

## *The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy*

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In his work on the problem of evil, Alvin Plantinga has made a useful distinction between “giving a theodicy” and “giving a defense.” To give a theodicy is to “answer in some detail the question ‘What is the source of the evil we find, and why does God permit it?’ ”<sup>1</sup> To give a defense is to construct a story according to which both God and evil exist and to attempt to show that this story is “possible in the broadly logical sense.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of giving a theodicy is “to justify the ways of God to men.” The purpose of giving a defense is, in the first instance, to show that the co-existence of God and evil is possible. (In the first instance. But one might have further projects in mind—such as the project of showing that the existence of God is not improbable on some body of evidence that includes a description of the amounts and kinds of evil that actually exist.)

Plantinga is rather down on theodicies. I have heard him say that to give a theodicy is “presumptuous.” I propose, nevertheless, to offer a theodicy. I propose to explain God’s ways—or at least to offer a partial and speculative explanation of those ways. I am sufficiently sensitive to the merits of Plantinga’s charge of presumption, however, to wish to say something in response to it. I will make three points.

(1) I do not claim that the theodicy I shall offer is *comprehensive*. That is, while I shall ascribe to God certain reasons for allowing evil to exist, I do not claim to give *all* of His reasons, or even to claim that the reasons I shall give are His most important reasons. For all I know, God has reasons for allowing evil to exist that no human being could understand; perhaps, indeed, He has hundreds of perfectly good reasons that no *possible* creature could understand. What I claim for the theodicy presented in this essay is this: it alleges a reason, or an interconnected set of reasons, that

God has for allowing evil—of the amounts and kinds we observe—to come to be and to continue; if these were the only reasons God had for permitting evil, they would by themselves justify this permission.

(2) The theodicy I shall present is not in any large part my own invention. I do not claim to be the first human being in history to have fathomed God's purposes. Nor do I claim to be the recipient of a special revelation from God: I do not claim to be a prophet whom God has charged with the task of disseminating an explanation of His ways. The method of this paper is simply philosophical reflection on the data of Christian revelation—or, more exactly, on what one tradition holds (in my view, correctly) to be the data of Christian revelation. (Those who do not share my allegiance to these data may wish to regard this paper as providing one more defense, in Plantinga's sense.)

(3) Insofar as anything in this paper is original, it is speculative. I do not claim that what is unique to this paper has any authority over those who accept the data of Christian revelation referred to above. But I claim more for these speculations than that they are “possible in the broadly logical sense.” I offer them as consonant with and a plausible elaboration of the data of Christian revelation. (This, by the way, could not be claimed for them if they contained any element that was improbable on the known facts of science and history. I therefore explicitly claim that no proposition contained in the theodicy presented in this paper is improbable on the whole set of propositions endorsed by the special sciences.) One might object that someone who offers a theodicy in such a tentative fashion as this is not really “giving a theodicy” in Plantinga's sense. To “give a theodicy,” one might argue, is to represent oneself as *knowing* that every proposition one puts forward is true. Perhaps there is some justice in this protest. If so, however, there is certainly *room* for the kind of thing I propose to do. There seems to be no reason to require that everyone who tells a story about God and evil must either claim to know this story to be true, or else claim only that it is possible in the broadly logical sense. And I think that if one does put forward an admittedly speculative, but (or so one believes) plausible account of God's reasons for allowing the existence of evil, one is not abusing language if one describes one's offering as a theodicy.

These three points, it seems to me, are sufficient to disarm the charge of presumption.

## I

It is generally, but not universally, conceded by Christians that the existence of evil has something to do with free will. The theodicy I shall present is of the “free will” type. That is to say, it proceeds by extending and elaborating the following story:

God made the world and it was very good. An important part of its goodness was that it contained creatures made in His own image—that is, created beings capable of understanding (to some degree) their own nature and their place in the scheme of things entire; creatures, moreover, that were fit to be loved by God and to love Him in return and to love one another. But love implies freedom: for A to love B is for A freely to choose to be united to B in a certain way.<sup>3</sup> Now even an omnipotent being cannot *insure* that some other being *freely* choose x over y. For God to create beings capable of loving Him, therefore, it was necessary for Him to take a risk: to risk the possibility that the beings He created would freely choose to withhold their love from Him.

To love God and to desire to submit to His will are very closely related—at least as closely as the love of one’s offspring and the desire to nurture and protect and raise them. God’s free creatures—or some of them—, instead of loving Him and submitting to His will, chose to turn away from Him and “to follow instead the devices and desires of their own hearts.” It was thus that evil entered the world. A husband and father who turns away from his wife and children and suppresses his natural desire to live with and to love and protect them, and chooses instead to indulge a desire for fame or sexual adventure or “self-realization,” turns himself into something unnatural and harmful. Likewise, a creature who turns away from God turns himself into something unnatural and harmful. Having turned away from God, His creatures laid violent hands on the created world. They snatched it out of His grasp, and turned it to their own purposes. We are now living with the catastrophic consequences of that act.

This is the beginning of our theodicy. At its heart is what is a familiar “move” in discussions of the problem of evil, the insistence that even an omnipotent being cannot insure that someone *freely* do one thing rather than some contemplated alternative. Some philosophers have said that the proposition

An omnipotent being cannot insure that a creature who has a free choice between  $x$  and  $y$  choose  $x$  rather than  $y$

is false—and, of course, necessarily false, for, owing to its modal character, this proposition is necessarily false if it is false at all. The issues raised by this contention have been extensively debated, and I have nothing new to say about them. I shall simply assume that this proposition is true.

I proceed now to elaborate the above very sketchy narrative of the origin of evil. It is obvious that this must be done. As it stands, the narrative accounts for the existence of only, as we might say, “some evil or other.” It says nothing about evil of the kinds or in the amounts we actually observe, or anything about its duration—thousands upon thousands of years—or anything about the fact that its worst effects are distributed apparently at random and certainly without regard for desert. I shall elaborate this narrative with certain propositions drawn from Christian theology. All Christian theologians who could lay any claim to the titles “orthodox,” “Catholic,” or “traditional” would accept the following theses:

- All evil is the result of the primordial act of turning away from God; there is no source of evil other than creaturely rebellion.
- The creatures who committed the initial act of rebellion received sufficient warning that their act would lead to disaster. While they may have been unlike us in many ways, they were not children and were at least as intelligent as we; they fully understood the warning and the wisdom and authority of its Source.
- Among the creatures who rebelled were an entire generation of human beings, all of the human beings who were alive at some particular moment. [In my view, it was the *first* generation of human beings. But I shall not build this into our theodicy because (a) it is not necessary, and (b) to argue that the proposition that there *was* a first generation of human beings is compatible with what we know about our evolutionary history would require a lengthy digression. The digression would involve the removal of two sorts of misunderstanding: misunderstandings about what it would be for there to be a first generation of human beings, and misunderstandings about what scientific study of the evolutionary history of our species has actually shown.] Before this rebellion, there was no evil—or at any rate none that affected human beings.<sup>4</sup>
- In turning away from God, our ancestors ruined themselves; they became unable to turn back to Him of their own power, as someone

who ignores a warning not to go too near the edge of a pit may fall into it, injure himself, and be unable to climb out. Thus, the act of rebellion, or its immediate consequences, may be called “the Fall.”

