

Liberty University

**Explanatory Ultimacy, Epistemic Access, and Evil:
A Community Theodicy**

A Thesis Submitted to
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Master of Christian Apologetics

by
Jonathan Michael Huls

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Approval Sheet

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Jonathan Michael Huls

Read and approved by:

Chairperson: Ronnie P. Campbell

Reader: Jonathan M. Waita

Date: December 13, 2022

Abstract

This is a work about meaning and value. How do human persons find meaning? Why do human persons have value—or do we? A stubborn problem of meaning is evidenced by the perennially treated theistic problem of evil. How is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God compatible with a world filled with violence and hate? If God is powerfully perfect, why is His world not perfect too? This project endeavors to notice that an answer to this problem depends on properly grounding human access to meaning—especially the meaning of the words *God*, and *evil*. It is argued herein that there can be no meaning, moral or otherwise without an explanatory ultimate to provide it. Likewise, a human relation to that ultimate is needed to explain the value in human persons. This thesis argues that God, as an indivisible Community of Love supplies a satisfactory explanatory ultimate for perfection, and thus a competent source of moral meaning. Since the creation entails features of the Creator, the incommensurable value of love, as seen in the self-giving of one person for another is offered as the sufficient reason motivating God's creation—as well as the morally sufficient reason for God's permission of evil. It is argued that evil results from the misorientation, or *sin* of a free moral creature's life in relation to their Creator. In short, the meaningful problem of evil is a problem of sin. Therefore, the meaningful solution to the problem of evil is found in the perfect life of Jesus Christ who has exhausted the power of sin and death in the perfection of His own Love and Life. There are in fact such things as meaning and value, and their explanatory ultimate is Love. God is Love.

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Dedication

For Robert Leonardi...

...and for all who suffer with Love.

God is Love.

1 John 4:16

Love suffers long and is kind.

1 Corinthians 13:4

“The God the heart needs is a God the head has good reason to believe really exists.”

—Norman Geisler

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The present reality of evil and suffering troubles not only philosophers and theologians, but all who awaken each day to live in a world that is obviously not Heaven. Evil has been appealed to from classical times to the present as a logical, evidential, or emotional hurdle that theism cannot overcome. This state of affairs constitutes the notorious *problem of evil*.¹ Suffering and evil are a problem for theists in general, but especially for evangelical Christians. These not only believe that God exists, but that they have a duty to grow in a mindful faith while loving an imperfect world as ambassadors of a perfect King. Does the Christian mission of reconciliation embrace a contradiction? It might. Christian philosophers J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig soberly note that the problem of evil is “undoubtedly the greatest intellectual obstacle to belief in God.”² If God is truly perfect, then what accounts for the historical and ongoing horrors which pollute His world? Is it not the same world that God once called very good (Gen. 1:31)? Do God and man have altogether different conceptions of what the word *good* means?

For non-theists, the problem of evil may defeat any lasting trust in God. After all, if God is real and changes lives, then why do those who follow Him behave in despicable ways? Perhaps the unforgivable sin in today’s inclusive world is Christian hypocrisy.³ Since all Christians are not yet just like Christ, many are condemned as inadmissible into the melting pot of postmodern pluralism.⁴ But what exactly is *wrong* with hypocrisy? What does *wrong* mean?

¹ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian World View*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), Ch. 29.

² Ibid., 540.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), Ch. 4.

⁴ Paul Gould, Travis Dickinson, and R. Keith Loftin, *Stand Firm, Apologetics and the Brilliance of the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2018), 127-144; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 6-7.

It is also not uncommon for theists to abandon trust in God on account of experiencing suffering or an instance of evil. Some might ask: “If God loves me, why do I hurt?” Or: “How can a God of love just sit back and watch as unspeakable horrors pollute His world every day?” Or: “If God is real, then why did my Christian neighbor hurt me?”

On the basis of horrors, cultural strictures, religious failures, and self-evident pain and suffering—the problem of evil is emotionally apparent to everyone. As a consequence, many Christians disengage from suffering neighbors and friends because they are ill-equipped to tackle sensitive moral issues with a balance of theological sophistication and charity. Tragically, some who do engage haplessly drive sufferers away from God by offering paradoxical comfort in the notion that evil is caused by God for the good of the sufferer—and if not that, then for the mysterious purpose of increasing His own glory. If God is perfect, how does evil increase His glory? Again, do God and man have different conceptions of what *good* and *evil* mean?

Though the human use of moral language is reflexive, the propositional content of moral terms defies consensus. The meaning of words like *good*, *evil*, *right*, and *wrong* are hotly debated—especially among Christians. This fundamental *problem of meaning* has thus far delimited the success and wide adoption of a Christian response to the problem of evil.⁵

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to engage closely with the academic conversation surrounding the problem of evil, and meaningfully extend it if possible. One of the most successful apologetic arguments of the last century is Alvin Plantinga’s *free-will defense*. Plantinga demonstrates that

⁵ Scholarly treatments on the problem of evil take two forms. A *defense* modestly offers a possible answer to the problem of evil in some form. A *theodicy* is more ambitious in that it risks giving the actual answer. This thesis is a deliberate theodicy. David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 139; Ronnie P. Campbell, *Worldviews and the Problem of Evil: A Comparative Approach* (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 22-23.

God is logically constrained in the kind of world He can actualize if creatures with meaningful free will are to inhabit it.⁶ The result of Plantinga's achievement is that the logical possibility of a coexistence between God and evil has been established, but is conditional upon something like a libertarian view of human freedom.⁷

However, a plurality of Christians do not believe that human persons are free in the libertarian sense and argue instead for the non-reality of human freedom, or for freedom's compatibility with a causally determined reality.⁸ It is hoped that Christian rapprochement on this topic may be helped by identifying a teleological function of human freedom which either extends or delimits Plantinga's free will defense.

While the free will defense is powerful in a narrow sense, it is deliberately modest. Plantinga offers a logically possible solution to one formulation of the problem of evil. Even so, his defense gestures to an explanatory theodicy which would be applicable to any formulation of the problem of evil. Perhaps free will is not the ultimate *good* of human persons. Perhaps human freedom is a teleological feature which is necessary for that ultimate good to obtain. This research endeavors to extend Plantinga's idea to logical ultimacy by arguing that *Community* rather than freedom is the *Summum Bonum*, or ultimate good.⁹ Such an identification supplies a nexus of being, knowledge, and purpose between the Creator and the human creature. It is

⁶ Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 26-55.

⁷ Plantinga argues: "If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action, and within his power to refrain from it." Ibid., 26. See also Craig, *On Guard*, 260-264; and Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, Ch.9.

⁸ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 69-71.

⁹ The researchers use of the word *community* is explained in detail in the Summary of Development and Position in this introduction. The thesis will argue that compound personal unity and actualized human being are correlative after the image of the Triune God as the necessary locus of *being*. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Ch. 6.

further argued that personal community is impossible without *personhood*, and that human free will is necessary as a *community-making good*.¹⁰ Thus, the purpose of the thesis is to demonstrate that enabling the incommensurable and growing *value* of community through creation is a morally sufficient reason for God to permit evil; and that community as a philosophical ultimate comports with the trinitarian truth claims of Christian theism.

Statement of Importance

The importance of the problem of evil is difficult to overstate given the incommensurable value of each human person, and the self-evident evil that delimits that value. Moreover, God's nature and priorities remain the subject of a paralyzing intra-Christian debate as regards God's causal relationship to evil. As communities of believers are stressed by dogmatic disagreements which have persisted for generations, the disharmony hinders evangelism, stunts discipleship, and delimits growth. At times, such pressures have boiled over into violent schisms, and even led to unspeakable horrors done in the name of dogmatic purity.¹¹ Such problems are not confined to centuries past. The attendant divisions in today's Christian corpus supply many honest seekers of the truth with compelling reasons to *keep out*—and others with compelling reasons to leave.¹²

Today, Christian divisions at every scale continue with cancer-like regularity. Rapidly evolving cultural pressures are compelling leaders and laypeople alike to choose between

¹⁰ Such is *necessary* in the same sense that a lens must be present for an eye to be capable of sight and obtain ontologically as an eye. In short, without a lens or any other necessary element, a camera is a collection of parts, but not a camera. Without a design and proper function, that is a *teleological* context, a lens by itself is nothing but useless matter. Such is the relationship between a free person and a *community*. The relationship between teleology and ultimate ontology is explored in chapter three's discussion of *freedom* and chapter four and five's discussion of *being*. Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 122-129.

¹¹ These are represented by the Marian persecutions, the Inquisition, and even the Holocaust. Yet, dogmatic purity is not a theistic motivator. The atheistic atrocities of Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot were likewise motivated by dogmatic purity. Ideological evil is not a religious phenomenon—it is a human one.

¹² Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, 8-13; Keller, *Reason for God*, Ch. 4.

Christian orthodoxy and compatibility with the postmodern culture. To be faithful to one invites being excommunicated (or cancelled) by the other. Too often, disagreements over these priorities result in disfellowship and a consequent delimitation of the Christian witness to a suffering world. This state of affairs is perhaps the penultimate failure of *community* in the cosmos, and a uniquely Christian facet of the problem of evil. If the church's cohesion in Christ is to remain recognizable; and if their ministry of reconciliation to a suffering world is to remain relevant, the above problem of meaning needs to be addressed (2 Cor. 5:14-6:2).¹³ That project depends upon clearly identifying the ontological source of moral meaning, accounting for human access to it, and then reckoning with its ultimate purpose.

The irreducible importance of *meaning* can be illustrated with practical examples. Unless the meaning and proper function of *weight* were understood by an English-speaking engineer, they would be incapable of designing wings that balance weight with *lift*. The meaning supplied by these physical terms is taken for granted by millions of travelers every day. Most do not grasp the math and science involved, but this does not defeat their confidence in aeronautical engineers. Why? Because airplanes are *meaningfully* real, and we can *actually* fly in them.

Likewise, if the meaning and proper function of *mitoses* were not understood by English-speaking physicians, they could not diagnose and treat instances of *cancer*. If these biological terms lacked meaning, then frightened patients would have no good reason to trust their oncologists despite the authority advertised by white lab-coats and medical degrees. It seems necessary that competent authority be grounded in recognizable meaning. If so, then does this constraint hold for any class of problem—even a moral one?

¹³ J.P. Moreland, *Love God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*, 2nd ed (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), Ch. 1.

If the word *evil* cannot be defined and properly understood, what warrants the theologian or moral philosopher to offer explanations and solutions to any *problem of evil*? How is this not like a doctor providing treatment without first understanding the nature of an illness? To be a doctor, one must first learn how their patient ought to properly function. Of course, it takes years of learning (collecting meaning) to develop the required competencies.

Notice that chemotherapy given to a healthy patient is not medical treatment—it is torture. The difference obtains in the context supplied by a competent, and therefore *meaningful* authority who endeavors to help rather than harm her patient. Should moral philosophers and theologians be excepted from this standard, or are medical doctors the only learned professionals who should avoid doing harm as a preliminary commitment?

If success requires settling preliminary questions as Aristotle taught, then a widely adopted solution to the problem of evil is beyond reach until preliminary terms are defined in a way that is transmissible across academic, cultural, and religious distances. Likewise, to achieve wide adoption, a theodicy must be cogent, intelligible, and accessible. As an ultimate metaphysical answer, a theodicy must hold for a lettered Doctor of Philosophy in one country, and for a kindergartner in her mother's arms in another.

Perhaps if the Bible can be shown to cohere with philosophical entailments which describe the moral lives of every human person, then biblical authority and Christian veracity can be supported in a true and attractive way. An apologetic bridge may be possible over life's basic questions. Who are we? What kind of world do we live in? And why are we here?

The importance of this project is reflected in the *value* of each person who may cross the bridge. After all, what is the value of a person? The academic prose of the question delimits its meaning. Perhaps a *personal* question is more appropriate. What is the value of *your* person

(husband, wife, son, daughter, father, mother, friend)? Is not their value beyond conceivable measure? Might you be willing to exchange your own value to redeem theirs were it possible? By identifying each person as a unique vector of value to another, it is possible to recognize the means by which a *defeat* of evil has been accomplished.¹⁴ As a consequence, the importance of the cumulative project of theodicy is beyond measure.¹⁵

Research Method

As an apologetic theological project, this research consists in a survey and critical analysis of relevant scholarship on the problem of evil. The scope of this literature encompasses the biblical texts in addition to works from classical philosophers, church fathers, medieval polymaths, and contemporary treatments from theistic and atheistic moral philosophers. The works listed in the bibliography have been mined for important contributions either deserving expansion or inviting exclusion.

Three contributing ideas are especially important to this project. The first is the ontological/epistemological notion of *explanatory ultimacy* which is briefly treated by William Lane Craig in his rebuttal to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in “The Most Gruesome of Guests.”¹⁶ The second is the epistemological standard supplied by Stephen J. Wykstra’s *condition for*

¹⁴ The competing concepts of *balance* and *defeat* are treated by Roderick M Chisolm, “The Defeat of Good and Evil,” In *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53-68; and from a Christian perspective by Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” In *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 216-221.

¹⁵ The value of this project is largely supplied by the historical and ongoing efforts toward theodicy undertaken by many scholars over many millennia. This thesis merely contributes to a much wider effort, and could not do so in the absence of important work already done. The researcher is grateful to each historical and contemporary contributor to this project, and to all peripheral fields upon which it depends.

¹⁶ William Lane Craig, “The Most Gruesome of Guests” In *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, eds. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2009), 172-173.

reasonable epistemic access.¹⁷ The third is the teleological concept that actualized human *being* transcends individuality and obtains through *personal community* with God and one's neighbors. This idea features in the trinitarian scholarship of Colin E. Gunton.¹⁸

The conceptual trinity of explanatory ultimacy, reasonable epistemic access, and actual being through community anchors the thesis. These ideas are extended throughout the paper to support the ontological ground of moral meaning in God, the epistemological availability of moral meaning in human persons, and the human *telos* of *being in community* with God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This compound-unity is evident in Jesus Himself who personifies deity, humanity, and true revelation in exemplary perfection.

Summary of Development & Position

This thesis addresses the above subjects across five chapters. Chapter one establishes the project's analytical measures, offers a preliminary assessment of the problem of evil in three forms, and introduces a preliminary question to be answered by the material that follows.

Chapters two and three examine the nature of God, along with reasonable human expectations in light of that nature. *Power* and *Love* are compared and contrasted as competing first principles in the logic of God. It is demonstrated that the decision to misprioritize these features of God results in philosophical and theological consequences that are unlivable in the real world.

Chapter four examines human access to moral meaning, the community substance of personal *being*, and recognizes definitions to moral terms from the ontological perspective.

¹⁷ The *Condition for Reasonable Epistemic Access* (CORNEA) asks an inquirer to evaluate their warrant to know a thing before offering commentary on it. Wykstra's common-sense contribution is far-reaching and foundational to this effort. Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments From Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'" In *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 138-161.

¹⁸ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 2003), Ch.2.

Finally, chapter five incorporates a *community theodicy* to the problem of evil consistent with the truth claims of Christian theism. Those familiar with the apologetic conversation will notice a synthesis of the *free will defense* with classical arguments from morality and design united by Anselm's argument that God is a necessarily perfect being.

It is important to qualify what the researcher means by the word *community* in the paper. In all cases, *community* is a portmanteau of *compound-unity*—that being, many united as a functional *one*. Community is applied in the personal sense to God and human persons to indicate the functional nature of compound-unity in contrast to the non-functional nature of isolated individuality.¹⁹ This semantic decision is deliberate in an effort to show the self-evidence of the teleological relationship of the human creature to the ontological nature of the Creator.²⁰ Even so, this use is problematic in the absence of some important preliminary qualifications.

First, there is a critical distinction between *Community* as applied to God, and *community* as applied to human persons, or to any other created state of affairs. This distinction must be recognized by context, but will be indicated by the capitalized *Community* when applied to God, and the lowercase *community* when applied generically or to a contingent subject.

Community is the ontological substance of *Love*, of which God is the ultimate exemplar and source (1 John 4:7). Love in this sense is thick with ontological meaning. Love is the free gift of one person to others, and consummates *being* in a *community* when the act of self-giving is reciprocated. In the absence of a perichoretic union with another person, an individual's *being* is not actual, but merely potential.²¹

¹⁹ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 5.

²⁰ Ibid., Ch. 8.

²¹ The concept of perichoresis is introduced in chapter three, and the Thomistic concepts of actuality and potentiality feature in chapters four and five to philosophically ground the community argument of the thesis.

In the life of God, the phenomenon of Love is eternal, *a se*, and indivisible. That is to say that the Love of God is ontologically simple. God is One by *being* Three, and is irreducible to individual personalities. Yet the Unity of God obtains in three distinct Persons with a unique *Self* to eternally give to the other Persons of the Trinity.²² This theology is Trinitarian Monotheism.²³

The *Community* of the Godhead is the *image and likeness* which human persons are made to reflect. It is for this reason that it is not good for a man to be alone, and why a man leaves his father and mother and unites with his wife to become *one* flesh (Gen. 2:18-24). Thus, *Community* represents the necessary Love relationship, or substance of divine being as experienced in eternal necessity by God in Tri-Unity. And *community* represents the teleological design and due perfection of human persons who lack being so long as they freely remain individual and isolated from a love relationship with God and their neighbors. This ontological framework is the key to understanding the nature of good and evil, and God's incarnational solution to the problem of sin, or non-being. The word *community* is chosen to accessibly represent the nexus between the necessary life of God, and the contingent lives of human persons.

The position of the researcher and the thread of the thesis are given as follows: God is morally perfect as a logically necessary and irreducible Tri-Unity of Persons bound by an *a se* Love relationship. As such, God is the first and ultimate ontological fact, the *Summum Bonum* of moral value, and the creative source of contingent *being*. The concepts of God and *sin* are ontologically incompatible. That is to say that God can neither be nor do evil in any sense, or He would not be God. Noticing this fact entails two ontological axioms: *Love* as being in Community. And *sin* as individual non-being against God's purposeful design.

²² Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 2-8.

²³ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 588-593.

The revealed function of human persons is to freely choose *being* by loving God and one another in community. Yet there is a cosmic difference between the *actual being* of God in necessary Trinity, and the *potential being* of human persons as free individuals. God's being is necessary and actual as an indivisible *Community* (Trinity). Human persons are potential beings whose true lives become actual through a right relationship with God and their neighbors. The freedom to enter *community* through self-giving, or to imprison self-value by remaining an individual is a true and unconstrained freedom intrinsic to human personhood. When personal freedom goes wrong, sin, moral evil, and death (non-being) follow necessarily.

God cannot causally determine each person's choice *to be* or not *to be* without cancelling His own motivation to create. This reason is nothing less than the actualization of a reality which increases in value incommensurably as free persons give themselves to God and each other in love after the *Imago Dei* (image and likeness of God). The actualization of a reality of ever-growing value supplies God with a sufficient reason to create, and with an identifiable justification for His allowance of evil.

The incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in glory constitute God's ontological solution to the problem of sin. In short, *sin* (non-being) has been exhausted in Jesus Christ who *being* God is the immutable source of *Love* (being). Death has been swallowed up in the victory of God's own Life (1 Cor. 15:54). The value of *community* in God that obtains for all who choose life in Jesus Christ is incommensurable and eternal—it is therefore undefeatable. Love is the greatest possible *good*, and therefore a necessary feature of the best of all possible worlds—Heaven.

Limitations

This project engages with a variety of emotionally charged controversial topics. As an analytical strategy, the paper conceptually deconstructs moral ideas in search of the properly basic.²⁴ As a consequence, the humanist framework for moral reasoning is shown to be without justification. Likewise, certain theological assumptions are examined and shown to lack the philosophical nuance necessary for describing God as a being of maximal greatness. The justifications for a fideistic worldview or presuppositional epistemology also receive criticism.

In consequence of the subject matter, the effectiveness of this effort is limited by the worldview commitments of the reader as these may contribute to the defeat of challenging data. This project drills into Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs.²⁵ It is acknowledged that the arguments and conclusions of the project will be significant only to readers with a philosophically mature level of vulnerability, and with the ability to critically reflect upon sensitive issues of profound personal importance.

Prejudicial limitations are by no means restricted to the reader. A significant limitation of the project exists in the researcher's ability to approach difficult topics with scholarly objectivity in balance with Christian charity. Of course, the goal is to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). It is confessed *a priori* that doing so is no easy task. The researcher asks for the reader's pardon should this balance seem to be tested in places. It is acknowledged that the researcher's upbringing, culture, economic status, education, family-life, and religious convictions influence the positions taken in this paper. Even so, a serious commitment has been made to seek the truth

²⁴ *Basic* in the sense applied means irreducible and ultimate as an explanation—a first principle or axiom. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81-85.

²⁵ Jeffrey S. Nevid, *Essentials of Psychology: Concepts and Applications*, 4th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 283-284.

for its own sake, and to cover the relevant topics with philosophical, if not absolute objectivity. The latter is held to be impossible.

Next, while the thesis embraces the positive project of recognizing the answer to the problem of evil, efforts are also made to address a deep intra-Christian controversy over a principle mutually exclusive to this project's success. That principle is metaphysical determinism.²⁶ Whether given in a naturalistic or theistic context, the idea that every occurrence has been determined by the inviolable processes of nature, or by the immutable decree of God, entails human persons to be a different creature than this research indicates. We argue that human persons are morally responsible and meaningfully free, and are purposefully created to constitute an incommensurably valuable love *community* in God.

Therefore, determinism exists in zero-sum competition with this project to explicate the meaning of moral concepts and their consequences. If determinism is true, then the conclusions of this project are false. However, if this project substantially gestures towards the truth, then determinism is false. Addressing this controversy is important to noticing the ground of *being* that God and human persons share. Therefore, chapter two makes a polemic argument against metaphysical determinism. For reasons already mentioned, this may not be well received.

Lastly, a goal of the thesis is to ground moral ontology in the nature of God as David Baggett, Jerry Walls, and others have already done. Yet grounding moral ontology warrants, and perhaps even necessitates the plain definition of moral terms. Precise definitions of *good*, *evil*,

²⁶ *Determinism* is applied throughout the paper in the sense of “hard-determinism” or causal necessity. Some scholars hold that causal determinism can be softened to allow for compatibility with meaningful human freedom and moral responsibility. The researcher holds that determinism and intrinsic human freedom are in fact logically contradictory. If a choice, or the human desire beneath a choice is installed by an inviolable chain of natural events, or by the designs of a supervenient agent—then it is not a free choice *per se*. See Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 69-72; Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 26.

right, and *wrong*, are recognized in chapter four. A limitation obtains in the dependence of the project's conclusions on the validity and shared recognition of the offered definitions.

C.S. Lewis' *argument from reason* met criticism from another Christian scholar because she disagreed with his syntactic use of the word *irrational*, and argued that it substantially ruined his argument.²⁷ The critique confused Lewis and inspired revisions. Even so, Lewis' original argument was cogent in context and need not to have been revised at all. The point is that interpretive equivocation was intensely frustrating for Lewis as he faced the dual challenges of logical positivism, and the linguistic turn in the philosophy of the mid-twentieth century. Lewis' friend and biographer George Sayer wrote that Lewis despaired about the continuing possibility of philosophical thinking in light of such developments. Much is sometimes made of the fact that Lewis began writing children's literature soon after.²⁸

Lewis faced the problem of meaning eighty years ago. The fact that one of the sharpest minds of the twentieth century was frustrated by interpretive equivocation should concern every contemporary apologist. Fluid language is an everyday reality in today's postmodern culture, and this constitutes an enormous challenge to apologetics, and to any meaningful exchange of information. The culture has enthusiastically licensed human individuals to shape their own reality, live their own truth, and invent language features to suit both.²⁹

²⁷ C.S. Lewis argues in the original version of *Miracles* that human rationality is supernatural and requires a rational supernatural source. Lewis argues that God must be that source, and that the rationality self-evident within human persons is nothing less than a "tap-root" into the rational mind of God. Lewis further argues that human rationality obtaining at the end of an *irrational* chain of events amounts to nonsense. It is noted with gratitude that the formulation of this thesis closely follows Lewis's strategy of appealing to an explanatory ultimate to account for a self-evident feature of the human life. For more on the Lewis/Anscombe debate, see Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*, (Canada, Distributed Proofreaders Canada, 2015); Victor Reppert, "The Lewis-Anscombe Controversy: A Discussion of the Issues." *Christian scholar's review*. 19, no. 1 (1989).

²⁸ George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), Ch.16.

²⁹ The dictionary's rapid expansion to keep up with recently invented identity pronouns is just one example of propositional fluidity in the postmodern world.

In light of the above limitations, and given the postmodern academic milieu in which this thesis is written, there will be little impact on the reader who does not hold that *truth* is descriptive of an objective factual reality that exists independently from systematic religious dogma or culturally motivated personal caprice.³⁰ Even so, a goal of the project is to simplify the Christian doctrine of God and the problem of evil to a degree at which interpretive equivocation is substantially frustrated. In light of the intransigence of historical dogmatism and the culture's adoption of ontological non-realism, epistemological relativism, and reader-response interpretation, this project will fail by some degree. Yet given the incommensurable value of every human person, it is worth a try—even if the effort advances the ball one more yard.

Delimitations

This project is limited in scope and strives for the narrow gate. As a consequence, there is important ground left uncovered that factors heavily in the overall conversation on the problem of evil. The most important of these are the perennially treated subjects of God's foreknowledge and relationship to time. While deeply fascinating, these topics are largely ignored in this project.³¹ The conversation is delimited to knowledge areas of which human persons have reasonable epistemic access of a self-evident nature. It is argued that the implications of personal *community* to the problem of evil are in fact available in this basic sense. A recognition of this state of affairs might offer a chance for new cross-denominational and cross-philosophical

³⁰ This is the *correspondence theory of truth*. While much ink is spilled over competing theories of truth, correspondence theory is axiomatic to human function in the world. It is either *true* in a correspondence sense that American automobiles belong in the right-hand lane unless clearly indicated—or it is not true. Philosophical elements of truth are available for untestable equivocations, but those of applied physics are not. A head-on collision has a devastating effect on life and limb. This is true in the correspondence sense and everyone without a pathological death-wish knows it. It is the reason highway systems can function. This categorical *truth dissonance* still awaits a postmodern explanation. Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, 15-22.

³¹ The researcher holds that God has comprehensive knowledge of future events as indicated by the phenomenon of fulfilled biblical prophecy. The mechanics of God's knowledge are beyond the scope of this project.

progress on the topic of moral realism. Knowledge of *community* is not available only to seminarians and lettered scholars, but to every human person—even to a newborn babe in arms.

This project prioritizes the logical and ontological features of reality over the temporal. If this strategy has promise, the conclusions may bear weight on future conversations surrounding God’s foreknowledge and relationship to time.³² In any case, the Calvinist, Arminian, and Molinist formulations have been argued for centuries to little ecumenical effect, and each view is supported by influential contemporary apologists. Yet the milieus in which the competing ideas were formed muddies the conversation. To the Catholic, Calvin is a reformer and a rebel. To the Calvinist, Molina is a counter-reformer, and purveyor of Papalism, among other Protestant non-negotiables. To both, Arminius is a milk-toast conformist who tries to eat his soteriological cake while he keeps it. So which Christians are right?

For the record, the researcher holds all three men to be genuine examples of human genius. Each is a brilliant theologian with an important place in the big story. Each may be a very fine person, and worthy of our study and fondness. But as Gandalf sagely reminds Bilbo, each is “only quite a little fellow, in a wide world after all!”³³ None of these men were Jesus Christ.

