

God and Gratuitous Evil

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Abstract

In view of God and his creation in light of the biblical record it seems that affirm gratuitous evil would not count against the moral perfections of God and would as Ronald Nash said, tip the debate on evil in favor of theism.

Keywords: God, Evil, theism, creation

William Rowe and other atheists have repeatedly argued that there appears to be some suffering so horrific that God could have prevented it without losing some greater good or allowing some greater evil. In other words, they claim that it appears that some evil is simply gratuitous—that is, it has no purpose. Rowe begins his objection to theism at this point, responding to the theist's commitment to the greater-good theodicy in which gratuitous evil is denied. This view holds that God allows into this world only that evil from which He can bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil. In other words, gratuitous evil simply does not exist contrary to at least human intuition as well as the facts themselves. It is clear that intuitively, human beings (Christians includ-

ed) ask the question “why” which indicates there seems to be no purpose. If the purpose was clear, we would have no questions. The theist, however, claims that gratuitous evil is only apparent, that when one looks at the evil properly it will be clear there is a purpose to the suffering even if it cannot be seen. Using the theists’ great-good theodicy, the atheist forms an argument something like this: if gratuitous evil exists, then according to the greater-good assumption God is not sovereign as some things would happen outside His sovereign purpose and if something could happen in God’s creation apart from His sovereign purpose, then He is not God. The conclusion of the atheist: it since the evil appears gratuitous; therefore, God must not exist because He would not be sovereign according to the greater good theodicy.

Based on that argument, that is, in light of the greater-good theodicy the atheist concludes whereas it appears gratuitous evil does exist it is more likely that God does not exist than He does exist. Given this, it seems the theist’s denial of gratuitous evil is precisely the very claim that strengthens the atheist argument from evil against the theist’s position.

While it is generally conceded by both theists and atheists that one cannot prove or disprove the existence of gratuitous evil, theists who hold to the greater-good theodicy categorically deny the existence of gratuitous evil as contrary to the character of God. In other language, they hold to what is called “meticulous providence” meaning that every human event of evil/suffering is allowed by God for His good purposes. In this case, the purpose of God is some ‘good’ that obtains from the evil which in turn provides the moral justification for God allowing the evil. As Michael Peterson points out, by denying gratuitous evil the burden of

proof rests on the theist.¹ As we know, he who makes the claim bears the burden of proof.

Yet, in spite of varied attempts by theists to demonstrate that the 'good' always obtains, many think that those arguments to this point fail to meet the necessary burden of proof leaving the debate between the atheist and theist at a stalemate. Remember that he who makes the claim bears the burden of proof. The question I will raise here is: "what would the theist sacrifice in terms of divine attributes if gratuitous evil did in fact exist?" I will suggest nothing.

It is the thesis of this paper that *if* gratuitous evil² exists it would necessitate no denial or redefinition of any of the attributes of God as traditionally understood, nor would it subvert the moral perfections of God. If this is so, it would remove the burden from the theist to demonstrate that good always obtains from each suffering/evil in this world at this present time. Should this be the case, this would in turn seriously undercut the atheist's argument from evil. [remember, the theist has defended God allowing evil predicated on the notion that He will bring about a greater good. This in turn requires the theist to give proof of his assertion] As a point of disclaimer, I am not saying there are not other is-

¹ Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 88.

² It seems this is the most we can say as to affirm that gratuitous evil exists would require one to point to a particular happening that could be defined as gratuitous. To the best of my understanding, to prove either that some evil was gratuitous or that it resulted in some greater good is beyond the efforts of the human mind. Here I only want to suggest the possibility of gratuitous evil so that it becomes unnecessary to focus the argument from evil on this turn—whether a greater-good occurred or not.

sues in the discussion, but here I am only attempting to suggest another way to consider evil by suggesting that it may be time to rethink the matter of gratuitous evil. Furthermore, I am not suggesting I can prove when gratuitous evil occurs, only *if* it occurs it would not in any way count against the moral perfections of God.

Generally speaking, theists who deny gratuitous evil and affirm the greater-good theodicy appeal to meticulous providence. This position simply states that gratuitous evil *cannot* be actual (because of meticulous providence), therefore, it *is* not actual. The theist merely pleads meticulous providence is the theological fence that prohibits gratuitous evil in God's creation in general or human experience in particular. On the one hand, atheists begin with the appearance of gratuitous evil and argue that it seems more likely that God does not exist than He does exist. On the other hand, theists claim God's meticulous providence assures no gratuitous evil is ever actual and, therefore, no matter what it looks like it only *appears* to be gratuitous (this is something like the argument that some use saying that it only appears there is design in the universe).

