

Defeating the Problem of Evil with Evil

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Abstract: I argue that the creation and freely chosen salvation and everlasting bliss of even just one person is a greater good than any finite amount of evil and suffering. Since it is extremely likely (if not certain) that, out of all possible individuals that could exist, some (or at least one) would only be freely saved through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering, then God would be justified in creating a world with evil and suffering to allow for the salvation of such individuals, so long as no one else freely lost their salvation who otherwise would not have lost it because of the evil and suffering. Thus, the problem of evil dissipates, as a world with evil and suffering, even seemingly gratuitous evil and suffering, would be entirely expected given theism.

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1. Introduction

The problem of evil (PoE) is arguably the most significant objection against theism, the view that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and perfect God exists. The logical PoE argues that evil and suffering are logically incompatible with theism. The evidential PoE, by contrast, claims that gratuitous evil and suffering are incompatible with theism, and since such evil and suffering (very likely) exist in the world, then God (very likely) does not (with gratuitous evil and suffering being understood here as the type of evil and suffering that God could have prevented without losing some greater good or allowing some other evil or suffering that was equally bad or worse than the one not being prevented).¹ To counter these two PoEs, the theist must not only show that evil and suffering are compatible with theism,

¹ Of course, this is only a snapshot of both forms of the problem of evil, though an accurate one (see Beebe and Trakakis).

but also that God would indeed lose a great good without the existence of such evil and suffering.

I seek to answer these two challenges by arguing that, on theism, God permits evil and suffering because, for some individuals, only the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering can lead them to freely choose salvation. And since the salvation of even one such individual outweighs all the finite evil and suffering that could exist, and since the creation of such individuals is a greater good than the evil and suffering itself, then God could justifiably permit the existence of evil and suffering for the creation and salvation of such individuals.

Additionally, note that, by theism, I specifically mean something like Christian theism, as the afterlife posited on that form of theism—i.e., an everlasting existence of God-united bliss—is critical to my argument. But given that theisms that posit that type of afterlife are quite common, this caveat is not overly detrimental to my argument.²

2. Using Evil to Save

When seeking to counter the problem of evil and suffering, one thing that is necessary, but that both theists and non-theists alike often fail to fully appreciate, is the sheer incommensurable good that everlasting salvation and union with God is. It is a union so intimate (the beatific vision) that we become partakers of the divine nature, experiencing perfect bliss forever (*Catechism* §§460, 1023–1029). Thus, salvation—or at least this conception of salvation—is such an unbelievable good, that any finite amount of evil and suffering by any finite amount of people is arguably less important than the creation and salvation of even just one person who would otherwise not be created and saved in the absence of that evil. This is because, in the end, one person’s creation and never-ending God-united bliss will be such a great good, and so far outweigh the total amount of finite earthly evil and suffering that existed, that the latter will seem almost insignificant when compared to the former in the light of everlasting salvation.³

² Not to mention that the existence of such an afterlife would arguably be entailed by God’s existence, meaning that such an afterlife is synonymous with theism; arguing this point in detail, however, would take us too far afield.

³ Talk of “everlasting” salvation assumes a dynamic or A theory of time. I use this view not only because I believe it is correct, but also to make the argument easier to understand. However, given that a static or B theory of time posits an eternal afterlife of timeless bliss, then the argument in this work could still function using that theory of time. Thus, the argument’s validity does not rest on the A theory.

This claim can be better appreciated using an illustration. Imagine that throughout all of earthly existence, a trillion people are created, and they all exist for an average of one hundred years. At the same time, every year, each person experiences an average of one unit of evil and suffering. This means that during all of earthly creation, one hundred trillion units of evil and suffering are experienced. Now imagine that one person is everlastingly saved. Given the overwhelming joy and good that salvation brings, that one saved person experiences a trillion units of bliss per year. In such a scenario, it is easy to see that the bliss of salvation of even just one person will almost instantly—relative to an everlasting existence—surpass *all* the evil and suffering ever experienced during earth's existence. Moreover, even if, for the sake of argument, we claim that the one saved person only experiences one unit of bliss per year, it is still the case that eventually (again, given an everlasting existence) the one person's bliss will be far greater (almost infinitely greater) than all the evil and suffering that ever existed during earthly creation. Indeed, given an everlasting existence, this would eventually be the case no matter what numbers were plugged into the equation.

Note, however, that the simple calculations above are not meant to imply that only basic measures of pleasure and pain are considered in this argument. Rather, the calculations are merely meant to provide a vivid illustration that is easy to understand. Naturally, an omniscient God, when weighing the salvation of one or more individuals versus the cost of evil and suffering, would be able to factor in *all* the qualitative and quantitative aspects of evil and suffering, including all their various dimensions; for instance, the trauma caused by mental and emotional distress, but also how the psychological harm of trauma decreases with time,⁴ and so on.

⁴ Indeed, God could consider the fact that, over time, the psychological impact of evil and suffering is significantly reduced. For example, while I experienced, observed, and contemplated instances of significant evil and suffering as a child, I cannot remember or feel that suffering now. Even though I remember the incidents themselves, the evil and suffering experienced and/or observed during those incidents no longer exists for me. It is gone; time has wiped it out. Thus, qualitatively, evil and suffering disappears from our lives, and over the course of an everlasting existence, all our past suffering would arguably disappear as well, becoming little more than a distant and abstract memory, generating none of the pain that we felt when the suffering was still close to us. In fact, given the overwhelming joy that salvation will immediately generate in us, that joy would instantly overwhelm and essentially erase any memory of evil and suffering, much like when, at certain moments in this earthly life, people are completely and uncontrollably overwhelmed by feelings of total bliss—and salvation will be infinitely more joyful, overwhelming, and good than any pleasure from this life.