- Their ruin was in some way inherited by all of their descendants. [This does not necessarily mean that their genes were altered by the Fall. I believe that it is possible to construct models of the Fall according to which its hereditary aspect is due to the effects of unaltered genes operating under conditions for which they were not “designed”—namely, conditions attendant upon separation from God. But I will not argue for this here.] Thus, evil is a persisting and—by any natural means—unalterable fact of history.<sup>5</sup>
- God has not left His creatures to their misery—not, at any rate, His human creatures. He has inaugurated a plan whose workings will one day eventuate in the Atonement (at-one-ment) of His human creatures with Himself. (Or, at least, the Atonement of some of His human creatures with Himself. It may be that some of His creatures will, by their own free choice, resist Atonement forever.) In order to achieve Atonement with God, a ruined creature must turn to God and ask for His help and accept that help. The undoing of creaturely ruin must be a cooperative endeavor. The creature cannot accomplish it for himself, and even an omnipotent being cannot effect the required sort of regeneration of a creature if the creature refuses to be regenerate. Any aspect of the creatures’ environment that would tend to discourage them from turning to Him and asking for His help would therefore be an obstacle to the completion of His plan.<sup>6</sup>
- Every human being has an eternal future (and, therefore, the human species has an eternal future). We are now living, and have been living, throughout the archaeologically accessible past, within a temporary aberration in human history, an aberration that is a finite part of an eternal whole. When God’s plan of Atonement comes to fruition, there will never again be undeserved suffering or any other sort of evil. The “age of evil” will eventually be remembered as a sort of transient “flicker” at the very beginning of human history.

I have said that I have drawn these points from Christian theology. But I have stated them so abstractly that, I think, at least some Jews and Muslims would agree with most of them. (The major point of disagreement would probably be over my inclusion among them of the doctrine of Original Sin; that is, the doctrine of hereditary ruin.) Now the body of Christian theology deals with what we may call—from our present vantage-point of lofty abstraction—the *details* of (what Christians believe to be) God’s plan of Atonement. But in the present essay I shall hardly mention such matters as God’s calling of Israel to be His people, the giving of the Law, the Incarnation, the ministry of Jesus, the institution of the Eucharist, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, or the one, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. It will be enough for my purposes to include in my theodicy the proposition that God has *some* plan of Atonement and that it will someday succeed in reuniting to Him all who choose to be reunited.

I added the above flesh to the skeleton provided by the standard “free-will” account of the origin of evil because it was clear that that skeleton was no theodicy. The skeleton, however, will require more flesh than this. We have still not got a finished theodicy. If we claimed that we had, a sceptic might, quite properly, respond along the following lines.

“God, you say, has set in motion a plan of Atonement. But why is it taking so long for His plan to work out? It’s all very well to tell a tale that represents ‘the age of evil’ as a ‘transient flicker at the very beginning of human history.’ But every finite period is a mere flicker in Eternity. Nothing has been said to challenge the obvious proposition that God would not allow ‘the age of evil’ to go on any longer than necessary. Why, then, is ‘this long’ necessary?

“And why is there so *much* evil at any given time? Evil may be, as you say, the result of the creaturely abuse of free will. But the amount of evil could have been far less. For example, God, without in any way diminishing Cain’s free will, could have warned Abel not to turn his back on him. If the implied general policy had been put into effect, a vast amount of evil would have been avoided.

“And why does God allow evil to be so unfairly distributed? Why is it so often the innocent—small children, for example—who suffer? Why is it so often the wicked who prosper?

“And what about ‘physical’ or ‘natural’ evil? How can the effects of the Bubonic Plague or the Lisbon earthquake be a result of creaturely free will?

“To roll all of these questions into one, Why has it been for thousands and thousands of years that enormous numbers of uncomprehending children have died as a result of epidemic disease and famine and natural disaster—while many a tyrant has died in bed? How could evil of such types and quantity and duration and distribution be necessary to God’s plan of Atonement? Or, if all this evil is *not* necessary to God’s plan, why does He not eliminate most of it, and make do with that residue of evil that is really necessary?”

## II

I will continue to flesh out our skeletal theodicy by attending to the questions posed by our imaginary sceptic. I will address the last of them first.

The question presupposes that if there are evils that are not required by God’s plan of Atonement, then there is such a thing as “that residue of evil that is really necessary,” the minimum of evil that is required for God’s plan to succeed. But this is not a very plausible thesis. It is not very plausible to suppose that there is a way in which evil could be distributed such that (i) that distribution of evil would serve God’s purposes as well as any distribution could and (ii) God’s purposes would be less well served by *any* distribution involving less evil. (One might as well suppose that if God’s purposes require an impressively tall prophet to appear at a certain place and time, there is a minimum height such a prophet could have.) But if there is no minimum of evil that would serve God’s purposes, then one cannot argue that God is unjust or cruel for not “getting by with less evil”—any more than one can argue that a law that fines motorists \$25.00 for illegal parking is unjust or cruel owing to the fact that a fine of \$24.99 would have an identical deterrent effect. The same point can be made in relation to time. If there is a purpose that is served by allowing “the age of evil” to have a certain duration, doubtless the same purpose would be served if the age of evil were cut short by a day or a year or even a century. But we would not call a judge unjust or cruel for imposing on a criminal a sentence of ten years on the ground—doubtless *true*—that a sentence of ten years less a day would have served as well whatever end the sentence was designed to serve. It is obvious that if, for any amount of evil that would have served God’s purposes, slightly less evil would have served His purposes just as well—a very plausible assumption—, then the principle that God should have got by with less evil, if less would have served,

entails the (*ex hypothesi* false) conclusion that God should have got by with no evil at all. It may be a difficult problem in philosophical logic correctly to diagnose the defect in illegitimate *sorites* arguments, but it is certainly evident that such a defect exists.