If arguing only at this level as the only way to settle this debate, it seems Jane Mary Trau is correct when she concludes: ". . . both are equally guilty of begging the question on the issue."³ Still, it appears, as Peterson argues, that the burden of proof rests on the theist to reasonably demonstrate that gratuitous evil does not exist. Remember the atheist only says it seems that certain evils appear to be gratuitous while the

³ Jane Mary Trau, "Fallacies in the Argument from Gratuitous Suffering," *The New Scholasticism* 60 (1986): pp 489.

theist denies that as a possibility. In this light, it is the theist who has the responsibility of showing how the existence of evil is consistent with his claim that God exists and that gratuitous evil is not possible. It is the theist who makes the strong claim. The atheist makes only a probability claim while the theist makes a categorical claim.

Whether the atheist has grounds to claim evil exists is a mute point and has no part in the argument here. The fact is the theist affirms the existence of evil and, therefore, has the task of reconciling the two claims as part of his theology. In order for theism to sustain a semblance of coherence⁴ or internal consistency, it must demonstrate how the existence of evil and the existence of God are compatible, especially in light of so much intense, unequally distributed horrific evils which includes the horrible suffering of children. This explanation cannot stand all by itself, it must make sense with all other theological affirmations of the system.

Over the years and especially in the last 40 years or so, theists have attempted to show how the 'good' obtains from evil. On these evidential grounds, they argue that God is morally justified in *allowing* evil to continue for this time, that is, evil which is both extensive and horrific, because of the 'good' He brings from it. That is, there is always some attending good that obtains from the evil which in turn justifies God allowing the evil. In this case, there can be no gratuitous evil as that would leave God without sufficient moral justification.

For most theists who deny the possibility of gratuitous evil, do so, on the idea of meticulous providence. This is part of the greater-good

⁴ Here I use coherence to speak of internal consistency.

theodicy. Remember, the greater-good theodicy claims God allows only those evils from which He can bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil (incidentally, I am not sure that the last part of this statement has any real meaning). Hence, so argues the theist, the good that obtains provide the grounds for God's moral justification for allowing evil. The other side of the argument is the idea of God's meticulous providence which maintains that God's providence assures no evil is gratuitous. So it is God's exercise of meticulous providence that provides a key operational plank in the greater-good theodicy.

Still, the complaint from the atheist is, that the theist cannot show that some justifying 'good' obtains from each evil or at least some of the most horrific evils. Or certainly no good that can be seen that would sufficiently justify morally God's allowing such evil to enter the human experience. Whereas the theist has claim the good obtains, the atheist merely asks: Where is the good.

In light of this, as suggested earlier, it seems the greater-good theodicy unnecessarily gives traction to the argument from the atheist. However, if good reasons could be found that would allow for the possibility of gratuitous evil then a serious blow would be delivered to the atheist's argument from evil. Theist Ronald Nash has noted, that if gratuitous evil does exist (and he thinks there are good reasons that is the case) then "there would be good reason to believe the stalemate is over and that the probabilities favor theism."⁵

⁵. Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 221.

Theist Michael Peterson suggests at least two reasons why gratuitous evil is possible and not merely apparent. Peterson reasons, "First, accepting the existence of some gratuitous evil is more consonant with our common experience than is the position which denies gratuitous evil *a priori*. Second, rejecting the principle of meticulous providence opens the way for a deeper and more profound apprehension of God than that widely accepted position allows."⁶ After considering Peterson's reasons, Nash writes: "The presence of gratuitous evils in God's, creation is consistent with God's purposes for creation; moreover, it is what we might expect to find in a natural order designed to serve as an arena in which free human beings are given an opportunity to respond to real dangers and challenges in the process known as soul-making."⁷ Within Peterson's argument, he rightly notes that the possibility of gratuitous evil is logically linked to the reality of significant human freedom. He writes: "One interesting benefit of this conception of gratuitous evil as a possibility which is *logically* linked to free will is that it does not necessitate limitation of any of the divine attributes, not even omnipotent."⁸

The fact is, human freedom is the major, if not the central, point in this discussion. At the deeper level, however, we find that the sticking point centers precisely on what is meant by significant human freedom. Alvin Plantinga has argued regarding human freedom that "If a person

⁶ Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 89.

