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Naturalism, Christian Molinism, and the Problem of Evil

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Thesis

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

From a philosophical standpoint, the problem of evil (POE) is reconciling God's existence with the existence of evil in the world. The POE is thought by many to be a problem primarily for the Christian. However, some might argue that, while the POE may not be a problem for the naturalist, naturalism provides no hope, ultimately, for those who experience or witness evil and suffering. For the sake of clarification, any reference to *naturalism* should be understood as the belief that everything comes from natural processes and supernatural or spiritual explanations are dismissed. Since naturalism excludes the supernatural, it must exclude the existence or possibility of God. In contrast to naturalism, Christianity does provide ultimate hope. Christianity affirms the perfect justice of God, which means God will right all wrongs in the end (Deut. 32:35; 2 Cor. 5:10). In regards to the POE being an issue for the Christian, the naturalist will argue that the Christian concept of God is that He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. It would seem then that God would have created a world with either no evil in it or, at the very least, one with significantly less evil.

In order to address the POE, it is important to make clear what is meant by "evil." There are at least two concepts of evil.[1] The first is the broad concept, and the second is the narrow concept. The narrow concept of evil typically focuses on the most morally horrendous actions and is usually only ascribed to moral agents.[2] The narrow concept of evil would seem to rule out

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[1] David Papineau, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "the concept of evil," accessed April 11, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/.

[2] Ibid.

any possibility of "natural evil." The broad concept of evil will usually include both moral evil (wrongful actions of moral agents) and any state of affairs that produces suffering (natural evil). To make this clear, moral evil would include things like murder, theft, lying, and other instances of that nature. Natural evil would include suffering that results from things like hurricanes, earthquakes, diseases, and even toothaches. The intensity of the suffering is not relevant so long as it results in some degree of suffering. For the purposes of this thesis, when evil or suffering is mentioned, it is a reflection of the broad concept of evil.

The POE has been debated for thousands of years. For instance, Epicurus presented an argument against the existence of God in the 3rd or 4th century BC, and his argument was addressed by the Christian apologist Lactantius.[3] According to Lactantius, Epicurus says:

> God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?[4]

Lactantius responds by saying God can do whatever He wishes and that He is neither weak nor envious. He says God allows evil so that wisdom can be given and that there is more goodness in wisdom than annoyance in evils because wisdom allows man to know God and, through that

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[3] Epicurus, according to Lactantius (ca. 240-ca.320 AD) in De Ira Dei (On the Wrath of God). An online translation of the work by Philip Schaff can be found at http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0240-0320,_Lactantius,_De_Ira_Dei_%5BSchaff%5D,_EN.pdf, 409.

[4] Ibid.

knowledge of God, obtain immortality which is the chief good. He concludes that unless one first knows evil, he will be unable to know good.[5]

Many difficulties within the problem of evil have been identified. Two of the most common include the logical problem of evil and the evidential problem of evil. Here it will be assumed that there is no logical contradiction between the statements "God exists" and "evil exists." Alvin Plantinga provides a convincing argument affirming the logical compatibility of God and evil in his work, *God, Freedom, and Evil*.[6]

What is left is the evidential argument from evil which, at the risk of oversimplifying, asserts that given the evil in the world, it is more reasonable to affirm atheism over theism. The purpose of this paper is to provide an abductive argument showing that a Christian Molinist worldview provides a better explanation for the amount of evil and suffering in the world than a naturalistic worldview.

The POE affects everyone, no matter their race, religion, age, social status, or wealth. Everyone experiences evil and suffering to some degree. Those who do not experience the worst of it can see it around them. A quick search on the internet will illuminate the horrendous evils committed by mankind or the suffering that results from natural disasters. There seems to be no escape from the reality of evil and suffering. As a result, the POE seems to be the most common and compelling argument against Christianity.

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[5] Epicurus, according to Lactantius (ca. 240-ca.320 AD) in De Ira Dei (On the Wrath of God). An online translation of the work by Philip Schaff can be found at http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0240-0320,_Lactantius,_De_Ira_Dei_%5BSchaff%5D,_EN.pdf, 409.

[6] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

It is the reality that everyone experiences and witnesses evil that makes the problem so important. Many people do not concern themselves with the origins of the universe or contemplate an explanation as to why the universe is fine-tuned for life. Some suggest the universe came about through natural processes. Others presume that there is a Mind behind its origins. However, given that suffering is inescapable, and it seems to spoil the human experience, everyone at some point will wonder why there is so much evil in the world and how, if He exists, an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good God could allow it to happen.

Many concerns have been raised concerning the POE over the past several centuries, and many compelling answers have been given. The continued contemplation of the issue can provide more answers or insights that are equally compelling. Perhaps the argument presented in this thesis could add a new perspective and move the discussion forward even more. For instance, Molinism has been around since at least the 1500s, and it has seen a sort of revival in the past few decades. However, there may be some theological and philosophical insights that Molinism can provide to the evidential problem of evil that has been neglected.

Importance of the Problem

Evil appears to be so prevalent, and mankind is so concerned with finding "happiness" and "justice" that the importance of the POE seems self-evident. The POE may be a catalyst for so many people either walking away from theism or rejecting it from the start. However, if God exists and Christianity is true, the worst thing someone can do is reject God. The decision to do so has eternal consequences. In a Christian worldview, rejection of God results in eternal separation from Him, which would be eternal separation from all good, among other things (2 Thes. 1:8-9).

Evil and suffering result in psychological distress, usually matching or exceeding the level of evil and suffering experienced. For instance, a paper cut is a minor inconvenience causing minor pain. The psychological distress is minor. The death of a child is extremely difficult and traumatic, resulting in much more significant psychological distress. Still, both result in some sort of psychological distress. Mankind finds themselves in a world with countless cases of said psychological distresses. There is also the issue of justice and whether it makes sense to be moral. The POE challenges the moral order and finding a way to understand and cope with it seems to be of utmost importance.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to create a Christian theodicy by forming an abductive argument showing that Christian Molinism can provide reasons for the existence of evil, and compared to naturalism, it provides the best explanation. This is accomplished by considering the naturalistic explanation of evil and building upon defenses and concepts such as the Free Will Defense and Molinism.

Statement of Position on the Problem

The position taken in this thesis is that Christian Molinism provides good reasons for why the amounts and types of evils experienced exist and that those reasons provide a better explanation for the POE than naturalism. If it is conceded that both the naturalist and theist are rational in their beliefs, the question remains as to which is most plausible.

The evidential argument from evil has been a powerful argument for the naturalist against Christianity. However, the evidential argument seems to make certain implicit assumptions about the world. One assumption may be that the world is rather simple. The argument assumes that

God could intervene in the series of cause and effect experienced in the *actual* world whenever He likes without losing some greater good or avoiding some equal or greater evil. The Christian Molinist would argue that the world is much more complex than the one assumed by the naturalist. For instance, the world may consist of a relatively independent and inexorable nature inhabited by billions of free creatures. As a result, it may very well be the case that every event results in a ripple effect throughout time so that even the smallest and seemingly trivial instance could have major consequences further down the chain of events. If that is true, then in order for the world to be relatively independent and for man's free will to have any meaning, God is limited in when and how often He can intervene.

A massively complex system, like the one described above, is the sort of world implied by Molinism. Molinism provides an explanation of how God, despite the challenges imposed by a massively complex system, *would* know whether an instance of evil is necessary while also maintaining human free will and His sovereignty.

Limitations

The problem of evil is a complex issue resulting in a constant stream of additional points and questions. Addressing all issues and questions within the problem would require a tremendous amount of space, and as a result, there will be several limitations to this thesis. For instance, the ontology of evil will not be explored in depth. Instead, its existence will be assumed.

The position of this thesis is that sometimes either the greater good achieved or equal or worse evil avoided through an instance of evil can be known, at least in part. However, because of the limited insight and knowledge of humans, it would be unreasonable to think one could

always know those things. As a result, despite this thesis asserting it is very plausible to affirm God has morally sufficient reasons for allowing the suffering He does, it also recognizes it cannot provide reasons in every circumstance that would be satisfactory for each and every person. The naturalist is in a similar boat because he cannot definitively show that God does not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil He does.

This thesis will not necessarily present an argument for human libertarian free will. Although it will be addressed to some extent, it will be assumed for the most part. There are many issues concerning the problem of evil that would be impossible to address in one paper. Therefore, this thesis will not attempt to answer the logical problem or emotional problem of evil. It will be confined to the evidential problem. As a result, another limitation of this thesis is the inability to provide emotional comfort to those who might be wrestling with the emotional problem of evil. The discussion within this thesis will be purely intellectual, with an attempt to be objective.

The naturalist tends to grant that the concept of God includes Him being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. This thesis will assume God possesses those characteristics and that they are essential to His nature. This thesis will also assume the existence of objective moral values and duties. In other words, it will assume that some things are truly evil, and others are truly good. There are three possible explanations examined in this paper. The first asserts that good and evil are grounded in the biological processes of the brain. The second is that good and evil exist as abstract moral properties. The third is that evil is ultimately a result of human free will and their opposition to God who is identical with the Good. The question then will be which of those three options provides the best explanation for the reality of evil?

Kinds and Origins of Evil

In order to evaluate whether naturalism or Christian Molinism gives the best explanation for evil, it is important to come to a general understanding of what evil is and how it manifests itself. This paper assumes there is evil of some sort, and as a result, arguments that evil does not exist in any way will not be addressed. Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to find a basic understanding, or common ground, between naturalism and Christian Molinism on what is meant by 'evil.' The task of finding common ground in this area is not an easy one since there are some stark contrasts between naturalism and Christian Molinism. Furthermore, there are no universally agreed-upon explanations of evil within naturalism or Christianity.

To avoid begging the question and assuming a theistic account of evil, it seems best to begin with the broadest understanding of evil, which will be one that is generally agreed upon by both naturalists and theists. From there, we can narrow it down as much as possible. A broad concept of evil is that it is any bad state of affairs, wrongful action, or character flaw.[7]

The broad concept of evil would include both *natural evil* and *moral evil*. Natural evil would be a bad state of affairs whose origin is grounded in the nature of things or natural law. Cancer, earthquakes, tsunamis, and death can be considered natural evils. Moral evil results from the actions and intentions of moral agents. A moral agent, as it is used here, refers to rational, morally sensitive, and reflective humans or, at the very least, humans who, by their nature, possess the capacity to be rational, morally sensitive, and reflective. Examples of moral evil include murder, theft, cheating, and so on.

In some situations, natural evil could be recharacterized as moral evil. For instance, a person may knowingly expose others, let's say, a child in their home, to harmful chemicals or

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[7] Todd Calder, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "the concept of evil," accessed June 27, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/#DuaPriTheEvi.

secondhand smoke, and later, the child develops some sort of health issue. It seems the decisions and actions of a moral agent have led to the natural evil of some sort of disease.

