

The Problem of Evil

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as ‘*the* problem of evil.’ There are responses to evil experienced as something awful that is thrown in one’s face, and these divide into the phenomenologically distinct categories of blame and lament; and there are also arguments from evil, framed in individual ways, not all of which have the same end in view.¹ There is no one ‘evil.’ When the Psalmist recoils in the face of wickedness (Ps. 10), or when William Cowper cries out in pain in his “Lines Written During a Period of Insanity,” or when Paul Celan speaks of the “Schwarze Milch der Frühe” in “Todesfuge,” each is answering to a separate thing: the persecution of the poor by the unrighteous, a dramatic breakdown of mental health, and the murder of Jews in the Shoah. ‘Evil’ is a notoriously slippery word: it can denote moral evil (sin as it is known in Judaism and Christianity) or mental and physical evil (suffering); and some philosophers would wish to add to these one or more of metaphysical evil (original imperfection), intellectual evil (error, ignorance and even mistakes) and aesthetic evil (ugliness). It can be used to designate a negative social value as well as to denote the pollution that has infected a person, whether deservedly or undeservedly. It falls on both sides of the distinction between active and passive, covering the deeds of a perpetrator and the sufferings of a victim, and is all too

* Kevin Hart is Jo Rae Wright University Professor in the Divinity School at Duke University. His recent books include *Lands of Likeness: For a Poetics of Contemplation* (Chicago UP, 2023), which consists of his Gifford Lectures given at Glasgow University, *Contemplation: The Movements of the Soul* (Columbia UP, 2024), and *Dark-Land: Memoir of a Secret Childhood* (Paul Dry Books, 2024). His poetry is collected in *Wild Track: New and Selected Poems* (Notre Dame UP, 2015), *Barefoot* (Notre Dame UP, 2018), and in two forthcoming collections, *Carnets* (Wipf and Stock, 2026) and *Firefly* (Pitt St. Poetry, 2026). His *Kierkegaard and Phenomenology* is forthcoming from Cambridge UP.

¹ See Paul Ricœur, “Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 250.

often regarded as justified by the perpetrator. (As Browning's Sordello says, each bad person believes "some fancied right allowed / His vilest wrong.")² Evil is accounted for by privation and by a definite spiritual force, sometimes conceived as personal. It can refer to something as quotidian as a toothache, as melancholy as the fact of mortality, and it surely indicates horrors that degrade their victims beyond apparent recovery.

Yet in recent decades we have inherited something called 'the problem of evil,' now a common topic in analytical philosophy (like 'the problem of other minds.')

It does not offer much by way of wisdom about evil or even say much about it. For that, one must look to phenomenology, which does not concern itself with pre-fabricated problems but goes directly to the 'things themselves'; or, even better, one must spend time with Scripture and the arts.³ Rather, in analytical philosophy 'the problem of evil' is taken to frustrate the possibility of rational belief in one or another of the Abrahamic religions. One does not find anything like the problem of evil, as formulated and discussed in the West, in Eastern religions — in Hinduism, for example. There we have moral evil (*papa*) and suffering (*duhkha*), to be sure, and these can be taken to constitute a problem all human beings face. Theologically, though, these forms of evil contribute to what is called the problem of injustice that is sometimes resolved by appeals to *karma* that has accumulated in an individual's past lives; and in some schools of Hindu thought there is no real distinction between good and evil in the higher reaches of reality.⁴

In the West modern scholarly writing on the problem of evil tends to converge, often implicitly, on Christianity and usually on its natural theology, which chiefly derives from terms set by Christian Wolff in his *Theologia naturalis* (1736-1737), although it has roots in the Renaissance.⁵ Earlier solutions to the problem, in which two wills of God are posited — a permissive will (*voluntas*

² Robert Browning, "Sordello," III, 794-95, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew, supplemented and completed by Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), I:191.

³ See Jean-Luc Marion, "Evil in Person," *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1-20.

⁴ See J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 131-132, and, more generally, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Mohanty denies that there is anything like a problem of evil in Hinduism while O'Flaherty points to suffering as constituting a human problem.

⁵ See, for instance, Raymond Sebond, *Theologia naturalis seu Liber creaturarum* (1487). Aquinas does not talk of *theologia naturalis* but of the *preambule fidei*.

permittens) and an approving will (*voluntas approbans*) — are overlooked.⁶ It may be that those who devise ever more sophisticated versions of an argument from evil have more than Christianity in mind, but almost all Anglo-American philosophers who set themselves against arguments from evil appeal overtly or covertly to Christian understandings of God, whether restricted to natural theology or extended to revealed theology.

Philosophers usually distinguish the logical argument from evil from its evidential counterpart.⁷ The first of these, perhaps best known in the form proposed by J. L. Mackie, maintains that there is a contradiction in a familiar set of propositions (God is wholly good, God is omnipotent, yet there is evil). Alvin Plantinga has contested this claim at a high level of abstraction, and there have been fresh attempts to restate the case in a clearer and more rigorous manner than Mackie's.⁸ The second argument is widely held these days to be the more troubling for believers: there is a preponderance of evil, some instances of which one must call horrors, that is experienced by human and non-human animals alike, and this state of affairs casts doubt on the existence of a wholly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God: the God of Christian orthodoxy.⁹ This argument is developed in assorted ways (direct induction, indirect induction, appeals to probability; global and particular cases; epistemic enquiries as well as doxastic ones), and is answered by a range of refutations, defenses, and theodicies. Some of these look, as Kant does, to epistemic humility, others to the constraints that even God faces when creating a world, and still others to the overriding good of

⁶ The two will theory was proposed by William of Champeaux and Anselm of Laon. See M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, pref. Étienne Gilson, ed. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 271.

⁷ Usually, but not always: see, for instance, Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 8.

⁸ See J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, 64 (1955): 200. See also, H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly* 10, no.39 (1960): 97-114, and Antony Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 144-169. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), ch. 9, and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). See also, Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963): 180-197.

