

THEODICY OF LOVE

Cosmic Conflict
and the
Problem of Evil

JOHN C. PECKHAM


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Preface

Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds. . . .
Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

Hab. 1:3, 13 NIV

Since I was a young child—indeed for as long as I can remember—I have been deeply troubled by the suffering and injustice in this world. I have wondered how the evil I saw in this world could be reconciled with my belief that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Before I knew what it was called, I was wrestling with the problem of evil: If God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil? And so much of it? One of the primary reasons I became fascinated with theology was because of this problem, perhaps the most difficult problem that Christian theism faces.

The problem of evil is far more than a philosophical or theological problem. The kind and amount of evil in this world present a deep, sometimes faith-crushing religious or existential problem, which is particularly acute for those who believe in an all-good and all-powerful God. Many people have lost faith for this reason, and others find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the God of Christianity in light of the horrendous evil in this world.

Although the religious, existential, and philosophical problems of evil should be distinguished and addressed quite differently, they should not be thought of as entirely unrelated. On the one hand, often the last thing somebody needs to hear while in the midst of acute grief is a philosophical or theological treatment of evil. Often, the best thing that can be done in the presence of someone grieving or suffering is to remain silent relative to attempts at explanation while expressing compassionate love and care for them in meaningful, tangible ways.

On the other hand, many Christians who undergo profound suffering eventually seek answers regarding how to reconcile such suffering with their faith in the goodness and love of God. I often wonder how much the framework one holds prior to undergoing such suffering or grief makes a difference in how suffering and grief are experienced. It seems to me that the very way one conceives of God and God's providential involvement in this world bears significantly not only on how suffering and evil are understood but also on how they are felt and processed. What I think of God's involvement in the cause of evil and suffering, or his lack thereof, will significantly affect the way I experience such evil and suffering, and misunderstanding God's relationship to evil may significantly intensify my psychological experience of suffering.

Although motivated by the relationship between how one conceives of God's relationship to evil and how one experiences evil, this book is not aimed at providing an approach to the religious or existential problem of evil, which demands book-length consideration of its own. Whereas addressing the religious or existential problem of evil concerns how people should deal with their experience of suffering and evil, this book focuses on the philosophical problem of evil (in its logical and evidential forms), which is concerned primarily with how one might understand the problem of evil and reconcile it with the goodness and love of God.

One unhelpful way to deal with the philosophical problem of evil is to attempt to downplay the problem itself, suggesting (even if only implicitly) that evil is not so bad after all. Such an approach tends toward justifying evil, which in my view is unjustifiable. Rather than justifying evil and injustice, even implicitly, we should abhor them and stand resolutely against them. Whatever else we say about the philosophical problem, I believe we should never attempt to downplay the horrendous evil and suffering in this world. Accordingly, it is never my intention to trivialize evil, justify evil, explain evil away, or minimize the magnitude of the problem.¹ On the contrary, my limited

1. For this reason I tend to avoid referencing specific examples of people's suffering. I do not want to give even the impression of trivializing such instances of suffering by using them as anecdotes in a theological discussion.

goal in this book is to try to understand, from the vantage point of Christian theism, how to coherently hold that God is entirely good and all-powerful, despite the evil in this world.

No perspective on evil can assuage its devastating impact. Ultimately, only God can resolve the problem of evil in all its aspects. And he will. In the meantime, I pray that some might find the approach and framework laid out in this book to be helpful to their own wrestling with evil and suffering, even though many questions remain. At the same time, with the many voices in Scripture, I wait in hope for God's final resolution while asking in lament, "How long, O LORD?" (Ps. 13:1).

Acknowledgments

This book is motivated not only by my own questions and wrestling with the problem of evil but has also been impacted by many family members, friends, and students with whom I have had numerous conversations on this issue over the years. I am thankful to all who, in good faith, have asked the kinds of thoughtful questions that I attempt to address in this book.

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I am also thankful to the editors of *Andrews University Seminary Studies* for allowing me to reuse material from my article, "Does God Always Get What He Wants? A Theocentric Approach to Divine Providence and Human Freedom," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52, no. 2 (2014): 195–212.

Finally, I am profoundly thankful to my family. I cannot thank my parents, Ernest and Karen, enough for all of their love and support. I would also like to thank my parents-in-law, Lee and Ann, who have also been

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Abbreviations

General

ANE	Ancient Near East	MT	Masoretic Text
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls	NT	New Testament
ET	English Text	OT	Old Testament
LXX	Septuagint		

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps./Pss.	Psalms/Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

Apocryphal Works

Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
1 Macc.	1 Maccabees		

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

1 En.	1 Enoch	Test. Dan	Testament of Dan
Jub.	Jubilees	Test. Levi	Testament of Levi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

Secondary Sources

AAR	American Academy of Religion
AB	Anchor Yale Bible Commentary
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
ANF	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1885–1887.
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., W. Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
CC	Continental Commentaries. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986–2004.
CD	Karl Barth. <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1969.
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by Karen van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
DTIB	<i>Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible</i> . Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by H. Balz and G. Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1993.
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and

- edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
- JPS Jewish Publication Society
- L&N Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2nd ed. New York: UBS, 1989.
- NAC New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H, 1991–2014.
- NIB *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.
- NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2014.
- NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976–2016.
- NIDNTT *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
- NIDNTTE *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Moisés Silva. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.
- NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
- NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978–2016.
- NIVAC NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994–2012.
- PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988–2015.
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary

1

The Problem of Evil and the Free Will Defense

“Life is outrageous. Hardly anyone will deny that conclusion outright. Tragedy, pain, injustice, premature death—all of these and more waste us away. No explanation seems quite able to still our anger, hostility, and sadness.”¹ So says John K. Roth in his essay advocating for what he calls a “theodicy of protest.”² This is not unlike what many biblical authors themselves say in protest against the evil in this world.

Job suffers so much that he wishes he were never born (Job 3). In the midst of his suffering, he questions God’s justice, saying,

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
He covers the faces of its judges.
If it is not He, then who is it? (Job 9:24; cf. 16:9, 11)

I cry out to You for help, but You do not answer me. . . .
You have become cruel to me;
With the might of Your hand You persecute me. . . .
When I expected good, then evil came;
When I waited for light, then darkness came. (Job 30:20–21, 26)

1. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 18.

2. Roth explains, “A theodicy of protest believes” that strong emotions of protest against evil “are in many cases justified” and should be expressed as challenges to God’s goodness. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 18.

Isaiah adds,

Justice is far from us,
And righteousness does not overtake us;
We hope for light, but behold, darkness,
For brightness, but we walk in gloom. . . .
We hope for justice, but there is none. (Isa. 59:9, 11; cf. Hab. 1:4)

The author of Ecclesiastes similarly decries injustice in this world, declaring, “I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness” (Eccles. 3:16; cf. 7:15; 8:14). Elsewhere, he repeatedly describes the “grievous evil” that he has seen (5:13, 16; cf. 6:1; 10:5) and declares it would be “better” to have never existed and thus “never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun” (4:3). This world includes “abominable injustice” and corruption; “there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps. 53:1, 3).