Untangling truth from untestable motivations is impossible. This leaves ecumenical rapprochement on many divisive issues very much in doubt. At present, there is a denominational stalemate in the academy, the broader church, and the technologically enflamed culture. Disjoint movements are well entrenched—even fortified in their views. In light of this problem and hopeful for a means of fresh progress, this project seeks a more *basic* solution. The search begins with an Aristotelian preliminary question. What is God really like?

³² For an excellent contemporary treatment of these issues see Campbell, *Worldviews*, Ch. 7.

³³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 330.

Chapter One

The Preliminary Question: What is God Really Like?

And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM...This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations." Exodus 3:14

Humanity has always struggled to describe God. This is to be expected and is altogether fitting. A cornerstone of knowledge and piety is to approach one's Creator with humility (Prov. 1:7). If God is the Creator, then human creatures ought not inform God of who and what He is—or ought to be (Isa. 45:9). Recognizing and respecting the distinction between a creature and the Creator is a fundamental principle of monotheism.¹ If God is the ultimate Fact of reality, then humanity cannot invent Him to suit our wishes or fit inside our theological commitments. No effect has ever created its Cause. According to Scripture, trying to define rather than recognize God is a fundamental crime.² If a creature holds the last word on reality, then who is their god?

Theism breaks down into a variety of competing conceptions about God. Monotheism is but one categorical option, and is itself represented by several competing formulations. Even when comparative theology is delimited to Christianity, diverse denominational commitments entail different conceptions of God all things considered. Given the law of non-contradiction, only one of these conceptions is substantially correct—or none of them are.³ Is this state of affairs indicative of total despair as regards reasonable belief in God? Not necessarily.

¹ The Creator-creature distinction is fundamental to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is perhaps the one idea that these worldviews hold in common without controversy.

² The first of the Ten Commandments is: "I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:2-3).

³ Aristotle's formulation of the *law of noncontradiction* can be stated: A proposition (*P*) cannot be both true and false in the same sense at the same time. This law is an absolute logical truth and is a foundation for reasonable cognition and analysis. A worldview which does not respect this rule is logically invalid. This is a classic issue arising from the tense relationship between faith and reason within the philosophy of religion. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 123-124; Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 119-122.

Perhaps differing conceptions of God contain a kernel of the full inscrutable picture. Each may be important, like a corner-piece on a cosmic puzzle. Yet great import might be confused for explanatory ultimacy. Perhaps such confusion leads to the exclusion or misapplication of a maximally important principle that makes sense of each and all of the connecting pieces—something like the undivided image on the box. Without such a guide, the puzzle remains inscrutable, and key pieces are either isolated or forced together out of place by those competing to construct the puzzle. This problem is borne out by the vast number of faith-based worldviews that claim to have successfully done so. Which one is correct? Is it even possible to tell? Not without a *divine image* to consult.

Aristotle famously noted that those who wish to succeed must first ask the right preliminary questions. For the sake of grounding a successful theodicy, it is necessary to reckon with the ultimate preliminary question. Since theists believe God to be the author of created reality, and good and evil are both features of that reality—what is God really like?

To determine if evil and suffering are compatible with the existence of God, it is of first importance to discover, rather than define what God is like in a moral sense. If God is evil, then derivative evil and suffering are to be expected in the creation as a matter of course. If such were the case, there would be no problem of evil *per se*. It is only the idea of an *all-good* and *all-powerful* God existing alongside evil that gives rise to the problem.

David Hume’s pithy formulation of the Epicurean Trilemma is still as good as any. Hume writes: “Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? then where does evil come from?”⁴

⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Amended: November 2007 (Jonathan Bennett, 2017), 44.

On the face of it, Hume's challenge has teeth. Yet something deep in the human heart resists the tidy explanation of a *bad god*. It seems that human persons need God to be good to warrant their beliefs and their disbeliefs—and for the world to make any recognizable sense.

Later, this research will examine the warrant for human moral vocabulary, and examine the implications of objective moral facts. Before this can be undertaken, morality itself requires an acknowledged explanatory ultimate. Since morality implies an objective standard of value, something ultimate, irreducible, and supervenient must be identified to supply meaning to that standard. Christians hold that God somehow supplies the explanatory ultimate of moral facts within Himself. Therefore, grounding morality from the theistic perspective depends on the human capacity to recognize *The Good* as a necessary feature of God's being. Is *Good* merely something that God does—or is it the substance of who God is? The logical difference is cosmic.

In what follows, two metrics of truth (one epistemological and one ontological) are offered to facilitate answering our preliminary question. Following this, three popular arguments from evil are introduced and examined. Finally, the hope of a theistic advance on the problem of evil is grounded in the concept of personal value.

No Excuse: The Pauline Constraint of Exemplary Self-Evidence

Because what may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has shown it to them...they are without excuse. Romans 1:19-20

How does one describe God with proper piety? If logic and mathematics are clues to God's creative works, divine fingerprints perhaps—then how great is the divine hand? If the sweeping harmonies of a chorus merely echo the divine song, then how majestic and dynamic is God's voice? Such allusions are called anthropomorphisms, and are expressed as well through poetry and art as through philosophy. Unless one appeals to Scripture, or another recognized authority, it seems that humanity is left to describe God with the best recognizable features of ourselves. In

noticing this, we need not consider humanity the explanatory ultimate of *god-ness*. It is not, and failing to recognize this is the dangerous trap of *humanism*. Instead, each human person is a divine reflection—a *person* created after the pattern of the *Imago Dei*. The Artist may be partially known by a careful examination of His work.⁵

Paul taught the Romans that:

...what may be known of God is manifest in⁶ them for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead,⁷ so that they are without excuse”⁸ (Rom 1:19-20).⁹

In the above passage, Paul argues that God’s eternal power and divine nature “is manifest in” human persons. While invisible, God’s nature is clearly seen and knowable. Also, any reasonable excuse to the contrary is disallowed by the nature of the case. In short, Paul argues that God’s existence, eternal power, and divine nature are *self-evident* “in” human persons.

A self-evident truth needs not appeal to authority or mystery to warrant rational belief.¹⁰ Also notice that Paul speaks comprehensively of humanity in the passage, and not only of those with an authoritative Bible to consult. According to Paul, it is not only those blessed with the

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 49-50.

⁶ *in* is translated from the Greek ἐν (*en*). This word is translated as *in, on, or among* in reference to an internal operation—or that which is from *within*. The proper interpretation of these two letters in context is critical to grounding the conclusions of the thesis. The jots and tittles are that important. Strong’s Greek 1722.

⁷ *Godhead* is translated from the Greek θεϊότης (*theiotes*). This has been translated to mean *divinity* or *divine nature* in contemporary English. Strong’s Greek 2305.

⁸ *Without excuse* is translated from the Greek ἀναπολογήτους (*anapologetous*). This is an antonym of *apologia* from which the word apologetics (a defense) is derived. Paul insists that no reasonable case can be defended which explains ignorance of God’s eternal power and divine nature on the part of a human being. The implications of the Greek reading are important. Either human knowledge of God is properly basic, or Paul has erred in this assertion and the authority of the passage is in question. If this were the case, the authority of the author would likewise be in question casting doubt on 2/3 of the New Testament. The importance of acknowledging the object of Paul’s assertion, and then reckoning with its implications cannot be overstated. Strong’s Greek 379.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced come from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: TN, Thomas Nelson, 2006).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros 1947), 1.2.1; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 74.

light of Scripture who are responsible for fundamental knowledge of God and His moral law. Indeed, all are and have been since creation. Paul's language is universal and unequivocal, and the application of the passage is comprehensive.

Since self-evident truths authorize themselves through immunity to dismissal, mankind has a *general* responsibility to know them.¹¹ Anyone enjoying proper noetic function ought to believe a self-evident truth just as they would accept a mathematical solution or rule of logic.¹² It seems doubtful that all people know about God in this basic sense—but do they?¹³

To find out, a search for the first principle of God's nature must take all of His revelation at face value. *Creation* and *Scripture* must confirm each other when properly interpreted. For Paul's claim to be true, light from both books must reveal God's eternal power and divine nature to be self-evident beyond reasonable excuse.

For a test of self-evidence to succeed, God's eternal power and divine nature must be recognizable without an *a priori* appeal to mystery or authority.¹⁴ Recognizable examples of the divine nature must be common since "what may be known of God is manifest in" human persons (Rom 1:19). This is the *Pauline Constraint of Exemplary Self-Evidence*. This epistemological constraint is the first of two metrics of truth for this project.¹⁵ The doctrine of God which ignores or inconsistently applies the Pauline constraint stands in need of revision—and may warrant summary rejection.

¹¹ Romans Chapters 1 and 2 support the doctrine of a self-evident *general revelation*. Historically, this has grounded a variety of theistic arguments such as the classical cosmological, axiological, and teleological arguments. This project forwards a *community* ontological argument grounded in both general and special revelation.

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1993), 4-11; Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 93-95, 101-102.

¹³ Keller, *Reason for God*, Ch. 9.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2.1.

¹⁵ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 127-135.

Perfect or Bust: The Anselmian Constraint of Maximal Greatness

Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite. Psalm 147:5

In the late 11th Century, a Benedictine monk named Anselm became convinced that he had arrived upon a perfect explanation for God's existence.¹⁶ In what became known as the *ontological argument*, Anselm offers the straight-forward idea that God exists because He must. Examined without careful thought, Anselm's idea may seem like a laughable brute assertion. Such a reaction is premature. Anselm argues that God *must* be maximally great, even greater than that which can be conceived. Since greatness certainly requires existence—God exists.¹⁷

Whether or not Anselm is successful in establishing God's existence, his notion does provide a helpful guide for describing God accurately, and with proper piety. On Anselm, it is philosophically unacceptable, and perhaps even blasphemous to understate the greatness of God. *Perfection* is the only suitable concept for describing what God is really like. The importance of Anselm's idea and its implications cannot be overstated. If the god of a theological system is not great beyond the limits of human conception, then *de facto* it is not God.

Anselm's argument combines ideas from classical philosophy with Christian doctrine. Augustine's theological explorations do the same with certain elements of neoplatonism. Given both men's historical influence over the western tradition, it is probably not possible to discuss God in the west without making oblique reference to classical philosophy. Still, is a synthesis of philosophy and revealed religion really appropriate?¹⁸

¹⁶ Anselm's argument that God is the *Perfect Being* is foundational to the arguments of this thesis and will be developed throughout. Edgar William, and K. Scott Oliphint, *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, Vol. 1, To 1500 (Wheaton: IL: Crossway, 2009), 365-369.

¹⁷ Anselm, *Proslogion*, Trans. Matthew D. Walz (South Bend IN: St. Augustine Press, 2013), 12-13.

¹⁸ Paul Copan and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), Ch. 4.

Tertullian warned against unduly blending philosophy with revealed religion when he asked: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem.”¹⁹ But on the Pauline constraint of exemplary self-evidence, those in Athens, as well as those in Jerusalem had general access to God’s eternal power and divine nature. It must be noted that Jerusalem (those with the light of Scripture) crucified their covenant God to preserve their own philosophical traditions (Matt. 15:1-9; Acts 2:14-40). Biblical availability alone does not protect people from embracing a self-defeating tradition. The Messianic murder is the ultimate case in point (Isa. 53; 1 Cor. 15).²⁰

Notice that the Bible unapologetically applies concepts recognized in classical philosophy. The first verse of John’s gospel identifies Jesus Christ as the λόγος (*Logos*). This term was coined by Heraclitus in the 5th century B.C. to describe the unifying principle operative within nature.²¹ John does not contradict this classical idea. Instead, he clarifies it by revealing that the unifying *principle* within creation is a *Person in Unity* with God (John 1:1-15). Through inspired revelation, John elucidates a true philosophical idea. There is in fact a unifying Principle operative within nature. His name is Jesus, and He is both God—and *with* God. Notice that it is not wrong *per se* to conceive of the earth as a circle, it is just radically incomplete. Such was the classical understanding of the *Logos* relative to *the Real* in the Person of Jesus Christ.²²

During his missionary work in Greece, Paul employed an apologetic bridge between classical philosophy and the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 17). Likewise, the early apologist Justin Martyr employed an apologetic bridge between classical philosophy and early Christian

¹⁹ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 35-37; Steve Wilkins, *Faith and Reason: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 12.

²⁰ This statement assumes the Christian position that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact Israel’s Messiah. Rapprochement between Judaism and Christianity depends upon correctly identifying the nature and identity of Jesus of Nazareth, and settling a debate over the unitary or tri-personal nature of God.

²¹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 80; Wilkins, 28.

²² Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 9-12.

theology.²³ Perhaps the greatest champion of philosophical Christianity was Thomas Aquinas who worked closely with a rediscovered Aristotle to develop his *Five-Ways* to see the reality of God by way of human reason.²⁴ Even C.S. Lewis was one for whom an intellectual assent to the *evidence* featured dominantly in his conversion from atheism, and later in his Christian writings. As Lewis describes it, he was unenthusiastically “checkmated” by the God of the universe.²⁵

Alvin Plantinga notes that philosophy is “not much more than thinking hard about some theme.”²⁶ Surely the meaning of ultimate reality warrants hard thinking if one is to avoid error. Mistaking tradition for truth (or vice versa) is no less risky today than it was two thousand years ago. Roughly a millennium before Christ, Solomon noted: “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9-10). The traditions of men have always opposed the truth of God regardless of scriptural availability. Thus, carefully discerning the difference between *truth* and *tradition* is the common project of philosophers, theologians, and fair-minded cab drivers everywhere. Lewis sagely states:

If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.²⁷

That the ontological argument has roots in classical philosophy evidences a *basic* Source of truth beneath every avenue of its transmission. Locating this epistemological headwaters is an

²³ Copan & Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 159-160; Wilkins, *Faith and Reason*, 12.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2.2-3; Williams & Oliphint, *Apologetics Past and Present*, 395-397.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy; the Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956), 228-229.

²⁶ Plantinga, “God, Freedom, and Evil,” 1.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 58-59.

important goal of this project. That God is a being of maximal greatness is tradition because it is the truth. The doctrine of God's perfection finds strong philosophical support and is revealed in both Testaments of the Bible.²⁸ Anselm's *ontological argument* for the necessary existence of a *Perfect Being* holds exciting promise for fresh philosophical/theological and interdenominational rapprochement on the nature of ultimate reality. It also contributes to the exciting possibility of a successful Christian answer to the problem of evil.

That God is a *Perfect Being* greater than any which can be conceived is the *Anselmian Constraint of Maximal Greatness*. This ontological constraint is the second metric of truth for this project. The doctrine of God which ignores or inconsistently applies the Anselmian constraint stands in need of revision—and may warrant summary rejection.

Thus, two analytical metrics are identified to recognize the explanatory ultimate of moral facts by way of establishing what God is really like. The first appeals to *self-evidence* and is epistemologically basic to human persons. The second appeals to *value* and regards the *Goodness* of God as an ontological fact incommensurably greater than humanity's loftiest ideals.

Therefore, this project advances on the supposition that God's essential nature is both recognizable within common human experience, and of incommensurable value. These are the necessary characteristics of God's eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:19-20). Since human persons are made in the image of God, His nature supplies the blueprint for human *being*. It is concluded that to recognize the nature of God is to recognize the ultimate ground of moral *being* (ontology), the explanatory ultimate of moral *knowing* (epistemology), and the purpose and proper function of moral persons (teleology). All well and good—but what about evil?

²⁸ Maximal Ontology: John 1:1 / Exodus 3:14. Maximal Knowledge: 1 John 3:20 / Psalm 147:5 Maximal Moral Value: 1 John 4:7-11 / Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Perfection Meets Paradox: Arguments from Evil

Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction? ...Lord, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?
Psalm 88:11-14

The Anselmian conception of God is nominally accepted by most monotheists, and all orthodox expressions of Christianity. Whether it is consistently accepted is a point of focus for this paper. While the entailments of God's perfections are fraught with denominational controversies, the basic position that God is a Perfect Being featured by Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnibenevolence is fundamental to Christian theology.²⁹

It is noteworthy that the Anselmian view of God is not only accepted by monotheists, but negatively confirmed by non-theistic arguments from evil. It is seldom argued that God is an all-powerful agent of evil, and as such explains human suffering. This is startling given the *prima facie* consistency offered by such a solution. Yet a non-theistic *argument from evil* typically resembles the following:

- P1: If God exists, He is maximally powerful, knowledgeable, and good.
- P2: If God is all-good, He prefers a world without evil and suffering.
- P3: If God is all-powerful, He would create the world He prefers.
- P4: The world is polluted by evil and suffering.
- C: Therefore, God *cannot* exist.³⁰

Notice that the first and fourth premises assume Anselmian theism and the reality of metaphysical evil respectively. P1 and P4 are held to be true without controversy by theists and atheists alike. Given the disparate metaphysical assumptions of each group, this is startling and wants for an explanation. Do theists and atheists share a moral epistemology? More on that to

²⁹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 50-52.

³⁰ This is the researcher's formulation of the *logical* problem of evil. An attempt has been made to update and simplify the language for contemporary apologetic application. For variations on the original formula see Craig, *On Guard*, 195-196; Hume, *Dialogues*, 44; J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" In *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 541.

come. For now, the problem is isolated to an assumption in P2 regarding God's preferred world; and an assumption in P3 that God's power allows Him to actualize that world without permitting evil. In total, the argument assumes without qualification that God has no morally sufficient reason to permit evil and suffering. Depending on formulation, intellectual arguments from evil are either grounded in deductive validity, or by way of statistical probability.³¹

Logical Arguments from Evil

The above is a *logical argument* from evil. As a deduction, the truth of the conclusion follows necessarily if the premises are true.³² The use of the logical argument extends to antiquity where it is thought to have been introduced by Epicurus. It also features in the more recent work of David Hume and J.L. Mackie, among others.³³

In common parlance, If God is perfect and created the world, then the world should be perfect too. Since it obviously isn't, God *cannot* exist. It is granted that the imperfections in our world are glaringly obvious. The idea that a morally perfect God is behind it may seem wildly implausible in the face of certain horrors. Mackie even argued that the reality of evil renders belief in God "positively irrational."³⁴ However, Mackie's argument is itself far from perfect.

The logical argument from evil insists that the co-reality of God and evil constitutes a logical contradiction and is therefore impossible.³⁵ Examples of logical contradiction include the *square sided circle*, the *married bachelor*, and *God creating a stone too heavy for Him to lift*.

³¹ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 21-23. Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 7.

³² Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 28-52.

³³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 44; Mackie "Evil and Omnipotence," 25.

³⁴ Mackie, 25.

³⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "God, Evil, and The Metaphysics of Freedom" *In The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 83-109; Moreland & Craig, 57.

These locutions are self-contradictory and necessarily false. Contradictions are concepts with no recognizable meaning, and *cannot* be true in any possible world.³⁶

Logical impossibilities must be distinguished from practical impossibilities. Just because our world does not contain a living tyrannosaur, this does not logically prohibit their existence. They *might* exist in another possible world—an earlier version of this one given the fossil evidence. A logical impossibility cannot obtain in any possible world, and no evidence can exist for one. It is crucial to recognize that the logical argument from evil bears the stratospheric burden of a logical proof. The argument is not that God *does not* exist—but that He *cannot* exist.

To succeed, P2 and P3 must combine to logically prohibit God's coexistence with evil. Does either premise shoulder its burden of proof? Logical P2 assumes as a brute fact that God prefers a world without evil. Likewise, P3 assumes as a brute fact that divine Omnipotence entails no ontological constraint.³⁷ In sum, the two premises combine to assume that God *cannot* have a morally sufficient reason to permit evil. Such an assumption is cosmic in scope. Nelson Pike helpfully notices that if God has even one morally sufficient reason to permit evil, then P2 is falsified, and the logical argument along with it.³⁸ By exploiting this weakness, the logical argument from evil is defeated by Alvin Plantinga's free will defense.

Plantinga demonstrates that if God prefers a world inhabited by *persons* who are meaningfully *free*, then He is constrained in the possible worlds He can actualize. If God prefers a world polluted with evil to a world without free persons, then He *might* have a morally

³⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Ch. 2.

³⁷ Ontological constraint is important to understanding divine Omnipotence. God is a *necessary* being. As such, God does not have the power to not *be God*. Hence God cannot be *ungodly*. This is not an intelligible limit to His power. Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 95-98; Lewis, 13-15.

³⁸ Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil" *In The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 41.

sufficient reason to permit evil that comports with the observable state of the real world.³⁹

Plantinga's argument depends on the relative value of evil and free persons in God's economy, and God's freedom to actualize a world featuring what He values most.

Plantinga forwards human free will as a *possible* source of value that *might* supply God with a morally sufficient reason to permit evil. Since Plantinga's *defense* is at least logically possible, it defeats the logical argument from evil. Most non-theistic scholars now accept this state of affairs.⁴⁰ Even so, this is not widely advertised to incoming classes of college freshman. The defeat of the logical argument from evil must be noticed again and again.

As exciting as Plantinga's achievement is for theists, his defense aids only those theological systems that affirm meaningful human freedom and a genuine human responsibility to meet moral obligations.⁴¹ Some important expressions of Christianity do not consistently affirm these. For example, Calvinist protestants reject Plantinga's libertarian view of human freedom as too extreme, and argue in favor of divine determinism. Such systems must explain the coincidence of God and evil in another way if possible.

The debate between determinists and those defending a libertarian view of human freedom is classic and far from settled. Unfortunately this results in strong disagreements among Christians over the nature of the problem of evil—or if there even is such a problem. Moreover, atheists do not throw in the towel on account of losing a round to Alvin Plantinga's brilliant riposte. Even if the co-reality of God and evil is logically possible—is it likely?

³⁹ Plantinga, "Metaphysics of Freedom," 84-86, 105-106.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 21.

⁴¹ *Meaningful* in the sense that moral consequences follow from free and undetermined choices; and *genuine* in that the locution of *responsibility* is taken seriously and consistently held. *Response-able* means an ability to respond. This is often given as the principle that *ought implies can*. Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 69-71.

Probability Arguments from Evil

Since the logical fangs have been pulled from the argument of evil, a rescue of sorts has been attempted by converting the argument to induction.⁴² This is accomplished by inserting the word *probably* into P2, P4, and the conclusion. Also, the category of gratuitous or *unnecessary evil* is inserted to render the following:

- P1i: If God exists, He is maximally powerful, knowledgeable, and good.
- P2i: If God is all-good, He *probably* prefers a world without *unnecessary* evil and suffering.
- P3i: If God is all-powerful, He would create the world He prefers.
- P4i: The world is *probably* polluted by *unnecessary* evil and suffering.
- Ci: Therefore, God *probably* does not exist.

The above is an update of William Rowe's *evidential argument from evil*.⁴³ Again, the first and fourth premises assume Anselmian theism and metaphysical evil respectively. Yet controversy is added to the second and fourth premises with the introduction of *unnecessary* evils—or those that do not *appear* to be a means of actualizing a good end state of affairs.⁴⁴

As with the logical formulation, the probability argument stands or falls on the strength of its second and third premises. The fourth premise is controversial but reasonable insofar as it addresses specific instances of evil, and not the possibility of evil *per se*.⁴⁵ The most important change is that the argument's inductive premises back it away from the more difficult burden of deductive proof. This move allows the atheist to adopt a more defensible strategy of grounding rational belief in God's non-existence on evidence supplied by *apparently unnecessary* evil.⁴⁶

⁴² Campbell, *Worldviews*, 21-23.

⁴³ William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" In *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn M. Adams and Robert M. Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 127-132.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The possibility of evil is a necessary feature of any world that allows for human freedom. This does not necessitate every unique occurrence of evil. Perhaps most, if not all evil occurrences are unnecessary or gratuitous.

⁴⁶ Rowe, 127-132.

Unlike the logical argument from evil, the defeat of the probability argument is not an open and shut affair. Still, the argument has some insurmountable problems. By retreating to induction, the probability argument sees math as a better tool for the trouble—but is it? Since metaphysical probabilities are anchored to *a priori* assumptions, they are ultimately arbitrary.⁴⁷ For instance, if we conclude *a priori* that miracles are impossible, then no evidence to the contrary can improve the odds of one occurring. After all, a variable multiplied by zero must always equal zero.⁴⁸ Since the probability argument from evil can make no distinction between a statistically significant variable and an *a priori* assumption, it is viciously circular.⁴⁹

Like its logical cousin, the probability argument smuggles in some cosmic assumptions. P2i begs the question of human access to a statistical data set which numerically represents God's preferences. This opens the argument to analysis by way of Stephen Wykstra's *condition for reasonable epistemic access* (CORNEA). What reasonably accessible knowledge warrants a human person to speak about probabilities in the context of what an Omniscient God would or would not prefer?⁵⁰ The premise contains a category fallacy. A competent observer of Omniscient choices would likewise need to be omniscient to construct a meaningful dataset. Of course, no human person qualifies to collect such data, let alone analyze it. Moreover, a solid induction derives from a testable hypothesis. Since the needed hypothesis must meaningfully measure God's mind, its formulation is not hard to imagine—it is patently impossible.⁵¹

⁴⁷ For a discussion on the limitations of Bayesian strategies as applied to philosophy and historicity, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 100-129. See also Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 53, 545-550.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Miracles*, 121-131.

⁴⁹ Moreland & Craig, 50.

⁵⁰ Wykstra, "Avoiding Evils of 'Appearance,'" 138-139.

⁵¹ Reasonable epistemic access to an *infinite* dataset has been shown to be impossible. For an example of the absurdities that result, consider the *Hilbert's Hotel* thought experiment in: Craig, *On Guard*, 130-135. There is an important distinction to be made between the *difficult* and the *impossible*. Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 48.

Human persons simply lack reasonable access to the knowledge required to ground the probability argument from evil. The Omniscience behind divine choices is beyond the ken of any contingent creature. As a consequence, P2i is an unwarranted conjecture rather than a meaningful conclusion derived from statistically significant data. Neither can P2i be researched by testing a workable hypothesis. Since the probability of the argument's conclusion follows from the probability of the truth of P2i, the argument's success is improbable.

Making confident numerical statements about God's preferences is something like a headstrong tailor setting out to measure God for a suit. Picture him atop a cosmic stepladder as he tries to measure God's inseam with a tape measure. Any numerical statement about God is categorically absurd. Thus, intellectual arguments from evil, whether deductive or inductive, are open to persuasive theistic rebuttal. The following category is dramatically more difficult.⁵²

Emotional Arguments from Evil⁵³

While the above discussion might stimulate philosophers and theologians with full bellies and a warm roof over their heads, the problem of evil is ultimately not an intellectual puzzle. Every human person is more than what Aristotle called an *intelligent animal*. Each of us experiences our world and the persons around us through a kaleidoscope of emotions, and through a spiritual sense too basic to define.⁵⁴

⁵² This project is interested in discovering an explanatory ultimate for *good* and *evil*, not with taxonomizing evil by kind or degree. A theodicy must explain the coincidence of God and evil *simpliciter*. Focusing on sub-order problems without answering preliminary questions prohibits meaningful progress. It is like framing the second floor of a house *in situ* before a foundation is laid. Such is not merely difficult—it is impossible. Ignoring this has thus far contributed to the present intransigence of the problem. See Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 48, 77.

⁵³ The language of this section is deliberately pastoral. The emotional facet of the problem of evil is not best treated with analytical arguments, but with love. See John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), Ch. 14.

⁵⁴ John Calvin called this the *Sensus Divinitatus*. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1.3. See also Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Ch. 3, and Keller, *Reason for God*, Ch.9.

The power of the emotional and spiritual senses as concerns evil and suffering are difficult to overstate. Intense suffering can quickly overwhelm us. Our reason or positive feelings can be abruptly defeated by physical, psychological, or spiritual trauma. All who experience the shock of losing a loved one in an accident, or by another person's evil actions knows this too well. Words do not exist to describe the scope and intensity of such hurts.