⁹ See William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-341, and Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23, no.3 (1989): 331-350.

human freedom (even when horrors are at issue).¹⁰ Many philosophers accept a division between moral and natural evil, yet there are those who do not: when seeking to defend God against the charge of permitting evil, Plantinga almost collapses natural evil into moral evil by pointing to Satan and the other fallen angels as a main cause of earthquakes, tsunamis, and so on.¹¹

Beginning with Epicurus

When one comes across either the logical or evidential argument in articles published in scholarly journals, encyclopedia entries, and even books on the topic by analytical philosophers it mostly seems to have fallen directly from the heavens or to have recently crept out of hell. Historical reference tends to be mainly restricted to mid-late twentieth-century responses to the problem or, at most, to formulations of it in philosophical modernity, chiefly those by Leibniz and Hume.¹² Taking a longer perspective, one sees that the earliest statement of it is attributed to Epicurus. However, even when the Greek philosopher is credited with the first formulation of the argument, little attention is given to differences between the end he has in mind and the ends that absorb Leibniz or Hume, let alone those who have followed them in the modern Christian era.¹³ It is worthwhile to begin by going back to the original formulation of the problem and to reflect on its aim, and then to consider, as concretely as possible, what it

¹⁰ See Immanuel Kant, “On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30. Plantinga develops a free will defense in the books already cited. See also, P. T. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). This is not the only defense available — there is the “plenitude” defense, for example, associated with Viscount Bolingbroke — though the free will defense has been worked out in the most detail. With regard to horrors, see Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” and Marilyn McCord Adams, “Theodicy without Blame,” *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 215–245.

¹¹ See Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 16. See also, Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), ch. 9.

¹² Inwagen sets the “early” debates” about evil in the 1950’s and 1960’s. See *The Problem of Evil*, 73.

¹³ Plantinga is an example. He notes Epicurus in *The Nature of Necessity*, 164 n.1, while eliding him in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 10. See also his “Supralapsarianism,” 3. No mention is made of Lactantius in either place.

has to do with the Christian God as distinct from the pagan gods. I shall make that journey by way of Hume.

In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) Hume has Philo, the character closest to his own skeptical views about the rationality of religious belief, note that “Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered.”¹⁴ (Clearly, Philo had not read Aquinas or, if he had, did not think he had satisfactorily answered the questions posed by Epicurus.)¹⁵ The questions refer to God: “Is he 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?” (66). Now Hume is not quoting directly from Epicurus: the passage cited exists nowhere in his surviving corpus, which is very small compared with what he is believed to have written. Rather, Hume quotes from Lactantius’s *De ira dei*, and this may well be why the argument is framed in terms of God and not the gods.¹⁶ Lactantius preserved the argument, or perhaps adapted it, because Epicurus influentially maintains that there is no point in fearing the anger of the gods or seeking to appease them through sacrifices because they enjoy perfect tranquility and accordingly are wholly unconcerned about us.¹⁷ This tranquility, *ἀταραξία*, is held by Epicurus to be a negative moral ideal that humans should follow in order to be as free from pain as possible. Appropriately enough, Lactantius cites Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, that wonderful poem of Epicureanism, as offering detail about this view of the gods.¹⁸ As presented by Lactantius, Epicurus does not take the argument to count against the existence of the gods; instead, evil is held to be irreconcilable with divine creation or any theodicy. Lactantius, however, brings to the fore the God revealed to be the Father of Jesus of Nazareth, God as Creator and Judge; and he has reason to think from Scripture that this God can be angry and that we should take pains to appease him when he is.

It is no surprise that Hume does not cite Lactantius: the philosopher attends to natural religion, not revealed religion, and Epicurus serves his purpose nicely. Hume does not think that one can prove by way of metaphysics that God exists,

¹⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, 1948), 66.

¹⁵ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 2 art 3 obj. 1. For Aquinas’s fullest account of evil, see his *On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan, ed. and intro. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ See Lactantius, *De ira dei*, cap. 13.

¹⁷ There is scholarly dispute as to whether Epicurus is indeed the author of the argument cited by Lactantius, but for the purposes of this paper I shall assume that it is Epicurus and not an unnamed member of his school.

¹⁸ See Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 646-12, and also III, 21-27, V, 149-194, VI, 68-79.

and he casts doubt on the rationality of claims about the goodness of God that are made in natural religion. The most that can be said, he thinks, is that “*the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*” (94), and that while a revelation would be necessary to shore up Christian belief he himself finds it impossible to give credence to one. (It is worth noting that the very use of the word “revelation,” rather than “illumination,” situates Hume’s thinking about Christian theological epistemology in the period after Aquinas.)¹⁹ The argument from evil is used by Hume to undercut confidence in the existence of a deity, proposed within the world of ethical monotheism, who is infinitely good or even very good. So “the problem of evil” has changed in function from Epicurus to Hume: it has passed from addressing the gods who embody a high moral ideal but who, because of the ἀταραξία they enjoy, are entirely unconcerned with humans to eroding the ground of any purely philosophical belief in the goodness of God. Yet it has remained the same in one important respect: Lactantius’s insistence, based on Scripture, that the Christian God is a person (and given to righteous anger) has dropped out of consideration.

Hume’s restatement of the argument from evil occurs in the context of eighteenth-century natural religion, which explicitly brackets revelation as explanation and even as possibility. The confidence in natural reason that led Aquinas to shift from a theological epistemology based on illumination to one based on revelation is now taken to undercut faith in revelation. Exactly the same bracketing occurs in many later iterations of the problem. In recent attempts to present the argument more narrowly than Hume does no fundamental questioning of the inherited terms of the argument has taken place, even though the context has changed from paganism to Christianity. It is worth keeping in mind that Epicurus himself marks a shift in Greek religion. His deities, enjoying perfect calm in intermundane space, are an abstraction of the Olympian gods; they have few of the human traits we associate with Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus.²⁰ These tranquil beings are made of atoms as we are but in a more highly refined way and their moral goodness, if one can call it that, is entirely self-enclosed: they enjoy a sublime selfishness, at least with respect to lesser beings.

¹⁹ The pivotal moment in the change from *illuminatio* to *revlatio* is *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. q. 1, *responsio*. Yet Aquinas considers *illuminatio* in *Summa Theologiae*, 1a q. 85 art. 6 ad. 1.

