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## The Problem of Evil

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The existence of evil, pain and suffering is considered by many philosophers to be the most vexed question concerning the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect deity. Why would a loving God permit wanton acts of cruelty and misery on the scale witnessed throughout human history? In this essay, Leslie Allan evaluates four common theistic responses to this problem, highlighting the benefits and challenges faced by each approach. He concludes with a critical examination of a theistic defence designed to show that the problem of evil is not a problem at all.

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of evil, pain and suffering is considered by some philosophers to be the most telling philosophical objection to theistic belief. At its heart is the notion that if God existed, he would be powerful enough to be able to prevent evil, wise enough to know how to prevent it and benevolent enough to want to prevent it. Given that evil, pain and suffering do occur, it seems reasonable to conclude that God does not exist.

The amount of suffering in our world is staggering. Near on 11 million children die painfully each year.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these deaths are preventable. The tsunami that hit 18 Asian nations in 2004 killed more than 250,000 people in a single day and left over 1.9 million people homeless.<sup>2</sup> Why would a loving and merciful God allow such misery and death on this grand scale?

On 19th August 1992, in the small town of Bargo, New South Wales, Ebony Simpson was walking home from school after alighting from the school bus. She was nine years old at the time. Andrew Garforth, petty criminal and father of two, abducted Ebony, forcing her into the boot of his car. After binding her hands and feet and brutally raping her repeatedly, he threw her alive into a local dam with her schoolbag, which he weighed down with rocks. Her parents, siblings, wider family and friends continue to suffer in the terrible aftermath of Ebony's murder.<sup>3</sup>

There have been countless more gratuitous acts of cruelty both before and after Ebony's murder. This one remains fixed in my memory, as at the time of the murder my own daughter was of a similar age to Ebony's. To many, Ebony's murder puts a searchlight to the question of why God, if he existed, would not act to prevent such wanton crimes of violence.

In this essay, I want to articulate the nature of the problem of evil and examine four common theistic proposals for why God would allow evil to exist to the extent that it does. I will lay out three criteria that a proposal must satisfy to be accepted. Three of the proposals I review here centre on the notion that God of necessity allows evil in order to prevent an even greater evil from happening or to grant us an intrinsic good that greatly outweighs the evil endured. The greater evil prevented proposed by theists is the harms done to our body. The two greater goods put forward are our free will on the one hand and our virtuous moral characters on the other. The fourth proposal I will examine here is that pain and suffering is an illusion.

After reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these proposals and finding them wanting, I will progress to considering an attempt to undercut the problem of evil. The skeptical theists' attack attempts to show how the problem of evil does not even arise as a problem once the relationship between God and humans is understood. I will show that this defence creates more problems for the theist than it solves and, at its worst, serves to exclude the theist from making moral judgements altogether.

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<sup>1</sup>Millennium Development Goals – Reduce Child Mortality, <http://www.unicef.org/mdg/childmortality.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Tsunami 2004, <http://www.tsunami2004.net/tsunami-2004-facts/>.

<sup>3</sup>CI, Ebony Simpson's Murder, <http://citv.com.au/crime-articles/75/ebony-simpsons-murder>.

In the final section of this essay, I make some general observations about proposals that presume specific religious doctrinal positions and about the utility for the theist of combining arguments. I conclude by finding that for each of the five arguments considered, there are major obstacles to its acceptance and that the problem of evil survives to provide a compelling reason to doubt the existence of a supremely perfect being.

## 2. Nature of the Argument

What I am examining here is the idea of the existence of what is called the ‘God of the philosophers’. This God is defined as perfect in all respects. His necessary attributes include omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. I understand that this concept does not apply to polytheistic religions, such as ancient Greek mythology, Hinduism and some strands of Buddhism, and to ditheistic religions such as Zoroastrianism and Catharism. It also does not apply to some elements of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, based as they are on Biblical traditions. Some Pentateuch authors, in particular, did not see God as omnipotent (Ex. 31:17; Judg. 1:19), omniscient (Gen. 11:5; Deut. 32:20) or omnibenevolent (Ex. 32:14; Deut. 32:23).