Thus, the argument here is a type of “greater good” theodicy, where the creation and freely chosen everlasting salvation of even just one person is ultimately a greater good than all the finite evil and suffering that could be experienced by any finite number of people.⁵ So, if the contemplation and experience of past, present, and future evil and suffering could lead to the freely chosen salvation of even just one person who otherwise would not be saved without that evil and suffering existing, then it would be a greater good to permit that evil and suffering to exist rather than not, so long as no one else freely lost their salvation because of that evil and suffering (i.e., so long as things remained “salvifically-equal”). And that, in turn, would mean that God would have a morally sufficient reason to permit evil and suffering to exist.

To see this, imagine that God creates a world (W1) that is free of evil and suffering where five people exist and freely choose salvation. Such a world would be good. But now imagine that God creates another world (W2) with the same five people, but where Bill is also created. Bill, however, will only freely choose salvation through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering. For him, evil and suffering, both past, present, and future, are *signals of transcendence*, meaning an occurrence in the natural world that point beyond that world, to something transcendent and supernatural, like theism (Berger 1970, 53). But for Bill, evil and suffering are the *only* signal that works; it is the only thing that will ultimately convince him to freely choose salvation, and God knows this. Thus, God creates W2 in a way that allows evil and suffering to come about so that Bill will freely choose salvation, but God also does so in a manner that ensures that things remain salvifically-equal, meaning that the same five people from W1 will not lose their salvation in W2 due to experiencing the evil and suffering that God permits. So, in this case—meaning the case that things are salvifically-equal between W1 and W2 for the five people—W2, even given its evil and suffering, is an overall better world than W1, because W2 includes the five saved people, but it also includes the great good that is the creation and salvation of Bill, as well as the God-united bliss that Bill will experience forever. Moreover, given the great good that Bill’s existence, salvation, and everlasting bliss would be, this reasoning would hold true whether it was just five people who had to experience evil and suffering, or five trillion. That is how significant the existence, salvation, and everlasting bliss of even just one person would be given theism.

Granted, such reasoning may be hard to accept, especially in the present moment, with evil and suffering so close to us. Still, when I think of this issue from an eternal

⁵ One could see the theodicy offered here as similar to John Hick’s soul-making theodicy, though in this case the goal is “soul-saving,” not necessarily soul-making.

perspective, it seems correct. For instance, my intuitions tell me that were I in heavenly bliss, and had been for, say, a trillion years, then it would be very easy to understand and accept that the existence and salvation of my heavenly compatriot Bill—or any other individual who would only freely choose salvation through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering—would easily be worth all the suffering and evil that I experienced in my now long-expired earthly life (which, had I lived 80 years, would have only formed 0.00000000008% of my total existence at that point). In fact, from that eternal perspective, it strikes me that just Bill’s existence and salvation alone would have been worth *all* the suffering and evil experienced on earth throughout history (even apart from the existence and salvation of more people like Bill). Indeed, seeing Bill in a saved and bliss-filled heavenly state, and seeing him everlastingly united with God, it would be clear—when viewed from that heavenly perspective—that Bill’s creation and existence was such a great good that it would justify God permitting significant amounts of temporary evil and suffering as an exchange for Bill’s freely chosen salvation (all other things being salvifically-equal, of course). Thus, using that eternal perspective, it strikes me that if I had to choose between creating a suffering-free world without Bill (W1) or a salvifically-equal one with a saved Bill in it, but also with unchosen evil and suffering existing for an infinitesimal slice of time relative to everyone’s everlasting existence (W2),⁶ then I would create the latter world every time. And God, given His everlasting existence, would arguably consider things from that perspective as well.

I would even reason in this way with the things most precious to me. For instance, imagine that I was aware of two options. On the one hand, two of my three children could exist and live comfortable earthly lives with no evil or suffering while also being freely saved. On the other hand, I could ensure the existence and freely chosen salvation of all three of my children, but doing so would mean that all three would have to have earthly lives filled with evil and suffering prior to salvation. This is because my third child would only freely choose salvation through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering. Emotionally, this choice might be difficult, but rationally-speaking, I would choose the latter option over the former one every time, because I realize what a great good it would be for my third child to actually be created and saved, even if it meant all my children having to experience a short period of evil and pain (in light of eternity) to achieve that. And given God’s that God’s benevolence, love and His willing of the good for His creations is

⁶ I mention “unchosen” evil and suffering existing for an infinitesimal amount of time because, if an everlasting hell exists, then suffering could exist forever. But the sufferings of hell would be a *self-chosen* experience, making it fundamentally different from the unchosen evil and suffering that humans experience while on earth (and this issue will be addressed further below).

infinitely greater than is my love for my children, then it is plausible that God would also reason in the above fashion.⁷

With the above points in mind, a formal articulation of the argument can be offered:

Premise 1: Because the existence, salvation, and everlasting bliss of persons—even just one person—is such an incommensurable good that ultimately dwarfs any finite amount of evil and suffering, then, if God could create a world with both natural and moral evil and suffering, but where one or more additional persons were created and freely saved who otherwise would not have been freely saved if the world did not contain such evil and suffering, then God would be justified in creating that world rather than one without evil and suffering, so long as everything else was salvifically-equal (meaning that no one freely lost their salvation due to experiencing that evil and suffering, who otherwise would not have freely lost it had they not experienced that evil and suffering).

This premise then leads to the following initial conclusion:

Conclusion 1: Precisely because He is good, if God decided to create a world, He would and should create a world with both natural and moral evil and suffering where even just one additional person would be created and freely saved through the contemplation and experience of that evil and suffering, over a world without evil and suffering but where the one additional person would not be created and freely saved if the evil and suffering did not exist.