²⁰ Of course, Epicurus was not the only Greek philosopher to do this. Recall Xenophanes of Colophon’s satirical lines about the gods and Plato’s remark on God being wholly good at *Theatetus* 176c. Philo draws on this tradition in his *On the Unchangeableness of God* in *Philo*, 10 vols, eds F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929-62), 3:39.

This abstraction of the deity continues when the argument passes into the Christian era, and might be said to increase with the help of scholastic theology.

One must be careful here. Let us take Aquinas as guide for a few steps. (From this point, even when I depart from Aquinas, I will assume a Catholic understanding of the Christian faith, and a faith that is informed by Catholic theology.) Although the angelic doctor affirms that God is perfect and hence perfectly good, he is chary about what this claim means when advanced in this life. To say that God is good is to affirm a *ratio deitatis* without reference to a *modus*: there is no imperfect means of realization at issue, as there would be, for example, if one urged that God is the rock upon which we stand. Goodness properly belongs to God, we say, even though in this life we cannot know goodness except through a mode. Now, for Aquinas, God is unconditioned — he abides above and beyond any genus — and so the effects of the divine agent in our conditioned world will have a very remote resemblance to him.²¹ This means that it is true that God is good but when we say it we do so with a highly inadequate understanding of what we are saying.²² We usually know what we mean when we affirm the statement “That man is good” but we mean far more than we can understand in this life when we say “God is good.” Cataphatic predication, as practiced by Aquinas, is chastened by an acknowledgement of apophatic reserve.

Modern Arguments

The apophatic reticence that Aquinas shows with regards to claims about God’s goodness needs to be kept in mind when pondering modern arguments from evil. Let us begin with Michael Tooley’s restatement of the logical argument from evil:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. Evil exists.

²¹ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 4 art. 3 *responsio*, and 1a q. 6 art. 2 *responsio*.

²² See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 13 art. 2 *responsio*. On God’s perfect goodness, see also, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. and introd. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), I. 38.

6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. Therefore, God doesn't exist.²³

One oddity about this argument is that we are told four times that God *has* this or that, whereas orthodox doctrine of God would specify that God *is* this or that. The point is worth making if only to show that Tooley tends, in the very statement of his case, to present a God who is not the deity of Christian orthodoxy but who has distinct pagan traits. This skewing of God is all the more apparent in the first line of the argument. For what does it mean to say that God is "morally perfect"?

Usually, the expression points us to the moral qualities of God, which are minimally holiness, righteousness and love. (Sometimes faithfulness and truth are included.) These are communicable qualities of the deity, yet quite different from the moral qualities that we may develop in life. God is not a "moral being" in the way that you or I might be: he does not develop virtues, pursue moral ends, or follow any moral commands. Tooley's phrasing makes him appear to suggest that God is moral as some human beings are but far more so and indeed without fault. Yet how odd it would be to contemplate God as a perfect utilitarian, say, or as impeccably following the moral law, or even as a maximal version of Sir Charles Grandison. A better way of putting matters would be to say, as the tradition does, that God is metaphysically good. Put more clearly, the adverb "morally" is unfortunate, since there could be no question of God being obedient to anyone or, since he is eternal, having a teleological structure to his actions, two things often associated with being moral. It would be better to speak, as I have been doing, of God being "perfectly good." That is, God would be good not just within this or that genus but by virtue of him abiding in no genus at all, and therefore being good in an absolutely singular manner. We cannot know what this goodness, this *summa caritas*, would be in and of itself by dint of this absolute singularity, although we have an inkling of it by reference to goodness as experienced in created beings. Even so, we cannot measure or assess the divine goodness. As is made plain in Job, one has no recourse to judge God for his actions (Job 38: 4).

²³ Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/evil>. (accessed 20th December 2024).

There is certainly no reason to think, however, of God being beyond good and evil, as some people suppose when one suspends the word “moral” when speaking of the divine goodness. The main point is that God’s goodness can be at best only very partly comprehended in this life. A secondary point is that this goodness may not be properly described wholly by way of the vocabulary of ethics; it may also require the vocabulary of aesthetics. When God saw that his creation was good [טוב, καλόν], as we are told in the first chapter of Genesis, the judgment seems to be as much aesthetic as moral. That judgment may include a distribution of light and shade, possibilities for good as well as for evil for the development of the creatures (and opportunities to defeat the evil, if it is chosen).

It is worth our while to pause at (2) and (4). No definition of “omnipotent” is given, which is perhaps not unexpected, since it is an extremely difficult thing to define.²⁴ And, as we shall see, it is by no means obvious that an almighty loving Creator would be in a position to order the world in such a way as to eliminate all evil or even all horrors. His omnipotence might well best be understood as unconditioned lordship in a free world, a matter to which I shall return. One thing that is striking in (2) and (4) is that Tooley simply assumes that if God is omnipotent, in some sense of the word, as well as being “morally perfect,” then he will wish to eliminate all evil and have no good reason not to do so. Yet the Christian God is invested in nourishing love among his creatures, and for that to happen we need freedom to make choices. We might say, while departing from Aquinas, that God performs an act of κένωσις, one that is deeply anterior to the incarnation, in order to make space for that freedom even when it goes directly against his deepest desires for how he would like human beings to act. He remains “morally perfect” and omnipotent, in some sense of the word, but does not intervene either before creation (to limit freedom) or in the teeth of particular evil actions (so that they may be frustrated) precisely because he has established a condition (freedom) for humans to love one another and himself. God, who wills the good at all times, does not change his will when, as it were, a nasty spot of evil shows up in the divine plan; and more than one such spot shows up, as we all know. Bare as Tooley’s proof is, it nonetheless presents a God who seems to be made partly in the image of man. Yet Christianity gives us a quite different image of God. Is. 55: 8, for instance: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (RSV). Indeed, if Christianity is right, God has revealed a plan— the Atonement — to overcome evil, which is already unfolding but will, for reasons of his own, not be complete

²⁴ On this question, see P. T. Geach, “Omnipotence,” *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7-20.

until the end of the time. The questions of how and when God chooses to act are not taken into account in (4). In short, we simply are in no epistemic position to grant (1), (2) or (4), and (4) runs counter to what Christians believe about God in the first place.