⁷ Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 221.

⁸ Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 105.

is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't."⁹ For Plantinga this is the only reasonable account of human freedom.¹⁰ As Richard Swinburne concludes: "the free-will defense becomes more plausible if 'free will' means libertarian freedom"¹¹ which he later states to be precisely how he understands human freedom. However, if meticulous providence prevails, many real evil choices would really never see the light of day—only those evil choices from which God could bring some good. This it is seems places a serious limitation on the idea freedom. Understand that we are not saying that God merely limits the number of choices man has (a fact I think is self-evident), but what we are saying is that once man chooses to do something, God prevents his thought-choice from materializing. This is what is required for meticulous providence to mean anything.

Significant human freedom means that man can obey as well as disobey God—those are real choices before him. A choice is only a true choice ,if, in fact, it is a choice that can actually be made and that there would be corollary consequences—such as in the Garden (Gen 2:17 or Ro 1). Furthermore, and I think more importantly, significant human

⁹. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Reprint, 1996) , 29.

¹⁰. Alvin Plantinga. *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford Universit Press, 1974), pp 164-95.

¹¹. Richard Swinburne. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 34.

freedom (libertarian freedom) is the only grounds on which it is possible for man to have an authentic love for God and neighbor (Matt 22: 37-40).

On this account of human freedom, man is in some respects free to commit or cause (as a casual agent) gratuitous evil as well as do good, and in either case both are real, not imagined. For Nash, "God's program for humanity includes this risk."¹² To prevent this possibility, it would require that many choices would only be imagined and man could only think that he could do this or that evil when in fact, he would not be allowed. This would seem to change the meaning of human freedom as discussed above. Granted, that could be a possibility, but it appears to do so would be to change the meaning of human freedom rather drastically. Furthermore it would mean that try as I might, I can do nothing that does not serve the purposes of God—namely the good.

Now it seems that there are no unambiguous statement(s) in the Bible that commitments God to preventing any evil that would be gratuitous. The more often quoted, at least in sermons, would be Romans 8:28. This text, however, only affirms 'good' for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. With the qualifier, the verse cannot mean all evil anytime, everywhere. It should be noted here that there is no denial that God works for good for those who suffer for righteousness sake. Nor is there any denial that God can bring a 'good' from evil once a part of human history.

Consider that for gratuitous evil to not exist, God would need effectively to prevent a human thought-choices to materialize, unless He

¹² Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 218.

could bring about some greater good or prevent some worse evil. That is, the evil intent could not become a part of the unfolding of human history as the evil could never be an actuality. This, we must see is something quite different from God doing something with the evil once it was part of the stream of human history. Man could think to do an evil deed and even make a conscious decision to commit the evil deed, but would simply be prevented from doing it. That is, I could think to do an evil deed, but could not accomplish it—unless that is, God could bring some good from it that would serve his creative or redemptive purposes. Yet, it is difficult to read biblical history and be convinced that this is the way history is. I am thinking about Gen 6; Is 5; Ro 1.

However, to affirm libertarian freedom as suggested above would put one in the accepted position of the first four centuries of church history, according to Swinburne.¹³ And for what it is worth (as Peterson reasons) it seems consistent with human intuition as well as human language. Parenthetically, language does tell us something about the reality in which we live. So, do we have the mode of possibility in our language (not just ours but all languages) where man speaks of “if” “I would have done such and such things would have been different”--- that is, we think we do have real choices, even choices to the contrary--- that we could have really chosen to do otherwise. If this is not really the case, then God has created a world in which we are deceived by our normal way of thinking and speaking. In fact, I think the argument can be made that meticulous providence carried to its logical conclusion would

^{13.} Richard Swinburne. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 35.

conclude with a world that is highly determined. A matter I will touch on a little later.

Arguments have been made concluding that it is *logically* impossible and *existentially* implausible for significant human freedom to exist in the context of meticulous providence.¹⁴ Nash suggests that “When proponents of meticulous providence suggest that God prevents or eliminates all gratuitous evil, they (perhaps unwittingly) place constraints on the type of human freedom that makes possible the most praiseworthy human actions.”¹⁵ Meticulous providence entails the notion that what happens on this earth has a divine purpose, which seems to put a squeeze on biblical history as well as to common sense and thought.