The state of this world raises major questions about God’s justice and hiddenness in the face of evil and suffering. “Why has the way of the wicked prospered? / Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?” (Jer. 12:1; cf. Pss. 10:5, 13; 94:3–7; Mal. 2:17). “Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?” (Jer. 5:19). “Why have these things happened to me?” (Jer. 13:22; cf. 16:10; Ezek. 18:2). “Why is the land ruined, laid waste like a desert, so that no one passes through?” (Jer. 9:12). “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal. 2:17; cf. Ps. 94:3–7). “Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up / Those more righteous than they?” (Hab. 1:13; cf. Job 12:6; 21:7, 9). “Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? / Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1; cf. 10:11; 30:7). Even Jesus himself cries out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46; cf. Mark 15:34). Why has God not prevented or mitigated evil or at least brought justice in response to it? Evil seems to continue unabated, so much so that psalmists repeatedly ask, “How long, O LORD?” (Pss. 13:1; 79:5; cf. 77:7–10; 94:3). In light of the horrendous evil in this world, where are the providence, goodness, and love of God?

Scripture contains no shortage of depictions of and laments over the problem of evil (e.g., 2 Kings 6:29). However, according to some, there is a severe shortage of adequate solutions to the problem offered by Scripture and, for that matter, by the broad tradition of Christian theism. In his book *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, Bart Ehrman argues that Scripture provides no adequate approach to the problem of evil. Instead he argues that “the Bible contains many and varied answers to the problem of why there is suffering in the world.” Yet he claims that “many of these answers are at odds with one another, and at

odds with what most people seem to think today.”³ Because “life is a cesspool of misery and suffering” for so many people, Ehrman finds it impossible to “believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge” of this planet.⁴ In his view, if there is a God, “he certainly isn’t the one proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one who is actively and powerfully involved in the world.”⁵

Much has been written toward resolving issues like these and the numerous other enormous problems that evil in this world presents for Christian theism, minimally defined as the view that the triune God is “an omnipotent and perfectly good being.”⁶ In recent times, the task of addressing the problem of evil has been undertaken primarily by philosophers, with varying degrees of success.⁷ Much less has been written that addresses the problem of evil as it is depicted and approached in Scripture.⁸ Given the claims of Ehrman and others, however, it seems apparent that more work needs to be done to bridge the realms of philosophy and biblical theology in this regard, with the goal of ascertaining and exploring some avenues for approaching the problem of evil that might be both intellectually satisfying and consistent with Christian theism and its sacred canon of Scripture.⁹

This book aims to set forth and explore one promising avenue in this regard, articulating a constructive proposal for a theodicy of love that is based on a close canonical reading of Scripture.¹⁰ This biblically based, philosophically informed, and theologically systematic treatment builds on and goes beyond

3. Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 15.

4. Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 3. Ehrman writes, “The problem of suffering . . . was the reason I lost my faith” (1).

5. Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 4. He adds, “I can’t believe in that God anymore because from what I now see around the world, he doesn’t intervene” (16).

6. S. Davis, “Introduction,” ix.

7. For one helpful introduction to the philosophical discussion, see Peterson, ed., *Problem of Evil*.

8. Some recent treatments relative to the biblical material include Crenshaw, *Defending God*; Crenshaw, *Theodicy in the Old Testament*; Laato and Moor, *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*. See also the accessible, introductory treatment by Gregg, *What Does the Bible Say about Suffering?* A couple of other notable works that have broken significant ground by approaching biblical material from a philosophical perspective are Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil?*; and Stump, *Wandering in the Darkness*.

9. Even those who doubt whether any approach could be successful in meeting both of these objectives may find the attempt to set forth such an approach stimulating as a case study.

10. Recognizing that there are many complex avenues within Scripture, this book offers an exploration of one significant stream of Scripture, which does not attempt to resolve all of the issues involved in the problem of evil but aims to complement further study. The canonical approach I employed in researching Scripture for this book involved investigating all of Scripture, approached as the divinely commissioned corpus of writings that God has ordained as the rule or standard of theology. On this approach, see Peckham, *Canonical Theology*.

the basic free will defense, articulating a theodicy that is rooted in the nature of God's love within the framework of a cosmic conflict. This theodicy of love affirms a robust account of God's omnipotence, providence, and involvement in this world that is consonant with Christian theism as described above, while denying that evil is necessary for some greater good or goods. In brief, I argue that God's love (properly understood) is at the center of a cosmic dispute and that God's commitment to love provides a morally sufficient reason for God's allowance of evil, with significant ramifications for understanding divine providence as operating within what I call covenantal rules of engagement.¹¹

This theodicy of love is set forth, piece by piece, in the following chapters. This first chapter begins by introducing the problem of evil relative to Christian theism, the basic parameters of the free will defense, and some significant objections and perceived shortcomings of the free will defense, along with some of the more prominent proposals that advocate alternatives or additions to the free will defense. Through this introduction to the problem of evil, it will become clear that while the existing approaches offer considerable resources for addressing the problems that evil presents for Christian theism, significant issues remain, which might be illuminated by closer consideration of the nature of God's love. This introduction thus sets the stage for a constructive proposal of a theodicy of love rooted in the biblical canon and in consonance with Christian theism. This proposal affirms and goes beyond the free will defense toward positing a coherent and morally sufficient reason for God to permit horrendous evil in a broad sense, without suggesting that there are (or need be) morally sufficient reasons for specific horrendous evils in and of themselves or for the proximate impact of such evils.

The Free Will Defense and the Necessary Possibility of Evil

The Free Will Defense

If God is good, why is there *so much* evil in this world?¹² The presence of evil poses a significant problem for Christian theists, insofar as they maintain that God is entirely good (omnibenevolent), all-powerful (omnipotent), aware

11. For more on the understanding of divine love employed in this work, see chap. 2 and Peckham, *Love of God*.

12. As David Hume framed it, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 134.

of everything (omniscient), and providentially involved in some significant way in governing the course of history (sovereign). Indeed, if God is both all-good and all-powerful, then he must both desire no evil and possess the power to prevent all evil.¹³ Yet there is horrendous evil all around us. Many thinkers contend that this perceived dilemma can be escaped only by concluding that God is not good or that he is not omnipotent or that he does not exist at all.

The free will defense is widely viewed as the most successful defense against the problem of evil to date. Put simply, it claims that God granted creatures a kind of free will that is incompatible with determinism, and it is thus impossible to *determine* that all beings *freely* do what God desires. Tragically, some creatures exercise their free will to do that which God does not desire (i.e., evil), and although God possesses the sheer power to determine all events, doing so would negate the free will that God has granted according to his benevolent purpose. Evil, then, is the result of creaturely misuse of free will.

The appeal to free will in order to address the problem of evil has a long history in Christian theology. As Paul Gavrilyuk explains, “Relatively early among patristic theologians, a broad agreement emerged that the free will of some rational creatures accounted for the actualization of evil. The Creator could not be held responsible for the free evil choices that rational creatures made, since God did not causally determine these choices.”¹⁴ Rather, the “misuse of angelic and human free will is the cause of evil.”¹⁵ The free will argument is thus in keeping with a significant stream of Christian tradition and is often associated most prominently with Augustine, particularly as put forth in his early work *On Free Choice of the Will*.¹⁶

In recent decades the free will defense has been set forth in highly influential and rigorous philosophical accounts, most notably by Alvin Plantinga.¹⁷ In the view of many philosophers, including many atheists, Plantinga’s free will defense has successfully resolved the *logical* problem of evil. In the words of

13. On divine omnibenevolence, see Deut. 32:4; 1 Sam. 3:18; Ps. 145:9–17; Hab. 1:13; Rev. 15:3. On divine omnipotence, see Rev. 19:6; cf. Jer. 32:17; Matt. 19:26.

