

CHAPTER 8

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

PETER VAN INWAGEN

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

THERE are many ways to understand the phrase “the problem of evil.” In this chapter, I understand this phrase as a label for a certain purely intellectual problem—as opposed to an emotional, spiritual, pastoral, or theological problem (and as opposed to a good many other possible categories of problem as well). The fact that there is much evil in the world (that is to say, the fact that many bad things happen) can be the basis for an argument for the nonexistence of God (that is, of an omnipotent and morally perfect God. But I take these qualifications to be redundant: I take the phrases “a less than omnipotent God” and “a God who sometimes does wrong” to be self-contradictory, like “a round square” or “a perfectly transparent object that casts a shadow.”) Here is a simple formulation of this argument:

If God existed, he would be all-powerful and morally perfect. An all-powerful and morally perfect being would not allow evil to exist. But we observe evil. Hence, God does not exist.

Let us call this argument “the argument from evil”—glossing over the fact that there are many arguments for the nonexistence of God that could be described as arguments from evil. The intellectual problem I call the problem of evil can be framed as a series of closely related questions addressed to theists: How would you respond to the argument from evil? Why hasn’t it converted you to atheism (for surely you’ve long known about it)? Is your only response the response of faith—something like, “Evil is a mystery. We must simply trust God and believe that there is some good reason for the evils of the world”? Or can you *reply* to the argument? Can you explain how, in your view, the argument can be anything less than an unanswerable demonstration of the truth of atheism?

These questions present theists with a purely intellectual challenge. I believe this intellectual challenge can be met. I believe it can be met by critical examination of the argument. I believe critical examination of the argument shows that it is indeed something less than an unanswerable demonstration of the truth of atheism. I attempt just such a critical examination in this chapter. In this chapter, we shall *examine* this argument, hold it up to critical scrutiny.

2. THE “MORAL INSENSITIVITY” CHARGE

Before we examine the argument from evil, however, we must consider the charge that to examine it, to treat it as if it was, as it were, just another philosophical argument whose virtues and defects could be weighed by impartial reason, is a sign of moral insensitivity—or downright wickedness. One might suppose that no argument was exempt from critical examination. But it is frequently asserted, and with considerable vehemence, that it is *extremely* wicked to examine the argument from evil with a critical eye. Here, for example, is a famous passage from John Stuart Mill’s *Three Essays on Religion*:

We now pass to the moral attributes of the Deity . . . This question bears a very different aspect to us from what it bears to those teachers of Natural Theology who are encumbered with the necessity of admitting the omnipotence of the Creator. We have not to attempt the impossible problem of reconciling infinite benevolence and justice with infinite power in the Creator of a world such as this. The attempt to do so not only involves absolute contradiction in an intellectual point of view but exhibits to excess the revolting spectacle of a jesuitical defense of moral enormities. (1875, 183)

I cannot resist quoting, in connection with this passage from Mill, a poem that occurs in Kingsley Amis’s (1966) novel *The Anti-death League* (it is the work of

one of the characters).¹ This poem puts a little flesh on the bones of Mill's abstract Victorian prose. It contains several specific allusions to just those arguments Mill describes as jesuitical defenses of moral enormities. Its literary effect depends essentially on putting these arguments, or allusions to them, into the mouth of God.

To a Baby Born without Limbs

*This is just to show you who's boss around here.
It'll keep you on your toes, so to speak.
Make you put your best foot forward, so to speak,
And give you something to turn your hand to, so to speak.
You can face up to it like a man,
Or snivel and blubber like a baby.
That's up to you. Nothing to do with Me.
If you take it in the right spirit,
You can have a bloody marvelous life,
With the great rewards courage brings,
And the beauty of accepting your LOT.
And think how much good it'll do your Mum and Dad,
And your Grans and Gramps and the rest of the shower,
To be stopped being complacent.
Make sure they baptize you, though,
In case some murdering bastard
Decides to put you away quick,
Which would send you straight to LIMB-O, ha ha ha.
But just a word in your ear, if you've got one.
Mind you, DO take this in the right spirit,
And keep a civil tongue in your head about Me.
Because if you DON'T,
I've got plenty of other stuff up My sleeve,
Such as leukemia and polio
(Which, incidentally, you're welcome to any time,
Whatever spirit you take this in).
I've given you one love-pat, right?
You don't want another.
So watch it, Jack.*

I am afraid I must accuse Mill (and the many other authors who have expressed similar sentiments) of intellectual dishonesty.

Philosophy is *hard*. Thinking clearly for an extended period is hard. It is easier to pour scorn on those who disagree with you than actually to address their

arguments. And of all the kinds of scorn that can be poured on someone's views, moral scorn is the safest and most pleasant (most pleasant to the one doing the pouring). It is the safest kind because, if you want to pour moral scorn on someone's views, you can pretty much take it for granted that most people will regard what you have said as unanswerable; you can take it as *certain* that everyone who is predisposed to agree with you will believe you have made an unanswerable point. You can pretty much take it for granted that your audience will dismiss any attempt your opponent in debate makes at an answer as a "rationalization"—that great contribution of modern depth psychology to intellectual complacency and laziness. Moral scorn is the most *pleasant* kind of scorn to deploy against those who disagree with you because a display of self-righteousness—moral posturing—is a pleasant action whatever the circumstances, and it's nice to have an excuse for it. No one can tell me Mill wasn't enjoying himself when he wrote the words "exhibits to excess the revolting spectacle of a jesuitical defense of moral enormities." (Perhaps he was enjoying himself so much that his attention was diverted from the question, What would it be to exhibit a revolting spectacle in moderation?)