Tooley's God is at once misleadingly concrete and highly abstract, and both qualities make it difficult for a Christian to accept his use of the word "God" in the proof. His God seems to be abstracted from what we would expect of a finite moral agent. (Or at least some moral agents, for even very good individuals do not feel called upon to intervene in all morally fraught circumstances, knowing that one can sometimes encumber with help.) And so this deity seems to abide in a genus of moral agents. However, a God who abides in a genus can be, at best, a god, like those whom Epicurus and Lucretius evoke as ideals. He certainly cannot be the God whom Christians worship. One might say, with William Rowe, that Tooley draws on "restricted standard theism" (RST), namely a bare theism before one adds "claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like," which would constitute "expanded standard theism" (EST).²⁵ Yet Tooley's theism, as conceived within his argument, is not the core of what Christians believe. It is something quite other than what we believe; and adding further claims, including very important ones that Rowe does not mention (the triune nature of God, and the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are consubstantial, for example), does not expand RST into Christianity; it remains something to the side of the faith, for it does not center on an absolutely singular deity.²⁶ RST is pure abstraction, a philosopher's confection of several positive divine attributes; in contrast, Christianity turns on the irreducibly triune nature of God and the economy of Trinitarian action, and before the doctrine of the Trinity was clearly stated Christianity pivots on Jesus making God thinkable as Father and King through the telling of parables and through his actions.

Let us turn to the evidential argument. As already indicated, there are many versions of it. For my purposes in this brief paper, however, only one need be considered. Consider Rowe's formulation:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

²⁵ William Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 95.

²⁶ I should point out that Paul does not use the noun *κένωσις* in any of his letters but various forms of the verb.

2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. (Therefore) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.²⁷

Note that Rowe figures God as a being — presumably the first being, the highest being, or something similar — and not as *ipsum esse subsistens modis indeterminatum*, an absolutely singular being outside or beyond all genus. Now Aquinas says that one *can* predicate *ens* of God, but only analogically, for, unlike creatures, the divine being does not participate in *esse subsistens* but *is* that *esse subsistens*.²⁸ None of this is acknowledged in Rowe's sense of "a being," and so one might wonder if he is talking of the orthodox Christian God or some other imagined deity. Furthermore, it is difficult to accept (1) because no human being who could declare it as true would be in a position to know that it is true. That there are moral horrors does not need to be underlined: the Harrowing of the North, the Shoah, and the Gulag stand as indices of murdering children, raping women, and torturing men, women and children. We live in a world "bursting with sin and sorrow," as Samuel Johnson said, and the world that we know is far worse than he could have imagined.²⁹ That there are also natural horrors perhaps needs to be asterisked, since they are talked about less often.

Rowe appeals to a fawn dying in agony in a forest fire caused by lightning as an example of intense natural suffering that could have been prevented without losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad. Yet forest fires are needed from time to time for the maintenance of the forest and for the good of wildlife as a whole; without an occasional fire some forests would become subject to the threat of a devastating blaze that would destroy more life when lightning finally strikes or a match is dropped, and such a fire would diminish the prospects of life for long after the conflagration was over. The death of Rowe's fawn may be the unavoidable price for the survival of many other animals. At a pinch one might elaborate other reasons, following analytic philosophy's penchant for zany examples and counter-examples. (My favorites are the "sheep in the field" story,

²⁷ Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 337.

²⁸ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 11 art. 4 *responsio*, and *Summa contra Gentiles* 1. 32. See also, *Exposition of the "On the Hebdonads" of Boethius*, trans. Janice L. Schultz (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), ch. 2.

²⁹ See Hester Lynch Piozzi, "Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson," in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. G. B. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), I:301.

the “pyromaniac” tableau, and the “fake barn” scenario.)³⁰ It may well be that if the fawn survived it would have run madly from the fire and trampled a baby who, had it lived, might have done immense good for humankind (or perhaps specialized as a veterinarian in diagnosing the diseases of deer). If the fawn survived the fire before human beings were on the planet, it might have rushed past one of the greater apes that would have chased it, spear in hand, rather than, as had been his intention, copulate with a particularly alluring female ape and so bring about what came to be regarded as a much-needed link in the chain of human evolution. And of course, the example can be re-stated with respect to a time before there were greater apes: there always seems to be a link in the chain of evolution that needs to have been forged.

With regard to (2) there are two main issues, one epistemic and one to do with prevention of evil. Once again we have insufficient knowledge of what it means to be a “wholly good being.” Rowe can extrapolate from knowledge of goodness that is available in a genus but in this life can never reach goodness that is held to be absolutely singular. A wholly good deity might have ends that surpass all our imagined goods here and now: the beatific vision — surely of pre-eminent value in every possible respect — might be shared by all created beings, and this would surely defeat any mortal suffering, however horrid and however degrading it might be. Also, a wholly good being might be constrained by a certain amount of evil having to be in any world he created, even a degree or more of unspeakable horror, and be unable, despite being omnipotent, to overcome it by the natural laws that he ordains and sets in motion. Cosmologists committed to the theory of the Multiverse talk of how tight the parameters need to be even for matter to form, let alone for life to emerge: the slightest increase in dark energy after the Big Bang would push the building blocks of matter away from one another so quickly that galaxies would not have been able to establish themselves.

