



God Questions 2: The Problem of Evil

Carl Stecher, Peter S. Williams

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God Questions is a record of debate arising out of a correspondence between American Atheist Professor Carl Stecher and English Philosopher Peter S. Williams in 2001-2002. It is reproduced here, as edited by the authors, for the first time.

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Peter and Carl agree that the Problem of Evil is central in any debate about the existence of God as defined by theists. God is supposedly all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect. How can these attributes be reconciled with the fact that our earth, His creation, is filled with evil? The evil is both moral – evil committed by human beings, and natural – evils such as children dying of cancer, for which there is no human responsibility. The principle theistic response is the Free Will defense, which essentially blames the woes of the world on its human creatures. The dialogue addresses these and related questions.

[Peter S. Williams] The only way one can object to God on the basis of evil is if evil is an objective fact, a departure from a standard of moral perfection. If no such standard exists, then no departure from the standard is possible, and the objection against God based on evil vanishes. On the other hand, if evil is admitted to be an objective fact, then, as the moral argument demonstrates, God must exist: “if objective values cannot exist without God, and objective values do exist – as is evident from the reality of evil – then it follows inescapably that God exists.”[1] The

problem of evil either falls at the first hurdle, by failing to acknowledge the objective reality of evil, or else ends up proving God’s existence.

[Carl Stecher] Well, here we go again; Peter persists in his argument that I must acknowledge evil as objectively real, by his definition, or I have no real standard by which to judge God. But if I do acknowledge such evil, it proves the existence of a perfect and all powerful God. I defy anyone to formulate a more perverse, anti-intuitive argument.

Perhaps this can best be shown by replacing God in Peter’s argument with Satan, defined as the *omnipotent, perfectly evil creator of the cosmos*. “The only way one can object to Satan on the basis of good is if good is an objective fact, since good must necessarily be a departure from a standard of perfect evil. If no such standard exists, then no departure is possible, and the objection against Satan based on good vanishes. On the other hand, if good is admitted to be an objective fact of the world, then, as the moral argument demonstrates, Satan must exist.” This is exactly the same argument, the same logic, that Peter uses to show that either the moral argument against God vanishes, or that God is ‘proven’ to exist.

If, on the other hand, Peter is right, that it is impossible to completely disprove the existence of God with the Problem of Evil (as it would be impossible to disprove the existence of a sovereign Satan with the Problem of Good) the non-theist can at least show how totally implausible the God of the Bible is (or for that matter, any God as defined by theism) by showing Him to be an egregious offender against nearly universal standards of law and justice. Shouldn’t such a God at least refrain from genocide, from complete disregard of the Geneva Accords?

[PW] The problem with your argument for Satan (unusually defined as he is) is it assumes that moral objectivism treats good and evil as opposite equals, when in fact it treats them as opposite unequals. In other words, the relationship between good and evil is asymmetric. Evil is deviation from the standard of goodness, but good is not deviation from some ‘ultimate standard of evil’. Evil must be defined in relation to good, not vice versa, because evil is parasitic upon

good. As Aquinas taught, good can exist without evil (cf. God prior to creation) but evil cannot exist in the absence of all goodness (since existence is itself a good thing). Besides, the postulation of an ultimate and absolute evil creator is self-defeating, because it would undermine all possibility of trust in our own grasp of reality, rational as well as moral. In making moral judgements we assume that the source and standard of those judgements is itself good, or else why trust the standards we derive from it?

The dilemma I posed above applies equally to the so-called 'logical' and 'evidential' arguments from evil against God. Terry L. Miethe calls attention to the atheist's use of 'evil': *"The atheist is constantly raising the problem of evil but never gives a solution. It is high time the theist called: 'Foul!' I defy the atheist to give an answer to the problem of evil."*[2] The challenge for the non-theist is to give an adequate account of the reality of evil that does not prove God's existence via the moral argument.

[CS] This seems to me a theistic attempt to confuse the issues. The Problem of Evil, everyone agrees, is the problem of reconciling the fact of evil with the supposed fact of an all-powerful and completely good God. This is hardly incumbent upon anyone who denies that such a God exists.

A Good God and an Evil World as a Logical Problem

[PW] Contemporary philosophers generally agree that the logical problem of evil, which attempts to demonstrate a contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil, has been laid to rest. Alvin Plantinga writes: *"it is fairly widely conceded ... that there is nothing like straightforward contradiction ... in the joint affirmation of God and evil. It is logically possible that God should have a reason for permitting all the evil there is; but if so, then the existence of God is not incompatible with the existence of the evil the world displays."*[3] As William Lane Craig explains: *"the atheist presupposes that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil in the world. But this assumption is not necessarily true. So long as it is even possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil, it follows that God and*

evil are logically consistent."[4]

An argument for the conclusion that God and evil are not logically contradictory does not need, and generally does not claim, to be a plausible explanation of how it is that God and evil are compatible (this is the task assumed by a *theodicy*). As Kelly James Clark writes:

this purely logical quandary may be resolved without attempting the more ambitious feat of actually discerning God's intentions for allowing evil ... it may employ statements that are not plausible ... because the atheologian contends that there is no possible way for God and evil to coexist. All the theist needs to do, to refute the logical problem of evil, is to specify a possible way or a possible state of affairs for evil and God to consistently coexist.[5]

Alvin Plantinga argues that it is logically possible that all evil is caused by wicked humans or demons, and many philosophers – theists and atheists alike – agree that this is not logically impossible, so a good God and an evil world are not logically incompatible.

[CS] I concede the point made above by Plantinga and the other theists that Peter quotes: there is no purely *logical* contradiction between the existence of the theistic God and the reality of evil in the World he created. (The same line of argument could be used to show that there is no logical inconsistency between the existence of good and an all-powerful Satan.) Either way the claimed logical victory is remarkably limited. Let me illustrate. By the same standards of logical possibility, it can be argued that elephants fly. It is not, after all, *logically* impossible that elephants have intelligence far superior to our own. Therefore it is not logically impossible that they have discovered a principle of flight completely unknown to us, with our inferior intelligence, and that there is a gigantic elephant conspiracy, for reasons we are unable to grasp, to cunningly hide their superior intelligence, and to fly only when it is impossible for us to observe their flights. (Perhaps some UFO's are actually flying elephants!) Admittedly, all of this is wildly implausible, but no part of this flying elephants fantasy is logically impossible. And in dismissing the logical problem of evil, theists argue that *"plausibility is irrelevant"*. Unless we are content

with a world in which elephants may be thought to fly, or in which a perfectly evil and all-powerful Satan allows the existence of good, the Problem of Evil needs a more compelling answer than the academic philosophers' assertion that a good God and evil in his creation are not logically impossible.

[PW] Carl, I am heartened to see you concede that: *"there is no purely logical contradiction between the existence of the theistic God and the reality of evil in the World he created"*. With the majority of contemporary philosophers of religion we can agree to consign the so-called logical problem of evil to what Daniel Howard-Snyder calls *"the dustbin of philosophical fashions"*.^[6] Of course, you think: *"the victory claimed for theism is remarkably limited"* and withdraw to the evidential problem of evil, where plausibility is indeed relevant.

But the demise of the logical problem of evil is a victory for theism that is far from limited. You concede that God's existence is logically possible. This is highly significant, because as the 'greatest possible being', God necessarily exists if His existence is possible (this is a version of the ontological argument). In order to deny God's existence, you must deny not only the actuality but also the possibility of God's existence, and you must now do this without the support of the logical problem of evil.