The important things to recognize about these two points are, first, that they are valid and that to ignore them is to court confusion, and, secondly, that, valid though they be, they do not really meet the essence of the difficulty perceived by the sceptic, the difficulty that prompts him to ask, Why so much?, Why so long? To revert to our legal and judicial analogy, there may be no minimum appropriate fine for illegal parking, but (most of us would agree) if a fine of \$25.00 would serve whatever purposes a fine for illegal parking is supposed to serve—deterrence, presumably—, then it would be wrong to set the fine at five thousand dollars. Similarly, if an “age of evil” of twenty years’ duration, an age during which there were a few dozen broken bones and a score or so of very bad cases of influenza, would have served God’s ends as well as the actual evil of human history serves them, then the enormity of His achieving these same ends by allowing the existence of “actual evil” passes all possibility of adequate description.

What the theodicist must do, given the facts of history, is to say what contribution—what essential contribution—to God’s plan of Atonement is made by the facts about the types, magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil that are made known to us by historians and journalists (not to mention our own experience).

It will be useful to divide this problem facing the theodicist—and why not call it simply the problem of evil?—into several sub-problems. One division of the problem of evil is well known: the division of the problem into “the problem of moral evil” and “the problem of natural evil.” A second division, one that will be particularly useful in our project of fleshing out our skeletal theodicy so as to meet the questions of the imaginary sceptic, cuts across the first. It divides the problem into three:

- the problem of the magnitude of evil
- the problem of the duration of evil
- the problem of the distribution of evil.

### III

I assume that we already have an adequate answer to the problem of moral evil. I am not much interested in treating the problem of natural

evil; my main interest in the present paper is the sub-problems generated by the second division. I shall, accordingly, treat the problem of natural evil in a rather perfunctory way. I shall suggest the broadest outlines of a solution, and leave the details for another time—or another writer. (But some of the things said in the course of our later discussion of the distribution problem will have some relevance to questions about the role in God's plan of natural evil.)

Natural evil is often cited as a special problem for those who say that evil entered the world through the creaturely abuse of free will, since tornadoes and earthquakes are obviously not caused by the acts—free or unfree—of human beings. The evil that results from tornadoes and earthquakes must nevertheless be treated in any theodicy of the “free will” type as somehow stemming from creaturely free will. One notorious way of doing this is to postulate that tornadoes and earthquakes are caused by malevolent non-human creatures. Another way (the way I shall take) proceeds from the observation that it is not earthquakes and tornadoes *per se* that are evil, but rather the suffering and death that they cause. Consider the following tale.

“Earthquakes all occur in one particular region called Earthquake Country, a region that was uninhabited (because everyone knew about the earthquakes and had no reason to go there) until twenty years ago. At that time, gold was discovered on the borders of Earthquake Country and the geological indications were that there was much more inside. Motivated solely by a desire to get rich, many people—people by no means in want—moved to Earthquake Country to prospect for gold. Many took their families with them. Some of them got rich, but many of them were killed or maimed by earthquakes.”

This tale may not be true, but it demonstrates that earthquakes need not be caused by the actions of creatures for the suffering and death caused by earthquakes to be a result of the actions of those creatures.

Our theodicy, as we have so far stated it, entails that at one time—before the Fall—our ancestors lived in a world without evil. This, I suppose, entails that they were not subject to the baleful effects of earthquakes and tornadoes. But why not? Well, for the purposes of a *perfunctory* treatment of the problem of natural evil, we need assume only that there was *some* reason for this, a reason that became inoperative when our ancestors separated themselves from God. We *might* suppose, for example, that the old tradition (it is without Biblical warrant) that Adam and Eve possessed “preternatural powers” is substantially correct, and that these

powers included certain cognitive powers; we might suppose that our unfallen ancestors knew (and pretty far in advance) whether an earthquake or tornado would strike a particular spot—and when. And we might suppose that their being able to know such things depended on their union with God and was lost as a natural consequence of their separating themselves from God. We must remember that, according to Christianity, human beings were designed for union with God, in the same sense as that in which they are designed to live in community with one another and to use language. A “feral child” is a ruined human being—though he is no less our brother than is Homer or Leonardo—and his ruin entails a grave diminution of his cognitive powers. According to Christianity, we have all been ruined by our separation from God, just as the feral child has been ruined by his separation from the human community. (The feral child’s ruin is thus a ruin within a ruin, a second, individual ruin of an already ruined common human nature.) And the ruin of human nature consequent on our separation from God may have involved a grave diminution of our cognitive powers. According to the “just-so story” I am telling,<sup>7</sup> we were designed by God to be able to protect ourselves from earthquakes and tornadoes—if you think that it would be possible to design a planet, and a universe to contain it, that was both capable of supporting human life and contained no earthquakes or tornadoes, I can only point out that you have never tried<sup>8</sup>—and that the loss of this power is as natural a consequence of our ancestors’ separation from God as is the loss of the capacity to acquire language a natural consequence of the feral child’s separation from the human community. (Expansion of this just-so story to cover tigers and droughts and epidemic disease and so on is left as an exercise for the reader.) Doubtless we could tell many tales of speculative theological fiction having the feature that our being subject to the destructive forces of nature is ultimately a consequence of the creaturely abuse of free will. For our purposes, as I have said, it will suffice to assume that one of the tales that fits this abstract description is true.

This is all I have to say about natural evil, but I wish to remind the reader that if all human beings were wise and good, our sufferings would be vastly less than they are; and it is probably not true that we should be much better off for a complete elimination of natural evil. Doubtless there would be human beings more than willing to take up the slack. Our ancestral ruin is *primarily* a moral, as opposed to a cognitive, ruin. But ruins we are. If two explorers—who have never seen such a thing—come upon a ruined temple in the jungle, and if one of them thinks that it is a natural

geological formation and the other that it is a building that is just as it was designed to be, neither will understand its shape. From the Christian point of view, it is impossible for one to understand humanity if one thinks of a human being as either a product of natural forces behind which there is no Mind or as the work that a Mind intended to produce. Both naturalism and deism (Christianity holds) go wrong about our nature right at the outset, and neither can yield an understanding of that nature.

We thus have some basis for understanding both “moral” and “natural” evil. (In a sense, the theodicy I am proposing entails that there is no fundamental distinction between them: natural evil is a special category of moral evil.) That is, we have a basis for understanding why God would allow such things to come to be. (This is a very abstract statement. Remember, we have not yet said anything about the magnitude, duration, or distribution of either sort of evil.) We may, to sum up, add the following statement to our theodicy.

Our unfallen ancestors were somehow able to protect themselves from earthquakes and tornadoes and wild beasts and disease and so on. This ability depended on their union with God, and was lost when they separated themselves from Him.

I now turn to my primary interests in offering a theodicy: The magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil.