Narrowing down an explanation of evil from the broad is much easier said than done. Evil seems to be one of those things that people recognize when they see it but defining it in specific terms is extremely difficult.

Perhaps instead of using specific terms to articulate a definition of evil, it may be more helpful to use examples. The battle between 'good' and 'evil' is one of the most prominent themes in literature and media. Considering various antagonists throughout history, both fictional and non-fictional, may help provide a good understanding of evil that can be accepted by both the naturalist and Christian.

One of the most popular Grimm's Fairy Tales includes Hansel and Grethel. The story includes an old woman who, in reality, is a "wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and only built the little bread house in order to entice them there."[8] She entices Hansel and Grethel there, locking Hansel into a stable with the intention of making him fat so she can eat him. Even worse, she makes Grethel participate in fattening up the boy. Of course, she not only intended to eat Hansel but had also planned to trick Grethel to get into the oven so she could lock her in and eat her as well. However, Grethel becomes wise to the witch's plans and tricks her into the oven, burning her to death before rescuing her brother, Hansel.

Anyone reading the story of Hansel and Grethel, even if they do not possess any degrees in philosophy or ethics or have spent little time thinking about either, knows that the actions of

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[8] Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2013), 57.

the old woman in the story are 'evil,' because surely luring children to your home with the intention of killing and eating them is 'evil.'

In the Marvel cinematic universe, the most prominent villain of the past decade, and perhaps the entire cinematic library, has been Thanos, appearing in multiple movies. The movies follow Thanos as he searches for all the infinity stones, each one providing a different type of power but combined will make Thanos almost omnipotent. His plan is to wipe out half of the universe's population.[9] He is motivated to carry out this plan after witnessing the starvation of the people on his home planet. The idea is that the population has grown so much that there are insufficient resources. Wiping out half of the population will bring balance to the universe and avoid further starvation.

The problem with Thanos is not necessarily the *why*. If there are not enough resources for the people living and mass starvation ensues, then there is a real problem that needs to be dealt with. The problem with Thanos is the *what*. What is to be done about it? Thanos decides to obtain as much power for himself as possible to do what he thinks is best, which is to annihilate half of the universe's population arbitrarily.

A significant difference between the old woman in Hansel and Grethel and Thanos is that one could assume the old woman in the Grimm's fairy tale probably knows that what she is doing is wrong, but she does it anyway. The story does not state this explicitly, but it could be assumed from the fact that she has built her house in secret, deep in the forest, so that no one will see. Thanos, on the other hand, believes that what he is doing is 'right.' He states his case openly and publicly without apology. He is even willing to sacrifice his own daughter in the process.

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[9] *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, featuring Robert Downey Jr., Chris Hemsworth, and Josh Brolin (Marvel Studios, 2018), DVD, (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018)
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Of course, one does not need to turn to fiction alone to find evil personified. There are plenty of historical figures or actions that rise to the level of fictitious villains. Take, for instance, Albert Fish, who confessed to murdering around 100 children across 33 states.[10] Not only did Fish murder his victims, but he also "tortured them, butchered them, plucked them with pliers and bored them out with drills, used them as pincushions, set them afire, gnawed at the roasted chunks of them, drank their blood," before burying what was left of them in an orchard.[11]

One of the more disturbing aspects of Albert Fish's killing spree was the killing of 10-year-old Grace Budd, which he provides chilling details of to her parents in a letter. He tells the story of his friend who supposedly ate human flesh in China and convinced him to try it. He then recounts the day he met Grace Budd, saying:

> On June 3, 1928, I called on you at 406 W. 15 St. and brought you pot cheese and strawberries. We had lunch. Grace sat on my lap and kissed me. I made up my mind to eat her… First, I stripped her naked. How she did kick, bite, and scratch. I choked her to death, then cut her in small pieces so I could take the meat to my rooms, cook, and eat it. How sweet and tender her little [obscenity] was roasted in the oven.[12]

It seems that anyone who falls short of being psychopathic, and perhaps even a psychopath who considers this crime against Grace Budd without bias, would conclude that the actions taken by Albert Fish were evil. Even if they were unable to provide an eloquent account of what the essence of evil is precisely and where it comes from.

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[10] Jay Maeder, "Buckets of Bones: Child cannibal Albert Fish's account of his grisly slaying of 10-year-old Gracie Budd," *New York Daily News*, August 14, 2017, https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/child-cannibal-albert-fish-account-grisly-gracie-budd-slay-article-1.786934.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jon Dean, "'I made up my mind to eat her': Cannibal's twisted letter to mother of victim," *Mirror*, January 18, 2016, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/i-made-up-mind-eat-7197600.

It is difficult to provide examples of evil without inciting thoughts of Adolf Hitler or the actions carried out by the Nazi regime, particularly during World War II. In his book *Ordinary Men*, Christopher Browning recounts some of these actions carried out by Reserve Police Battalion 101in Poland in response to orders given by Adolf Hitler and the other Nazi leaders. This particular police battalion was tasked with going to the village of Józefów and rounding up the 1,800 Jews there.[13]

Several men were ordered to surround the village of Józefów and shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were ordered to round up the Jews in the village and take them to the marketplace. Any Jews found that were too sick or frail to walk to the marketplace, including infants, were to be shot on the spot.[14] After separating out the men of working age among the Jews, the rest were loaded onto trucks and taken to the nearby forest. Since there were such a large number of Jews in the village, they were transported to the forest in groups of approximately thirty-five to forty at a time.

Once in the forest, policemen were paired off with their victims. The Jews were marched down the path in the forest to execution sites, ordered to lie down in a row, and shot. This sequence was repeated throughout the day. It was not uncommon for the men in the battalion to have difficulty aiming properly. One of the policemen remarked, "At first, we shot freehand. When one aimed too high, the entire skull exploded. As a consequence, brains and bones flew everywhere. Thus, we were instructed to place the bayonet point on the neck."[15] According to

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[13] Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2017), 55.

[14] Ibid., 56-57.

[15] Ibid., 64.

Hergert, one of the policemen participating, there was a "considerable number of missed shots,"

leading to "the unnecessary wounding of the victims."[16] After seventeen hours of shooting, the

last of the Jews were killed. There were reportedly so many bodies in the forest that it became

difficult to find places for the last of the Jews to lie down to be shot. Once all the Jews were

murdered, they were left unburied in the forest as the policemen prepared to leave for Biłgoraj.[17]

The actions of the old woman, Thanos, Albert Fish, and the Nazis are described in this

paper to provide an illustration of what is meant by 'evil.' Of course, many do not just affirm

moral evil but natural evil as well. A powerful example of natural evil can be found in an event

that took place in Columbia during the mid-80s.

On November 13, 1985, the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Columbia erupted, causing a

massive landslide that destroyed the town of Armero. The landslide killed fifteen to twenty

thousand people.[18] Among the thousands killed was Omayra Sánchez, a thirteen-year-old girl

who was trapped for sixty hours in neck-deep, muddy, cold water before dying of exposure.[19]

Omayra was pinned between a wall and other debris, with her legs tangled in the arms of her

dead aunt under the surface of the water.[20] Her death was documented extensively over the sixty

hours she was trapped. She even participated in a news interview which can be viewed online.

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[16] Browning, *Ordinary Men,* 64.

[17] Ibid., 68.

[18] Joseph Treaster, "15,000 Feared Dead in Columbia as Eruption of Volcano Sends Torrent of Mud Over 2 Towns," *New York Times*, November 15, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/15/world/15000-feared-dead-colombia-eruption-volcano-sends-torrent-mud-over-2-towns.html#:~:text=Towering%20walls%20of%20mud%20swept%20through%20the%20valleys,and%20devastated%20much%20of%20Chinchina%2C%20with%2070%2C000%20people.

[19] "Trapped Girl, 13, Dies," *The New York Times*, November 17, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/17/world/trapped-girl-13-dies.html.

[20] Ibid.

Her father was killed under the rubble of their home, but her brother and mother survived to observe the slow death of their sister and daughter.

The death of Omayra is difficult enough to read about. However, the interview and pictures showing her deterioration over time while rescue workers worked hard to try and figure out a way to free her are even more difficult to see. The suffering that resulted from the eruption of Nevado del Ruiz could certainly be considered a 'natural evil' if anything of the sort is to exist.

The examples of evil mentioned are to serve as illustrations of what, at the very least, is meant by 'evil.' This is not to say that less severe examples could not be considered evil, but it seems that these examples would certainly be considered evil by any rational, morally sensitive, and objective thinker. One might still consider it to be begging the question to say that because these things 'seem' or 'feel' like evil, then it follows that they are, in fact, evil. However, there are many beliefs people have that are held without a formal argument explaining the belief, but that are still rational and sensible beliefs to hold.

Take, for instance, the belief that the external world exists, which most people likely believe to be true. It is perfectly rational for someone to believe the external world exists based on their experience of the external world without an argument. What sort of argument would it take to prove, in the strict sense of the word, that the external world exists? Someone could always say that any evidence provided is simply a subjective experience of that person's mind.

Put another way, how could someone prove that the external world is not really a simulation, like the one depicted in the Matrix series, and the only thing that actually exists is their mind? The answer is that, although it is possible the external world does not exist and everything is just a simulation, there is no defeater for the belief that the external world actually

exists. There is no evidence or argument that *proves* the external world does not exist, and therefore, it is a rational and justified belief. It may be the case that belief in the existence of evil is similar to belief in the external world. It may be the case that belief in the existence of evil is a rational and justified belief because, although there are arguments suggesting evil does not exist, there is no defeater for the belief that evil exists.

To give a definition of what evil is and its essence, we might say that evil is any bad state of affairs, wrongful action, or character flaw that occurs as the result of an absence of goodness or an opposition to a good.[21] Regarding the idea of the absence of goodness, the following provides a good illustration. The existence and well-being of Omayra Sánchez could be considered intrinsically good. The volcanic eruption and mudslide caused her suffering and death, which resulted in an absence of something intrinsically good which *ought* to exist.[22] Regarding a moral agent who opposes a good, take, for instance, Albert Fish, who was mentioned previously. He made the intentional and conscious decision to subject Grace Budd to physical, mental, and emotional suffering, humiliation, and death for his own gratification. Robert Adams explains the opposition to a good as the deterioration or destruction of a good rather than just a mere absence of a good.[23]

Whether the "good" is God, platonic objects, brain function, the well-being of conscious creatures, or some other 'thing,' evil seems to oppose it. For instance, disease opposes health, lying opposes truthfulness, the old woman in Hansel and Grethel was in opposition to the

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[21] Todd Calder, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "the concept of evil," accessed June 27, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/#DuaPriTheEvi.

[22] Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 103.

