evil quite directly; and it is relevant to some natural evil, as well.

The libertarian can point out that God had to create creatures without necessitating that they do right, if He wanted to secure certain great goods: e.g., loving communion among free agents (including God), and all the moral virtues that require freedom. It is impossible for someone else to "make it the case that" I freely choose to do such-and-such; in particular, God's determining that I do something is incompatible with its being freely chosen. Asking God to cause me to freely choose something is like asking someone to make a four-sided triangle or a colorless green liquid. It is no diminution of God's omnipotence to say that he can't do impossible things like those.

To see the force of the free will defense, one should compare God to human parents: We let our 15-year-old learn to drive behind the wheel of a car, despite the risk of accident and the possibility he'll get scared and never drive again, because it's the only way for him to learn. We vaccinate our children, despite the possibility of adverse reaction to the vaccine, because immunity is worth the risk and there is no risk-free way to make them immune. Of course God could give a person the skill to drive, or immunity from disease, miraculously and without risk. But in the case of free agency and all the morally valuable states of affairs that depend upon it, not even God can bring them about without risking the occurrence of moral evil in the form of wrong decisions freely taken.

The libertarian who makes use of the free will defense believes, then, that there exist moral evils that had to be risked by God if he wanted to allow for morally significant actions and the distinctively moral virtues. These moral evils may not themselves be essential parts of an overall good state of affairs; they may simply be bad, their badness never defeated by their playing an important role in some other good that requires them. Still, their possibility had to be countenanced, if morally good states of affairs were to be possible. So the libertarian will think that 4** requires further amendment, to allow for moral evils that had to be risked, even if the good for which they were risked does not actually come about:

> 4***. Every being that is good and benevolent eliminates every evil it can, unless: (i) it is an essential part of an overall good state of affairs, or (ii) risking the evil is an essential part of a state of affairs that could have come about, and that would have been overall good

(and worth the risk).

What exactly it takes to have been "worth the risk" is a nice question. But, when confronted by the extremes of moral evil — the best (or worst) examples we can find of "self-made monsters" — we have a strong temptation (some might say, an obligation) to cry out: Surely the value of freedom is not worth risking this!

How much evil did God have to risk, in order to make room for the possibility of free creatures who display moral virtues and all the other goods that require freedom? The builders of Christian theodicies often claim that the possibility of meaningful choice among morally significant options depends upon the choices having their intended results at least frequently. And if the choices are morally significant — not just "Paper or plastic?" — then some of the intended results must be bad for other people. The possibility of being able freely to help others, freely to set aside some of one's own interests in favor of someone else's, has built into it the possibility of doing things that would harm others — for if everything would be just as good for someone else, no matter what I did, my choice to help is of no consequence. So, allowing for the possibility of morally significant action — freely choosing between helping and harming others — meant allowing for the possibility of moral evil that stretches beyond the bad choices themselves to include bad consequences for others. God had to run the risk of bad states of affairs that are not "confined to the head" of the agent.

We libertarians tend to believe that a great deal of what is best about human beings depends upon genuine freedom. Freely choosing between morally significant options is not an isolated ability that could be removed from our make-up, without undermining the distinctive value of a community of creatures who can think and feel in the ways we do. Furthermore, a large number — perhaps all — of the character traits we take to be distinctively moral virtues would seem to require not only the risk of misused freedom, but some other sorts of bad states of affairs as well. Take fortitude, for example — an ability to remain committed to what one believes to be the right course of action in the face of mounting discomfort or difficulties. A kind of "fortitude" that is foisted upon a person is not so much a moral virtue as it is great good luck. Morally praiseworthy fortitude must be acquired through freely and repeatedly choosing to do the right, but difficult, thing; and thereby creating a habit of right behavior that one would not otherwise have had. Or so the libertarian is likely to contend. But if that's what the moral virtue of fortitude requires, then the person who has it must at various times in the past have experienced difficulties; and so the occurrence of some kind of difficulty or unpleasantness was a necessary evil that could rightly be allowed in order to make room for the possibility of a morally good state of affairs — even in cases in which the

person facing difficulties does not respond in such a way as to develop fortitude.

Other examples are even more straightforward: No one can truly forgive, or experience forgiveness, unless someone is wronged. One cannot display courage in the face of danger, or protect another from harm at great cost to oneself, unless there is genuine danger and harm.

One might grant all of this, and allow that it shows that a perfectly benevolent, all-powerful deity might allow some bad consequences to befall some creatures; while insisting that the consequences we see are beyond the pale of anything a truly benevolent deity would countenance. That is a complaint to be taken up below. At this point, my purpose is merely to sketch the traditional way in which the libertarian defends the compatibility of some moral evil with the existence of a loving God.

Natural Evil

Theodicy-builders also sometimes explain the existence of much natural evil as being an essential part of a world in which free creatures can take responsibility for helping or harming one another. Rational, morally significant action, at least for creatures like us (and we have no business faulting God for not making other creatures[16]) depends upon a world that behaves in law-like, predictable ways — a world in which the results of our choices are independent of the value of the choices made, and in which these results are sometimes harmful. There must be processes that lead to states of affairs that are bad for us, processes that we can initiate or prevent. Richard Swinburne has claimed that we must sometimes see these processes in operation, working independently of us, in order to know what the consequences of our actions will be — and that knowledge is required, as opposed to mere guesswork, or irrational belief, if our choices are to have moral weight.[17]

Another way in which theodicy-builders have connected natural evil to freedom is by means of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of "the Fall". In the story of the sin of Adam and Eve, the first occurrences of extreme pain, suffering, and futile labor are portrayed as the direct result of human sin. The first humans were not supposed to sin; their disobedience was not secretly hoped for or brought about by God so he could fulfill ends that required it. It was their doing, and not his. And the pain of childbirth, the difficulty of cultivating food, the emotional pain of shame and guilt, etc., all stem from their sin — either as natural effects that are rightly allowed to follow from their action, or as direct punishments. One need not take the story to be literally true in all its details in order to believe that it conveys the truth about the human situation. For example, one might take it to be a "true myth" with the following content: Our ancient forebears were innocent, compared to us, and therefore in a kind of communion with God that exempted them from death and other evils. They

were left truly free to choose between faithfulness and selfishness; and they succumbed, as a race, to the temptation. At that point, God had a choice: either start over, hoping it would not happen again; or allow them to suffer the natural consequences of their stumble. To allow rebellious creatures to remain blissfully free from psychological and physical harm, as though nothing were wrong with their state, would not be good for them. So, they are allowed to experience some natural evil, while God instigates a plan to draw them back into fellowship with himself — a plan that would allow divine and human agents to show mercy, forgiveness, humility, courage, fortitude, patience, and other moral virtues that require some natural and moral evils. The fact that the natural evils resulting from the rebellion can become essential parts of good states of affairs — the virtues that depend upon threats to health and happiness — makes it worthwhile to allow the rebellious creatures to live with the natural evils they brought upon themselves.[18]