Since suffering can defeat pleasure, a person's heart might eventually lead their head into religious incredulity, or even disbelief. This is the *emotional* facet of the problem of evil.⁵⁵ Anger at the world, or at the "incompetent misanthrope" supposed to be running it, can defeat faith in God for believers and unbelievers alike. Several notorious atheists used to be professing Christians, but abandoned faith in God in response to the problem of evil. These include Louise Antony and Bart Ehrman.⁵⁶ Yet not all who endure suffering are ultimately defeated by it.

For instance, C.S. Lewis bravely shared of his struggle with doubt and suffering after the loss of his wife to cancer. Lewis' feelings and insights were so disturbing to him that *A Grief Observed* was initially published under a pseudonym.⁵⁷ Lewis might be the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century. Still, he was temporarily overwhelmed by evil and suffering. Like Job, Lewis' faith in God was stretched, but it endured the trial unbroken.⁵⁸ Even Jesus Christ seemed to be temporarily overwhelmed by evil. Enduring an indescribable distance from

⁵⁵ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 450-454; Craig, *On Guard*, 214-217.

⁵⁶ Louise Antony, "Atheism as Perfect Piety" In *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, edited by Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 67; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009) Ch.1.

⁵⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), xi.

⁵⁸ The value of Lewis' journal to those experiencing loss is remarkable. Lewis knew that evil was real and that euphemizing it was just silly—so he took it head on. Lewis also knew that evil is eventually defeated by *oneness* with God in the same way that darkness is defeated by turning on a lamp. Many have found comfort in the most vulnerable of C.S. Lewis' published works.

His Father on the cross, Jesus looked to Heaven in agony and cried: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46)?

Antony and Ehrman were defeated by evil and have turned to themselves for answers. Lewis, and Christ were temporarily overwhelmed by evil, but remained oriented toward God in the midst of their suffering.⁵⁹ They certainly asked difficult questions motivated by pain, but their questions were directed to God in the trust that He constitutes the ultimate answer. Jesus’ final words were “Father, into your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Which is the rational response? It depends on what God is really like. If it turns out that God is evil, then it is difficult to see any rational error in the responses of Antony and Ehrman. But if God is good in ways and degrees beyond the reaches of human understanding, then the response of Lewis and Christ is the rational one. Therefore, the rational human response to God hangs on His moral nature. In short, *ought* we trust God in spite of our sufferings?

While we recognize goodness in our world and seek to enjoy it, we recoil when it is stripped from us by an evil choice, chance, or circumstance. Sure, evil happens all the time. If it bothers us, we usually just change the channel. But if God is truly perfect, then why does evil happen to you or me—or to someone we love? Only God knows. But notice this. If Jesus can rightly lift His face to Heaven and ask “why?”—then so can we. The answer will not come as an explanation, but through the Love of God Himself. The book of Job illustrates this fact, and it is ultimately demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the height of His suffering, Jesus gave His life for ours and entrusted Himself to His Father’s Love. The next Sunday morning, Jesus rose from suffering to glory. In the Love of God—someday so can we.

⁵⁹ In the case of Jesus Christ, this orientation is ontologically necessary as He is a Person of the Trinity. In the case of Lewis, the orientation is potential and conditionally actual upon the right application of Lewis’ personal freedom to trust in God through Jesus Christ. The difference between ontological and teleological freedom is a subject of chapter three’s discussion of *personal value*. The Love of God is the subject of chapter five.

Reasonable Attraction and the Promise of a Theistic Advance

The apologetic progress described in this chapter is important. Still, the theistic counterarguments discussed above are merely parries and ripostes to non-theistic challenges motivated by human suffering. Ultimately, the best theistic arguments do nothing in themselves to solve the problem of evil. For now, evil remains a self-evident reality.

While intellectual arguments from evil are weakened by their internal problems, the emotional problem stands as the true defeater of a lasting faith in God. Perhaps every intellectual argument from evil is really the emotional argument expressed in quasi-rational terms. This might explain the rational blind spots identified in the arguments above. While Theism can hold its ground in the intellectual sphere, to advance it must address the emotional and spiritual roots beneath the problem of evil. After all, it is not a brain that requires convincing—it is a *person*.

Therefore, Theism must embrace a *constraint of reasonable attraction*.⁶⁰ To meaningfully advance, arguments for theism must promise reasonable hope to those who live and suffer in a world polluted with evil.⁶¹ If a human person is to recognize such a hope, then God's nature as a *Being* of maximal greatness must be recognizable too. Norman Geisler writes: "The God the heart needs is a God the head has good reason to believe really exists."⁶² If God is perfect, then He must be trustworthy to the heart as well as to the head. Might God's faithfulness be supported by recognizing a maximally good reason for His permission of evil and suffering? Might there be an identifiable feature of reality that is so *good* as to obviously be worth the cost. Might that reason be the incommensurable *value* of love shared between free persons? What if a world without evil is a world without love? Is painlessness worth the price of Joy?

⁶⁰ Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, 207-210.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 278.

Conclusion: An Anselmian ‘Why Not?’

Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, “...it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few.”
1 Samuel 14:6

Chapter one began by acknowledging a biblical anthropomorphic link between God’s nature and something “manifest in” human persons (Rom. 1:19). From this, the *Pauline Constraint of Exemplary Self Evidence* is inferred as an epistemological metric of truth as to what God is really like. Next, Anselm’s idea that God is a being greater than any which can be conceived was introduced. The Anselmian *Constraint of Maximal Greatness* is inferred as an ontological metric of truth as to what God is really like. An analysis followed of popular arguments from evil in intellectual and emotional forms, and the chapter closed with a discussion of reasonable attraction and the promise of a theistic advance grounded in personal value.

Given the complexity of moral philosophy, and the inscrutability of God’s sovereign council, many regard the problem of evil to be intractable. Even so, this state of affairs invites an Anselmian thought experiment. If the god of one’s theological system entails an intractable problem of evil, then *why not* conceive of a greater God? If one finds that conceiving of a greater being is even remotely possible, then the *god* of their theological system is not God. Only when the human conception of God approaches perfection are we really thinking about God. On Anselm’s constraint, anything less is logically invalid, and perhaps even blasphemous.

But what is *greatness*? The problem of evil obtains in the perceived tension between God’s power and His goodness. What is God really like? Is God’s goodness an extension of His nature as *power*? Or is God’s power an extension of His nature as *The Good*? The following chapters treat each question in turn. At stake is the moral nature of God. Is He Good or evil? Or are we to accept on faith alone that He is both—but still maximally great? Anselm saw that greatness entailed existence. Does it not also entail *meaning*?

Chapter Two

The Logic of God and the Love of Power

Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, who write misfortune which they have prescribed to rob the needy of justice... Isaiah 10:1-2

In every accessible avenue to the truth there is a prescribed order of operations. Reality contains such an order, and it must be discovered before sense can be made of anything. For instance, causes precede their effects, Y-chromosomes render male bodies, and water flows downhill to the sea without exception. Students of mathematics are taught that a correct solution begins inside the parentheses. We trust aeronautical engineers not to buck the mathematical order every time we climb aboard an airliner. We trust English-speaking physicians to read our medical charts from left to right. Israeli patients trust theirs to read from right to left. Of course, when one declares epistemological anarchy and works an ordered system backwards, it results in nonsense.

In logic it is formally invalid to affirm the consequent. Consider:

P1: If Dr. Campbell is doing research, then he is thinking hard.

P2: He is thinking hard.

C: Dr. Campbell is doing research.

This argument is invalid since doing research is a *sufficient* but not a *necessary* condition of hard thinking.¹ Dr. Campbell might be composing an anniversary card to his wife. Or he might be trying to keep up with Hercule Poirot in the solving of an Agatha Christie mystery. Indeed, Dr. Campbell might think hard on any number of occasions—research being just one. The argument fails because it lacks the meaning necessary to justify its conclusion.²

Paul taught that God's "invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse"

¹ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 32.

² Ibid.

(Rom. 1:20). If there is an order to reality, can it be used to infer disorder in God? Norman Geisler writes: “Being causes being similar to itself. This is the *principle of analogy*. An effect resembles its efficient cause. Like produces like. Being shares being, for this is all that it has to share. Being cannot give what it has not got. But what it gives (i.e., being) it must have had to give.”³ The principle of analogy is at the very root of the problem of evil. Since evil is a self-evident feature of reality, and God is reality’s efficient cause—where does evil come from if not from God Himself? If it does, then *de re*—God is evil. As indicated above, most prefer to infer God’s nonexistence rather than countenance the possibility of His malevolence.

Still, is the statement “God is evil” even meaningful? Is it logically possible? Geisler also notes that: “Being is not nonbeing. This is known as the *principle of noncontradiction*. Opposites cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense.”⁴ The proposition “God is evil” is just such a contradiction. By definition, God is necessarily a *Perfect Being*. Perfection cannot contain imperfection and still *be Perfection*. Like the square sided circle, such is a locution without meaning, and therefore necessarily false.⁵ So, where *can* evil come from?

As with the best of Poirot mysteries, something important is either missing or inappropriately assumed. Perhaps we are trying to solve the problem backwards. Or perhaps we lack the meaning necessary to justify our conclusions. If there is a solution to the problem of evil, identifying the correct order of operations is an important part of it. This chapter begins a search for the logical first principle in the nature of God. According to Paul it is evident beyond excuse. What is God really like? Is Perfection the love of power—or is it the power of Love?

³ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 266.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Identified contradiction is proof of nonexistence. Such is the nature of an imperfection in God—it *cannot* obtain. To point one out is to notice that a subject is not God. See Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 13-15.

Is God Power (Sovereignty)?

Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. Jeremiah 32:17 NIV

A fundamental understanding of God for monotheists is contained in one of the most recited passages in the Bible. In the Hebrew *Shema*, the prophet Moses addresses Israel saying: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4). This passage is treasured by Jews and Christians alike. Indeed, Jesus taught that the prerogative to attend to, recognize, and comprehensively love God was the great command in the Law—a command that He radically claimed to personally fulfill (Matt. 22:35-40; Matt. 5:17-18).

The English LORD is a pious substitute traditionally used in place of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. The use of LORD indicates a biblical occurrence of the sacred Name יהוה which transliterates to English as either YHWH or JHVH. The divine Name expresses the ontological aseity of God by His self-revelation to Israel: “I AM THAT I AM.” (Exod. 3:14).⁶

Notice that the original Hebrew emphasizes the *ontology* or necessary *Being* of God, while the pious substitute reflexively emphasizes the nature of God’s *relationship* to the creation. Is the change accurate? Are being and sovereignty essentially the same? *Being* means actuality. *Sovereignty* means supreme ownership and rule. In what sense is God sovereign prior to creation? Does God own and rule Himself? Such seems unintelligible on its face. Why should God’s immutable Perfection require the revelation and enforcement of His own intention? A revelation of God’s power necessitates its outward extension—hence the creation. But creation is something that God does. It is not who God *is* (John 1:1-5; Rom. 1:25; Col. 1:17).

⁶ Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. R.K. Harrison (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1988), 781-782.

The interpretive choice to replace YHWH with the LORD follows the tradition of the Septuagint to replace יהוה with κύριος (*kurios*), the Greek word for *Lord* or *Master*. The meaning of *kurios* conveys an absolute right of ownership.⁷ The translational decision of the Septuagint writers has roots in the Hebrew custom to read יהוה aloud as אדני (*Adonai*), or “my Lord” to avoid pronunciation of the sacred Name.⁸ The practice of interpretive piety regarding God’s Name spans several millennia, and is featured in most modern translations of the Old Testament.

The essential difference between *being* and *ruling* poses an important question that warrants further research and reflection. Is a tradition truly pious if it delimits human recognition of God? Is not Scripture’s proper function to reveal what God is really like to human persons (2 Tim. 3:16-17)? Given the principle of analogy, the ontology of God is preliminary to any human understanding of the world He created—a world by which His eternal power and divine nature are known beyond excuse (Rom. 1:19). Colin Gunton asks:

What is the world and how is it structured both in relation to ourselves and to such meaning as might be conceived to inform it? ...The reason for the importance of ontology is not only that if it is ignored it will be assumed, and therefore will shape theology in an unacknowledged way. It is also for the more positive reason that only if we root a proper concern with apologetics, culture and the renewal of Christianity in a wider and deeper theology of being will we be able to relate the different concerns that we have met without reducing one to the other.⁹

I AM is the Name by which God revealed Himself to Israel (Exod. 3:14). Is it possible that a traditional emphasis of God’s sovereignty over his ontology shaped Jewish theology (and by extension Christian theology) in an unacknowledged way? Might an ontological presumption have prevented first century Israel from recognizing their covenant God, even when He stood in their midst? Perhaps *meaning* is fundamental to recognizing what God is really like?

⁷ Strong’s Greek 2962.

⁸ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 781-782.

⁹ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 22-23.

The Cosmic Copyright

The command of Moses to hear (*Shema*) teaches an important fundamental of piety. The appropriate response of a creature to their Creator begins with directed attention. Only when God has our attention can the human response graduate to recognition and consummate through comprehensive love in obedience to the divine intention. But what is the efficient cause of human attention? The *Shema* contains the *a priori* assumption that once recognized, God is worthy of comprehensive love. Is it God's power that primarily supplies *meaning* to this fact?

The Bible opens with the declaration: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). If true, then all that exists apart from God owes that existence to the creative action of a necessary and eternal being of overwhelming power.¹⁰ God owns the world in the same sense that a designer owns their copyrighted intellectual property. It is intellectual theft to steal the creation from God, just as counterfeiting a Rolex entails stealing from a human patent holder. If God is truly sovereign, then hearing from Him really ought to bring human persons into a clear understanding of our own radical contingency and dependence on God for existence. So why doesn't it?

The Sovereignty of God is broadly understood by Christians in one of two ways. A view substantially held prior to the Reformation, and by Arminian and Molinist Christians since, is that God is a being of causal ultimacy and logical priority.¹¹ God is the ultimate Lord and King whom the creation is meant to serve, and to whom mankind is ultimately accountable. God's nature as Love, and character as Goodness are logically prior to creation. Thus, these are

¹⁰ A *necessary* being is self-existent and not dependent upon any antecedent cause for its existence. In short, a necessary being cannot fail to exist. God (I AM) is a necessary being existing in all possible worlds. See Anselm, *Proslogion*, 12-13; Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, Ch.5; Moreland & Craig, *Foundations*, 510-514.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.3.6; Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 273-275; Moreland & Craig, 476-493.

logically prior to God's sovereignty over the world.¹² This view sees God's goodness as recognizable to human creatures, and sees it fitting that God should be worshipped and obeyed—even loved in obedience to the *Shema*. The moral creature's decision to love God or not supplies meaning to the concepts of *Love* and *sin*—and to the moral vocabulary packed within these axioms.¹³

Contrary to this view, Christian determinism—a view predominantly held by Calvinist Protestants—posits a strong sense of God's power in which He has sovereignly decreed each facet of created reality.¹⁴ It is unintelligible on determinism to think that anything occurs within human behavior except by God's will.¹⁵ Thus, the power of God is installed as a first principle and placed logically prior to God's love and goodness. This is evidenced by the disparate expressions of God's love towards human creatures depending on where they stand in relation to His salvific election.¹⁶ For inscrutable reasons that are His alone, God elects a small minority of humankind to unmerited salvation, and consigns the rest to their merited destruction. All human outcomes express God's sovereignty for the sake of displaying His glory.¹⁷

The entailments of Arminian and Calvinist Christianity are fundamentally exclusive. As a consequence, it is difficult to gain a consistent understanding of how these competing *theologies* describe the same God. Even so, all professing Christians agree that since God is the Creator, He holds the ultimate metaphysical copyright and is the sovereign Lord of His Creation.¹⁸

¹² Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, Ch. 4-5; Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 6; Geisler, *Apologetics*, 160-161, 277.

¹³ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 786, 1198-1199.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.3,8; 1.18.1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.18.1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.21; Baggett & Walls, 72-83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.14.20.

¹⁸ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 61-77. See also Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 66.

The Dubious Consent of the Governed

When Adam and Eve partook from the fatal tree, they grasped for one thing on purpose, and lost something else by accident. The thing they grasped for was independent power—for *sovereignty*. Their expert stewardship of the world under God’s sovereignty was no longer satisfying. They wanted to take ownership. The opportunity to become independently powerful “like God” was dramatically compelling (Gen. 3:1-5). But in their reach to gain independence, Adam and Eve lost something of incommensurably greater value—*life in community* with God.

Paul’s appeal in Romans to the self-evidence of God’s divine nature is given in the context of a polemic against the human propensity to worship themselves as sovereign gods. Paul concludes that humanity at large has “exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Paul provides a list of ways in which mankind adopts sovereignty over nature for purposes against and instead of God’s design for human persons. Each vice on Paul’s first-century list is apparent in contemporary behavior. Solomon was right, there is nothing new under the sun.

In general, it seems that human beings show little regard for God’s intellectual property rights when it comes to ultimate reality. For instance, divinely authored teleological facts are widely disregarded by human creatures. Many see a categorical difference between sex and gender, and regard the latter to be a flexible construct open to new interpretations. Historically, a *man* is understood to be a *homo sapiens* featuring Y chromosomes, male reproductive features, and the proper function to love others as a responsible son, brother, father, grandfather, uncle, neighbor, or friend in the *Image of God*. Yet many human males abandon the *telos* of a man in favor of their own *self-design*. Likewise for human females abandoning the *telos* of a woman. How does the aberrant self-design of a creature manifest the sovereign rule of their Creator?

If human preference is the explanatory ultimate of reality, and gender is in fact a selectable construct, then why has God not foreseen the preferred genders of each person and matched their biology to their appetites in the first place? The culture is working on the assumption that for a percentage of those who bear the divine image, God has blundered and mismatched some human identities with the wrong DNA and reproductive plumbing. Yet the mistake of a Perfect Being is meaningless. What is the efficient cause of such confusions?

The discord begs the question of moral *meaning*. What is *sin* if not to fall short of the due perfection of divine intention (Rom. 3:23)? What is disobedience if not a failure to *conform by choice* to the divine intention as revealed (Deut. 28)? Since the Perfect God holds the cosmic copyright, the divine intention for creation is likewise perfect *de re*. Such is necessitated by the principle of analogy. “Being cannot give what it has not got.”¹⁹ Since God is The Good, goodness is all He has to give. Yet the world is not perfect—hence the problem of evil.

Taking reality on its face, it seems that human creatures are meaningfully free to abolish themselves from the sovereign design of their Creator (Gen. 6:5-6).²⁰ Since individuals command the affirmation of their identities (or attempt to), they seem to wield an independent power—really a stolen *sovereignty* over their lives. Many sit in the seat of God and rule as though they created their world instead of Him (Isa. 14:13-14). Such is the meaning of a *rebellion*.

The only authority self-evident to many human persons is their own, and perhaps their motivating culture’s. Is the human grasp for independence an element of God’s sovereign design for the world? If so, it is a mysterious design indeed.²¹ What of corporate sovereignty?

¹⁹ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 266.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 53-79; Craig, *On Guard*, 260-264; Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 26.

²¹ Jan Van Vliet, "Repose in Mystery: The Limit of Sobriety According to John Calvin," in *Pro Rege*: Vol. 44: No. 3, (2016): 21-31. https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol44/iss3/5.

It was held until recently, even among secular psychologists, that human persons thrive when their lives are aligned with known facts of reality. A serious misalignment constituted a psychological pathology called *delusion*.²² This concept has recently become outmoded as cultural caprice and the strength of individual convictions have replaced correspondence to reality in explanatory ultimacy.²³ For instance, small children are now encouraged by those in positions of trust and authority—those in whom kids place their innocent faith (parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, doctors, and now even their pastors)—to select a reality from a growing menu of options as though life itself were customizable to a child’s (or a selfish adult’s) fancy.²⁴

Today’s children (tomorrow’s police officers, paramedics, pastors, and presidents) are being taught that reality is something like the *happy-meal* they order from a drive-thru menu. Of course, these are not selected for their nutritional value, or for the crummy way one feels after finishing it. They are chosen for the transient distraction of a senseless plastic toy.²⁵

Contemporary culture has rejected the correspondence relationship between reality and true beliefs. As a consequence, the culture is systematizing delusion in the next generation of human persons and updating the relevant textual authorities to lend academic backing to a

²² DSM-IV defines a *delusion* as “A false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture (e.g., it is not an article of religious faith).” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR*. Fourth edition (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 821.

²³ DSM-5 defines *delusion* as “fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence...delusions are deemed *bizarre* if they are clearly implausible and not understandable to same-culture peers and do not derive from ordinary life experiences...The distinction between a delusion and a strongly held idea is sometimes difficult to make and depends in part on the degree of conviction with which the belief is held despite clear or reasonable contradictory evidence regarding its veracity.” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR*. Fifth edition (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022), 87.

²⁴ Cathy Ruse, *Sex Education in Public Schools: Sexualization of Children and LGBT Indoctrination* (Washington D.C.: Family Research Council, 2020), 2-17.

²⁵ LGB began in the 1990’s as an activist acronym in support of aberrant sexual lifestyles. The sexual identity *menu* has recently expanded to LGBTQIA+. See Erin Blakemore “From LGBT to LGBTQIA+ The evolving recognition of identity” In *National Geographic*, October 19, 2021, Accessed June 3, 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/from-lgbt-to-lgbtqia-the-evolving-recognition-of-identity>.

postmodern overhaul of human ontology. This destructive project has long been euphemized with the word *progress*. Yet the hazards of such societal gambling defy any meaningful quantification. If unchecked, ‘human-progress’ will bring about what C.S. Lewis referred to as *The Abolition of Man*.²⁶ After all, what is a *man* without *meaning*?

Evidence of the abolition is already commonplace at the highest levels of human society. For instance, the most recent inductee to the Supreme Court of the United States was asked to supply the definition of a *woman* during her examination in the senate. The sharp response given was: “I am not a biologist.”²⁷ Is this acceptable? What if she had been asked to supply the definition of a *human being*? Since her job is to safeguard the liberties of American citizens (each a human being, and roughly half of those women), the question is fair. The response given by this judge demonstrates that her authority on the Supreme court will be substantially meaningless. Is societal confusion over meaningful authority an element of God’s sovereign design for the world? If so, it is a mysterious design indeed.²⁸

What follows from these mysteries and confusions? Human persons are setting aside the first thing we learn about ourselves and each other, and ceasing to *be* who we really are and *ought* to be—men and women *together* in God’s *Image* (Gen 2:21-35). Concerning divorce, Jesus taught that human persons were not to separate what God had joined together (Mark 10:9). But what sense does this make if God is sovereign in the determinist sense. How does such a metaphysic not render Jesus’ statement unintelligible? Jesus can’t be wrong—can He?²⁹

²⁶ Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 61-63.

²⁷ Government Publishing Office, Nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson. Congressional Record Vol. 168, No. 61. April 6, 2022. Accessed August 14, 2022, S2027, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2022/4/6/senate-section/article/S2026-1?s=1&r=65>.

²⁸ Van Vliet, “Repose in Mystery,” 21-31.

²⁹ This rhetorical question does not reflect confusion on the part of the researcher. Is God evil? and can Jesus be wrong? are unintelligible on Christianity. A worldview that begs such questions is likewise unintelligible.

A Mystery without Meaning

In light of the world's manifest confusions, the sovereignty of God is not self-evident in human persons and societies seeking to actualize realities in their own image instead of God's. It is self-evident that human persons largely ignore God's cosmic copyright, grasp at independence, and use technology to lever the creation toward our self-destruction. Is the real world compatible with a determinist metaphysic and the Anselmian constraint of God's Perfection?

The power struggle between God and the human persons who occupy His world is either evidence of the reality that God determined for His glory—or it is not. If God has purposefully caused the sin, disobedience, and rebellion discussed above, then we are left to understand how the mutilation, depression, and suicides of culturally manipulated schoolchildren meaningfully reflect the goodness of God. This effort might not be difficult—it might be impossible.³⁰

An examination of the world as it stands offers many examples of human power applied for its own sake.³¹ When those who are strong force their will on the weak for pleasure, is this the eternal power and divine nature of God being manifest in human persons? What example of such behavior is reflexively recognized for being godlike—or Christlike? Does every expression of malevolence really manifest the necessary outworking of God's sovereignty for His glory?

It is a troubling point of fact that the above is entailed by a view of divine sovereignty held by many Christians. John Calvin wrote: "Men do nothing save at the secret instigation of God, and do not discuss and deliberate on anything but what he has previously decreed with

³⁰ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 48, 77.

³¹ At the time of this writing, Russian President Vladimir Putin is pursuing a war of aggression against his neighbors in Ukraine. Putin has threatened NATO and the west with nuclear holocaust in an effort to deter aid to Ukraine. Commentators have been unbashful in their application of the word *evil* to describe his actions. What axiom supplies the globally recognized meaning of this term if the free application of sovereign power is *good*?

himself, and brings to pass by his secret direction.”³² Calvin’s doctrine has been unpacked with rare consistency by contemporary theologian Mark Talbot. He writes:

...it isn’t just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory (see Ex. 9:13-16; John 9:3) and his people’s good (see Heb. 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God’s having even brought about the Nazis’ brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child...Nothing that exists or occurs falls outside God’s ordaining will. *Nothing* [Talbot’s italics], including no evil person or thing or event or deed. God’s foreordination is the ultimate reason why everything comes about, including the existence of all evil persons and things and the occurrence of any evil acts or events. And so it is not inappropriate to take God to be the creator, the sender, the permitter, and sometimes even the instigator of evil. This is what Scripture explicitly claims.³³

Notice that Talbot appeals to mystery by pointing out the “incredible” and “unacceptable” seemliness of his assertions.³⁴ To close his essay, Talbot argues that “The mystery of why God has ordained the evils he has is as deep as the mystery of the evil in our hearts.”³⁵

Likewise, Talbot appeals to authority when he invokes the explicit claims of Scripture—really his doctrinal authority’s interpretation of Scripture. Talbot’s moral reflex regarding the fittingness of his view demonstrates that his persuasion is logically prior to his right-thinking on the basis of an *a priori* epistemology. In Talbot’s case, this is the theology of John Calvin and those who have extended his systematic into the present. Talbot’s epistemological allegiance compels Him to presume that the biblical data in question cannot allow for an alternative interpretation which better comports with his own reflex on the meaning of *good* and *evil*.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*. 1.18.1.

³³ Mark Talbot, “All the Good that is Ours in Christ” in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006) 42-44. The researcher is grateful to Mark Talbot for this unflinching explication of Calvinist dogmatics. This view is rarely affirmed with such univocal consistency for the obvious reason that it is reflexively deplorable. See Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 72.

³⁴ Talbot, 42; Van Vliet, “Repose in Mystery,” 21-31.

³⁵ Talbot, 77.

There are several problems with Talbot's determinist explanation of evil and suffering. First, it reduces to ontological absurdity. The evil that God is purported to "create, send, permit, and instigate" requires an efficient cause and explanatory ultimate.³⁶ Talbot bravely follows his argument to its first principle, but he fails to reckon with the consequences upon arrival. If evil is a created teleological feature, then God created it. This is beyond dispute—but what follows?