To people who employ the argument from evil and attempt to deflect critical examination of this argument by that sort of moral posturing, I can only say, Come off it. These people are, in point of principle, in exactly the same position as those defenders of law and order who, if you express a suspicion that a man accused of abducting and molesting a child has been framed by the police, tell you with evident disgust that molesting a child is a monstrous crime and that you're defending a child molester.

3. GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE, HIS MORAL PERFECTION, AND HIS KNOWLEDGE OF EVIL

Having defended the moral propriety of critically examining the argument from evil, I will now do just that. The argument presupposes, and rightly, that two features God is supposed to have are "nonnegotiable": that he is omnipotent and morally perfect. That he is omnipotent means that he can do *anything*—provided his doing it doesn't involve an intrinsic impossibility. (Thus, even an omnipotent being can't draw a round square. And God, although he is omnipotent, is unable to lie, for *his* lying is as much an intrinsic impossibility as a round square.) To say that God is morally perfect is to say that he never does anything morally wrong—that he could not possibly do anything morally wrong. If omnipotence

and moral perfection are nonnegotiable components of the idea of God, this fact has the following two logical consequences. (1) If the universe was made by an intelligent being, and if that being is less than omnipotent (and if there's no other being who *is* omnipotent), the atheists are right: God does not exist. (2) If the universe was made by an omnipotent being, and if that being has done even one morally wrong thing (and if there isn't another omnipotent being, one who never does anything morally wrong), the atheists are right: God does not exist. If, therefore, the Creator of the universe lacked either omnipotence or moral perfection, and if he claimed to be God, he would be either an impostor (if he claimed to be omnipotent and morally perfect) or confused (if he admitted that he was less than omnipotent or less than morally perfect and still claimed to be God).

One premise of the simple version of the argument set out above—that an all-powerful and morally perfect being would not allow evil to exist—might well be false if the all-powerful and wholly good being were ignorant, and not culpably ignorant, of the existence of evil. But this is not a difficulty for the proponent of the simple argument, for God, if he exists, is omniscient. The proponent of the simple argument could, in fact, defend his premise by an appeal to far weaker theses about the extent of God's knowledge than "God is omniscient." If the simple argument presents an effective *prima facie* case for the conclusion that there is no omnipotent and morally perfect being who is omniscient, it presents an equally effective *prima facie* case for the conclusion that there is no omnipotent and morally perfect being who has even as much knowledge of what goes on in the world as we human beings have. The full panoply of omniscience, so to speak, does not really enter into the initial stages of a presentation and discussion of an argument from evil. Omniscience, omniscience in the full sense of the word, will become important only when we come to examine responses to the argument from evil that involve free will (see Section 9).

How shall we organize our critical examination of the argument from evil? I propose that we imagine in some detail a debate about the existence of God, and that we try to determine how effective a debating point the reality of evil would be for the party to the debate who was trying to show that there was no God.

4. A DESCRIPTION OF AN IDEAL DEBATE ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Let us imagine that we are about to watch part of a debate between an atheist ("Atheist") and a theist ("Theist") about whether there is a God. This debate is

being carried on before an audience of agnostics. As we enter the debating hall (the debate has evidently been going on for some time), Atheist has the floor. She is trying to convince the agnostics to abandon their agnosticism and become atheists like herself. Theist is not, not in this part of the debate anyway, trying to convert the agnostics to theism. At present, he is trying to convince the agnostics of only one thing: that Atheist's arguments should not convert them to atheism. (By an odd coincidence, we have arrived just at the moment at which Atheist is beginning to set out the argument from evil.) I mean these fictional characters to be ideal types, ideal representatives of the categories "atheist," "theist," and "agnostic": they are all highly intelligent, rational, and factually well informed; they are indefatigable speakers and listeners, and their attention never wanders from the point at issue. The agnostics, in particular, are moved by a passionate desire for truth. They want to get the question of the existence of God *settled*, and they don't at all care *which way* it gets settled. Their only desire is—if this should be possible—to leave the hall with a *correct belief* about the existence of God, a belief they have *good reason* to regard as correct. (They recognize, however, that this may very well not be possible, in which case they intend to remain agnostics.) Our two debaters, be it noted, are not interested in changing *each other's* beliefs. Each is interested in the effects his or her arguments will have on the beliefs of the agnostics and not at all in the effects those arguments will have on the beliefs of the other debater. One important consequence of this is that neither debater will bother to consider the question, Will my opponent accept this premise? Each will consider only the question, Will the agnostics accept this premise?

Can Atheist use the argument from evil to convert these ideal "theologically neutral" agnostics to atheism—in the face of Theist's best efforts to block her attempt to convince them of the truth of atheism? Our examination of the argument from evil will be presented as an attempt to answer this question.

5. ATHEIST'S INITIAL STATEMENT OF THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL; THEIST BEGINS HIS REPLY BY MAKING A POINT ABOUT REASONS

Atheist, as I have said, is beginning to present the argument from evil to the audience of agnostics. Here is her initial formulation of the argument:

Since God is morally perfect, he must desire that no evil exist—the nonexistence of evil must be what he *wants*. And an omnipotent being can achieve or bring about whatever he wants—or at least whatever he wants that is intrinsically possible, and the nonexistence of evil is obviously intrinsically possible. So if there were an omnipotent, morally perfect being who knew about these evils—well, they wouldn't have arisen in the first place, for he'd have prevented their occurrence. Or if, for some reason, he didn't do that, he'd certainly remove them the instant they began to exist. But we observe evils, and very long-lasting ones. So we must conclude that God does not exist.