As before, many will understandably object that, although some natural evil might be necessary for us to know about the consequences of our actions, or might be justified as the natural result of the rebellion that followed hard upon God's granting us freedom; still, there is much that seems utterly gratuitous — much that, so far as we can tell, serves no particular good end. Still, at this point, I mean only to gesture in the direction of some standard elements of free will theodicies in the Christian tradition — elements that can be used to explain why some natural evil might well find a place in a world created by a genuinely benevolent deity.

Reinstating the Argument from Evil

The modifications of 4 have produced 4***, and when this is put together with 1, 2, 3, and 5, it is no longer possible to derive a contradiction — the form of the argument has been ruined. From 2 ("God is perfectly good and benevolent") and 4***, one can only conclude that God prevents an evil state of affairs if it is not essential to some good state of affairs and not worth risking in order to make possible a good that could not be had in any other way. Putting this sub-conclusion together with 5, one can only conclude that God can and will eliminate an evil state of affairs if it is not essential to some good state of affairs and not worth risking for the possibility of some good state of affairs. There is obviously nothing incompatible with this conclusion and the original 3, which merely says: Some evil exists. "Granted, some evil exists", the theist may reply, "but if all evils are essential parts of various greater goods, or had to be risked in order to make some greater good so much as possible, then 1, 2, 3, 4***, and 5 can all be true together."

So the original Humean argument is blocked. But it is a simple matter to reinstate an argument from evil that still has a great deal of plausibility:

Modify 3, so that it affirms the existence of forms of evil that do not satisfy the qualifications that were added to 4 when it was turned into 4***. This new version of 3 should say that there are some evils that cannot be explained away as having been necessary for more comprehensive goods; and that some of them cannot even be explained away as the result of a risk that had to be taken in order to allow for the possibility of some greater good.

Stated so as to mesh with 4***, then, 3 is transformed into:

> 3*. There are evil states of affairs that are not essential parts of any overall good state of affairs; and risking the occurrence of these evil states of affairs was not even an essential part of an overall good state of affairs that might have come about (and was worth the risk).

Now the argument goes through once again. From 2 and 4***, one concludes that evils that are not parts of greater goods or worth risking for greater goods would be eliminated by God if he could; and from 5, one concludes that he could. So there are no such evils; and 3* affirms that there are. Contradiction!

Still, the Humean skeptic must admit that the new version of the argument offers the theist new opportunities to resist. In the original argument, premise 4 was not very plausible; modifying it until it became 4*** made it much harder to reject. But that meant replacing 3 with 3*; and 3* is not nearly so blindingly obvious as was 3.

One way to oppose 3* would be to claim that, in some way we cannot fully understand, all the sufferings and moral failures and tragedies of "this life" will prove to be essential parts of some overall valuable whole when regarded from the vantage point of "the next life". And there are strains of Christian thinking that capitalize on this idea. Many Christians have thought that the meaning of our suffering is somehow bound up with the fact that Christ himself knew some of the extremes of human suffering — both physical and psychological. For example, Paul makes Christ's suffering the key to understanding ours. The whole universe is off kilter, due to sin. "For the creation was subjected to futility…in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption…. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." (Romans 8: 20-22[19]). Every part of creation is waiting for "the revealing of the sons of God", and there is "glory" in store for us that cannot be compared with the sufferings now endured. (Romans 8:18-19; cf. also Romans 8: 31-9 and Colossians 1:13-20.) And the suffering that has resulted from humanity's ancient and ongoing rebellion can ultimately become part of our identification with Christ (Colossians 1:24). These themes appear frequently in the New Testament — for example, in 1 Peter 4:12-14: "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that

also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation."

Theologians and philosophers sometimes offer theories about the nature of the mystical greater goods suggested by the New Testament writers. For example: If the "beatific vision" is the greatest good, incomparably better than most of what we call "good"; and if the very inner life of God includes suffering; then, it has been suggested, the suffering we undergo could prove to have been a crucial part of our ability to know God fully.[20] This provides a glimpse of a way in which every pain and disappointment and moment of despair might be turned into something of great value.

Christians agree that the incarnation, and the precise nature of the redemptive suffering and death of Christ, are great mysteries. In the circumstances, then, it is natural for us to think that there may be ways in which the evil we know, like that suffered by Christ, can serve as necessary means to good ends we only half understand. Our grasp of the mechanism may be poor, but that is to be expected. Why think we should be able to grasp all the concepts that would afford us a full understanding of the mystery of the incarnation and other doctrines concerning God's nature? So why think we have the concepts necessary to be able fully to understand the way in which God's nature includes Christ's suffering? Since these concepts would clearly be relevant to the possibility of good states of affairs that include our suffering and Christ's suffering as essential parts, the Christian will not be surprised if the details remain somewhat mysterious.

I am optimistic about the prospects for a theodicy that makes use of a distinctively Christian emphasis upon mystical identification with the sufferings of Christ — and upon God's suffering being, in some deep sense, for us and our sad situation. This theme is crucial to my own thinking on the topic; I don't know that I should be able to remain so confident in God's goodness, despite the depth and distribution of suffering in our world, if I did not believe that God suffers with us — a theme to which I return at the end. But detailed speculation about the way in which the agony of Christ might transmute the agony of creatures into something good, something of which the agony is itself an essential part... that is a topic I shall leave to those further along the Christian path than myself.

Defending 3*

I have described a few types of goods that have been thought to include some intrinsically bad states of affairs, or the risk of such states of affairs, as essential parts. For the remainder of this essay, I focus on the ones that are central to the free will defense — bad states of affairs that had to be brought about, or at least risked, in order make room for the moral goods only free creatures can enjoy.