Given the *principle of analogy*, if God created evil, then evil is something intrinsic to God Himself. On Talbot's view, God must be ontologically evil—yet somehow still God. Since God and evil are ontological opposites, their functional unity is prohibited by the *law of non-contradiction*. The statement "God is evil" is logically equivalent to "Being is non-being."³⁷ Perfection cannot contain imperfection and still *be perfect*. Thus, Talbot's ontological theology is defeated by *reductio ad absurdum*. Ultimately, Talbot's hard determinism lacks the consistency necessary to answer the *logical argument from evil*.³⁸

Second, Talbot's claim reduces to epistemological absurdity by evacuating *meaning* from the terms *good* and *evil*. A basic mathematical analysis is sufficient to demonstrate this. Scripture indicates that most find destruction, and few find life (Matt. 7:13-14). If Talbot's view is accepted, it follows that God prefers death and damnation to life and blessing. Were this not the case, God would determine a different possible world. Since He has not, it seems that dead and dying humans manifest God's glory more than do the living elect. Of course, the 'good' in such a dispensation is unrecognizable to human persons. As a consequence, how do we distinguish between God and His enemy (Matt. 12:24)? Is there a distinction with a meaningful difference?³⁹

³⁶ Talbot, "Ours in Christ," 42-44.

³⁷ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 266.

³⁸ Chapter 1: Logical Arguments, Pages 26-29

³⁹ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 31-43; Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 65-76.

All Christians confess that God is perfectly *good*. But if God has “instigated”⁴⁰ and “secretly directed”⁴¹ every idolatry, murder, rape, theft, genocide (or other atrocity that human persons reflexively recognize to be evil)—then what we perceive to be *evil* might really be *good*. If so, then all human moral commentary is substantially meaningless.⁴² C.S. Lewis writes:

...could one seriously introduce the idea of a bad God, as it were by the back door, through a sort of extreme Calvinism? You could say we are fallen and depraved. We are so depraved that our ideas of goodness count for nothing; or worse than nothing—the very fact that we think something good is presumptive evidence that it is really bad... This, for all practical (and speculative) purposes, sponges God off the slate. The word good, applied to Him, becomes meaningless...if reality at its very root is so meaningless to us—or, putting it the other way round, if we are such total imbeciles—what is the point of trying to think either about God or about anything else? This knot comes undone when you try to pull it tight.⁴³

The epistemological consequence of Talbot’s theology renders human persons incapable of *sin*, *disobedience*, or *rebellion* in the normal sense of these terms. Yet we are held responsible for these quasi-moral failures, and most of us await destruction because of them. The arbitrariness of this arrangement is widely noticed by non-theists, and by some notable scholars who have abandoned Christianity in response to the paradox. If the words *God* and *evil* are equivalent, then there can be no such thing as God. If Christianity is to promote a standard of cogency in any other context, then it is difficult to accuse such objections of being wrongheaded.

Moreover, the importance of the epistemological problem for a theology like Talbot’s is impossible to overstate. The Bible reveals God’s personal response to human moral failings, and uses terms like *good*, *evil*, *love*, and *sin* to ground its case. Since these words have no recognizable meaning on a view like Talbot’s, the ultimate epistemological catastrophe obtains

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Ch. 2. See also G.N. Schlesinger, “The Problem of Evil and The Problem of Injustice,” *Tradition: A Journal of Jewish Thought* Vol. 13, No. 2 (1972): 44-51

⁴³ Lewis, Ch. 2.

in a Bible with no truth value. Talbot's Calvinist formulation of God depends on a deterministic view of divine sovereignty and an *a priori* commitment to *Sola Scriptura*. The demonstrable consequence is that Talbot's dogmatics evacuate meaning from his source of truth. In short, Talbot's worldview is self-refuting.

Last and most important, Talbot's determinist theology reduces to teleological absurdity as regards the moral value of God and human persons. According to Talbot, every evil person is a consequence of divine foreordination. Thus, no human can fail to manifest God's glory. Since the thoughts and behaviors of each person are installed by God's secret instigation, the human creature is incapable of being or doing anything but that which reflects God's intention.⁴⁴

On Talbot's admission, the above encompasses the horrors enacted by the Nazis at Birkenau and Auschwitz, the sexual abuse of young children, and the atrocities committed by Dennis Rader.⁴⁵ If this view is consistently extended, it is inescapable that God is the efficient cause of each and every human horror—no matter how heinous. Talbot embraces this state of affairs, but again fails to reckon with the teleological consequence of his explanatory ultimate.

All orthodox Christians confess that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God and Man in all due perfection (1 Pet. 2:22). The revealed human *telos* is to Love God and one's neighbors just as Christ perfectly demonstrated. The human hope of *glory* is revealed to be "Christ in us" (Col. 1:27). Paul wrote: "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28). Jesus Himself commanded "therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1; Talbot, "Ours in Christ," 42-44.

⁴⁵ Dennis Rader was the 20th century serial killer known as BTK—a name he gave himself after his pattern to bind, torture, and kill his victims. Talbot's use of Rader as an exemplar of divine sovereignty is to his credit, consistent with the entailments of his theology. But it is also morally repugnant. A God whose sovereignty is exemplified through Dennis Rader and those like him is not a being who is recognizably good, let alone a *Perfect Being* greater than can be conceived. Ibid. See also Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, Ch.4.

Notice the following very carefully. If the mind of Christ is the mind of God (John 1:1), and the mind of God exhaustively instigates the binding, torturing, and killing of women for fun (or glory)—then no moral distinction is possible between Jesus Christ and Dennis Rader. If such is really the case, then it is difficult (impossible?) to understand how this one entailment does not devastate Christian theism. Indeed, the explanatory ultimate of Talbot's determinist metaphysic is the precise negation of the Anselmian Perfect Being. Such would be a horror greater than any which could be conceived. Unfortunately, Talbot and those who hold similar views fail to recognize God by meaningfully distinguishing between the *Perfect Creator* and a *fallen creation*. The Bible explicitly reveals such misrecognitions to be the root of idolatry (Isa. 44-46; Rom. 1).

The fullness of *Perfection* cannot possibly be exemplified by Dennis Rader as he bound, tortured, and killed women for his glory. Instead, the fullness of God's Perfection dwells in Jesus Christ, who gave Himself to be bound, tortured, and killed so that whosoever believes in Him can live (Isa. 53; John 3:16; Luke 22-24; Col. 2:9). Jesus is risen in living glory. He is *Perfect* by virtue of His eternal power and divine nature as the great I AM Himself (John 8:58). It is only in the perfect Love of Christ that any human person truly reflects the *Image and Likeness* of God.

If determinist Christianity is a livable worldview, then it must consistently meet the three objections identified above. It must not reduce to ontological absurdity by equating God with evil. It must not reduce to epistemological absurdity by adopting and extending a meaningless moral framework. And it must not reduce to teleological absurdity by failing to meaningfully distinguish the *Perfect Creator* from an *evil creature*. The determinist metaphysic of Mark Talbot fails on all three counts. Talbot's deep mystery as to why God ordains evil, is ultimately a mystery without meaning.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1; Talbot, "All the Good," 42-44, 77.

Test and Hold Fast: The Problem of Meaning

*Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.
1 Thessalonians 5:21-22*

The confusions discussed above give rise to a difficult *problem of meaning*. Is a Bible without meaning a *meaningful* authority? As noted, it depends on *a priori* worldview commitments.

What if God’s “might makes Him right” and that’s just the end of it? Recall the engineer and doctor from the introduction.⁴⁷ Human experts ground their authority in recognizable meaning and a helpful purpose towards a value driven end (*telos*). Does God not rise above the human standard of competency? If God’s ways are higher than man’s, are they not also at least as high? After all, if a doctor’s authority is meaningfully helpful and God’s is not, how is the human authority not the greater one—or perhaps the *real* one?

The intransigence of any religious *problem of meaning* is exemplified in the argument between Mormonism and Islam—or any other fideist pair. Such arguments are absurd since each grounds their worldview in a novel epistemological authority. Thus, little of substance is shared between the competing systems to supply a bridge of ecumenical rapprochement. Since each constitutes a *worldview*, complete with a metaphysic by which to understand perceptions and data—no supervenient truth factor obtains by which to judge the competing claims. Such gives rise to the intransigence between religion and the scientific community; between competing religions; and between competing formulations of the same religion—especially Christianity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Introduction: Statement of Importance, 5-6.

⁴⁸ *Science* is not a fideistic system, but an inductive tool to discover knowledge by challenging assumptions, exploring hypotheses, and analyzing statistically significant data. *Scientism* is an epistemology associated with metaphysical *naturalism*. Scientism holds science to be the only valid means of establishing knowledge. Such is a persuasion in the explanatory ultimacy of science, and an ironic example of *fideism*. Scientism is self-refuting since its truth value cannot be scientifically proven. It is adopted by *a priori* persuasion—*faith*. Alexander Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 20; Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, 63.

Authoritarian Epistemology

Every faith system works from competing books, and each is convinced of the truth value of its own.⁴⁹ Competing formulas of Christianity are no exception. While common appeal is made to the authority of the Old and New Testaments, this is often merely lip-service. In many cases, meaningful authority resides in the reformer, prophet, vicar, theocratic ruler, or YouTube personality trusted to find meaning in the biblical texts. Some of these establish such a motivational inertia that their views become indistinguishable from those of God in the minds of their disciples.⁵⁰ The effect is compounded when one gains a historical foothold and launches a multi-generational faith-movement. Since religious teachers are human (fallible at their best, and treacherous the rest of the time), it is too often the case that meaning is not discovered in the inspired pages of the Bible. Sometimes it is violently installed.⁵¹

The divisions of human community that result from competing faith-authorities are the consequence of a series of ideological chess matches that have been playing out for millennia. All sides cheer their champion, confident in the *a priori* persuasion that they cannot lose. After all, it is they alone who really know the rules. However, since ‘truth’ is tightly confined to each epistemological authority, these contests are substantially meaningless—and endless.

On any authoritarian epistemology, the words *good* and *evil*, are relativized. For instance, Talbot’s moral vocabulary is obviously idiosyncratic. Indeed, the meaning behind Talbot’s use of *good* and *evil* is altogether alien to anyone thinking beyond the borders of Calvinist Christianity.

⁴⁹ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 26-28.

⁵⁰ Examples include Joseph Smith, Ellen G. White, Charles Russell, Mary Baker Eddy, David Koresh, etc. The question before all believers is what distinguishes one’s own epistemological authority from heterodoxy. On what basis is John MacArthur, Joel Osteen, Chuck Smith, or anyone’s pastor meaningfully different from the ones listed? Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Ravi Zacharias (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2003).

⁵¹ In Jesus case, He is much more than a religious teacher—He is Perfection. See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moises Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), Ch. 2, 70-72.

A consequence of semantic idiosyncrasy is that the meaning of an entire moral framework can become corrupted. Were this not possible, there would be no need for the Holy Spirit's inspiration of Isaiah to write: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Isa. 5:20). If Isaiah can be taken at face value and accepted as authoritative, then it is inescapable that God is less than pleased with those who upend His revealed moral order. Were such reversals not possible in the real world, the divine complaint would have no meaning.

Notice that God's sovereignty being gloriously manifest in the priceless human ashes that fell upon loved ones waiting quietly in line for their turn in the hellish ovens of Auschwitz—is for most an alien moral concept. Yet such was not internally inconsistent with Nazi ideology. It is internally inconsistent with the determinist Christianity explicated by Talbot.⁵² Does it matter? Of course, this begs the question of *authoritative quality*. Are some authorities objectively *better* than others? Is being *wrong* possible? What warrants any human person or community to make value judgements? These questions will be explored in the remaining chapters.

For now, it is worth pointing out that an authoritarian epistemology is acceptable if and only if its explication of the divine ontology is true as a matter of fact. That is, the system's god must also be the God of the theory independent world. Of course, such is quite difficult to prove. Thus, for an authoritarian worldview to promote the truth value of its sacred authority, it must be accepted by *a priori* persuasion.⁵³ Historically, the epistemological decision to prioritize persuasion over reason has been called *faith*—but perhaps there is more to faith than that.

⁵² The researcher ensures the reader that a maximum effort towards charitable rhetoric has been undertaken in the composition of this section. If the implications of the content are horrifying—this is precisely the point. Did God cause the horror and then install your reflexive reaction to it? If He did, then how do we make any moral sense of God. Like C.S. Lewis said, if you try to pull this knot tight, it comes undone. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Ch.2.

⁵³ For a helpful discussion of presuppositional epistemology in the Christian context, see Norman Geisler's commentary on Gordon Clark's revelational rationalism. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 26-28.

Presuppositional Epistemology

Perhaps Mark Twain's close interactions with Mary Baker Eddy⁵⁴ prompted his famous quip: "faith is believing what you know aint so."⁵⁵ The presuppositional fideist must confront the fact that Twain's incisive critique cannot be met without appealing to the authority in question. On a presuppositional epistemology, nothing trusted can be properly thought about until *after* one is persuaded that it is true. The inevitable result is a worldview of vicious circularity.⁵⁶

Notice carefully that fideism cannot supply an objective metric for one's quality of reasoning. Hence, logically informed criticisms from those outside the system are not taken seriously. Such "attacks" can be viewed as persecution from an *infidel, reprobate, denier*—or other *ad hominem* construct.⁵⁷ Such a response is unattractively convenient, and resembles a frustrated child who 'wins' at chess by claiming exclusive knowledge of the rules; and resorts to name-calling if her behavior is challenged. Ultimately, if reality is described by the Christian Bible, then a better supporting reason must be given than: "because it is the Christian Bible."⁵⁸

Persuasion before right thinking is a proverbial recipe for disaster. Such is supported by common sense and Scripture both. Paul taught: "Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess. 5:21-22). Likewise, John taught: "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1-2). What human endowment enables the commanded analysis if not right-

⁵⁴ Marry Baker Eddy was the founder of the Christian Science Movement, a modern repackaging of Gnosticism. For a poignant personal account of the tension between *faith* and the *livability* of a religious system in the real world see: Val Kilmer, *I'm Your Huckleberry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

⁵⁵ Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (New York: Dover, 1989), 132.

⁵⁶ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 57; Gould et. al., *Stand Firm*, 22.

⁵⁷ Martin, *Kingdom of Cults*, Ch. 3.

⁵⁸ Geisler, *Apologetics*, 26-34.

reason? How does one accurately trust something unless it is available to be heard, recognized, and loved—just like the *Shema* assumes? Likewise, how can one test something if it is unavailable to their attention, recognition, and appropriate response?

Given the biblical data, human persons are not to love everything that we recognize. Indeed, the Bible commands us to “depart from evil and do good” (Ps. 37:27). The command is meaningless unless human persons can *meaningfully* tell the difference. Even the biblical definition of faith appeals to the *evidence* (Heb. 11:1).⁵⁹ Of course, all such analysis is meaningless unless genuine counter-authorities really exist to be avoided.

Still, Martin Luther regarded the *a priori* application of reason to be “the devil’s prostitute” and “the greatest enemy that faith has.”⁶⁰ But if Luther is followed, what adjudicates between competing authorities when they disagree. Luther simply assumed that his version of Protestantism was true—but so did Joseph Smith? Who was right? Perhaps trusting the truth value of a presuppositional epistemology is like navigating the Pacific with a map, but with no compass or knowledge of the stars. Can we really be sure that safe landfall will occur in Fiji? Should we question the absence of palm trees or pretty girls when we wash up on a barren atoll? The fideist says: “the paradisaal advertisement was wrong, because I can’t be—welcome to Fiji.”

Any who land on Truth by *faith alone* will have been cosmically lucky. Since human persons trust in a variety of mutually exclusive faith-objects, the *problem of meaning* is intractable on a fideist metaphysic. Were a *coexist* sticker applied to the bumper of every automobile on earth, such would remain the case. Perhaps it is not good for faith to be alone.

⁵⁹ *Evidence* is the KJV translation of the Greek ἔλεγχος (*elenchos*). This has been translated to mean evidence, proof, and inner conviction. The word itself contains the idea that persuasion and right-thinking are inextricably linked. Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 382; Strong’s Greek 1650.

⁶⁰ Steve Wilkins, *Faith and Reason: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 18.

Faith, Reason, and Revelation: The Promise of a United Epistemology

The relationship between faith and reason is yet another historical tension within the philosophy of religion. Where tensions obtain, extreme views will entrench. Two are germane to the tension in view. In one ditch, *fideism* adopts the strategy of *faith alone*. Persuasion is prior to reason, and unconstrained by it.⁶¹ In the other, *strong rationalism* trusts only that which can be proven by *reason alone*.⁶² Both strategies end in epistemic despair. On fideism, nothing trusted can be known; and on strong rationalism, nothing known can be trusted.

Perhaps it is necessary for a properly oriented faith to be grounded with right reason and the responsible interpretation of a true revelation (Isa. 1:18; 2 Tim. 3:16). Likewise, perhaps right reason ultimately consummates in a properly oriented faith in a true revelation (John 1:1-5; 14).⁶³ Perhaps faith and reason are two essential strands that encircle revelation to form a three-strand chord known as the Truth—the knowledge orientation to reality as it is (John 14:6; Heb. 1:1-2).

Perhaps no one thing has *being* by itself. Faith alone is indistinguishable from delusion. A boy may be persuaded that he is a girl—but his faith cannot make him one. Reason by itself is indistinguishable from ignorance since no one can *prove* that they aren't a brain in a vat. Finally, a revelation that no one can hear, recognize, and respond to is indistinguishable from a message in a bottle to an illiterate world. Whether by faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13); or by the Spirit, the water, and the blood (1 John 5:8); or by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19)—the truth is established on two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15; 1 Cor. 13:1). Thus, the solution to the problem of meaning will not be found alone—but in *Community*.

⁶¹ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 35-55.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 19-34.

⁶³ This is the researcher's formulation of *Thomistic synthesis*. For a comprehensive discussion of the tension between faith and reason see Craig A. Boyd, "The Synthesis of Reason and Faith" in *Faith and Reason: Three Views*, Steve Wilkens ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 132-158.

Conclusion: Affirming the Consequent

Chapter two began by noticing an order within reality necessary to understanding its function. Examples from logic, mathematics, and pragmatic living were provided. The principle of analogy entailed that creation is like the Creator in a fundamental sense. Of course, this gives rise to the problem of evil. The chapter asks: is perfection the love of power? The sovereignty of God was analyzed by way of the ontological, epistemological, and livability constraints of this project. First, it was shown by way of a preliminary analysis of the *Shema* that *sovereignty* and *being* are not synonymous. It is plausible that the quasi-pious tradition of emphasizing God's sovereignty over His ontology has influenced Jewish and Christian theology in a substantially unacknowledged way.

Next, God's cosmic copyright was established, and two competing views of sovereignty were introduced. A critical analysis of human behavior followed, and the determinist view of sovereignty was shown to be fraught with difficulties. First, the behavior of human persons, individually and collectively, do not support the self-evidence of God's comprehensive ownership of the world. Neither do they support the perfection (or even competence) of a determinist Creator. The discord is difficult—perhaps even impossible to reconcile. Therefore, God's sovereignty is not well supported by the Pauline constraint of exemplary self-evidence.

Likewise, an analysis of a quotation from determinist theologian Mark Talbot showed that human morality is evacuated of meaning if God's power is prioritized ahead of His moral nature and character. The ontological, epistemological, and teleological entailments of Talbot's hard determinism were shown to contradict the Anselmian constraint of maximal greatness.

Finally, the problem of meaning was analyzed by way of authoritarian and *a priori* epistemologies. It is concluded that both render comparative theology impossible, and are

therefore not indicative of a Perfect Being who has manifested His divine nature in human persons as part of a purposeful and livable reality. The chapter closed by introducing the promise of a united epistemology that synthesizes rather than isolates faith and reason as human persons engage with revelation in the search for Truth—really the search for God Himself.

For centuries the Anselmian formula has described God as Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnibenevolent—in that order. It is plausible that this formula has in some way been informed by millennia of continued emphasis of God’s Lordship over the creation. Has something fundamental gotten lost—or perhaps laid aside on a dusty shelf? It is clear that an unconstrained Omnipotence is not good in any meaningful sense. Might the order of operations be wrong? Does Theism necessarily entail a determinist metaphysic?

The determinist notion of sovereignty may contain a formal fallacy. Determinism is a sufficient condition for God’s sovereign relationship to the creation—but not a necessary one.

P1: If God meticulously determined the world, then He is Sovereign.

P2: He is Sovereign.

C: God meticulously determined the world.

This argument affirms the consequent and is therefore formally invalid. As with the hard thinking of Dr. Campbell, this argument lacks the *meaning* necessary to justify its conclusion. It is possible that God can be Sovereign without necessitating determinism. Perhaps God created the world for a teleological purpose that requires morally significant human freedom. Perhaps God’s own freedom permits Him to value something enough to purpose it in His creation. Perhaps human agency is required to render this value actual—something like the *value* of love perhaps. *Love* and *sin* have meaning if man is a morally responsible agent created on purpose by a Sovereign God. This meaning does not delimit God’s sovereignty—it magnifies it. Indeed, such Providence has made the greatest conceivable human good a reality—Love.

Chapter Three

The *Logos* of God and the Power of Love

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.
1 John 4:7-8*

The previous chapter asked: “is perfection the love of power?” It was shown that a decision to logically prioritize the power of God over the perfection of His nature results in problems of consistency and livability. Perhaps there is better promise in a different order of operations. What if perfection is the power of Love? This chapter examines Love as a first metaphysical principle. We have argued that while God has the power to create, the creation—and consequentially His sovereignty are not essential to God’s nature. This chapter argues that Love is in fact essential to God’s eternal power and divine nature (John 15:1-13, 17; Rom. 1:19-20; 1 John 4:7).¹

Just as the *Shema* features in Jewish piety, the mantra “God is Love” has taken root within Christian expression. This New Testament phrase has become a popular slogan featured on many church marquees. Such is appropriate, but divisions in the world and church evidence another *problem of meaning*.

In consequence of the human proclivity to reject God’s sovereign design in favor of an independent self-design, the mantra “God is Love” is increasingly interpreted as an algebraic equation instead of the biblical declaration of reality’s ontological bedrock. It is now widely assumed that since all true equations balance—“God is Love” is equivalent to “love is God.”² Such is *new math* writ large.³

¹ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 593-594.

² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 173-174.

³ *New Math* is a critical label for the postmodern tendency to prioritize interpretation over fact when assigning truth value. These trends began in the humanities and are increasingly infecting the hard sciences and their fundamental language—mathematics. This is another alarming example of Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*. Lewis, *Abolition*, 53-79; Geisler, *Apologetics*, 9; Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, Ch.2.

When the creature informs God about who and what He is, they adopt explanatory ultimacy over reality. In effect, they try to *be* the god over God (Gen. 3:5-6; Isa. 14:12-15). But there is an incommensurate inequivalence between God who is a necessary being and the creature dependent upon God for existence. God contains information which human persons lack due to our contingency as creatures, and moral imperfection as sinners. Just as a blurry photo cannot contain the information present in a human person, no creature contains the information present within God. So, who defines the meaning of *God* and *Love*? Can the creature supply the meaning necessary? Or must God *reveal* the meaning of *Love*, the meaning of *God*, and with these the true meaning of *man*? True equations do balance—on the right order of operations.

God Is Love: The Biblical Witness

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. 1 John 4:15-16

The biblical statement “God is Love” begs an important question. What is love? If it is what God properly *is*, then the question is altogether preliminary. To answer this question is to discover the meaning behind reality. It is obvious that God’s nature cannot be comprehended by a finite creature—but might it at least be apprehended? A beginning understanding of the nature of love is certainly needed to understand what God is really like. Moreland and Craig notice:

...it is of the very nature of love to give oneself away. Love reaches out to another person rather than centering wholly in oneself. So if God is perfectly loving by his very nature, he must be giving himself in love to another. But who is that other? ...It belongs to God’s very essence to love, but it does not belong to his essence to create...So created persons cannot sufficiently explain whom God loves. Moreover, contemporary cosmology makes it plausible that created persons have not always existed. But God is eternally loving. So again created persons alone are insufficient to account for God’s being perfectly loving. It therefore follows that the other to whom God’s love is necessarily directed must be internal to God himself.⁴

⁴ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 593.

The implications of love as a necessary ontology are important to recognize. For love to be intelligible as a description of God's nature, God must contain a plurality of "selves" who freely give of each other in an eternal and indivisible relationship—a *Community*. Colin Gunton writes: "God is no more than what Father, Son and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the inseparable communion that is the outcome of their love. Communion is the meaning of the word [God]: there is no 'being' of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation."⁵ Is Gunton's trinitarian theology biblically supported?

The compound-unity of God is best evidenced by the New Testament's record of Jesus of Nazareth's radical self-identity. This is especially apparent in Jesus' claims to be I AM (Mark 14:62; John 8:58), and to have both distinction from and oneness with the Father and the Holy Spirit (John 14:9-10; John 15:26; John 17).⁶ The veracity of Jesus' divine identity is primarily supported by the historical certainty that He rose from the dead following His death by crucifixion.⁷ Indeed, the authority of the New Testament is anchored to the historicity of this event (1 Cor. 15:1-19). Jesus claimed to be "one" with the Father in a unique sense (John 14). Yet a sense of otherness is also indicated by Jesus' prayers to the Father, and personal description of the coming Holy Spirit (John 14:26). These passages and others inform the doctrine that God is *one* in substance, but also the *Unity* of three unique Persons—a Trinity.

Since God by definition is essentially immutable in consequence of His perfection, He did not become a Trinity when the New Testament was written. God cannot *become* anything. Therefore, if God is an eternal *Community*, it stands to reason that such would be indicated by both testaments of His inspired Word (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 13:8).

⁵ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 10.

⁶ Ibid., Ch. 7.

⁷ Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 8-9; Geisler, *Apologetics*, Ch. 19-20; Licona, *Resurrection*, 619.

Without appealing to the New Testament as a hermeneutic lever, seeing the compound-unity of God in the Old Testament is controversial. From the Christian perspective, the veracity of the Old Testament may be best evidenced by the fact that Jesus treated it as divinely inspired Scripture.⁸ Once the triune nature of God is accepted on the basis of the New Testament, it is tempting to eisegete the idea into Old Testament texts where it may or may not be indicated.

The Genesis account of creation begins with: “In the Beginning God... (Gen.1:1).” The English word *God* is an improper singular noun identical to the Anglo-Saxon word for *good*.⁹ In English, *God* contains the notion that God and *The Good* in the platonic sense are one and the same. While certainly true, this translational issue is similar to that previously mentioned of the Tetragrammaton. Like *LORD*, *God* is a substitute for a Hebrew word with potentially thicker meaning. *God* is translated from the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*)—an improper *plural* noun.¹⁰ Historically, scholars have seen *Elohim* to indicate an ontological plurality consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, Merrill Unger argues:

This, the first of the primary names of Deity, is a plural noun. Implicit in *Elohim* from the first verse of divine revelation is the Trinity...The triune nature of God is latent in the Old Testament, patent in the New Testament.¹¹

Even so, there is disagreement as to whether God’s ontological unity is really indicated by the plural nature of *Elohim*. More recent scholarship may see Unger’s interpretation as an overreach since *elohim* is a nuanced term applied by the Hebrew language in a variety of ways.¹²

⁸ Geisler, *Apologetics*, 419-425.

⁹ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 480.

¹⁰ Cooper, David L., *The Eternal God Revealing Himself to Suffering Israel and to Lost Humanity*, 3rd ed. (Biblical Research Society, 1974), 30-33; Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 360; Strong’s Hebrew 430.

¹¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: Tyndale Theological Seminary, 2002), 7-8.

¹² Ronnie Campbell, e-mail message to the researcher, October 7, 2022.