It may be that even an omnipotent deity had to create within highly limited constraints if there was to be life at all, let alone the possibility of intelligent life. Every poet knows that before writing a poem one has great freedom but that the very first line that is written diminishes endless possibilities for the composition as a whole: meter, rhyme, genre, mode, tone, and so on, become fixed very quickly indeed. (Yet those very constraints also generate creativity.) God’s powers are of course incomparably greater: could he have chosen a completely different set of laws of physics? Perhaps, but we have no reason to suppose that those laws

³⁰ The authors of these examples — Roderick Chisholm, Brian Skymys and Alvin Goldman (who credits Carl Ginet and whose example was taken up by Edmund Gettier) — could have had brilliant careers as prose poets in another possible world.

would yield a more benign cosmos. Could he have created other sorts of beings? Indeed. And in fact he did, Christians believe, *viz.*, angels. Yet to the medieval imagination, at any rate, a fallen angel has a worse time of it than we do, since an angel cannot repent.³¹

The other issue in (2) turns on God being obliged to prevent evils. Rowe does not make it clear in the demonstration whether he has in mind God preventing all possible evils by, say, creating beings who would be free yet would always choose the good, or whether he is thinking of particular evil actions being prevented. It would take too long to advance criticisms of the compatibility of free will and determinism. Suffice it to say that, in my view, the compatibilist position requires something too weak to be justly called “free will”: one needs real and robust alternatives to actions if the will is truly to be free. Perhaps Rowe has in mind God arranging reality so that the perpetrator of a great evil comes to a sticky end before he or she can bring the evil deed about. However, this rubs against the view that God, having willed the good, does not change his mind about it. He has performed a pre-incarnational *κένωσις* to allow for the overriding goods of love and freedom, and cannot intervene in the course of history to change particular situations before the fact. Or perhaps Rowe is thinking of particular evils that can be prevented by divine action but without quietly disposing of the perpetrator by a metaphysical fiddling of the books. True, at any given time God could intervene in an awful situation, and suspend one or more natural laws in order to prevent dire evil, but there would be a cost in doing so, perhaps a very high one indeed. We can imagine an angel coming to save the fawn in a remote forest, even if such a visitation might result in more harm than less; but can we imagine a world, one in which human beings are to live without perpetual bewilderment and which we are to govern with appropriate care, that is forever subject to divine intervention in this way?³² Such a world would not encourage rational behavior, and certainly would not be conducive to nurturing faith in the God who wills the good from eternity and who does not change his mind about what he has willed.

It may be that God simply cannot create a world, in which humans *en masse* are to be responsible and loving beings, that escapes a great deal of evil, including horrors. The divine omnipotence needs to be understood within these terms, as absolute lordship, not the ability to do anything at all: form mountains without valleys, make rocks heavier than he can lift, devise square circles, and tell lies. Of course, it may be that God sees benefits resulting from the terrible situation of

³¹ Such, at least, is Aquinas's view. See *Summa Theologiae* 1a q. 64 art. 2.

³² See Peter van Inwagen on massively irregular worlds in *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), lecture 7.

a world with unavoidable horrors — the setting of salvation as a personal and group goal, for instance — although it is insuperably hard for us in this world to admit that these benefits compensate for horrors or defeat them. One might grit one's teeth and argue that a spectacle of senseless, intense evil can prompt certain individuals to increase their faith, hope and charity, and therefore to be "heroic" in the "practice of virtues," as a formula for canonization of the saints has it.³³ Certainly the martyrs and many of the saints have had first-hand experience of horrors. Yet some horrors go further than we can bear and pollute all who come in touch with them: simply recall the Shoah. One might maintain that, because of the restriction that God faces in creation, he will seek to defeat evil by eventually granting the beatific vision to all who have suffered when they are in a state to sustain that vision. This might include non-human animals.³⁴

Does this mean that God permits evil in this life, even though he may overcome it at the Last Judgment? Not quite: God does not permit individuals or groups to do evil; it is always forbidden. And, as I have said (with Aquinas in mind), natural evil comes about by accidents to do with natural things that are in themselves good. Yet people nonetheless perform evil acts, and these acts have consequences that are sometimes horrific. God wills the good, and never wills otherwise. The consequences of doing evil fall to the perpetrator, in this life or the next, and the evil done to the victim is defeated by the possibility of being granted the beatific vision. It seems, even from the Scriptures, that God tends to act after an evil act has taken place rather than beforehand: Adam falls, and then a plan is put into place to redeem him and his progeny; Jesus is mocked, whipped and crucified and then is raised from the dead. Adam's freedom, and the freedom of the Romans, is respected, even if it lacerates the divine heart. The problem of evil is thrown towards theology and is sometimes caught, but it really should be returned to the philosopher as mystery. For it cannot be solved in the register of natural reason. The philosopher sets up the problem with "God" used as a word, a sort of counter in the difficult games of logic and metaphysics, with no deep understanding of the theology that subtends the use of that word. This comes

³³ See the Apostolic Constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* (1983): http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_divinus-perfectionis-magister_en.html (accessed 20th December 2024).

³⁴ Of course, not all Christian theologians would consider this possibility. Nor indeed would all Muslim theologians. See, for instance, Margaretha T. Heemskerk, *Suffering in the Mu'tazlite Theology: 'Abd Jabbār's teaching on Pain and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 187-189, and Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over al-Ghazālī's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 245-246.

about by not hearing “God” as spoken in concrete situations of worship. And so theodicy becomes, as Northrop Frye says, “a dreary chess problem.”³⁵

From Natural Theology to Revealed Theology

Natural theology, when conducted properly, does not seek to prove the existence of God; rather, it attempts to show that one can reasonably believe in the God who is revealed to us. Aquinas’s *quinque viae*, for example, are not read well when taken to offer apodictic proofs that God exists. Instead, they seek to make clear, in a preliminary manner, that it is not unreasonable to affirm the existence of God and what the word “God” means, and that meaning is fleshed out over the rest of the *Summa theologiae*. As Aquinas says, just before beginning the second question of the *Summa*, his aim is to follow “Christ, who, as man, is our road to God.”³⁶

Arguments in natural atheology similarly cannot conclusively disprove that God exists, although they can try to erode a rational person’s belief in the deity. Such is the point of arguments from evil, whether logical or evidential, global or particular. At least one analytical philosopher maintains, with good reason (and with a very high bar in mind), that all philosophical arguments of moment are failures: they cannot be made sufficiently clear or rigorous to persuade any genuinely neutral participants in discussion.³⁷ I agree with those philosophers who acknowledge that no premises in philosophical arguments on substantive matters can be entirely free from dispute, and, in particular, I affirm epistemic humility as a desirable stance to adopt when discussing theodicy, along with other topics in theology and the philosophy of religion. Given that premises in this area are always going to be controversial, one should value those philosophers who take pains to present convincing premises, and that is most likely to happen with people who have sound knowledge of Christian theology. Life is too short to play with Rubik’s cube for very long. Finally, I should like to stress that, if natural atheologians aim to discompose Christians, they miss the point in developing their arguments by relying on a notion of God presented in RST or EST that is not what Christians take God to be.

³⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), 114.

³⁶ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia ante q. 2.

³⁷ See van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, lecture 3. McCord Adams makes a similar claim when describing her position as “skeptical realism.” See *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

In the high scholastic doctrine of God there is no God who is only omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good; he is, irreducibly, also eternal, immutable, impassible, loving, personal, simple, and triune. This combination of positive and negative attributes is a perplexing one, to be sure, but it exceeds the scope of this short paper to defend it by appeals to deductive development and so forth. Besides, we simply do not know in this life enough about the divine essence to offer a philosophical account of the combination. With that in mind, it also needs to be remembered that the divine “attributes” are not ascribed to God by human beings; rather, believers take God to reveal them in Scripture, and it is not clear that the “attributes” contradict one another or indeed could do so for a deity whose essence is simple.³⁸ I restrict myself to some limited observations that stem from the combination. That God is eternal, immutable and impassible is important; it means that he can be trusted: his word is his being, not a mere contract that can be broken were he to change his mind and, being all powerful, escape the terms of the contract. And that he is personal and loving is central: one can be in a deep, abiding relation only with another person. His triune nature, a matter of real distinctions not divisions, is love itself. But high scholastic theology is only an interpretation of Christianity, albeit a very imposing one, and one that needs some revisions (with respect to pre-incarnational κένωσις, for example).³⁹ Christianity turns on the manifestation of God in and through Jesus, and the God who is rendered thinkable through Jesus is concrete, *viz.* lovable. Arguments against the existence of God from evil of the sort in question in natural atheology do not deal with the concrete God whom Christians worship, and they do not even abstract from that God.

Indeed, as I have been suggesting, the focus of some philosophers of religion may well be the Christian God but in fact is not: it is an abstraction from a pagan deity such as Zeus or Apollo who, when we are reading Homer or Ovid, sometimes strikes us as acting immaturely. And this might go some distance towards accounting for the way in which some analytical philosophers have of lecturing God as though he were a very bright undergraduate, perfectly capable of getting a pretty solid First if only he would apply himself a bit more. After all, he could have made free beings that always chose to do what is morally right. “Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility...” — and Mackie continues speaking, apparently oblivious of the fact that he is talking of *God*, whose

³⁸ See on this point Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesaria, Gergory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

³⁹ Aquinas's views on incarnation with respect to κένωσις may be found at *Summa Theologiae* III q. 1 art. 1 ad. 4.

metaphysical grandeur infinitely exceeds even that of an Australian Professor of Philosophy.⁴⁰ This deity treated by some analytical philosophers of religion is conceived as relatively singular, however, not as absolutely singular: he contrasts with human beings, and so his otherness is vastly reduced. The God Christians worship is not other than us, as are the gods on Olympus or even those tacitly indicated in book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* or those constructed by Tooley and others, for he is other than anything that can be captured by a distinction between the same and the other.⁴¹ As Anselm showed in the second chapter of the *Proslogion*, Creation adds nothing to the being of God. The argument from evil as conducted in analytical philosophy, especially as proposed by natural atheologians, frequently continues pagan assumptions about God even when the argument is more rigorously stated and even when beautifully formalized in the Christian era. It remains signed by Epicurus, even though Draper, Mackie, Rowe and others change its sense and function and then countersign it.

Revealed Theology

As I have noted, both natural theologians and natural atheologians often have Christianity in mind when advancing their arguments: RST gets expanded to EST in a distinctly Christian manner, although of course no reference to Jesus or to divine κένωσις before or after the incarnation is made. Perhaps this preference for Christian monotheism occurs because in Judaism there is a tradition that God individually implants the *yētsēr ha-ra* or evil tendency in each human heart, which compromises ethical monotheism and which makes Christianity a more desirable target for analysis because it resists such compromise. And perhaps it is because in Islam the metaphysics of evil is more elusive. According to Ibn Sīnā, at least, there are two sorts of metaphysical evil, one essential and another accidental (and having both existing and non-existing modes), which complicates the picture.⁴² Nonetheless, analytical philosophers who have their eyes set on divine omnipotence as the weak spot in theology might do better in attending to Islam rather than Christianity or Judaism; one does not find an emphasis on divine

⁴⁰ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 101.

⁴¹ See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), ch. 3.

⁴² For an introduction to Ibn Sīnā on this topic, see Shams C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sīnā's Theodicy* (Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University: Global Publications, 2000).

κένωσις there.⁴³ More generally, analytical philosophers of religion tend to be trained in philosophy but not theology and almost never in world religions.⁴⁴ And so, by and large, natural theologians tend to draw on Christian motifs taken from the popular culture around them: Plantinga evokes a somewhat Miltonic Satan as the cause of much natural evil, van Inwagen has his imaginary theist relate a story very like that of the Fall, while McCord Adams, Stump and Swinburne remain plainly within the orbit of Judeo-Christian Scripture or Christian *sacra doctrina*, even when they sometimes bracket the explanatory value of inspiration, illumination or revelation.⁴⁵ Some of these philosophers have no difficulty in slipping from natural theology to revealed theology, at least on occasion, when offering a defense of God's goodness.

Sometimes the visit to the neighboring land of revealed theology is not a happy one. Consider the use made by philosophers of Satan. Gregory Boyd stars the Evil One in a cosmic battle theodicy, while Plantinga appeals to his existence in a defense of divine virtue.⁴⁶ Both make surprising plunges for people living in the twenty-first century and able to be well informed about science and, indeed, theology. Consider Plantinga, the weightier philosopher of the two: he indicts Satan and his cohorts as largely responsible for natural evil. He is a Calvinist as well as a philosopher, and the philosopher defends the Calvinist.⁴⁷ Rather more justification than a bare appeal to tradition would be needed, however, to make his claim stick; for the teaching of the fallen angels is more vexed than Plantinga supposes. Besides, is "tradition" here an appeal to longstanding popular belief or to Church doctrine or to theological reflection? Belief in Satan as an angel fallen before Creation is not creedal, nor is it canonical in a straightforward way: the allusions in Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2: 4 derive from 1 and 2 Enoch, and perhaps

⁴³ In Kabbalistic Judaism, of course, there is the teaching of *tsimtsum*. Given the very different senses of "omnipotence" in play in the Abrahamic religions one might doubt all the more whether there ever has been such a thing as RST.