The charitable Humean skeptic may grant that there is a kernel of truth in

the free will defense, and in the claim that certain evils are necessary if certain moral virtues are to be displayed, but insist that 3* is true, nevertheless. A skeptic can grant that certain kinds of moral and natural evil were worth risking; while claiming that the amount and kinds of evil that actually occur cannot be explained in this way. For she may say:

> I can see that a Christian might reasonably think there are some kinds of goods that are worth God's bringing them about, despite the fact that they require a bad state of affairs; and some bad states of affairs that would be worth risking for good states of affairs that failed to come about. Nevertheless, the goods to which you point in your examples — morally significant action, and the development of moral virtues — could have been procured much more efficiently, at much less cost in pain and suffering. And surely a truly benevolent God would be moved by compassion to choose a minimum of pain, suffering, and other suboptimal states of affairs — just so much badness as is absolutely necessary to achieve these good ends, and no more.

The skeptical defender of 3* who makes this speech — and whom I will be addressing for the remainder of this essay — is a skeptic who has gone along with a great deal of the traditional theodicy-building moves described so far. She is someone who grants that some goods — such as displays of courage, fortitude, patience, forgiveness, repentance, and so on — may require instances of a person being injured by another person or by impersonal forces. She grants that, in order to be truly free, we must have been susceptible to temptations; for meaningful freedom, to choose between right and wrong, we needed some selfish tendencies that, when fostered, might become so bad as to constitute cruelty and depravity. Her complaint is that the very same goods — courageous deeds, morally responsible action, etc. — could have been acquired with much less evil.

For example, she may be willing to agree that, yes, perhaps there must be violent deaths and serious injuries in any society of people in which extremes of morally praiseworthy courage and morally blameworthy cowardice can be displayed; and she may agree that allowing for some minimal amount of these bad things would be well worth doing, even at some cost of life and limb. Nevertheless, she will point out, a well-publicized shipwreck in which one person drowns while attempting to rescue another would be sufficiently serious to bring home the risks facing the rescuers in a subsequent shipwreck. There need not have been one hundred souls lost at sea, simply to convince future rescuers that the stakes are high when they dive into the water to save shipwreck

victims. And isn't it clear, she will ask, that there is far more mayhem than is strictly necessary for the amount of courage, fortitude, and other virtues that can be displayed in our world? A damning piece of evidence here is the fact that some disasters are of such magnitude that we cannot even grasp the amount of suffering. Surely, one hundred or two hundred fewer victims of the Lisbon earthquake or the World Trade Center collapse would not have substantially decreased the amount of heroism, fortitude, self-sacrifice, and other badness-entailing virtues that could be exhibited by those affected by them.

Another example: our skeptical defender of 3* will grant that Hitler and Stalin, if they were to be allowed the freedom to develop good or evil characters, had to be free to do some bad things, and even to begin cultivating cruel temperaments. Still, God could have run the risk of their forming evil intentions and developing calloused consciences, without allowing them to cause as much suffering as they actually did. If the members of a society are to bear significant responsibilities toward one another, some people will really have to be given the power to hurt, or to fail to protect, their neighbors; so much, my Humean skeptic is willing to allow. But these responsibilities to our neighbors can be understood by us, and then either borne or shirked, without anyone's ever becoming a Hitler or Stalin — that is, acquiring an evil character and also being in a position to destroy so many lives.

In general, the skeptical defender of 3* thinks that there is far too much gratuitous pain and suffering for us to reasonably believe that this is a world created by a truly benevolent being — for there are evils that, although they may be of a sort that is needed for some actual goods, could nevertheless have been traded in for some lesser evils without the loss of any actual good state of affairs of the relevant type.

Now, in the face of any apparently gratuitous evil, the Christian theist may always make the mystical move described in the previous section: he may, that is, invoke mysterious future goods that we cannot now completely grasp, gesturing towards the sufferings of Christ and a kind of identification with God – and of God with us — that our suffering makes possible. Such appeals can be called upon to "neutralize" a great deal of evil, especially in the hands of theodicy-builders with a sufficiently flexible doctrine of the afterlife, according to which the beatific vision remains a genuine possibility for all human beings, whatever the time and place of their birth. (Although such views of the afterlife were soundly rejected by American fundamentalists early in the last century, they have a respectable history,[21] and many respected contemporary defenders.[22]) Mysterious post-mortem goods are a sort of universal solvent that the canny theodicy-builder can apply to all the pain and disappointment experienced by any beings whatsoever — so long as he supposes them capable of an afterlife. (Animal pain rears its hideous head at this point. Although the horrors of the meat industry make the topic even more urgent than it would otherwise

be, it is another issue I shall have to set aside in this essay.) The theological principles behind any such "mystical identification" response to evil tend to be matters of controversy among Christians; and, although it will be natural for any Christian to look to the suffering of Christ for an explanation of apparently pointless human suffering, the way in which our sufferings "fill up the sufferings of Christ" (to use Paul's expression) is bound to remain somewhat mysterious. It would be nice to be able to build a theodicy using principles that are more widely accessible and easier to grasp. And I believe there is a good deal to say in response to the objections raised by the skeptical defender of 3*, before bringing in the mystical "big guns".

In my presentation of various elements of a typical free will theodicy, I have skated rather lightly over deep waters, in part because readers can turn to the literature of Christian apologetics for more detailed presentations of these responses to the skeptic. In the final sections of this essay, I explore a theme in theodicy that is less well known (outside academic philosophical circles); but it seems to me to greatly undermine the sort of skeptical objections just raised, and to deserve a larger role in discussions outside the philosophy journals.

Infinite Options

The skeptic's speech, above, on behalf of 3* certainly has a plausible ring to it. But a little reflection convinces me that our tendency to be quick to blame God for not doing more to eliminate evil is due, in part, to poverty of imagination. We go along with the skeptic because we fail to take seriously the attributes God is supposed to have, and we become guilty of a kind of anthropomorphism: imagining the choices confronting a being of infinite power and knowledge as though they were like ours in ways they could not possibly be, and applying moral principles to these choices that, although they almost invariably apply to us, cannot be applied — or at any rate cannot be guaranteed to apply — in the divine case.