[23] Ibid.

children's health and well-being, the Nazis were in opposition to the lives and well-being of the Jews, and the suffering endured by Omayra Sánchez was in opposition to her comfort and contentment.

Evil is complicated to define if it can be adequately defined at all. However, there appear to be sufficient conditions that make it rational to call something evil. If there is a privation of the good, then it is evil. If something is in opposition to the good, then it is evil. Other conditions may count as evil, but what seems clear is that evil is almost always recognized, and all the cases mentioned satisfy those conditions.

Naturalism and Evil

While naturalism does not have a precise meaning in philosophy, it typically refers to the idea that nature is the only thing that exists and there is no "supernatural."[24] In addition, the scientific method should be used when investigating reality, including the human condition and morality, because everything that exists has come about through natural processes.[25] This definition will be used for this thesis when referring to naturalism.

Regarding the existence of moral values and duties, Naturalism seems to have two options. The first is to deny that objective moral values and duties exist. The proponents of this idea are usually referred to as moral anti-realists. The second is to affirm that objective moral values and duties do exist. The objective moral values and duties would be grounded in nature or explained by natural processes. Proponents of this concept are usually referred to as moral realists. This paper assumes moral realism and the question it addresses broadly is whether

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[24] David Papineau, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "naturalism," accessed April 11, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/.

[25] Ibid.

Naturalism or Christian Molinism best explains evil. Therefore, a discussion of the views within moral realism alone seems appropriate.

The naturalist can affirm the existence of objective moral values and duties but would need to ground them in nature somehow. This option, as opposed to the anti-realist position, seems to be the most appealing due to the discomfort some have with denying any objective morality. If objective moral values and duties do not exist, then some may draw the same conclusion as that made in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

> I will tell you instead, gentlemen, another interesting and rather characteristic anecdote of Ivan Fyodorovitch himself… he solemnly declared in argument that there was nothing in the whole world to make men love their neighbors. That there was no law of nature that man should love mankind, and that, if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was not owing to a natural law, but simply because men have believed in immortality… if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism.[26]

C.S. Lewis draws a similar conclusion when he says that if no moral facts are more valid or better than any other, then there would be no reason to prefer "civilized morality to savage morality."[27]

The question then becomes how does a naturalistic moral realist ground moral values and duties? One option is to ground it in nature somehow. This has been the approach of Dr. Sam Harris, a prominent neuroscientist and philosopher. Harris is also a naturalist and a moral realist. According to Harris, values are facts that can be understood through science, and there is no need

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[26] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Newburyport: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2018), 69, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[27] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity a Revised and Amplified Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, Broadcast Talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (San Francisco, CA: HarperColins, 2009), 12.

for appeal to the supernatural.[28] To be clear, Harris does not view science as merely mathematical facts or empirical data. He views these as specific tools within a broad field called science. According to Harris, science encompasses "our best efforts to understand what is going on in this universe," including the human condition.[29] He says that "questions about values - about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose - are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures."[30] Dr. Harris grounds the objective "good" and "evil" in the biological processes of the brain in this way:

> There are facts to be understood about how thoughts and intentions arise in the human brain; there are facts to be learned about how these mental states translate into behavior; there are further facts to be known about how these behaviors influence the world and the experience of other conscious beings. We will see that facts of this sort exhaust what we can reasonably mean by terms like "good" and "evil."[31]

It seems that, in Harris' view, objective moral properties are determined this way: Neurons in the brain of a conscious human fire in a particular way producing a thought and an intention. These thoughts and intentions lead to behavior that influences the world and the experience (thoughts, intentions, and behaviors) of other conscious humans. If the thought, intention, and/or behavior is not oriented toward the general well-being of other conscious humans, then it is something we *ought not* to do. If they are oriented toward the general well-being of other conscious humans, then it is something we *ought* to do.

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[28] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 1. Kindle Reader.

[29] Ibid., 29.

[30] Ibid., 1.

[31] Ibid., 3-4.

Harris seems to think of moral values as brute facts and acting in a way that is conducive to the good naturally follows. Consider the statement, "Human flourishing *is* good, and therefore one *ought* to act in a way that increases it." The Scottish philosopher, David Hume, suggests that a fact about the world (the way the world is) cannot tell us how we *ought* to behave.[32] When considering the above statement, Hume might say that even if it were the case that human flourishing *is* preferred or "good," that fact does not obligate us to act in any particular way. However, Harris rejects this notion and says asking why we ought to value human well-being does not make much sense because these concepts of values leading to obligations are like many other aspects of science and rationality. They are "generally based on intuitions and concepts that cannot be reduced or justified."[33]

It is important to note what Harris seems to mean when he uses the term *objective*. When Harris speaks of objective moral values, he is not saying these moral properties exist in the *ontological* sense but in the *epistemological* sense. He explicitly states, "I am certainly not claiming that moral truths exist *independent* of the experience of conscious beings - like the Platonic Form of the Good - or that certain actions are *intrinsically* wrong."[34] In other words, Harris would say love is objectively good only if there are conscious creatures to think love is good. When a theist says love is objectively good, he is saying love would be good even if there were no conscious humans to think love is good. This is an important distinction to make if one is to make sense of Harris' explanation for "objective" moral truth.

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[32] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), 715. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[33] Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 220.

[34] Ibid.*,* 29.

Take, for instance, a situation where a man, Steve, needs money, and he decides he will rob his neighbor, Don, to get the money that he needs. Let's suppose, given the circumstances, Steve genuinely believes that stealing in this situation is not bad and he will be doing nothing wrong. On the surface, it seems that Harris's moral landscape faces a problem. It appears that Steve's brain functions have determined that there is nothing wrong with stealing from Don. Since Harris grounds moral truth in the functions of the brain, it seems Harris would have to conclude that Steve is not doing anything wrong, making the "moral truth" in this scenario subjective. However, when Harris uses the word "objective" to speak of objective moral truth, he is saying the moral truth was determined through non-biased reasoning.[35] As a result, in response to the scenario presented above, it is reasonable to conclude that Harris would say that Steve did not use unbiased reasoning to conclude that stealing from Don is okay. Steve stealing from Don will likely not contribute to Don's well-being, and therefore, despite the fact that Steve thinks it is okay to steal, it is not.

Given that Harris equates objective goodness with human flourishing the implication seems to be that evil is whatever is not conducive to human flourishing. Anything that opposes human flourishing might be considered evil. For example, diseases are typically not helpful for human flourishing and so they would be evil. Murder is not typically conducive to human flourishing and would be considered evil. On Harris' view, evil, like goodness, would ultimately be grounded in the biological processes of the brain.

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[35] Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 29.

Dr. Erik Wielenberg, another naturalist and moral realist, says humans are like every other living creature on earth, made by blind natural processes beyond their control.[36] He attributes all human accomplishment to "dumb luck" and whether God exists or not, "puffing oneself" up over others is foolish.[37] However, Wielenberg then says, "I am not suggesting that no life is better, more admirable, or more worthwhile than another…"[38] He says it is obvious that a successful artist who has just painted a masterpiece is more accomplished than if he had spent the day in a gutter.[39] He also asserts that every action and thought one has taken place within a framework that is beyond that person's control.[40] Wielenberg claims that a virtue like humility depends on the fact that man's accomplishments are outside of his control, and the dependence on factors beyond one's control makes humility an appropriate attitude to have.

If one's accomplishments are largely due to blind forces beyond one's control, then what is one to think about the virtue of charity? One person finds affluence, and another finds poverty, and neither has much say in the matter. Wielenberg imagines the circumstances people find themselves in like this: Suppose millions of humans parachute down to the surface of another planet, and the biomes that make up that planet vary widely. Some areas are lush forests with lots of resources, and others are barren deserts with no resources. Some people land in the lush forest, some in the barren deserts, and some in quicksand, struggling to survive. Where the people landed on the planet was largely out of their hands. Suppose the people parachuting know that no

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[36] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 108.

[37] Ibid., 110.

[38] Ibid., 111.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

perfect being is responsible for their circumstances and no divine commands are issued to help

their neighbors. Instead, they are on their own. It is this sort of scenario that Wielenberg says

mankind finds himself in a naturalistic universe.[41]

As Wielenberg puts it, "What obligations, if any, do the better-off among these humans

have to the worse-off?"[42] He concludes that the one who is better off is obligated, to some

degree, to help the worse-off because helping a neighbor in this situation is intrinsically good.[43]

The fact that helping a neighbor in the situation presented above is intrinsically good provides

normative reasons for one to help. The normative reasons are connected to moral obligation

through supervenience, resulting in a moral obligation for the better off to help the worse off.

Wielenberg admits that moral properties cannot be grounded in biological evolution or

social conditioning. Instead, he views moral properties as metaphysical.[44] He suggests moral

properties are supervenient properties, leading one to believe that Wielenberg accepts a sort of

moral platonism and that these moral properties are abstract objects rather than concrete. In fact,

Dr. William Lane Craig remarked in a lecture that Wielenberg has explicitly stated in an

interview that his view is platonic, and although some view the term platonic as a criticism,

Wielenberg says he embraces the label.[45] It appears that these moral properties, which exist as

abstract objects, include both good and evil properties. The moral property "goodness" might

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[41] Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, 113-115.

[42] Ibid., 115.

[43] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4, Oxford Academic.

[44] Ibid., 2.

[45] William Lane Craig, "Dr. Craig on Wielenberg's Robust Ethics: Theistic Responses," ReasonableFaithOrg, December 15, 2017, YouTube video, 24:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6wc8yTRorc&t=1086s&ab_channel=ReasonableFaithOrg.

supervene on the physical situation of a baby being born while the moral property "evil" might supervene on a situation where a man has been murdered.

For Wielenberg, something has intrinsic value when the activity is the end, or the activity is worth doing for its own sake.[46] One example given is participation in a loving relationship. The idea is that if everything except the activity of participating in a loving relationship were removed and one imagines the activity in isolation, and the activity still seems good despite only the relationship existing, then it is intrinsically good.

The thought experiment presented above is referred to as the *isolation test*.[47] A similar test proposed by Scott Davison is called the *annihilation test*.[48] Using the annihilation test, one might imagine that a loving relationship, every aspect of it, is completely annihilated. Has something valuable been lost? If so, it is an indication that a loving relationship is intrinsically valuable.

Just as some things are intrinsically good, some things are intrinsically bad, and they are determined in the same way. Something that is intrinsically bad would be considered 'evil.' Wielenberg considers a situation where he is on his way to class and finds one of his students with his arm engulfed in flames, screaming from pain and requesting assistance.[49] The student's pain is intrinsically bad in the same way a loving relationship is intrinsically good. If one were able to remove everything except the pain experienced by the student, the pain would still seem bad, and if one were to remove every aspect of the pain, then it would seem something bad has

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[46] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 3.