What shall Theist say in reply? I think he should begin with an obvious point about the relations between what one wants, what one can do, and what one will, in the event, do:

I grant that, in some sense of the word, the nonexistence of evil must be what a perfectly good being *wants*. But we often don't bring about states of affairs we can bring about and want to bring about. Suppose, for example, that Alice's mother is dying in great pain and that Alice yearns desperately for her mother to die—today and not next week or next month. And suppose it would be easy for Alice to arrange this—she is perhaps a doctor or a nurse and has easy access to pharmacological resources that would enable her to achieve this end. Does it follow that she will act on this ability she has? It does not, for Alice might have *reasons* for not doing what she can do. (She might, for example, think it would be morally wrong to poison her mother; or she might fear being prosecuted for murder.) The conclusion that evil does not exist does not, therefore, follow *logically* from the premises that the nonexistence of evil is what God wants and that he is able to bring about the object of his desire—since, for all logic can tell us, God might have reasons for allowing evil to exist that, in his mind, outweigh the desirability of the nonexistence of evil.

But Theist must say a great deal more than this, for, if we gave her her head, Atheist could make a pretty good *prima facie* case for two conclusions: that a morally perfect creator would take pains to prevent the suffering of his creatures, and that the suffering of creatures could not be a necessary means to any end for an omnipotent being. Theist must, therefore, say something about God's reasons for allowing evil, something to make it plausible to believe there might be such reasons. Before I allow him to do this, however, I will introduce some terminology that will help us to understand the general strategy I am going to have him follow in his discussion of God's reasons for allowing evil to exist.

6. A DISTINCTION: “THEODICY” AND “DEFENSE”

Suppose that I believe in God and that I think I know what God’s reasons for allowing evil to exist are and that I tell them to you. Then I have presented you with what is called a theodicy, from the Greek words for “God” and “justice.” Thus, Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, tells us that the purpose of the poem is to “justify the ways of God to men”—“justify” meaning “exhibit as just.” (Here I use “theodicy” in Alvin Plantinga’s sense. Other writers have used the word in other senses.) If I could present a theodicy, and if the audience to whom I presented it found it convincing, I’d have an effective reply to the argument from evil, at least as regards that particular audience. But suppose that, although I believe in God, I *don’t* claim to know what God’s reasons for allowing evil are. Is there any way for someone in my position to reply to the argument from evil? There is. Consider this analogy.

Your friend Clarissa, a single mother, left her two very young children alone in her flat for several hours very late last night. Your Aunt Harriet, a maiden lady of strong moral principles, learns of this and declares that Clarissa is unfit to raise children. You spring to your friend’s defense: “Now, Aunt Harriet, don’t go jumping to conclusions. There’s probably a perfectly good explanation. Maybe Billy or Annie took ill, and she decided to go over to St Luke’s for help. You know she hasn’t got a phone or a car and no one in that neighborhood of hers would come to the door at two o’clock in the morning.” If you tell your Aunt Harriet a story like this, you don’t claim to know what Clarissa’s reasons for leaving her children alone really were. And you’re not claiming to have said anything that shows that Clarissa really is a good mother. You’re claiming only to show that the fact Aunt Harriet has adduced doesn’t prove Clarissa isn’t a good mother; what you’re trying to establish is that for all you or Aunt Harriet know, she had some good reason for what she did. And you’re not trying to establish only that there is some remote possibility that she had a good reason. No lawyer would try to raise doubts in the minds of the members of a jury by pointing out to them that for all they knew his client had an identical twin, of whom all record had been lost, and who was the person who had actually committed the crime his client was charged with. That may be a possibility—I suppose it *is* a possibility—but it is too remote a possibility to raise real doubts in anyone’s mind. What you’re trying to convince Aunt Harriet of is that there is, as we say, *a very real possibility* that Clarissa had a good reason for leaving her children alone, and your attempt to convince her of this consists in your presenting her with an example of what such a reason *might* be.

Critical responses to the argument from evil—at least responses by philoso-

phers—usually take just this form. A philosopher who responds to the argument from evil typically does so by telling a story, a story in which God allows evil to exist. This story will, of course, represent God as having reasons for allowing the existence of evil, reasons that, if the rest of the story were true, would be good ones. Such a story philosophers call a *defense*. A defense and a theodicy will not necessarily differ in content. A's defense may, indeed, be verbally identical with B's theodicy. The difference between a theodicy and a defense is simply that a theodicy is put forward as true, while nothing more is claimed for a defense than that it represents a real possibility—or a real possibility given that God exists. If I offer a story about God and evil as a defense, I hope for the following reaction from my audience: "Given that God exists, the rest of the story might well be true. I can't see any reason to rule it out." The logical point of this should be clear. If the audience of agnostics reacts to a story about God and evil in this way, then, assuming Atheist's argument is valid, they must reach the conclusion Theist wants them to reach: that, for all they know, one of Atheist's premises is false. And if they reach that conclusion, they will, for the moment, remain agnostics.