[CS] I don't have to concede this significance of the purely logical solution to the problem of evil because of its link to the ontological argument for God's existence. The ontological argument is extremely silly, the sort of academic hocus pocus that discredits the discipline, and I suspect most philosophers dismiss it. I could as well argue that it is logically possible for a perfect baseball player to exist. He would be a pitcher who would strike out every batter with three pitches; as a batter he would hit a home run at every bat, etc. By the ontological argument, if such a player could possibly exist (why not?) he must necessarily exist because necessary existence is obviously more perfect than existence only in my imagination. I also find it strange that you tout a purely logical solution to be significant, holding plausibility to be irrelevant. In a previous chapter I demonstrated that by using your logic I could argue giraffes to be the source of moral value. You conceded my logic but dismissed my

argument as implausible. Are we really living in a world where moral giraffes, flying elephants, an evil Satan creating a world full of good and a good God creating a world full of evil are ideas to be taken seriously because they are not logically impossible?

[PW] If the ontological argument, based upon the unique concept of the 'greatest possible being' is sound, then its conclusion is logically inescapable and thereby beats any concerns based upon judgments of plausibility. Anyone who accepts the objectivity of value would seem free to conclude, in the light of the collapse of the logical problem of evil, and given the coherence of 'the greatest possible being', that God's existence is necessary.^[7]

Even supposing that evil, while failing to disprove God, is nevertheless evidence against God's existence, one must still take into account all the evidence for God before deciding if evil counts *decisively* against God. Theists believe that the evidence for God's existence overwhelms any evidence against His existence that the evidential Problem of Evil provides. Furthermore, theists argue that humans can experience God in such a compelling way that the Problem of Evil loses significance.^[8]

However, I do not think that evil is even evidence against God. If evil has no objective existence, as you argue, it can't be used as evidence against God; if evil has objective reality, it proves the existence of God because objective moral values, the standard by which evil can be known, can only originate in an infinite mind. And since it is granted that the co-existence of God and evil is possible *per se*, it becomes very hard to see how any particular *amount* of evil can disprove God's existence: *"That's like saying it's reasonable to believe in God if six Jews die in a Holocaust, but not seven. Or sixty thousand but not sixty thousand and one, or 5,999,999, but not six million... When you translate the general statement 'so much' into particular examples like that, it shows how absurd it is. There can't be a dividing line."*^[9]

[CS] Even as human beings, we sometimes find it necessary to make such calculations (I am thankful that I have never been in this position). We make military decisions, for example, deciding

whether the number of civilian casualties is justified by military necessity. But the alleged God in his omnipotence and omniscience is never in this position. It is certainly in His power to prevent any unnecessary suffering. The fact that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, or that 20 million people died in the influenza pandemic of 1918, is only a measure of how grossly this God fails.

[PW] Atheists sometimes argue that because they don't see any good reason for evil, there probably is no good reason, and since God, being good, would have to have such a reason, He probably doesn't exist. I think that we can grasp some of God's reasons for allowing evil (such as the value of free will, love, personal responsibility, and so on), but it doesn't seem at all likely that we finite creatures would be capable of grasping all of God's reasons. In which case, the evidential argument from evil outlined above is a dud.

[CS] I wonder, however, how Mr. Plantinga *et al* would respond to the following statements made by two survivors of a Nazi death camp:

1) *This is what I think: we were sent forth by humanity, by mankind, although it was not even aware it was doing so, to find out once and for all if there's a God. That's the meaning of the camps. It was meant to bring Him out into the open if He existed at all. Nothing else or less significant could have brought Him out into the open, to respond and to act and to show His face. It was a stupendous test; unconscious and unintentional but a test nevertheless. And God failed the test and proved His own nonexistence. And I, as part of the experiment, stopped believing in Him altogether. Just as certain laboratory experiments are conclusive and incontrovertible, so was this. If He wouldn't come out then, during those times, when?*

Now when man writes his history he can say there was a vast laboratory experiment conducted by man during the 1940's to see if there is a God or not. The conclusion was no God exists. There were guinea pigs in the test and other kinds of experimental animals, but mainly guinea pigs – Jews of course. I know. I was one of them.

2) *I'll tell you why I lost my faith in God in the Holocaust. Because if God exists then He's a*

monster. And Hitler was God's deputy on earth. Do you want me to believe that? I'd rather be an atheist.

Maybe man's existence without God is meaningless, but I'd rather have a meaningless life than a God who allows pogroms and the slaughter of the innocent. And I refuse to believe God is a horrible sadist. There are no other choices at all. God either does not exist or He is the Devil. I'd simply prefer to believe in no God at all.

(The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors, ed. Reeve Robert Brenner, the Free Press.)

In the face of the overwhelming evil experienced by real human beings, I think it is almost obscene for philosophers to resort to abstractions and self-congratulations on having "solved" the *logical* Problem.

Imagine yourself locked into a cattle car with your children, your elderly parents and a hundred other miserable souls, without food or water and with only an overflowing bucket for a toilet. Imagine that this cattle car is creaking and groaning on its journey to the gas ovens and crematoria. How much consolation would you find in the kind of response Plantinga makes to the problem of evil? Would you find any reassurance that it is logically possible that God, omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good, does exist and that the problem of evil is not really a problem after all?

[PW] This is a very good question. It is, of course, a hard question to answer *psychologically* speaking. Certainly, many Christians have died and continue to die in horrible ways while praising their Lord to the last. However, *philosophically* speaking my answer is an unequivocal YES! Peter Kreeft is right: *"The very worst the world can do is kill us, and all that does is send us Home. There is simply nothing left to fear, 'neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing' (Romans 8:38-39)."*^[10] As Paul says: *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* (Romans 8:18)

[CS] You answer my question but you left your children and aged parents out of the cattle car

trundling to Auschwitz. Even if you were able to separate your psychological from your philosophical perspective, I think you would at least wonder why an omnipotent God could not “send them home” without such torture on the journey.

[PW] Your criticism of Plantinga is unfair; in the passage you quote he is merely describing a philosophical distinction, which you accept and use in this discussion; he is not even attempting to say anything in response to the evidential problem of evil. If asked to respond to the sufferings of Holocaust survivors, he would probably say something more along these lines from his personal testimony:

God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his Son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross... God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours... God ... was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin and death and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. So [even if we don't know] why God permits evil; we do know ... that he was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception.[11]

Your quotations from Holocaust survivors are moving, and one can only have sympathy for the way in which this trauma has affected their whole lives, including their spiritual lives. Faced with such a person I would not even consider initiating a philosophical discussion. Nevertheless, the purpose of our discussion is philosophical, and your quotations included some interesting points. For example, the conclusion: “God either does not exist or He is the Devil. I'd simply prefer to believe in no God at all.” The Problem of Evil makes no pretence to disprove the existence of a supernatural being who is all-knowing and all-powerful but sadistic. Indeed, it counts nothing against a being with any two out of the three relevant characteristics of omniscience, omnipotence and total goodness. Perhaps an all-knowing, all-good but powerless deity would be

the best we could hope for if the Problem of Evil were a successful argument, but the Problem of Evil cannot say anything against such a hope. While this fact is little comfort to a theist, who believes that God exhibits all three ‘great making’ qualities, *it is equally little comfort to non-theists such as yourself.*

[CS] You seem to be suggesting, in defending God's essential characteristics, that two out of three ain't bad. I'm inclined to agree. I see no moral danger in worshipping a God who is loving and omniscient, but often powerless to prevent evil. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and distinguished theologian, was hanged by the Nazis in Flossenburg Concentration Camp in 1945 for his role in the conspiracy against Hitler's life. In letters which he wrote during his final imprisonment, Bonhoeffer reinterpreted the meaning of the crucifixion: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us... Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering... Only the suffering God can help.”

I think it difficult to reconcile this idea of God with the God who is the First Cause of the universe, and this God seems far removed from the God of theism and the God of traditional Christianity. But this is an idea of God that I find very attractive. I don't believe that this God exists external to the Cosmos or the human mind; I see ‘Him’ instead as a useful symbol of the fellowship of humanity, the empathy that we can have for the suffering of others, the impulse we have to relieve this suffering, even if all too often we fail to act upon this impulse. I have no quarrel with this God, or anyone who believes in Him.