Normally, it is safe to assume that the moral agents we praise and blame are never confronted with more than a finite array of choices. No human being could contemplate — or be capable of recognizing the differences between — the infinitely many ways in which the World Trade Center could be rebuilt, for example. We can think up lots of concrete proposals; but if we are ever to choose one design plan, we must limit ourselves to a finite number of options, compare them, and pick the one among that finite number that seems best. Even given precise standards for judging the plans, and even if one design is clearly the best of all those considered, it will be hard to deny that there is a better design plan than the one chosen — given that there are infinitely many viable building plans "out there", as logical possibilities; and that only a few of them are actually conceived in any detail and drawn up for the consideration

of the committee charged with making the decision. Suppose that there were a being capable of thinking, at once, of every possible rebuilding plan — an "infinite architect". Such a being would face very different circumstances than would be faced by a mundane human committee. The infinite architect would be confronted by infinitely many genuinely distinct possibilities, and would almost certainly be forced to make an arbitrary decision in favor of one design plan amongst a range of acceptable designs.

An infinite architect might be forced to choose arbitrarily for reasons that could even affect a committee of finite decision-makers, limited by time and creativity to consider only a few plans. If, for every ultra-precise building plan, there are some tiny differences that would not increase or decrease the aesthetic and practical features of the plan, then the infinite architect will have to make a somewhat arbitrary decision. And there may be equally good plans that differ a great deal in the details, due to tradeoffs between aesthetic and practical virtues, say. In the case of a committee of human beings, it would be a defect in the committee if it could not break a tie by either arbitrarily choosing, or somehow acquiring a preference for, one plan among equals. Similarly, an infinite architect who refused to choose a plan simply because there were ties would be defective — paralyzed by indecision.

But the infinite architect might face arbitrariness from a different source; for it might turn out that — given the aesthetic and other standards for judging the quality of the rebuilding proposals — there are infinitely many plans, each better than the next, with no absolutely best plan. In that case, too, it would be a defect in the infinite architect to be unable to settle upon one plan, despite the presence of better plans. Assuming it is better to rebuild than not to rebuild, the architect frozen by the presence of infinitely many very good plans is less rational, less qualified to be in charge of the operation, than one who can settle for a design that is "good enough". Imagine an infinite architect who explained his refusal to rebuild on the site of the World Trade Center by pointing to the fact that, whatever plan he chose, he could be reproached for not having chosen a better plan. Would he not be like the man in the "parable of the talents" (Matthew 25:14-30) who buried his money in the ground rather than investing it, because he knew his master had expectations he could never live up to?

Application of the moral of this story to God is usually made in the context of the assumption that God's creative decision is a choice among a range of "possible worlds". Leibniz supposed that there must be a "best of all possible worlds", and that God must have chosen it. But, as many others have pointed out, the supposition is far from obvious. Indeed, the opposite would seem much more likely: For any world one considers, with any number of good qualities, could it not be improved in some way — simply by adding some more good things? Even if there are some configurations of goods that could not

be improved upon by the simple addition of additional good beings or good societies on additional planets, because there is something specially good about the universe's being that size and no larger; still, why suppose that, for some such world, there are no better worlds that are simply quite different in their contents? I shall assume, henceforth, that we have every reason to expect that there is no "best of all possible worlds", and, indeed, that with respect to all sorts of smaller choices (e.g., how vulnerable his creatures should be, and how resistant to temptation), God faces this sort of situation.

I think it is a mistake to imagine God's creative choices as consisting, really, in one gigantic choice — the choice to create a world that is, from beginning to end, like so. Leibniz, a compatibilist about freedom, had no problem imagining that God could decide every detail of everything that has ever and will ever exist, "in advance" (so to speak — Leibniz's God is not exactly "in time"). Those of us who make use of the free will defense are incompatibilists, however. We should not suppose that, once God has decided to create free creatures, he can also decide exactly what they shall do, and thereby decide upon the entirety of the world, beginning to end (if there is a beginning and an end) all at once. Some incompatibilist Christian theists (called "Molinists", after the 16th Century Jesuit philosopher, Luis de Molina) maintain that he can choose a complete world all at once, "in advance", despite the presence of free creatures whose actions are not determined by prior conditions or even by God.[23] Many Christian theists would agree with my assessment of Molinism: that it is implausible, open to devastating objections.[24] The only philosophers who accept the view, so far as I know, are those who make use of it to explain how God can choose an entire world all at once. I shall assume, here, that Molinism is false, and that God does not choose an entire world in a single creative act. He may, or may not, have absolute foreknowledge of all free decisions (though if he lacks foreknowledge, and exists in time, it had better be the case that there is no fact of the matter, beforehand, about what a free creature will do — otherwise, God would not be omniscient; there would be truths he does not know). But, in either case, God's creative decisions occur "piecemeal". For example, suppose he decides to create free beings in a universe that starts with a bang, and gradually cools until a tiny corner of it is inhabitable. When he makes this decision — whether the decision is made before the universe is created, or from a non-temporal eternal perspective — God cannot take into account what these creatures are going to freely do. After all, his decision to create them and to let them do what they will, without interference, is a precondition of their existence and their freedom; deciding to create them because he knows that they will exist and do such and such would introduce an unbearable explanatory circularity into this picture of creation. It would be as though, "before" God has decided whether to create me rather than someone else, a "message" comes from the future, informing God that I

will indeed eventually exist and freely sin in certain circumstances; and then, because he knows this, he decides to cause me to exist in those circumstances rather than leaving me out of the picture altogether. This explanatory circle is no better than the story of the time traveler who received the designs for his time machine from a mysterious old man…who turns out to be the time traveler himself, come back from the future to pass on the information given to him by an old man so many years earlier. The story is consistent, perhaps, but leaves unexplained the circle of events including: the presentation of the plans, which is explained by the decision of the time traveler to go back and tell his younger self how to build a time machine, which decision is explained by the possession of a plan for a time machine by the man, which is in turn explained by his receiving it from an old man, which is then explained by his decision to return…. In the divine case, what is unexplained is the circle of God's knowing that I will exist and freely sin in such and such circumstances, which is explained by my actually existing and freely choosing to sin, which in turn is explained by God's deciding to create me and put me in those circumstances, which is explained by God's knowing that I will exist and freely sin….

So, we libertarians should conclude that, if God chooses to create a world with more than "slaves" and non-moral types of goodness, he could not choose an entire world, all at once, beginning to end. He must decide upon certain kinds of creatures, leaving them free to do whatever they will within certain parameters; and he only decides how he will respond to their choices after he has resolved to create them. (This may not have to be a temporal "after". And all God's conditional decisions — e.g., "If they do thus-and-so, reward them with such-and-such", and, "If they refrain from doing thus-and-so, punish them with an absence of such-and-such" — might be settled "before" the decision to create. Still, the decision to actually reward or punish creatures could not be made until after their creation is certain, and their free decisions are known.)