[47] George Edward Moore, *Principa Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 91.

[48] Scott Davison, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 35.

[49] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 8.

been lost. Therefore, the situation where the student's arm is on fire, and he is experiencing intense pain is bad in and of itself.

To understand how one becomes obligated to engage in an intrinsically good activity or to intervene when possible, to stop or prevent an intrinsically bad situation, it is essential to understand normative reasons. Wielenberg suggests that if something is intrinsically good, then we have normative reasons to act or not act in a certain way. Sticking with the example of a loving relationship, if a man is in a loving relationship and he knows that making some personal sacrifice, such as buying his wife a gift rather than spending the money on himself, would contribute toward preserving the loving relationship, then the man has a normative reason for buying his wife a gift rather than spending the money on himself. These normative reasons, Wielenberg might say, are what obligates us to act in a certain way.

Similarly, if we come across a person whose arm is on fire, we are witnessing a situation that is intrinsically bad. Suppose we also notice that there is a bucket of water nearby, and we have the ability to stop, pick up the bucket of water, and douse the flames. We have it within our ability to stop this intrinsically bad situation, and so we have normative reasons to stop it. This ability, combined with the situation being intrinsically bad, creates an obligation for us to stop, grab the bucket, and douse the flames.

Summary

In the naturalistic worldview, there are varying thoughts about morality and evil. The moral anti-realist denies any objective moral truths and, therefore, denies that anything can be called objectively evil. As a result, the moral anti-realist has nothing to offer regarding the POE because it denies its existence from the start. Of course, this does not mean moral anti-realists do

not live "good" moral lives. However, they do so because it is the way they prefer to act. Any value judgments they make are recognized as asserting only opinions and not a moral truth.

On the other hand, there are some naturalists who affirm that objective morality exists. In contrast to the anti-realist, when a value judgment is made, the moral realist would affirm that it is either true or false. In the case of Dr. Harris, he grounds objective moral truth in the natural world, specifically, the human brain. Dr. Wielenberg recognizes the issues that result if one attempts to ground objective moral truth in purely biological or evolutionary processes. As a result, he grounds their objectivity in the metaphysical realm, asserting moral properties exist as platonic objects. With the affirmation of objective moral truth and evil, the POE is indeed a problem that the naturalist and moral realist must address. The question is whether the naturalist or the Christian Molinist provides a better grounding for these moral truths and which worldview provides the most plausible or satisfying solution.

God and Evil

There are varying views on the kinds and origins of evil within Christianity, but the Christian Molinist agrees with the moral realist in affirming that there is such a thing as objective morality, including objective evil. Within morality, there are moral values which are those things that are good or bad, and moral duties, which are those things that one ought or ought not to do. To be objective, these moral values and duties are true independent of what any human thinks. Suppose every human who has existed in the past, present, and future was brainwashed into thinking torturing children for fun was good. Would torturing children for fun still be bad, and should one do what they can to protect the child? If the answer is "yes," then that is an affirmation of objective moral values and duty.

The Christian Molinist is in the same position as the naturalist in that if he is going to affirm that objective moral values and duties exist, he must ground that claim. The Christian will ground objective moral values and duties in God since He is the ultimate reality and ultimate authority. The grounding of morality in God may tempt one to bring up a more than two-thousand-year-old dilemma referred to as "the Euthyphro dilemma."

In Plato's work *Euthyphro,* a dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro presents what appears, on the surface, to be a problem. Socrates says, "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."[50] Translated to monotheistic Christianity, the problem would go something like this: Is something good because God decided it was good, or does God decide something is good because it is good?

If something is good because God decided it was good, then the good seems to be arbitrary. In other words, God could have decided anything was good. He could have decided that hating your neighbor was good and loving your neighbor was bad. If God decides something is good because it is good, then the good would be independent of God, making God unnecessary for objective values. Over the centuries, philosophers have shown the Euthyphro dilemma to be a false dichotomy. The two options are presented as if they are the only two possibilities, but there is, in fact, a third. God is the Good. In other words, God and the Good are ontologically inseparable.[51] The idea that God is *essentially* good or identical with the Good is a deep concept

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[50] Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Project Gutenberg, 1999, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1642/pg1642-images.html.

[51] David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 93. Oxford Academic.

that a chapter or book could not do justice, but it is worth noting that the view has a long history

in Christian thought among Anselmians, Thomists, theistic activists, and theistic Platonists.[52]

If God is the Good, then it does away with the problem of the Good being separate from

God. The Good being essential to God makes it so that if God did not exist, neither could The

Good. The appearance of right and wrong being arbitrary appears false, given that the Christian

concept of God is that He is not only identical to the Good but also perfectly loving. As a result,

the fear that God could command one to, say, practice cruelty for its own sake is resolved

because God, being perfectly Good and loving, will not command such things.[53] Otherwise, He

would not be perfectly Good and loving.

With a grounding of objective morality, the obvious question follows, "Why would God

permit evil to occur?" Some may see a contradiction between God and evil existing

simultaneously. After all, if God is all-powerful, perfectly just, and perfectly good, how could a

world that He created contain evil?

A major key to understanding why God might permit evil is found in the Free Will

Defense (FWD) articulated by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga's FWD shows that there is neither an

explicit nor implicit contradiction, at least in the logical sense, between God's existence and the

existence of evil. Essential to the FWD is the idea that persons are free with respect to an action:

> 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.[54]

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[52] Baggett and Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, 93.

[53] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 1 (1979): 67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40018244.

[54] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29.

Plantinga argues that a world with significantly free persons who can freely perform more good than evil is more valuable than a world containing no free persons at all. God can create free creatures, but He cannot *cause* or *determine* them to only do what is right. If He does so, then they would not be significantly free. If it is better to have a world with significantly free creatures capable of moral good, then, by virtue of their free will, they also possess a capability of moral evil because they can oppose the moral good. This freedom to choose moral evil cannot be taken away from them because their ability to choose freely is removed as a result.[55] Plantinga says, "The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good."[56]

What does Plantinga mean by saying God could only have prevented moral evil by removing the possibility of moral good? Augustine claimed, and it is the opinion in this paper, that a universe with free creatures who choose moral goodness has more good than a universe that lacks such free creatures.[57] Without free creatures, there would be no one to freely choose what is *right*. There would be no one to receive divine commands and, as a result, no need for *ought* or *ought not*. There would be the Good, but no one to choose moral goodness. God, it seems after all, has no need to issue Himself commands. The result is that God can create a better universe by permitting evil.

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[55] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 30.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 27.

An objection raised against this view is that there is a possible world containing free creatures who never sin. If God is omniscient, He would know about this possible world; if He is omnipotent, He could have actualized that world. The idea that God being omnipotent means He can do literally anything is a false notion. The simplest explanation is that God cannot do something that contradicts His nature. For instance, because God is holy and morally perfect, He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Similarly, God cannot do that which is logically impossible since logic, like morality, is grounded in His very nature. God could not make it so that He never existed because the premises (1) God existed and (2) God never existed are contradictory. (1) could be true, or (2) could be true, but they cannot both be true. So, omnipotence does not include the ability to do any and all things.

According to Plantinga, one of those things an omnipotent Being cannot do is actualize *any* possible world. In other words, "there are possible worlds God could not have actualized."[58] A possible world is an abstract conceptualization of a way things could have been. It is a state of affairs of some kind and states of affairs can exist as propositions without obtaining. God *creates* the heavens and the earth and everything in them, but He does not *create* states of affairs; instead, He *actualizes* them according to Plantinga.[59]

Plantinga calls the idea that God can actualize any possible world *Leibniz' Lapse*. He states, "The atheologian is right in holding that there are many possible worlds containing moral good but no moral evil; his mistake lies in endorsing Leibniz' Lapse. So one of his premises - that God, if omnipotent, could have actualized just any world He pleased - is false."[60] In other

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[58] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 42.

[59] Ibid., 38.

[60] Ibid., 44.

words, a world with free creatures that never go wrong is *logically* possible, but nevertheless, it

is not really possible.

Why is it not really possible for God to actualize a world with free creatures that never go

wrong? Plantinga suggests it is because humans suffer from what he calls transworld depravity.[61]

The concept of transworld depravity suggests that every free creature will perform at least one

morally reprehensible action in any possible world they are created. Transworld depravity is an

essential property of each free creature and so it must be present in all worlds the creature exists.

If Plantinga is correct, then it is not necessarily true that God could actualize a world with

free creatures who always do what is right, even if it is a possible world. He provides a helpful

example to demonstrate why this is the case. He supposes the mayor of Boston, Curley Smith, is

opposed to a freeway being built in a particular area. However, the Highway Department director

offers Curley a bribe of $35,000 to support the project. Curley Smith accepts the bribe and

supports the project. Later, the director wonders whether Curley would have accepted a bribe of

$20,000 had he offered it.[62] What the director is wondering is which of the two possibilities is

true. (a) If Curley had been offered a $20,000 bribe, he would have accepted it, or (b) If Curley

had been offered a $20,000 bribe, he would have rejected it. Some may suggest that neither of

these statements is true or false because Curley was not offered $20,000. He was offered

$35,000. However, it is natural to assume and perhaps obvious that had these states of affairs

occurred, Curley would have done something. Plantinga states,

> There is a possible world *W* where God strongly actualizes a totality *T* of states of
> affairs including Curley's being free with respect to taking the bribe, and where
> Curley takes the bribe. But there is another possible world *W** where God
> actualizes the very same states of affairs and where Curley *rejects* the bribe. Now

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[61] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 49-53.

[62] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 173-74.

> suppose it is true as a matter of fact that if God had actualized *T*, Curley would have accepted the bribe: then God could not have actualized *W**. And if, on the other hand, Curley would have rejected the bribe, had God actualized *T*, then God could not have actualized *W*. So either way there are worlds God could not have actualized.[63]

Since God created Curley with significant freedom, God cannot causally determine him to accept or reject the bribe. In that moment of choosing, Curley is free to accept or reject. Curley, in a weaker sense of the term *actualize,* has it within his power to actualize a certain state of affairs. He can actualize either his acceptance or rejection of the $20,000 bribe. It is within God's power to either create or not create Curley, and it is within God's power to make him free with respect to the action of either taking or rejecting the bribe, but if God creates him and gives him that freedom, then whether Curley takes or rejects the bribe is up to him and not God. So, there are a number of possible worlds where it is partly up to Curley whether God can create them.[64]

With that in mind, God, having given man free will because it allowed for moral good, is limited in the possible worlds He could create. If moral evil is a result of the decisions made by free creatures and Plantinga is right that moral evil does not count against God's omnipotence or goodness, how should we understand natural evil? Perhaps we can place the responsibility of moral evil on man, but can we place the responsibility of natural evil on man as well, or does that count against God? Here, I think the Christian has a few options.