Some people, if they are familiar with the usual conduct of debates about the argument from evil, may be puzzled by my bringing the notion "a very real possibility" into my fictional debate at this early point. It has become something of a custom for critics of the argument from evil first to discuss the so-called logical problem of evil, the problem of finding a defense that contains no internal logical contradiction; when the critics have dealt with this problem to their own satisfaction, as they always do, they go on to discuss the so-called evidential (or probabilistic) problem of evil, the problem of finding a defense that (among certain other desirable features) represents, in my phrase, a real possibility. A counsel for the defense who followed a parallel strategy in a court of law would first try to convince the jury that his client's innocence was logically consistent with the evidence by telling a story involving twins separated at birth, operatic coincidences, and mental telepathy; only after he had convinced the jury by this method that his client's innocence was logically consistent with the evidence would he go on to try to raise *real* doubts in the jurors' minds about his client's guilt.

I find this division of the problem artificial and unhelpful and will not allow it to dictate the form of my discussion of the argument from evil. I am, as it were, jumping right into the evidential problem (so-called; I won't use the term) without any consideration of the logical problem. Or none as such, none under the *rubric* "the logical problem of evil." Those who know the history of the discussions of the argument from evil in the 1950s and 1960s will see that many of the points I make, or have my creatures Atheist and Theist make, were first made in discussions of the logical problem.

All right. Theist's response will take the form of an attempt to present one or more defenses, and his hope will be that the response of the audience of

agnostics to this defense, or these defenses, will be, “Given that God exists, the rest of the story might well be true. I can’t see any reason to rule it out.” What form could a plausible defense take?

One point is clear: a defense cannot simply take the form of a story about how God brings some great good out of the evils of the world, a good that outweighs those evils. At the very least, a defense will have to include the proposition that God was *unable* to bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse). And to find a story that can plausibly be said to have this feature is no trivial undertaking. The reason for this lies in God’s omnipotence. A human being can often be excused for allowing, or even causing, a certain evil if that evil was a necessary means, or an unavoidable consequence thereof, to some good that outweighed it—or if it was a necessary means to the prevention of some greater evil. The eighteenth-century surgeon who operated without anesthetic caused unimaginable pain to his patients, but we do not condemn him because (at least if he knew what he was about) the pain was an unavoidable consequence of the means necessary to a good that outweighed it: saving the patient’s life, for example. But we should condemn a present-day surgeon who had anesthetics available and who nevertheless operated without using them—even if his operation saved the patient’s life and thus resulted in a good that outweighed the horrible pain the patient suffered.

7. THEIST’S REPLY CONTINUES; THE INITIAL STATEMENT OF THE FREE-WILL DEFENSE

There seems to me to be only one defense that has any hope of succeeding, and that is the so-called free-will defense.² I am going to imagine Theist putting forward a very simple form of this defense; I will go on to ask what Atheist might say in response:

God made the world and it was very good. An indispensable part of its goodness was the existence of rational beings: self-aware beings capable of abstract thought and love and having the power of free choice between contemplated alternative courses of action. This last feature of rational beings, free choice or free will, is a good. But even an omnipotent being is unable to control the exercise of free choice, for a choice that was controlled would ipso facto not be free. In other words, if I have a free choice between x and y , even God cannot ensure that I choose x . To ask God to give me a free choice between x and y

and to see to it that I choose x instead of y is to ask God to bring about the intrinsically impossible; it is like asking him to create a round square or a material body with no shape. Having this power of free choice, some or all human beings misused it and produced a certain amount of evil. But free will is a sufficiently great good that its existence outweighs the evils that have resulted and will result from its abuse; and God foresaw this.

Theist's presentation of the free-will defense immediately suggests several objections. Here are two that would immediately occur to most people:

How could anyone possibly believe that the evils of this world are outweighed by the good inherent in our having free will? Perhaps free will is a good and would outweigh, in Theist's words, "a certain amount of evil," but it seems impossible to believe that it can outweigh the amount of physical suffering (to say nothing of other sorts of evil) that actually exists.

Not all evils are the result of human free will. Consider, for example, the Lisbon earthquake or the almost inconceivable misery and loss of life produced by the hurricane that ravaged Honduras in 1997. Such events are not the result of any act of human will, free or unfree.

In my view, the simple form of the free-will defense I have put into Theist's mouth is unable to deal with either of these objections. The simple form of the free-will defense can deal with at best the existence of *some* evil—as opposed to the vast amount of evil we actually observe—and the evil with which it can deal is only the evil that results from the acts of human beings. I believe, however, that more sophisticated forms of the free-will defense do have interesting things to say about the vast amount of evil in the world and about the suffering caused by earthquakes and hurricanes and other natural phenomena. Before I discuss these "more sophisticated" forms of the free-will defense, however, I want to examine two objections that have been brought against the free-will defense that are so fundamental that, if they were valid, they would refute any elaboration of the defense, however sophisticated. These objections have to do with free will. I am not going to include them in my dialogue between Atheist and Theist, for the simple reason that, in my view, anyway, they have not got very much force, and I do not want to be accused of fictional character assassination; my Atheist has more interesting arguments at her disposal. But I cannot ignore these arguments: the first has been historically important and the second turns on a point that is likely to occur to most readers.

8. AN OBJECTION TO THE FREE-WILL DEFENSE: GOD CAN CONTROL THE EXERCISE OF FREE CHOICE

The first of the two arguments is essentially this: the free-will defense fails because free will and determinism are compatible; God could, therefore, create a world whose inhabitants are free to do evil but do only good.

This might seem a surprising argument. Why should anyone believe that free will and determinism were compatible?