⁷ Also note that this form of reasoning is not foreign to theistic traditions like Christian theism. For instance, in Luke 15:7, Jesus notes that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who need no repentance, a statement which supports the idea that salvation is a massive good, especially the salvation of a person who would otherwise not be saved. Furthermore, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3-6—which leads to the above statement in Luke 15:7—is even more supportive of the idea behind the argument in this work. For in that parable, the shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep in the open field on their own to find the one lost sheep. This could be understood as leaving the ninety-nine already saved sheep, meaning people, in a field of danger, alone and unprotected, in order to save just one other unsaved sheep. This is similar to what the argument in this paper claims: that God would allow his saved sheep to endure temporary danger and pain in order to save just one more sheep, because that is how important and good salvation is.

The core idea here is that there is a justified reason why a good God would create a world where natural and moral evil and suffering exists: namely, for the great good that is the creation, salvation, and everlasting bliss of souls who would otherwise not be saved without such an evil-filled world.⁸ And this is such a great good, that God should create such a world if He decides to create at all. Of course, this need not be the only reason that God permits evil and suffering to exist⁹, but it could be, and it could certainly serve as one of the reasons that God would do so.

After this initial conclusion, the next premise:

Premise 2: Given the number of possible worlds and possible individuals that there could be, and which God could foresee (more on this below), it is extremely likely—arguably even certain—that there would be a possible world with natural and moral evil and suffering where all other things were salvifically-equal to a world without evil and suffering, but where at least one additional person (and, in reality, likely many more people) would be created and freely saved only or ultimately¹⁰ through contemplating and experiencing that evil and suffering.

When combined with our first conclusion, the above premise—which will be supported further below—leads to the main point of the argument: namely, that evil and suffering should not be viewed as evidence against theism because, if God exists, then it is extremely likely (if not certain) that the world He creates would be a world with evil and suffering, along with individuals—or at least one—who are

⁸ Interestingly, this may mean that the best of all possible worlds—assuming such a concept is coherent—would be a world filled with evil and suffering.

⁹ And it should be reinforced that, for this argument, God need not *cause* evil and suffering, only permit it, which frees God of the charge of being the direct cause of such evil or suffering. This point, moreover, could shed light on other theological issues, like why God would create an entity like the Devil knowing that the latter would eventually fall and be a cause of evil and suffering. Specifically, if God could (or would) not cause evil and suffering, but knew that some people would only be freely saved via the contemplation and/or experience of it, then the creation of a world with a Devil-like entity who would eventually fall would achieve the end of permitting evil and suffering to enter the world without God's direct action; and that, in turn, would lead to the salvation of the type of people noted above. Thus, for views like Christian theism, this theodicy could help explain why a foreknowing God would create a Devil-like entity or permit something like the fall of Adam and Eve, an event which, on the Christian view, is what led to humanity experiencing evil and suffering.

¹⁰ The term “ultimately” in this context signifies that while evil and suffering may not be the only things that motivate certain people to freely choose salvation, they may be the things that ultimately “seal the deal,” so to speak. Consequently, without the existence of evil and suffering, the person would not have a sufficient number of other reasons to freely believe and be saved.

moved towards salvation via that evil and suffering. Consequently, since evil and suffering would be fully expected given theism, they provide no evidentiary value against that worldview.

3. Objections

God as Utilitarian

An initial counter to the argument is that it turns God into a type of salvation-utilitarian, where He merely weighs one or more persons' salvific joy against the suffering of others. Some may find such reasoning morally objectionable. However, given that the argument is articulated in greater good terms, where the salvation of one additional person (or people) is seen as a morally sufficient reason for God to permit evil and suffering, then this theodicy is little different from others that use the same approach and yet are deemed morally acceptable (at least by many).

Moreover, the utilitarian angle should not be dismissed so quickly. After all, it is quite plausible that God wants the greatest good—meaning a freely chosen God-united salvation—for the greatest number of people, even if He also takes other considerations into account. Furthermore, if anyone can actually make utilitarian reasoning work, it is an omniscient creator. Not only would He know all future outcomes for all people (more on this below), but, as our creator, God would also know how we experience joy and/or suffering, and He could objectively calculate the total quality and quantity of the joy and/or suffering that we would experience, thus allowing Him to know whether the former would outweigh the latter over the course of an everlasting existence. And the idea of measuring pain is not even foreign to us as humans, given that doctors routinely ask patients to rate their level of pain on a verbalized scale, and to state how long that pain has lasted. Consequently, if human beings can offer such rough albeit still valuable ratings, then surely God, as both our designer and an omniscient being, could know such facts as well. So, while purely utilitarian considerations may not be God's sole concern when weighing whether to permit evil and suffering in the world, they surely form at least part of the story.¹¹

¹¹ Divine utilitarianism, moreover, is not a foreign concept to the theistic tradition given its endorsement by such thinkers as George Berkeley and William Paley (see Flannagan (2018)). In fact, John Stuart Mill himself noted that utilitarianism is a religion-friendly teaching, as God would want His creatures to be happy (see Mill (1863, 30–31)).

Nevertheless, some may argue that certain evils simply cannot be defeated or outweighed by a greater good for which those evils are necessary, and standard objections to utilitarianism illustrate this point. For instance, it may be true that if a sheriff allows a lynch-mob to kill a falsely accused man, that will avert a devastating riot. Yet even if this is the only way to prevent the riot, the sheriff cannot justifiably allow the innocent man to be lynched. The prospect of a future greater good, no matter how much greater that good might be, could not on its own morally justify such permission. The reason for this is not that lynching is worse than the death and destruction of the riot. Quite the contrary. Rather, the reason is that persons have a right to be treated as ends, not means, and so their mistreatment cannot be justified by greater goods that might result from their mistreatment. A similar point could be made about horrendous evils; some of those evils may be viewed as so horrendous that nothing could justify their use to achieve some greater good.