In a more recent work, Michael Heiser has argued that *elohim* is indicative of any number of heavenly beings belonging to a divine kind.¹³ Heiser notices that *elohim* is applied in the singular sense over 2,000 times in reference to the God of Israel.¹⁴ Likewise, Heiser sees the “let us make man in our image” phrase in Genesis 1:26 as a pronouncement to a divine council, rather than the internal contemplation of the plural Godhead.¹⁵

Entering this debate in earnest would be fascinating, but the lexical and hermeneutical issues are beyond the scope of this project. Even so, it is a fact that *elohim* is an improper *plural* noun. Heiser seems to infer its singular use simply by noticing its singular referent—the God of Israel.¹⁶ Given the progressive nature of revelation, and the trinitarian framework of the New Testament, an indication of ontological plurality needs not be excluded. Jesus taught that He was in the Father, and the Father was in Him (John 14:11). Likewise, John writes that the *Logos* was *with God* in the beginning, was God, and is the Creator of all things (John 1:1-3). If such is a time independent fact, it should not be surprising to see evidence of it in the Old Testament.

Perhaps a more important indication of God’s plural-unity is found in the *Shema*. The *Shema* calls for the attention of human persons, and then introduces the Name and self-existence of God before commanding love as the human response. Standing between the Name of God and the imperative to love Him are four words that may indicate a plural ontology in the one God. In Moses’ declaration that “YHVH is one!” there is a biblical assertion not of something that God has or wants in relation to His creation, but of what He properly *is*—*one* (Deut. 6:4).

¹³ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21. Heiser notes that *Elohim* is primarily used in description of YHWH—over 2,000 occurrences.

Special interest is warranted by the Hebrew word translated as *one*. The Hebrew :אֶחָד (echad) is a nuanced term sometimes applied in cases of *compound-unity*.¹⁷ While *echad* can be applied to instances of numerical singularity, it is the only Hebrew word used to denote a community. Such renders the context necessary to infer the author's intended use.¹⁸

A notable example of the use of *echad* to denote a community is found in Genesis 2:24 which states: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become *one (echad)* flesh." Notice that the plural referent *they*—are to become *one* flesh. Here God's fundamental invention of human society obtains in two unique persons uniting as *one community*. Is the use of *echad* at the institution of the family and the *Shema* significant? This researcher is inclined to think so.

The meaning of *man* is grounded in God's ontology as revealed by the divine decision: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). If man is made in a plural image (*Our* Image), then man cannot rightly remain an individual.¹⁹ This view has the explanatory power to elucidate why "male and female, He created them." The record of God's creation of man begins with the reference '*Us*' and is completed with the referent '*them*.' With all due regard to Heiser's approach to prioritize the Ancient Near East context and see a hermeneutical key in Psalm 82²⁰—both interpretive resources are intensely mysterious. Thus, they are not well supported by the Pauline Constraint in Romans 1:19-20. The New Testament is a much stronger hermeneutic anchor (Matt 7:24-25; John 8:31-32).

¹⁷ Cooper, *Eternal God Revealing Himself*, 37-45.

¹⁸ Cooper, 36-44; Unger, *Old Testament*, 242.

¹⁹ Cooper, 34-35.

²⁰ Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 11-17.

Since the New Testament declares that God is Love, the image and likeness of God must be plural as argued above by Gunton, and Moreland & Craig. Therefore, it is not implausible that *Elohim* in Genesis, and *echad* in the *Shema* have some ontological revelatory component. If they do, then the Old Testament speaks in harmony with the New Testament of God's *Community* ontology—and by entailment, humanity's *community* teleology.

If the above holds, then the *Shema*'s declaration of God's unified nature may bookend the New Testament declaration: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Perhaps "YHVH is *echad*" and "God is love" are equivalent true statements.

Love in the passage from 1 John is translated from the Greek ἀγάπη (*agape*).²¹ Since this word is rooted in the moral preference of one person for another, it is unintelligible if applied in an ontological sense (*is*) to a singular personality.²² Scripture gives a checklist for what constitutes *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13. In every case, *agape* involves the self-giving of one person for the sake of another. If God is *Agape* in an ontological sense, then divine self-giveness is eternal and logically prior to creation. Of course, such is unintelligible unless God is a *Community* of free Persons.

The trinitarian argument is unwelcome to non-messianic Jews, theistic unitarians, and modalists who regard the *Shema* to explicitly teach the numerical singularity of God. There are three weaknesses to the unitarian position. First regarding the *Shema*, other Hebrew words for *one* exist which leave no doubt when a numerical singularity is intended. Most forceful is the word יָחִיד (*yachid*) referring exclusively to cases of numerical oneness.²³ It seems that if

²¹ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 786; Strong's Greek 26.

²² Campbell, *Worldviews*, 169-175; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 1; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.

²³ Unger, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 242.

numerical singularity were in view in the passage, God could have prevented the ontological confusion by simply inspiring *yachid* instead. But in the *Shema*, God inspires Moses to use *echad*—the one Hebrew word suited for describing an ontological *Community*.²⁴

Second, an Anselmian problem arises in the concept of an individual biblical God. Notice that the first biblical mention of a state of affairs which is *de facto* ‘not good’ is the individuality of man (Gen. 1:18). If man exists for the purpose of *imaging* God, and it is *not good* for man to be *alone*—then in what possible world can God be *The Good* while *alone*.²⁵

God’s ways are higher than man’s in the sense that God contains every *good* in an infinite sense. If being *alone* is *de re* ‘not good’—then a morally perfect God who is *alone* constitutes a contradiction. If such is the case, then the unitarian commits an ontological category fallacy. God cannot be *Good* and *alone* any more than a man can be married and remain a bachelor.²⁶

Finally, since love by definition is the gift of oneself to another, and since God is by definition essentially immutable—it follows that if God *is* Love, He must consist in an eternity of self-giving and self-receiving between genuine *Others*.²⁷ If He does not, then Moses’ declaration that YHWH is *echad*, and John’s claim that God is *Agape* are unintelligible. Since God is a being greater than any which can be conceived, there categorically can be no greater *Good* than God Himself. It follows that if human persons are made in God’s image, then love expressed in genuine community with others constitutes the greatest possible human good.²⁸

²⁴ Cooper, *Eternal God Revealing Himself*, 37-45.

²⁵ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch.1.

²⁶ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 45-57.

²⁷ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 169-175; Gunton, Ch. 1; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.

²⁸ Gunton, Ch. 2; Walls, *Things That Matter*, Ch. 7.

Exemplary Self-Evidence: A Personal Revelation

But did He not make them one [echad], Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. Malachi 2:15

Love is a feature of the human experience which transcends description but is always being described anyways? Since the dawn of time, philosophers, poets, artists, musicians, and hormonal teenagers have tried to grasp what it means to be *in love*. The use of *in* is interesting. Is love a place, a state of mind, an overwhelming sensation—or something cosmically more?

The Natural Witness

One of the greatest historical challenges for Christians obtains in forming a cogent explanation of the Trinity. Perhaps no theological subject appeals to mystery more. How do three divine Persons obtain in one God? On its face, such an idea is mathematically absurd. It also seems to run afoul of certain theological ideals. Since God is *simple*, he is thought to have no parts.²⁹ How then can God be the *Unity* of three unique Persons? As a consequence of these difficulties, there has ever been a Christian quest for the “holy grail” of an accessible trinitarian allegory.

Important help is provided by the Cappadocian Fathers’ contribution towards defining personhood and community.³⁰ If these are grounded in the *being* of God, they are irreducible, and not defined from the contingent perspective of humanity. The present challenge to define *man*, *woman*, and *love* are examples of the *problem of meaning* encountered by all who try to define primitive concepts. Difficulty arises in the fact that primitive axioms are needed to supply *meaning* to anything. Remove *meaning* from the axiom, and epistemological anarchy ensues.³¹

²⁹ Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 530-532.

³⁰ Gunton *Trinitarian Theology*, 5-14; John D. Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), Ch. 4.

³¹ Gunton, 56-61, 109; Zizioulas, *Communion*, Ch.2.

The Cappadocian contribution may be summed up by what John of Damascus called *perichoresis*.³² This word invokes the image of a cooperative *dance* as free persons move and interpenetrate with one another to produce a harmonious dynamic whole.³³ Ronnie Campbell has offered a good illustration of *perichoresis* with the example of three tuning-forks turned inward. When struck, each produces a sound that interpenetrates the others to produce a univocal note to the listener.³⁴ While certainly helpful, Campbell's idea may gesture to a thicker one.

People disagree over much, but an area of overwhelming, if not universal agreement is that beauty and truth are basically expressed through music. The *harmony* produced by a musical *chord* is the combination of three individual notes—a root note, a major or minor third note—and a *perfect* fifth note. Let us assume that David's secret chord that pleased the Lord was a 'C-major' chord. This contains the notes C, E, and G respectively.

The 'C-major' chord obtains in the compound-unity of three notes, and cannot obtain without them. The sound from each individual note is given to the *being* of the chord. In a noticeable sense, each note gives itself to the other two, and likewise receives itself from the other two. At times each note may take priority in the chord and be especially emphasized. Even so, the emphasized note still requires the other two to complete the chord and ground its *being*. The interplay, interpenetration, and intercompletion of each note contributes to the aesthetic beauty and ontological *being* of the triune chord. The result is a feature of reality of indescribable beauty and inexpressible truth. In music this phenomenon is called *harmony*. Within a community of free persons, it is called *love*.³⁵

³² Campbell, *Worldviews*, 175-178; Gunton, *One Three & Many*, 163-173; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Campbell, 177.

³⁵ Campbell, 220-227; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174-178.

Now, the above illustration is not ultimate as an explanation of *perichoresis*. In fact, the illustration breaks down in a very important way. A ‘C-major’ chord is not a *necessary* example of perichoresis. Neither is it an ontologically *simple* example of perichoresis. Like the love that human persons may experience, a musical chord is merely a *contingent* example of perichoresis. A ‘C-major’ is reducible to its individual elements—God is not. The perichoresis of God is necessary and ontologically simple—it is therefore irreducibly ultimate.

Once again, the right order of operations is crucial. God is not perichoretic because music is. Rather music is *potentially* perichoretic because God is *necessarily* so. In short, God does not love as a mere potentiality—God is love.

The incommensurable value of love is clearly seen. The reality of its power renders all without excuse. The *value* of a wife to a husband in right relationship is indescribably beautiful. Likewise, the *meaning* of their relationship is inexpressibly true as each gives *being* to the other, and receives their own *being* in return. Love is a mystery transcending description, but one that is manifestly real. Since love is descriptive of God’s nature, it is the basis for human ontology and the first axiom of human epistemology. If Love does not supply meaning to reality, then reality reduces to absurdity. Love is the first and preeminent fact of reality—because God is Love.³⁶

Finally, love which is shared between two free persons is incomplete and wants to be given to a third.³⁷ Malachi notices that the *Community* of God is *imaged* in the man and woman who come together with a “remnant of the Spirit” to be one [*echad*] (Mal. 2:15). The suggestion of Trinity in this Old Testament passage is compelling—a man, a woman, and God as one (*echad*). Creation is pictured in the miraculous result of an overabundance of love in the form of

³⁶ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 61; Walls, *Things That Matter*, 26,43,178.

³⁷ Gunton, 89-90; Richard of St. Victor, “On the Trinity” In *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, eds. Khaldoun A. Swiss and Chad V. Meister (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 227-228.

godly children. When a husband and wife give themselves to God, and then to each other—their reality takes on miraculous new value. They become more than the sum of themselves. True love brings new life into reality, and a brand-new vector obtains by which value is increased through loving *community* from generation to generation (Deut. 7:9). Therefore, the *Imago Dei* can be “clearly seen” in the man and wife united in *community* with God for the sake of a better world. It always has been.³⁸

The Alternative Witness

Perhaps the most beloved quote from Augustine is “...thou has made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.”³⁹ Similarly Blaise Pascal argued:

What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.⁴⁰

These classic words underlie the contemporary notion of a *God sized hole* in unredeemed human persons. If love is the ontological bedrock of both divine and human *being*, there are catastrophic consequences to *human being* when we abandon community for the sake of individual power. To *sin* is not to *do* the wrong thing, it is to *be* the wrong thing.⁴¹

The need for affirmation (conferral of value/being through unity with another) is so primitive in humans that it cannot be jettisoned.⁴² Community is properly basic in the

³⁸ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 6; Walls, *Things That Matter*, 178.

³⁹ Augustine. *Confessions and Enchiridion*, Trans. Albert C. Outler (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1994), 11.

⁴⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York: Philosophical Library/Open Road Integrated Media, 2016), 121.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 95-96; Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, Ch. 2.

⁴² Ibid.

relationship of a father to a son, a mother to a daughter—and in all naturally occurring personal relationships in proper function.⁴³ In a God-honoring family, this affirmation is natural and automatic by way of the harmonious unity of persons in relation. But since *love* is the axiom of human being and design, comparison becomes available only by way of a corruption—a *sin*.

By definition, *sin* is that which falls short of what it ought to be by design.⁴⁴ Notice that the ‘C Major’ chord is what it is and can be nothing else—until the introduction of a ‘D flat’ pollutes it. Something has gone wrong. Something has either fallen short or been added out of place. And everyone with functional hearing can notice the problem—even without musical training.⁴⁵ Here is the apologetic conundrum of the 21st century. Should the song of God’s reality be converted to human discord—or should attempts still be made to get humanity back on key?

Notice that it is never enough to ignore God’s copyright, embrace individual sovereignty, and forge one’s self-design into reality. There is a stubborn need to be affirmed by others that it is *right* and *good* to have done so. It seems that *being* and *goodness* are inescapably linked.⁴⁶

As the family undergoes a postmodern overhaul in man’s image instead of God’s, the natural means by which value is added to reality is being de-limited. Meaningful community and goodness are being redefined as the culture adopts a policy of *community by constraint*. The affirmation of human infringement against the divine copyright is now mandated as a morally significant cultural duty. That is, to be *given meaning* in the culture, one must first *give meaning* to others’ delusions. Since natural community-growth is physically impossible for many in the new world, growth must be accomplished by way of recruitment and conditioned assimilation.

⁴³ Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 14-17; 21-42.

⁴⁴ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 1198-1199.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 9-14.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5.

The *new culture* expects the *old man* to repent of traditional views grounded in *Being*, and turn to embrace a *new covenant* grounded in individual identity and fluctuating cultural caprice. And what is rejected as delusion today may require unhesitating affirmation tomorrow. That is, if one wants to participate in the culture as a doctor, nurse, professor, schoolteacher, pilot, president—or God.⁴⁷

As a consequence, the church (both individual and institution) is faced with a difficult dilemma of community. Choose God at the expense of the new culture—or choose the new culture at the expense of God. An overwhelming number are embracing the latter option. For the sake of being affirmed by their neighbors, these hide their Christianity if they do not disavow it entirely.⁴⁸ Those coming out with *pride* are being replaced in the closet by *ashamed* Christians unwilling to stand in the culture for their narrow-minded God.⁴⁹ While tragic, the point is that the human need for community is overwhelmingly compelling to everyone—saint and sinner alike. It is unavoidable on account of what human beings are—*persons* who are incomplete without the affirmation of God and their neighbor. It is not good for a man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Why? Because alone he cannot be a man at all. This truth is fundamental in human persons and cannot be switched off—even should we wish it. It is clearly seen and beyond excuse.

When human persons isolate themselves from God, a lifetime of attempted compensation ensues. As Pascal notes, this project is ultimately hopeless. It is an infinite abyss which only God can fill.⁵⁰ Still, the need is so basic that traffic halting parades, intrusive awareness months, social conditioning curriculums, ostentatious advertisements, a technologically linked social-credit

⁴⁷ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (2nd ed. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), Ch.1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

⁵⁰ Pascal, *Pensees*, 121.

structure, and a host of other Orwellian schemes are being deployed to aggressively *condition* both man and God to ‘give value’ to humanity’s new-found *meaning*.⁵¹

Two problems arise from the postmodern humanist framework. First, being conditioned to affirm a delusion is a gross violation of one’s personal freedom. Since love is meaningless without personal freedom, there can be no *community by constraint*. Such is categorically impossible and results in horrors when tried.⁵² What word denotes the forcing of one’s acquiescence to community by compulsion—*rape* perhaps?

Second, causation is not algebra at all. Any ‘love’ invented by man is not God. As a consequence it is a poor counterfeit for the explanatory ultimate it caricatures. Man is made in God’s image, not the other way around. By definition God cannot be *made* at all. Therefore the equation “love is God” cannot possibly balance. Without God, there can be no such thing as love. Likewise, a man can no more make a god, than a blurry photograph can make a man. Why? Because we lack the necessary *meaning*.

The Pauline Witness

Humanity’s basic need for *community* is manifestly self-evident. At bottom, this is a basic need for oneness with God and one’s neighbors. The need for *Community* is clearly seen *in* human persons to the degree of rendering all without reasonable excuse. Likewise, both natural and alternative exemplars demonstrate that humanity’s fundamental ontology obtains in *community* after the image and likeness of God. Thus, *Community* (Love) is supported by the Pauline constraint of exemplary self-evidence as the first principle of a perfect God. And *community* (love) is likewise supported as the human *telos* in God’s image.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 53-79.

⁵² See Chapter 2, pg. 47-52.

Maximal Greatness: The Value of Love Freely Given

Given the worldwide problem of evil, the religious problem of meaning, and the imminent humanist overhaul of human ontology, what chance of a meaningful advance does Christianity really have? What chance did it ever have? Christianity spread from the Judean backwaters to cover the known world in just a few centuries. Those spreading the good news of life in Jesus were not focused on any *chance of success*. What chance of success does a crucified corpse have to purposefully march out of a rich man's tomb as 'the glorified Man.' Miracles were needed in those days, and miracles happened. Why should Christianity's end be different from her beginning. Where faith and love remain—hope lives forever.

Paul wrote that at the consummation of all things, three fundamental features of reality would yet remain. Faith, hope, and love—the greatest of these being love (1 Cor. 13:13). Paul identified love as the eschatological end that justifies the means apparent in a manifestly imperfect creation. In preparation for the theodicy forthcoming, this important section foreshadows the answer. What feature of created reality might possibly warrant an all-loving God to permit evil? Rowe's evidential argument appeals to gratuitous, or meaningless evils which a morally perfect God would prevent since they do not contribute to a greater good—or to the exclusion of an evil equally bad or worse.⁵³ In what follows, it will be demonstrated that what Rowe was really asking for was the nonexistence of this world. For if this reality is to contain real *value*—it must contain the possibility for evil.⁵⁴

⁵³ Rowe, "Varieties of Atheism," 127-131.

⁵⁴ Plantinga, "Metaphysics of Freedom" 101-106.

Immutability and Creation: A Problem of Ultimate Value

It is a classic debate among metaphysicians of all stripes whether the world as we know it is necessary or not. Does it exist because it must? Is it a brute fact, or did it begin? If it did begin—then why? Theists, who prioritize a distinction between the Creator and His creation have long held that the world is *contingent*. It only exists because God freely chose to create it.⁵⁵

While the above view leaves the important orthodox distinction between Creator and creation intact, it may have curtailed some important exploration of why the world is here—since here it is. What does the world's *being* tell us about God (Ps. 19)? It was argued above that the Bible reveals God to be Love (*Community*). It was likewise argued that community is so basic in mankind as to warrant a bedrock identification of the community image of God in man. Might the reason for creation run part and parcel with the ontology of God and human persons?

One of the most difficult doctrines concerning God is *divine immutability*. God is both necessary in His *existence* and perfect in His *being*. God cannot change since any change would be for the worse.⁵⁶ It has long been debated whether there are exceptions where God's relationships with creation are concerned—but all orthodox Christians hold that God is unchanging in His essential nature.⁵⁷ Thus a *problem* (for lack of a better word) obtains for a God who is Love by ontological necessity.

Is Love ever satisfied—or does it ever seek new expressions? Let us return to the musical analogy for *perichoresis*. Human beings have been combining notes into compound-unities called chords—and chords into compound-unities called songs for thousands of years. It is mathematically astonishing that every possible combination of notes has not yet been exhausted.

⁵⁵ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 67-69.

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 227-234; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 532.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Even so, people make up new songs every day from the same notes and chords that have always been used. Will the indescribable beauty and inexpressible truth of music ever be exhausted. I cannot say precisely why—but for some reason deeply held (perhaps even properly basic)—I don't think it will. Dynamic *Harmony* may well be the sound of an eternal God.

A preliminary question emerges, both relevant to this work, and warranting additional research and reflection. While God is perfect in His aseity prior to creation—is He satisfied?⁵⁸ Because all accessible evidence points to the contrary. Is there room in perfection for something like dissatisfaction, or is such a manifest contradiction? Is Love ever truly satisfied?

In one of the briefest and most incisive answers to the problem of evil, Jewish theologian George Schlessinger claims that the problem of evil is illusory—that there is no such thing.⁵⁹ Schlessinger appeals to *The Degree of Desirability of State* (hereafter DDS), and notices following John Stewart Mill, that it is better to be a dissatisfied fool than a satisfied pig—and better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool.⁶⁰

Schlessinger argues that a *vicious infinite progress* obtains since no matter how high one's DDS might become, it could always advance a step further *ad infinitum*. Schlessinger then appeals to the ethical notion that 'ought implies can' to notice that even God cannot increase every person's DDS *ad infinitum*. Therefore, He is not really obligated to increase them at all. Since every human person will always be in a position to complain about their DDS, they do not have meaningful warrant for their present complaints. As a result, the problem of evil vanishes.⁶¹ Very tidy indeed.

⁵⁸ See John Feinberg's helpful discussion of theonomy, rationalism, and modified rationalism with regard to God's decision to create. Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, Ch. 2-4.

⁵⁹ Schlesinger, "Evil and Injustice," 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

On Schlesinger's idea, there is a positive correlation between one's desirability of state and their potential for dissatisfaction.⁶² By following Schlesinger's logic, it may be inferred that a being of maximal greatness would be a being of maximal potential dissatisfaction—the ultimate 'Super-Socrates.' Might Schlesinger's idea actually comport with Anselmian theism? Perhaps it depends on what motivates one's dissatisfaction.

While human dissatisfaction stems from comparing one's DDS with the DDS of another as regards wealth, beauty, power, position, etc.—no such comparison is available for a perfect Being. Indeed, God obtains as the *ideal* by which any comparison derives meaning. If God is to experience something like dissatisfaction or motivation, such must obtain in the ontology of divine *Being*. If God is Love, then creation exists because His Love motivated Him to create.

This discussion is theologically ticklish since it sees something like *potential* in God's *actual perfection*. Still, there is good reason to think that the world was created in the finite past. Christians also hold that God created freely, and following Leibniz—that He had a sufficient reason to do so.⁶³ Since creation exists as a matter of fact, it seems that *Perfection* is susceptible to something like *motivation*. If not, then the existence of the world is absurd.

How the doctrine of God's immutability can make sense of the real world is an unsettled topic warranting fresh research and reflection.⁶⁴ Two Aristotelian preliminary questions need answering. First, why would a God of maximal value create if His aseity lacks for nothing? Second, how could a God of maximal greatness add value to a reality of already infinite value? In short, If God was perfectly satisfied in His pre-creative aseity, why did He create? What if creation is simply the free expression of Godself as Love?

⁶² Schlesinger, "Evil and Injustice," 45.

⁶³ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, Ch.3.

⁶⁴ To wit, a recent and careful treatment of divine immutability is given in Campbell, *Worldviews*, Ch. 6-8.

If God is perfect, and perfection contains satisfaction, then a change in God's relatedness to anything *other than* Himself is unintelligible. God must create if ultimate value is not to be imprisoned in His own aseity. Moreover, for there to be a genuine distinction between Creator and creation, a necessity exists by which a perfect God is motivated to create. Since nothing supervenient to God can exist, this motivation must be eternal, necessary, and *a se*—that is, essential to divine *Being*. The motivating force of an immutable God of moral perfection is Love. Any *must* in God is not logical, but *ontological*. In short, God is only motivated by *being* God.⁶⁵

Expanding on Schlesinger's idea, Love is unsatisfiable. It was argued above that an individual cannot possibly contain it. Why then should Three freely choose to contain it? Why should love not reach to 4,16, 256, 65,536... and on *ad infinitum* (Deut. 7:9)? Perhaps God is something like the ultimately unsatisfied 'Super-Socrates' inferred by Schlessinger's vicious infinite progress. Yet Schlessinger's idea breaks down in an all-important way. God is not an evolutionary impossibility beyond the reach of an infinite progress—He is reality's First Fact.

As a being greater than that which can be conceived, God's maximal dissatisfaction in a reality without creation has given rise to a world manifesting ever increasing vectors of value. Such are supplied by every human person who chooses to live in community with God and their neighbors. If God is Love, and Love transcends satisfaction, then a creation manifesting new expressions of love—distinct from yet ultimately purposed for community with the Godhead, is necessary in something like a *de re* sense.⁶⁶ Echoing Malachi, Jesus declares:

And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me
John 17:22-23

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.44.1; William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Faith and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 96-100.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 247-249; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 43-47.

Likewise, Paul declares:

For “He has put all things under His feet.” But when He says “all things are put under Him,” it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. 1 Corinthians 15:27-28.

These biblical passages seem to indicate that genuine value change is possible for God by way of *glory* (value) gained by way of *community* with created *others*. How is this possible for an immutable being—let alone intelligible? What created example exists to reflect such meaning?

When a man and a woman become truly *one* (*echad*) under God—one person of incommensurable value joins their value to another of incommensurable value under the divine source of all value. Miracles result. New vectors of value obtain in each human child. When human persons fall in love, infinite values are multiplied, and new infinities are brought into being. Thus, the unsatisfiable Love of God is become created reality’s greatest good. A value argument from *community* is given as follows:

- P1. If God exists, He is maximally great in goodness, value, knowledge, and power.
- P2. A maximally great Being would increase the value of reality insofar as He could.
- P3. A *creation* of incommensurable and ever-increasing value is self-evident.
- C. God exists to have created the world, and He supplies meaning to its incommensurable value through His own perfect nature as Love (*Community*).

From Freedom to Freedom: Toward the *Summum Bonum*

No thoroughgoing discussion of the problem of evil is possible without wrestling with human freedom, and this can be no exception. Returning to the *Shema*, following the command to hear and recognize God as defined by His perfection in unity, the commandment is completed by “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5). Of special interest is the imperative sense of “*You shall love*.”

Given the self-evident state of the world, there are but two possible meanings. First, “*You shall love*” is a reality paradoxically exemplified by every human person as they live out God’s

express command (Isa. 55:11). Such love has no recognizable order or *meaning* to human persons, but leaves a determinist view of divine sovereignty intact. The second option is that “*You shall love*” contains the ultimate teleological *ought* for human persons who are meaningfully free and morally responsible for their own lives and their consequences. A fundamental rule of ethics is that *ought* implies *can*. This is sometimes rendered: “responsibility entails the ability to respond.” A morally significant *duty* to act or refrain from action requires a moral agent to have a genuine ability to make a choice. If no such ability is meaningfully real, then there can be no such thing as moral significance.⁶⁷ In short, the great command in the *Shema* tells us that having recognized God as a loving *Community*—so too should we be.

A core argument of this project is to notice that *freedom*, while of great importance, is not itself a suitable explanation for the coincidence of God and evil.⁶⁸ Metaphysical freedom has generally been understood in one of two ways. First, libertarian freedom sees each person as free to act, or abstain from action with no antecedent conditions determining either their action or inaction.⁶⁹ On its face, this is how human freedom seems to work. When we sit down for dinner at a restaurant, each option on the menu is a *real* option. Neither God nor physics has installed our choice of chicken or fish, whiskey or tea, blonde or brunette—or any other choice manifest in the mundane outworking of human desire. Libertarian freedom furnishes the moral creature with the ability to obey God or not, and sees the latter choice to be the efficient cause of moral evil.⁷⁰ Still, those holding to a determinist view of divine sovereignty see libertarianism as too extreme, especially in light of biblical data held to indicate the contrary (Jonah; Rom. 9; etc.).

⁶⁷ Baggett & Walls, 69-70; Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 6.