#### IV

“Our ancestors turned away from God and ruined themselves both morally and intellectually—and thus they began to harm one another and they lost their aboriginal power to protect themselves from the potentially destructive forces of non-human nature. This condition—their wickedness and helplessness—has persisted through all the generations, being somehow hereditary. But God has set a chain of events in motion that will eventually bring this state of affairs to an end.”

The theodicist who wishes to add to this story elements that will account for evil as we actually find it must consider the questions about the magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil that we have put into the mouth of our imaginary sceptic. It will aid my order of exposition—and not, I think, unfairly modify the sceptic’s case—if we recast the sceptic’s three questions as four questions. The first and third have to do with the duration of evil, the second with its magnitude, and the fourth with its distribution.

- Question 1. Why didn't God immediately restore His fallen creatures to their original union with Him?
- Question 2. Why doesn't God protect His fallen creatures from the worst effects of their separation from Him: the horrible pain and suffering?
- Question 3. Why has God allowed "the age of evil" to persist for thousands and thousands of years?
- Question 4. Why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper?

#### *Question 1*

What would doing that actually have involved? Suppose that two brothers quarrel. Suppose that the quarrel becomes violent and then bitter and that finally they come to hate each other. Suppose that their mother prays to God that He restore their mutual love—and not by any gradual process, but immediately, right on the spot. What is she asking God to do? I can think of only one thing: to grant her request, God would have to wipe away all memory of everything that had happened between them since just before the moment they quarreled. Any philosopher worth his salt will probably be able to think of several grave conceptual difficulties that would attend this plan, but (assuming they could be overcome by omnipotence) God would not do such a thing, because, as Descartes has pointed out, God is not a deceiver, and such an act would constitute a grave deception about the facts of history. (I have no memory of a violent, bitter quarrel with Eleonore Stump, and thus my memory represents the past to me as containing no such quarrel. I have the best epistemic warrant for believing that no such quarrel has ever occurred. If she and I *have* so quarreled and if God has "deleted" my memories of it—and has somehow rendered the resulting set of memories coherent—then He has deceived me about the past.) I cannot see how God could simply, by sheer fiat, immediately have restored fallen humanity other than by a similar grave deception. And, we may add, if He did, what would happen next? What would prevent the Fall from immediately recurring?

## V

*Question 2*

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. (Those whose memory of this story is dim will find it in the Gospel According to St. Luke, 15:11-32.) Suppose the father of the Prodigal had foreseen the probable effects of his son's rash use of his patrimony, and had hired actors to represent themselves as gamblers and deliberately to lose substantial sums to the Prodigal; and suppose that he had further arranged for his agents to bribe prostitutes to tell the Prodigal that they had fallen in love with him and wanted to give him all their earnings (following which declaration they are to pass on to him monies provided by his father); and suppose that the father's agents, on his instructions, had followed the Prodigal about in secret to protect him from the dangers attendant on the night life of the ancient Middle East.

What would have been the effects of this fatherly solicitude? Certainly the son could have continued to squander his substance indefinitely and with impunity. But here the word impunity must be understood in a rather superficial sense: for the son will be living a life of illusion (and that is a misfortune), and it is hard to see what could ever induce him to consider returning to his father (and I am inclined to think that that would also be a misfortune).

This modification of the story of the Prodigal Son suggests why it is that God does not simply "cancel"—by an almost continuous series of miracles—the pain and suffering that our separation of ourselves from Him has led to. First, if He did so, He would be, no less than in the case of the deleted memories, a deceiver. If He did so, we should be living in a world of illusion. Our lives would be invisibly "proped up" by God, but we should—justifiably—think that we were living successfully simply by the exercise of our native powers. This, it seems to me, would reduce our existence to something worse than meaningless: We should be, every one of us, *comic figures*. (If there were a novel whose plot was the "revised" life of the Prodigal Son sketched above, he could not be its hero or even a sympathetic character. The novel would be a low comedy and he would be the butt of the joke.) Now illusion of this sort is a bad thing in itself, but it would have consequences even worse than its intrinsic badness. If God did what is proposed, we should all be satisfied with our existence—or at least a lot closer to being satisfied than most of us are

now. And if we are satisfied with our existence, why should we even consider turning to God and asking for His help? An essential and important component of God's plan of Atonement—this constitutes an addition to our theodicy—is to make us *dissatisfied* with our state of separation from Him; and not by miraculously altering our values or by subjecting us to illusion or by causing us suffering that has no natural connection with our separation, but simply by allowing us to “live with” the natural consequences of this separation, and by making it as difficult as possible for us to delude ourselves about the kind of world we live in: a hideous world, much of whose hideousness is quite plainly traceable to the inability of human beings to govern themselves or to order their own lives. Let us expand our theodicy:

An essential part of God's plan of Atonement for separated humanity is for human beings to perceive that a natural consequence of human beings' attempting to order their own lives is a hideous world—a world that is hideous not only by His standards, but by the very standards they themselves accept.

Why is it important for human beings to perceive the hideousness of the world? Well, first, because that's how things are. That's what “man on his own” *means*. Look at the world around you—the world of violence, starvation, hatred, the world of the death camps and the Gulag and (quite possibly) thermonuclear or ecological catastrophe. (These are not the worst features of separated human life in the eyes of God, for these are all finite evils, and He can see quite plainly that each of us daily risks an infinite evil, the loss of the end for which he was made. But they really are hideous and they are recognizable as hideous by almost everyone, no matter what his beliefs and values may be.) These are natural effects of our living to ourselves, just as a literally feral existence is a natural effect of an infant's separation from the human community.

People who do not believe in God do not, of course, see our living to ourselves as a result of a prehistoric separation from God. But they can be aware—and it is a part of God's plan of Atonement that they *should* be aware—that something is pretty wrong and that this wrongness is a consequence of the intrinsic inability of human beings to devise a manner of life that is anything but hideous. (They *can* be aware. Few are. Part of the reason is that various myths<sup>9</sup> have been invented<sup>10</sup> for the purpose of obscuring the intrinsic incapacity of human beings to live successfully even by their own standards. The myths of Enlightenment, Progress, and the

Revolution are the most prominent of these. Such myths in the end refute themselves by leading to ever deeper human misery; but, unfortunately, only in the end.) The broad psychological outlines of this feature of the plan that our theodicy ascribes to God are not hard to fathom. The realization that undirected human life is bound to be a failure even in secular terms may possibly set people to wondering whether there may not be some direction somewhere. But people who still think that the obvious hideousness of our world is caused by some accidental feature of human life—superstition, technological backwardness, primitive economic organization—, one that we shall presently get round to altering, are probably not going even to consider turning to God. It is a commonplace that religious belief is more common in South America and the Middle East and Africa than in the English-speaking countries and Western Europe. One possible explanation of this fact is that miserable and uneducated people turn to religious institutions as a man with a painful and incurable illness turns to quacks (and he is all the more likely to fall prey to quacks if he is uneducated). Here is another possible explanation. In the relatively prosperous and well-ordered West, people—middle-class people, anyway—are subject to an illusion about human nature and the conditions of human life. Although the prosperity and order in their lives is due to a special, fragile, and transient set of circumstances, they foolishly regard the kind of life they lead as the sort of thing human nature can be trusted to produce. The “wretched of the earth,” on the other hand, see human nature as it really is. Many of them may be uneducated, in the sense of lacking the cognitive skills necessary to construct and operate a machine-based civilization, but they are far better educated than middle-class Europeans and Americans as regards the most general and important features of human nature. If an analogy involving medical quackery is wanted, we may say that a typical “post-religious” American or European is like a desperately sick man who has got his hands on some temporary panacea and who, as a consequence, has decided that the doctors who attempted to impress upon him the gravity of his condition are all quacks.