But here we should remember that, on several theistic understandings, God does not have moral duties or obligations to His human creations. As William Lane Craig notes:

There is no external law hanging over God to which He must conform . . . He literally has no moral duties to fulfill. He can act in any way consistent with His nature. He does not have the moral duties we have and will have unique prerogatives, such as giving and taking human life as He wills. (Craig 2018, 69)

Thus, for those who hold to this view, the question becomes: Would allowing certain humans to suffer evils, even horrendous evils, in order to achieve the free salvation of other individuals, be consistent not with some moral obligation for God, but with His omnibenevolent nature? I contend that it would. To see why, consider the lynching example from earlier. While it may be true that allowing an innocent man to be lynched to prevent a riot may not be morally justifiable, what if the riot was going to be planet-wide, with millions of people being killed and hundreds of billions of dollars in property damage? Suddenly, the morally correct or benevolent course of action is not so clear. And what if, instead of needing to kill the innocent man to prevent the planet-wide riot, all the sheriff had to do to satisfy the lynch-mob was to give the innocent man one slap across the face? In this case, it seems obvious that the benevolent (and moral) course of action would be to smack the man in the face, even though doing so would mean assaulting an innocent man and using him as a means rather than an end.

In ethical terms, this is understood as “threshold deontology,” the view that while some acts are morally wrong regardless of the overall good consequences that they

may produce, if those good consequences become sufficiently large and pass a certain threshold, then it is morally permissible, and arguably even required, to engage in the acts that would otherwise be morally wrong and impermissible.¹² And on this view, the question of whether the necessary threshold has been met depends on various factors, such as the intensity, duration, and permanence of the evil and suffering being used to achieve the greater good, and what the greater good is. For instance, in the case of the slap, the evil being used—namely, the assaultive slap—is of limited intensity and short duration, and it leaves no permanent damage, yet it stops a massively destructive planet-wide riot. By contrast, lynching the-innocent man is a permanent action, and it only stops a small riot. This is why (or at least part of why) we intuitively accept the slap as morally justified and even benevolent, but not the killing of the innocent person.

Now, for the argument in this work, we must remember to view the situation from God's perspective, meaning one where humans do not permanently die (they merely transition from one type of life to another) and where they have an everlasting existence in bliss (if they so freely choose). Given this, and to see how God acting as a type of threshold deontologist would be consistent with His benevolent nature, consider this analogy. Imagine that a man's wife is pregnant. However, because of an incurable illness, the child will soon die in the womb and never be born. Hyper-advanced aliens, however, have offered to cure the unborn child if the man allows them (for unknown reasons) to commit absolutely horrendous acts of pain and suffering on his five other young children, such as cutting off their limbs while electrocuting them, etc. Now, without further details—such as how long the suffering would last, how permanent it would be, etc.—it is obvious that if the father allowed this action to occur then he would be immoral and unloving. But what if the aliens stated that, in order to save the unborn child, the torture they would inflict on the other children would only last one one-hundredth of a second, and immediately thereafter, the bodies of all the children would not only be fully healed, but would also be vastly improved, and all the children would then live for the next hundred years in total peace, bliss, and health. Moreover, given their blissful existence, it would only take a few moments in that existence and the children would forget (for the rest of their lives) about the painful event that they had experienced. In this modified situation, it is by no means clear that the father choosing *this* course of action would be immoral or unloving. In fact, given that

¹² Though controversial, this ethical position is readily defensible. See Moore (2018). Additionally, while the threshold for the threshold deontologist may have “fuzzy edges,” this is no different than a concept like “guilt beyond a reasonable doubt,” which, though fuzzy, is still routinely used for some of our most serious ethical decisions (like whether to jail a person for life).

choosing this course of action would 1) permit one of his children to live who otherwise would not have, and live in utter bliss, while 2) the suffering endured by his other children would be of an extremely short duration (relative to their full existence) and would not be permanent, and 3) all his children would subsequently live in bliss and not even remember their painful experience, then a strong case could be made that a father who chose this course of action would be loving and benevolent.¹³ And this is analogous to the situation with God and the argument in this work. Thus, permitting humans to experience an average of eighty years of evil and suffering—which, from the perspective of an everlasting existence, would be much less than what one one-hundredth of a second is when compared to our earthly existence—in order to allow for the freely chosen salvation of other humans who otherwise would not be saved, would arguably still be loving and benevolent. This means that it would be consistent with God’s nature, which is what is needed for the argument to proceed.

Damnation through Suffering

While the argument in this work focuses on people—or at least one person—being freely saved through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering, what about people who would be damned through that experience? Granted, the concept of salvific-equality is meant to clarify that this argument only works if no one freely loses their salvation because of evil and suffering who otherwise would not have lost it. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern that if some people can freely choose to be saved through the experience of evil and suffering, then perhaps others could freely choose to be damned because of it. And who is to say that the latter will not outnumber the former, meaning that there would be more lost than saved because God permitted evil and suffering to exist?

It is here that an appeal to God’s robust foreknowledge is required; perhaps something like Molinism, where, prior to creation, God would be aware of all the free choices that every possible creature would make in every possible world. Such foreknowledge would ensure that God could create a world where the amount of people freely saved through the experience of evil and suffering outnumbered those who were lost. Indeed, if God was aware of such choices, He could choose to create a world where all things were salvifically-equal, but where no one lost their salvation from contemplating and experiencing evil and suffering who otherwise would not have lost it for some other reason, and where there were individuals who

¹³ And, even for doubters, it is at least not obvious that such a decision would be unloving or evil.

gained their salvation because of contemplating and experiencing such evil and suffering. In fact, given something like Molinism, it is possible that God could create a world where *all* people would freely choose salvation regardless of evil and suffering, and thus, He would be justified in creating a world with evil and suffering so that those people who are freely convinced of salvation only through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering could also enjoy both existence and salvation.