It is wrong, then, to imagine God as choosing, in its entirety, one among an infinity of possible "complete worlds", each surpassed by slightly better worlds; but it is not implausible to suppose that he is still confronted by choices that exhibit the relevant feature: there are infinitely many alternatives among which to choose, each worth doing, but each not quite as good as some of the alternatives. Suppose, for example, that God is choosing among a range of possible "first families", groups of creatures that will be the first genuinely free moral agents. How much freedom should he give them? They must have some desires that could devolve into out-and-out selfishness, if their freedom is to be exercised over morally significant ranges of choices; but how prone to temptation should they be? Their good and bad choices must be allowed to have genuinely helpful and harmful consequences for their fellows, at least on many occasions; but how dependent upon one another should they be, how much responsibility should each bear towards the others? If it is plausible to

suppose that there is no "best of all possible worlds", it is plausible to suppose that there is no "best of all the possible types of free creature", an ideal moral agent "than which none greater can be conceived".

Similar things can be said about all sorts of goods that require the risk or the actual occurrence of some bad states of affairs. Given that there must be some danger if courage is to be possible, how dangerous should the world be allowed to become? How much natural evil should be allowed to occur in order that courage may be displayed? In these and many other cases, it is fairly natural to think that God may well have been confronted by infinitely many options; but that, for every choice he could have taken, there was an option allowing for the possibility of just as much moral goodness but with a little less badness.

In all likelihood, then, God faced the following sort of situation — what I call a "less-is-more" dilemma"— when deciding what kinds of free creatures to create (if any):

> A "Less-Is-More" Dilemma: The agent faces an infinite (or indefinite) range of options among which he or she can choose; choosing one among them is better than choosing none; but, for any alternative the agent chooses, there is at least one alternative choice that would result in an overall better state of affairs.

I call this a "less-is-more" situation, because it is better to pick an outcome that is not as good as other available outcomes than not to choose from among them at all; there is no good alternative other than to choose an outcome that leaves one open to the rebuke: "You could have done better". An agent who, in such circumstances, is willing to "settle for less" is better than an agent who rejects all of the options in the infinite series.

Because it is almost (but, as I shall show, not quite) impossible for human beings to consider a range of options that satisfies the "less-is-more" description, we naturally neglect such dilemmas in our moral thinking. But moral principles that almost invariably apply to us could not be applied to an agent in a "less-is-more" situation; in particular, the following rule, plausible though it may sound, should not be applied to such an agent:

> The "Don't-Settle-for-Less" Rule: If an agent is facing a decision, and two of the options he or she has considered are otherwise permissible, but one of them would result in an overall worse state of affairs than the other, and the agent knows this, then he or she should not choose the option that would result in the worse state of affairs.

"Don't-settle-for-less" is almost always an appropriate admonition to us, who can only ever consider finitely many courses of action. When we are in a position to reliably calculate the goodness and badness of the outcomes of our courses of action, the range of actions we will have considered by the time we are forced to choose will almost inevitably contain a maximum value: there will be one course of action we expect to have an overall best outcome, or a group of different actions with equally good outcomes, unsurpassed by any of the "live" alternatives. We can always — or almost always — be faulted if we flaunt the "don't-settle-for-less" rule; but this is largely a result of our finitude. I will now argue that, if we could get ourselves into a "less-is-more" situation, we would certainly exempt ourselves from the "don't-settle-for-less" rule. And so, if God is in such a situation, we have no business applying it to him.

   In fact, with a little imagination, we can come up with examples of "less-is-more" dilemmas that could really affect ordinary humans; and, when we contemplate them, our immediate response is to drop the "don't-settle-for-less" rule. Although we can't consider infinitely many distinct courses of action, we often use vague concepts that produce indefinitely many courses of action. Bald is a paradigmatically vague concept. We say that people are bald, even though they may have a tuft of hair here or there. So how many hairs can you have on your head, arranged in what ways, and still qualify as bald? Imagine the process of plucking the hairs from the head of a hirsute man or woman, one at a time, until none are left. Someone with three or four hairs is still a bald person. So, by the time the process reaches the last few hairs, the person is already bald. But surely there would be no magic "last hair" that would mark the precise point at which the person became bald. Rather, there would be a period during which the person was becoming bald — not exactly bald, but not exactly not bald, either. Imagine a man named Curly, who has lost all of his hair, due to chemotherapy. He has been told, by his insecure, bald employer: "You may allow some of your hair to grow back, but not too much of it; I want you to remain bald." So Curly allows a fringe of hair to grow above each ear, but shaves 99 percent of his head. His wife chides him for not letting more of his hair grow back: "Had you left one more hair on your head, you would not have suddenly stopped being bald; and so your boss could not have faulted you; and so you should have done it!" If she applies this reasoning whenever she can, then he cannot possibly please her, while remaining within the bounds set by his boss.

   Another example of a "less-is-more" dilemma can be built around the vague notion of a "heap". A single gold coin is not a heap of gold coins. Neither is two or three. How about four? Well…not exactly a heap. Five? Same answer. Six? Seven? When there are one hundred gold coins in a pile, one surely has a heap of gold; but take them away one by one, and, eventually, there is no

heap — though there is no last coin that marks the boundary between heap and non-heap. Now suppose a very stingy king is held hostage by bandits who demand that the king's treasurer bring them "a heap of gold coins" as ransom. So he hauls a wheelbarrow full of coins, dumps it at the designated location, and the bandits take the gold and release the king. Suppose there were 100 coins in the heap. Could the king fault the treasurer for not economizing a bit, and bringing a heap containing only 99? If so, why should he not expect the treasurer to have done still better, handing over only 98 coins? The principle behind the criticism, "Why not 99?" would seem to be: If you have a heap of coins, you still have a heap if you take just one away. And that may be true — or at least, whenever you have something that is definitely a heap of coins, taking one away will not cause it to directly pass over into being a non-heap. Since there is no lower bound to the number of coins in a heap, the king cannot legitimately demand that the treasurer bring exactly that many. And saying, "Well, at least you could have brought fewer than you did", is unfair — since it's an allegation the king could level no matter how many coins the treasurer brings, so long as they constitute a heap. If the treasurer were to act on the maxim, "Do not bring a selection of gold coins unless there is no smaller group of coins that would still qualify as a heap", then he would bring no coins at all, and the king would be killed. Far better for the king to have a treasurer capable of making an executive decision, settling upon a certain number and not freezing up over the vagueness of the concepts being used in the bandits' instructions.