For the purposes of this essay, I will define each of the divine characteristics as follows. By ‘omnipotence’, I mean that attribute of a being that allows it to do anything that it is logically possible to do. That is, to do anything that cannot be described as self-contradictory. An omnipotent being, for example, can create a star, but he cannot create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it.

By ‘omniscience’, I mean that attribute of a being in virtue of which it knows the truth of every true proposition and falsity of every false proposition. The truths known include counterfactuals, such as, ‘If the sun was twice as hot as it is now, human life would not survive’. It also includes propositions about the past and future, such as, ‘The president of the United States will propose items of legislation in 2020.’

By ‘omnibenevolence’, I mean that attribute of a being by which it desires and wants to act to minimize the amount of pain and suffering in the world. Presented with options to act and all other things being equal, an omnibenevolent being will choose the option that contains the least pain and suffering. Philosophers of religion continue to debate the meanings and logical interrelationships between these concepts, but I think the brief definitions I have given above will serve the intent of this essay.

The problem of evil has been formulated in many different ways over the millennia. A version attributed to Epicurus<sup>4</sup> is perhaps the oldest. The argument can be formalized into a syllogism as follows:

*Premise 1:* If an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent god exists, then evil does not.

*Premise 2:* There is evil in the world.

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*Conclusion:* Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God does not exist.

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<sup>4</sup>The ‘Epicurean paradox’ or ‘riddle of Epicurus’ reads: ‘Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?’ Reprinted in Hospers [1990: 310].

This argument proceeds by *modus tollens* and is logically valid. *Premise 2* is generally accepted by theists and is largely non-controversial. (In §6 below, I will consider one theodicy that rejects the truth of *Premise 2*.) The soundness of the argument then hangs on whether *Premise 1* is true and what evidence can be mustered in support of it. There have been attempts to reformulate the argument with the aim of demonstrating *Premise 1* to be logically true (that is, self-contradictory to deny). I'm not convinced that any such reformulations succeed. Perhaps, at best, the problem of evil demonstrates God's existence to be improbable. Assuming the definitions of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence given above, a concise argument in support of *Premise 1* can, I think, be stated as follows:

*If it were possible for a particular instance of pain or suffering to exist, God would be wise enough to know of this possibility, powerful enough to prevent its instantiation and benevolent enough to desire and want to act towards its prevention. Therefore, if God exists, it is not possible for pain and suffering to exist.*

Theistic philosophers have responded with a number of counterarguments to the problem of evil, so stated. Each of these counterarguments, termed a 'theodicy',<sup>5</sup> is designed to demonstrate how the existence of evil, pain and suffering is compatible with the existence of God. I want now to examine the most common and persuasive of these theodicies to see if one or more stand up to critical scrutiny. Three of these theodicies use the 'greater good' argument; that God allows evil, pain and suffering in order to either bring about a greater good or to prevent a greater evil. The final theodicy considered here proposes that the problem of evil is a chimera because pain and suffering itself is an illusion.

In examining each of these theodicies, keep in mind that for a theodicy to be convincing, it must do more than demonstrate that the existence of God is compatible with evil *per se*. It needs to account for the evil we experience in *our* world. In particular, we need to evaluate whether the argument it presents provides an adequate account of the types, amount and distribution of evil, pain and suffering in the world. Each criterion prompts us to ask specific questions.

- Types:* Does the theodicy account for 'moral evils'; the evils perpetrated by human agents, such as torture and theft? Does it account for 'natural evils', the pain and suffering humans and other creatures endure from natural events, such as epidemics, floods, fires and earthquakes?
- Amount:* Does the theodicy demonstrate why the world contains the amount of pain and suffering that it does? Could God's purpose or reason for allowing pain and suffering be achieved with a lesser amount?
- Distribution:* Does the theodicy explain the distribution of pain and suffering throughout the world; why some people experience more pain and suffering than others in virtue of their economic or social position, geographical location or time in history?

It pays to keep in mind these questions as I critically examine each theodicy in turn. In the next section, I will briefly present each theodicy and my responses will follow.

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<sup>5</sup>The term 'theodicy' was first coined by Gottfried Leibniz in 1710.