To deny meticulous providence, however, does not necessitate denying God’s sovereignty in any way. Some would argue that to deny meticulous providence is to be left with a chaotic purposeless world. However, at a minimum such a position clearly confuses the difference between purpose and reason. While all purposes entail reasons, not all reasons entail some purpose. There would always be a reason for gratuitous evil and hence an explanation for why things happened as they did so we would not live in a chaotic world. However, the existence of evil would not necessitate some purpose for the evil. Purpose has to do with the end while reason only explains cause. For example, I might tell you I

¹⁴. Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), pp 217-220 and William Hasker, “Must God Do His Best?” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 216-17.

¹⁵. Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p 218.

did not pay my taxes because I did not have the money—that would be a reason. On the other hand, I might say I did not pay my taxes because I am protesting the rate increase—that would be a purpose.

I believe an argument can be made that given this kind of human freedom, opening history up to be shaped in part by human choices (good and bad) is an exceptional exhibition of God's sovereign wisdom and power in the way He has created what is. To allow man to make real choices within creation's moral structure, as for example, when He allowed man to name the animals after God had named the heavenly bodies is a testimony to the glory of man and the wonder of the unsearchable riches of God. I think that, instead of gratuitous evil being a strike against the God who is there, it would instead be a testimony to the wonder of creation itself and the design and ordering of the universe that man might be a true moral being—capable of true personal relationship with God where real choices in respect to potentials really exist. Furthermore, it accentuates the moment by moment radical providential interaction of God with His moral agents living within this wonderful creation. In this way he would be governing the flow of human history assuring its determined end.

A creation morally structured where humans have libertarian freedom within the boundaries of that order. While this position may well argue against meticulous providence, it does not entail a denial of divine providence, in fact, it affirms divine providence. Furthermore, to suggest the possibility of gratuitous is not to suggest that all is evil is gratuitous. In addition, there is no question here that whatever happens on this planet is not only allowed by God, but known by God.

There seems to be good reason to think that as we zoom out for a larger view of creation and God's creative purposes, that the value of significant human freedom is part of what it means to live in a morally structure universe. In fact, it seems to be the only authentic way man can have a personal and meaningful love relationship with God. With human freedom, there must be order, just as when you have a game it requires rules so people are free to make choices (the game cannot exist as a game without this), but within a prescribed boundary. It is a morally structured where God in His sovereign choice has given man libertarian freedom. Since creation there are two kinds of minds in the universe—necessary mind and contingent mind—where the contingent is real but subservient to the necessary mind. If this is so, then the moral ordering of the universe is the result of God's deep wisdom made possible by his creative omnipotence and supervised by His providence. This would mean God voluntarily committed to limiting or restricting the manifestations of some of his divine attributes within his creation for the higher value of having a personal relationship with man.¹⁶ We see this same kind of self-limitation of attributes in the Incarnation.

If this view is right, it would mean man could really have this freedom, but never to the extent that it could defeat the plan and ultimate purposes of God (God's providence overruling bad intentions or intervening to correct bad actions (Gen 11). However, such freedom does entail the possibility that man could exercise the freedom to go against

¹⁶. While some would argue this is the greater good, namely libertarian freedom, for to be so it would require a re-working of the greater good theodicy as it assures that good comes from each evil, not in some general way, but in a specific way of a good obtaining—a good, not the good.

God. However, as Augustine argued it is better to have a runaway horse than a stone. Furthermore, there are limits on the kind and extent of possibilities before man—man is not free to do just anything. Limits, however do not undercut libertarian freedom itself, they only limit the choices open to libertarian freedom. However, those limits allow for very bad choices leading to very bad consequences. However, if some of those consequences would be classified as gratuitous evil, this would not count against God's moral perfections as it is His divine sovereignty that arranged the universe in this way making human freedom a reality. In fact, it seems logically impossible for man to love God without this kind of freedom (Matt 22: 37-40).

However, meticulous providence and human freedom are not the only concerns relative to the greater-good theodicy as a plausible framework for understanding evil/suffering in this world. I will speak to some of them as they present themselves to my understanding.

First, if all evil is screened by God to assure that only that evil is allowed which can bring about a greater good, how would that impact an understanding of social justice? That is, how would one reconcile the command for the people of God to be involved in social justice (I Thess 5: 15) if the evil present in the world is here for a purpose? If the evil that exists presently is allowed by God to bring about some good, then the logical question to ask is why prevent the evil. Since in this account of things, the good would be sufficiently great enough (either qualitatively or quantitatively) to justify the evil. Consider the matter of abortion. Whereas abortion is actual/real (by that I mean not imagined or called one thing by God and something else by man), one could only conclude that its presence is allowed by God to bring about a greater good.