[PW] While you take the Problem of Evil to count against the God of theism, you acknowledge that it provides you with no reason to postulate God's complete non-existence, as it were. Nevertheless, this is just what you do postulate, confining deity to the subjective realm of your own mind. But this is an even less enticing theory than the objective existence of a powerless God. As theologian David Ford says: “A ‘solution’ to evil which does away with God will face other problems. If, for example, the solution is to see evil as simply one

natural outcome of a messy, chance-driven evolution in a universe without God, then there will still be the question about how one can or should respond to it, and problems about the meaninglessness of the whole process.”[12] Hence, I agree with the Holocaust survivor who said that: “*man’s existence without God is meaningless*”, but I disagree that: “*I’d rather have a meaningless life than a God who allows pogroms and the slaughter of the innocent.*” Such an attitude fails to take meaninglessness seriously. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, argues that meaning is our primary need. According to Frankl, a nihilistic denial of meaning is not the answer to the Holocaust, it is the problem that caused it: “*I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz ... were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin, but ... in lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers.*”[13]

Consider the admission of Freud: “*The idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system... The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence.*” Likewise, Jean Paul Sartre said: “*If God does not exist ... man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon, either within or outside himself.*” Without God, as Professor William Provine writes, there is: “*No life after death; no ultimate foundation for ethics; no ultimate meaning for life; no free will.*”[14] Given a choice between a meaningless world and a world where God allows (perhaps for very good reasons that I just don’t grasp) “*pogroms and the slaughter of the innocent*” but where there is life after death, objective value, purpose, meaning, free will and something we can depend upon outside of us, I would choose the world with God.

[CS] Unfortunately, Peter, we do not get to choose the world we live in. We see it very differently, but we agree that it is objectively real. The Holocaust survivor thought that if God rules the world he must be a sadist. He had personal experience hard to discount to support this conclusion. You have an impressive collection of theists and atheists who think the world meaningless if there is not a God and an afterlife, but this idea is rejected by many other serious thinkers. I certainly do not believe it.

Evil and Free Will

[PW] I believe that in God’s world there is sufficient justification for the existence of evil. Geisler and Corduan put earth’s evil in the correct perspective: “*A sinless heaven is better than an evil earth, but there was no way for God to achieve a sinless heaven unless he created beings who would sin and did sin in order that out of their sin he could produce the best world where beings would not sin. An imperfect moral world is the necessary precondition for achieving the morally perfect world.*”[15]

Christians believe that God will one day transform the Cosmos and those who love him into a state without evil. We hold that the resurrected Jesus gives us a foretaste of God’s promise. Heaven is the supremely valuable goal of creation, and the heart of Heaven (and the heart of Christianity) is a relationship with God that must be freely chosen. However, if human beings were morally perfect in their very nature, they would lack the freedom to freely accept or reject relationship with God; the ‘choice’ of totally good beings to love God would be a necessary consequence of their nature, and not morally praiseworthy or significant. Therefore, God could not create Heaven without first creating a world that contains original sin: “*God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.*” (Romans 11: 32) In heaven there will be no sin, but those who attain this sinless state will have chosen it freely. God will then be able to create a reality where there will be nothing evil (heaven) because these are only necessitated by our presently sinful nature. The existence of beings with libertarian freedom in a context that permits them to exercise this freedom is both good in itself, and necessary to the end of creating Heaven:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it [i.e. God], in hope that the creation itself would be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present. (Romans 8:20-22)

[CS] If God is all-good and God cannot do anything that would contradict his own divine

character, then God has no freedom to do evil. Why would God want us to have a freedom to do evil that He clearly does not have Himself? And since this alleged God has no moral freedom to do evil, any good He does, according to your analysis, is neither praiseworthy nor significant.

[PW] God is not stingy that He would deny us a freedom that He does not have Himself! God has libertarian freedom, but only to do good. One can divide the moral value of things into 1) evil acts, 2) obligatory good acts it is evil not to do, and 3) good acts one is not obliged to do. For example, it is 1) evil to cheat on your wife and 2) good and obligatory to pay your taxes and 3) good but not obligatory to give half your earnings to the poor. God is not free to do evil, but he is free to do non-obligatory good acts, and since many choices are good but not obligatory, God is free to choose between these goods. One such non-obligatory good act was the creation of the cosmos; another was the sacrifice of his own son to atone for the sins of humankind. I think humans will enter just such a state of freedom in Heaven.

[CS] God is not stingy? In fact, He is so generous that he gives us freedom that He does not have Himself, a freedom that results in a world plagued by evil? Better if God were stingy. The claim that God had to make weak fallen creatures and a world beset by evil before he could make a perfect world inhabited by sinless creatures makes no sense. I can understand that the Ford Motor Company had to make the Model T and the Model A before it acquired the expertise to make far superior cars, but the same certainly does not apply to God, whose omnipotence allowed him to make a superior product from the beginning. The theistic argument about a fallen world of pain and suffering being good in itself and a necessary precondition of heaven seems totally daft to me. I fail to see the necessity of even temporary evil.

[PW] Let's get a misunderstanding out of the way: you say you do not see that any apologist has made the case for *"the necessity of even temporary evil"* – but be this as it may, all the apologist needs to defend is the moral *allowability* of temporary evil.

I think your worldview ultimately treats people as machines, since it denies free will to people, which I see as one of the marks that distinguishes

a person from a machine. Of course making the first Ford cars was an essential pre-condition of arriving at the improved cars. Ford could not have made a modern Ford at first. Ah, you respond, but God is omnipotent and so he could have made morally perfect beings straight away. I will grant that God could have done this. However, I do not grant that God could have created creatures *who had freely chosen* (in the libertarian sense of freedom) to be made sinless *without giving them the choice in question*. And I deny that without such a choice creation would be as valuable as it in fact is. People are not cars; they are not machines. A person who is by nature morally perfect can't possibly choose to do evil. Such a being would be a machine, not a real person.

The goodness of God's creation of the universe – something he was not obligated to do – is even more clear when you consider that God has freely brought upon Himself an immense amount of grief, the pain that He too suffers with his creatures, and the enormous sacrifice of the crucifixion of his own son.

[CS] If there were a morally perfect and omnipotent God, it would obviously be in His power to create at any time a heaven full of loving, morally perfect creatures who would love Him and each other just as freely as He loves them. How could it be necessary for God to first create a world and creatures who would so often become evil, a world where both the innocent and the guilty suffer? If, as you write, *"God has freely brought upon Himself an immense amount of grief"*, He has only Himself to blame. We must keep in mind that the evil we are talking about so glibly is immense; it involves the abject misery of hundred of millions of creatures God has created. The "morally perfected" people who are eventually to enjoy the benefits of all this human misery surely do not justify this evil. In fact, you seem to have retreated even from defending the necessity of evil: now the sufferings of the world need only be "allowable." Theists don't set the bar very high for themselves. From a merely human point of view, no unnecessary suffering is allowable.

[PW] Your statement that it is obviously within God's power: *"to create at any time a heaven full of loving, morally perfect creatures who would love Him and each other just as freely as He loves them"* is, as I see it, incorrect. The only possibility

for God giving morally praiseworthy and significant free will to *creatures* rests in creating a world such as ours where we have the ability to commit the ultimate evil of rejecting God. *It is therefore logically impossible to create Heaven without first creating a non-heavenly precursor wherein people can freely choose whether or not they will enter into heaven.*

I agree with you that evil is not necessary, in that had God not created the universe, there would be no evil. But the existence of moral evil and the natural evil of a world suitable for sinful creatures was a necessary condition for ends good enough to justify them. You ask why God doesn't immediately create Heaven, a world without evil. But it is crucial to the definition of Heaven that it is a state of existence *which people have freely chosen.*

[CS] Now I am even more confused. Is God's power limited by a definition of heaven? Isn't God free to define heaven however He wishes? And if He is truly good, wouldn't he instead define heaven in such a way that it would not have an earth full of evil as a precondition?