### 3. Free Will

*Theodicy 1:* For God to have previously determined that our acts will never result in pain or suffering would have been to deny us freedom of choice, and to have denied us this would have been to deny us an incomparable good.<sup>6</sup>

The type of free will that theists appeal to with this theodicy is of the philosophical libertarian sort. What this means is that voluntary human acts have no sufficient physical cause; that they are contra-causal. In other words, acts resulting from the exercise of our free will cannot be explained completely on the basis of physical laws and forces acting in our brains. This theodicy makes a serious attempt at explaining the variety of moral evils humans commit.

*Response 1:* My first objection to this defence is that, in fact, human beings do not possess the kind of free will advocated by theists. After almost one century of scientific research, psychologists and neuroscientists have not found any place in the brain where the sequence of physical causes is broken. They have not found the 'ghost in the machine' firing the motor neurons that trigger our muscles into action.

I do not even think we suffer the illusion of contra-causal free will. When we ordinarily speak of 'free will', we are not contrasting it with determinism; the notion that all of our actions, voluntary and otherwise, have a sufficient physical cause. Our idea of a 'free' choice is contrasted with a coerced choice. We say an act is not chosen freely if the agent is forced to choose that act because they believe that if they did not choose that way they would lose something of great value.

If I am right on this—that we can choose freely in a deterministic world—then it was open to God to have created our world such that we always freely choose the good. Further, being omnibenevolent, God would have been morally obliged to have created such a world in deference to the one in which we in fact live.

*Response 2:* Granting the libertarian theists' notion that humans possess free will in the contra-causal sense, the exercise of that type of free will is logically incompatible with God's omniscience. Consider the following scenario. Assume that at time  $t_1$  God has foreknowledge that at time  $t_2$  person A will choose  $x$ . Then, at time  $t_2$ , for person A to have free will, it must be possible for him to either choose  $x$  or choose  $y$ . If at time  $t_2$ , person A chooses  $y$ , then God is mistaken in his foreknowledge, which is logically impossible given God's omniscience. Therefore, if God does have foreknowledge, then it is impossible for person A to choose anything other  $x$  at time  $t_2$ . Hence, person A cannot have free will if God is omniscient.

To put this concretely, imagine God knows on Monday that John will choose to rob Mary of her purse the following Friday. If John can freely choose on Friday, it must be possible for him to choose to rob Mary or not to rob Mary on that day. If John chooses not to rob Mary, then God is mistaken in his foreknowledge, which is logically impossible given that 'God' is omniscient. Therefore, John cannot possess free will if God is omniscient.

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<sup>6</sup>For a much debated argument for the free will defence, see Plantinga [1975].

To avoid this logical incompatibility between God's omniscience and the exercise of our free will, some theists have argued that God exists outside of time. This manoeuvre leaves God unable to interact with the universe and to have a personal relationship with believers. He could not, for example, have created the universe, handed Moses the Decalogue, died on the cross, perform miracles and answer prayers.

*Response 3:* Assuming that the contra-causal notion of free will is logically compatible with God's omniscience, the existence of evil then poses a quandary about the relationship between God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence. The problem is that the exercise of our free will is logically compatible with the total absence of pain and suffering in our world. It appears logically possible for God to have created a world in which all bad intentions are thwarted before they result in harmful actions. For example, an assassin's gun malfunctions at the critical moment of firing and a thief unknowingly steals an empty jeweller's case.

God, being omniscient, could, without much effort, devise many and varied, and all seemingly natural, methods of frustrating such harmful intentions so that we would continue to think that harmful acts were physically possible. Even if it were not feasible for God to thwart every evil intention, there are some intentions that he could have thwarted that would have dramatically reduced the amount of suffering in this world. If one of the assassination attempts on Hitler's life, for example, had been successful, the number of deaths witnessed during World War 2 would have been greatly curtailed.

*Response 4:* Assuming again that free will in the contra-causal sense is compatible with God's omniscience, then, in creating the world, God would know beforehand the outcome of each possible creation. Of all the possible worlds he could have created, God could have chosen to create a world in which everyone always freely chose the right action. God, being omnibenevolent, would have chosen such a world.