Well, many very able philosophers *have* believed this, and for reasons unrelated to theological questions. Philosophers of the stature of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill have held that free will and determinism are perfectly compatible: that there could be a world in which the past determined a unique future and whose inhabitants were nonetheless free agents. Philosophers who accept this thesis are called “compatibilists.” It is not hard to see that *if* the compatibilists are right about the nature of free will, the free-will defense fails. If free will and determinism are compatible, an omnipotent being *can*, contrary to a central thesis of the free-will defense, create a person who has a free choice between *x* and *y* and ensure that that person choose *x* rather than *y*.

Those philosophers who accept the compatibility of free will and determinism defend their thesis as follows: being free is being free to do what one wants to do. Prisoners in a jail, for example, are unfree because they want to leave and can't. The man who desperately wants to stop smoking but can't is unfree for the same reason—even though the barrier that stands between him and a life without nicotine is psychological, and not a physical thing like a wall or a door. The very words “free will” testify to the rightness of this analysis, for one's will is simply what one wants, and a free will is just exactly an unimpeded will. Given this account of free will, a Creator who wants to give me a free choice between *x* and *y* has only to arrange matters in such a way that the following two “if” statements are both true: *if* I were to want *x*, I'd be able to achieve that desire, and *if* I were to want *y*, I'd be able to achieve *that* desire. And a Creator who wants to ensure that I choose *x* rather than *y* has only to implant in me a fairly robust desire for *x* and see to it that I have no desire at all for *y*. And these two things are obviously compatible. Suppose, for example, that there was a Creator who had placed a woman in a garden and had commanded her not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree. Could he so arrange matters that she have a free choice between eating of the fruit of that tree and not eating of it—and also *ensure* that she not eat of it? Certainly. To provide her with a free choice between the two alternatives, he need only see to it that two things are true: first, that if she wanted to eat of the fruit of that tree, no barrier (such as an unclimbable fence or paralysis of the limbs or

a neurotic fear of trees) would stand in the way of her acting on that desire, and, second, that if she wanted *not* to eat of the fruit, nothing would force her to act contrary to *that* desire. And to ensure that she not eat of the fruit, he need only see to it that not eating of the fruit be what she desires (and that she have no other desire in conflict with this desire). An omnipotent and omniscient being could therefore bring it about that every creature with free will always freely did what was right.

Having thus shown a proposition central to the free-will defense to be false, the critic can make the consequences of its falsity explicit in a few words. If a morally perfect being could bring it about that every creature with free will always freely did what was right, there would of necessity be no creaturely abuse of free will, and evil could not possibly have entered the world through the creaturely abuse of free will. The so-called free-will defense is thus not a defense at all, for it is an impossible story.

We have before us, then, an argument for the conclusion that the story called the free-will defense is an impossible story. But how plausible is the account of free will on which the argument rests? Not very, I think. It certainly yields some odd conclusions. Consider the lower social orders in *Brave New World*, the “deltas” and “epsilons.” These unfortunate people have their deepest desires chosen for them by others, by the “alphas” who make up the highest social stratum. What the deltas and epsilons primarily desire is to do what the alphas tell them. This is their primary desire because it has been implanted in them by prenatal and postnatal conditioning. (If Huxley were writing today, he might have added genetic engineering to the alphas’ list of resources for determining the desires of their slaves.) It would be hard to think of beings who better fitted the description “lacks free will” than the deltas and epsilons of *Brave New World*. And yet, if the compatibilists’ account of free will is right, the deltas and epsilons are exemplars of beings with free will. Each of them is always doing exactly what he wants, after all, and who among *us* is in that fortunate position? What he wants is to do as he is told by those appointed over him, of course, but the compatibilists’ account of free will says nothing about the *content* of a free agent’s desires: it requires only that there be no barrier to acting on them. The compatibilists’ account of free will is, therefore, if not evidently false, at least highly implausible—for it has the highly implausible consequence that the deltas and epsilons are free agents. And an opponent of the free-will defense cannot show that that story fails to represent a “real possibility” by deducing its falsity from a highly implausible theory.

9. A SECOND OBJECTION TO THE FREE-WILL DEFENSE: FREE WILL IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH GOD'S OMNISCIENCE

I turn now to the second argument for the conclusion that any form of the free-will defense must fail: the free-will defense, of course, entails that human beings have free will; but the existence of a being who knows the future is incompatible with free will, and an omniscient being knows the future, and omniscience belongs to the concept of God; hence, the so-called free-will defense is not a possible story—and is therefore not a defense at all.

Most theists, I think, would reply to this argument by trying to show that divine omniscience and human free will were compatible, for that is what most theists believe. But I find the arguments, which I will not discuss, for the incompatibility of omniscience and freedom, if not indisputably correct, at least pretty convincing, and I will therefore not reply in that way. (And I think that the attempt of Augustine and Boethius and Aquinas to solve the problem by contending that God is outside time—that he is not merely everlasting but altogether nontemporal—is a failure. I don't mean to say that I reject the proposition that God is outside time; I mean that I think his being outside time doesn't solve the problem.) I will instead reply to the argument by engaging in some permissible tinkering with the concept of omniscience. At any rate, I believe it to be permissible for reasons I shall try to make clear.

In what follows, I am going to suppose that God is everlasting but temporal, that he is not “outside time.” I make this assumption because I do not know how to write coherently and in detail about a nontemporal being's knowledge of (what is to us) the future. Now consider these two propositions:

X will freely do A at *t*.