God’s refusal to “cancel” the suffering that is a natural consequence of the Fall by providing separated humanity with a vast set of miraculous and invisible props can (according to the theodicy I propose) be understood on the model of a doctor who refuses to prescribe a pain-killer (say, for angina), on the ground that he knows that his patient will curtail some beloved but self-destructive activity—long-distance running, say—only if the patient continues to experience the pain that his condition signals. Now

this sort of behavior on the part of a *doctor* may well be morally objectionable. The doctor is the patient's fellow adult and fellow citizen, and, or so it can plausibly be argued, it would be presumptuous of him to act in such a paternalistic way. One might even say that in so acting the doctor would be "playing God." But we can hardly accuse *God* of playing God. God is justifiably paternalistic because He is our Father and because He is perfect in knowledge and wisdom and because, or so I would argue, He has certain rights over us. These rights, as I see it, derive from the following facts: He made up the very idea of there being creatures like us out of the thought of His own mind, and He made us out of nothing to meet the specifications contained in that idea; everything we have—including the intellectual and moral faculties by means of which we make judgments about paternalism—we have received from Him; He made us for a certain purpose (to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever) and we threaten to prevent that purpose from being fulfilled.

I have suggested that the initial stage of God's plan of Atonement essentially involves His separated creatures' being aware of the hideousness of their condition and of its being a natural result of their attempting to order their own lives. I would also suggest that the *outcome* of His plan of Atonement, the unending union of creatures with Himself, will essentially involve the *memory* of that hideousness. A student of mine, a Christian, once told me of a professor of philosophy who had questioned him somewhat as follows. "You Christians believe that in the beginning man was in Paradise, and that in the end man will be in Heaven. In each of these states, man is in perfect union with God. So what is the difference between Paradise and Heaven? By abusing his free will, you say, man lost Paradise. And, you say, Heaven will be forever. But how can you know that man, having attained Heaven, won't proceed to lose it again by abuse of his free will?" There is a very simple answer to this question. The human beings in Heaven (that is, those whom God has rescued and restored to union with Himself; 'Heaven' is not the name of a place but of a condition) will know what it's like to be separated from God. They will remember the hideousness of their lives before the restoration of their union with God, and their continuing in their restored state will be no more puzzling than the refusal of the restored Prodigal Son to leave his father's house a second time. (Christian theologians have generally held that the inhabitants of Heaven—unlike the inhabitants of Paradise—are *unable* to sin. If the considerations of the present paragraph are combined with the theses on the nature of free will that I have argued for in my paper "When

Is the Will Free?,”<sup>11</sup> it is easy to see why this should be so.) Theologians have also held that the happiness of those in Heaven will essentially involve, will perhaps be identical with, an immediate, intuitive knowledge of God, generally called the Beatific Vision. We might speculate that this Vision will have as a component an awareness of God’s opposite, an awareness best revealed in the memory of separation from Him. Reflection on reunited lovers or returned exiles suggests why this might be the case.

Let us formally add these ideas to our theodicy:

The perception by human beings of their incapacity to “live to themselves” is essential to God’s plan of Atonement because, first, without this perception few if any human beings would consider turning to God. (If, therefore, God were miraculously to “cancel” the natural consequences of separation from Himself, He would not only be a deceiver but would remove the only motivation fallen human beings have for turning to Him.) And because, secondly, memory of the hideousness of separated human life will be an important, perhaps an essential, component of the final state of restored humanity. Among the natural consequences of separation from God is the vast quantity of pain and suffering that we observe.

## VI

### *Question 3*

I am uncertain about what to say about the duration of the “age of evil.” I suggest some speculations that seem to me to be plausible.

—Perhaps God wants the final community of those in union with Him to be rather *large*. (Couldn’t God allow an increase in the human population to occur *after* His plan of Atonement has been completed? Well, there is certainly the point to be considered that people born after the completion of God’s plan would not remember the “age of evil” and thus would be just as liable to sin as their remote ancestors in Paradise; and it might be, as I have speculated, that memory of a world separated from God will be an essential part of the final condition of restored humanity.)

—Perhaps God wants the final community of those in union with Him to be rather *diverse*. It seems plausible to suppose that if God had brought the age of evil to an end in, say, 1000 A.D., the final human community would have been very unlike what it would be if He brought that age to

an end tomorrow. In the latter case the final community would contain men and women whose cast of mind and world-view were radically unlike those of the members of any earlier age or culture. One might speculate that the members of a community composed of people born in diverse periods and cultures would be able to perceive and to communicate to one another aspects of the Divine Nature that the members of a community of less heterogeneous cultural origins would have been blind to.

—Various important stages in God's plan of Atonement may require particular levels of social and cultural development. The unhappy first generation of separated human beings must have been in a truly miserable state, having lost the smoothly functioning behavioral instincts of their purely animal ancestors, but without the learned social organization, custom and tradition by which human beings—as we know them—maintain themselves in an environment indifferent to their welfare. (Perhaps they were even without an actual language: a population of feral children, as it were. I suppose no one claims to know what would happen to a closed population of feral children over many generations?) Or even if they were never wholly without a culture and social organization, we can hardly suppose them to have had anything but a tribal culture. It may well be that God's plan of Atonement requires that at certain points in history some people belong to a more "advanced" culture than a tribal culture. If we consider the Christian account of God's plan of Atonement, for example, we shall see that it is evident that the ministry of Jesus (an essential part of God's plan) could not have taken place in a culture much different from that of first-century Palestine; certainly it could not have taken place in a tribal culture, or in a "normal" culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, a pagan polytheism. A "specialized" culture like that of ancient Judaism cannot appear overnight. Even if one does not believe the Biblical account of God's long interaction with Israel, one must grant that the Hebrew culture of two thousand years ago embodied a long history. (God doubtless had the power to "raise up children for Abraham from these stones," but if He had exercised that power He would have been a deceiver; vivid and detailed memories of the long history of their people were an essential part of the reaction of Jesus' Hebrew audience to His preaching.) And, of course, the rapid and accurate spread of the news about Jesus (also an essential part of God's plan, according to Christians) could hardly have happened except within the setting of a vast, cosmopolitan empire.