One line of thinking is that some natural evils and persons are so closely connected that had the evil not occurred, the persons would have produced less moral good.[65] Take, for example, a person who develops cancer and suffers tremendously. As a result of their cancer

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[63] Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 180-81.

[64] Ibid., 184.

[65] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 57.

diagnosis, they are motivated to create an organization that goes on to provide productive research and development for cancer treatment as well as practical assistance to lessen the suffering of countless other people who have cancer. Perhaps without the cancer and suffering, the organization would not have been developed or have provided as much benefit as it did with the cancer and suffering. It would seem, on balance, that the whole state of affairs is valuable.

Another option is to say that all natural evil is ultimately a result of moral evil so that natural evil is still a result of creatures having free will, which we have already stated was better for a world to have free creatures than none at all. St. Augustine proposed an idea that is plausible in a Christian worldview, although the naturalist will strongly disagree since it requires metaphysical beings. He proposed that Satan, a powerful non-human spirit who is also a free and rational being, is the cause of any natural evil that cannot be attributed to God's punishment.[66]

Plantinga's argument that, given the free will of these creatures, God may not have been able to create a possible world where these free non-human creatures would not go wrong applies here as well. He states it is possible that:

> Natural evil is due to the free actions of nonuman persons; there is a balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of these nonhuman persons; and it was not within the power of God to create a world that contains a more favorable balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of the nonhuman persons it contains.

This would be consistent with the belief that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good. Finally, another option is that a world with natural laws is necessary if it is to contain free creatures.

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[66] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 58.

The need for natural laws view says that events in the world need to primarily take place in a regular way so that effective action is possible.[67] The events will only take place in a regular way if they are governed by natural laws. If events are primarily governed by natural laws, then it makes it possible for those events to harm humans. As a result, God allowing natural evils would be justified because natural law, even though it provides an opportunity for natural evil, is required for persons with free will, and a world with free persons contains more good than a world without free persons.

There are some objections to the "need for natural law" argument.[68] One objection is that the occasional intervention by God would not render effective human action impossible. A second is that there are many major natural disasters that God could have intervened to stop, and the miracle would go largely undetected. This objection seems to address the Divine hiddenness argument, which says that if God intervened too much, then people would be compelled to believe in God in such a way that their free will to choose God is effectively nullified.

A third objection says that natural evil relies not only on the laws of nature but also on the initial or boundary conditions. As a result, it is claimed that God could have created a world with the same laws of nature as the actual world but without, say, non-human carnivores. Creating a world without non-human carnivores would remove the evil or suffering caused by them. Perhaps the world could have also been created with unlimited resources for a growing population resulting in no starvation. A fourth objection is that God could have also created people with different neurophysiological states so that extreme pain did not exist or could be turned off when needed by the person.

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[67] Michael Tooley, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "the problem of evil," accessed August 3, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#NeeForNatLaw.

[68] Ibid.

One possible fallacy underlying these objections is that the world is fairly simple, and an alteration in an event would have no significant ripple effect through time. It seems that the idea with at least some of these objections is that God could intervene 'sometimes' and not affect man's ability to choose or have a meaningful impact freely. They also seem to suggest that God could have created any possible world, but we have already argued that it is possible that is not the case. If God cannot create just any possible world, and perhaps the actual world is the best feasible, why can God not intervene, when possible, to reduce suffering? The answer to that question is that it is possible God does intervene as much as possible without negating man's freedom and losing a greater good.

The Main Objection - The Evidential Problem of Evil

The problem to be addressed here is this: given the amount of evil that exists in the world, is atheism or theism more reasonable? In his article "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," William Rowe presents the evidential argument from evil and forms his argument as follows:

> 1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
>
> 2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
>
> 3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.[69]

Rowe's argument is valid in that if the two premises are true, then the conclusion follows. Many theists would accept the second premise in the argument. Much could be said about what exactly

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[69] William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979): 336. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009775.

the second premise means but for the purposes of this paper, it will be assumed that the second premise is saying God, because He is perfectly good, would prevent any *unnecessary* suffering. As a result, it is the first premise where atheists and theists tend to disagree.

The assertion made by many atheists, including Rowe, is that, given the evils that occur in the world, atheistic belief is more reasonable than theistic belief.[70] The idea is that if God is omniscient, He knows what evil will occur ahead of time. If He is omnipotent, then He can stop the evil from occurring. Since He is also perfectly good, He would want to stop the evil. However, evil is experienced daily throughout the world. As a result, the atheist concludes that God must not exist.

More specifically, the evidential problem might say that although God's existence, omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness are logically compatible with evil, the amount of evil present in the world makes it more likely that God does not exist. The atheist might reason that, even though the permittance of evil might be necessary for free creatures, surely an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God could reduce the amount or severity of evil.

Many theists will argue that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil He permits. In other words, God allows the evil He does to bring about a greater good or to avoid an equally bad or worse evil. In his second premise, Rowe seems to grant that if it were the case that the suffering was necessary to bring about the greater good or to avoid an equally bad or worse evil, then God has sufficient reasons for allowing it.[71]

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[70] Michael L. Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, Second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 131.

[71] Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 336.

So, what would be the justifying reason for God to permit some instance of evil He could prevent? There are at least two options. The first is that there is some good that outweighs the bad, which God wishes to actualize but cannot without permitting that instance of evil.[72] The second is that there is an equal or worse instance of evil that God wishes to prevent but cannot without permitting the instance of evil that occurs.[73] The question the atheist raises is whether it is rational to believe that *all* of the evils that occur in the world meet one of these two requirements. Rowe will admit that the argument is not proof that God does not exist because, although the argument is logically valid, the truth of the premises cannot be known with certainty.[74]

In contemplating the problem evil raised for the theist, Rowe and his contemporaries consider and evaluate two responses given by theists. The first is to say that the atheist has not given any good reasons for thinking the first premise of Rowe's argument is true. The theist might argue that what the atheist is saying is that since the good achieved or evil avoided by permitting an instance of evil cannot be seen, it is reasonable to conclude that the good to be achieved or evil to be avoided does not exist. The theist may say this is an argument from ignorance, and all the atheist is saying is that if there are justifying reasons for allowing the evil, then we do not know what they are.[75]

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[72] Peterson, *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 132.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., 133.

[75] Ibid., 135.

The theist might further assert that, since God is omniscient, is it likely that the justifying reasons God has for permitting the evil could be comprehended by man? The theist might compare God's knowledge to man as that of a parent to their small child.[76] After all, parents allow their children to endure some level of suffering for the good of the child despite the fact that the child cannot understand the purposes.

The atheist may argue that they are not making an argument from ignorance by making a distinction between goods one can know about and goods beyond man's ken.[77] Rowe, Howard-Snyder, and Bergmann consider a five-year-old girl who is beaten, raped, and murdered. Their conclusion is that there is no known good, that is, a good that one can cognitively grasp, that justifies God to permit that suffering.[78]

Regarding the parent analogy, the atheist will say that God would be consciously present with humans when He permits them to suffer, just as a parent would be present with their child. God would give them "special assurances of His love for them."[79] Since countless humans endure prolonged and horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of the presence of God or receiving any special assurances from Him, it is reasonable to conclude that God either does not exist or the parent analogy is flawed.[80]

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[76] Peterson, *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 135.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., 137.

[80] Ibid.

Despite the theist's first response, the atheist concludes that there is no good reason to believe God has a justifying reason for permitting the five-year-old to endure what she did, and any good that might have resulted could have been actualized by God without the girl suffering.[81]

In the first response, the theist attempts to show that there is no good reason for thinking premise one is true because man's ignorance compared to God's omniscience prevents one from adequately showing that premise one is true. The theist's second response is to try to give good reasons or evidence for thinking premise one is false.

Christian Molinism - The Answer to the Evidential Problem of Evil

Many arguments have been given to form a theory as to why God does not intervene more in our world. One argument that this paper will attempt to articulate is that the world is, in fact, not simple at all. Instead, the world is extremely complex and consists of an enumerable series of events, many of which rely on one another to obtain the given outcome. The result is that even though it may appear that there are some situations where God could have intervened in a non-obvious and unintrusive way to avoid some evil and suffering, given the freedom of man and nature being relatively independent and inexorable, even the smallest of interventions could cause a ripple effect such that God would have to continuously intervene to 'keep the train on the tracks' so to speak.

Take, for instance, the Holocaust. It seems that God could have intervened in a way to cause the death of Hitler and avoid the Holocaust. God could have done this very subtly. Perhaps Hitler dies in an accident at a young age, or one of the assassination attempts is successful. The

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[81] Peterson, *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 135.

problem is that the result would not *just* be that the Holocaust did not happen. That small intervention would set in motion a different series of events, possibly making it so that a greater good is not ultimately achieved.

The result of the world being extremely complex, and states of affairs being connected in a very complex way would mean that if God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the instances of evil that He does, it is very unlikely that we would be able to identify what those reasons are in most circumstances. This inability to know why God permits what He does could be considered a version of skeptical theism. This paper understands skeptical theism, as it applies to this argument, to hold that if theism is true, we should be skeptical about our ability to understand all of God's plans for organizing the world the way He has, including His reasons for the amount and nature of evil. In addition, if it is true that we do not possess the ability to understand all of God's reasons for permitting the evil that He does, then this either undermines or greatly mitigates the evidential argument from evil.

Stephen Wykstra uses what he calls the "Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access" (CORNEA) to argue against the evidential argument from evil.[82] According to CORNEA, in order for someone to be entitled to claim "it appears that p" based on a cognized situation s, it should be reasonable for them to think they have "epistemic access" to the truth of p through s.[83]

One example Wykstra gives to demonstrate the plausibility of CORNEA is to imagine you look through a doorway into a large room the size of a Concord hangar to see if there is a

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[82] S. J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 85, https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/scholarly-journals/humean-obstacle-evidential-arguments-suffering-on/docview/1297952575/se-2.

[83] Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," 85.

table inside. In the room are several objects obstructing your vision, including bulldozers, dead elephants, and Toyotas. Surveying the room from the doorway, you see no table. Should one claim, "It does not appear that there is a table in the room?"[84] It seems unlikely, given the amount and size of objects obstructing your vision, that you would see a table if it were in the room.