I doubt that "less-is-more" dilemmas that stem from vagueness can afflict God. But I am reasonably confident he is confronted by the sort of dilemmas that arise due to the presence of infinitely many acceptable options, each of which could be improved upon. Any being capable of contemplating infinitely many distinct options, and carrying any one of them out, is likely to face "less-is-more" dilemmas. Here are a couple of examples, both of which clearly call for relaxation of the "don't-settle-for-less" rule.

Suppose I have some putty, and I'm going to use it to patch a hole in the hull of a ship. This is very special putty. It is what philosophers sometimes call "atomless gunk". Unlike ordinary matter, which turns out, upon minute inspection, to consist in a variety of particles; atomless gunk consists of smaller bits of gunk, which in turn consist of smaller bits of gunk, and so on, ad infinitum. A cube of this putty fills a cubical region of space by having one part in the left half of the region, and another in the right half; and the part that fills the left half does so by having a left and right half for the left and right halves of that region; and so on, ad infinitum. The putty is ideal for patching holes in ships. It sets instantly and bonds permanently, so long as there is a finite amount of overlap with the outer surface of the hull. And any amount of overlap will suffice — it's just that strong! So I can patch a circular hole that is one inch in

diameter with a circle of putty that is one-and-one-sixteenth inches in diameter, or one-and-one-twenty-fourth inches in diameter, or…. So long as the circular patch is a little bit larger than the hole, no matter how small the difference, the putty will bond with the hull. Suppose I have been hired to patch a one inch hole, and my boss tells me to "use as little putty as you can", because of its great expense. If I do not have tools that are sensitive enough to distinguish between patches that differ in diameter by less than a micron, then it will be easy enough to comply. But suppose I have precision tools that will allow me to pick any finite size for the diameter of the patch. In that case, just because I am so good at patching holes, I cannot comply with his request. There is no smallest amount of putty I can use; for any patch that works, there is a slightly smaller patch that would work. What should I do? If I leave the hole, the ship will sink, and my employer wouldn't want that. I'll have to explain the situation — explain that I can't comply with his reasonable-sounding request to use the absolute minimum of putty, because there is no absolute minimum. If he continues to insist that I use the smallest possible patch, he simply has not understood my situation. If he does understand, and says, "Fine, just patch it, and don't use more than ten-dollars-worth of the stuff", but I refuse to plug the hole because there is no way for me to "do my very best", then I am being unreasonable; he should hire a better shipwright, one who is capable of making arbitrary decisions when they are called for.

Here is an even more fanciful case: You'll remember that the Cat-in-the-Hat had a smaller cat underneath his hat, named "A"; and he, in turn, had a smaller cat under his hat, named "B"; and so on to "Z". But suppose there were a cat with a smaller cat named "One" under his hat; who, in turn, had a cat named "Two" under his hat; and so on, ad infinitum. And suppose these cats were not merely mischievous, but downright evil; each is able to wreak havoc in proportion to its size. So, if you let One live, it will immediately strangle you to death; if you kill One, but let Two live, Two will blind you; Three would break your kneecaps; etc. Every one of them is bad, and, if allowed to live, will leave the world worse then he found it; but the bigger they are, the more damage they will be able to do. The evil cats are about to be set loose upon an unsuspecting world, and you have just thirty seconds to kill as many of them as possible before they get away. Fortunately, you have a gun that can be set to fire at any rate you choose — a thousand bullets per minute, two thousand, whatever you like; but you have to pick a setting and start firing before they all get away! Whatever number of bullets-per-minute you choose, you will have allowed cats to escape that you could have killed, if only you had chosen a faster rate. So, whatever you do, some people will be hurt by some of the cats, and those people will be able to say, "If you had chosen a faster rate, you could have killed the cat that is tormenting me!" If you do nothing, however, even more people will be able to blame their troubles on you; so inaction is

worse than an arbitrary choice. Clearly, if you were confronted by this sort of "less-is-more" situation, we ought not to judge your action by the "don't-settle-for-less" rule.

"Less-is-more" and the defense of 3*

I return to the skeptic's defense of 3*: "Perhaps some bad or suboptimal states of affairs would have to be allowed, or at least risked, by a God who wants free creatures, moral virtues, and so on; but God could have worked out a much better cost-benefit ratio than this!" I am suggesting that this accusation may be inappropriate for the same reason it would be wrong to criticize me for not using less putty, or you for not killing more cats. Yes, we could have done a better job, but that complaint could have been lodged no matter what we did — because there is no absolute minimum amount of putty that will do the trick, and no absolute maximum number of cats that can be killed in the thirty-second window. And, if there is no absolute minimum amount of badness that would allow creatures like us to have the kinds of morally significant freedom and badness-entailing virtues that we actually can have, then God is in the same sort of situation.

Recall the risks-of-badness that were supposed to be required for freedom and moral virtues. Our skeptic is accepting the cogency of the free will defense as a reasonable explanation of why God would want to risk the occurrence of some bad things — both moral evil in the form of wrong choices; and moral evil in the form of bad or suboptimal states of affairs that result from wrong choices. She grants that the possibility of meaningful choice among morally significant options depends upon the choices having their intended results at least frequently — including, potentially, when the results are bad. So God must run the risk of moral evil that stretches beyond the bad choices themselves, if he wants a society of free creatures able to behave responsibly or irresponsibly with respect to one another; the bad states of affairs can't be confined to the head. And the skeptic I am addressing will even grant that a world in which free creatures are able to develop virtues such as fortitude, patience, compassion, etc. might well need a certain amount of natural evil, as well. God's choice to create a world in which there was a risk of this much moral and natural evil (the actual amount) was a choice made in "less-is-more" circumstances if there was no absolute minimum amount of badness that could have been risked for the amount of moral goodness possible in a world like ours. And I seriously doubt that there is one.