14. Gavrilyuk, “Overview of Patristic Theodicies,” 4.

15. Gavrilyuk, “Overview of Patristic Theodicies,” 6.

16. Some scholars believe Augustine came to embrace determinism after he wrote this work, but others dispute this. Regarding the wide disagreements about Augustine’s view of free will, see Stump, “Augustine on Free Will,” 124–47.

17. See Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*; Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Plantinga describes his defense as aiming only at what “God’s reason [for evil] might possibly be,” in contrast to a theodicy, which “attempts to tell us why God permits evil.” Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 28. My theodicy of love, however, uses the term “theodicy” in a weaker sense, akin to that of Stephen T. Davis, who defines it as “any response to the problem of evil from the perspective of Judeo-Christian religious belief, broadly construed.” Davis, “Introduction,” xi.

William Rowe, a leading atheist philosopher, “The logical problem of evil has been severely diminished, if not entirely resolved,” as a “result of Plantinga’s work.”¹⁸

The logical problem of evil, as famously set forth by J. L. Mackie, contends that the premise “evil exists” is logically incompatible with the premises that “God is omnipotent [and] wholly good.”¹⁹ Plantinga’s free will defense, conversely, aims to demonstrate that the presence of evil in the world is not logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.²⁰ To do so, Plantinga makes use of possible-world semantics, wherein “a possible world is any possible state of affairs that is complete” or “maximal.”²¹ In other words, a possible world is a comprehensive conception of the way *all* things might be, where “all things” includes the entire history of that possible world. Using this concept, Plantinga summarizes his free will defense as follows:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can’t cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren’t significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can’t give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God’s omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.²²

Mackie, conversely, argues that an omnipotent God should be able to create a world in which every creature always and only *freely* does what is good. If God cannot do this, Mackie contends, God is not omnipotent, and if he can but chooses not to do so, God is not entirely good. Mackie’s argument hinges on the premises that “a good thing always eliminates evil

18. Rowe, “Introduction to Part II,” 76. So also, Hasker, *Triumph of God over Evil*, 42. However, J. L. Schellenberg departs from this near-consensus in Schellenberg, “A New Logical Problem of Evil,” 34.

19. See J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in Adams and Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 25–37.

20. I offer only a brief summary of Plantinga’s argument here. For his fuller argumentation, see Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*.

21. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 36.

22. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30.

as far as it can” and that “there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.” As such, “it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely.”²³

Plantinga argues, in contrast, that it might be the case that an omnipotent being has a good reason or reasons for not eliminating every evil that he can. Perhaps God cannot actualize the great value of morally significant creaturely free will without also allowing evil.²⁴ Plantinga argues that it is nonsensical to *determine* beings to *freely* do something, so creatures may choose to do evil, even if God does not want them to do so. As Richard Swinburne explains, “A God who gives humans such free will necessarily brings about the possibility [of evil], and puts outside his own control whether or not that evil occurs. It is not logically possible,” then, “that God could give us such free will and yet ensure that we always use it in the right way.”²⁵

Yet could not God simply create only those creatures that always freely choose good? Plantinga admits that a world in which everyone always and only freely does what is good without being causally determined is theoretically possible. However, he adds, it may not be within God’s power to actualize such a world. Rather, it *might* be the case that any world that God could actualize containing significantly free creatures would include evil done by those creatures.²⁶ If so, this could explain why a God who foreknows the future exhaustively might create *this* world anyway. Perhaps all the alternatives were less desirable in this or some other way.²⁷ Although Plantinga believes (as do I) that God does possess (exhaustive definite) foreknowledge, his basic free will defense does not hinge on this premise.²⁸ I will thus set aside (for discussion in later chapters) further questions regarding whether God could have used foreknowledge to actualize only those creatures who always freely do good.

23. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in Adams and Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 26.

24. See Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29. See further the discussion of Plantinga’s distinction between strong and weak actualization in chap. 2 of the present work.

25. Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, 86.

26. Perhaps “every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity,” which means “it was not within God’s power to actualize any world in which that person is significantly free but does no wrong.” Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 189, 186. If so, “it was beyond the power of God himself to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil” (189).

27. Even if God could “actualize a world including moral good but no moral evil,” perhaps such a world would include far less “moral good” than this world or would include only a few persons. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 190.

28. One prominent form of Plantinga’s argument presupposes the controversial view that God possesses knowledge of what any creature *would* do in any circumstance (middle knowledge). However, Plantinga has set forth another version of this argument that does not require middle knowledge. See Plantinga, “Self-Profile,” 50–52.

Free Will and Omnipotence

Apart from issues regarding foreknowledge, Plantinga's basic line of argument relies on two crucial premises: (1) his libertarian conception of free will, which holds that free will is incompatible with determinism (incompatibilism) and (2) the understanding that, though God is omnipotent, even he cannot bring about just any state of affairs.²⁹ Both of these crucial points merit further attention.

For Plantinga, "A person is significantly free, on a given occasion, if he is then free with respect to a morally significant action."³⁰ What is crucial here is "*being free with respect to an action*. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't."³¹ As Rowe explains, "Once given," this kind of free will "is beyond God's direct control."³² On this view, some of what occurs or does not occur is not up to God alone but genuinely up to the decisions of free creatures.³³ As Richard Swinburne explains, if one has this kind of "free choice between good and evil, that makes him an ultimate source of how things go in the world in a very significant way."³⁴

Given such libertarian free will, it follows that there are some states of affairs that God, although omnipotent, cannot actualize. This is not because God lacks any power but because, insofar as God grants creatures libertarian free will, some states of affairs are contingent on the free decisions of creatures. In this regard, philosophers have long understood omnipotence in a way that undermines Mackie's supposition that "there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do."³⁵ On the contrary, Swinburne argues that the assertion "God is omnipotent, that is, literally can do anything" requires the "obvious qualification that to be omnipotent a person need not be able to do the logically impossible."³⁶

29. Here Plantinga presents only a defense; he "believe[s] that we do" have libertarian freedom but allows that we might not. Plantinga, "Ad Walls," 337. Jerry Walls argues, however, that Plantinga's argument should commit him to a "free will theodicy." Walls, "Why Plantinga Must Move from Defense to Theodicy," 331–34.

30. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30. Here, an action is morally significant if "it would be wrong for [one] to perform the action but right to refrain or vice versa" (30).

31. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29 (emphasis original).

32. Rowe, "Introduction to Part II," 76.

33. As Chad Meister writes, "Free choices are truly up to the individual" such that this "type" of freedom "is incompatible with causal determinism." Meister, *Evil*, 18.

34. Swinburne, "Some Major Strands of Theodicy," 250.

35. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in Adams and Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 26.

36. Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 153. See further chap. 5 in the present volume.

C. S. Lewis explains,

[God's] omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to his power. If you choose to say "God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it," you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can." . . . It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because his power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.³⁷

Omnipotence, then, entails only the "power to do what is logically possible."³⁸ Yet as Richard Rice argues, insofar as God grants creatures libertarian free will, the exercise of his power would thereby be self-limited to "anything logically possible *that does not require creaturely cooperation*."³⁹ Insofar as some good is contingent on the significantly free choices of creatures, it may not be possible for God to bring it about. In other words, if God is committed to respecting the free will of humans, what God can bring about will be limited by the free decisions of humans. As Plantinga puts it, "There are plenty of contingent states of affairs such that it is not within the power of God to bring about their actuality, or cause them to be actual. He cannot cause it to be the case that I freely refrain from an action A; for if he does so, he causes it to be the case that I refrain from A, in which case I do not do so *freely*."⁴⁰

Plantinga states the matter simply: if God grants free will to Maurice "with respect to [a particular] action, then whether or not he actually performs the action is up to Maurice—not God."⁴¹ For this reason, Plantinga's free will defense does not claim that this world is the best *possible* world. First, the notion of a *best* possible world might not even be coherent. "Perhaps for any world you pick, there is a better" one.⁴² Second, even if the notion of a best possible world is coherent, "better worlds than this world certainly seem

37. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 18.