In a Christian worldview, God can and does intervene occasionally, modifying nature and producing miracles. Consider the many miracles found in the New Testament, which may not even be close to the number of miracles performed by Jesus and His disciples (Jn. 21:25). However, the concept of a stable world where people make choices, and their choices result in consequences demands that these interventions be rare compared to the events as a whole. C.S. Lewis provides a great illustration of how this might limit God in His ability to intervene:

> In a game of chess you can make certain arbitrary concessions to your opponent, which stands to the ordinary rules of the game as miracles stand to the laws of nature. You can deprive yourself of a castle, or allow the other man sometimes to take back a move made inadvertently. But… if all his moves were revocable and if all your pieces disappeared whenever their position on the board was not to his liking - then you could not have a game at all. So it is with the life of souls in a world: fixed laws, consequences unfolding by causal necessity, the whole natural order, are at once limits within which their common life is confined and also the sole condition under which any such life is possible.[85]

How much can God intervene before free creatures can no longer be considered free? That is a difficult question to answer. Lewis suggests that God can intervene on occasion without free will being effectively removed, but at some point, that line would be crossed. Considering the world's complexity and how each event in history, which includes the decisions made by free creatures,

[84] Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," 85.

[85] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 25.

is connected to future events complicates the question further. Knowing the answer would require infinite wisdom and knowledge.

The idea that a small change in circumstances could cause major changes in future events is known as the *Butterfly Effect.* The term was coined after research conducted by Edward Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist. Lorenz was trying to figure out how to predict the weather further into the future.[86] If, for instance, a hurricane could be accurately depicted a month or two in advance, then better preparations could be made, saving the lives of many people. The idea was that, "Given an approximate knowledge of a system's initial conditions and an understanding of natural law, one can calculate the approximate behavior of the system."[87]

In theory, Lorenz thought a computer could let meteorologists do what astronomers do, except instead of accurately forecasting the constellations, comets, spacecraft, and missiles, he could accurately forecast winds and clouds. Instead, what Lorenz found was a system that appeared to be chaotic. He discovered that when it comes to weather, there are far too many variables, and the relationships between them are impossible to pin down, and deterministic long-term weather forecasting is an impossibility. It has been suggested that even with all the current technology, weather forecasts beyond two or three days are speculative, and beyond six or seven days are worthless.[88]

We can make philosophical assertions about how the butterfly effect might affect a world of free creatures. In fact, we have seen this in books and movies. Ray Bradbury, a great American author, wrote a short story titled "A Sound of Thunder," providing a fictional account

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[86] Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

[87] James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), 237, Kindle.

[88] Gleick, *Chaos*, 333.

of what might happen if even a small seemingly insignificant change in the distant past occurred. In his story, a man named Eckels travels back in time to hunt a dinosaur, an adventure provided by Time Safari, Inc.[89]

In the present day, a man named Keith has just been elected president. Eckels and a worker at Time Safari, Inc. comment on how badly things could be if Deutscher had been elected instead of Keith. Just before traveling over sixty million years into the past, the worker tells Eckels about the stiff penalties if he does anything other than what the safari guides tell him. In the past and outside of the time machine, Eckels finds an antigravity metal path set up by Time Safari, Inc., and he is instructed to not, under any circumstances, get off the path and not to shoot any animal the guides have not instructed him to. Travis explains the concern of changing the future. He tells Eckels they don't belong in the past and supposes they accidentally kill a mouse. If they kill that mouse, they also kill all the future families and families of the families of that particular mouse. With one step, they could wipe out *billions* of future mice that otherwise would have existed.[90]

Eckels does not seem to pick up on the significance of killing the one mouse. Travis goes on to explain:

> Well, what about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of ten foxes, a lion starves. For want of a lion, all manner of insects, vultures, infinite billions of life forms are thrown into chaos and destruction… fifty-nine million years later, a cave man, one of a dozen on the entire world, goes hunting wild boar or saber-tooth tiger for food. But you, friend, have stepped on all the tigers in that region. By stepping on one single mouse. So the cave man starves… From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From their loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a race, a people, an entire history of life… With the death of that one cave man, a billion others yet unborn are throttled in the womb. Perhaps

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[89] Ray Bradbury, *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* (New York: RosettaBooks, 1980), 248. EBook Central.

[90] Ibid., 250.

> Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest, and only Asia waxes healthy and teeming. Step on a mouse and you crush the Pyramids. Step on a mouse and you leave your print, like a Grand Canyon, across Eternity. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, Washington might not cross the Delaware, there might never be a United States at all. So be careful. Stay on the Path. Never step off![91]

In the story Eckels does step off the path after running from a dinosaur and crushes a butterfly. When they return to the actual present, everything is very different, including the results of the election. The philosophical conclusion we can make is that we have no idea how things might be if even the smallest changes in circumstances were different. These wonderings about how things might be different are known as counterfactuals.

Counterfactuals are typically presented as an *if/then* statement. Consider the following example of a counterfactual. Winston Churchill was born on November 30, 1874. However, suppose Winston Churchill had not been born. Suppose either something happened during pregnancy or his parents, for whatever reason, did not copulate at the time necessary for Mr. Churchill to be conceived. The following statement could be made: (*a*) "*If* Winston Churchill had not been born, *then* Hitler and the Nazi's would have succeeded in exterminating the Jews and controlling Europe." The hypothetical *a* is a counterfactual, and it seems obvious, just as it was with Curley in Plantinga's example, that something would have happened as a result of Churchill not being born. After all, Winston Churchill seems to have played a vital role in the outcome of World War II.

It seems that the butterfly effect does something to address the naturalist's four objections to God being justified in permitting natural evil and some moral evil. If the world is complex in the way described above, then even the smallest interventions on God's part could have consequences on a global scale. The fact is that we would have no idea what sequence of events

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[91] Bradbury, *The Stories of Ray Bradbury,* 250-51.

will occur following an incident of evil and suffering or what sequence of events would have

occurred had past instances of evil and suffering been avoided. The Christian might argue that

God does know those counterfactuals, and so He permits the evil and suffering He does to avoid

an equal or worse evil or actualize a greater good.

The idea that God knows all counterfactuals, referred to as His "middle knowledge," is a

foundational premise in Christian Molinism. It also seems vital to the argument that God permits

the evil and suffering He does to avoid an equal or worse evil or to actualize a greater good

because in order for God to know which evil to permit, He would need to know the truths of all

counterfactuals. The name "Molinism" comes from the 16th Century Spanish Jesuit Priest who

argued that God does possess middle knowledge.[92] Molinism and the idea that God has middle

knowledge came about to address the problem of theological fatalism and show that God's

sovereignty and human free will are compatible. For the purposes of the argument in this paper,

it will be essential to provide a brief overview of what might be referred to as "mere

Molinism."[93]

Mere Molinism could be described as an affirmation that God has middle knowledge and

possessed this knowledge logically prior to His decree to create the world. He used this

knowledge to choose which world He would create and then actualized the states of affairs

contained within the actual world. Again, to make the distinction clear. God *created* the universe

and the world (caused it to exist), and by creating this world, He actualized (not casually

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[92] David Hunt, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "foreknowledge and free will," accessed September 7, 2023,https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/.

[93] Timothy A. Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism: A Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Philosophical Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020).

determining the states of affairs so that they must exist but ensuring that they *would* exist) when He created the world.

The concept of middle knowledge was described by William Lane Craig, a prominent philosopher, as "one of the most fruitful theological ideas ever conceived."[94] Mere Molinism would say there are three logical moments in God's knowledge. The first moment is called God's *natural knowledge,* which is the knowledge of all necessary truths, such as the laws of logic. The third is God's *free knowledge* which is knowledge of the actual world that God has created and includes His foreknowledge. God's free knowledge is logically posterior to His decision to create the world.[95]

In between God's natural knowledge and free knowledge is His middle knowledge. In this moment, God knows what every possible creature *would* (as opposed to simply *could*) freely do in any possible set of circumstances. Take, for instance, Plantinga's example of the mayor, Curley, possibly being offered a bribe of $20,000 instead of $35,000. If God possesses middle knowledge, He knows what Curley *would* have done had he been offered $20,000.

God's natural knowledge is essential to Him, but His middle knowledge and free knowledge are not since people have the ability to choose differently. For example, God knew that Curley would accept the $35,000 bribe, but Curley could have rejected the bribe. Of course, if Curley were going to reject the bribe, God would have known that instead. It is important to note that this does not mean God's knowledge changes temporally as people make decisions. God would have always known Curley was going to reject the bribe. God's knowing what

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[94] William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 126.

[95] Ibid., 129.

Curley would do does not necessitate that Curley's decision is *causally determined*. It is not that

Curley *must* accept the bribe but that he *will* accept the bribe.

Utilizing His middle knowledge, God knows which of the possible worlds, known in

virtue of His natural knowledge, are within His power to create. He knows which of those

possible worlds contains the best balance between good and evil. God's middle knowledge, like

His natural knowledge, is logically prior to His decision to create the world. The Christian has a

couple of options available to him to explain how God could know what free creatures would

choose to do. Craig summarizes them in this way:

> If it be asked how God has middle knowledge of free decisions by creatures,
> proponents of middle knowledge usually respond in one of two ways: (1) God by
> his infinite understanding knows each creature so completely that he discerns
> even the creature's free decisions under any conceivable circumstance. Since the
> moment of middle knowledge is logically prior to God's creation, no actual
> creatures exist at that moment, but God comprehends them as they exist in his
> mind as possible creatures. He knows them so well that he knows what they
> would freely do in any situation. (2) Statements about how creatures would decide
> to act if placed in certain circumstances are true or false; since God is omniscient,
> he knows all truth; therefore, God simply knows all true statements about how
> creatures would act in certain circumstances.[96]

The concept of God having middle knowledge is controversial, even among Christians. The main

objection to middle knowledge is referred to as "the grounding objection." The philosopher and

objector to middle knowledge, Steven Cowan, says that the grounding objection is "the

contention that God cannot have middle knowledge because the counterfactuals of freedom

which are the objects of His middle knowledge have no truth-value."[97] The proposition made by

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[96] Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 133.

[97] Steven B. Cowan, "The Grounding Objection to Middle Knowledge Revisited," *Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2003): 93. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/stable/20008449?pq-origsite=summon#metadata_info_tab_contents.

a counterfactual does not correspond to an actual state of affairs, so there is nothing to provide truth conditions for their truth or falsity. Other prominent philosophers such as Robert Adams, William Hasker, and Thomas Flint have argued the same.

Supporters of middle knowledge, such as William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga, have responded to these objections. Craig forms the grounding objection in this way: "It is the claim that there are no true counterfactuals concerning what creatures would freely do under certain specified circumstances…"[98] These counterfactual sentences are said to have no truth-value or they are universally false since there is nothing to make them true. Also, since counterfactuals, according to the Molinist, are true logically prior to God's creative decree, there is no ground for their truth and so cannot be known by God.

Craig calls the grounding objection a "radical claim" and gives three reasons why the Molinist view of middle knowledge is warranted.[99] The first is that we ourselves seem to know such true counterfactuals and use them daily in our conduct and planning. The second is that it is plausible that the Law of Conditional Excluded Middle (LCEM) holds for counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Craig forms counterfactuals of creaturely freedom this way: "*If* S *were in* C, S *would freely do* A, where S is a created agent, A is some action, and C is a set of fully specified circumstances including the whole history of the world up until the time of S's free action."[100] So according to LCEM, If S were in C, S would either freely do A or freely not do A. Take, again, for instance, Plantinga's example of Curley. If the circumstances throughout history

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[98] William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection"," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 18, no. 3 (2001), 337-38 DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200118329.