Where should the consequences of wrong choices stop, how much evil should be allowed to stem from an agent? What is the minimum amount of success that should be allowed the evil-doer? Consider a world that looks much like ours, but is "run by miracle": Every glimmer of wrongdoing or choosing of the sub-

optimal is snuffed out before it can have significant impact. Choosing between lying and telling the truth, hurting or helping, etc. would be impossible. So God must exercise less control than that — there must be worse consequences, and natural laws must be allowed to do more impersonal work, unimpeded by miracle. But how much? Presumably, quite a bit. But why think that there's a cut-off, a precise amount such that any less would be too little for agents to have morally significant freedom to the degree we do? A world in which all bad consequences were miraculously blocked would have no morally significant freedom; a world in which someone's choice were allowed to make it the case that everyone else would have been better off not existing would, I believe, give freedom too much scope; but is there a precise cut-off? If not, then God's choosing one rather than another among a range of acceptable options cannot be faulted. So the skeptic must argue for something much stronger than the very plausible thesis that this world contains some evil that isn't absolutely essential to some good; she must argue that, on some other grounds besides the mere gratuitousness of some of its evil, this world is unacceptable.

Conclusion

Given the amount of pain and suffering and frustration our world contains, and the difficulty of making out a good purpose that is served by much of it, a benevolent deity should not be surprised when the howls of complaint arise from his creatures. Those of us who believe in such a being are still frequently stunned by the intensity and magnitude of human (and animal) suffering, and also by the silence with which our requests for an explanation seem often to be met. Is it any wonder that we should shake our fists at God, some of us? The book of Job is somewhat reassuring on this score, for it implies that God tolerates a decent amount of fist-shaking. Job complained bitterly, demanding that God explain why he allowed undeserved calamity to fall upon himself and his family. God's answer was, in essence: "Look at how staggeringly complex the world is, consider the fact that I am responsible for its every detail, and admit that you have no idea what reasons I might have for allowing the righteous to suffer…".

> Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
> Tell Me, if you have understanding,
> Who set its measurements, since you know?
> Or who stretched the line on it?
> On what were its bases sunk?
> Or who laid its cornerstone,
> When the morning stars sang together,
> And all the sons of God shouted for joy?[25]

God's goal in the final chapters of Job is to get Job to confess: "I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" — in other words, to admit that he cannot expect to fully understand the choices of a God who has created a world as unfathomably complicated as ours. However unsatisfying this reply may seem, there is encouragement in God's response to Job's "friends". They told Job he was wrong to complain and that he must have done something to deserve his suffering. God tells them that his "wrath is kindled" against them; and that Job "has spoken of Me what is right". One can complain bitterly yet still be righteous in God's sight.

I have been arguing that, when we are tempted to accuse God of breaking the "don't-settle-for-less" rule, we are forgetting the incomprehensibly rich variety of creative options among which God was free to choose; we are projecting principles that virtually always apply to us, in our simple circumstances, but that almost certainly cannot be applied to God, in his vastly more complex circumstances. Although we can have no real idea what it would be to face infinities of creative options, we can at least see that someone able to think infinitely complex thoughts is likely to face circumstances in which "less-is-more". Though our comprehension of the alternatives among which God chose is surely very dim; still, we can see that a God of infinite power and knowledge, who is responsible for a complete universe of relatively independent, free creatures, might be unable — precisely because of his infinite power and knowledge — to create the "best" such creatures, or to put them in the "safest" environment that would still allow them the power to help and to harm one another and to develop morally significant character traits.

Perhaps, if God himself were to say such things to us "from the whirlwind", it would convince a modern-day Job that we know very little, really, about the universe and its place among the infinities of possible kinds of universe among which God chose; that we know too little to be sure our complaints are not the result of illegitimately applying "don't-settle-for-less" to an infinitely complex "less-is-more" situation. Confronted by a deity of astonishing power, even Hume himself might admit, like Job, that he spoke of what he did not understand.

But this essay is considerably less impressive than a voice from a whirlwind. If God does not reveal himself miraculously to me when I am in agony or grief, there is little consolation in the abstract thought that there might be a God; that he might have had to allow some pointless suffering in order to create a world with moral significance; and that I might have been one of the unlucky ones, chosen more or less at random, to endure it. Fortunately, for someone who takes the Christian revelation seriously, there is a great deal more to be said. For one thing, of course, there is the suggestion considered, briefly, above: that all suffering, however inexplicable it might seem, could eventually serve to unite us with Christ in his suffering. But there is consolation of a much less "mystical" sort, as well.

Christians believe that God was so moved by the tragedy of our pathetically suboptimal situation that he became like us — subject to pain, despair, and doubt. The cross, and the suffering it represents, is, in the rather shocking words of Charles Williams, God "taking his own medicine" — whatever else it is. I would find it much harder to believe in the loving intentions of a God who allows us to experience seemingly pointless suffering if I did not also believe that he chose to experience it, too, in all its depths. Balthazar, one of the three kings come to see the infant Christ in Dorothy Sayer's radio play, contemplates the consolation this belief can provide:

> I speak for a sorrowful people — for the ignorant and the poor. We rise up to labour and lie down to sleep, and night is only a pause between one burden and another. Fear is our daily companion — the fear of want, the fear of war, the fear of cruel death, and of still more cruel life. But all this we could bear if we knew that we did not suffer in vain; that God was beside us in the struggle, sharing the miseries of His own world. For the riddle that torments the world is this: Shall Sorrow and Love be reconciled at last, when the promised Kingdom comes?[26]

Of course theists from other religious traditions cannot be expected to accept the idea that the life and death of Christ are a true expression of God's solidarity with human suffering. It is still open to them to make the moves I have been sketching; they, too, can plausibly argue that the infinite complexity of the Creator's thoughts and creative opportunities may well have meant that, for God, "less-is-more" — that such a being could pursue good ends that nevertheless require that there be evil, even some evil that either plays no essential role in any good state of affairs, or that did not absolutely have to be risked in the course of attempting to achieve something good. But it helps make it easier to believe that God is perfectly benevolent if one also believes, with the writers of the New Testament[27], that Christ was God "showing up", "in person", to suffer with and for us.[28]

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Notes

[1] David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, edited and with an introduction by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill, 1947; first published, posthumously, in 1779), p. 198. Hume points out that the questions can be found in Epicurus.

[2] Lewis, "Evil for freedom's sake?", Philosophical Papers 22 (1993), pp. 149-172.

[3] Jason Turner has shown me a way in which "compatibilism" about freedom (a view described below) can be combined with the central moves in the "free will defense" (also described below). Although it allows for God's foreknowing everything the future holds, it also requires that God not deliberately choose who will sin on which particular occasions; and so will not be an option for the most serious sort of Calvinist.

[4] Some theists might reject even this qualified assertion about the importance of theodicy. For a likely candidate, see Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Evil: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 16 (1984), pp. 73–93.

[5] Jeffery L. Sheler, "Hell Hath No Fury", U.S. News and World Report, January 31, 2000.