Would it not follow that if the evil were to be prevented, then also the good? The logic would be if the evil is overcome by socially concerned individuals, then the good would not obtain. But if the good was to serve the purposes of God, it would be evil to try to thwart the purposes of God, or so it would seem. This seems somewhat confusing when carried to its logical conclusion. In addition, it would be reasonable to raise the question about attempting to prevent the evil. God's purposes would be foiled by man's obedience to God's command, namely to stand against evil. All of this would also apply to praying for people who are suffering as well as actually doing something to prevent suffering—such as going to doctors or taking medications.

At least on the face of it, it would seem that if the evil is prevented, then so is the good—in other words one argues that the good is that Christians will stand against the evil, to me this seems to raise at least two difficult questions: (1) what is the good when Christians do not stand against the evil as they did not in the case of slavery to cite one example; (2) do this not mean that there is some "goods" that God cannot bring to pass without the aid of sin? If so, then the fall is a necessity to certain goods, goods that appear so necessary to the plan of God that He has made sure the needed conditions of evil are present to bring about the good.

A second and related concern raises the question of God's relationship to evil. It would seem that the logical conclusion would be that in the end God would be the cause of evil, even necessarily so. This seems incongruous with the truth that He is light in whom there is not darkness at all (I Jn 1:5) – the One whose "ways are justice. A God of Truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He." What would

the argument look like? The evil allowed by God is justified on the grounds that from it He would bring about some greater good. That is, that would be the purpose for which the evil was allowed. Now if the good serves the purposes of God which we assume are not made up as we go along, the individual good must somehow fit into the larger cosmic purposes of God. If the good did not obtain, then the purposes of God would in some way not obtain. However, if the good is essential to the purposes of God, then that good must obtain. If it could be obtained by some other means, a lesser evil or no evil at all, then that would be the morally appropriate way to go. If the good is necessary and it can only come by a particular evil, then the evil is also necessary. In this case, God is the actual cause even planner of the evil which seems contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

Associated with this, as I see it, there must be some goods necessary to the plan of God that cannot obtain unless the necessary evil also obtains. In this case, there would be some goods necessary to the purposes of God which could not be part God's purpose apart from the evil. Now, there is something that God purposes to do, but cannot do apart from evil which means even the fall or something like it becomes necessary to creation's history and purposes. What does this say about God's omnipotence and His goodness that has an everlasting plan which requires evil?

A third question that comes to mind is one of determining how much good is sufficient to offset the evil. This question reveals the evidentiary nature of the greater-good theodicy which appears to be a weakness. Still the fact is, most theists attempt to defend the greater-good theodicy by showing where the good obtained. In cases where no good

can be found the response is that it is there but the human mind cannot see it--it is beyond our ken. While it is possible this might be the case at times and one cannot deny that it is, however, on what grounds should we think that the good did obtain, but it is beyond our ken? It seems we should accept what appears to be the case unless there is overwhelming evidence to conclude it is not the case. In addition, if the good is greater (in some way) than the evil, it seems difficult to see how a good that obtained from the evil of something like if Stalin (60 million), Pol Pot (1-3 million or $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the country's population, Hitler (6 million plus), Islamic Fundamentalist at the trade tower-3,000) would be hard to miss. Furthermore, how would one calculate how much good would be needed to morally justify God's allowing all the pain, suffering, torture and mayhem extended through the years from one evil. It seems that such a view as the greater good theodicy runs up on rough sledding when we take a serious look at all the horrible evils and human suffering in human history to say nothing of its inability to explain natural evil.

Fourth it seems there is a major logical mistake in this approach. First we must recognize that we are not talking about what God might do with evil once it has occurred, but rather on what grounds is God morally justified in allowing the evil to occur. We all, it think, can agree that God has brought and will bring good out of suffering—maybe not every time, but we know it is within His providence and purposes to do so at least at times. It is, however, fallacious to argue moral justification because of the consequences it reverse cause and effect and takes the effect (the good) to be the cause (God's moral justification). Furthermore, it confuses reason for purpose as I have pointed out earlier.