[PW] God cannot make a square circle. This does not mean his power is limited, and certainly not by an arbitrary definition, but by the inherent nature of the thing described. Likewise, God cannot make Heaven without first creating creatures who are not morally perfect. Heaven is a freely chosen relationship with God, and our world is a necessary precondition for Heaven. God doesn't have to create Heaven since He doesn't have to create at all; but if He does create Heaven then He has to create a world like ours first.

[CS] I have also argued that God, if He exists, could at least make a few unobtrusive interventions and extinguish in the cradle the worst of us, such as Caligula, Pope John XII, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and in so doing save millions from misery and early death. At the same time I question why he allows great benefactors of humanity to have untimely deaths.

[PS] Answering this question opens a rat-bag of metaphysical worms! However, in brief: I would question the coherence of supposing that God could know what a given person will do in the future and on the basis of that knowledge prevent

the person in question from being able to do the things that are meant to serve as His grounds for snuffing them out in the cradle or whatever! (If God were able to snuff out future Hitler's in the cradle, you would surely be calling Him evil for killing babies for no good reason that you could see!)

[CS] Although it's hard to imagine that all those whom God kills in infancy had the murderous potential of a Hitler, there might be some weird truth in your rejoinder, but God would have to be remarkably dull-witted not to be able to figure out that Hitler, having murdered 3,000,000 Jews, was likely to murder more if allowed to.

[PW] So, having dropped the incoherent request that God snuff Hitler out in the cradle, you now want Him to prevent people exercising their free will for evil somewhere along the line. Once again, your argument depends upon the assumption there is more evil than God has good reason to allow, but how could one possibly justify such an assumption given our finitude and God's infinity? Besides, your evidential argument from evil still fails if only subjective evil is admitted, or proves the existence of God if objective evil is admitted. Finally, given that you want God to stop evil in its tracks 'somewhere along the way' rather than in the crib, how evil does someone have to be to qualify for judgment? If God had struck down Hitler before he could gain notoriety, someone else would qualify as 'the most evil man in history', and so on *ad infinitum*. In the end, you would find yourself facing the very judgment you demand! My sin and your sin may be nothing in comparison with Hitler, but in comparison with a perfectly holy God, our good deeds are as rags....

[CS] This is a feeble evasion, Peter. We both know that evil exists – you have never denied this. You can't evade the problem of reconciling a good and omnipotent God with the reality of evil with this bogus argument. Let me see if I can summarize our positions. You believe that the evil and suffering of this world is necessary, or at least allowable, because it gives human beings freedom to choose or reject God, freedom which some will willingly sacrifice for the heavenly bliss of an eternal relationship with God. Heaven would not really be heaven unless people were first given this freedom in an earthly existence, and this freedom would be illusory if they were created

morally perfect. By contrast, I don't believe in an afterlife, so for me the argument has no force. I believe that this is an elaborate and implausible attempt to rationalize the theist concept of God in the face of the overwhelming reality of evil. And I have shown that the very same reasoning could be used to 'prove' the existence of an all-powerful and totally evil Satan. Even if there were a God, and a God as powerful as theists insist, I would consider him indelibly stained by the evil in the world he has created.

Solely for the sake of argument, however, I will accept all of your premises and then test if your conclusion necessarily follows. Let's suppose that there is an all-powerful, morally perfect God who created the universe; let's suppose also that there is a Heaven, and that this Heaven, by definition, means an eternal relationship with God for those who have freely chosen it. Even if all this were granted, it would not establish the need for a world full of moral and natural evil. Surely God could have endowed his human children with a stronger impulse to benevolence and altruism, and far weaker impulse to selfishness, lust and aggression. And since He is capable of making heaven, he could have made this earth without plagues, earthquakes, mosquitoes, etc. Would this make humans less free? No, they would be as free as God Himself. And like God they would have a clear choice between non-obligatory goods: the rewards of earth and the greater rewards of an eternal existence with God. Humans could choose to live an earthly existence of loving human companionship, intellectual exploration, physical development, artistic creation, ending after many years in a serene and painless death. In fact, even death would not be necessary. In other words, they could enjoy all of the innocent pleasures of a good earth, an earth without terrorists and cancer, rape and famine. Or they could freely choose to sacrifice some of these pleasures, perhaps through years of hard study or by becoming monks, to seek the greatest good, an eternal existence within the special love of God. It would be, by your definition, by any definition, a totally free choice. And unlike the present world of theism, there would not be the coercive threat of hell. So why does God, as our Creator, not give us stronger impulses to altruism, weaker impulses to violence, and a world without natural evil?

[PW] You suggest that God could have given us a stronger predisposition to altruism, but I doubt this to be true. Our sinfulness may be caused in part by our evolutionary history, in part by our freely chosen corruptions being inherited and worsening through the generations. Another factor to be taken seriously is the free will of demonic influences.[16] Also, with a greater degree of determinacy towards naturally choosing the good, we would be less morally praiseworthy in doing so. Perhaps the value of moral heroism outweighs, or partially outweighs, the disvalue of greater propensity towards selfishness. It seems hard to say at what point between making us as sinful as possible and as naturally virtuous as possible God gives us maximum freedom for significant moral choice. I think God has placed us somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

One must always remember that we have an inbuilt tendency to seek God. *"Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee"* as Augustine put it. Or as Aristotle said, *"Man by nature desires to know"*, we do seek after the good, the beautiful and the true, after objective blessedness, peace, forgiveness and wholeness. These things are, I believe, exactly what knowing God offers.

The Free Will Defence

[CS] Your argument to this point has been premised on the existence of libertarian free will, which you define as *"the freedom to do otherwise than what one actually does."* Most people take it for granted that we have such freedom. But the nature of human freedom to choose "A" rather than "B" deserves very careful attention, since, if we do not have libertarian free will, the Free Will Defense collapses, and so also the only real defense for the Problem of Evil.

Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth century Puritan divine and eventually the President of Princeton University, is widely considered America's most brilliant theistic philosopher. In his classic work, *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards presents what seems to me to be an unanswerable argument *against* the libertarian concept of free will, and does so from an explicitly Christian perspective. Edwards argues that an action is always determined by the strongest motive at the instant that a decision is made, and that it can not be otherwise. Why, in any given instance, do we

choose A rather than B? Because A appears to us the more agreeable (or less disagreeable) choice. Why does choice A appear more agreeable than B? This is determined by both our fallen and totally corrupt nature, as Edwards sees it, and by the totality of our experience. Nature and nurture, in short. Edwards argues that whenever we make a choice, we will always do what we want to do – we cannot do otherwise – but what we want to do, the choice we make, is determined by our inborn nature and our total experience combining to establish the strongest, determining motive. The will cannot determine the will, but we are free in the sense that we do what we will. In other words, faced with a moral choice, we discover the strongest motive and then necessarily act in accordance with that motive. We cannot do otherwise. I teach Edwards every Fall in my American literature class. After I explain his analysis, I challenge my students to supply a single case where Edwards' analysis proves untrue. No student has ever met this challenge.

A simple illustration. A student has to choose (A) to come to class on a morning when the weather is foul, the student is hung over, and the student loathes the material being covered in class; or (B) to skip class, sleep off the hangover. Why does the student choose (A)? There might be many motives, perhaps working in combination – fear of failing the class, the chance to ogle that attractive female who sits near the window, force of habit. Whatever. But the motive(s) upon which choice (A) is made are stronger than the motives for choice (B), or the student would instead skip the class. The student must necessarily act upon the strongest motive: he cannot, by an act of will, make one motive prevail over the others. Unless Edwards' analysis can be shown to be false, humans who had been created morally good would have exactly the same moral freedom, the only freedom possible: the freedom to do what they want to do – to act upon the strongest motive. The difference, of course, is that humans created morally good would freely choose good actions, rather than bad actions. They'd all come to class!