[99] Ibid., 338.

[100] Ibid.

were exactly the same leading up to the time Curley is offered a bribe, and instead of Curley being offered a $35,000 bribe, he was offered a $20,000 bribe, then, according to LCEM, the proposition, "Curley would accept the bribe," is either true or false.

Craig says it isn't necessary that the Molinist endorse LCEM without some limitations, but regarding the very specialized sort of counterfactuals we are considering, it seems they must be true or false. The reason Craig gives is, "since the circumstances C in which the free agent is placed are fully specified in the counterfactual's antecedent, it seems that if the agent were placed in C and left free with respect to the action A, then he must either do A or not do A."[101]

The third reason Molinism is warranted is that Scripture seems to include several counterfactual statements. The example Craig gave is found in Paul's letter to Corinth. Paul, reflecting on God's plan for salvation realized through Christ, says, "None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8, CSB). Paul asserts a counterfactual of creaturely freedom. Craig says, "Will we have the temerity to say that Paul was wrong? Since the Church believes that Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write these words, she accepts them as revealed truth from God."[102]

In 1 Samuel 23, David rescues the residents of Keilah from the Philistines. Saul hears of this and plans to attack Keilah and besiege David there. David learns of the plan and asks God if Saul will come down to Keilah just as David had heard. God says, "He will come down" (1 Sam. 23:10-11). David then asks God if the citizens of Keilah will hand David and his men over to Saul, and God replies, "They will" (1 Sam. 23:12). Using this information, David and his men leave Keilah. Saul, finding out David left, cancels his plans. How is one to understand these

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[101] Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection"," 338.

[102] Ibid., 339.

verses without affirming that at least some counterfactuals can be true? God tells David that Saul "will come down," yet Saul never does come down to Keilah. The same is true for the counterfactual statement regarding the citizens of Keilah handing David and his men over to Saul. Was God mistaken? Of course not. The Molinist will say that the most natural interpretation of this passage is that God was telling David what *would* happen *if* he remained in Keilah.

One last example is found in Matthew 11. Jesus denounces the towns where many of his miracles were performed, saying, "Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago" (Mat. 11:21). Jesus seems to be making a counterfactual claim about free creatures and indicates that it is true that had the miracles been performed there that were performed in Chorazin and Bethsaida, the people would have repented. It seems that these verses, and others like them, provide strong *prima facie* warrant for affirming that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

The grounding objector, Craig says, might retreat to a position that affirms counterfactuals about creaturely free acts can be true but that there are none logically prior to God's creative decree.[103] The problem with this affirmation is that it limits the truth of such counterfactuals to being logically posterior to God's creative decree and appears to make God the author of sin.[104] Moreover, it seems to eliminate human freedom since it would be the case that God is the one who decrees which counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true, including those of sinful actions. Craig argues that the grounding objection is phrased as a rebutting

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[103] Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection"," 339.

[104] Ibid.

defeater, and as such, it requires more warrant than the Molinist's assumption. The Molinist is simply proposing a model that intends to convey one possible solution to the alleged contradiction between God's sovereignty and human freedom.[105]

In summary, the Christian Molinist, when giving an account for evil, might argue the following:

1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

2) Evil exists.

3) Evil is ultimately a result of free will, which requires a relatively independent and inexorable nature resulting in both moral evil and natural evil.

4) A world with free creatures contains more good than a world without free creatures.

5) While there are possible worlds with free creatures who never go wrong it was not in God's power to create those worlds if creatures were to be genuinely free.

6) God possesses middle knowledge.

7) God created this world and actualized the states of affairs it contains using His middle knowledge because the actual world contains the best balance of good and evil among the feasible worlds.

8) The world is a complex system and small changes in circumstances can lead to major consequences.

9) God is limited in His ability to intervene, given the complex system of free creatures.

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[105] Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the "Grounding Objection"," 339.

10) God, using His middle knowledge, permits the evil He does because He knows the series of events that will occur after, and the evil will ultimately lead to a greater good or prevent an equal or worse evil.

11) God is not culpable for the evil and suffering that exists.

Analysis

With a review of the naturalist perspective on moral realism, the evidential problem of evil, and the Christian Molinist perspective, a brief analysis is warranted to answer the question as to which of the two worldviews provides the best answer for the problem of evil and suffering. Which worldview provides the best explanation of evil, and does the Christian Molinist provide a plausible explanation as to why God allows the amount and severity of evil that He does?

Concerning the two naturalist explanations of moral realism, Wielenberg's argument seems to make the best attempt at affirming and grounding objective morality. In Dr. Harris' argument presented earlier, he seems to redefine "good" and "evil" in non-moral terms. He says facts about the well-being of conscious creatures exhaust what we can know about "good" and "evil."[106] Harris says, "Questions about values… are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures."[107] Craig, in a debate with Harris, points out that because Harris has redefined his terms this way, asking the question, "Why is maximizing the well-being of creatures good?" is the same as asking, "'Why does maximizing creatures' well-being maximize

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[106] Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 3-4.

[107] Ibid.*,* 1.

creatures' well-being?'"[108] The result is redundancy without actually explaining a grounding for affirming that maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures is good.

If the reader will recall, it was also pointed out that Harris' use of *objective* does not fully capture the intended meaning in this paper. Objective moral values for Harris are moral values that are decided on impartially or without bias, but they do not exist independent of the human mind.[109] To be clear, he says they do not exist independent of "conscious beings."[110] The Christian would agree since he grounds moral values in God, a conscious being, but Harris, being a naturalist, can only be referring to conscious human beings. To reiterate, the term *objective* in this paper is meant to convey something that exists independent of the human mind, and objective moral truths could not have been different. As a result, the view in this paper concerning Harris' argument is that of Dr. Craig's when he says, "Dr. Harris isn't really talking about moral values at all. He's just talking about what's conducive to the flourishing of sentient life on this planet."[111]

Dr. Wielenberg's approach is different than that of Harris because he does not attempt to ground morality in the human mind since it was developed through what he calls "dumb luck."[112] Instead, he grounds moral values in some form of moral platonism, suggesting moral values exist

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[108] "Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate," Debates, Reasonable Faith, April 2011, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba.

[109] Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 29.

[110] Ibid.

[111] "Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate," Debates, Reasonable Faith, April 2011, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba.

[112] Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, 108.

as abstract objects. Under the right physical circumstances, these abstract objects supervene on the situation. The theists' worldview admittedly involves some substantial metaphysical claims, but the claims made by moral platonism seem to be even more extravagant. Peter van Inwagen admits difficulty with explaining what the term 'abstract object' even means.[113] He explains that the Platonist must think of objects as falling into one of two exclusive and exhaustive categories: concrete or abstract.[114] If x falls into one category and y into the other, then those two objects could not be more different. He asserts that the difference between God and a pen is insignificant when comparing the pen (concrete object) with the number 4 (an abstract object), assuming abstract objects exist. Craig asserts:

> Given this strange bifurcation of reality into these two causally unconnected domains, it would be much more credible to suppose that one of the categories is empty. But concrete objects are indisputably real and well-understood, in contrast to abstract objects. So, van Inwagen maintains, the presumption should be that abstract objects do not exist.[115]

The conclusion made by both Craig and Inwagen seems to be that Platonism is implausible, and one should not wish to be a Platonist if it is rationally possible not to be one.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that moral values exist as abstract objects. Wielenberg's argument still faces some formidable obstacles. One is the idea that abstract moral properties can supervene on physical situations. To explain how this supervenience might occur, Wielenberg suggests that physical objects *cause* abstract moral properties to supervene on

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[113] Peter van Inwagen, "A Theory of Properties" in *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 154.

[114] Ibid., 156.

[115] William Lane Craig and Erik Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality: What is the Best Account of Objective Moral Values and Duties?"* ed by Adam Lloyd Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2021), 32-33.

physical situations.[116] In response to this explanation, Craig asks, "How can a physical object somehow reach out and causally connect to a transcendent, causally isolated, abstract object?"[117]

To explain how physical objects can cause abstract moral properties to supervene on physical situations, Wielenberg appeals to theism as an example. He uses the example that if God wills that p, then God's willing that p necessarily brings it about that p obtains. He goes on to say, "The claim is that, on the theistic view, there is a distinctive and robust causal relation that holds between divine willing and its effects, and that this same sort of causal relation holds between non-moral and moral properties."[118] Craig points out that the analogy fails because both God and the universe are concrete objects "endowed with causal powers and dispositions, which can therefore be causally related to one another."[119]

If, again, for the sake of argument, we assume that moral values exist as abstract objects and physical objects cause moral properties to supervene on physical situations, one might then ask how the physical objects "know" which abstract objects to instantiate?[120] What if the physical object picked out moral badness instead of moral goodness or some number? To address this, Wielenberg says that some moral properties supervene on physical situations necessarily and others contingently.[121] Wielenberg again appeals to theism to provide an analogy of how this happens using the doctrine of divine conservation, calling his view a "doctrine of non-moral

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[116] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 16-20.

[117] Craig and Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, 34.

[118] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 19-20.

[119] Craig and Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, 34.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 37-38.

conservation."[122] The analogy fails, however, because God is a personal agent who freely chooses to sustain certain contingent things.[123] It is difficult to see how these physical objects, which have no agency, correctly choose the right moral properties to instantiate since they are not agents.

The list of problems presented here is not exhaustive, but a final one that will be dealt with is that Wielenberg's view seems vulnerable to Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism and possibly makes true moral knowledge impossible.[124] According to Plantinga's view, naturalism is self-defeating because our cognitive faculties will have evolved through naturalistic processes and would not be aimed at truth but rather survival.[125] As a result, our cognitive faculties cannot be relied on to produce true beliefs. Craig suggests Plantinga's argument can be applied to moral beliefs and, if true, provides good reasons for having no confidence that our moral beliefs are true.[126] Craig says:

> Dr. Wielenberg is acutely aware of this problem for Godless Normative Realism. His very complex answer to this problem, simply put, is that the same cognitive processes that produce our moral beliefs also cause the abstract moral properties to be instantiated. Notice that this account depends crucially on the supposed causal connection between physical properties and abstract moral properties, which is perhaps the most obscure point in his philosophy.[127]

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[122] Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 20.

[123] Craig and Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, 35.

[124] Ibid., 36.

[125] Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 344–345.

[126] Craig and Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, 37.

[127] Ibid.