Y, a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken, believes now that X will do A at *t*.

These two propositions are consistent with each other or they are not. If they are consistent, there is no problem of omniscience and freedom. Suppose, then, that they are inconsistent, and suppose free will is possible. (If free will isn't possible, the free-will defense is self-contradictory for that reason alone.) Then it is impossible for a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken to have beliefs about what anyone will freely do in the future. Hence, if free will exists it is impossible for any being to be omniscient. Now, if the existence of free will implies that there cannot be an omniscient being, it might seem, by that very fact, to imply that there cannot be an omnipotent being. For if it is intrinsically impossible for any

being now to know what someone will freely do tomorrow or next year, it is intrinsically impossible for any being now to *find out* what someone will freely do tomorrow or next year; and a being who can do anything can find out anything. But this inference is invalid, for an omnipotent being is, as it were, excused from the requirement that it be able to do the intrinsically impossible. This suggests a solution to the problem of free will and divine omniscience: why should we not qualify the concept of omniscience in a way similar to the way the concept of omnipotence is qualified? Why not say that even an omniscient being is unable to know certain things—those such that its knowing them would be an intrinsically impossible state of affairs. Or we might say this: an omnipotent being is also omniscient if it knows everything it is able to know. If we say, first, that the omnipotent God is omniscient in the sense that he knows everything that, in his omnipotence, he is able to know, and, second, that he does not know what the future free acts of any agent will be, we do not contradict ourselves—owing to the fact that (now) finding out what the future free acts of an agent will be is an intrinsically impossible action.

I must admit that this solution to the problem of free will and divine foreknowledge raises a further problem for theists: Are not most theists committed (for example, in virtue of the stories told about God's actions in the Bible) to the proposition that God at least sometimes foreknows the free actions of creatures? This is a very important question. In my view, the answer is no, at least as regards the Bible. But a discussion of this important question is not possible within the scope of this chapter.

10. ATHEIST CONTENDS THAT THE FREE-WILL DEFENSE CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR THE AMOUNT AND THE KINDS OF EVIL WE OBSERVE

I conclude that neither an appeal to the supposed compatibility of free will and determinism nor an appeal to the supposed incompatibility of free will and omniscience can undermine the free-will defense.

Let us return to Atheist, who, as I said, has better arguments at her disposal than those considered in sections 8 and 9. What shall she say in response to the free-will defense? What she should do, I think, is to concede a certain limited power to the free-will defense and to go on to maintain that this power is *essen-*

tially limited. Her best course is to concede that the free-will defense shows there might be, for all anyone can say, a certain amount of evil, a certain amount of pain and suffering, in a world created by an all-powerful and morally perfect being, and to conduct her argument in terms of the amounts and the kinds of evil that we actually observe. Her best course is to argue for the conclusion that neither the simple version of the free-will defense I have had Theist present nor any elaboration of it can constitute a plausible account of the evil, the bad things, that actually exist. I have mentioned two points about the evil we observe in the world that would probably occur to most people immediately upon hearing Theist's initial statement of the free-will defense: that the amount of suffering (and other evils) is enormous and must outweigh whatever goodness is inherent in the reality of free will; that some evils are not caused by human beings and cannot therefore be ascribed to the creaturely abuse of free will. I will now ascribe to Atheist a rather lengthy speech that takes up these two points—and a third, perhaps less obvious.

I will concede that the free-will defense shows that the mere existence of *some evil or other* cannot be used to prove the nonexistence of God. If we lived in a world in which everyone, or most people, suffered in certain relatively minor ways, and if each instance of suffering could be traced to the wrong or foolish acts of human beings, you would be making a good point when you tell these estimable agnostics that, for all they know, these wrong or foolish acts are free acts, that even an omnipotent being cannot determine the outcome of a free choice, and that the existence of free choice is a good thing, sufficiently good to outweigh the bad consequences of its occasional abuse. But the evil we actually observe in the world is not at all like that. First, the sheer *amount* of evil in the world is overwhelming. The existence of free will may be worth some evil, but it certainly isn't worth the amount we actually observe. Second, there are lots of evils that can't be traced to the human will, free or unfree. Earthquakes and tornados and genetic defects and . . . well, one hardly knows where to stop. These two points are familiar ones in discussions of the argument from evil. I want also to make a third point, which, although fairly well-known, is not quite so familiar as these. Let us consider certain particular very bad events—"horrors" I will call them. Here are some examples of what I call horrors: a school bus full of children is crushed by a landslide; a good woman's life is gradually destroyed by the progress of Huntington's Chorea; a baby is born without limbs. Some horrors are consequences of human choices and some are not (consider, for example, William Rowe's [1979] case of a fawn that dies in agony in a forest fire before there were any human beings). But whether a particular horror is connected with human choices or not, it is evident that God could have prevented the horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

Now a moment ago I mentioned the enormous amount of evil in the world, and it is certainly true that there is in some sense an enormous *amount* of evil in the world. But the word "amount" at least suggests that evil is quantifiable, like distance or weight. That may be false or unintelligible, but if it is

true, even in a rough-and-ready sort of way, it shows that horrors raise a problem for the theist that is distinct from the problem raised by the enormous amount of evil. If evil can be, even roughly, quantified, as talk about amounts seems to imply, it might be that there was *more* evil in a world in which there were thousands of millions of relatively minor episodes of suffering (broken ribs, for example) than in a world in which there were a few horrors. But an omnipotent and omniscient creator could be called to moral account for creating a world in which there was even *one* horror. And the reason is obvious: that horror could have been “left out” of creation without the sacrifice of any great good or the permission of some even greater horror. And leaving it out is exactly what a morally perfect being would do; such good things as might depend causally on the horror could, given the being’s omnipotence and omniscience, be secured by (if the word is not morally offensive in this context) more “economical” means. Thus, the sheer *amount* of evil (which might be distributed in a fairly uniform way) is not the only fact about evil Theist needs to take into account. He must also take into account what we might call (again with some risk of using morally offensive language) *high local concentrations* of evil—that is, horrors. And it is hard to see how the free-will defense, however elaborated, could provide any resources for dealing with horrors.