Perhaps it is difficult to accept Edwards' determinism because we have the illusion of libertarian free will. We often don't know what we are going to decide until we actually make the decision; it therefore seems that we might have chosen differently. Moreover, we aren't always

clear on why we choose as we do: who has such complete self-knowledge as to be able to weigh accurately all one's motives and counter-motives, one's rationality and one's emotional needs? As Melville's Ishmael says about his decision to go on a whaling voyage,

Yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment.

[PW] If we do not have libertarian free will then the case for what is called 'free will theism' certainly collapses; but the case for theism *per se*, even Christian theism, does not. Perhaps my response to the problem of evil would look a little thinner if free will falls by the wayside, but it would not be overwhelmed.

People are free agents; they determine their own actions. They have reasons for these actions, reasons which explain but neither cause nor determine the actions. Since, as you admit, most people believe we have such freedom, the burden is on you to prove otherwise. According to Edwards, both belief and disbelief in his theory will be determined by the strongest motive. If Edwards is correct, my strongest motive is to disbelieve his theory, so I must disbelieve it. Your strongest motive is to believe it, so you must believe it. But this makes any rational discussion purposeless, since we must all believe what we are most strongly motivated to believe. For this reason, Edwards' argument must be rejected by anyone holding that human beings are not totally irrational.

To put it another way, we ought to believe the truth, or at least propositions which are supported by rational arguments. But if our beliefs instead are determined by our desires, then your belief in Edwards' argument is not grounded in rational arguments, nor can his argument have any claim to the truth. Having argued that beliefs are determined by desires, Edwards' has abandoned the very ground upon which arguments are made, that a rational consideration of the evidence, not our desires, is the path to truth. This would leave

us with no rational reason to accept his or any other argument.

[CS] I think you are mistaken on this point. Rationality and Edwards' determinism are not incompatible. In fact, I am hard pressed to think of an argument more rational than the one that Edwards makes. But each of us will necessarily believe that which, for whatever reason, seems true to us. Some will predominately be guided by their rationality; others will be guided predominately by their emotional needs. For almost everyone there is a mixture of rationality and emotional needs, and for many, emotional needs will color what seems to be rational. To a certain extent we can test our beliefs against accepted standards of rationality, but often the evidence will be complex and / or ambiguous, and equally intelligent interpreters of this evidence will come to contrary conclusions, each believing those who conclude otherwise to be to some degree irrational. I think that we do not freely choose what we believe; more accurately, we discover what we believe and are not free to believe otherwise unless we are presented with evidence that overwhelms our first conviction. Our correspondence illustrates this analysis. You think, given the evidence and arguments you have presented, that I ought to believe in God as you define Him. But I cannot. I find your evidence and argument inadequate to overcome the contrary conclusions that I have arrived at. It is literally not in my power, at this juncture at least, to believe what you believe.

[PW] Determinism destroys the possibility of rationality. If determinism were true, it would be impossible for anyone to rationally believe anything:

Given certain evidences, I "ought" to believe certain things. I am intellectually responsible for drawing certain conclusions, given certain pieces of evidence... If I ought to believe something, then I must have the ability to choose to believe it or not believe it. If one is to be rational, one must be free to choose her beliefs in order to be reasonable... But such deliberations make sense only if I assume that what I am going to do or believe is "up to me" – that I am free to choose and thus, I am responsible for irrationality if I choose inappropriately.[17]

It is a necessary presupposition of rational pursuits (such as Philosophy) that rationality is possible. Therefore, determinism, which rules out libertarian freedom, is necessarily false.

For the libertarian, an act is free not when it is the act most strongly *desired* by the person, where that desire is something ultimately determined solely by causes beyond herself; rather, an act is free when it is *chosen* by the person in question. Again, I am rationally obligated to draw certain conclusions from certain evidence, but this obligation is not something any deterministic account can admit. But how can I be rationally obliged to draw a conclusion if the conclusion I arrive at is determined *solely* by my desires?

[CS] Peter, I do think that at certain points your beliefs are determined by your desires, that they aren't rational at all. And perhaps you think the same of mine. But more to the point, you are confusing two very different issues here. Edwards' concern is why we *do* A rather than B; it has much less to do with why we *think* C rather than D. No one claims that conclusions are determined solely by desires. At most, there is an interesting parallel between why we do what we do and why we believe what we believe. We must necessarily believe that evidence which appears strongest to us. I may devoutly wish my best friend to be innocent of child molestation, but in the face of overwhelming evidence (including a confession) I might have to believe him guilty. Or I may feel that my close knowledge of my friend's character makes it impossible that he committed this crime; if such is the case I will believe him innocent even in the face of his confession (it must have been coerced!) In the case of an opinion, the weight of the evidence as it appears to us must necessarily determine what we believe. We can be hypocrites, and pretend to believe something that we don't believe, but we cannot truly believe against what we perceive to be the truth of the matter. Certainly, what we desire to believe will much influence how we perceive the evidence, but for people with a strong measure of rationality it will not ordinarily determine what they believe. A motive to act and a desire to believe are not identical.

[PW] I don't think that we can easily separate "why we *do* A rather than B" from "why we *think* C rather than D". The latter frequently has an impact on the

former. Indeed, you affirm: *“that at certain points your beliefs are determined by your desires, that they aren’t rational at all”*. I have two observations. The first is that, if you really do not claim that *at every point* my beliefs are determined by my desires, then you must admit that at least at some points my beliefs are *not* determined by my desires. If my beliefs are not necessarily determined by my desires, and if my beliefs have any effect on my behavior (and surely they do) then it necessarily follows that my behavior is not necessarily determined by my desires. This admission is at odds with the deterministic theory you have advanced. My second observation is that you clearly imply that if my belief is *“determined by [my] desires”* then it is not *“rational at all”*. However, your claim is, is it not, that all of your beliefs *are* determined by your desires. It follows, does it not, that none of your beliefs are *“rational at all”*. Suppose I have misunderstood you. Suppose you do not claim that your beliefs are necessarily determined by your desires. As I pointed out in my first observation, this supposition would disprove determinism.

[CS] I agree that there are some perplexing questions here. Let me see if I can answer your questions and make my position clear. A motive and a desire are not identical.

A Desire: I wish that Santa exists.

A Belief: Santa doesn’t exist, because, as strong as my desire is, I cannot deny the evidence that points to his non-existence. I am not choosing to disbelieve in Santa; my desire to believe is overcome by my perception of the evidence against his existence. I am certainly not claiming that all beliefs are determined by desires.

By Contrast

A Motive: My hatred of LeRoy.

Another Motive: My moral compunction against killing. Which ever motive is stronger will determine whether I kill LeRoy.

A desire and a motive are not the same. My hatred of LeRoy is not a desire; it is a motive to kill him. My moral compunction is not a desire; it is a motive not to kill him.

[PW] Nothing in your argument convinces me that we do not have libertarian free will. People are

agents and, as such, are first causes or unmoved movers who have the power to act as the ultimate originators of their actions. In other words, the cause of a free action on the part of an agent is not previous ‘events or circumstance’ but *the agent*. Agents perform actions for reasons, and these explain why the agent acts one way rather than another. Reasons explain actions, but they do not cause or determine them.

[CS] As an advocate of libertarian free will, you attempt to differentiate between *reasons* and *causes*. I think a closer analysis, however, reveals that this is an attempt to differentiate where there is actually no difference. Consider the following: Why did Jason kill LeRoy? 1) The reason that Jason killed LeRoy was that he hated him. 2) Jason killed LeRoy because he hated him. 3) The cause of Jason killing LeRoy was his hatred of LeRoy. These three expressions, in common usage, are interchangeable. And they all speak to the same situation. Jason killed LeRoy because his hatred of LeRoy was the most powerful motive, the motive that determined his will. If there had been a more powerful counter-motive, say, a moral compunction against killing, Jason would not have killed LeRoy. In fact, he could not have killed LeRoy, because to do so he would be acting contrary to his will, which is necessarily determined by the strongest motive. In one sense, Jason is free because he did what he willed, i.e., he did what he wanted to. But he was not free to will as he wanted to. As Edwards neatly put it, *“the will cannot determine the will”*.