38. Swinburne, *Coherence of Theism*, 180.

39. Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 52 (emphasis original).

40. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 171 (emphasis original).

41. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 44.

42. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 168. Perhaps an additional value might be added to any conceivable world.

conceivable.”⁴³ However, if it is not up to God whether Maurice takes a particular action, then if Maurice chooses to take action *x*, it is not up to God to create the possible world wherein Maurice chooses not to take action *x*, even if that world is better. As such, if God does not determine the free will decisions of creatures, only some possible worlds are able to be actualized by God. Here, “central to the Free Will Defense is the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world He pleased.”⁴⁴ Rather, “the creation of a world containing moral good is a co-operative venture” involving the significantly free decisions of creatures.⁴⁵ If God “aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures on whose cooperation he must depend. Thus is the power of an omnipotent God limited by the freedom he confers upon his creatures.”⁴⁶

This understanding brings us back to “the heart of the Free Will Defense,” which for Plantinga “is the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil.”⁴⁷ On this view (contra Mackie), there are “limits on what an omnipotent thing can do,” and it is not necessarily true that, as Mackie insists, “a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can” or “that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely.”⁴⁸ Rather, because of the free will decisions of creatures, there may be some value or values that God cannot bring about without allowing evil. Given creaturely free will, Davis writes, “the amount of good and evil that exists in the world is partially up to us and not entirely up to God.”⁴⁹ Indeed, in Plantinga’s view all “evil arises from creaturely free will.”⁵⁰

The Necessary Possibility of Evil for Genuine Love

If evil is the result of the misuse of creaturely free will, then, as Stephen Davis argues, “God is not to be blamed for the existence of moral evil. We are.”⁵¹ However, many question whether the value of free will is worth all the

43. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 75.

44. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 34. This is in contrast to what he calls “Leibniz’s Lapse,” which claims God could do so (44).

45. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 190.

46. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 190.

47. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 31.

48. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in Adams and Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 26.

49. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil, 75–76.

50. Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” 4.

51. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 75.

evil in this world. Perhaps, some suggest, God should not have granted free will, particularly if the result is all the horrendous evil in this world.

In my view, the free will defense is strongest when the value that is offered as the morally sufficient reason for God's allowance of evil is not moral freedom alone but love, which I take to be a greater good, perhaps even the greatest good in the universe. Indeed, if "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), what value could be greater? Thus I agree with Davis and many others that love was a "main aim" of God in granting free will: "God wanted to create a world in which created rational agents (e.g., human beings) would decide freely to love and obey God."⁵² As such, love itself might be God's "overriding reason for allowing the amount of moral evil that exists in the world."⁵³

If love requires freedom and if the rejection of God's love is itself evil, then love requires the *possibility* of evil.⁵⁴ Davis explains, "Obviously, in making human beings free, God ran the risk that they would go wrong. The possibility of freely doing evil is the inevitable companion of the possibility of freely doing good."⁵⁵ Rice further argues that love "requires freedom." He explains, "God's creatures would not be free to say yes to God unless they were free to say no. Sadly, this is just what some of them did."⁵⁶ Put another way, love (as defined in this work) must be freely given and freely received. For creatures, this entails the ability to reject God's love and thus directly or indirectly oppose God's desire for love. If opposition to God's desire is evil (as shall be argued in chap. 2), then love itself requires the *possibility* of evil.

The understanding that love requires the *possibility* of evil relates to a number of further issues while also raising additional important questions for exploration throughout this book. First, understanding the possibility of evil as a necessary condition of genuine love provides a potential response to those who suggest that God should not have provided free will to creatures. As noted above, many wonder why free will would be valued so highly as to be viewed as a morally sufficient reason for the permission of evil (particularly horrendous evils). This theodicy of love posits, however, that free will is a functional good, a means to the greater end of love—where love is perhaps the highest intrinsic good. As Lewis puts it, "Free will is what made evil possible. Why, then, did God give [creatures] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that

52. S. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," 74.

53. S. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," 77.

54. See chap. 2 in the present volume.

55. S. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," 75.

56. Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 47.

worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other. . . . And for that they must be free.”⁵⁷

Second, this understanding challenges the view that (actualized) evil is itself necessary for some greater good. Whereas the free will defense is compatible with such a claim, the theodicy of love set forth in this book contends that God never desires or needs evil. Rather, God desires that creatures such as humans enjoy a love relationship with himself and others, which requires the *possibility* but not the *necessity* of evil. Although it is possible that everyone freely chooses to love God, it is also possible that some do not do so. As such, evil is not *necessary* for love, but the necessary context for love requires the *possibility* of evil. As Davis says, “It was not necessary that evil exist. The nonexistence of evil was possible; humans could have chosen to obey God. Sadly, they didn’t.”⁵⁸ Rice adds, “God is responsible for the *possibility* of evil, but not for the *actuality* of evil. The creatures who misused their freedom are entirely to blame for that.”⁵⁹ If so, the great good of the flourishing of love in this world (particularly in the eschaton) might not have been obtainable by God in any preferable way. This is not because evil is itself necessary but because, in the free will defense, what is obtainable by God is limited by the free decisions of others.

Many additional questions remain, including the much-disputed question regarding whether humans possess such libertarian free will. Mackie, for instance, preemptively argues that appeals to free will as a “solution” are “unsatisfactory primarily because of the incoherence of the notion of the freedom of the will.”⁶⁰ Further, even if one grants that humans possess such free will, does the extent of free will required by love really provide a sufficient explanation for the evil in this world? It could be argued that there are many evils in this world that God could have mitigated or eliminated without damaging or jeopardizing love.

Objections to the Free Will Defense and a Way Forward

In my view, the free will defense is successful relative to the logical problem of evil, and I will make a case in the following chapter that the biblical data strongly support the minimal parameters of the free will defense, contra

57. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 48.

58. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 75.

59. Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 47.

60. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in Adams and Adams, *Problem of Evil*, 33.