I will, finally, call your attention to the fact that the case of “Rowe’s fawn,” which I briefly described a moment ago, is a particularly difficult case for Theist. True, however sentimental we may be about animals, we must admit that the death of a fawn in a forest fire is not much of a horror compared with, say, a living child’s being thrown into a furnace as a sacrifice to Baal. The *degree* of horror involved in the event is not what creates the special difficulty for theists in this case. What creates the difficulty is rather the complete causal isolation of the fawn’s sufferings from the existence and activities of human beings. No appeal to considerations in any way involving human free will can possibly be relevant to the problem with which this case confronts Theist, the difficulty of explaining why an omnipotent and morally perfect being would allow such a thing to happen.

11. THEIST ELABORATES THE FREE-WILL DEFENSE: EVIL RESULTS FROM A PRIMORDIAL ESTRANGEMENT OF HUMANITY FROM GOD

This is Atheist’s response to the free-will defense. How is Theist to reply? If I were he (and in some sense I am), I would reply as follows.

The free-will defense, in the simple form in which I've stated it, suggests—though it does not entail—that God created human beings with free will, and then just left them to their own devices. It suggests that the evils of the world are the more or less unrelated consequences of uncounted millions of largely unrelated abuses of free will by human beings. Let me propose a sort of plot to be added to the bare and abstract story called the free-will defense. Consider the story of creation and rebellion and the expulsion from paradise we find in the first three chapters of Genesis. Could this story be true—I mean literally true, true in every detail? Well, no. It contradicts what science has discovered about human evolution and the history of the physical universe. And that is hardly surprising, for it long antedates these discoveries. The story is a reworking—with much original material—by a Hebrew author or authors of elements found in many ancient Middle Eastern mythologies. Like Virgil's *Aeneid*, it is a literary refashioning of materials that were originally mythical and legendary, and it retains a strong flavor of myth. It is possible, nevertheless, that the first three chapters of Genesis are a mythicoliterary representation of actual events of human prehistory. The following is consistent with what we know of human prehistory. Our current knowledge of human evolution, in fact, presents us with no particular reason to believe this story is false:

For millions of years, perhaps for thousands of millions of years, God guided the course of evolution so as eventually to produce certain very clever primates, the immediate predecessors of *Homo sapiens*. At some time in the past few hundred thousand years, the whole population of our pre-human ancestors formed a small breeding community—a few thousand or a few hundred or even a few score. That is to say, there was a time when every ancestor of modern human beings who was then alive was a member of this tiny, geographically tightly knit group of primates. In the fullness of time, God took the members of this breeding group and miraculously raised them to rationality. That is, he gave them the gifts of language, abstract thought, and disinterested love—and, of course, the gift of free will. Perhaps we cannot understand *all* his reasons for giving human beings free will, but here is one very important one we *can* understand: He gave them the gift of free will because free will is necessary for love. Love, and not only erotic love, implies free will. The essential connection between love and free will is beautifully illustrated in Ruth's declaration to her mother-in-law, Naomi:

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; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1: 16, 17)

It is also illustrated by the vow Mr. van Inwagen, the author of my fictional being, made when he was married:

I, Peter, take thee, Elisabeth, 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.

God not only raised these primates to rationality—not only made of them what we call human beings—but also took them into a kind of mystical union with himself, the sort of union Christians hope for in Heaven and call the Beatific Vision. Being in union with God, these new human beings, these primates who had become human beings at a certain point in their lives, lived together in the harmony of perfect love and also possessed what theologians used to call preternatural powers—something like what people who believe in them today call paranormal abilities. Because they lived in the harmony of perfect love, none of them did any harm to the others. Because of their preternatural powers, they were able somehow to protect themselves from wild beasts (which they were able to tame with a look), from disease (which they were able to cure with a touch), and from random, destructive natural events (like earthquakes), which they knew about in advance and were able to avoid. There was thus no evil in their world. And it was God's intention that they should never become decrepit with age or die, as their primate forbears had. But, somehow, in some way that must be mysterious to us, they were not content with this paradisaical state. They abused the gift of free will and separated themselves from their union with God.