*Response 5:* I think we also need to question the assumption that free will, in the theist's contra-causal sense, is an incomparable good. Does the good of freely choosing right or wrong really outweigh the evils of the Nazi gas ovens, Pol Pot's murderous genocide and ISIS's campaign of terror? If God had a choice between creating a world in which people could freely choose the barbaric acts we see in this world and a world in which people had the illusion of free will but had no or comparably much less pain and suffering, I argue that God would be morally obliged to choose the latter. To my mind, the good of contra-causal free will (if it has a value at all) has a finite value and that value is greatly outweighed by the suffering we see in this world.

My response here also applies to the argument that God's omniscience logically precludes foreknowledge of the choices made by agents granted contra-causal free will. Let's grant that I am wrong in thinking that omniscience is compatible with foreknowledge and assume that God, if he existed, is left in the dark about the choices we will make in the future. In this case, I think God would not have granted us free will. Being omnibenevolent, God would have been morally culpable in creating a world of free agents that ran the significant risk of generating the vast amounts of human pain and misery witnessed over our entire human history. I submit that the kind of God who bets on his creation with tokens of human wretchedness is morally reckless and not deserving of our devotion.

*Response 6:* A related concern of mine is that victims of cruelty and injustice are deprived of the goodness of their free will in submission to the goodness of the free will of the perpetrators. The future good of the free-will of a murdered child is sacrificed to the exercise of free-will of her murderer. The scope of the free-will of the person wrongly imprisoned is severely restricted so that his jailer can exercise his freedom to frame an innocent. If free will is so valuable, it is not at all clear why God allows some morally unblemished people to have theirs curtailed for the sake of the immoral exercising theirs.

In summary, the free will defence attempts to explain the type of evil we call 'moral evil' and accounts for the distribution of the effects of this evil in terms of the free choices of human agents. However, it fails to explain the amount of pain and suffering experienced in the world. The theodicy is based on the false premise that humans possess contra-causal free will, that this type of free will is consistent with God's omniscience and that the value of this good outweighs the pain and suffering in this world. In addition, God bestowing this good is consistent with a world containing substantially less pain and suffering than our own. As this theodicy makes no attempt to explain the natural evils, it needs to be supplemented with another defence.



## 4. Character Building

*Theodicy 2:* The existence of pain and suffering is necessary for the development of good moral characters and for the committing of virtuous acts. There would be no bravery without war, no self-sacrifice without disease, no compassion without cruelty, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

An advantage enjoyed with this theodicy is that it attempts to explain both 'moral evils' and 'natural evils'. The pain and suffering caused by both these kinds of evil help to build moral character in individuals and enables them to act righteously.

*Response 1:* The challenge for the advocates of this theodicy is explaining satisfactorily the geographical and societal distribution of pain and suffering in the world. Citizens living a relatively comfortable life in industrially developed nations experience fewer and less demanding moral challenges than, say, inhabitants of war zones and doctors working in refugee camps. At the personal level, most parents caring for a child with incurable brain cancer are faced with many more opportunities for character building compared with parents rearing healthy children.

*Response 2:* This theodicy also leaves unexplained the temporal disparity in the distribution of pain and suffering. Nature has been 'red in tooth and claw' for millions of years prior to the onset of *Homo sapiens*. What was the purpose of pain and suffering in the animal kingdom prior to the evolution of human moral agents?

In addition, pain and suffering has diminished dramatically following the discovery and widespread use of antibiotics, vaccines and anaesthetics. These medical advances appear to have reduced the world's capacity for soul-making over time. Consider also that many infants and children do not get the opportunity for soul-making. Globally, millions die from disease and malnutrition before reaching their fifth birthday.

*Response 3:* The experience of trials and tribulations does not always result in the building of resilience, charity and other morally praiseworthy traits. For some, witnessing the murder of their child leads to alcoholism and despair. Other consequences of experiencing tragedy include apathy, mental breakdown and suicide. These are second-order evils that weigh against the goodness of virtuous characters.

*Response 4:* Where characters are developed and improved through trial and tribulation, we must ask whether the good of the characters developed outweighs the pain and suffering experienced. Does the caring shown by family members and diligence displayed by doctors outweigh the painful deaths experienced by the over 50 million people who fell victim to the bubonic plague in the 14th Century? Are the sufferings of the five million Jews who perished in the gas ovens and concentration camps of the Nazi war machine worth the bravery shown by Allied soldiers? I think not.