Your mileage may, of course, vary concerning God having this type of robust foreknowledge, but the idea is not *ad hoc* and it can be accepted on independent grounds, which it is for many theists. Consequently, requiring such a trait for this argument to function should be acceptable for a broad range of theists. And even if this type of robust divine foreknowledge is discarded, the argument could still proceed as a defence against evil and suffering, given that it could still be argued that, for all we know, it is logically possible that the number of saved through evil and suffering outnumber those who are damned because of it.

Furthermore, for a theist who rejects the idea that God has foreknowledge at all, it could be argued that, if God, as our creator, calculated—but did not foreknow—that some individuals would very likely be freely saved only via the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering, while others would very likely *not* freely lose their salvation *only* because of the existence of evil and suffering, then such a God would still be justified in permitting evil and suffering in this case in order to very likely bring about the salvation of individuals who otherwise would very likely not be saved without evil and suffering existing. Thus, a version of the argument can still proceed even if the concept of divine foreknowledge is rejected.

However, circling back to the idea of God having foreknowledge, note that an appeal to such foreknowledge generates another problem for the argument. To see why, consider Bill again. Bill is only convinced to freely choose salvation by the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering. But is this true of Bill in all possible worlds? And if not—meaning that there might be possible worlds where Bill would freely choose salvation for other reasons—then could not God foresee and create a world where all things were salvifically-equal, *and* where Bill is saved, but where evil and suffering need not exist.

Two answers can be offered here. First, for all we know—again, supporting the defensive aspect of this argument—possible worlds where Bill (or others like him) are saved through something other than the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering would not be salvifically-equal. Perhaps other individuals would be damned, or never created in the first place, and so a world where Bill is saved via evil and suffering would be better than any world where he is not. But the second

answer is the fact that, given *all* the possible people that could ever exist, it is extremely likely—if not certain (and definitely possible)—that at least one person, in *all* possible worlds, would only freely choose to be saved by the experience and contemplation of evil and suffering. Thus, across all possible worlds, the only way that such a person could be saved would be through the experience and contemplation of evil and suffering. But since the salvation of such a person would still be an incommensurable good, God would still be justified in creating this person, even if doing so meant permitting evil and suffering to exist in the created world.

God's Creation of Creaturely Inclinations

Arguing that God permits the existence of evil and suffering to allow for the creation and salvation of people who would only be freely saved through the contemplation and experience of such things raises the question of how much control God has over the inclinations of His free-willed creatures. In particular, would it not be possible for God to avoid creating individuals with such an inclination, thereby avoiding the need to create evil and suffering to allow them to be saved?

On the one hand, if God constituted human nature so that no one could ever be convinced to be freely saved via evil and suffering, then that would arguably be an overly severe impediment to our libertarian free will. This does not, however, require the argument to claim that free will inevitably leads to evil and suffering. Rather, the argument is noting that since it is extremely likely that there are some possible individuals who would only be freely saved via the contemplation of evil and suffering, then the *creation and salvation of such individuals* is such a great good that it justifies permitting evil and suffering, *even if* God could create other worlds full of other free-willed individuals that had no evil or suffering in them. Thus, it is the creation and salvation of unique individuals that is the core great good being weighed in the argument, not free-will.¹⁴

But what if God could create individuals in such a way that they would be deemed sufficiently free but also *not* be saved only through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering. If that were possible, then would God still be

¹⁴ Granted, some may argue that creating free willed creatures in any capacity is not worth the price of evil and suffering, but I contend that an omnibenevolent God would want any creatures made in His image to genuinely love Him, and genuine love arguably requires genuine choice, which requires libertarian free will. Thus, if God is to create any human-like beings, they would have to be created with free will, so the creation of such beings is unavoidable if God is to create creatures who can love.

justified in creating individuals who would only be freely saved through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering if He did not have to?

Here, much depends on one's view of God's creative fecundity. For instance, Timothy O'Connor (2012, 111–121) has argued—on grounds that are independent of this argument—that God's perfection and love is so diffusive, that not only would God create, but He would likely create all the good worlds that He could; essentially, God would create a multiverse (even an infinite one) of overall good worlds. Consequently, such a God would want to create beings in all their great variety. And Katherin Rogers (2020) has noted that many theists, both contemporary and classical, would endorse the *principle of plenitude*, the idea that God creates the fullness of good worlds and of good things that He can create. But Rogers (2020, 28) adds that this principle is usually “cast in terms of *kinds*”—i.e., in terms of diversity, rather than sheer quantity. Thus, the principle does “not value the mere repetition of similar individuals.” So, if God operates with something like the principle of plenitude, as certain theists find plausible, then, even if He did not need to, He would *want* to create individuals with an inclination to be freely saved through the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering, and even individuals who would *only* be freely saved through such means. This would even include creating individuals who would only be freely saved through such means *in all possible worlds*. God would want to create such individuals because they would add to the diversity and beauty of creation and of salvation history, and that would be a great good in and of itself—especially if one adopts the view that existence itself is a great good, so merely creating such individuals would be a good done by God.

This point is also related to the issue of foreknowledge, because even if a plenitudinous God did not have foreknowledge, He would still want to create individuals with the aforementioned inclination. And doing so, would, in turn, allow such a God to confidently calculate that it would be very likely that such individuals would freely choose salvation through evil and suffering, even though He would not foreknow if they definitely would. Thus, the principle of plenitude could reinforce this argument for theists who deny God's foreknowledge.

The Opposite Inclination

Another worry is: If it would be a great good to create people who only freely choose salvation via the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering, and if at least one such person very likely exists in some possible world, then what about the objection that it would be just as likely, and just as great a good, for God to create individuals who would only be freely saved in a world without any evil or

suffering? Whose creation should God prioritize, since it seems that God could not create both such individuals in the same world?

Once again, God's overflowing creativity and the principle of plenitude could be used to argue that God would create both kinds of individuals in their own separate worlds (along with many other worlds). Thus, the fullness of creation would be maximized and both types of individuals would exist.