⁶⁸ Craig, “Gruesome Guests,” 173.

⁶⁹ Plantinga, *God Freedom and Evil*, 26.

⁷⁰ Craig, *On Guard*, Ch.7; Plantinga, “Metaphysics of Freedom,” 84-86.

Contrary to the libertarian view, both naturalist and religious determinists hold that human freedom either does not exist, or that it is *compatible* with divine causation or physical necessity respectively. On *compatibilism*, a person will perform every action by causal necessity, but do so freely and with moral responsibility.⁷¹ Some determinists migrate the source of evil from the creature's free will to their inordinate desires.⁷² Yet this seems like a distinction without a difference. The change is mainly semantic since God is the instigator and director of human passions as much as the human will acting upon them.⁷³ It is hard to see how God is not the efficient cause of evil unless a vicious causal regress is to be tolerated by faith alone.

Still, compatibilism is an attractive solution for many who hold by faith to both the meticulous causal agency of God and the moral responsibility of man on the basis of biblical data that seems to indicate both realities (Rom. 6-11). Unfortunately, on compatibilism the interpretive difficulty of discerning a faith-based tension from a genuine contradiction leaves the *problem of meaning* stubbornly intact. To wit, C.S. Lewis remarks:

If you choose to say 'God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it, you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words 'God can.'⁷⁴

Finally, since we seek an explanatory ultimate, the question must be asked: since freedom is a *good*, in what sense is God free? Neither the libertarian nor compatibilist sense of freedom seems to approach the thickness necessary to do justice to God's freedom. It follows from the above discussion that enabling new and increasing vectors for *community* is a sufficient reason

⁷¹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 69-71; Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 72-87.

⁷² Feinberg, 169-172.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1.

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 14.

for a perfect God to create. But does the sufficiency of a reason necessitate its execution? This question exhausts our reasonable epistemic access into theological matters. Who can say but God? Necessarily or not, He did create. That is answer enough to the question of whether it would have been better if He hadn't.⁷⁵ He did—and since God is maximally good, so too is His reason for creating. Perhaps we have missed something essential in the philosophy of freedom.

What if freedom is a function of *being* rather than a function of *doing*? If *being* and *goodness* are one and the same as Aristotle and Aquinas thought⁷⁶—then the goodness of freedom is rooted in ontology, not in *deontology*.⁷⁷ Perhaps God created on the basis of His *being* Love (*Community*). He cannot have done so on the basis of any supervenient moral duty.

Since God is immutable and causally ultimate, nothing supervenient exists which might motivate or constrain Him. Therefore, compatibilist freedom is unintelligible as regards God. Likewise, libertarian freedom is wholly inadequate since God is indeed constrained by the fact that He is God. Every action that God takes is *de re*—a godly act⁷⁸

In consequence of the above, God is maximally free as an ontological matter of fact. Nothing motivates God but God Himself. Likewise, no supervenient factor can efficiently *cause* God to cease from being godly. It is in this sense that God cannot *sin*. This is not an intelligible limit to his Omnipotence.⁷⁹ Solely on the basis of *being* God—He is *free* not to. Like His Love, the freedom of God is necessary and *a se*. It is an *ontological freedom*. Mankind is not so free.

⁷⁵ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 45-67.

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5.

⁷⁷ There is confusion between these two concepts for the obvious reason of common spelling. *Ontology* concerns *being*. *Deontology* concerns moral duties and obligations. Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 47.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Michael Huls, *The Logic of Holiness*, Unpublished Academic Paper (Lynchburg, Liberty University, 2021), 10-14.

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 14.

On the evidence given by Mark Talbot, human persons are guilty of horrific atrocities.⁸⁰ This is beyond doubt in the aftermath of the holocaust, the political cleansings of the 20th century—and the crusades, inquisitions, and jihads carried out behind cries of “God wills it.” Such is also beyond doubt as evidenced by the immeasurable value stolen from a Texas community by one troubled young man with a gun. All are right to look to Heaven as Christ once did and ask “Why?” It is the perfect question, once asked with a broken heart by the perfect Man.

The phrase “I’m only human” is a tired cliché denoting some preventable failure. The frequency of such failure is not what it *ought* to be. This follows from the fact that there is a vast distance between the way humanity *is*, and the way that we *ought* to be. Noticing this distinction is axiomatic and reflexively valid despite skeptical or empiricist protests to the contrary.

For instance, David Hume thought that deriving an *ought* from an *is* reduced to subjective opinion. He had the order of operations backwards.⁸¹ Any moral failure requires a moral standard from which to measure it—an ultimate *ought*. Comparison is only possible in the presence of a corruption. Such is the self-evident *sin* of an individual ‘D flat’ thumbed over a ‘C-major’ chord. Every *is* either comports to its teleological *ought*, or is *sin* by falling short of its due perfection.

If we follow David Hume into his guillotine, we decapitate any warrant for moral objection and should forego comment on human moral failings—no matter how heinous.⁸² Hume cannot answer why it was *wrong* as a matter of fact for Salvador Ramos to slaughter nineteen children and two teachers as though he were clearing a level of *Doom* while sitting in his basement. It is not *being human* that gave rise to Ramos’ *is-ought* problem—it was a failure to *be human enough*. What made Ramos’ falling short possible? In a word: *freedom*.

⁸⁰ Talbot, “All the Good,” 42-44.

⁸¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Electric Book, 2019), 518.

⁸² Ibid., 518; Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 217-229.

If freedom is the causal factor behind moral evil, then what could possibly warrant its existence? Apologists from Augustine to Zizioulas have appealed to the *good* of human freedom as an answer to the problem of evil—yet the problem still remains. Moral evil would not exist but for morally significant creaturely freedom. And since man is not free like God is, we remain capable of ontological change. God is immutable and infallible. Human persons are both mutable and fallible. Yet freedom is necessary for any human person to *be* a person at all. The human *telos* is lived out by loving God and one's neighbors in *community* after the *Imago Dei*. But community by constraint is impossible. Therefore, a genuine choice must exist by which human persons may conform to or fall short of the *image of God* we are created to reflect. Like our love, the freedom of human persons is contingent and dependent. It is a *teleological freedom*.

Now, in what sense is God's free choice to give freedom to moral creatures not the efficient cause of evil? For such not to be the case, creaturely freedom must exist as a part of God's perfect purpose, and supply meaning to an ultimate supervening good—that being, Love. *Community* (Love) is an incommensurable *value-maker*, and as such is the only supervening good of sufficient value to justify permitting the possibility of moral failure. In short, freedom is necessary in the teleological sense as a *community-making* good. It is definitely not *good simpliciter*.⁸³ *Community* is a *de re* necessity in all possible worlds containing *love*, and personal freedom is a *de re* necessity in all possible worlds containing *community*. In summary, an important distinction exists between the freedom of God and that of human persons. God's freedom is ontologically necessary, and *a se*. God cannot fail to be a *Community* united in Love. Human persons can so fail. The entropy of *being* from Godly aseity to human contingency renders human freedom *teleological*. It is a lesser freedom—a *potentially sinful* one.

⁸³ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, Ch. 7.

There is a greater good than freedom, one that can never fail (1 Cor. 13:8). *Community* (Love) is The Good greater than can be thought. As such, love is a suitable *Summum Bonum* for human persons meant for perfection in the *image of God*. This brings us to the end of our analysis of what God is like, and begs the question of theodicy. If man is intended for ontological perfection, but falls short of that standard on account of the freedom necessary for it to obtain, then what hope do we really have? It seems a miracle is needed. Perhaps *One* has been given.⁸⁴

The Anselmian Witness

Many features of the human life are easily definable, and therefore quantifiable. Even evils are quantified by human society. For instance, the heinousness of a crime determines the length of a prison sentence or size of a monetary penalty. Whether such is appropriate or effective is a debate for another paper. What has emerged from this chapter is that God's *being* necessarily obtains in a *Community* bound by Love freely given. There is no available metric with which to quantify the value of love—even when dramatically delimited to contingent human experience.

Since the value of *Community* is indescribably beautiful, and inexpressibly true, Love is 'that which nothing greater can be thought.'⁸⁵ Free beings united in Love is the greatest possible good—for God on the basis of who He is—and for human persons on the basis of what we *ought* to become. As evidenced by centuries of poetry, art, philosophy, and the soul-stirring miracle that obtains when a piano becomes one (*echad*) with a cello—the value of love transcends human thought. *Community* (Love) is confirmed by the Anselmian constraint of maximal greatness as the first principle of a perfect God, and the human *telos* in His image.

⁸⁴ Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will*, Trans. Thomas Williams (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1993), 1-2, 30.

⁸⁵ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 12-13.

Conclusion: The Explanatory Ultimate

The first three chapters set out to answer an ultimate preliminary question. If God exists, what is He really like? The Pauline test was applied toward recognizing an eternal feature of God's nature manifest in the lives of human persons. Paul insists that what may be known of God is clearly seen beyond excuse (Rom. 1:19-20). Likewise, the Anselmian test has been applied toward identifying a component of human value that is 'greater than that which can be thought.'

This chapter argued that both testaments of the Bible reveal God to be a self-existent ontological *Community*. Such is evidenced by the Old Testament's assertion that "YHVH is *echad*" (Deut. 6:4)—and the New Testament's assertion that "God is Love" (1 John 4:7). An argument followed showing *community* to be properly basic to human teleology as evidenced by the basic human need for affirmation from others.

Next, the value of community was analyzed and demonstrated to exceed human comprehension. The value potentials contained within human communities with God and others supply a sufficient reason for a God of perfect value to create a world with value distinct from, yet ultimately purposed for Himself. God's *being* is clearly imaged in human families in biblical order—each a growing *community* of incommensurable value (Deut. 7:9).

In conclusion, *Love* is recognized as the fundamental nature of God. As such, Love is the bedrock axiom of all reality. The *Community* nature of God is the explanatory ultimate of all contingent *being* and *meaning*. Likewise, *community* supplies each human person with accessible knowledge to what we fundamentally are—free persons who lack *being* absent life in community with God. With *Love* as the Axiom (John 14:6), the following chapter will identify the means and warrant for human moral reasoning and recognize definitions to basic moral terms. If an answer to the problem of evil is to be *meaningful*—the problem must itself have *meaning*.

Chapter Four

Reasonable Epistemic Access: Or Morality Sez Who?

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Isaiah 5:20

With *Community* recognized as the nature of God and His design for human persons, this chapter gives an account of human access to moral meaning. Such access is indispensable to warranting an answer to the problem of evil in the form of a theodicy. By proposing a *possible* solution to the problem of evil, the defender may appeal to possible worlds, possible word meanings, and thus *possibly* provide a convincing argument with little meaningfully at stake. As important as Plantinga's free will defense is, it is modest in just this way. Plantinga acknowledges that his defense needs not be true—just possible.¹ As a theodicy, this project risks giving *the answer*. Yet a meaningful answer to the problem of evil depends on the *meaning* of the problem. Of course, rightly understanding any problem depends upon answering preliminary questions, recognizing basic definitions, and identifying an appropriate standard for comparison.

Recall that the physician who gives chemotherapy to a healthy patient offers torture, not treatment. The only difference between torture and treatment obtains in the meaning of cancer as understood by an oncologist who is educated in proper cell function, and committed to helping their patient. Likewise, to be meaningfully helpful, an answer to evil depends upon a right understanding of reality's proper function. Such depends upon two elements. First is to gain an accurate understanding of what the word *God* means. Such has been the project of the last three chapters. Second is to understand the meaning of *evil*. What is evil? Alas, this question is not preliminary. To understand the meaning of evil, one first must ask: "What is good?"

¹ Plantinga, "Metaphysics of Freedom," 108.

Asylum for Socrates: Embracing the Euthyphro Dilemma

Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil. Proverbs 4:27

One of the most appealed to resources to support arguments from evil is the dialogue by Plato entitled *Euthyphro*. A famous moral dilemma is contained therein which has been deconstructed and anachronistically reformulated: “Is an action morally good because God wills it—or does God will an action because it is morally good.”² This is often called the *Euthyphro dilemma*. Those paying close attention might call it a “Euthyphro-style dilemma.”³ We argue that it is nothing of the sort. Rather by installing meaning into Plato’s classic which neither Plato, Socrates, nor Euthyphro had in mind, modern scholars adulterate the message and have missed Socrates’ whole point. That is what happens when interpretation is prioritized over ontology and epistemology. Meaning is installed into reality rather than discovered there.⁴

Norman Geisler notices that there has been an evolution of priority in the thinking of man as it has moved through premodern, modern, and postmodern chapters.⁵ Premodern thought prioritized ontology. It was most important to understand what something was. Only then could it rightly be understood. An authority crisis eventually ensued as Christendom held the meaning of God secret, and sold it piecemeal by way of the most effective marketing plan ever conceived. Hence Martin Luther’s famous note, and the bloody Reformation that followed.

With the arrival of modernism, good questions began to be asked. “What do we know” gave way to “how do we know it?” Epistemology replaced ontology as the priority in modern thought leading to a chess match between rationalists like Descartes and Leibniz and skeptics

² Antony, “Perfect Piety,” 70-72; Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, Ch.2.

³ Baggett & Walls, 91-92.

⁴ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 9-10.

⁵ Ibid.

and empiricists like Nietzsche and Hume.⁶ Now that postmodernism has firmly taken hold, human thought priorities have evolved once more. Being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology) have given way to *interpretation* (hermeneutics).⁷ Today it is the interpretation of the individual that warrants their knowledge and being: “I identify as—that is my truth—therefore, I am.”

Notice the explicit reversal in the above. Likewise, notice that humans have adopted the role of assigning meaning to reality—even to God (Isa. 14:13-14). On postmodernism, a *man* is no longer a male human person made in the image of God, knowable by the revelation of nature and Scripture, and only rightly interpreted as such. Postmodernism withholds the definition of *man*, allowing it to be constructed through interpretation. Thus, human creatures have adopted the attitude: “I am the truth.” The problem is that the Creator of human persons makes the very same claim (John 1:1-5; 14:6). Who is right—the Author or the interpreter? Socrates might ask modern philosophers the same question. Like Christ, Socrates said one thing, but has been forced by a postmodern audience to mean something else. What Socrates really said is important.

Socrates was about to stand trial for the crimes of *impiety* against the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens. If found guilty, he would be executed. When Socrates confronted his own problem of meaning, the stakes could not have been higher for him. Atheists should consider the temperature of Socrates’ sandals as they parse his meaning in the dialogues. Were they in the same foxhole as Socrates—well, clichés are cliché for a reason.

Since impiety was going to get him killed, Socrates wanted to know what *piety* really was. Euthyphro was a passerby taking his father to court for neglecting a servant which led to his death. Socrates thought that Euthyphro must be a serious expert on piety, so he interviews him in

⁶ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 9-10.

⁷ Ibid.

the hope of solving his *problem of meaning*. When asked to define *piety*, Euthyphro responds that piety is that which is loved by the gods.⁸ Socrates is unimpressed by this since the gods each loved different things. Socrates essentially responds, “loved by which gods?”⁹ Euthyphro begins to see the problem and offers that piety is that which is loved by “all the gods.”¹⁰ Socrates, less impressed than before poses his famous dilemma: “The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”¹¹

This is perhaps the second most important ontological question ever asked. It would only be eclipsed four and a half centuries later when the adopted son of a Galilean carpenter turned to His disciples and asked: “but who do you say that I am” (Matt. 16:15)? Ultimately the Euthyphro dialogue ends in despair with Socrates’ problem of meaning unresolved, and the dilemma left hanging for Plato’s readers to ponder. We have been wrestling with it ever since. Soon after, Socrates was put to death for the crime of impiety.¹²

In *Euthyphro*, Plato writes of Socrates’ pressured interest to notice an explanatory ultimate for *right* human behavior (*piety*). If Socrates is going to be judged by a standard, then he wants to understand the warrant for that standard. Socrates recognized that the prevailing metaphysic of Greek polytheism lacked the resources to provide the needed explanatory ultimate. Being a genius, Socrates knew that if something is pious merely because it is loved by the gods, then piety is nothing more than the arbitrary tastes of a group of fickle superbeings.

⁸ Plato, *Euthyphro*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, accessed September 13, 2022 (The Internet Classics Archive), <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Copan & Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 159-160.

Moreover, since the gods do not consistently agree on anything for long (see Homer)—piety as an immutable divine standard cannot exist. On the other hand, if the gods love something because it is pious, then the gods are not the explanatory ultimate of piety at all, and the metaphysical question is left unanswered. *Euthyphro* is one of the best available examples of a vicious explanatory regress. Every definition provided by Euthyphro begged the question of another definition. Socrates' demand for each one eventually prompts Euthyphro's retreat.

So, what is piety? Socrates was not posing a problem of evil to show that piety could exist independently of a perfect standard as some moral atheists currently argue.¹³ Quite the opposite. Socrates noticed that the needed explanatory ultimate for piety had not been properly recognized, and that Euthyphro was begging the question. Socrates was orbiting the same Truth that drew in Anselm like a gravity well. It is ontologically necessary that a perfect Being exist to ground being—and by entailment, ground the *meaning* of being.

The transcendental explorations and metaphysical developments that followed in Socrates' student Plato, and then in Plato's student Aristotle evidence the importance of Socrates' ontological questions. Plato offered *the forms* as the eternal ideals which all created things represent. Plato correctly noticed that the creation is meant to *image* its explanatory ultimate.¹⁴ Later, Aristotle noticed the need for an originating cause and organizer of meaning—an *Unmoved Mover* of reality.¹⁵ Perhaps his interest in preliminary questions owes much to Socrates having asked so many of them. Aristotle's life's work consisted in trying to identify irreducible concepts and give an account for them.

¹³ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong "Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality," In *Is Goodness Without God Good Enough: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, eds. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2009), 105-111.

¹⁴ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 18-20; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 513-531.

¹⁵ Moreland & Craig, 513-531.

The metaphysical progress of Aristotle comes to Christianity by way of Thomas Aquinas and is startling in truth value.¹⁶ Each philosopher mentioned sought the explanatory ultimate of *meaning*, and with it of right human behavior. What conclusion did they draw in common? The same conclusion implied by Socrates' preliminary question to Euthyphro. No contingent being, or pantheon of contingent superbeings can possibly be the explanatory ultimate of *meaning*.

Contrary to popular appeal, Socrates is not making an argument that meaning exists independently of a suitable explanatory ultimate. Rather, he is demonstrating that this ultimate does not exist in human beings. Neither does it exist in the Greek gods since each is demonstrably fallible and will eventually die. As a consequence, the Socratic moral dilemma does not disprove the need for the Anselmian God—it altogether necessitates Him!

Let us review the postmodern reformulation: Is an action good because God wills it, or does God will an action because it is good? On the basis of the argument that God is a being perfect in *Community*, the adulterated dilemma is vacuous of truth value. The first horn reduces to a tautology by asking: "Is something good because it is good?"¹⁷ The second horn reduces to category fallacy by ignoring God's necessity and the creative nature of His efficient causation.

Once again, the order of operations has been jumbled resulting in nonsense. God by virtue of His perfect *Being* simply is the explanatory ultimate. The will of a Perfect Being is *de re*, a *perfect* will. Likewise, goodness cannot supervene on God any more than can life, truth, and beauty. As a *Community* bound in love, God simply *is* the Good. It is not within God's power to be anything else (Mark 10:18). Such is the meaning of *God* in the Anselmian sense.¹⁸

¹⁶ Edgar & Oliphint, *Apologetics Past and Present*, 395-402.

¹⁷ Antony, "Perfect Piety," 70. Antony recognizes the tautology and rationalizes it with her moral view. As a consequence, she like Euthyphro has chosen to live with her view's weak explanatory power, and ultimately begs the same questions that Euthyphro did. Antony's interest in *Euthyphro* is appropriate, but it is unfruitful thus far.

¹⁸ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, Ch.5; Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 6.

The Ontology of Love: The Meaning of Good and Evil

Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. Matthew 5:47

From classical times to the present, many Christian philosophers have argued that evil is merely a *privation* of something good, just as darkness is a privation of light, or silence a privation of sound. While these simple analogies can help us make a beginning, they are ultimately unsatisfactory since both darkness and silence are *very good* things in their proper function.¹⁹ Even so, Augustine noticed that evil cannot exist on its own, but only becomes real as a parasite on something good. In short, only a potentially good thing can become evil.²⁰

Augustine's idea of privation is compelling, but it does not provide a locus for evil's parasitic existence on its own. Some scholars argue that Augustine's platonic influences excessively influenced his theology at times.²¹ Is evil some kind of negative *form* which selectively supervenes only on good things? Moreover, if the devil himself is the archetype of personal evil, then in what sense can it be argued that he is a good thing?²²

Significant conceptual progress was later made by Thomas Aquinas who following Aristotle instead of Plato noticed that goodness requires an ultimate efficient cause which allows for no logical regression, and supplies meaning to the value of one's *potential* being. In short, Thomas argues for an ultimate standard which human persons are to seek as their *telos*—that is, the ultimate good and true happiness to be found in one's purposed end.²³

¹⁹ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 11-22; Walls, *Things That Matter*, 17.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions & Enchiridion*, 239-241.

²¹ Feinberg, *Faces of Evil*, 69-71; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 3. It is difficult to nail down Augustine's view of the relation of evil to human free will. His early anti-Manichean writings support free will, but his later anti-Pelagian writings seem not to. The problem of meaning is real, even for a luminary like Augustine.

²² This insight is owed to the researcher's brilliant wife Brenda Huls. In attempting a cogent privation argument in conversation, the non-existence of evil has been a source of warranted confusion. It is hoped that this section provides the needed linguistic and conceptual clarifications towards an accessible privation response to evil.

²³ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1-2.3.8.

Of course, the human *telos* cannot be informed by an imperfect *potential* being—or even by a pantheon of imperfect potential super-beings since they all will eventually die. Death is obviously not the locus of ultimate happiness. Rather, humanity’s teleological standard must obtain in one *fully actual Being*—that is to say, in God.²⁴

When Socrates posed his famous question to Euthyphro, it was because he had precisely diagnosed the above *problem of being*. The atheist’s suggestion that Socrates believed human morality to have obtained as a brute fact is both obtuse anachronism and careless eisegesis. Thus, the atheist reading of *Euthyphro* reduces to interpretive fantasy and is entirely without warrant. No matter how much one might wish it, postmodern interpretations are powerless to install meaning into classic texts penned two and a half thousand years ago. With this epistemological fact established, we now return to Socrates’ life and death question?

Quid Est Bonum?

Thomas Aquinas describes evil as “the privation of a due perfection.”²⁵ Thomas importantly noticed that “evil lessens the good composed of a subject and its proper perfection insofar as the perfection is removed and the subject remains.”²⁶ Thomas’ description is given in the context of a discussion on whether evil is contained in good as Augustine seemed to suggest. Given this paper’s comparison of power and love as competing explanatory ultimates, this is a live philosophical problem for theists—especially for Christians.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5; Campbell, *Worldviews*, Ch. 6; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 2.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo*, Trans. Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.2.

²⁶ Ibid. Notice the term “lessens” as applied to goodness in this quotation. Thomas does not argue that the goodness of a thing is annihilated by evil; merely that it is reduced from due perfection. Thus, *total depravity* is an overstatement of mankind’s lack of holiness. Noticing this distinction by no means reduces the soteriological need for atonement in Christ. It does however illuminate God’s motivation to save sinners. He loves human persons because we are especially purposed for that due perfection. The love of God is the human *telos*.

Aquinas brilliantly solved the above conundrum by noticing an important difference between actual and potential *being*, with God exemplifying the former, and human persons representative of the latter.²⁷ Ultimately, it is the potential being of human persons that gives rise to incomplete being, and with it the possibility of evil.²⁸ Thomas is a *bona fide* genius, and the careful scholar might conclude that his arguments amount to a theodicy. In fact, they do. The problem is that there has been a profound entropy of ontological understanding as humanity has disavowed being for the sake of knowing—and now knowing for the sake of interpreting.²⁹

A second challenge is that Thomas' philosophy is highly sophisticated. Thomas is a paradigm of one who loved God with all his mind as evidenced by a life tightly integrated with his worldview.³⁰ As a consequence, Thomas' meaning can be difficult to follow unless one spends time studying him carefully in light of the wider metaphysical conversation with which he engaged. Unfortunately, such only occurs in select seminaries and philosophy departments since light reading Thomas is not—and neither are his sources. So, how might Christianity's scholastic treasures be disseminated to a wider audience? Preparing such an attempt is a goal of this project, and perhaps ought to be an apologetic priority in the 21st century. One need not be a Thomistic philosopher to *meaningfully* understand the problem of evil. One needs only recognize and remember that they are a human person whose proper function is *to be*.³¹

Chapter three argued that Love uniting a Community of free Persons is the bedrock axiom of reality. We argue that the *being* of God is the ontological fact from which all other facts

²⁷ Aquinas, *QDM*, 1.2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 9-10.

³⁰ Moreland, *Love with Your Mind*, 94.

³¹ Copan & Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, Ch. 10; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 2.

derive meaning. Thus, God Himself is the *actual* to which Thomas refers.³² Likewise, Thomas insists that the actual perfection of God contains no evil at all.³³ Elsewhere, Thomas argues that *being* and *goodness* are equivalent³⁴—and that human happiness obtains in the final end of *knowing* the greatest possible good, that being God Himself.³⁵ On the Thomistic system it seems that there is but one way to know what *good* truly is in its fullness—know God.

Of course, protests are made that human beings can reject knowledge of God and still know what *good* is—and even be ‘good people.’³⁶ Strictly speaking, and in a relativized sense, we cannot disagree.³⁷ However, the action of rejecting knowledge of God, and the reality of disavowing that knowledge are entirely different things.

It was argued above that knowledge of God is self-evident to human persons on the basis of a fundamental need for *community* (properly, a need for God). It was likewise demonstrated that this knowledge cannot be switched off. On the basis of what we are, human persons require the affirmation of reality and their peers (properly God and their neighbors) in order to *be* human persons at all.³⁸ Paul taught that what may be known of God is manifest in human persons and clearly seen beyond excuse (Rom. 1:19-20). As a consequence, a human person can no more disavow their knowledge of God than they can disavow their knowledge of how to take a breath. Such knowledge is hardwired into human design. Thus, human knowledge of God can be corrupted or taken for granted—but it cannot be summarily discarded.

³² Aquinas, *QDM*, 1.2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5.

³⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1-2.3.8.

³⁶ David Baggett & Jerry L Walls, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 243-254; Craig, *On Guard*, 219-227.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 5; Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, Ch.2.

Paul noticed that the fundamental knowledge of God was *suppressed*, but also that it was clearly seen beyond excuse (Rom. 1:18-20). *Suppressed* is translated from the Greek κατεχόντων (*katechonton*). This is an explicit action term containing the meaning of holding back, restraining, or even arresting so as to imprison.³⁹ None of these actions are intelligible if the object being suppressed does not exist. In an ironic sense, the need for human persons to suppress the knowledge of God is contrarian evidence of His reality. No one can hold a beach ball beneath the surface of a swimming pool unless the beach ball is there to be held back. The scale of that analogy is woefully insufficient. Perhaps a human person holding back their knowledge of God is more like trying to hold back the ocean tide with a kitchen mop and a bucket. Avoiding God requires continuous hard labor.

With Aquinas, it is concluded that *goodness* and *being* metaphysically amount to the same thing, that being the compound-oneness of God—*Community*. Since the source of *being* is an ontologically necessary Community, it is entailed that Community (Love) is Good *Simpliciter*.⁴⁰ God is *The Good*.⁴¹ By noticing the locus of moral meaning in the *being* of God, the definition of *good* becomes self-evident.

Good:

D1: [noun] The perfect state of *Being* which obtains in *actual* loving *Community*—that is, in God.