*Response 5:* The soul-making theodicy reverses the reasons why virtuous acts are considered good. On this account, suffering is worthwhile because it leads to acts of charity. However, this is putting the cart before the horse. Our commonplace moral judgement is that acts of charity are good because they reduce suffering. To put it more technically, the

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<sup>7</sup>For an extensive development of the character building theodicy, see Hick [1968: ch. XIII, §3].

soul-making theodist regards the primary evil of suffering as instrumentally good because it leads to the primary good of charity. This contradicts our commonly held moral intuition that charity is an instrumental good because it reduces the primary evil of suffering.

*Response 6:* For a moral agent to consciously and deliberately use the pains and sufferings of one person for the benefit of another is to treat the pained person as a means and not as an end in themselves. It may be the case that to cause or allow pain or suffering in one person as means to another good is justified in rare and isolated cases. However, to elevate this principle on a global scale is morally questionable. To treat people as means contravenes Kant's time-honoured principle that we find integral to many ethical systems.

*Response 7:* One consequence of treating people as means is that many acts and omissions that we regard as heinous become, on this account, morally permissible, or even morally obligatory. Consider this scenario. I am about to reach a medical breakthrough with the development of a cure for a type of cancer that kills millions of sufferers annually. Announcing my breakthrough will lead to a lot of potential patients no longer developing the virtues of courage and humility. It will stop hundreds of researchers continuing their selfless search for a cure and prevent millions of future caregivers nurturing the sick and dying. For the sake of not reducing the incidence of character development and of virtuous acts, I am morally obliged to withhold my cure.

As a corollary, think about this moral situation. Previous bushfires in my state have led to enormous acts of courage by local emergency workers and great acts of charity toward fire victims. For the soul-making theodist, these virtues and virtuous acts outweigh the pain and suffering endured by victims. Hence, the principles underpinning this theodicy seem to morally oblige me to light a bushfire near a densely populated town.

Reviewing the character building theodicy, it appears to fall short in accounting for the uneven distribution of opportunities for soul-making in the world and ignores the disvalue of secondary evils. It also assumes that the resulting good always outweighs the victims' pains and sufferings and relies on an untenable moral principle that treats people as means instead of ends. The upshot is that the theodicy leads to morally repugnant implications.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>I deal with the character building theodicy in more detail in my Allan [2015].

## 5. Necessary for Survival

*Theodicy 3:* Pain is a God-given warning device that alerts us to body damaging situations, such as fire, abrasion, piercing, and so on. As such, it is designed to prevent even greater harm.<sup>9</sup>

*Response 1:* Advocates of this theodicy leave unexplained why God created such potentially dangerous situations at all. It is not obvious why God could not have fashioned a world in which acids, knives, viruses, and so on, had no effect on the human physique. We know this is possible because, for example, many animal viruses are unable to infect humans.

*Response 2:* As a warning system, our pain mechanisms have many deficiencies that we would not expect from an omniscient and omnipotent designer. For many potentially harmful situations, humans experience no prior feelings of pain. Examples here include exposure to environmental pathogens, such as bacteria and viruses, to damaging radiation and to ingestible toxins, such as arsenic. In addition, a small minority of babies are born with a debilitating genetic defect known as congenital analgesia. This gene mutation deprives the infant of pain receptors, with devastating effects on their quality of life.

*Response 3:* To help us avoid the greater evil of bodily injury, it seems possible that God could have designed us in such a way that we automatically and without conscious deliberation steer clear of perilous situations. Our existing blink reflex response to excessive corneal stimulation and withdrawal reflex response to excessive heat are reflexes that do not incur pain and that God could have generalized in the design of our physiology.

*Response 4:* This theodicy leaves unexplained suffering that does not involve bodily pain. For example, it fails to explain the mental torment of the mother who discovers her husband's incestuous relationship with their daughter, the unemployed youth's contemplation of suicide and the maddening effect of solitary confinement.