We have already discussed the issues with Wielenberg's view of how abstract moral properties can be instantiated. If the process of producing objectively true moral knowledge is the same, then similar issues apply. Plantinga's argument gives reasons for doubting whether these processes Wielenberg articulates will trigger true moral beliefs instead of beliefs that are merely conducive to survival.[128] Christianity does not face the same issues because moral values and duties, as discussed previously, are grounded in a concrete, although immaterial, Being who is also a personal agent with free will.

If Christianity provides a better grounding for objective moral values and duties, can it adequately address the issues presented by the evidential problem of evil? The argument this paper makes is that Christian Molinism, in particular, can adequately address the problem. The most popular form of the problem is Rowe's version presented earlier. If the reader will recall, we granted that premise 2 is correct, and our main contention was with premise 1, which asserts that there are instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God could have prevented without losing a greater good or preventing some evil or suffering equal or greater.[129]

The simple response to premise 1 is that it does not seem at all obvious that it is true. Rowe's argument seems to imply at least two things. The first is that even if an instance of suffering were connected to some good or prevented another instance of suffering, it is unlikely that the resulting good outweighs the suffering or that another instance of suffering could be worse in every instance. The second is that God can intervene in a world of free creatures to stop

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[128] Craig and Wielenberg, *A Debate on God and Morality*, 37.

[129] Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 336.

instances of suffering from occurring while also guaranteeing that whatever good would have resulted still obtains.

Regarding God intervening in the choices of free creatures, this paper has argued that God can only intervene on very rare occasions without either canceling the free will of creatures or so severely undermining it that their free will is effectively non-existent. The result is that God has limited Himself, presumably because a world of free creatures is better than a world without them, regarding which circumstances He can intervene. One might think back to Lewis' example of a game of chess. If a grandmaster is playing a child in chess, he may intervene, when necessary, but he will try to do so in a way that does not change the established rules of the game, which would remove the effectiveness of the child's choices and result in something that only appears to be a game of chess but in actuality is not. Of course, the grandmaster's choices in this regard are fallible, and God's are not given His omniscience which includes middle knowledge. God's middle knowledge would allow Him to know when He can and cannot intervene.

Regarding there being some instances of suffering that do not lead to some greater good or avoid some other suffering or evil, this paper has argued that we are in a very bad position to make this claim. The world appears to be a whole set of events connected in a complex way (as opposed to a collection of isolated events) where even a change in a seemingly trivial state of affairs could result in extraordinary consequences later. The result is that it is impossible for us to know what consequences would result if God intervened in any given circumstance.

The idea of the world being a complex, interconnected series of events or states of affairs is important because it provides strong reasons for suggesting that our knowledge of how things *would* be *if* some circumstance or state of affairs were different is extremely limited. At worst,

there is a tie between the naturalist and Christian as to whether it is more reasonable to deny or affirm his first premise. The Christian can take a modest and humble approach, saying that even if there were justifiable reasons for permitting evil and suffering, we shouldn't expect to know them, because we cannot follow connected states of affairs both before and after the instance of evil and suffering in question to identify what events were necessary. However, *if* God possesses middle knowledge, *then* He would know the consequences and create a particular world so that the creatures He creates remain free and actualize the states of affairs they do, yet every instance of suffering and evil ultimately results in a greater good. With the complex interconnected world theory, Christian Molinists enjoy the benefit of design and order, despite the appearance of disroder at times. The naturalist, however, does not enjoy this benefit. The naturalist can only say the connectedness of states of affairs is random, following the processes of evolution, which consists of no agent guiding it.

I believe the Christian Molinist can go a step further. So far, the argument presented shows that the naturalist is not in a good position to say God does not have reasons for permitting the evil He does, and the Christian Molinist is in the same boat. As a result, both would be justified in their response. The naturalist will say he sees no reason to think all the evil and suffering in the world is justified, so he sees no reason to affirm the existence of God. The Christian will say he sees no reason to think all the evil and suffering in the world is not justified, so he trusts God.

Plantinga, who has been skeptical of the idea that theodicies can be successful, presents a theodicy that he says, if true, is successful.[130] I will attempt to contribute to his argument and hopefully satisfy the question as to which worldview best explains evil. Naturalism, as has been

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[130] Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 373.

argued earlier, does not seem to provide unity or harmony to the problem of evil. It is not clear that objective evil can be affirmed in a naturalist worldview, and even if it could, it does not seem to provide any purpose for evil.

Let us explore the matter as follows. God intends to create a world, and, in order to do so, He must actualize a maximal state of affairs which Plantinga refers to as a possible world. Keep in mind that God creates the heavens and the earth and everything in them, but He does not create states of affairs. He actualizes states of affairs. A likely imperfect analogy might say that it would be like God creating a book with its paper, binding, characters, and environment. However, He does not causally determine the decisions the characters make. Instead, the characters He has created are free to develop the story themselves using their free will. Does this mean God creates the book, characters, and environment and sits back, hoping everything turns out okay? No. God, using His middle knowledge, knows what those characters will freely choose to do, so He orders things in such a way that the characters make their choices freely, but God remains ultimately sovereign of the story as a whole and achieves the ending He desires.

God considers all the enumerable possible worlds He could create, each having its own degree of goodness or value. As we have discussed earlier, and Plantinga argues as well, many of these possible worlds are not within God's power to actualize since, given free will, many of the states of affairs in them are determined by the free creatures and not God.[131] As a result, we will call the possible worlds God can actualize, feasible worlds. God's aim, we might suppose, is to create an extremely good feasible world.

The question may be - what are good-making qualities among the feasible worlds? One might think of creaturely happiness, beauty, and justice, as well as creatures who follow the

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[131] Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 367.

divine law to love God and their neighbor. There are also bad-making characteristics such as pain, suffering, hatred, and rejecting God. Plantinga argues, and I agree, that these lists leave out the two most important good-making qualities.[132] The first is the existence of God. Any world where God exists is much more valuable than a world where He does not. Of course, the traditional Christian view is that God is concrete and necessarily exists, so He would have to exist in every world.

The second is a contingent good-making characteristic that does not exist in all possible worlds, and that is "the unthinkably great good of divine Incarnation and Atonement."[133] Plantinga says:

> Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine trinity, incomparably good, holy, and sinless, was willing to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate, and to suffer and die so that we human beings can have life and be reconciled to the Father. In order to accomplish this, he was willing to undergo suffering of a depth and intensity we cannot so much as imagine, including even the shattering climax of being abandoned by God the Father himself: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"[134]

What we have is a contingent state of affairs that God ensured was actualized so that humans, who have turned their backs on God, can be reconciled to Him and enjoy an eternity with Him without evil or suffering. It is an eternity without evil and suffering that can be enjoyed after a finite amount of evil and suffering. Surely there is no good-making characteristic of a world that rivals the Incarnation and Atonement?

It may very well be the case that God is not obligated to provide salvation for free creatures who go wrong. So, there are possible worlds where free creatures go wrong, and there

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[132] Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 368.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.

is no atonement. In these worlds, the free creatures are ultimately cut off from God. However, these worlds are not nearly as good as worlds where sinful creatures are offered salvation.

We may now say that all possible worlds are very good since they include the existence of God, who is unlimited in goodness, love, power, knowledge, and holiness. So, at the very least, the actual world is very good. However, I would like to suggest that, not only is it very good, but it is possible that it is the *best* world if such a thing could exist. Out of those possible worlds, we have the feasible worlds. Out of those feasible worlds, we have the worlds where Jesus becomes God Incarnate and makes the ultimate sacrifice so that humans can be reconciled to God. Those feasible worlds would be better than the worlds without the Atonement.

Part of what was required for Atonement through Jesus was that Jesus would grow up, live a sinless life, be charged and sentenced innocently, and be killed. I presume that in any world where the Incarnation occurs, Jesus would have lived a sinless life. However, Jesus living to the appropriate age, being wrongly convicted, and killed could have been different since free creatures were involved in that process. Jesus could have died in infancy or as a child. I would imagine the life expectancy in the earliest part of the first century was not good. His disciples could have decided not to follow him. Perhaps Pilot could have decided to release Jesus since he apparently recognized that Jesus was an innocent man (Luke 23:13-16).

If the world is a complex interconnected chain of events, as I have argued, then there are an enumerable number of things that could have happened that would have affected God's plan for the Atonement. It seems that in order for the Atonement to occur without God intervening in a way that undermines or destroys human freedom, the feasible worlds God had to choose from are further narrowed. Perhaps the actual world, despite having a tremendous amount of evil and suffering, is *the* world with the least amount of evil and suffering where the events necessary for

the Atonement, one of the two greatest good-making characteristics, still obtains. If these

arguments are true, and I submit that it is plausible they are, then it is plausible to suggest that

the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. Even if there can be no *best* world, we have a

very good world.

Furthermore, if a world containing Incarnation and Atonement is more valuable and

contains more good than a world without them, and God wishes to actualize a really good

possible world, then evil becomes necessary. Part of the purpose of the Atonement is to save

creatures from the consequences of their sin. If there is no sin, then there would be no evil and no

consequences of sin to be saved from. As a result, there would be no atonement. Therefore, sin

and evil are a necessary condition of atonement. But all the best worlds contain atonement; hence

all the best worlds contain evil and suffering.

This argument gives the Christian Molinist a straightforward response to the question,

"Why is there evil in the world?" God wanted to create and actualize one of the best of all the

possible worlds. All those worlds contain atonement which requires sin and evil. In the words of

Alvin Plantinga, "if a theodicy is an attempt to explain why God permits evil, what we have here

is a theodicy--and, if I'm right, a successful theodicy."[135]

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to show that Christian Molinism provides a better answer

to the problem of evil and suffering than the naturalist. It seems that Christianity provides a

better grounding of objective moral values and duties by ultimately grounding them in God.

Christian Molinism demonstrates how God not only knows everything that *could* happen but

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[135] Peterson, ed., *The Problem of Evil Selected Readings*, 373.

everything that *would* happen under different circumstances. He uses this information to actualize a world where evil exists by virtue of creatures being free, but the instances and amount of evil and suffering that do occur are not only ultimately justified but necessary in order to make a very good world.

Christian Molinism provides unity and harmony for the tension that seems to exist between good and evil in the world. Naturalism, it appears to me, falls short of providing any harmony or unity. It also does not provide an ultimate resolution to evil. In the naturalistic view, we are born, we experience evil in varying amounts, and we die. Death is the only escape in a naturalistic worldview. However, if the Christian Molinist is correct, there are reasons God permits evil and suffering, and there ultimately is a resolution to the problem, namely, that Christ defeated evil and suffering, creating a way for man to be reconciled to God and enjoy eternal bliss following a necessary finite amount of evil and suffering. I would humbly suggest that the arguments presented here show that Christian Molinism provides a better answer to the problem of evil and suffering than Naturalism.

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