D2: [adjective] The quality of *being* by which an object *comports to* the perfection inherent in the *potential* of its design—and ultimately in the *actuality* of its Designer.

D3: [adverb] The quality of a causally efficient action taken by a moral agent described by D1 and D2.⁴²

³⁹ Strong's Greek 2722.

⁴⁰ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 10. If God is *simple*, He is thus as a logically irreducible Community.

⁴¹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 92-102.

⁴² Notice carefully that we are not defining *good*. Rather, we are recognizing the definition of good in the *Being* of God. Goodness has *meaning* only because God is the Good.

Quid Est Malum?

With a cogent definition for *good* now recognized, it is possible to gain a clearer understanding of the parasitic nature of evil. While privation is certainly an important aspect of evil, it is incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying. It is hard to ground the argument that things without existence are evil when horrors in our world are caused by malevolent agents that do in fact exist. Once again, we are stuck with an ontological *problem of meaning*.

Today's equivocated language arrives from antiquity having undergone significant entropy. Important examples have been treated above. Recovering meaning is becoming ever more difficult as interpretation is widely seen as the creative force behind both *meaning* and *being*. In focus here are the concepts of *being* and *existence*. While these may seem reflexively interchangeable, there is a crucial distinction of a teleological nature. Not all things that exist have *being*. Noticing this distinction is the key to understanding what evil really is.⁴³

Were the lens permanently removed from a camera, would it *be* a camera anymore? Or is it merely a useless collection of camera like parts? Each camera part exists as an individual, but the camera only has *being* when the parts coalesce as a community in proper function. To this functional end (*telos*), the presence of a lens is altogether necessary.⁴⁴ Careful reflection will reveal that not one feature of functional reality is exempted from the constraint of *being* obtaining through *functional community* (Ps. 19; Rom. 1-2). Therefore, evil is not merely the privation of a good. As Thomas noticed, evil is the privation of a due perfection from a subject in which the subject remains. In short, *evil* is a privation of proper function in that which has been purposed for goodness.⁴⁵

⁴³ Aquinas, *QDM*, 1.2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Plantinga, *Warrant & Proper Function*, 14-17; 21-42.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Moreover, the better a thing is purposed to be, the worse it will become if it goes wrong. C.S. Lewis noticed that it takes archangels make the worst devils. The greatest of potential goods actualize the worst of actual horrors when they go wrong. Thus, the degree of evil within Satan is indicative of his once *potential* goodness. Perhaps the greatest of all possible evils is a human species created for community with God and each other, but forever united only in their hatred of God and each other. The biblical name for this unfortunate state of affairs is *hell*.⁴⁶

Indeed, a privation of proper function is apparent in every imperfection which pollutes a good creation.⁴⁷ For instance, an out of tune piano certainly exists. It may even sound fine to a tone-deaf amateur. But when a professional cellist like Yo-Yo Ma sits down with his perfectly tuned instrument for a duet, a privation of due perfection will soon become apparent. From the first note, all will recognize a privation of proper function in the form of *discordant* instruments. Each musician exists, but a *duet* does not—since the sounds from each instrument defeat instead of give *being* to the other.⁴⁸

Moreover, the apparent disunity is an offense to a human sense which is fine-tuned by design to hear, recognize, and love the indescribable beauty and inexpressible truth of community in harmony. While only Yo-Yo Ma may understand the problem with sufficient expertise to describe it theoretically, everyone with functional hearing knows that it is a problem. It is self-evident. How ought such a problem be solved?

⁴⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 92; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 215.

⁴⁷ It is a tired cliché that “all analogies break down.” This is often given as an excuse to avoid the entailments of a particularly good one when it presents challenging data to one’s worldview commitments. As a result, analogies are not given in what follows. Instead, illustrations are made. The difference is that these illustrations do not break down. Even if presented in counterfactual scenarios, the truth value of the illustrations are self-evident and clear beyond reasonable excuse. To abandon their meaning is to abandon meaning all together.

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 175-178; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch.1.

Should Yo-Yo Ma really twist the knobs of his perfectly tuned cello to align with the unstable reference of a *bad* piano? Or should the piano be tuned and brought into conformity with the due perfection for which it was designed by reference to a transcendent standard? The *right* answer is obvious. But what happens if we increase the scope of the illustration?

Imagine paying hundreds of dollars for box seats at the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Now imagine that each member of this *potential* miracle of community has embraced reader-response interpretation, epistemological relativism, and ontological non-realism.⁴⁹ Let us suppose that each musician has licensed themselves to install *meaning* onto their charts, and *being* into their instruments and themselves without due regard to the intention of their composer, or to the specific nature of their instrument's due perfection and proper function. Brace yourselves.

As the composer raises his wand, each musician adopts proper position, looking like the experts they are. A hush (silence in proper function) falls over a hopeful audience, and at long last—the cue. Chaos ensues as 106 expert musicians abandon their *potential* for the sake of playing to their own truth. A flutist identifies as a percussionist and beats his instrument on a music-stand out of time. A percussionist identifies as a flutist and blows across the end of her drumstick to no notable effect. Instead of *functioning* as a community by design, 106 solos are attempted. Each musician competes for the affirmation of the other musicians, the composer, and the audience. The results are manifestly hellish—confusion, chaos, and pain. If only it could end. When the *good* of relieved silence resumes, is applause really warranted? Of course not.

On account of individuals stealing sovereignty from their composer and ignoring his copyrighted symphony, the *potential* for a miracle has given way to an *actual* horror. At that moment, each musician of the New York Philharmonic exists as an individual soloist, but they

⁴⁹ Geisler, *Apologetics*, 9-11; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, Ch. 9,18.

are not members of a reference class orchestra. By seeking individual power, they have fallen from due perfection and lost the glory intended for them by their composer. Indeed, if any member prioritizes individual power and an inordinate desire for affirmation over the compound *being* of the orchestra, they steal *being* from their community, and the orchestra ceases to exist.⁵⁰

God has designed humanity to function as the ultimate reference class community. Human persons exist for the good purpose of freely giving ourselves to God and our neighbors, and receiving our *being* in community as God and our neighbors freely give themselves to us.⁵¹ When this occurs, an indescribably beautiful, and inexpressibly true miracle of harmony obtains in the form of loving community. This dream is called Heaven, and there are reflections of it here on earth. A reference class orchestra is but one example. A loving family living in the image of God is a better one.⁵² Outside of life in God's love, *homosapiens* may exist as individuals, but we do so without *being* members of the reference class community for which we are designed—that is, without *being one* with God Himself (Jn. 17). By noticing the locus of human meaning in the *being* of God, the definition of *evil* becomes self-evident.

Evil:

D1: [noun] An imperfect state of *being* which obtains in *disunity* with loving *Community*—that is, *against* God.

D2: [adjective] The quality of *being* by which an object *conflicts with* the perfection inherent in the *potential* of its design—and ultimately in the *actuality* of its Designer.

D3: [adverb] The quality of a causally efficient action taken by a moral agent described by D1 and D2.⁵³

⁵⁰ Meditation on this concept is helpful toward understanding the exclusive nature of Heaven's perfections, and God's disallowance of any pollutions therein. Simply put, God does not allow Heaven to be blackmailed by those who choose not to belong there. Walls, *Things That Matter*, 157; Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 118.

⁵¹ Ibid., Ch.1,7; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch.1-2.

⁵² Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 1.

⁵³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11; Aquinas, *Summa*, 1-2.3.8; Baggett & Walls, *God and Cosmos*, Ch. 9; Campbell, *Worldviews*, 248-251; Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 6-7; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 1-2.

In summary, *good* is a positive value term entailed from the ontological axiom *Love*. Likewise, *evil* is a negative value term entailed from the negative ontological axiom *sin*. Since *Love* is equivalent with *Being* (John 15:1-13, 17; 1 John 4), and *sin* is equivalent with *non-being* (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23)—these axioms are categorically irreducible, and therefore suitable as a moral explanatory ultimate.⁵⁴

Recall that *sin* describes that which falls short of the due perfection for which it is designed. Whether this obtains in a ‘D-flat’ played over a song composed in ‘C-major,’ as rust on a trumpet, or rust on a trumpeter’s expertise as a consequence of laziness or lack of care—each is a privation of proper function, and a falling short of the due perfection for which each is purposed. Goodness is *Being* as experienced by God in *Community*. Sin is simply the pollution of the due perfection of community in a created subject purposed for goodness. In short, Love is existence consummated in *Being* (Life), and sin is existence stifled by *non-being* (death).

The Teleology of Love: The Meaning of Right and Wrong

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.
Matthew 10:39

Perhaps nothing is more repugnant to the non-theist than the concept of a divine-command theory of ethics. After all, who is God to tell us what we shall and shall not do? Some caricature God as a spiteful taskmaster eagerly awaiting the opportunity to judge some minor iniquity with everlasting torture. In what sense does the punishment fit the crime?⁵⁵ After all, if something is *good* for no reason but that a pernicious deity prefers it, then Euthyphro style charges of arbitrariness have sharp horns indeed.

⁵⁴ Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 266.

⁵⁵ Keller, *Reason for God*, Ch. 5; Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, Ch. 8.

In recent work, Christian moral philosophers like Robert Adams, David Baggett, William Lane Craig, and Jerry Walls (among others)—have noticed a critical distinction between moral values (good and evil), and ethical duties (right and wrong).⁵⁶ Noticing this difference is overwhelmingly helpful. It was noted in chapter three that a human person cannot contain the information in God in the same sense that a photograph cannot contain the information in a man. Thus, while each human person is created for goodness, none are capable of actualizing every good potential or being every good thing. Since *ought* implies *can*, none have a duty to try.⁵⁷

For example, a bright high school senior with a passion for animals may choose to become a veterinarian, or decide to be a biology teacher instead. Either vocation images God in important ways, and carries the potential to do great good. Even so, she can only choose one path. She is not duty-bound to make a particular choice. If she elects one over the other, she has not made the *wrong* choice.⁵⁸ Her duty before God and her neighbors is merely to make a *good* choice. So, how does one fail in their duty to God and their neighbors by doing the *wrong* thing?

Our senior may choose to disavow all of her good *potentials* and waste her God-given brilliance by becoming absorbed in herself and her own appetites. By lying, cheating, and stealing to finance one more hit of whatever it is that grips her (think seven deadly sins), she will have failed in her *duty* to *be* of *value*. By giving herself only to herself, she will have failed to *be* a self-giving member of a *community* after God's image. She is alone—and she is not good. Indeed, there is no such thing as a functional individual since function is entailed by community.

It seems that warranting a divine command theory of ethics rests upon the order of operations distinction dividing chapters two and three of this paper. Does goodness follow from

⁵⁶ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 47.

⁵⁷ Baggett & Walls, 69-70; Schlesinger, "Evil and Injustice, 44-47.

⁵⁸ Craig, *On Guard*, 216-218.

sovereign power? Or does sovereign power belong to The Good? The Socratic question bears repeating: “which God?” If one is under a divine command, and therefore duty bound to do some things and abstain from others—they like Socrates (and all right-thinking human persons) ought to be interested in the moral nature of the lawgiver.

It makes a cosmic difference of competence whether divine commands come from Zeus, Aries, Allah, Mormon-Elohim, Shiva, the dark side of the force, or the Anselmian God of Christianity who is *Community* (Love) by necessity, and that which nothing greater can be thought.⁵⁹ If the divine command comes from the latter of these, then *de re*, it is a loving command and can be trusted to promote one’s proper function as an *imager* of the divine Love.⁶⁰ If this meaning of *God* is embraced, it is clearly seen how human persons have a genuine *duty* to *be* human persons in a *community* after God’s image.⁶¹

Let us return to the divine command which contains all other divine commands (Matt. 22:40). “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4). Recall the importance of the imperative “you shall love.” If the divine command entails a deterministic outcome, then human obedience is a vacuous concept. By secret instigation and direction, all carry out the divine will as a logically necessary *must*. Such love is *actual* in the Thomistic sense, but meaningless from the human perspective.⁶² Since a responsibility entails a genuine ability to respond, no *duty* to do *right* is *actual* for any human in the normal sense of these terms. This *problem of meaning* leaves the teleological value of human persons shrouded in mystery.

⁵⁹ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 12-13.

⁶⁰ Keller, *Reason For God*, 72-78; Walls, *Things That Matter*, Ch. 3.

⁶¹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 103-125; Baggett & Walls, *God and Cosmos*, Ch. 9.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1.

However, if “you shall love” contains the ultimate human *ought*, then human persons have a genuine *duty* under God to carry out certain imperatives and abstain from those actions incompatible with human *being* in *community*. As Aquinas noticed, it is the *potential* to carry out our duties that makes our *being* possible.⁶³ But the same potential renders the sin of separation and loneliness possible as well. If our *potential being* is to become *actual*, then we are duty bound as human persons to do the *right* thing and *be*.

In light of the above, the distinction between moral issues of value, and ethical issues of duty can be narrowed a step further. The moral (*axiological*) issue is essentially ontological, having to do with one’s *being*. By definition, a *good* person is one who lives and has *being* in an actualized community of love after the image of God. The ethical (*deontic*) issue is essentially teleological. By definition, a *good* person operates according to their design by freely choosing to do *right* towards their proper end (*telos*) of life in a community of love after the image of God.

Now, if God has created human persons to live in harmonious community with Himself and each other, and the meaning of that harmony is supplied by the free choices of human persons to comport with the potential perfection of their design—then it stands to reason that God must let human persons in on His cosmic plan insofar as it pertains to us. If human persons are to function properly, then something like an operating manual is necessary to get us up and running. Such is the design and proper function of *revelation* (Ps. 119:105).

Therefore, divine commands are not an arbitrary list of meaningless directions from a pernicious child who created the world out of cosmic boredom. They are limitations on human *being*, meaningfully given by a Good Designer who created because He is eternally motivated by His perfect nature as Love. Divine commands are something like the limitations section in

⁶³ Aquinas, *QDM*, 1.2.

humanity's operating manual. They should make sense to us because our limits are built into the human machine through reason, sensation, and the moral faculty of conscience (Rom. 2:12-16).

Notice that a car engine has limits as indicated by the big red line on the RPM gauge. To ignore the limit is to damage the engine. If a habit is made of this, heat and pressure will eventually tear the engine apart. Once this occurs it will no longer *be* an engine—just a useless collection of engine like remains.⁶⁴ Ignorance of the limitation is no excuse. There's a red line on the gauge, a red dash-light to back it up, clearly marked warnings in the owner's manual—and the ever-worsening smell of burning oil as the state of the engine's *being* worsens. Ignoring the limits of proper function produces manifestly evident consequences. So too with human persons.

Should it be an offensive concept that human teleology is substantially similar to that described above since we too are designed for a very good function (Gen. 1:27-31)? Indeed, no functional system in the cosmos is exempt. It is our *natural law* to be human persons after the image of God.⁶⁵ It is the *good* in the potential of our *being* that renders God's commands meaningful. However, since God is that which nothing greater can be thought, to be given *being* in the community of God's love carries with it the greatest conceivable duty—the duty to *be*.

When a brilliant musician is invited to join the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, they achieve the pinnacle of their vocation after many years of sacrifice, discipline, and development. When they accept the invitation and join, each embraces a *duty* to 105 other reference class musicians, and to one world class composer. Notice carefully that most orchestra instruments can only play one note at a time. For triune chords to be formed, each musician must give *being* to the *community*, and receive their own *being* in return under the composer's ordered direction.

⁶⁴ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 81.

⁶⁵ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 280-287; Lewis, *Christianity*, Ch. 1-2; Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 83-99.

No individual musician can possibly accomplish the *good* in the composer's design on their own. For the composer's genius to become manifest, all 106 members of the orchestra must unite to function as *one*. To this end (*telos*), the marks on each musician's chart are nothing less than compositional commands. For the orchestra to achieve *being*, each musician has a *duty* to play the *right* notes in the *right* time—and to abstain from playing the *wrong* notes in the *wrong* time. When each musician plays as they *ought* to under the ordered direction of the composer, a miracle of indescribable beauty and inexpressible truth is given to each member of the orchestra, to their composer, and to an enraptured audience who hears, recognizes, and loves the manifest miracle that is a *community* in proper function.

As the consummate crescendo builds toward its triumphant *telos*, the composer's wand makes a final flourish, and the orchestra together becomes still. A heavy silence falls over the auditorium. It is not a privation. It is a far better quiet than that previously described. It is not the embarrassed sound of awkward relief. It is the excited hush of a renewed anticipation—one brimming with joy. Long seconds pass. Finally, the composer steps down from his high station, bows low, and then rises again opening his arms to a miracle become actual—his community of living harmony. The happy silence reaches a critical mass and bursts. As the lights come up, praise and adoration fill the auditorium. It is the *true moment* every musician hopes to experience—one in which happy tears are shed and then wiped away without shame.

Those outside in the dark and cold hear the muffled applause amongst the cacophony of a busy city street. They can but wonder what the fuss is all about. Inside, it is a different story. What has each musician justly received in exchange for the gift of themselves to their composer, to each other, and to their craft? They have received love, affirmation, and glory. They have

received their very *being*. At that joyous moment, each member of the orchestra is become a musician indeed. If only such a moment could last forever?

Right

D1: [adverb]: The quality of a free action by which one obeys competent authority for the sake of *being* in a *community*. Right action is fully actualized through *harmonious oneness* with God and one's neighbors.

Wrong

D2: [adverb]: The quality of a free action by which one disobeys competent authority for the sake of promoting *oneself* at the expense of their *community*. Wrong action is fully actualized by *discordant isolation* from God and one's neighbors.

The Grand Sez You: Socrates Is a Double Agent

What may be known of God is manifest in them...they are without excuse.
Romans 1:19-20

In a now famous essay, Arthur Allen Leff soberly acknowledges the *problem of being* examined in this chapter as it applies to the *problem of meaning* examined in the first three. Leff's contribution is important and warrants a summary and brief analysis. Leff acknowledges that if any law, or normative expectation of human behavior is to have meaning, it must be grounded in a transcendent source. Leff called this "the grand sez who."⁶⁶ Leff remarks:

Putting it that way makes it clear that if we are looking for an evaluation, we must actually be looking for an *evaluator*: some machine for the generation of judgments on states of affairs. If the evaluation is to be beyond question, then the evaluator and its evaluative processes must be similarly insulated. If it is to fulfill its role, the evaluator must be the unjudged judge, the un-ruled legislator, the premise maker who rests on no premises, the un-created creator of values. Now, what would you call such a thing if it existed? You would call it Him.⁶⁷

Leff notices the inescapable fact that if God is not this transcendent standard, the need for such a standard does not conveniently evaporate. Leff continues:

⁶⁶ Arthur Allen Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," *Duke Law Journal*, No. 6 (1979): 1230.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Put briefly, if the law is "not a brooding omnipresence in the sky," then it can be only one place: in us. If we are trying to find a substitute final evaluator, it must be one of us, some of us, all of us—but it cannot be anything else. The result of that realization is what might be called an exhilarated vertigo, a simultaneous combination of an exultant "We're free of God" and a despairing "Oh God, we're free....one key question: who ultimately gets to play the role of ultimately unquestionable evaluator, a role played in supernaturally based systems by God? Who among us, that is, ought to be able to declare "law" that ought to be obeyed?⁶⁸

Notice that Leff recognizes that the moral standard must be "in us."⁶⁹ Of course, he is right. But if moral knowledge is in us, how did it get there? This question is begged by arguments from atheist moral realists like Louise Antony and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong among others. By way of an anachronistic appeal to *Euthyphro*, some dismiss competent authority from moral meaning, and have no hope of replacing it by way of a fallible human construct.⁷⁰

For instance, Shelley Kagan has attempted such a replacement with his social-contract theory of ethics grounded in a hypothetical council of perfect moral reasoners.⁷¹ Yet Kagan runs into the Pauline constraint in so far as no single created being now exists (or ever has), who is known to display (or have displayed) perfect moral reasoning. So, who is qualified to sit on Kagan's imaginary council of perfect moral reasoners? Moreover, Kagan's strategy is logically compromised. Kagan's moral contract theory can be represented as follows:

- P1. If *homosapiens* could reason perfectly, there would be human access to objective moral facts.
- P2. There is human access to objective moral facts.
- C. *Homosapiens* can reason perfectly.

Kagan's argument is formally invalid since it commits the blunder of affirming the consequent.⁷²

⁶⁸ Leff, "Unnatural Law," 1233.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Antony, "Perfect Piety," 80-81; Sinnott-Armstrong, "Adequate Foundations," 101-117.

⁷¹ Shelley Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc., 1991), 39-46.

⁷² Jonathan Michael Huls, *The Purpose of Persons*, Unpublished Academic Paper (Lynchburg, VA, Liberty University, 2021), 11-13.

What is more, Kagan cannot make an evidential retreat from logic in the style of William Rowe since there is not even one perfectly reasonable human being to which Kagan might point to lend statistical credibility to his ethical theory.⁷³ Kagan's evidential data set contains a population of zero. Thus, Kagan's moral theory lacks both logical and evidential warrant.

Also, by appealing to *Euthyphro* the atheist moral realist gains nothing better than a demonstrably imperfect humanity to install as the explanatory ultimate of goodness.⁷⁴ As a consequence they have blundered fatally and must either surrender, or embrace their own self-defeat with something much like *faith alone*. Notice that the council of moral reasoners imagined by Kagan has much in common with the Greek pantheon. Every human present would contain biases, preferences, and thought horizons that would limit their judgement. Anyone who has sat on a human board or council knows this to be a fact. As a consequence, the human appeal to *Euthyphro* to avoid God is self-defeating. Socrates is a "double-agent" with a preliminary question for any humanistic moral realist: Is an action *good* because *homosapiens* happen to like it, or do *homosapiens* like an action because it is good.⁷⁵

In the absence of an ontological locus of perfection as supplied by God as a *Community* of free persons in perfect relation, the horns of Socrates' dilemma are sharp indeed. On the first, *homosapiens* are even more fickle than Homer's gods. If we agree about something today, it will change tomorrow. Thus, any human construct of morality is bound to move. Sometimes this move would be *right*—as regards slavery for example. But sometimes the move would be *wrong*—as regards violating the divine copyright on human sexuality. In any case, if left to humans, what is *right* today will be *wrong* tomorrow. Humanism is gored by the arbitrariness

⁷³ Huls, *Purpose of Persons*, 11-13.

⁷⁴ Leff, "Unnatural Law," 1233.

⁷⁵ Huls, 5-7.

horn of this *Euthyphro* style dilemma. On the other horn, if humans like intrinsically good things, then no council of human reasoners ever created *goodness*.

Socrates did not argue for morality as a brute fact. He simply noticed that morality could not be explained by the Greek thought of his time—and specifically not by Greek theology. Socrates' philosophical son and grandson picked up his torch and made remarkable progress that is now taken for granted without epistemological responsibility. We must not forget the giant shoulders that we stand upon to see. Moreover, we must not fail to look. Leff closes his essay with one of the best moral statements to come out of the second half of the 20th century: “As things now stand, everything is up for grabs. Nevertheless: Napalming babies is bad. Starving the poor is wicked. Buying and selling each other is depraved...There is in the world such a thing as evil. [All together now:] Sez who? God help us.”⁷⁶

Human persons have a moral sense as finely tuned as our hearing is for music. We can know that the atrocities on Leff's list are *evil* as a matter of fact, in the same way that we can hear the discord of a ‘D-flat’ thumbed by a young pianist playing a recital in ‘C-major.’ The embarrassed parental grimace is not hard to imagine. But for some reason silly beyond measure, the divine one is. A *wrong* sound pollutes the community of the *good* chord and defeats it. Such is the terrible power of evil to corrupt the human community of free persons purposed for good.

All that is needed to answer Leff's challenge is the identification of a common axiom between human persons and ultimate reality—something necessary to God and contingent in human persons, as both Paul and Leff have acknowledged. That axiom is Love. Sez who? Sez you in common voice with every human person purposed for the incommensurable good of life in community with God.

⁷⁶ Leff, “Unnatural Law,” 1249.

Conclusion: Reasonable Epistemic Access

This chapter began with a close analysis of Plato's *Euthyphro* in light of modern moral arguments by atheists. It was shown that Socrates did not argue for a morality unhinged from explanatory ultimacy. On the contrary, Socrates recognized that he was about to be slain by an ethical system with no meaningful warrant. Next, definitions were recognized for the axiological terms *good* and *evil*, and the deontic terms *right* and *wrong*. It was concluded that *good* and *evil* are ontological in nature and describe *community being* (love) or lack thereof respectively (sin). It was concluded that *right* and *wrong* are terms of duty descriptive of the human responsibility to *be* in accordance with humanity's community-design. Love and sin are identified as the irreducible axioms of all meaning. As such, deconstruction of their meaning is not possible. Even so, their veracity is demonstrable by way of self-evident illustrations, such as a reference class orchestra in proper function.

It is concluded that human persons have *reasonable epistemic access* to the fundamental truth of God on the basis that we share the same fundamental truth as the first fact of our potential *being*. I AM is a *Community* (God is Love), and human persons are made to reflect His *community* image (1 John 4:7). Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (Rom 1:19-20).

Chapter Five

Whence Then Is Evil? The Community Theodicy

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

We now arrive at the solution to the classical problem of evil. Throughout this argument, two constraints have been applied to ground a reasonable understanding of God for human persons. One of these is ontological, and the other epistemological. The Anselmian constraint of maximal greatness establishes that God is a being greater than any which can be conceived, and therefore a *Community* of free Persons united in Love. The Pauline constraint of exemplary self-evidence establishes fundamental knowledge of God in human persons. God is a loving *Community* by ontological necessity. Man is made in God's image and is therefore purposed to have *being* within loving *community* as well. With our ontological foundation established, and our epistemological ultimate now recognized—we are finally warranted to rightly interpret the problem of evil.

With the arguments of this thesis substantially given, let us return to David Hume's Epicurean trilemma. Hume remarks: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? then where does evil come from?"¹ Notice that Hume's question divides on the power and goodness of God. Hume argues that on account of the reality of evil, God cannot be powerful and good at the same time. Louise Antony helpfully notices that the problem of evil does not stand against the existence of any god, but against the existence of the Anselmian God as traditionally conceived.² God could be all-good or all-powerful, but not both. We agree—almost.

¹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 44.

² Antony, "Atheism as Perfect Piety," 79.

The conclusion of this research is that Epicurus, David Hume, J.L. Mackie, William Rowe, Louise Antony, and others—are in fact substantially correct. There is a genuine *problem of evil* which exhausts the explanatory resources of a consistent Anselmian theism—if and only if that theism is *not* revealed in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Notice that Christian revelation begins in *being* (goodness), by way of *meaning* (knowledge), for a *proper function* (power). Like its cousin the Euthyphro dilemma, the problem of evil is really a helpful Socratic filter. It defeats every notional god, but *One* [*Echad*]*—the God who is Love.*

A Puzzle Constructed Upside Down: The Meaningful Problem of Evil

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5

A variety of compelling arguments are given to support rational belief in the existence of God. Many of these are biblically supported by Romans 1-2 and Psalm 19 as they speak to God's general revelation in creation. Each argument is powerful and expertly argued by various apologists. Taken together, there is a compelling cumulative case to be made for theism. But in the spirit of Socrates, it is right to ask: "which theism?" It has been argued by atheists that the reality of evil is so compelling that it defeats *any* case for theism.³ In the face of evil and suffering, Mackie went so far as to declare theistic belief "positively irrational."⁴ He is correct in every case but one. Since *community* (love) is manifest in human persons and clearly seen beyond excuse, there is *One* (*Echad*) divine candidate who yet warrants our reasonable faith.