Also left unexplained is pain that overstays its usefulness; excruciating pain that the unfortunate sufferer does not have the power to avoid. One such incident ending in unavoidable agonizing pain was the spilling of molten pig iron onto steelworker Wayne Thompson in 1994.<sup>10</sup> Another well-known case involved climber Aron Ralston in 2003. After getting his arm trapped in a fall in Utah's Bluejohn Canyon, he first broke and then cut off his own arm without any form of anaesthesia.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, a plus for this theodicy is that it includes within its scope animal pain. However, this theodicy both fails to account for the many types of human deprivation that do not serve as a warning and for the absence of pain when it could have served as a caution. Most importantly, it fails to explain the necessity of the feeling of pain itself as a warning indicator.

<sup>9</sup>For an argument along these lines, see Hick [1968: ch. XV].

<sup>10</sup>Baltimore Sun, Steelworker Killed by Molten Metal Never Let Dangerous Job Get Him Down, [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-04-23/news/1994113032\\_1\\_wayne-thompson-beth-steel-molten-metal](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-04-23/news/1994113032_1_wayne-thompson-beth-steel-molten-metal)

<sup>11</sup>Shane Burrows, Cheating Death in Bluejohn Canyon, <http://climb-utah.com/Roost/bluejohn2.htm>

## 6. Evil as Illusion

*Theodicy 4:* Evil, pain and suffering have no real existence. They are but the lack of unity with God, just as darkness has no separate existence but is the lack of light.

The idea that evil is not real was introduced by Spinoza [1677] and taken up in a confused fashion much later by Mary Baker Eddy [1890], the founder of Christian Science. This theodicy is unique in that it denies one of the premises of the problem of evil argument; that evil, pain and suffering exist.

*Response 1:* If the illusion of evil, pain and suffering is simply separateness from God, the existence of happy, pain-free and contented non-believers requires explanation. This uneven distribution of the apparent evil of pain and suffering does not appear correlated with the degree of people's proximity to God. Also, on this account, animals are considered not to have souls. This raises the question of why it is that they labour under the same illusion.

*Response 2:* If the belief that evil, pain and suffering are real is mistaken, then it is pertinent to ask why an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being allows such a false belief to arise and persist. The problem of evil is not solved, but simply moved to another level.

To summarize, this theodicy attempts a global solution to the problem of evil through denying one of its premises; the premise that evil exists. However, it fails to account for the illusion of pain and suffering experienced in the animal kingdom, the distribution of the illusion of evil within human populations and the existence of the illusion *per se*.

## 7. Skeptical Theism

*Defence:* God has a reason for allowing evil, pain and suffering. However, with our limited and finite minds, humans cannot possibly comprehend what that reason might be.<sup>12</sup>

This argument is not so much a theodicy as a reason for thinking that no attempted theodicy can succeed. It seeks to defuse the problem of evil even before it gets a chance to start. This idea that our diminished cognitive abilities pale in comparison with divine omniscience finds expression in the New Testament.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?

[Romans 11:33–34]

*Response 1:* This defence raises the question of why God had not given humans an assurance that he has a reason for allowing evil, pain and suffering. We would expect God, at the least, to tell us that he *has* a reason and why he is not revealing it. This would assure us that there is a plan and this assurance would go some way to making terrible sufferings more bearable.

It may be the case that God wants to keep us at a distance so that we freely choose to join his presence. John Hick advances this argument in his book, [\*Evil and the God of Love\*](#) [1968: 317–321]. However, akin to the problem I pointed out with the soul-making theodicy, this approach does not account for the enormous disparity in the distribution of opportunities to know God. This approach is also morally questionable. God's actions here can be likened to the father who deliberately hides himself from his children behind a veil of suffering and ignorance so that his children can admire him freely.

*Response 2:* The skeptical theist's defence leads to the odd and morally unsettling conclusion that no possible amount or distribution of natural and moral evils will count against the existence of God. Even in a world of immense suffering in which billions of animals and humans experience extreme pain and distress and in which there is little or no pleasure and happiness and few or no righteous acts, God's existence is deemed possible. On this defence, if we had existed in such a miserable world, our extreme suffering would go no way to counting as evidence against God's existence.