Ehrman's claim that free will "plays only a very minor role in the biblical tradition" in accounting for "suffering."⁶¹ In this regard, I agree with Davis that the free will defense "is a theodicy that grows out of the witness of the Christian scriptures."⁶² However, many Christian theologians question whether Scripture teaches that humans possess the kind of free will posited in the free will defense in the first place. Alternatively, some theologians claim that God has determined everything that happens in this world in order to achieve some purportedly greater good, such as the manifestation of his power and glory. Before making the case for why I think a libertarian free will approach is preferable to determinism, a number of other objections to the free will defense should be noted, setting the stage for the discussion in the remaining chapters of how a theodicy of love goes beyond the basic free will defense and thus might helpfully address such objections.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

Although most philosophers now view the free will defense as successful relative to the *logical* problem of evil, many philosophers think it improbable that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would permit the kind and amount of evil, particularly *horrendous* evil, in this world.⁶³ They believe the free will defense is insufficient relative to the evidential problem of evil, which claims that the kind and amount of evil in this world counts as evidence against the existence of an all-powerful and entirely good God.⁶⁴ In response, some philosophers have made a case for what they call skeptical theism, which doubts the present ability of humans to make sufficiently knowledgeable judgments about why God has acted or refrained from acting as he has. However, others believe that skeptical theism is not adequate to rebut these charges and that more is needed, particularly in light of the positive claims of the Christian faith.⁶⁵

Further, some critics have contended that the free will defense is not able to account for "natural evils" in this world at all, horrendous or otherwise. As William Rowe puts it, "While this theodicy may explain some of the evil in our world, it cannot account for the massive amount of human suffering

61. Ehrman, *God's Problem*, 12.

62. S. Davis, "Free Will and Evil," 89.

63. See M. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.

64. For an introduction to the evidential problem of evil, see Rowe, *God and the Problem of Evil*, 121–233.

65. A great deal has been written recently regarding this approach. See, e.g., the large section in McBrayer and Howard-Snyder, *Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 377–506. See further Dougherty and McBrayer, *Skeptical Theism*.

that is not due to human acts of free will. Natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.) bring about enormous amounts of human and animal suffering. But it is obvious that such suffering is not proportionate to the abuses of free will by humans.”⁶⁶ In response to such objections, Plantinga has suggested the possibility (without claiming it is true) that what we call “natural evils” are actually caused by the free will decisions of “non-human persons,” including much evil caused by “Satan and his cohorts.”⁶⁷ Defining “natural evil” as evil “that cannot be ascribed to the free actions of human beings,” Plantinga suggests that “both moral and natural evil” might be “cases of what we might call broadly moral evil—evil resulting from the free actions of personal beings, whether human or not.”⁶⁸ If this is possible, then the free will defense is also successful relative to the (logical) problem of natural evil.

Some have critiqued this appeal to supernatural agencies as not dealing with “natural evils” at all but rather as claiming that there are no such things. Further, Michael Tooley maintains that “though it is possible that earthquakes, hurricanes, cancer, and the predation of animals are all caused by malevolent supernatural beings, the probability that this is so is extremely low.”⁶⁹ Plantinga himself recognizes that “many people find this idea [of supernatural agencies] preposterous; but that is scarcely evidence against it. Some theologians tell us that this idea is repugnant to ‘man come of age’ or to ‘modern habits of thought.’ Again, this may be so (although it certainly isn’t repugnant to everyone nowadays), but it doesn’t come to much as evidence.”⁷⁰ For his part, he considers it

less than clear that Western academia has much to say by way of evidence against the idea. That beings of these sorts should be involved in the history of our world seems to me (as to, e.g., C. S. Lewis and many others) not at all unlikely, in particular not unlikely with respect to Christian theism. The thought that much evil is due to Satan and his cohorts is of course entirely consistent with God’s being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good; furthermore it isn’t nearly as improbable with respect to “what we now know” as most philosophers seem to assume.⁷¹

66. Howard-Snyder, Bergmann, and Rowe, “Exchange on the Problem of Evil,” 136.

67. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 192. See chap. 4 in the present volume.

68. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 191, 193. S. Davis similarly believes that “the devil exists and is possibly responsible for natural evil.” S. Davis, “Rejoinder,” 214n12. However, he thinks other responses are stronger apologetically (104).

69. Tooley, “Problem of Evil.”

70. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 62.

71. Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” 16. Cf. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*.

In this and other regards, much hinges on the plausibility of appeals to demonic activity within Christian theism. This issue will be taken up further in chapter 3 in light of the claims of Scripture and the Christian tradition.

Even if one accepts Plantinga's defense relative to so-called natural evils, one could argue that the horrendous magnitude of some of these—coupled with the enormity of moral evils in human history (e.g., the Holocaust)—counts as strong evidence that God is not good, not all-powerful, or does not exist at all. According to Plantinga, the “typical atheological claim at present is not that the existence of God is incompatible with that of evil; it is rather that the latter offers the resources for a strong evidential or probabilistic argument against the former.”⁷² For example, Paul Draper advocates a form of the evidential problem of evil, contending that “our knowledge about pain and pleasure creates an epistemic problem for theists.” Because of the horrendous evils in this world, he maintains, “we have a *prima facie* good epistemic reason to reject theism.”⁷³ He believes the weight of the evidence suggests that, even if supernatural beings exist, they are indifferent to human pain and suffering. He calls this the “hypothesis of indifference” and believes it provides a better explanation than theism for the kind and amount of suffering in this world. On this view, “neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons.”⁷⁴

Whereas free will *might* provide a logical defense for *some* evil in a world created and governed by an all-good (omnibenevolent) and all-powerful God, advocates of the evidential problem of evil contend that it does not adequately account for the amount of horrendous evil that we find in *this* world. They believe that free will by itself does not provide a morally sufficient reason for the kind and amount of evil in this world. In this regard, Davis notes that although the “free will defender” attributes “all morally evil events” to “created free moral agents who chose to do evil,” the “question can still be raised whether the moral freedom that the FWD [free will defense] says God gave us was worth the cost.”⁷⁵ Chad Meister asks further, “Would not a world without free will be better than a world with free will if evil of this magnitude is its result?”⁷⁶

72. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 462.

73. Draper, “Pain and Pleasure,” 180.

74. Draper, “Pain and Pleasure,” 181. See the further discussion in chap. 6.

75. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 82. D. Z. Phillips, for his part, rejects the free will defense because he thinks it amounts to an “instrumentalism” that “makes creation look like an ego-centric exercise.” Phillips, “Critique of the Free Will Defense,” 90.

76. Meister, *Evil*, 33.

Alternatives and Challenges to the Basic Free Will Defense

Based on the evidential problem of evil and other considerations, John K. Roth sets forth a theodicy of protest, or anti-theodicy, contending that whereas “human freedom has been used as God’s defense; in fact, it is crucial in God’s offense.”⁷⁷ In his view, humans “have more power and more freedom than is good for us” such that “history is largely a slaughter-bench.”⁷⁸ In this regard, William Rowe argues,

While being free to do evil may be essential to genuine freedom, no responsible person thinks that the good of human freedom is so great as to require that no steps be taken to prevent some of the more flagrant abuses of free choice that result in massive, undeserved suffering by humans and animals. Any moral person who had power to do so would have intervened to prevent the evil free choices that resulted in the torture and death of six million Jews in the Holocaust. We commonly act to restrict egregious abuses of human freedom that result in massive, undeserved human and animal suffering. Any moral being, including God, if he exists, would likely do the same. And since the free will theodicy is representative of the other attempts to justify God’s permission of the horrendous evils in our world, it is reasonably clear that these evils cannot be explained away by appeal to theodicies.⁷⁹

Davis offers a series of difficult questions that can be asked in this vein: “Why didn’t God create a world of less freedom and thus less murder? Why didn’t God place us in an environment that provides fewer opportunities or temptations to do wrong? Why didn’t God provide us with a morally stronger psychological endowment? Why didn’t God create us with an inability to kill other human beings?”⁸⁰ Further, if God possesses foreknowledge, why did he not “opt to create only those” who would be “morally perfect”—or at least only those who would not be “heinous moral monsters”?⁸¹

One way to reply to these questions is to suggest that all of these evils actually bring about specific greater goods that could not be achieved without them.⁸² However, many evil events appear to be what philosophers call gratuitous evils, which Davis defines as “any painful event that makes the world

77. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 8.

78. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 10, 7.

79. Howard-Snyder, Bergmann, and Rowe, “Exchange on the Problem of Evil,” 136.

80. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 82.

81. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 85. This foreknowledge objection is discussed in chap. 6 in the present volume.

82. E.g., Swinburne’s higher-order goods defense, discussed below.

worse, all things considered, because it occurs.”⁸³ Meister voices the worry of many when he notes that, whereas the free will defense “may account for some of the moral and natural evils that exist, it does not seem to provide an answer for why there is so much evil, and why there is so much evil which seems utterly horrific and gratuitous.”⁸⁴

The problem of gratuitous evils, particularly horrendous ones, is closely related to beliefs about the extent of God’s power. As a free will defender, Davis argues that “God has the power totally to control all events and things but does not use it” to do so.⁸⁵ Although “God is fully sovereign and omnipotent, [he] voluntarily shares some of the divine power with the creatures.”⁸⁶ Davis believes that

God’s policy decision to make us free was wise, for it will turn out better in the long run that we act freely, even if we sometimes err, than it would have turned out had we been created as innocent automata, programmed always to do the good. . . . The good that will in the end result from it will outweigh the evil that will in the end result from it. In the eschaton it will be evident that God chose the best course and that the favorable balance of good over evil that will then exist was obtainable by God in no other way or in no morally preferable way.⁸⁷

In his view, even though God temporarily allows horrendous evil in this world, ultimately “God will redeem all evil.”⁸⁸

Yet even if the result “outweighs” the evil, it seems that God could have brought forth at least as much good with less evil, which would contradict Davis’s view. Does free will alone sufficiently account for God’s allowance of all the horrendous evils in this world? Could not some evils have been mitigated without diminishing free will? Even if not, should not one who possesses the power to prevent horrendous evil do so, even if it contravenes free will? What about Christian eschatology? If creaturely free will leads to such horrendous evil now, would it not continue to do so in the eschaton?

Some open theists—who hold that God does not possess exhaustive definite foreknowledge—have argued along the lines of a free will defense similar to Davis’s but have added that God may not be culpable for the horrendous evil in this world because, in their view, God did not know with certainty that

83. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 84.

84. Meister, *Evil*, 33.

85. S. Davis, “Critique of Process Theodicy,” 136.

86. S. Davis, “Critique of Process Theodicy,” 136.

87. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 75.

88. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 83.

such evils would result from his creation of this world.⁸⁹ Perhaps God created this world in hope that it would turn out far better than it has but committed to doing all that he can to maximize goodness and love without undermining the free will that is requisite to genuine love.⁹⁰ One wonders, however, whether open theism's suggestion that God might not be culpable for that which he does not foreknow actually helps to assuage the difficulty of the problems of evil. Presumably, an omnipotent God with present knowledge of evil could stop any and every evil just before it would occur.⁹¹

The open theist might reply that, in committing to the context necessary for creatures to enjoy a love relationship with God and one another, God has (morally) limited his own action relative to the mitigation or elimination of evil. As John Sanders puts it, God "does not limit his power or abilities, but does restrain the exercise of his power or the scope of his activities," and this "divine self-restraint" is "the restraint of love in concern for his creatures."⁹² Greg Boyd sets forth a trinitarian warfare theodicy of cosmic conflict, wherein the free will and irrevocable power of some supernatural agencies opposed to God help explain why God does not mitigate or eliminate more evils than he does.⁹³ Both the conception of divine self-limitation and that of cosmic conflict provide helpful avenues for addressing the problem(s) of evil, which shall be further explored in the coming chapters. However, neither of these avenues (nor the emphasis on love) requires commitment to open theism. In particular, they do not require or benefit from the rejection of (exhaustive definite) divine foreknowledge, which stands in significant tension with the majority view of Christian theism and some significant biblical material suggestive of God's exhaustive and sovereign plan for human history. Further, open theism struggles to adequately account for confidence in the final eschatological defeat of evil.

The open theist accounts discussed above and other forms of the free will defense face the considerable challenge of making sense of the view that God could prevent heinous evils but chooses not to do so. In this regard, many

89. As Rice explains it, "open theodicy" maintains that since future "free decisions" are "not there to be known," God not only is "not responsible for these decisions" but also "cannot be blamed for not knowing them, not preventing them or not warning us about them." Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 104.

90. Rice writes, "Suppose the likelihood of rebellion was slight and the results were potentially catastrophic. What then? On this scenario, God did everything possible to minimize the chance that anyone would rebel." Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, 102.

91. Unlike many process theologians (see below), most open theists maintain that God is omnipotent.

92. Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 241.

93. See Boyd, *God at War*; Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.

thinkers maintain that a God who fails to prevent horrendous evils that he could prevent would not be good at all. If God has limited himself, some maintain, he should “un-limit” himself when faced with such evils.

David Ray Griffin, a prominent proponent of an approach called process theodicy, believes that an omnipotent God *should* prevent evil by intervening whenever necessary to do so and could do so in such a way that nothing would be lost by any creatures. Given omnipotence of the kind defined as the power to do anything that is intrinsically possible, Griffin argues, “God could intervene to prevent any specific instance of evil” without any loss to creatures by determining all events while making individuals think that they possess significant free will.⁹⁴ In other words, “God could have created beings identical with ourselves, except that they would not really have been free to sin.” Such creatures “could even have believed that they were really acting freely while always doing good. Only God would know otherwise.”⁹⁵ Since only God would gain from creaturely “genuine freedom . . . granting this freedom, from which most of the world’s ills result, would thereby seem to be a very selfish decision.”⁹⁶ Griffin concludes that since such an omnipotent God would be morally wrong not to prevent or eliminate evil, God must not be omnipotent in the traditional sense.⁹⁷ He thus advocates a form of finitism, which avoids the problem of evil by claiming that God is not culpable for the evil in this world because God lacks the power to prevent it.⁹⁸

Thomas Jay Oord sets forth a similar perspective, arguing that God lacks the power to prevent evil because he is love, which Oord defines as utterly uncontrolling. In Oord’s view, any “God” who possess the power to override free will to prevent some horrendous evil would be morally obligated to do so. As he puts it, a “God who can veto any specific act should veto acts of

94. Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing,” 117.

95. Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing,” 118. This would require deception by God. Griffin himself admits that “any kind of deception would be morally problematic.” Griffin, “Critique of Irenaean Theodicy,” 54.

96. Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing,” 118.

97. Griffin believes most “problems of Christian theology” stem from “the traditional doctrine of divine omnipotence.” He believes “we must fully surrender this doctrine if we” are to hold that God is “unambiguously loving.” Griffin, “Critique of the Free Will Defense,” 96. This echoes seminal process theologian Charles Hartshorne’s view that the problem of evil is a “false problem” that arises from “a faulty or non-social definition of omnipotence.” Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process*, 41.