[PW] If Jason killed LeRoy *“because his hatred of LeRoy was the most powerful motive”* does it make sense to hold Jason responsible for murder? Is it his fault that he has this all-determining motive? You say: *“If there had been a more powerful counter-motive, say, a moral compunction against killing, Jason would not have killed LeRoy.”* But is Jason to blame for the fact that he didn’t have this counter-motive? Perhaps if Jason had thought or behaved differently in the past he would have acquired this alternative motive, and perhaps we can blame him for not having done so. But then, Jason would only have done so had he had the necessary motive; and can we blame him for not having had that motive? And so on. In the end, the explanation for why Jason killed LeRoy will track back through a series of determining motivations in a web of

cause and effect stretching back to the big bang itself. In sum, Jason is no more to blame for killing LeRoy than the universe is to blame for being the way it is, and a similar conclusion applies to everything you and I and everyone in the whole world has done or ever will do.

Edwards' account of the will reduces human history, reduces the people you love, to the necessary result of a series of cause and effect. This strips Jason of the dignity that comes from being a responsible agent, someone who has moral responsibility for killing someone even though he didn't have to. It turns Jason into a machine to be re-tuned, or a patient to be cured, rather than a person to be deservedly punished and given the opportunity for reform.[18]

For the libertarian, an act is free not when it is the act most strongly desired by the person, if that desire is something ultimately determined solely by causes beyond himself; rather an act is free when it is chosen *by the person in question*. A free choice is not determined by desires or anything else, it is undetermined. This is not to say that it is uncaused, but that it is caused *by the agent* exercising his or her will. As Norman L. Geisler writes: "*Some actions can be caused by human beings to whom God has given free moral agency. Free choice is not, as Edwards contends, doing what one desires... Rather, it is doing what one decides.*"[19] Perhaps "*the will cannot determine the will*", but people can freely determine what they will.

[CS] Libertarians argue that: "*a person is not free ... if that person is caused ... to perform the action*". But what could this mean? People act without motive? On a whim? Randomly? If this were true (as assuredly it is not), would not this mean instead that such actions have *no* moral significance? Both you and Geisler misunderstand the point that Edwards made. Edwards is in complete agreement that freedom – he holds that this is the only possible freedom – is doing what one decides. But Edwards is asking the deeper question. *Why* does someone decide A rather than B? The question, once asked, has only one possible answer: the person must choose in response to the strongest motive, which in turn is determined by both the person's character and by external factors. And when a person is free to do either A or B, that person will

do one or the other according to the strongest motive. The decision will never be made against the strongest motive. Peter, can you think of a single instance when you made a decision contrary to your strongest motive?

I think Edwards' analysis of human behavior, an analysis contrary to the idea of libertarian free will, is irrefutable. And since the free will defense depends upon libertarian free will, this defense against the Problem of Evil collapses, and the Christian idea of a personal God who is both omnipotent and morally perfect is shown to be incoherent. If there were such a God, He could not escape responsibility for moral evil since humans beings necessarily act in response to the strongest motive, which is dependent upon their inborn nature given to them by God, and in response to their experiences and situations in a world that God supposedly governs.

[PW] Of course people have motives for acting as they do, but this is not to say that they were caused to act as they do by their motives. To accept that this is the case would cause severe problems for our concept of morality. It is not up to the stone whether or not it falls to earth if I throw it into the air; the stone *will* fall back to earth. The stone has no freedom to do anything other than what it is caused to do; its activity is determined by causes over which it has no control. If humans lack free will, then our actions fall into exactly the same category as those of a falling stone; we have no freedom to do otherwise than we do. If we are thus determined, does it make any sense to retain belief in moral obligation? A moral obligation is something you *ought* to do, something you *should* do; but what use is there for concepts like 'he *ought* to do this' and 'she *should* do that' in a world where every human action is a 'has to do'? We therefore face a choice: either to accept determinism and dump the notion of moral obligation, or to retain belief in moral obligation and dump determinism.

[CS] I don't think you fully understand Edwards' concept of determinism. Our feelings of moral obligation are part of what determines our actions. I will often (not always, alas) do something because I think I ought to. Let me illustrate with a moral choice of less than earth-shaking consequence. My chorale society has three performances of its Christmas program, the last

on a Sunday afternoon. Sunday afternoons I normally play hockey, something that I look forward to all week, something that I passionately enjoy. I could play hockey (and hooky) Sunday afternoon, even though it has been stressed how important it is that we sing in all three concerts. I can rationalize that with almost 200 voices the chorus will sound just the same whether I sing Sunday or not. I know I would enjoy playing hockey more than singing. But I can't quite escape the feeling that I *ought* to sing, not play hockey. Which will I do? How will I decide? I will necessarily do what I want to do; that is, I will respond to which ever motive is the more powerful – the motive to have fun playing hockey, or the motive to do what I feel I ought to do and sing the concert. Whatever motive is strongest when I finally decide will determine my decision. Correctly understood, determinism as defined by Edwards in no way means “*dumping a notion of moral obligation*”. Unlike a rock which has neither motive or will, I have both.

It is something of a paradox, but Edwards' soft determinism, as philosophers call it, actually increases our moral freedom. Or at least, a clear understanding of the concept enables a person to overcome the helplessness that Edwards' determinism seems to doom us to. Edwards writes, for example, that “*A very lascivious man, in case of certain opportunities and temptations, and in the absence of such and such restraints, may be unable to forbear gratifying his lust. A drunkard, under such and such circumstances, may be unable to forbear taking of strong drink.*” How does a wise man, a man aware of his weaknesses, respond to this reality? He does not go to 4th Avenue where the saloons are frequented by prostitutes, because he knows that if he does this the inevitable result will be a drunken orgy. Instead, he drives down 12th street and goes to an AA meeting. As Emerson put it, “*Intellect annuls fate.*” That is, if he understands his strengths and weaknesses, if he knows how he will respond to a certain situation, the alcoholic is able to alter his circumstances. True, to do so will require some inner character (and / or the urging of his best friend), and in making *this* decision he will necessarily be following the strongest motive. But his intelligence and self-knowledge will give him a measure of control in making decisions that will alter the appeal of motives in later decisions. And he still should be held morally accountable,

because an awareness of the praise or condemnation resulting from a decision, or even of the resulting self-esteem or shame, will very much influence which motive is strongest, and therefore which decision is made.

[PW] You cannot simply say that: “*intellect annuls fate*” because, as you admit, in making up one's mind to not to frequent saloons (for example) one “*will necessarily be following the strongest motive*”. A new input may of course alter the previous balance of motivations, but then you have merely substituted a new and different “*fate*” for an old one! This is hardly increasing our moral freedom!

Here's another question: How could Edward's account cope with a situation where someone had *two equally strong desires*? Wouldn't it simply have to deny that this situation was possible? But such a situation certainly seems to be possible. What would prevent its occurrence? Edwards could argue that desire is determined by God, and say that God would simply never give someone two equally strong desires. But of course, you cannot use such a get-out without admitting the existence of God!

[CS] I don't deny that the situation is possible (although it should be expressed as equal motives, not desires.) There are several answers to this seeming dilemma, none of them involving God. If someone is confronted with such a situation, the likely response would be, at least momentarily, a crisis of the will and resulting paralysis. For example, a soldier in combat faces extreme danger; he has equally strong impulses to fight and flee. Instead of doing either he may freeze and the result could be catastrophic. (On the other hand, choosing either alternative might have the same result.) There is also another possible resolution to the problem you pose. Let's say I have one delicious chocolate treat, and cannot decide whether to give it to my lovely wife or my adored child. I may end up giving it to neither and eating it myself! If someone is presented with a question of fact, and the evidence on both sides seems equally weighted, the result is likely to be confusion and a consequent inability to resolve the issue.