If the skeptical theist concedes that in this imaginary world, such misery would count against the existence of God, then this raises the question of what that level and distribution of evil, pain and suffering would be. That level must lie somewhere between the level existing in our actual world and the level existing in my imagined extremely miserable world. The challenge for the theist is in (a) providing a reason for why there is such a level of evil beyond which God's existence can be questioned rationally, and (b) saying what that level is.

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<sup>12</sup>For articulations of this defence, see Wykstra [1984] and Stroop [2002].

*Response 3:* The skeptical theism defence is too strong. Epistemically, it allows too much. Consider the proposition that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and omnimalevolent being. Now, there is just as much evidence for the existence of this being as there is for the theist's God. The traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of God—the ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the teleological argument—just as equally prove the existence of a perfectly malevolent being.

In addition, the argument from religious experience can be drawn on to vouch for the existence of a powerful, malevolent being. Sightings of the devil figure frequently in religious literature, including that from the Abrahamic tradition. The existence and the plethora of mutually exclusive revealed religions can also be seen as the expected workings of this perfectly malevolent being intent on confounding us.

What of the moral argument for the existence of a divine law giver? From the standpoint of the omnimalevolent being hypothesis, the moral argument can be mustered to support the conclusion that the necessary law giver commands that we ought to further our own selfish desires and ignore the needs and wants of others.

When we point to the amount, nature and distribution of good in the world, the proponent of the perfectly malevolent being idea is faced with a problem for which he needs an answer. How can he reconcile the goods we experience with the existence of a perfectly malevolent being? The problem of evil, pain and suffering is here turned on its head to become the problem of good, pleasure and ecstasy.

Mirror image theodicies can be made to work here just as well as for the theist. For the malevolent being advocate, free will is granted us by this being so that we can freely choose selfish actions. The soul-making theodicy can be repurposed into an ego-building, narcissist-making explanation. Similarly, on this scheme, pleasure and ecstasy are necessary prerequisites for enticing us towards selfish acts. Taking a cue from Spinoza and Baker Eddy, pleasure and ecstasy can alternatively be thought of as illusions resulting from our distance from the supremely evil being.

Returning to the skeptical theism defence, the challenge here for the skeptical theist is that if his move is effective for reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of a perfectly benevolent being, it is equally effective at reconciling the existence of good with the existence of a perfectly malevolent being. The philosophical and experiential case for the existence of a perfectly malevolent being is equally open to the defence that such a being has a reason for allowing good, pleasure and ecstasy. As our cognitive capabilities are severely limited in comparison with those of the omniscient evil one, the argument goes, we are not privy to that reason. Given this agnostic nature of the skeptical theist's defence, the theist's hands are tied by his own reasoning. He cannot then count the existence of goods as evidence *against* the proposition that a perfectly malevolent being exists.

The paradoxical nature of this defence is of the same type as that resulting from Pascal's Wager.<sup>13</sup> Considering there are no conclusive objective reasons for believing in the existence of God or for not believing, Pascal asked his readers to bet on the existence of God, for betting on his existence is more prudent than betting on his non-existence. For

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<sup>13</sup>For the statement of Pascal's Wager, see Pascal [1670].

Pascal, betting on God's non-existence runs the risk of losing everything: missing out on eternal bliss while suffering eternal damnation in Hell. In Pascal's case, his wager ignores the possibility of the existence of a malevolent deity lying in wait to entrap Christians, and so fails to insure against this possible deity's malevolent intentions. As with the skeptical theist's defence, when Pascal's wager is taken to include all possibilities, it equally provides reasons for believing in a malevolent deity who rewards believers in him.

*Response 4:* The skeptical theism defence is too strong in a second way. In addition to casting doubt on the moral qualities of the universe as a whole, this skeptical defence also casts doubt on our everyday moral judgements. Skeptical theism, or what I will call *principium ignoramus* (human ignorance as an unavoidable principle), leads to a thoroughgoing moral skepticism.<sup>14</sup> By allowing for unknown moral properties of states of affairs and voluntary acts that can outweigh the badness of some things and the wrongness of some acts, how can we know for certain that any particular seemingly bad situation or evil act is in fact bad or evil and deserving of our moral condemnation?