However, another answer notes that God, through His foreknowledge, could create both types of individuals in the same world and still achieve salvation for both of them. Specifically, God could create a world with evil and suffering—like our world—where those who need evil and suffering to be freely saved can thus contemplate and experience such evil and suffering, but where those who would be lost through experiencing any evil and suffering die young, before they are fully conscious of the evil and suffering that exists (as many people in our world already do). By perishing young, such individuals would be morally blameless and would thus be saved. This would keep things salvifically-equal in a world where both types of individuals existed. Moreover, the pre-mature deaths of such individuals would serve as some of the very evil needed for the salvation of the other type of individual.

Note as well that this solution could not be reversed, because pre-mature death (and even just death itself) would, as mentioned, be an evil that could not logically exist in a world free of evil and suffering. Thus, God could *not* create a salvifically-equal world free of evil and suffering where individuals who need evil and suffering die young and are saved, but He could create a salvifically-equal world with evil and suffering where this occurs for those who need to avoid evil and suffering in order to be saved.

Hell

Alongside heaven, the concept of an everlasting hell is also part of many theistic traditions. An objection could thus be raised that the never-ending suffering of those in hell would offset the bliss of those in heaven to a sufficient degree that this argument would collapse, as its earlier bliss-related calculations would no longer be valid. However, several options are available to address this objection.

First, it is not even clear that this objection is relevant to the argument, as it could be argued that the evil and suffering of hell is *self-chosen* and so is different in kind from *unchosen* earthly evil and suffering. This distinction would then allow the theist to further argue that self-chosen evil and suffering have no part in the bliss-related calculations of this theodicy, which only needs to account for unchosen evil and suffering. This response is also supported by the plausible idea that earthly

sufferings and the sufferings of hell are sufficiently different to warrant separate theodicies. For instance, the theodicy presented in this work, alongside many others, could justify God's permission of earthly evil and suffering, while God's justification for hell could be something like the following: God knows that existence—even existence in hell—is a greater good than non-existence for human persons (or, alternatively, perhaps an omnibenevolent God cannot extinguish people from existence, as that would be tantamount to murder, which God would not do), and yet, simultaneously, God cannot force persons to be with Him in heaven. This necessitates the existence of a place like hell, where humans can continue to exist, but without the personal presence of God. Thus, the distinction between unchosen and self-chosen evil and suffering allows for separate theodicies and is arguably enough of a difference to remove the need for this argument to weigh hell's self-chosen evil and suffering in its bliss-related calculations.

Second, even if hell's evil and suffering did need to be considered by this argument, perhaps the sufferings of hell are not as bad as normally imagined and consist primarily of separation from God (as taught, for instance, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§1035)). In such a case, the sheer intensity of the continuous bliss of the saved would always overwhelm the low intensity suffering of the damned, even if both endured forever, and so the argument could still function.

Finally, nothing in this argument precludes the adoption of universalism or annihilationism. And if either of these positions is accepted, then, ultimately, all suffering will cease at some point, either because all people are eventually saved¹⁵ or because the damned are completely extinguished from existence at some time. Thus, by combining one of these views with this work's theodicy, the sufferings of hell need not be accounted for as those sufferings either do not exist or will eventually cease to exist (i.e., in case some people must spend some time in hell before salvation or annihilation). Note, moreover, that given the independent theistic pedigree of these positions, combining them with this theodicy is not an *ad hoc* maneuver.

For all these reasons, hell is not an insurmountable objection to this argument.

¹⁵ This option also includes what might be called Molinistic-universalism, where an everlasting hell still exists and people could technically be sent there, but God has so arranged things via His foreknowledge that all persons actually repent (perhaps even doing so in a post-mortem state) and are ultimately saved.

No Such Individuals

Even if all the above is found plausible, it could still be argued that there is no evidence of there being individuals who need to experience evil and suffering to freely choose salvation or to move towards theism.

Such evidence, though, is unnecessary for the argument, because the existence of such individuals is certainly logically possible and thus God could create them with such an inclination if He desired to do so (which He would given such things as the principle of plenitude). Moreover, by sheer probability alone, it seems extremely likely (even certain) that out of all the possible free-willed individuals that could exist in some possible world, there are some—or at least one—who would only freely choose salvation via the contemplation and experience of evil and suffering (even in all possible worlds). These points are all that is needed for the argument to go through; nevertheless, there actually is evidence from our world that the type of people mentioned above likely do exist.

For example, one website commentor explained how, after a “long period of denial and rationalization,” a life experience forced him to concede that genuine evil—“not just bad or undesired or unfortunate or suboptimal or tragic [events], but evil [ones]”—actually existed, and it was specifically accepting genuine evil which forced him to deny secular-materialism and embrace a different and more transcendent metaphysical view.¹⁶ What is particularly interesting is how the commentor implies that a significant instance of suffering was needed to convince him that evil was real, and that this instance needed to be of such a type that he could not write it off as something else, like a mere unfortunate event. Additionally, the commentor concedes that it was only after a long period of denial and rationalization that he admitted that evil was real and that his secular-materialism was false, further implying that he needed something serious, like a drastic case of evil, to finally move him away from his secular-materialism and towards the transcendent.

On another website, a woman stated that through her suffering, she “found God,” in the sense of having a deeper and fuller relationship with Him; the woman added that sometimes “we suffer to bring us closer to [God] and sometimes to bring others close to Him.”¹⁷ Another internet writer noted that for him, “it took physical suffering” to open his eyes to his “spiritual starvation” (Kenton 2018), while yet another recalled a discussion where an atheist was moved towards theism because

¹⁶ Although the commentor does not explicitly say that he came to believe in God, he does admit that it was evil that made him drop his atheistic position of secular-materialism. See Axxr.