—Creatures like ourselves, sunk deep in self-will, take a long time to respond to any sort of guidance, particularly if it appeals to considerations higher than power and wealth. It may be hard to kick against the goad, but it is certainly done.

#### *Question 4*

Let us not discuss cases of the suffering of the innocent that depend on human wickedness or folly or corrupt institutions. Let us instead examine cases in which there are no oppressors but only victims. These would seem to raise all of the difficulties for the theodicist that are raised by cases in which an oppressor is present, and to be amenable to a smaller class of solutions; they are not, for example, amenable to any solution that involves a concern for the ultimate spiritual welfare of the oppressor or respect for his free will or anything of that sort.

A young mother dies of leukemia. A school bus full of children is crushed by a landslide. A child is born without limbs. A wise and good man in the prime of life suffers brain damage and spends the remaining thirty years of his life in a coma. I do not know of a good general term for such events. Journalists often call them tragedies. But this word is properly applied only to events that are in some sense meaningful, and I know of no reason to think that such events *always* have a “meaning.” I will call them *horrors*.

Why do horrors happen? I want to suggest that horrors happen for no reason at all, that when, e.g., a child is born without limbs, the only answer to the question, “Why did that happen?” is “There is no reason or explanation; it just happened.” Or, at any rate, I want to suggest that this is sometimes the case. (Whether some horrors are brought about by God for special purposes is a question I shall not attempt to answer.<sup>12</sup> If *some* horrors are brought about by God, and thus have a purpose and a meaning known to God but not to us, I have no opinion as to what percentage of the whole they might constitute.) But are not *all* events ordered by God, and must not *all* events therefore have some sort of meaning? Christians and other theists are, I believe, committed to the truth of the following proposition:

God is the maker of all things, visible and invisible (other than Himself); He sustains all created things in existence from moment to moment, and continuously supplies them with their causal powers.

In a previous paper,<sup>13</sup> in which I presented an account of God's action in the world, I argued that this proposition is consistent with the proposition that there are events having the following feature: If one asks concerning one of these events, "Why did that happen?," the only answer to one's question is, "There is no reason or explanation for that event. God did not cause it to happen or intend it to happen. It is not a part of God's plan for the world or anyone else's plan for anything. It just happened, and that's all there is to say about it." (Let us say of such events that they are *due to chance*.) I will not reproduce my arguments. Interested readers may turn to the earlier paper, to which the present paper is a sequel (although I have tried to make it self-contained). Now to say that there is no answer to the question, Why did X occur? is not to say that there is no answer to such questions as Why did God allow X to occur? or Why did God not prevent X? I ended the earlier paper with these words:

If what I have said is true, it yields a moral for students of the Problem of Evil: Do not attempt any solution to this problem that entails that every particular evil has a purpose, or that, with respect to every individual misfortune, or every devastating earthquake, or every disease, God has some special reason for allowing it. Concentrate rather on the problem of what sort of reasons a loving and providential God might have for allowing His creatures to live in a world in which many of the evils that happen to them happen to them for no reason at all.

I will now take my own advice and present my solution to this problem. God's reason for allowing His creatures to live in such a world is that their living in such a world is a natural consequence of their separation from Him. Consider again our earlier sketchy account of natural evil: in separating ourselves from God, we have somehow deprived ourselves of our primordial defenses against such potentially destructive things as tigers and landslides and tornadoes. But if, by our rebellion and folly, we have allowed the destructive potential of these things to become actual, how shall we expect the effects of that actuality to be distributed? At random, surely? That is, with no correlation between these things and the innocence or wickedness of the people they impinge on—since the operations of these things in no way depend upon the moral qualities of the people they interact with? In fact, there is little correlation between the manner in which these things operate and *any* factor under human control (although civilization does what it can to try to induce correlations of this type).

Suppose that a certain man chooses, of his own free will, to stand at spot  $x$  at time  $t$ . His arrival at that place at that time converges with the arrival of an avalanche. Let us suppose that God did not miraculously cause the avalanche, and that He did not “move” the man to be at that place at that time. And let us also suppose that neither the man’s arrival at  $x$  at  $t$  nor the avalanche’s arrival at  $x$  at  $t$  was determined by the laws of nature and the state of the world, say, one hundred years earlier. (This is a plausible assumption on scientific grounds. Quantum mechanics has the following astounding consequence: Imagine a billiard table, one not subject to external influence other than constant, uniform gravitation, on which there are rolling perfectly spherical and perfectly elastic balls that—somehow—do not lose energy to the walls of the table in collision or to its surface in friction; the position of the balls a minute or so in the future is not even approximately determined by the laws of nature and the present physical state of the balls. This example strongly suggests that the precise moment at which an avalanche occurs is not determined a hundred years in advance.)

The man’s death in the avalanche would seem to be in every sense due to chance, even though (the theist must suppose) God knew in advance that he would be killed by the avalanche and could have prevented it. In fact, the theist must suppose that, during the course of that event, God held all of the particles that composed the man and the moving mass of snow and ice in existence and continuously decreed the operation of the laws of nature by which those particles interacted with one another.

Why did God not miraculously save the man? We have seen the answer to this question already. He might very well have. Perhaps He sometimes does miraculously save people in such situations. But if He *always* did so, He would be a deceiver. If He always saved people about to be destroyed by a chance encounter with a violent phenomenon of nature, He would engender an illusion with the following propositional content:

It is possible for human beings to live apart from God and not be subject to destruction by chance.

To live under this illusion would be a bad thing in itself, but, more importantly, it would have harmful effects. This illusion would be, as it were, a tributary of illusion feeding into a great river of illusion whose content was, “Human beings can live successfully in separation from God.”