When a young child is tortured and killed, how can the skeptical theist be sure that the act was morally heinous, all things considered? Skeptical theism leaves open the possibility that the act has some hidden right-making property that makes the act morally excusable or morally praiseworthy. The same is true of states of affairs, such as the suffering of the murdered child. There may be some good-making property of the suffering that makes the suffering, on balance, intrinsically valuable.

This is not a problem of moral ignorance that is restricted to some acts and situations and not to others. As every voluntary human act is preventable by an omnipotent and omniscient being, this skepticism applies globally. And it is not an epistemic problem that can be overcome by the skeptical theist with further analysis, for such morally significant properties are unknowable in principle. It seems that the skeptical theist's defence leads to a radical moral skepticism that is, by its nature, inescapable.

Rounding up this discussion of the skeptical theism defence, I conclude that this strategy creates more puzzles than it is intended to solve. The defence leaves God's act of hiding himself morally questionable. Furthermore, it appears to morally excuse a perfectly benevolent being for allowing an almost infinite amount of pain and suffering. It also equally provides an escape clause for the rival hypothesis that there exists a perfectly malevolent being. Perhaps, the defence's most fatal liability is that it inescapably leads to a radical moral skepticism.

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<sup>14</sup>A version of the following argument using inductive logic can be found in Tooley [2015: §3.5].



## 8. Conclusion

There are theodicies of a narrow religious nature that I have not dealt with in this essay. These theodicies rely on religious doctrines peculiar to particular creeds. Theodicies of this type draw on the doctrine of the fall, as recounted in Genesis 3, and the doctrine of everlasting heavenly bliss, whether it be accompanied by an ancillary doctrine of everlasting hellfire or not. The doctrine of heavenly reward, at best, is a teaching about compensation for earthly pains and sufferings. As such, this doctrine does not provide a justification for such pains and sufferings, which is required of a *bona fide* theodicy. These kinds of creeds also typically run counter to established scientific theories and generally accepted facts, and so have a hard time to get going. Many also raise serious questions about the moral probity of God and so fail on that account.

It may be thought that although no one theodicy explains all of the types, amounts and distributions of evil, pain and suffering in the world, two or more combined can provide a coherent and comprehensive account. The discussion of each of the theodicies dealt with in this essay, I think, shows that no one theodicy explains satisfactorily the nature and scope of the evil, pain and suffering it was designed to explain. Combining individually defective theodicies will not make an effective overall argument for the moral permissibility of all of the evil we see in the world.

Combining some theodicies also generates new paradoxes for the theist. A case in point is theodicians who conjoin the soul-making theodicy with the idea of the intrinsic value of free will in an attempt to avoid the possibility of a world in which we always freely choose rightly. In this package deal, God determines that some people must freely choose to do evil for the benefit of developing virtuous traits in others. However, the theodician must now explain how these acts of evil are genuinely 'free' and thus worthy of our moral condemnation.

Combining either the soul-making theodicy or the free will theodicy with the doctrine of heaven also generates puzzles. If there is no evil in heaven that requires minimizing through virtuous acts, then of what benefit is soul-making for the afterlife? Further, if 'free will' necessarily entails the possibility of acting wrongly, then how can heaven be guaranteed to be free of evil?

Given some three centuries of monotheistic thought, it seems reasonable to suppose that if a convincing theodicy or combination of theodicies were to be found, it would have been constructed and generally accepted by now. In just the last two hundred years, scientists have uncovered the workings of the universe at the global scale, with the two theories of relativity, and at the micro scale with quantum field theory. Each of these theories is conceptually multifaceted and mathematically complex. It's not that the world of human beings has had a shortage of intellectual ingenuity.

As a last resort, the skeptical theists wish to make the problem of evil philosophically irrelevant. This essay shows that their argument created more problems and paradoxes than it was intended to solve. Their retreat to *principium ignoramus*, as I tried to show, also excludes them from making legitimate moral judgments altogether. In this sense, their skeptical move parallels that of nineteenth century theists making God a 'God of the gaps'



within the empirical domain. With the help of skeptical theists, that gap has now slammed shut inside the moral sphere. In conclusion, the problem of evil remains as a significant challenge to the rationality of monotheistic belief.

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