¹⁷ See Brenna.

of the reality of “spiritual evil” (Dreher 2022). And, in an incident that many non-theists would likely point to as a paradigmatic case of gratuitous evil, a woman named Mary Stauffer claimed that her faith in God only became stronger, not weaker, after experiencing what she called “basically hell”: specifically, in the 1980s, Stauffer was kidnapped, along with her 8-year-old daughter, and then held, tormented, and repeatedly raped by her stalker for fifty-three days (Nolasco 2019).

A more recent example of a person moving towards theism because of evil comes from the Baby Indi Gregory incident, where life-sustaining treatment was removed from Indi, leading to her death. Indi’s originally non-religious father, Dean Gregory, stated that fighting for his daughter’s life in court felt like being “dragged to hell” and that it “was as if the devil was there.” Dean then reasoned that if hell exists, then heaven must exist, and if the devil exists, then God must exist. Having arrived at this conclusion, Dean had Indi baptized before her death and was baptized himself (Fenton 2023).

Admittedly, these are just random comments/stories on the internet, but that is actually the point: it is relatively easy to find average people claiming that, for them, evil and suffering helped move them towards the divine, not away from it.

This type of connection has also been observed in specific settings, such as those relating to war and violence. For example, in his book *God in the Foxhole*, author Charles W. Sasser notes the following:

One reporter embedded with American troops in Iraq in 2004 asserted that not a single soldier he’d talked to was not seeking a stronger connection to God. Scorched by the fires of war, many warriors discover faith that has been missing from their lives. Others gain a greater sense of God. Few are not in some way touched by the supernatural as they struggle for understanding, comfort, and protection. “In my . . . experience,” noted Arthur Kammerer, 102nd Infantry Division, World War II, “I’ve seen [combat] make killers out of some, cowards of some, Christians of most.” (Sasser 2008, chap. 1)

Sasser (2008, Introduction) also recalls a story from a US Marine Sergeant from World War II where the only atheist the Sergeant knew claimed that he (the atheist) would not pray when he got to the front, but the very first night, the atheist prayed together with another man. And Sasser (2008, chap. 1), writing about the story of World War II Army Air Corps Sergeant James Gautier, relays how in Gautier’s experience even “hard-core atheists and skeptics turned into believers at the random, almost haphazard manner in which death continued to claim its victims. How else to explain why some died and others lived, except through the divine plan of providence.”

Furthermore, some research supports Sasser's contentions. For instance, one study about religion and combat noted that "as combat became more frightening, the percentage of soldiers who reported praying rose from 42 to 72%" (Wansink & Wansink 2013).

Other research demonstrates that poorer and less secure countries—meaning countries where there is greater uncertainty, hardship and suffering—are more religious than more secure countries (Pew 2018). There is also research which demonstrates that natural disasters and other tragedies lead the people affected by them to become more religious, not less. For instance, speaking of the Christchurch earthquake of 2011, the authors of a study which showed that there was a net increase in religious belief in the people directly affected by the disaster wrote the following:

we found that religion became more appealing among those exposed to the Christchurch earthquakes, relative to those who were not exposed. This finding offers the first evidence from a large population that religious conversion increases following a natural disaster. . . . it is remarkable that there was a significant overall increase in religious faith among the earthquake-affected . . . Philosophers have plausibly argued that natural disasters such as the Christchurch earthquake are rationally incompatible with the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God, because natural disasters cause pointless suffering to innocents, which a compassionate power would never permit. Though faith eroded elsewhere in New Zealand, there was a significant upturn in religious faith among those who experienced the misery of New Zealand's most lethal natural disaster in eighty years. (Bulbulia & Sibley 2012)

Such evidence not only supports the claim that evil and suffering can turn some people towards religion and the divine, but also that it can generate a significant *overall* turning towards those things, with a net positive of people moving in that direction.

Additionally, this research—as well as the research that affluence and comfort seem to minimize religious belief, not increase it—offers some evidence to counter the objection that more people would actually turn away from religion and the divine because of suffering and evil than would turn towards it, for that does not appear to be the case given the evidence noted above.

It is also interesting that past authors, both in fiction and non-fiction, have seen the connection between suffering and movement towards the divine. For instance, at the end of the final chapter of Fyodor Dostoevsky's (2021, 823) *The Brothers Karamazov*, it appears that because of the death and suffering of one of the child

characters in the book, numerous wrongs are made right, and another child character has a conversion, thereby implying that the latter finds salvation. Thus, the finite suffering and death of one child saves the eternal existence of another. C.S. Lewis (2007, 604) has also articulated how pain is God's way of rousing and potentially saving otherwise apathetic or sinful human beings. In a quote that partially prefigures the argument in this work, he notes that "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Consequently, given the above evidence, it is plausible that there are indeed people who are moved towards salvation through evil and suffering, thus making it easier to believe that, for some possible individuals, evil and suffering may be the only things that move them to freely choose salvation. And note that it is irrelevant if the non-theist finds such reasoning unconvincing or irrational.¹⁸ All that matters for the argument is that certain people find the connection between evil, suffering, and salvation to be sufficiently convincing to cause them to freely choose the latter via the contemplation and experience of the former.

Still Gratuitous

Even if the above argument is sound, an objector could claim that the type of evil and suffering that exists in the world is more than is necessary for someone to freely choose salvation through the contemplation and experience of that evil and suffering. Thus, *qualitatively* gratuitous evil would still exist, and so a modified version of the evidential problem of evil would still have force. Additionally, it could be wondered if the totality of the evil and suffering that has, does, and will exist in the world is all necessary for the salvation of certain individuals (or even just one)? If not, then, again, some of the evil and suffering in the world would be gratuitous, but this time in a *quantitative* sense.