In our current state of separation from God, we are continually blundering into “lines of causation” (the descent of an avalanche; the evolution of the AIDS virus; the building up of tension along a geological fault) that perhaps have no purpose at all and certainly have no purpose in relation to us. (It is simply a part of the mechanics of nature that intrinsically harmless but potentially destructive things like avalanches or viruses or earthquakes should exist. As I remarked above, if you think that you can design a world that does not contain such things and which can also serve as a home for human beings, you have never tried. Such things are a part of God’s design in the sense that the ticking sound made by a clock is a part of the watchmaker’s design: not intended, necessitated by what *is* intended, foreseen, and allowed for. What is not in any sense a part of God’s design is *this* avalanche, *this* virus, and *this* earthquake. These are—sometimes, at any rate—due to chance.) If we had never separated ourselves from God, we should have been able to avoid such blunders. No longer to be able to avoid them is a natural consequence of the Fall. It is as if God had had—for some purpose—to cover the earth with a certain number of deep pits. These pits (we may stipulate) were not dangerous, since they could easily be seen and avoided; but we frustrated God’s Providence in this matter by deliberately making ourselves blind; and now we complain that some of us—quite often the good and wise and innocent—fall into the pits. God’s response to this complaint, according to the theodicy I propose, is this: “You are the ones who made yourselves blind. If you make yourselves blind, some of you will fall into the pits, and, moreover, *who* falls into a pit and *when* will be wholly a matter of chance. Goodness and wisdom and innocence have no bearing on this matter. That’s part of what being blind means.” Or, rather, this is what we might imagine God’s response to be in our simple “world of pits.” In the real world, we should have to picture God as saying something more complex, something like the following.

“Even I can’t make a world that is suitable for human beings but which contains no phenomena that would harm human beings *if* they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The reasons for this are complicated, but they turn on the fact that the molecular bonds that hold you human beings together must be weaker by many orders of magnitude than the disruptive potential of the surges of energy that must happen here and there in a structurally and nomologically coherent world complex enough to contain you. My Providence dealt with this fact by endowing you with the power never to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, a power you lost when

you ruined yourselves by turning away from Me. That is why horrors happen to some of you: you simply blunder into things. If I were to protect you from the consequences of your blindness by guiding you away from potentially destructive phenomena by an unending series of miracles—and I remind you that for all you know I *sometimes* do guide you out of harm's way—I should be deceiving you about the meaning of your separation from Me and seriously weakening the only motivation you have for returning to Me.'

We may add the following proposition to our theodicy:

Among the natural consequences of the Fall is the following evil state of affairs: Horrors happen to people without any relation to desert. They happen simply as a matter of chance. It is a part of God's plan of Atonement that we realize that a natural consequence of our living to ourselves is our living in a world that has that feature.

This completes my presentation of the theodicy I propose.<sup>14</sup> I have fleshed out the well-known story about how evil entered the world through the abuse of the divine gift of free will; I have fleshed it out in such a way as to provide plausible—at any rate, I find them plausible—answers to four pointed questions about the magnitude, duration, and distribution of evil. But in a sense it is not possible effectively to present a theodicy in a single piece of work by one author. Various elements in any proposed theodicy are bound to be thought false or felt to be implausible by some people. An essential part of presenting a theodicy is meeting the objections of those who have difficulties with it, or perhaps refining it in the face of their objections. A theodicy is a dialectical enterprise. The present paper, therefore, is best regarded as the "opening move" in such an enterprise, rather than a finished product. In closing, I wish to answer one objection to the theodicy I have presented, an objection that has been raised in conversation and correspondence by Eleonore Stump. Professor Stump objects that the theodicy I have presented represents God as allowing people to suffer misfortunes that do not (even in the long run) benefit *them*. An example may make the point of this objection clear. Suppose that God allows a horrible, disfiguring accident to happen to Alice (a true accident, an event due entirely to chance, but one that God foresaw and could have prevented). And suppose that the only good that is brought out of this accident is embodied in the following state of affairs and certain of its remote consequences: The accident, together with an enormous number of similar horrors, causes various people to realize that one feature of a

world in which human beings live to themselves is that in such a world horrors happen to people for no reason at all. But suppose that Alice herself did not need to realize this; suppose that she was already fully aware of this consequence of separation from God. And suppose that many of the people who do come to realize this partly as the result of Alice's accident manage (owing mainly to luck) to get through life without anything very bad happening to them. According to Stump, these suppositions—and it is pretty certain that there *are* cases like this if our theodicy is correct—represent God as violating the following moral principle:

It is wrong to allow something bad to happen to X—without X's permission—in order to secure some benefit for others (and no benefit for X).

I do not find this principle particularly appealing—not as a *universal* moral principle, one that is supposed to apply with equal rigor to all possible moral agents in all possible circumstances. The circumstances in which it seems most doubtful are these: The agent is in a position of lawful authority over both X and the “others” and is responsible for their welfare (consider, for example, a mother and her children or the state and its citizens); the good to be gained by the “others” is considerably greater than the evil suffered by X; there is no way in which the good for the “others” can be achieved except by allowing the evil in question to happen to X or to someone else no more deserving of it than X; the agent knows these things to be true. By way of example, we might consider cases of quarantine or of the right of eminent domain. Is it not morally permissible for the state to restrict my freedom of movement and action if I am the carrier of a contagious disease, or to force me to move if my house stands in the way of a desperately needed irrigation canal (one that will not benefit *me* in any way)? It is not to the point to protest that these cases are not much like cases involving an omnipotent God, who can cure diseases or provide water by simple fiat. They are counterexamples to the above moral principle, and, therefore, that moral principle is false. What is required of anyone who alleges that the theodicy I have proposed represents God as violating some (correct) moral principle is a careful statement of that moral principle. When we have examined that carefully stated moral principle, and have satisfied ourselves that it is without counterexample, we can proceed with the argument.

## NOTES

1. The characterization is Plantinga's. See his "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds., (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 42.
2. The characterization is mine. The phrase "possible in the broadly logical sense," however, is Plantinga's. See, e.g., *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 2.
3. At any rate this is true for certain sorts of love (I concede that the word 'love' may sometimes refer to a mere feeling), and it is love of these sorts that is meant. Anyone who is doubtful that there are kinds of love that have this feature should meditate on Ruth 1:16-17 and the Anglican wedding vow:

And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.

I *M.* take thee *N.* to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.

4. To allay the possible curiosity of some readers, I will mention that I regard the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis as a myth, in the sense that, in my view, it is not a story that has come down to us *via* a long historical chain of tellings and retellings that originated with the testimony of participants in the events it describes. In my view, the rebellion of creatures against God happened far too long ago for any historical memory of it to have survived to the present day. (There are not even any surviving stories of the last glaciation, and the rebellion of our species was certainly before that.) I believe, however, that the development of this myth in the ancient Middle East and its eventual literary embodiment in Genesis took place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; and I believe that, within certain limits, Genesis can be used as a guide to what actually happened. The key to observing these limits is to concentrate on the spiritually relevant features of the story, and to remember that the Bible is addressed equally to the people of all epochs and cultures and that a story of those remote events that satisfied modern standards of historical accuracy would probably have to involve concepts and facts that would render it inaccessible to the people of most epochs and cultures.
5. This is not a popular view among theologians just at present. The following passage by the late Lord Ramsey is typical:

The acceptance by Christian teachers of . . . the findings of evolutionary biology . . . [has] radically altered . . . the doctrine of the creation and fall of man. . . . [T]here is a radical reappraisal of the fall of man, so radical that the use of the word 'fall' is questionable. No longer is it thought that mankind's first parents collapsed from a state of innocence bringing pain and death as a punishment. (Michael Ramsey, *Jesus and the Living Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 20-21).