Recall the conceptual consequences wrought by the choice to replace YHWH with The LORD, and *Elohim* with God. Both replacements have resulted in an entropy of fundamental

³ Mackie, "God and Omnipotence," 25.

⁴ Ibid.

meaning in consequence of placing pseudo-pious hermeneutic preferences logically prior to meaningful descriptions of God's ontology as given by nature and Scripture. Similarly, the theistic *problem of meaning* has polluted the logic of the classical perfect being formula.

For centuries theists have argued that God (The LORD) is “all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good”—in that order. Take careful notice of the logical flow because it is crucial. This expression moves from power (application)—to knowledge—to being, in the same way that postmodernism moves from application—to knowledge—to being. Both formulas are precisely inverted from the order of their revelation, and demonstrably self-refuting.

As a consequence, the position of classical theism does not meaningfully differ from scientism's claim that naturalism is true because science is the only source of true meaning; or from the relativist's view that one can supply meaning to their own reality.⁵ By embracing an inverted logical structure, each strategy begs the question. As a consequence, those who adopt these worldviews are stuck with an epistemologically irresponsible fideism. Chapter two of this thesis was given to elucidate this state of affairs.

Likewise, chapter three demonstrated that since God's being is ultimately causal, the theology of divine perfection is not algebra. The order in which the Anselmian formula is given makes all the difference in the cosmos. Even a correct algebraic balance depends upon the application of a fixed and immutable *order of operations*. Without this, all mathematical solutions are inscrutable. In what possible world are the first facts of ultimate reality not constrained to be *true* in the same correspondence sense that grounds mathematics?⁶

⁵ By classical theism, we mean the concept of standard restricted theism—essentially the attempt to hold an Anselmian view of God without adequately acknowledging the Trinity. This research shows that such a conception of God is contradictory. Campbell, *Worldviews*, 178-195; Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 1-2.

⁶ Gould et al., *Stand Firm*, 15-22.

A *meaningful* solution to the problem of evil depends on the correct human recognition of the Logic (*Logos*) of God (John 1:1-5); followed by a *right* response to that recognition. This metaphysical order of operations is precisely what makes the *Shema* the great commandment. Mankind is purposed to receive the revelation of God's love; recognize the truth of God's love; and then respond to God with power by giving all of oneself to Him—through love.⁷

There is an all-important reason for this order. God is not power or knowledge in the ontological sense—but He is Love (1 John 4:8). Therefore, the Anselmian God revealed in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father is “all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful.” The *telos* of human persons is to reflect this divine image and no other (Exod. 20:2). The great command teaches us how to be truly *human*. Therefore, the *Logos* of God's *being* must be noticed if Christianity is to ecumenically unite or evangelically advance.

For centuries the divine puzzle has been constructed upside down and backwards. The consequence has been a suppression of the divine image (truth) in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). The meaning of *unrighteous* in the cited verse is thick in light of the definitions recognized in chapter four. The *being* of God is the light of man, but the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it (John 1:4-5). Human persons have this light by natural law⁸—that is, by virtue of being *persons* meant for community-life in God's image.⁹ Yet the light of human *being* is overturned on account of sin. It shines so as to be clearly seen beyond excuse, but it is suppressed on account of unrighteousness.

⁷ That human love must be given to God through love ultimately necessitates an incarnational solution. Jesus Himself provides this necessary *through* from human persons to God. Jesus' ability to do this is supplied by the fact that He is both God and a human person in exemplary fullness.

⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Ch. 1-2.

⁹ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 1.

Imagine a flashlight placed lens down on a flat kitchen table. It might be switched on, but it cannot light the room (Mat. 5:14-16). The light has a due-perfection and an obvious proper function—but its *orientation* presently defeats it from *being* a light. If it does not give its light away, then it is not a light at all. So it is with human persons.

Every human person is a good creation meant to give themselves to others in a loving community in God's image. But we are disoriented by sin and keep our light to ourselves. Unless this orientation is corrected, we cannot *be* truly human.¹⁰ The *Shema* commands human persons to hear, recognize, and then comprehensively love the Lord our God (Deut. 6:4). To reverse this logical orientation is to miss the mark—to *sin*. A man cannot fire an arrow at a target when he holds the bow backwards. Indeed, he is certain to shoot either himself or one of his neighbors. The reality of sin is the *meaningful* problem of evil.

A solution to the problem of sin depends upon correcting the human orientation to God. If God does not exist to supply a unified transcendent standard for goodness, truth, and beauty—then the problem of evil reduces to absurdity. In short, there can be no problem of evil unless the Anselmian God exists to supply meaning to each and every due perfection.¹¹ Without a meaningful perfection to ground every comparison, there can be no such thing as a corruption. The identification of this transcendent yet immanent standard of perfection leads us to the ultimate preliminary question. Rightly answering it solves the meaningful problem of evil—the *problem of sin*. Socrates asked the *second* greatest question of all time. The greatest was asked four and a half centuries later by the adopted son of a Galilean carpenter.

¹⁰ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 247-249.

¹¹ Baggett & Walls, *Good God*, 92-103; Craig, *On Guard*, 291.

Confronting Christ: The Exhaustion of Evil In Glory

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Matthew 16:15 NIV

Over the course of a short public ministry, Jesus of Nazareth captured the devotion of a small group of disciples which eclectically sampled the scope of humanity. He was followed by Jews, Gentiles, fishermen, soldiers, tax-collectors, prostitutes, and political activists. He was followed in secret by members of the government with reputations to protect. He was sold by His accountant for a month’s wages, abandoned by his friends, and murdered by representatives of all humanity. It occurs that this description is sadly *apropos* to the present day.

Following a season of feeding hungry people, healing broken ones, and raising up a few dead ones—Jesus earned the attention of Israel, and with it, the hateful ire of the Jewish religious leaders. Why? Because He made radical claims to be *one* with God in a cosmically personal sense. Jesus went around making “I Am” declarations, and then doing things that only I AM could do.¹² Speaking to his grieving friend Martha, Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this” (John 11:25-26). Just as Jesus spoke being into the universe, he spoke life back into Lazarus, and called him out of his tomb.¹³

It is a well attested historical fact that soon after, Jesus was arrested and tried by Jewish and Gentile courts. He was then crucified to death and quickly buried in the private tomb of a well-known Jewish statesmen.¹⁴ It is also a historical certainty, evidenced by a number of well attested historical facts, that the following Sunday morning Jesus Christ rose from the dead.¹⁵

¹² Craig, *On Guard*, Ch. 8; Lewis, *Miracles*, Ch. 14-15.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Craig, *On Guard*, 367-383; Licona, *Historiographical Approach*, 303-318.

¹⁵ Craig, Ch.9; Habermas & Licona, *Case for Resurrection*, Ch.3; Licona, 582-611.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the pivotal event in human history, and the evidential lynchpin of the Christian worldview. Paul remarked that if Jesus was not raised, then Christian teaching and belief is entirely unwarranted (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Notice that Paul makes unabashed statements about the things that really matter. He told the Romans that their knowledge of God was properly self-evident but suppressed. Likewise, Paul told the Corinthians that Jesus rose from the grave as a matter of verifiable fact—and that victory over death and the potential for human glory follow from this cosmic event (1 Cor. 15:3-58).

The precise means by which Jesus supplies the solution to *the problem of sin* is one of the most controversial elements of the Christian religion. Along with the Trinity and hypostatic union of Jesus Christ, *atonement theory* is a source of historical divisions and ongoing debate. Might this also stem from the problem of meaning? Might a proper recognition of the *Logos* of God help bring clarity to the issue?

If the love of God in Community is accepted as the first fact of reality, something like a chief cornerstone (Acts: 4:11-12), then creation, redemption, and glorification can be united in common purpose (*telos*)—an “at-one-ment” between the creation and God.¹⁶ This actualization of the ultimate community will be a reality of incommensurable value. It is the best of all possible worlds, obtaining in an ever-new heaven and earth (Rev. 21).

A number of important theological questions may be prompted by this researcher’s decision to recognize *Community* (Love) as the explanatory ultimate. There seem to be nuanced consequences to the classical understanding of God’s perfections as well as to His immutability, impassability, simplicity, and capacity to suffer. Addressing each in turn is beyond the scope of this project, but we hope that fresh thought can be undertaken in light of its arguments.

¹⁶ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch.10; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Ch. 4.

Even so, given the need for atonement, God's capacity to suffer is of special interest to the problem of evil. Is it possible for a perfect being to suffer and remain perfect? To wit, has God suffered? It depends on what the word *suffer* really means. Eleanor Stump notices a difference between pain and suffering, and argues that not all pain amounts to an evil.¹⁷ Stump argues that suffering does amount to an evil by limiting the sufferer's intrinsic worth, heart's desires, or ultimate flourishing as a person.¹⁸ Campbell closely engages with Stump on this point and seems inclined to agree in so far as suffering on Stump's definition would delimit the divine perfection. Campbell's point is that a lack flourishing in God constitutes a contradiction. After all, it is in the very nature of perfection to flourish.¹⁹

On Stump's definition, the *problem of meaning* surfaces once more since a consistent theme of New Testament teaching is the *suffering* of Christ for the sake of a glory achieved through the restored community of God and human persons (Isa. 53; Phil. 2; Heb. 2:9-14; 2 Pet 2:21-24; etc.). The risen Jesus taught his disciples: "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to *suffer* and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). On the *prima facie* reading of the English New Testament, it seems that God has indeed suffered in the person of Jesus Christ. It would likewise seem that God has suffered as a perichoretic whole if Christological and Trinitarian orthodoxy are affirmed. The *problem of meaning* arises either in Stump's interpretation of *suffering*, or in the biblical meaning beneath the English word *suffer*. Campbell's point is well taken. God *must* flourish.

¹⁷ Eleonore Stump. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 5-6.

¹⁸ Ibid, 6-8.

¹⁹ Campbell, *Worldviews*, 22-26.

The Greek word from which *suffering* is derived in the cited passages is πάσχω (*pascho*).²⁰ This word carries a sense of *weight*, as in heaviness as a result of being acted upon. It is beyond both historical and biblical dispute that Jesus Christ was acted upon in the most horrific manner possible. Jesus was genuinely affected by the anticipation of the experience in the garden—and throughout His endurance of it at the Sanhedrin, praetorium, and finally upon the cross. Evidence of this is seen in Jesus' various responses to the passion event.

Notice carefully that Jesus turns the other cheek when bound and tortured. Thus, He exhausts the evil of His inquisitors and torturers. Jesus begs for the forgiveness of the ignorantly wicked. He places His mother into the care of His best-friend—the only disciple who bothered to show up for His ghastly funeral. Jesus promised paradise to a man who in his eleventh hour, heard Jesus, recognized Him for who He truly is, and then loved Him with all a dying man has left to give—himself. The prayer of that criminal contains one of the most beautiful human utterance ever recorded: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

Jesus cried out on account of experiencing a forsakenness greater than any conceivable by men. Finally, Jesus entrusts His *being* into the perfect care of His Father. In the greatest example of love ever given, and in fulfillment of the Law and Prophets—God gave completely of His own *being* to both God and His neighbors for the sake of a *new community* (Phil. 2).

It should be carefully noticed that each of Christ's affectations were motivated from Love. It was argued in chapter three that since Love is intrinsic to perfect *Being*, it can be the only motivating factor within God.²¹ If Jesus is truly God in indissoluble Community with the Father and the Holy Spirit, then God has most certainly suffered. However, the suffering of God

²⁰ Strong's Greek 3598.

²¹ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 10; Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 593.

did not result in the diminution of His intrinsic worth, heart's desire, or flourishing as a perfect *Being*—quite the contrary. In Scripture, the suffering of God is almost always followed by a description of that suffering's teleological function—*Glory* (Phil. 2).

The English translation of *glory* first comes from the Hebrew קָבוֹד (*kabowd*).²² It can be no coincidence that this word also carries the meaning of *weight* as it pertains to intrinsic value, and does so in the exclusively positive sense. Likewise, the Greek δόξα (*doxa*) appeals to the intrinsic value of God in the explicitly relational sense of God's worthiness of exclusively *good* opinions.²³ In short, God's glory denotes His intrinsic value and praiseworthiness.

This semantic exploration is important toward solving Stump's problem of meaning. The suffering of God has not resulted in a diminution of His worth at all. It has manifested God's worth to human persons, and simultaneously revealed the incommensurable value of *Community* (Love). Paul teaches that man's *community* with God has been purchased at a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). What price? It was nothing less than the life of God Himself (1 Cor. 15).

Jesus Christ personally reveals the value of both God and human persons—because He is the *Actual* of both God and Human Personhood in exemplary perfection. By hearing Jesus, recognizing Him, and freely choosing to give oneself to Him because He first gave Himself—the glory of God is magnified in God's *community* with human persons. Therefore, the greatest human good is made possible since Jesus has exhausted the power of *sin* with His *Love*. As a consequence, Jesus has exhausted the power of *suffering* and *death* with His own glorious life in *Community*—The Incommensurable Good.²⁴ Thus, Christianity satisfies the Anselmian constraint of maximal greatness. Does it meet the Pauline constraint of exemplary self-evidence?

²² Strong's Hebrew 3519.

²³ Strong's Greek 1391, 1392.

²⁴ Adams, "Horrendous Evils, 218-222; Campbell, *Worldviews*, 274-249; Craig, *On Guard*, 286-291.

Stump appeals to childbirth to notice a difference between pain and suffering. Her illustration is better than she recognized. From the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15, the solution to the problem of evil has been revealed. That there is suffering in childbirth is naturally self-evident and biblically grounded (Gen. 3:16). However, all such sufferings are exhausted by the actualization of a new *community*. Anticipating His separation from the disciples, Jesus taught:

Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you (John 16:20-22).

In the following chapter, Jesus offers His high-priestly prayer to the Father. The ontological truth behind this passage constitutes the only sufficient solution to the problem of evil and suffering.

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was... And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:4-26).

Carefully notice the divine desire expressed in John 17:24. God's *desire* is to *be with* human persons. The lengths that were taken to display this godly desire are greater than any which can be conceived. This is Love: Christ died so that God could be one with sinners (Rom. 5:8).

Ultimately, the *meaning* of God and human persons is grounded in their ontological nexus—Jesus Christ.

While classical arguments can tell us *that* God is. Jesus Christ teaches us *who* God is. First, Jesus claimed to be I AM. Second, Jesus rose from the dead and demonstrated that He is in fact I AM. Third, Jesus did this because He is God, and is therefore eternally motivated by His own *perfect Being as Love*. Jesus is the divine fullness and express image of a *living Community* united in love (Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:3). Jesus taught that “greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus demonstrated that to *be* Love is to give oneself away. To *be* in love is to recognize God for who He is and give oneself to Him in return. This is the divine command, moral duty, and free decision before every living person. Jesus asks: “Who do *you* say that I am?” One’s reasonable faith in the *right* answer to His question is the solution to anyone’s problem of evil.

To Be or Not to Be: The Hope of Glory and the Abolition of Man

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.
1 Corinthians 3:18

In the book of Acts, Peter makes an especially clear soteriological statement, and it warrants quoting at length:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8-12).

In our final exploration of the *problem of meaning* we turn to Jesus’ name. The Hebrew יֵשׁוּעַ (*Yehoshua*) arrives in modern English as *Jesus* following several transliterations and one

important conceptual adjustment.²⁵ It is the latter that is of significant theological importance. The meaning of Jesus' name is often given "The Lord is Salvation."²⁶ Notice the presence of the divine name within Jesus' own name. Recall that "The Lord" is a pious interpretive substitute for YHWH (I AM). In English that preserves the thickness of its original meaning, Jesus's name is "I AM is Salvation."²⁷

Notice the ontological focus of Jesus' name—the only name by which we must be saved. As argued above, I AM is one *Being* obtaining in a *Community* of three *Persons*. God properly *is* Love. Therefore, human salvation is first and foremost an ontological phenomenon. God's very *Being* is the source and power behind human salvation.

As a consequence, the Christian atonement is first and foremost an "at-one-ment" formed between the *actual being* of God and the *potential being* of human persons in an *actual* perichoretic *community* through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.²⁸ So, how does one enter into *community* with God? By freely giving one's whole self to God in obedience to the great command and being *born again* of the Holy Spirit. (Deut. 6:4; Mat. 22:36-37; John 3:1-21). The greatest human *good* is achieved by *rightly* making that most important of all free choices. Love God in Christ by the Spirit and *be*. Or love yourself *alone* and *be not*. The former choice contains our hope of glory. The latter choice is the *abolition of man*. C.S. Lewis poignantly writes:

The Christian way is different: harder, and easier. Christ says 'Give me All...Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.'²⁹

²⁵ Strong's Hebrew, 3091

²⁶ Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, 682, 713.

²⁷ Ibid., 781-782.

²⁸ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch.10; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Ch. 4.

²⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 196-197.

Elsewhere Lewis notices that:

To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth; to enter hell, is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) into hell is not a man: it is ‘remains’ [sic]. To be a complete man means to have the passions obedient to the will and the will offered to God: to have been a man—to be an ex-man or ‘damned ghost’—would presumably mean to consist of a will utterly centred [sic] in its self and passions utterly uncontrolled by the will.³⁰

As truly God and truly Man in exemplary fullness, Jesus Christ constitutes the cosmic bridge between God and human persons. In the Thomistic sense, Jesus Christ is the one truly *actual* human person. Jesus supplies the means of glorious *being* in the community life of God (John 17). Therefore, it is through *being in Christ* that human persons are saved (Eph. 2:6-9). It is likewise *in Christ* that the *potential* being within every created human person can be made *actual*. Jesus, by the revelation of His very name is the ultimate exemplar of both the *being* and creative *purpose* of God. Jesus is God motivated by God for the sake of God—the very image and fullness of perfection that is perichoretic Love made visible (John 1:14; Col 1:15).³¹

Likewise, our unity with God in Christ is achieved by way of a perichoretic love relationship enabled by the Holy Spirit (John 3; Rom. 8; Gal. 5). Paul taught the Romans that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Of course, death is synonymous with non-being. Recall that the consequence of original sin resulted in accidental individuality and isolation from God—that is, in *non-being*. The pollution of human sin prevents human harmony with God’s perfection. Even so, *being one* with God remains the human *telos*. Jesus Christ has supplied the needed perfection for those who orient their lives (faith) to God through Him (John 14:6). The positive consequence of this restored relationship is a restoration of the Holy Spirit as the Unifier in the perichoretic love relationship between God and Man through Jesus Christ (John 3: 1-21).

³⁰ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 81-82.

³¹ Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 1,2,10.

The fruit of this relationship obtains in Love for God and one's neighbors (John 15; Gal. 5; 1 John 4). In short, *community* with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit—is Life (Deut. 30:20). Outside of community with God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, every human person is a potentially good instrument out of tune, and *un-alive* in the cosmic sense. Each person is designed for life. Indeed, life is the due perfection of every human potential.³² Each human person is meant to join and play their respective instruments within the perfect human ensemble. But they can be incomplete in one all-important way. Their instruments can be *disoriented* to their proper function and clash against, instead of harmonizing with the intentions of their perfect Composer. Such instruments are discordant, and defeat instead of give being to the instruments of their neighbors. So, what is to be done? God cannot corrupt Himself for the sake of our community. If He did, then it would no longer be a perfect community and He would cease from *being* God. Since such is categorically impossible, it is for human persons to be tuned to God's transcendent standard and brought into harmony with the perfection which is *potential* in human *being* and *actual* in God's *Being*. For a human person's *being* to become actual, they must become one with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit (John 3:1-21, 15, 17; Gal, 5; 1 John 4).

Since every contingent human person is an instrument out of tune, this problem is intractable from the human side. Even if we picked someone *good* relative to every other contingent human to act as our standard, and tuned our instruments to match—we would still not be in true harmony with God. We might think we are close, like the amateur pianist using an untuned piano to attempt a duet with Yo-Yo Ma and his reference cello. But what is close? Perfection is not horseshoes and hand-grenades. Finite humans have no idea what the word *close* even means. Is it a googleplex of parsecs? Is it 10,000 light years? Is it one? Is *close* a mile, a

³² Aquinas, *QDM*, 1.2.

millimeter, a micron, or a millimicron? It is all the same to God. He transcends and is present in every measure (Ps. 139). We must confront the fact that there is Love and there is sin—and that is all there is—a free moral choice between life and death (Deut. 30:19; Rom. 6:23).

Since humans are potential beings, we remain powerless to actualize our own potential lives. We cannot cause ourselves to *be*. When we try, something like the cacophony of 106 instrumental solos obtains—but on an incommensurably greater scale. Such is evidenced by the world as it stands. It is a good world, but it is out of tune having been polluted with human evil. In the same way that an orchestra needs a pitch pipe to supply a standard by which the accuracy of each of its various instruments, strings, drumheads, etc. can be measured; humanity needs just such a standard to supply *meaning* to the accuracy of human *being*, and actuality to the potential of human *being*. We require a cosmic pitch pipe—a revelation of the truth. Such is the good and proper function of the Bible in addition to the empirical world.

Now, is the pitch pipe the explanatory ultimate of perfect pitch. Of course not. Just like Scripture and science, it is an instrument with a proper function. So, what on earth *is* the note called ‘C’? What *is* the trinity of a ‘C-major.’ It is definitely not a pitch pipe. Because truth is not grounded in interpretation. It is grounded in *being*.³³

Notice the noun which mankind has adopted to describe the musical phenomenon of a trinity. It is a *chord*. But what is a chord? It is a perichoretic community of interwoven *being*. The *Community* ontology of God is the necessary source of all such *being*. The perichoretic nature of the Creator is reflected in the perichoretic *telos* of the creation. The world has been made for the sake of *value*. The more threads woven into the chord of creation, the stronger and

³³ Copan & Litwak, *Gospel in the Marketplace*, 158-161.

more valuable it becomes. There is not only one ‘C-major.’ In a fascinating witness of musical nature, the piano has *seven* octaves of each chord, and each may be played in orchestral arrangements by a huge variety of dynamic instrumental combinations. The potential for indescribable beauty and inexpressible truth is *complete* in its inexhaustibility after the *Imago Dei*. Music is the sound of God’s very good creation—it is the sound of Love.

Let us now apply this illustration to human *being*. Harmony is what a community sounds like. To see what one looks like, we need look no further than coded *human being* (DNA). At the explanatory ultimate of our physical being, a man and a woman are fearfully and wonderfully woven into one (*echad*) in the value laden miracle that is every godly child. Such is the *image* of God, and of the true life which God purposes for every human person (Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9).

The world’s song is out of key, but it is not because God is imperfect—it is because we humans are (Gen 3:17; Rom. 8:18-25). If the whole of creation is to be redeemed, then human *being* must first be set to rights. How do we know a ‘D flat’ against a ‘C-major’ when we hear it? For the same reason that we recognize goodness, truth, and beauty, and their respective pollutions wherever they are found. Every human person is purposed to experience these transcendentals in their perfect fullness.³⁴ The faculty for that appreciation is nothing less than a taproot into the *Being* of God.³⁵ *Actual Being* is in fact *The Good*.³⁶ Of course any recognized contrast with such *being* is evil *simpliciter*—and deep down we all know it. Indeed, our very *being* renders each of us without excuse. God loves us. To truly live we must decide to love Him back. To suppress knowledge of God is to suppress one’s own potential goodness, beauty, and truth. To suppress the Love of God is to suppress oneself (Rom. 1:18).

³⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136.

³⁵ Lewis, *Miracles*, 36-38.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.5.

Conclusion: The Greatest of These is Love

*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:13*

For centuries, classical theistic arguments have been given from contingency, cosmological beginnings, teleological design, and from the moral reality self-evident to human persons. This research project integrates key elements from each of these into a *perichoretic chord* around Anselm's ontological argument for the necessary existence of a perfect God. Chapter one established the Pauline and Anselmian tests of truth, analyzed the problem of evil, and assessed the potential for theistic advancement. Chapter two analyzed determinism and relativism in light of each other, and discarded both as unlivable models of reality. Chapter three formed the backbone of the thesis by arguing that God is a necessary and self-existing *Community* on the basis of both special and general revelation. Chapter four analyzed the epistemic warrant of human beings with regard to moral facts, and recognized the definition of important metaphysical terms in light of their axioms—*Love*, and *sin*. Finally, Chapter five has synthesized the arguments of the thesis into *The Community Theodicy* to the problem of evil.

This research concludes that *Love* shared in a *Community* of free Persons is The Incommensurable Good—that is, God. The value of God's creation as a consequence of human *community* is likewise incommensurable. There is no overstating the value of love on any scale, and the potential for love in this possible world remains overwhelming. Actualizing such potential is nothing less than God's sufficient reason to create. Love has created for the sake of love. God's free choice to share His Love with human persons is His morally sufficient reason to permit the possibility of evil. Were God to cease from permitting evil, this world would end. Indeed, Christian eschatology anticipates just such an outcome. Even so, God patiently sustains this world (2 Pet. 3:9)—and this is proof enough that it is still *potentially* “very good.”

It is concluded that the *Community Being* (Love) of God has the power to exhaust evil, and that this fact supplies human persons with a genuine hope of glory (Col. 1:27). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof of this hope. In Jesus, *Love* has defeated *sin*. Indeed, the devil's attempted murder of God amounts to the greatest of all possible blunders. Perfection is not the love of power after all. Perfection is the power of Love. Because God is Love, death has been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54). Peter Kreeft puts it beautifully:

Calvary is judo. The enemy's own power is used to defeat him. Satan's craftily orchestrated plot, rolled along according to plan by his agents Judas, Pilate, Herod, and Caiaphas, culminated in the death of God. And this very event, Satan's conclusion, was God's premise. Satan's end was God's means. It saved the world.³⁷

Therefore, the *Explanatory Ultimate* of reality is the logically necessary and self-existent *Community* that modern man calls God. Human *epistemic access* to reality at every level is informed by the Axiom of axioms—Love. Love is why there is harmony in music. Love is why reality becomes more valuable when a man leaves his father and mother to become one (*echad*) with his wife for the sake of a better word. And Love is how God weaves the value from that man and woman into the perichoretic miracle that is every human child. Love is Life itself.

Love is transcendent and immanent. It is mundane and profound—and everything in between. Love is not an important corner piece to the cosmic puzzle. Love is the undivided Image on the box. Love is what the puzzle looks like when it is finished and its Creator declares: “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:5). Love is Goodness, Beauty, and Truth in *Community*. God is Love. Finally, love is the reason that *meaning* is moving from this page, through human eyes, into a human mind—and God willing, into your human heart. Love is what your life is meant to *be*. In the Love of God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit—it *can be*.

³⁷ Peter Kreeft, “Evil, Suffering, and Calvary,” 445.

One day, perhaps a moment or two from now, all who have freely joined God in His living miracle will take their place in the reference class *community*. Each one present will be a glorified instrument of perfection, precisely tuned to the transcendent standard of God Himself in Jesus Christ. Each one present will live in unity and harmony under the perfect direction of the Composer-King. When the song of creation reaches its glorious consummation, the God of the universe will have stepped down from His high station, bowed low, risen again, and opened His arms to a miracle become actual—His *community* of created love. The light will have overcome the darkness—and a new creation will burst forth with everlasting joy (Rev. 21-22).

This is the *true moment* that our lives are meant for. Those outside in the dark and cold will weep and gnash their teeth wondering what the happy fuss is all about. Inside it is a different story. Inside abide faith, hope, and love, these three—but the greatest of these is Love. To be alive in the *true moment* is to *be in Love*. It is our Home where tears of joy are wiped away without shame. If you find yourself there, you will *be* human indeed. If only it could last forever? It will—Love never fails (1 Cor. 13:8).

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.
John 3:16

And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.
John 17:22-23

The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”
Romans 10:8-13

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