Fifth it seems to take a very determinative view of God's sovereignty. Sovereignty actually does not seem to be the best word for what it being referenced, but it is what is used so we will go with it. When people use the word sovereignty, I think they mean pretty much the idea that God is in control—a notion I affirm. It seems to me, however, that one can affirm the idea that God is in control without meticulous providence. For example, there are two ways one can affirm someone is in control. It can be used in the sense of a man being in control of his automobile. In this case, we mean to say, that when he turns the wheel to the left, the car goes to the left (all things being equal of course). This would be a very mechanistic view of "being in control". However, there is another sense in which one can be said to be in control. This would be where we say that a man is in control of his family. In this sense, we mean he sets the guidelines for the family and then enforces those guidelines, but members of the family are free to make decisions within those guidelines. I take God being in control in the latter sense.

Finally, it would seem that if the greater good holds true, then the greater the evil the greater the good. The logic of this presents itself to me as ending up with the end forbidden in Romans 6 where Paul strenuously refutes the idea of sinning that grace might abound. If the good is greater than the evil, why not let evil takes its course because in the end humanity will be better off because there will be more good in the human experience. But I am sure, none of us really think that we should follow this path. It not only runs counter to our humanness, it runs counter to the teaching of the Bible at least as I understand it. However, let me say at this point, there are many good men and women of God who affirm the greater good theodicy and meticulous providence.

My comments today are in no way intended as a criticism of them as individuals, I am merely raising what presents itself to me as concerns for the greater-good theodicy. I am merely picking up the conversation where people such as Ronald Nash have left it and tried to move the larger discussion forward using a different paradigm. It is one that affirms libertarian freedom, denies meticulous providence while affirming a traditional evangelical understand of divine attributes of the Trinitarian God of the Bible.

In *AWrinkle in Time*, Madeleine L'Engle makes this point: We pick up the dialogue between Mrs. Whatsit and Calvin:

“Can’t she [the Happy Medium] see what’s going to happen?” Calvin asked.

“Oh, not in this kind of thing.” Mrs. Whatsit sounded surprised at his question. “If we knew ahead of time what was going to happen we’d be—we’d be like the people of Camazotz, with no lives of our own, with everything all planned and done for us. How can I explain it to you? Oh, I know. In your language you have a form of poetry called the sonnet.”

“Yes, yes,” Calvin said impatiently. “What’s that got to do with the Happy Medium?”

“Kindly pay me the courtesy of listening to me.” Mrs. Whatsit’s voice was stern, and for a moment Calvin stopped pawing the ground like a nervous colt. “It is a very strict form of poetry, is it not?”

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“Yes.”

“There are fourteen lines, I believe, all in iambic pentameter. That’s a very strict rhythm or meter, yes?”

“Yes.” Calvin nodded.

“And each line has to end with a rigid rhyme pattern. And if the poet does not do it exactly this way, it is not a sonnet, is it?”

“No.”

“But within this strict form the poet has complete freedom to say whatever he wants, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.” Calvin nodded again.

“So,” Mrs. Whatsit said. [end of page 198]

“So what?”

“Oh, do not be stupid, boy!” Mrs. Whatsit scolded. “You know perfectly well what I am driving at!”

“You mean you’re comparing our lives to a sonnet? A strict form, but freedom within it?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Whatsit said. “You’re given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you.”¹⁷

A reading of the Old Testament in particular records what by all appearances to be God responding in a real way to the circumstances of life, much of which has been shaped by the choices of his moral agents.

¹⁷ Madeleine L’Engle. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Dell, 1973 (originally published by Farrar, Straus and Girous, Inc. in 1962), 199.

There are cases where it is clear the evil has not brought about some greater good, but only judgment from God. For example, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. Here we listen in to the Lord's conversation with Abraham and there is nothing about all of this evil has been allowed because He would bring some good from it. It was evil and needed only to be judged. The book of Amos gives another example where God scolds the leaders of Samaria for failing social justice and only judgment is promised not some good. Personal responsibility is required of those who make the wrong choices (Deut 28 -29) where there is the admonition to not "turn to the right or the left to go after other gods to serve them: (Deut 28:14) where God says: "I have set before you today life and good, death and evil" (Duet 30:15) all of which are meaningless unless man has power to choose to the contrary. When death is the result that is not good as Ezekiel records the words of the Lord: "For I have no pleasure in the death of the one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore turn and live!" (Ek. 18:32).

In conclusion, in view of God and his creation in light of the biblical record it seems that affirm gratuitous evil would not count against the moral perfections of God and would as Ronald Nash said, tip the debate on evil in favor of theism.

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