98. I use “finitism” as a category that includes any view denying that God possesses the power to prevent evil. Griffin, however, maintains that God has “perfect power, with ‘perfect’ defined as the ‘greatest conceivable,’” claiming “traditional theism’s idea of omnipotence” does not provide an adequate standard for saying “the power of process theism’s God is imperfect, finite, or limited.” Griffin, “Rejoinder,” 139.

genuine evil. Not to do so means God is morally culpable.”⁹⁹ Oord thus argues that any appeal to divine self-restraint, such as that of Sanders, describes a God who “fails to act like a loving human, let alone a perfectly loving God [because] loving parents prevent evil when they can.”¹⁰⁰ He maintains instead that “if God does not care enough to prevent genuinely evil occurrences while having the power to do so, God is not love.”¹⁰¹ On Oord’s essential kenosis approach, conversely, God’s nature is self-emptying love and thus God cannot prevent the horrendous evils in this world. Oord rejects the view that God *allows* evil.¹⁰² If God could prevent any such evils, he would do so. However, as uncontrolling love, God by nature *cannot* mitigate or prevent the evils in this world.¹⁰³ Since “God does not essentially possess all power” and cannot coerce, he is not responsible for evil.¹⁰⁴

Although this view may effectively deny divine culpability for evil, many Christian theists do not find it appealing because it conflicts with the traditional Christian view of divine omnipotence. Indeed, Scripture and the Christian tradition maintain that God has intervened powerfully and miraculously in the past to prevent evils and has thus repeatedly exercised the kind of power that, it seems, could also mitigate or eliminate the evil in this world. As Ehrman puts it, “For the authors of the Bible, the God who created this world is a God of love and power who intervenes . . . [with] answered prayer and worked miracles.” Ehrman asks, “Where is this God now? . . . If God intervened [in the biblical narratives], why doesn’t he intervene now?”¹⁰⁵ In this regard, while agreeing with Griffin and Oord that God’s failure to exercise his power to prevent horrendous evils makes him culpable for such evils, Roth contends that the God of Christianity *must* possess the power to prevent such evils. In his view, the God who raised Jesus from the dead “plausibly had the might to thwart the Holocaust long before it ended.”¹⁰⁶

Finitist approaches that reject the view that God possesses the power to prevent evil have significant problems accounting for the basic claims of

99. Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 141.

100. Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 135.

101. Oord, “Matching Theology and Piety,” 345. Elsewhere Oord writes that a “voluntarily kenotic God is culpable for failing to prevent evil.” Oord, *Nature of Love*, 124.

102. Oord gives his approach this label, by which he means God is essentially related to the world in a way that involves “*involuntary* divine self-limitation.” Oord, *Nature of Love*, 125 (emphasis original).

103. See Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 148, 181.

104. Oord, “Matching Theology and Piety,” 314.

105. Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 5.

106. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 11. Cf. Wiesel, *Night*.

Christian theism. For Davis, although accounts that deny this kind of divine omnipotence deserve a hearing, they are not properly *theistic* responses to the problem of evil.¹⁰⁷ Such views are unacceptable to a traditional Christian theist because they deny what Thomas P. Flint calls “the traditional theological claim that God is the all-knowing, sovereign, providential lord of the universe.”¹⁰⁸ In Flint’s view, “Scripture seems to speak clearly and repeatedly of a God who knowingly and lovingly exercises detailed control over his creation.”¹⁰⁹ Yet if this is so, Roth asks, “Why should anybody bother with a God like this one, who seems so infrequently to do the best that is within God’s power?”¹¹⁰

If God possesses the sheer power to intervene to prevent evils, as he is depicted as possessing throughout the Bible, then it would seem that he should (at least sometimes) do so. Yet God often appears to be hidden, particularly in times of suffering (see Ps. 10:1; 13:1–4).¹¹¹ The value of free will alone seems to fall short in explaining this problem. As Tooley writes, “The fact that libertarian free will is valuable does not entail that one should never intervene in the exercise of libertarian free will. Indeed, very few people think that one should not intervene to prevent someone from committing rape or murder. On the contrary, almost everyone would hold that a failure to prevent heinously evil actions when one can do so would be seriously wrong.”¹¹²

Some approaches avoid this charge by rejecting its main premise. They argue that “failure to prevent [even] heinously evil actions when one can do so” might not be “seriously wrong,” particularly if such evils bring about some specific greater good or goods that could not have been achieved without such evils. While a number of prominent proposals take something like this view, for now I will focus on some that do so while also accepting that the free will defense (or something like it) must be part of the equation to effectively address the problem of evil.

One of the most prominent of these is John Hick’s soul-making theodicy.¹¹³ For Hick, soul-making takes place “through the evolutionary process”

107. For Davis, theism entails “an omnipotent and perfectly good being.” S. Davis, “Introduction,” ix.

108. Flint, *Divine Providence*, 3.

109. Flint, *Divine Providence*, 17.

110. Roth, “Theodicy of Protest,” 11. Although Roth believes in this kind of God, he also protests against what he considers to be God’s immorality.

111. Cf. Schellenberg’s argument that divine hiddenness justifies atheism. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.

112. Tooley, “Problem of Evil.”

113. See John Hick’s seminal work *Evil and the God of Love*. For a briefer account, see Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy.”

wherein “immature creature[s]” develop by “living in a challenging and therefore person-making world.”¹¹⁴ On this view, genuine morality and spirituality *must* develop freely and at some distance from God, which can take place only in a world like ours with all its religious ambiguity, suffering, and evil. Humans are created morally imperfect and “at an epistemic distance from God,” that they might grow into God’s children through their own choices.¹¹⁵ Such “cognitive” or “epistemic distance” from God requires a world that looks “as if there were no God”—that is, “a world which functions as an autonomous system and from within which God is not overwhelmingly evident.”¹¹⁶ Accordingly, “God must set [humans] at a distance from Himself, from which [they] can then voluntarily come to God.”¹¹⁷

On Hick’s account, God’s hiddenness, distance from the world, and allowance of evil provide the necessary context for human souls to develop based on their own decisions. In a context of danger, pain, suffering, and religious ambiguity, human souls can develop free from divine interventions, which would purportedly upset the necessary context for utterly free moral development and growth.¹¹⁸ Indeed, Hick contends, the “capacity to love would never be developed, except in a very limited sense of the word, in a world in which there was no such thing as suffering.”¹¹⁹ Relative to charges against an omnipotent God who fails to prevent horrendous evils, Hick contends that if “we take with full seriousness the value of human freedom and responsibility, . . . then we cannot consistently want God to revoke that freedom when its wrong exercise becomes intolerable to us.”¹²⁰ Rather, the evils in this world are actually for the greater good of the process of

114. Hick, “Irenaean Theodicy,” 39. Hick notes, however, that this theodicy “cannot, as such, be attributed to Irenaeus.” Irenaeus is the “patron saint” of this type of theodicy, which is presented by later thinkers, “the greatest of whom [is] Friedrich Schleiermacher” (40).

115. Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 275. Hick thus rejects the view that humans fell from perfection, arguing that it is both implausible, given modern science, and that it is “logically impossible for humans to be created already in [a] perfect state.” He claims that the moral development of finite beings requires their “freely choosing the good in preference to evil” and “coming freely to an uncoerced consciousness of God from a situation of epistemic distance” (276).

116. Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 269–70.

117. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 317.

118. Hick explains that soul-making requires that the “environment, instead of being a pain-free and stress-free paradise, be broadly the kind of world of which we find ourselves to be a part.” Hick, “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 275. Cf. Meister’s “theodicy of fulfillment,” which “includes the main elements of free will and soul-making [wherein] a challenging environment is necessary,” emphasizing “a redemptive component” relative to God’s “workings” in “the natural world.” Meister, *Evil*, 40. Cf. also Hasker’s approach in *Triumph of God over Evil*.

119. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 361.