[6] Clark Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," Criswell Theological Review 4 (1990), pp. 243-59.

[7] For an example of a contemporary reconception of hell, see Jerry L. Walls, Hell: The Logic of Damnation (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). John Sanders defends — and finds considerable theological precedent for — the idea that there must be opportunity for salvation apart from explicit faith in Christ in this life; see Sanders, No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

[8] These doctrines are conveyed allegorically in The Great Divorce (London : Geoffrey Bles, 1945).

[9] Cf. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", Mind 64 (1955), 200-212; Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defence", in Max Black (ed.), Philosophy in America (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 204-220; and Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977).

[10] The following papers had a particularly strong influence on the contents of this essay: Peter van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy", Philosophical Topics 16 (1988), pp. 167-68; Michael J. Murray, "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God", American Philosophical Quarterly 30 (1993), pp. 27-38; Richard Swinburne, "Natural Evil", American

Philosophical Quarterly 15 (1978), pp. 295-301; Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World", Faith and Philosophy 11 (1994), pp. 260-268.

[11] Those new to philosophy should know that, during the 20th century, Western philosophy effectively split into two quite different streams, which came to be called "analytic philosophy" and "Continental philosophy", though neither label is very appropriate, and neither stream very unified. The parting-of-the-ways was a gradual process, with its roots in the 19th Century. At the beginning of the 20th Century, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore championed what they called "the philosophy of analysis". (The work of Gottlob Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein was equally crucial to the beginnings of analytic philosophy.) The term "analysis" emphasized the contrast between their approach and that of the idealists, who denied that one could come to understand a fact or proposition by "analyzing" it — that is, considering its component parts and their mode of combination. Idealists like F. H. Bradley espoused an extreme form of holism — "we murder to dissect" transformed into a radical philosophical creed.

The term "analytic philosopher " is now applied very widely; there is no real connection to the dispute about "analysis" in which the phrase originated. To deserve the label these days, one need only take logic and argument seriously, and make use of old-fashioned notions like "truth". Representatives of almost every point-of-view in the history of the subject can be found among today's analytic philosophers: there are analytic Platonists, dualists, idealists, Thomists, rationalists… you name it. Contemporary controversies among analytic philosophers are continuous with the ones that exercised Kant, Hume, Berkeley, Leibniz, Descartes, Aquinas, Ockham, Aristotle, and Plato.

"Continental philosophy" is perhaps even less unified than analytic philosophy. Its practitioners look back to a different set of heroes — not Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, but philosophers from the Continent of Europe, such as the "three Hs": Heidegger, Husserl, and Hegel. While analytic philosophers tackle the traditional problems of philosophy in more or less traditional ways, today's continental philosophers are much more skeptical about whether it is worthwhile to try to "solve" philosophical problems or to defend philosophical theories. They tend to be less interested in argument, more interested in subtleties of "interpretation". Whereas analytic philosophers want to know: "Does God exist? What arguments can be given for and against the existence of such a being?"; Continental philosophers are more apt to say: "It's pointless to worry about whether God 'exists'; nevertheless, here are some interesting things we can say about God…". (For an example of a characteristically Continental approach to theological questions, see Jean Luc Marion, God Without Being (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).)

¹² J. L. Mackie was an eminent latter day Humean who put the problem of evil in roughly the terms I shall use here. Cf. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence".

¹³ Hume does not explicitly mention God's knowledge in the formulation with which I began, but he obviously assumes that God could not get Himself off the hook by pleading ignorance of evil.

¹⁴ Here is the "Deductive Argument from Evil", formulated in first-order logic. Those with the know-how can check its validity. Let Fx stand for: x is all-powerful and all-knowing; Gx for: x is perfectly good and benevolent; Ex for: x is a type of evil; Hx for: x occurs, or has instances; Rxy for: x can prevent y's occurrence.

1.   Fa

2.   Ga

3.   ∃x(Ex and Hx)

4.   ∀x(Gx ⊃ (∃y((Ey & Rxy) ⊃ ~Hy))

5.   ∀x(Fx⊃ ∀y(Ey ⊃ Rxy))

6.   ∃x((Ex & Rax) ⊃ ~Hx)) & ∀x(Ex ⊃ Rax))

7.   ∀x(Ex ⊃ ~Hx)

8.   ∀x(Ex ⊃ ~Hx) & ∃x(Ex and Hx) (CONTRADICTION)

¹⁵ I seem to recall stealing this witticism from Peter van Inwagen.

¹⁶ See Robert M. Adams, "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil", and "Must God Create the Best?", reprinted in his collection, The Virtue of Faith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ One might wonder why God doesn't just tell us — but that, says Swinburne (in "Natural Evil"), would require that he reveal himself more fully than would be good for the purpose of allowing us significant freedom. Eleonore Stump has objected that God could have shown us the bad consequences of certain courses of action in dreams, instead of in the form of natural evils. See Stump,

"Knowledge, Freedom, and the Problem of Evil", International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983), pp. 49-58.

[18] This is more-or-less the interpretation of "the Fall" that Peter van Inwagen uses in his theodicy; see "The Magnitude, Duration and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy" for more details.

[19] All quotations from the Bible are from the New American Standard Bible.

[20] Cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[21] Cf. John Sanders, No Other Name (InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[22] As mentioned above, one notable defender is C. S. Lewis; but there are many more, even within relatively conservative Protestant (i.e., "evangelical") circles. Official Catholic doctrine has also softened on this issue.

[23] Cf., e.g., Thomas Flint, Divine Providence: The Molinist Account (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[24] For objections to Molinism, see Robert Merrihew Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument", in James Tomberlin (ed.), Philosophical Perspectives, Volume 5:Philosophy of Religion (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview, 1991), pp. 343-354; William Hasker, "Middle Knowledge: A Refutation Revisited", Faith and Philosophy 12 (1995), pp. 223-236. I level an objection of my own against Molinism; cf. my "Yet Another Anti-Molinist Argument" in Larry Jorgensen and Sam Newlands (eds), Metaphysics, History, Ethics: Exploring the Philosophy of Robert Adams (forthcoming).

[25] Job 38: 4-7.

[26] Dorothy L. Sayers, The Man Born to Be King (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1943), pp. 39-40.

[27] Here are a couple of representative passages, from Paul and the author of Hebrews: "…Christ Jesus, … although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2: 5-9). He was willing

"to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest…. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2: 17-18).

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