[PW] I will happily concede that you can answer my question about equal but opposite desires by suggesting that the result would be a stalemate

until a different motivational balance was reached. However, I am still unsatisfied that the determinist can salvage the concepts of moral responsibility, blame, etc. Indeed, I still think that such concepts contradict and thereby disprove determinism. Nor do I see any prospect of your escaping from the dilemma that determinism is epistemologically self-defeating. You clearly still hold that a person's actions are determined by their desires and / or motives.

[CS] Peter, if you check the last few pages carefully, you will find that I have never argued that a person's actions are determined by desires. You introduced the term *desires* into the discussion; I clearly differentiated between desires, which do influence our opinions, and motives, which determine our actions.

Natural Evil

[CS] The free will defense applies only to moral evil, and here the ultimate cause, the ultimate responsibility, clearly lies with God, if God in fact exists. The case against God is even stronger when one considers natural evil; here both the immediate and ultimate responsibility lie with God. If God created nature, it seems sensible to assume that nature reveals something of God's character.

*In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another, are nature's every day performances. Killing, the most criminal act recognized by human laws, Nature does once to every being that lives; and in a large proportion of cases, after protracted tortures such as only the greatest monsters whom we read of ever purposely inflicted on their living fellow-creatures.... Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyr, starves them with hunger ... and has hundreds of others hideous deaths in reserve.... All this, Nature does with the most supercilious disregard both of mercy and of justice. (John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*)*

If there were a morally perfect and omnipotent God, it seems to me this God, if He wanted company would, from the start, create a world free of evil of any sort and full of loving, morally

perfect creatures who would love Him and each other, just as freely as He loves them.

[PW] I don't think God created the universe because he needed company. The doctrine of the Trinity neatly solves the problem of how deity can be self-sufficient in love and relationships.

As I have previously argued, God could not make Heaven without first making a world containing creatures with immoral impulses. As I will argue in a subsequent chapter, modern science reveals an incredibly close fit between the structure of the physical world and the possibility of human life as we know it. It is highly unlikely that the physical world could be different than it actually is and still provide a home for beings such as ourselves (creatures with significant free will and the ability to reject God). Thus the free will theodicy [which we discuss above] is brought to bear upon the question of natural evil. A physical world like ours is the necessary means to the end of human life as we know it (and so to the creation of Heaven), and the total value of such a world and the ends it makes possible are sufficient justification for such a creation. As Herbert McCabe argues:

you cannot make material things that develop in time without allowing for the fact that in perfecting themselves they will damage other material things... You may be tempted to argue that it would be better not to have lions at all – but if you think along those lines you have to end up thinking that it would be better not to have any material world at all... A world without any defects ... would be a world without any natural order in it. No reasonable person objects to an occasional withdrawal of natural cause, a miracle from time to time; but a world without any natural causes ... would not be a natural material world at all. So the people who would like [God] to have made a material world without suffering ... would have preferred him not to have made a world.... But ... most people are pleased he made such a world... The accusation that God made it does not seem very damning.[20]

Some natural evil is caused by demons. Angels, as Aquinas argued, were not created in a state of perfect grace, but were given free will, like humans, to serve God or to pursue their own selfish ends. Those who turned from God became demons, and having free will and considerable

power, their rejection of God is marked by the natural evils that they cause.[21]

I want here to press again the fact that moral subjectivism leaves one unable to criticize anyone, including God, who doesn't share your particular sense of right and wrong. On the other hand, if one admits that good and evil are objective values, independent of humanity, then one has allowed the first premise of the moral argument for God's existence.

[CS] Peter, I have already demonstrated that heaven, even accepting all your premises, does not require any evil in this world. I will defer other questions I have about heaven to a later chapter.

The moral quandary you challenge me with (how can I judge God evil if I deny any absolute standard of evil) can just as well apply to you. George Smith puts it this way:

The Christian, by proclaiming that God is good, commits himself to the position that he is capable of distinguishing good from evil – for, if he is not, how did the Christian arrive at his judgment of “good” as applied to God? Therefore, any attempt to resolve the problem of evil by arguing that man cannot correctly distinguish good from evil, destroys the original premises that it purports to defend and thus collapses from the weight of an internal inconsistency. If the human standards of good and evil are somehow invalid, the Christian’s claim that God is good is equally invalid.

Consider the following case. A four-year old child is playing with matches. A responsible adult watches over the child at play, knowing full well the danger of the situation. The adult could intervene without danger or even inconvenience to himself, but does nothing. The child's clothes catch fire, and the child suffers severe burns over most of his body. The child suffers horribly for months as doctors desperately try to save him with skin grafts. Eventually an infection develops and the child dies. His anguished parents never fully recover from the horrible loss. What moral judgment would you render on the adult who could have prevented this tragedy but chose not to?

Tragedies of this sort happen every day – with one exception. Very few responsible adults with the

power to avert such a catastrophe would not in fact do so. As a rule, human beings are not so indifferent to the suffering of others, so negligent in preventing it. They would view inaction, in this situation, to be evil.

But you are arguing for a world in which there is an omniscient, all-powerful, personal God. This God, by your definition, is exactly in the position of the responsible adult watching the child at play. He is sufficiently powerful to have created the entire universe. Surely he could find some way of saving this child. It need not involve any obvious contravention of nature. He not only sees the danger, but He knows in his omniscience what will happen if he does not intervene. He does nothing. In all such ‘natural disasters’ whether they involve a single family or thousands of people, God could intervene, but often does not. But what judgment does your morality demand? What would you say to the parents of this child, who ask why an omniscient, all-powerful God watching over their child did nothing to save him? If the God of theism exists, it seems to me that this tragedy, as innumerable other natural disasters, is really a moral evil, and the malefactor is God.

[PW] I have never attempted “to resolve the problem of evil by arguing that man cannot correctly distinguish good from evil”. I have argued that God might have good reasons for allowing bad things to happen that we just don't see, but this is totally different.

You pose an initially very impressive question about God's fatherhood in relation to suffering. Kelly James Clark responds by asking whether it is so clear that God has the same obligations to us as we have to each another: “If God is Father, does it follow that he has obligations identical with those of human fathers?”[22] The answer is no. God is our heavenly father, but there are crucial differences between Him and an earthly parent. Even so, a human parent will sometimes allow a child to suffer harm to avoid a greater harm. We may discourage but allow a child to smoke a cigar, knowing that the likely result will be a quick rush to the toilet, but knowing also that the experience may be beneficial to the child in the future.

Clark argues that humans basically stand in a similar relation to God as a baby-sitter stands in

relation to a child's parent. We would be upset if a baby-sitter allowed our child to smoke this cigar, feeling that this was a decision and a responsibility that only a parent rightfully has. As parents, we have superior knowledge of the child's individual nature and history, we have more experience and moral judgment, and we are in a better position to comfort the child and use the experience to teach.

As the baby-sitter is to the parent, the parent is to God. "God's infinite ability to benefit those suffering harms greatly increases his permission to allow them." [23] Unlike a human parent, God's power to be a Father doesn't end with the child's death. Moreover, God the Father has billions of children, and what is good for one must be in the context of what is good for the others. And the father-child analogy is only part of the picture, as God the Father has many other roles: creator, sustainer, redeemer, and ultimately, the judge. All these things should be considered when we think of God as the Father.

[CS] Peter, I think your point is well-taken. No one should make too much of the parent / child – God / human analogy. Clearly what we would universally expect and demand of a human parent – that the child be adequately fed, clothed, sheltered, immunized from disease, (when possible) educated, protected from foreseeable harm and made to feel loved – we cannot expect from God. God might have, as you suggest, many other things on His mind. Or God might be taking care of us in ways that we do not understand – in an afterlife, for example. And we are often unable to understand God's purposes and ways in this life.

From within an unwavering faith, this makes some sense. And some believers testify that there is no conceivable turn of events that could happen on this earth, no apparent evidence of God's non-existence or evil in His nature that would shake their faith. You seem to take this position.