⁴⁴ The poverty of knowledge of theology is perhaps indicated by the number of references to Gordon Kaufman, one of the fuzziest of modern theologians. See, for instance, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ See Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism," 16, van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 85, McCord Adams, *Christ and Horror*, Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010), and Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

⁴⁶ See Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, esp. ch. 12.

⁴⁷ Much analytical philosophy of late seems to be called into service to defend the philosophical commitments of the philosopher in question; it has become less of a style of thinking than a technique of justification, used by proponents and critics of given views. As A. R. Ammons observes, though not with this particular philosophical movement in mind, "philosophy gives clubs to / everyone," *Northfield Poems* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 57.

also Jubilees, which are all non-canonical, and Rev. 12: 10-12 has Satan being thrown out of heaven at the end of time, not before Creation.⁴⁸ I doubt that the teaching of Satan as a fallen angel would satisfy the Vincentian test of orthodoxy if it is properly applied. True, there is some early theological support for the view, principally in Tertullian, Origen, Jerome and Augustine, and deriving from the biblical image of Lucifer as “prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2: 2), but the biblical evidence is scant.⁴⁹ As regards Satan’s power in the world, views are mixed at best. Anselm, for one, is strongly against the idea: nothing happens without God’s permission.⁵⁰ Aquinas thinks of the issue quite otherwise. Natural evil has natural causes, he thinks; it does not derive from the divine will but comes about by accidents involving things that are in themselves good.⁵¹ Also, it needs to be kept in mind that it has been held that the fallen angels also encourage false belief. They have already done so among the Greeks and Romans, it was once believed; and once someone appeals to the malign role of Satan, as Plantinga does, can one rule out that he and his dark cohorts continue to corrupt belief, even in Christianity?⁵²

Perhaps not: there are, after all, ultra-conservative Catholics who think that Satan helped to bring about the Reformation (and, to be fair, Vatican II). Of the idea that Satan encourages false belief, Plantinga says, “it is less than clear that Western academia has much to say by way of evidence against the idea” (16). It is worth pausing for a moment to consider his words as justification for his decision to indict Satan as a main cause of natural evil. They are odd words, since Western academia, including historians of theology, has had rather a lot to say about the matter, finding Satan as a fallen angel to be a patristic and medieval construction read back into the Bible, and of course rejecting the idea that witches, as instruments of Satan, have been responsible for natural evils. Another objection to Plantinga can be made: it is also traditional belief that God not only permits evil but also brings about as much natural evil as he wishes. Is. 45: 7 is an unnerving verse: “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I

⁴⁸ See Norman Powell Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), 495.

⁴⁹ See Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Part II.

⁵⁰ See Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.10, Jerome, *Epistola*, lxix, cap. 6, Augustine, *De civ. dei*, 20: 19, and Anselm, “On the Fall of the Devil,” *Three Philosophical Dialogues*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 89.

⁵¹ See Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III. I. 13, and *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 19 art. 9 *responsio*.

⁵² See Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VIII. 4.

the Lord do all these things.”⁵³ We read in Exodus that the Lord punished Egypt with ten plagues (Exod. 7: 14-12: 36), Simone Majoli in his *Dies Canicularii* (1597) testifies at impressive length that God uses lightning and thunderstorms to punish the wicked, and William King continued the case in his *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* (1731).⁵⁴ The Vatican dropped its opposition to the lightning rod only in 1769, twenty years after it was invented; it seems that, as the Church saw things for two decades, the Almighty did not wish anything to impede his aim when about to smite a village atheist coming home late at night from the local pub or from his mistress’s bed.

As a theologian, I see no reason to limit responses to the problem of evil to natural theology, as determined in the eighteenth century and developed very significantly since then, and to occasional forays into revealed theology when necessary. The *preambule fidei* give us not all that much more than what Hume thought could come from natural religion: drop Hume’s “probably” and one gets close to what can be securely gained.⁵⁵ And theology as a whole gives us rather more in its own ways. Yet some Christian analytical philosophers have developed natural theology in interesting and valuable new directions, and there is no sound reason for we theologians not to avail ourselves of its benefits. Natural atheologists have also played an important part in the discussion, even if, it seems to me, some are motivated by a rationalism that is overconfident given the demands of epistemic humility with respect to the deity and that, in any case, fails to capture the nature of the Christian God as absolutely singular. It may be that an omnipotent God cannot create a world that fits his ideal plan, as it were, and that also allows for an apodictic proof of his existence, and it may be that this is a good thing: it encourages human beings to seek God through love of neighbor as well as love of the deity rather than simply through discussion in a seminar room or by introspection in an armchair. Reason is good; love is better. It may be that the existence of evil, even intense evil, has the same end: it prompts us (or even shocks us) to action motivated by love of God and neighbor in order to reduce the chances of such evil in the future. However, this would not be

⁵³ Commentary on this verse by the Fathers is not especially reassuring with regards to the goodness of God. See, for example, Augustine, *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum*, 1. 23. 48, and Gregory the Great, *Moralia, sive Expositio in Job*, 3. 15-16.

⁵⁴ Simonis Majoli, *Dies caniculares* (Rome: Ex officina I. A. Ruffinelli, 1597). A modern translation of extracts is available: *Les jours caniculaires: livre des divinations*, trans. Clotilde Duroux (Paris: Éditions Trajectoire, 2007). Also see William King, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil*, trans. Edmund Law (1731; rpt. New York: Garland, 1978), 146.

⁵⁵ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a q. 12 art. 12 ad 2.

God's original intention but a consequence of people abusing the conditions of freedom required for love. Christianity takes due stock of this situation: Jesus says, "love your enemies" [ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν] (Matt 5:44). There are all too many instances when such love presumes more than even a noble human nature can supply. We all need Grace.