However, the argument in this work could be modified to address these objections. For instance, it could be argued that it is extremely likely that, of all the possible individuals that could exist, there would be some—or at least one—who would only freely choose salvation through the contemplation and experience of significant and seemingly gratuitous incidents of past, present, and future evil and suffering, and/or through the contemplation of the *totality* of the evil and suffering that has, does, and will exist in the world. I say "and/or" because it is possible that

¹⁸ Although it is arguably not irrational, given that several philosophers contend that the existence of genuine good and evil is much more likely on theism than on metaphysical naturalism, and so inferring theism from the existence of evil is at least reasonable.

one person would be convinced by the contemplation and experience of specific seemingly gratuitous acts of evil and suffering, but would not need to think of evil in its totality to be so convinced, whereas another person would only be convinced to freely choose salvation by viewing the totality of all the evil and suffering in the world, as no specific incident would be sufficient to convince him. Thus, these could be two different people. And a third type of person might need to contemplate both to be convinced.

Moreover, think again of the principle of plenitude. A God who endorsed such a principle would want to create all the above types of individuals (i.e., one convinced by seemingly gratuitous *instances* of evil, one convinced by the *totality* of evil, and one only convinced by both). This is because they would be different kinds of people and would thus add to the beauty and diversity of creation, while also being equally deserving of life and creation, which a loving God would want to grant to them so long as things remained salvifically-equal (which, as noted, a foreknowing God could ensure (or, for a God without foreknowledge, could at least calculate to a high degree of certainty)).

Thus, given the above, the argument's second premise could be re-formulated to address these concerns:

Premise 2a: Given the number of possible worlds and possible individuals that there could be, and which God could foresee, it is extremely likely—arguably even certain—that there would be a possible world with natural and moral evil and suffering where all other things were salvifically-equal to a world without evil and suffering, but where at least one additional person (and, in reality, likely many more people) would be created and freely saved only or ultimately through contemplating and experiencing *significant levels of past, present, and future* natural and moral evil and suffering (*including seemingly unnecessary and gratuitous instances of evil and suffering*), and/or through contemplating the totality of all the evil and suffering that has, does and will exist in the world.

Note further that this modification is not *ad hoc*. Remember, for instance, how one of the website commentators from earlier claimed that he rationalized and denied things for a long period of time, and it was only after an implied significant experience that he admitted evil was real. In other cases, it was the incredible horrors of war and the seemingly random deaths therein that moved soldiers toward the divine. Or it was a brutal earthquake that did so. Thus, for some people, it appears that seemingly gratuitous evil and suffering is precisely what is required to move them towards the divine and potential salvation.

Additionally, while some may find it implausible that any person needs to contemplate the totality of all past and present evil to freely choose salvation, this implausibility collapses when we remember that we are considering *all the possible individuals that could ever exist*. In that case, it seems certain, or at least highly likely, that such an individual could exist, and so would deserve to be created if a loving God could do so. Furthermore, it is also possible that the totality of evil is not necessary (or not *only* necessary) to convince just one person at one point in history, but rather, it is used to convince different people at different times, and so evil and suffering existing over time is necessary to convince these various individuals who live at different periods of history.

Unpalatable

Even with the other objections addressed, some may still find the above argument so distasteful as to be absurd. Yet it is difficult to translate this distaste into something more rational given the plausibility of each part of the argument: namely, 1) that it is extremely likely (even certain) that there are possible individuals who could exist and who would only be freely saved through the contemplation and experience of past, present, and future evil and suffering, including seemingly gratuitous evil and suffering (either qualitative or quantitative); 2) that if things remained salvifically-equal, then the creation and freely chosen salvation of such individuals would be a greater good than any finite amount of evil and suffering that needed to exist alongside them; and 3) that a loving (and possibly plenitudinous) God would thus be justified in creating a world with such individuals in it, and that He should do so (if He creates at all), even if that means permitting evil and suffering to exist in the world.

Furthermore, it seems difficult to object to such reasoning given that humans readily endorse it, even if only tacitly. Consider, for instance, that citizens in democratic societies could vote to cut all speed limits by 90%, thereby reducing traffic fatalities and injuries to nearly zero. Yet we do not, because the goods derived from higher speeds—i.e., the faster movement of products, ease of getting around, etc.—are considered greater than the limited number of deaths and injuries that necessarily come with those speeds. Naturally, we try to mitigate the suffering that comes from this decision—i.e., using seatbelts, airbags, etc.—but we still choose to create a world with the evil and suffering of traffic accidents, because we understand that certain goods outweigh those evils and that we are therefore justified in creating such a world. Similarly, if the *only* way that God could create and freely save certain

individuals is by permitting evil and suffering to exist, then He is justified in doing so to achieve that great good.

And, as noted above, this argument is compatible with universalism, which could be adopted to make the argument more palatable.

4. Evidence for Theism?

If the argument presented here is correct, then, on theism, it would be entirely expected that God would create a world—or some world within a broader theistic multiverse—with evil and suffering in it, including evil and suffering that appeared gratuitous. Consequently, a world with significant amounts of evil and suffering—just like our world—should not be seen as evidence against theism, as the latter can account for such a world, and this means that both the evidential and logical problems of evil are undermined (or, at the very least, the logical problem of evil dissipates).¹⁹

Additionally, if an evil and suffering-filled world (like our world) is fully expected to exist on theism, then one could argue that the existence of such a world raises the probability that theism is true. And if *that* is the case, then, given certain understandings of confirmation theory, an evil and suffering-filled world actually becomes evidence *for* theism. Moreover, if an evil and suffering-filled world is also more expected to exist on theism when compared to other worldviews, such as naturalism, then the existence of such a world would be evidence for theism over naturalism. And though it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this line of reasoning further, it would indeed be fascinating if that which was most often seen as evidence against theism—meaning evil and suffering—was actually evidence for it.

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¹⁹ It is also interesting to consider whether this argument could be reformulated to answer the problem of divine hiddenness. Namely, that if some individuals would only be freely saved by contemplating and experiencing a world with a hidden God, and all things remained salvifically-equal in that world, then God would be justified in being hidden rather than being more apparent.

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