120. Hick, “Irenaean Theodicy,” 49. Although Hick’s own theological views have evolved, his soul-making theodicy was premised on divine omnipotence.

soul-making, which allows Hick to affirm the ancient phrase *O felix culpa* (Oh happy fault).¹²¹

In a somewhat similar vein, recognizing the significant problems facing the free will defender, Richard Swinburne sets forth a higher-order goods defense in addition to the free will defense, which he views as “a central core of theodicy.”¹²² The higher-order goods defense posits “the good of [freely] performing certain sorts of good action” such as “those done in the face of evils,” which “cannot be done unless there is pain and suffering . . . to which they react.”¹²³ Such goods include “showing sympathy, . . . helping the suffering, and showing courage of a certain sort.”¹²⁴ These are, he contends, part of a “logical straightjacket of goods which cannot be realized without actual or possible evils.”¹²⁵ Davis appeals to this line of argument in order to deal with “natural evil” as well, saying that “as Richard Swinburne has argued, certain goods are such that God’s creating a world in which natural evil exists is the only way, or the morally best permissible way, for God to make them possible.”¹²⁶

According to Swinburne, there is “some truth” in “O Felix Culpa. . . . There are good actions of certain kinds which can only be done in the face of good actions of various kinds.”¹²⁷ Swinburne considers the objection that there are “too many, too various, and too serious evils to justify bringing about the goods which they make possible,” to which he replies, “It must be stressed that each evil or possible evil removed takes away one more actual good.”¹²⁸ He thus argues that each evil is indispensable because “we need a similar amount of evil if we are to have the similar amount of good.”¹²⁹

Whereas such a position might be effective as a defense at the level of logical possibility, I have serious misgivings about the adequacy of this kind of

121. See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 400. Further, he argues, the “justification of evil” depends on “the completeness, or universality, of the salvation achieved” such that “in the end all will freely turn to [God] in love.” Hick, “Irenaean Theodicy,” 52.

122. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 250, 251. Notably, Plantinga himself allows that “perhaps some natural evils and some persons are so related that the persons would have produced less moral good if the evils had been absent.” Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*, 192.

123. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 250. For a fuller account, see Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

124. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 250.

125. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 251.

126. S. Davis, “Free Will and Evil,” 79.

127. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 253. He does qualify, however, that there is “not as much” truth in *felix culpa* “as the writer of the *Exultet* supposed” (253). Notably, Plantinga also recently set forth a *felix culpa* theodicy. Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” 10. See the discussion in chap. 6 of the present volume.

128. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 258.

129. Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 257.

response and any other that makes the actuality of some evil *necessary* for the achievement of a greater good. As Davis recognizes, “Those theists who hold that all evil helps lead to a greater good deny that ‘genuine evil’ exists. They implicitly affirm that all evil is only apparent.”¹³⁰ Such a position appears to make every evil effectively an instrumental good.¹³¹ This appears to contradict Paul’s rejection of the assertion, “Let us do evil that good may come” (Rom. 3:8; cf. 6:1).¹³² If evil is *never* gratuitous, then why should it *ever* be prevented? If every evil brings some greater good, why not propagate more evil?

Beyond such objections, I question whether the “goods” in virtuous responses to evils are themselves intrinsic goods without which there would be less value in the world. It seems to me far more likely that the intrinsic good displayed in such virtuous responses flows from the underlying disposition of love, which presumably could be maximally displayed in a world without evil. If this is so, there are likely comparable or better virtuous actions and responses in a world without evil that more profoundly display the intrinsic goodness of love.¹³³

Another Way Forward

The theodicy of love set forth in the remainder of this book attempts to carefully outline a way forward for those who, like me, affirm divine omnipotence, divine foreknowledge, and a view of providence that includes special interventions, while denying that evil is necessary for (greater) good. However, any path forward will need to address the seemingly plausible claim that an omnipotent God who respects free will would nevertheless be able to do more than he appears to do to mitigate evil in this world.

Perhaps God could make the consequences of bad decisions far less bad than they are, especially with regard to the suffering of innocents. As Meister asks, “Even granting a robust libertarian view of free will, could God not have prevented the consequences of the evil decisions made by free creatures—consequences having to do with both moral and natural evils?”¹³⁴

130. S. Davis, “Critique of Process Theodicy,” 134.

131. This is notwithstanding Swinburne’s view that it “remains the case, however, that evil is evil, and there is a substantial price to pay for the goods of our world.” Swinburne, “Some Major Strands of Theodicy,” 260. Cf. Hick’s discussion of Schleiermacher’s “instrumental view of evil.” Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 239.

132. In this regard, I agree with Karl Barth’s protest that “when sin is understood positively” and “when it counterbalances grace and is indispensable to it, it is not real sin.” K. Barth, *CD III/3:333*.

133. See the discussion in chap. 6 of the present volume.

134. Meister, *Evil*, 32.

Further, one might wonder why God does not intervene in ways that could prevent or mitigate evil without seeming to impinge on free will at all. For example, perhaps God could have provided some special revelation to the CIA director about the impending terrorist attacks of 9/11, providing just enough information that law enforcement could thwart the attacks. Whereas some perspectives (such as Hick's) might argue that special revelation of this (or any) kind would negate the epistemic distance necessary for free will, the traditional Christian view of God's providence affirms the claims of Scripture that God has repeatedly provided special revelation to selected individuals and groups in the past. If God could warn Pharaoh of an impending famine via a dream (Gen. 41:1–7), why did God not warn the director of the CIA (or someone else in a position to prevent the disaster) of the impending World Trade Center attack or of any other number of atrocities and tragedies?¹³⁵

In this respect and others, the basic free will defense leaves some significant and troubling questions unaddressed. Critics have called for further specific arguments that go beyond defense to theodicy. Accordingly, the following chapters of this book outline a theodicy of love that moves beyond the basic free will defense, addressing the evidential problem of evil within the context of a cosmic conflict over love, aiming to provide an internally consistent and canonically plausible explanation as to why God permits so much evil in this world.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the complexity and magnitude of the problem of evil within the context of Christian theology, introduced the free will defense as the most successful approach to the logical problem of evil to date, and noted that the free will defense nevertheless seems insufficient to address the evidential problem of evil. The chapter also briefly introduced numerous proposals that are live options in the current discussion, some competing with the free will defense and some that are compatible with it but move beyond it, including brief examples of protest perspectives, determinism, open theism, finitist approaches, skeptical theism, and some prominent *felix culpa* strategies.

In light of this discussion, it seems that further articulation is needed beyond the basic parameters of the free will defense and perhaps beyond the other live options as well. Although many of these avenues hold considerable

135. Here the problems of evil and divine hiddenness converge.

potential, the paths forward discussed in this chapter also leave significant questions unaddressed or raise other significant issues for the Christian theist, especially one who wishes to affirm a view of divine providence wherein God can and does strongly intervene in the history of the world while rejecting the view that evil is *necessary* to bring about (greater) good.

Toward addressing this situation, the following chapters of this book set forth the various components of a theodicy of love. Chapter 2 begins with a canonical account of creaturely free will that might undergird the basic free will defense (thus bridging the gap between philosophical and biblical accounts) and sketches a working model of divine providence wherein God does not always get what he wants. Chapter 3 expounds the reality of the cosmic conflict framework in Scripture, which is robustly supported in the Christian tradition. Chapter 4 unpacks the nature of this cosmic dispute over God's love and moral government, explaining a covenantal rules-of-engagement framework that assists in understanding why God might not intervene or otherwise prevent or mitigate evils, even in cases where doing so would not appear to violate creaturely free will. Chapter 5 turns to the suffering God of the cross as the conclusive demonstration of God's character of unselfish love, which evokes confidence in God's goodness, even as many questions remain unanswered as we await the final, eschatological solution to evil. Chapter 6 concludes the book with an evaluation of the preferability of this theodicy of love and a discussion of the questions that still remain.