[PW] If the non-theist can see that the theist has a reasonable answer to some question *from the perspective of faith*, then the non-theist can't continue to see in that question a justification for skepticism.

When we debate the goodness of God I feel less like a scientist debating the merits of string-theory

than a lawyer defending a friend against misrepresentation in court. I am in the position of Job; I *know* that a good God and real evil are compatible realities because I have experienced both. More specifically I have experienced both the evil in my own heart and God's goodness in relating to me in empowering love and forgiveness. I might perhaps be turned away from the Bible as revealing God if all it contained was unjustified apparent evils clearly commanded by or directly attributed to God; but this simply is not the case. I think I have sufficient warrant to accept some mysteries because any God I can comprehend obviously isn't God!

[CS] I think when you take such a position you are falling back on what George H. Smith calls 'Christian agnosticism':

There is an interesting assortment of arguments designed to explain the existence of natural evils. Some theologians argue that evil exists for the sake of a greater good; others maintain that apparent evils disappear into a universal harmony of good. Although something may appear evil to man, we are assured by the Christian that God is able to view the overall perspective, and any apparent evil always turns out for the best. These approaches share the premise that man cannot understand the ways of God, but this simply pushes us into agnosticism. It will not do for the Christian to posit an attribute of God [such as his moral perfection] and, when asked to defend that attribute, contend that man cannot understand it. (Atheism: the Case Against God Prometheus Books, 1989, p.85)

Unfortunately, it is at precisely this point that any real dialogue, any attempt to convince someone outside your circle of faith, becomes impossible. How can I be convinced of your defense of God when you take the position that his goodness is often incomprehensible? Whenever God becomes incomprehensible, any attempt to defend him rationally is doomed to fail.

In very brief summary, I have contended in this chapter that though theistic philosophers crow that they have resolved the Problem of Evil, all they have done is shown that it is logically possible that God and evil in the world He has created are not incompatible. By the same logic, I have argued that moral giraffes and flying

elephants are not logically impossible. You continue to shelter God from attacks on his moral nature by the dodge that He cannot be condemned, whatever He does, unless it is first conceded that all real morality comes from Him. And then He can't be condemned either. I have demonstrated that exactly the same argument can be used to 'prove' that Satan is the all-powerful creator and ruler of the universe. I continue to argue from a morality based upon basic human values recognized both by civilized human beings and international law. You argue that God cannot be condemned for the amount of evil in the world, it being hard to draw the line between 10, 10,000 or 6,000,000 dead people; I argue that *any* unnecessary suffering is evil. You argue that sin and suffering are necessary because they are a precondition of Heaven; I answer that there is no reason why they must be a pre-condition. You argue for libertarian free will; I answer that such free will is an illusion, that nobody can produce a single example of it, and that if there is a God He must take some measure of responsibility for moral evil – and all responsibility for natural evil. We also differ on whether Edwards' analysis of human freedom precludes human moral responsibility and rational judgment.

[PW] Presented with the problem of evil, I have responded in two ways. First, I offered a *defense* that showed that evil doesn't make belief in God irrational because it does not disprove or count against God, at least not when other data is taken into account. Most importantly on this score, I have argued that any argument against God from evil either fails (if it only recognizes subjective evil) or ends up proving God's existence (if it recognizes objective evil). I have also pointed out that the logical problem of evil is widely recognized as defunct, and that the evidential problem of evil suffers from several problems. Second, I went a step further than a defense by offering a *theodicy* that explains how the reality of evil does not exclude the reality of God. God probably has reasons for allowing evil that are 'beyond our ken', but I have also sketched out a 'greater-good theodicy' in which the existence of our world containing embodied creatures with libertarian freedom and the capacity for moral evil is a necessary precondition for the creation of Heaven. This plausible theodicy is unnecessary but strengthens the theistic position.

I do not "posit an attribute of God [his moral perfection] and, when asked to defend that attribute, contend that man cannot understand it." Of course we can't *comprehend* it (it is too big, too wonderful); but we can certainly *understand* it. God is the living embodiment of Goodness by whose character we judge all lesser goods and evils to be what they objectively are. God is the personal being who, without having to, created us and this beautiful world that we live in, who puts up with our sin, forgives us, and offers us eternal fulfillment in an everlasting relationship that can begin now but will flourish in Heaven. In understanding *how* this belief does not contradict the fact that the world contains evil (a question asked by believers and non-believers alike), the various answers I have given never involve the retreat from reason you imply. I will summarize my main responses to the problem of evil:

1. The problem of evil does not even claim to be an attempt to disprove, nor even count against, the existence of a 'God' who is, for example, all-good and all-knowing but who lacks power. This may be cold comfort to the theist, but it is equally cold comfort to the non-theist. I see Christian theism as the overall best supported theistic worldview.
2. Any attempt to argue against God on the basis of subjective moral values is doomed from the outset. If what is wrong for me is not necessarily wrong for you, then it certainly isn't necessarily wrong for God.
3. If the anti-theist attempts to argue against God on the basis of objective moral values then the problem of evil becomes self-defeating and actually proves God's existence via the moral argument for God.
4. The non-theist has a harder time explaining good and evil without God than the theist does with Him.
5. As William P. Alston reports: "*It is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides that the logical problem [of evil] is bankrupt.*"^[24]
6. This means that the ontological argument may be taken to prove God's existence, unless one denies objective values (as you do – but see point

2).

7. Once it is granted that the co-existence of God and evil is possible *per se*, no particular amount of evil can disprove God's existence.

8. Even if evil does count against God, there is more grounds for belief than there is for non-belief.

9. Rejecting God results in a nihilistic worldview.

10. If God exists, He probably has some reasons for allowing evil that we do not, and perhaps cannot, grasp.

11. On the Christian view of things, God suffers with us and for us.

12. Creaturely freedom in matters of morality is valuable but requires original sin.

13. The existence of embodied creatures with original sin requires a world that incorporates natural evil, but this evil does not outweigh the good things made possible by the existence of a physical world.

14. One of these good things is Heaven, since Free Will is a necessary precondition for Heaven. God could not make Heaven without creating creatures like ourselves in a world like our own so that we can freely choose relationship with Him. Love does not force itself upon the beloved.

15. Free will theodicy explains some natural evils as the free will actions of demons.

16. Denying free will in order to rebut the free will defense / theodicy leads to serious ethical problems and is epistemologically self-defeating.

Only one of these responses makes an appeal to ignorance (and a limited appeal at that), and only having provided good reason to expect such ignorance. In short, you have accepted the failure of the logical problem of evil and I think you have been unable to press the evidential problem of evil in a way that is not morally and / or rationally self-defeating.

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[1] William Lane Craig in debate with Kai Nielsen, cf. 'The Craig-Nielsen Debate: God, Morality, And Evil' @ <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-nielsen0.html>.

[2] Terry L. Miethe, *Does God Exist?*, p.192.

[3] Alvin Plantinga, 'Arguing for God', *Perspectives in Philosophy*, (ed.) Michael Boylan.

[4] See <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-nielsen1.html>.

[5] Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason*, (Eerdmans, 1998), pp.65-66.

[6] Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, (Indiana University Press, 1996), Introduction.

[7] Cf. <http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ap85/471/ontarg.html>;

Also <http://www.abarnett.demon.co.uk/atheism/ontol.html> (no longer available at August 2010).

[8] Plantinga argues the theist "*might well have much better non-propositional grounds for her theistic belief than any argument from evil provides her with propositional grounds against it. And whether this is so is largely a matter of whether God has given us certain cognitive powers, as classical theism asserts. Thus, according to Plantinga, whether theistic belief is rendered unreasonable by any evidential argument from evil depends on whether classical theism is true.*" Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, (Indiana University Press, 1996), Introduction.

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[19] Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Baker).

[20] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, (Mowbray, 1987), pp.31-33, my emphasis.

[21] Cf. Peter S. Williams, *The Case for Angels*, (Paternoster, 2002).

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] William P. Alston, 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition.'

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