In natural atheology evil is presented as a problem, and its conception of God is highly abstract. In theology, however, God is thought concretely, in and through Jesus's uncovering of the Kingdom as anterior to the world, and evil is encountered as a mystery, not a problem.⁵⁶ The God whom Christians worship first impinges on us as the Father of Jesus Christ, and we are told that he is love (ἀγάπη): not a concept or a chilly ground of being but a person, someone to whom we can address our prayers. "God" means "God-for-us"; his goodness is expressed relationally, in his care for his creation. Why is there evil, why is there so much evil, and why are there horrors? These questions are more pressing in revealed theology than in natural theology, for we are speaking not of God by way of moral perfection, which could be quite icy, as it is with Epicurus's gods, but of God as love. Christian theology is unable to answer all these questions in a convincing manner, at least not in this life. The degree of convincingness that is available rachets down sharply from the first question to the third, and all of it turns on pre-incarnational κένωσις. It is not given to us to know just why God allows evil, even those evils that, it seems to us, could be avoided without loss of goodness in the world. We are mostly left with what Kant called "negative wisdom," even if we do not subscribe to his way of attaining it.⁵⁷

In the terms of 'the problem of evil' there is evil, and it is regarded by some philosophers as an obstacle for anyone wishing to remain rational and still confess belief in the God of the Abrahamic religions. This yields the God who is, as Geoffrey Hill's Ovid says, "distant, difficult."⁵⁸ Yet if we see God as Jesus teaches us to see him, we have something different before us: there is evil, and God is the answer to it for those who believe in him. For God certainly knows about evil and has already acted to defeat it. Such is the doctrine of the economic Trinity, which turns on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. The Cross is the lens through which Christians try to see God. Jesus's sacrifice makes it clear not only that God is *for* us but also that God is *with* us: he shares our suffering in

⁵⁶ See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrar (Westminster: Dacre, 1949), 117. See also, Jacques Maritain, *St Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942), 14.

⁵⁷ See Kant, "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," 30.

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Hill, "Ovid in the Third Reich," *King Log* (London: André Deutsch, 1968), 13.

the most extreme way, physically and spiritually. God may well defeat evil after the fact by granting the blessed the beatific vision at the end of time. He might possibly eliminate all evil, if the teaching of ἀποκατάστασις — in Gregory of Nyssa's sense rather than Origen's (which does not rule out a cyclic theory of salvation history) — turns out to be true. Or, for reasons undisclosed to us, God might leave evil to fester eternally in hell and, as it were, neutralize it by denying it any further consequences in reality. The first way of seeing God, within natural atheology, is, in effect, an admission of the continuing power of evil, while the second way involves hope that God will contest that power and be victorious over it. The Christian who has pondered the *preambula fidei* will not regard it as irrational to have that hope, although he or she will not be able to offer a proof that will satisfy any philosopher that God exists. Then again, no proof will satisfy everyone: even at its clearest and most exacting philosophy is neither science nor mathematics, and it has its inertias and fashions like all scholarly disciplines. When I was an undergraduate studying analytical philosophy metaphysics was thought to be nonsense, now analytical metaphysics is high on the totem pole, which of course is no guarantee that it will remain there.

What is mysterious for the Christian about dire evil is not why it is not overcome by God but why God delays doing so until the very end of time. The doctrine of the Atonement assures us that it has been dealt with in essence and will be in fact but not yet, and the suffering faithful sometimes experience this delay as the absence of divine love. This felt absence of God can be agonizing when faced with horrific suffering: think of the Psalmist's lament in Ps. 13: 1-3 ("How long, O LORD? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?," RSV). At times one will desperately want compatibilism to be true, the perpetrator of an evil act to have been stillborn, or an angel to appear to overcome a specific horror — a child dying of AIDS contracted from his or her mother, an old man being beaten by soldiers, a teenage girl being pack raped by drunks in a park — and not see any reason why God should not have done something to prevent the evil. At such a time any talk of pre-incarnational κένωσις or the beatific vision will seem thin, perhaps even a cruel fantasy of clerics and theologians.

Christianity does not teach that God can be made present to consciousness; instead, it teaches that we can be made present to God in hard-won lives of faith, hope, and charity. We live the time of faith as a temporal delay in which evil occurs, and this temporality introduces other elements into the picture: Scripture and art. Love presumes imagination far more so than reason does, and an event of

evil opens up a space for blame or lament. We can resolve mystifications, but we cannot resolve mysteries; and the deepest human response to the mystery of evil is found in art, whether it be poetry, narrative, the visual arts, or music. It takes time for human beings to deal with evil, and, apart from prayer, meditating on the story of Job or a sketch by Käthe Kollwitz, or pondering Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* (1947), for example, is one of the best ways for a wounded soul, one with enough education and leisure, to seek healing. No artwork answers the problem of evil, for artworks are not answers to questions posed by modern philosophers or theologians, thank goodness. Yet sublime art, whether biblically canonical or non-canonical, can sometimes reconcile us to past evil and even allow us to grow around it, if not beyond it. Analytical philosophers, in particular, would do well to ponder how they might best avail themselves of such art.

Only truly great souls can say, and deeply mean it, that suffering brings them closer to Christ; and even they cannot decently say it about the suffering of others. The rest of us must be content not to devise positive theodicies of the star wars kind that trivialize the faith or cause more pain for those who are already suffering. Revelation concerns what is needed for our salvation; it does not reveal everything that we would like to know about God here and now, including why dire evil is permitted. Curiosity is deflected by the command to love, and perhaps the fact of evil is one ground why we must be commanded to love one another. In this life we can learn from philosophy how to defeat arguments from evil and, in that way, perhaps make a little more room for faith, hope and charity. Even at its best philosophy tends to drain depth and temporality from the mystery of evil. Most analytical philosophers of religion, including natural atheologists, need to know a lot more Christian theology — or Jewish theology or Muslim theology — before their contributions to their subject can be anything more than clear and rigorous formal exercises. Their premises need to be informed by knowledge of concrete religious practices and centuries of theological reflection. One thing that would be learned by them is that in Christianity the word “God” points to the abyss of love, not to an abstraction of an idol.

Prof. Kevin Hart
 Duke Divinity School
 Duke University
 Durham
 USA

khart@div.duke.edu