If these words were simply a description of the reaction of nerveless academic theologians, carried about with every wind of doctrine, to what they believe to be the findings of evolutionary biology, they would, unfortunately, be unobjectionable. But what they are in fact is a statement of the way theologians *ought* to react to the findings of evolutionary biology. To this statement I can only say (borrowing from Russell) that I should not believe such a thing if it were told to me by the Archbishops of Canterbury

and York. What one does not find in the writings of theologians like Lord Ramsey is a clear statement of what they take the “findings of evolutionary biology” to be, and an argument to show that acceptance of these “findings” requires a radical alteration of the doctrine of the Fall. But my strong feelings on this matter should not be allowed to give the impression that I think that the theodicy I present in this paper could not possibly be modified to accommodate a “radically revised doctrine of the fall.” I leave that an open question, one to be investigated when it becomes clear that there is some reason to attempt such a revision.

6. These words are consistent with the heretical doctrine called semi-Pelagianism (i.e., the doctrine that the ruin of those creatures who separated themselves from God was not so complete as to deprive them of the power of turning to Him and asking for His help), but they by no means entail it.
7. I have borrowed this use of “just-so story” from Daniel Dennett. (See his *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (The M.I.T. Press: Cambridge, Mass., [1980] p. 38.)) Dennett’s just-so stories are tales told to illustrate possibility, tales told against a background that may be described as the standard model of evolution. My just-so story is of a similar sort, but the “background” is provided by what I have described as “the data of Christian revelation.”
8. Before you try, you should read “Logical Possibility” by George Seddon (*Mind*, LXXXI [1972] pp. 481-494). See also my discussion of possibility and consistency in “Ontological Arguments,” *Nous* 11 (1977), pp. 375-395, pp. 382-386 in particular, and my review of Richard Swinburne’s *The Coherence of Theism* (*The Philosophical Review*, LXXXVII, [1979] pp. 668-672).
9. 2 Timothy 4:3-4.
10. Ephesians 6:12.
11. To appear in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 4. I owe this point to Eleonore Stump.
12. I shall not attempt to answer it because I do not think that there is any way to get a purely philosophical grip on it. Any useful discussion of this question must presuppose an agreed-upon deposit of divine revelation, of God’s statements to us about His purposes. The relevant Biblical texts are very numerous. (Many of them, obviously, are contained in the book of Job.) Two important texts, which I choose almost at random, are Jeremiah 45:1-5 and John 9:1-3.
13. “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays on the Metaphysics of Theism*, Thomas V. Morris, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
14. It is often contended that a theodicy is a mere intellectual exercise; that the theodist has nothing to say that would profit or comfort or even interest a religious believer who was undergoing, or watching a loved one undergo, terrible suffering, and who cried out to God for an explanation. The usual response to this contention is rather defensive: A distinction is made between intellectual and pastoral concerns and it is declared that a theodicy purports to be a solution only to the intellectual problems that human suffering raises for the theist. I believe, however, that there is a closer connection between intellectual and pastoral concerns than this response suggests. One is certainly asking too much of a work of theodicy if one demands that it should be capable of being read with profit by someone in terrible pain or distress. But one is not asking too much of a work of theodicy if one demands that it should be capable of being read with profit by someone whose vocation it is to minister to those in terrible pain or distress. By way of illustration, I should like to quote, with the writer’s permission a paragraph from a letter I have received (concerning the paper cited in note 13, above) from Dr. Stephen

S. Bilynskyj, who is both a trained philosopher and the Lead Pastor of the First Evangelical Covenant Church of Lincoln, Nebraska:

As a pastor, I believe that some sort of view of providence which allows for genuine chance is essential in counseling those facing what I often call the “practical problem of evil.” A grieving person needs to be able to trust in God’s direction of her life and the world, without having to make God directly responsible for every event that occurs. The message of the Gospel is not, I believe, that everything that occurs has some purpose. Rather, it is that God’s power is able to use and transform any event through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus a person may cease a fruitless search for reasons for what happens, and seek the strength that God offers to live with what happens. Such an approach is very different from simply assuming, fideistically, that there must be reasons for every event, but we are incapable of knowing them.

In addition to illustrating the point I wished to make, this paragraph raises an important further point. Dr. Bilynskyj’s words suggest that God will at least sometimes use the sufferings that come to us—whether they come by chance or by providential design—not only for the general spiritual benefit of separated humanity, but for the individual spiritual benefit of the sufferer himself (at least if the sufferer submits to God’s will and cooperates). I myself believe this, as, I suppose, do all Christians. I have not, however, incorporated this thesis into the theodicy I have presented. There are three reasons for this. First, a plausible discussion of the spiritual benefits of suffering would require a far longer paper than this one, and it would radically alter the character of the paper: it would necessitate a paper that contained a great deal more specifically Christian soteriology than the present paper. Secondly, I think that the theodicy I have presented gives, as it stands, an *adequate* explanation of the magnitude, duration, and distribution of suffering and other sorts of evil; I do not claim to have presented a complete account of the use God makes of evil. Thirdly, and most importantly, I see no reason whatever to believe that God does make use of *every* instance of suffering in a way that benefits the sufferer. And if there are any cases of suffering that do not benefit the sufferer, these are the “hard” cases and are therefore the ones that a theodicy (especially one that makes no claim to completeness) should concentrate on. If, however, anyone wishes to add to the theodicy I have presented the thesis that in at least some cases, *perhaps* in all cases, God uses suffering to bring important spiritual benefits to the sufferer himself, I shall certainly regard that as a “friendly amendment.”

While we are on the subject of pastoral concern, I will briefly mention one other objection that has been made to the theodicy I have given, an objection that I think is best classified as “pastoral.” A friend has told me that I have represented God as a lofty Benthamite deity who coldly uses suffering as a tool with which to manipulate His creatures (albeit for their own good). I don’t see it. I will leave aside the point that as a Christian I believe that God is Himself a human being and was once tortured to death (a peculiar kind of loftiness). I will only record my conviction—a conviction that seems to me to be in no sort of tension with the theodicy presented in the text—that when we no longer see through a glass darkly, when we know as we are known, when God’s sorrows are made manifest to us, we shall see that we have never felt anything that we could, without shame, describe as sorrow.