The result was horrific: not only did they no longer enjoy the Beatific Vision, but they now faced destruction by the random forces of nature, and became subject once more to old age and natural death. Nevertheless, they were too proud to end their rebellion. As the generations passed, they drifted further and further from God—into the worship of invented gods (a worship that sometimes involved human sacrifice), inter-tribal warfare (complete with the gleeful torture of prisoners of war), private murder, slavery, and rape. On one level, they realized, or some of them realized, that something was horribly wrong, but they were unable to do anything about it. After they had separated themselves from God, they were, as an engineer might say, “not operating under design conditions.” A certain frame of mind became dominant among them, a frame of mind latent in the genes they had inherited from a million or more generations of ancestors. I mean the frame of mind that places one's own desires and perceived welfare above everything else, and that accords to the welfare of one's relatives and the other members of one's tribe a subordinate privileged status, and assigns no status at all to the welfare of anyone else. And this frame of mind was now married to rationality, to the power of abstract thought; the progeny of this marriage were continuing resentment against those whose actions interfere with the fulfillment of one's desires, hatreds cherished in the heart, and the desire for revenge. The inherited genes that produced these baleful effects had been harmless as long as human beings had still had constantly before their minds a representation of perfect love in the Beatific Vision. In the state of separation from God, and conjoined with rationality, they formed the genetic substrate of what is called original or birth sin: an inborn ten-

dency to do evil against which all human efforts are vain. We, or most of us, have some sort of perception of the distinction between good and evil, but, however we struggle, in the end we give in and do evil. In all cultures there are moral codes (more similar than some would have us believe), and the members of every tribe and nation stand condemned not only by alien moral codes but by their own. The only human beings who consistently do right in their own eyes, whose consciences are always clear, are those who, like the Nazis, have given themselves over entirely to evil, those who say, in some twisted and self-deceptive way what Milton has his Satan say explicitly and clearly: "Evil, be thou my Good."

When human beings had become like this, God looked out over a ruined world. It would have been just for him to leave human beings in the ruin they had made of themselves and their world. But God is more than a God of justice. He is, indeed, more than a God of mercy—a God who was merely merciful might simply have brought the story of humanity to an end at that point, like a man who shoots a horse with a broken leg. But God, as I have said, is more than a God of mercy: he is a God of love. He therefore neither left humanity to its own devices nor mercifully destroyed it. Rather, he set in motion a rescue operation. He put into operation a plan designed to restore separated humanity to union with himself. This defense will not specify the nature of this plan of atonement. The three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, tell three different stories about the nature of this plan, and I do not propose to favor one of them over another in telling a story that, after all, I do not maintain is true. This much must be said, however: the plan has the following feature, and any plan with the object of restoring separated humanity to union with God would have to have this feature: its object is to bring it about that human beings once more love God. And, since love essentially involves free will, love is not something that can be imposed from the outside, by an act of sheer power. Human beings must choose freely to be reunited with God and to love him, and this is something they are unable to do of their own efforts. They must therefore cooperate with God. As is the case with many rescue operations, the rescuer and those whom he is rescuing must cooperate. For human beings to cooperate with God in this rescue operation, they must know that they need to be rescued. They must know what it means to be separated from him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply "canceled" all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. If he did that, we should be content with our lot and should see no reason to cooperate with him. Here is an analogy. Suppose Dorothy suffers from angina, and that what she needs to do is to stop smoking and lose weight. Suppose her doctor knows of a drug that will stop the pain but will do nothing to cure the condition. Should the doctor prescribe the drug for her, in the full knowledge that if the pain is alleviated, there is no chance she will stop smoking and lose weight? Well, perhaps the answer is yes, if that's what Dorothy insists on. The doctor is Dorothy's fellow adult and fellow citizen, after all. Perhaps it would be insufferably paternalistic to

refuse to alleviate Dorothy's pain in order to provide her with a motivation to do what is to her own advantage. If one were of an especially libertarian cast of mind, one might even say that someone who did that was "playing God." It is far from clear, however, whether there is anything wrong with *God's* behaving as if he were God. It is at least very plausible to suppose that it is morally permissible for God to allow human beings to suffer if the result of suppressing the suffering would be to deprive them of a very great good, one that far outweighed the suffering. But God does shield us from *much* evil, from a great proportion of the sufferings that would have resulted from our rebellion if he did nothing. If he did not shield us from much evil, all human history would be at least this bad: every human society would be on the moral level of Nazi Germany—or worse, if there is a "worse." But, however much evil God shields us from, he must leave a vast amount of evil "in place" if he is not to deceive us about what separation from him means—and, in so deceiving us, to remove our only motivation for cooperating with him in the working out of his plan for divine-human reconciliation. The amount he has left us with is so vast and so horrible that we cannot really comprehend it, especially if we are middle-class Europeans or Americans. Nevertheless, it could have been much worse. The inhabitants of a world in which human beings had separated themselves from God and he had then simply left them to their own devices would regard our world as a comparative paradise. All this evil, however, will come to an end. There will come a time after which, for all eternity, there will be no more unmerited suffering. Every evil done by the wicked to the innocent will have been avenged, and every tear will have been wiped away. If there is still suffering, it will be merited: the suffering of those who refuse to cooperate with God in his great rescue operation and are allowed by him to exist forever in a state of elected ruin—those who, in a word, are in Hell.

One aspect of this story needs to be brought out more clearly than it has been. If the story is true, much of the evil in the world is due to chance. There is generally no explanation of why *this* evil happened to *that* person. What there is is an explanation of why evils happen to people without any reason. And the explanation is: that is part of what our being separated from God means: it means our being the playthings of chance. It means not only living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, it means living in a world in which each innocent child who dies horribly dies horribly for no reason at all. It means living in a world in which the wicked, through sheer luck, often prosper. Anyone who does not want to live in such a world, a world in which we are the playthings of chance, had better accept God's offer of a way out of that world.

I will call this story the *expanded* free-will defense. I mean it to include the "simple" free-will defense as a part. Thus, it is a feature of the expanded free-will defense that even an omnipotent being, having raised our remote ancestors to rationality and having given them the gift of free will, which included a free choice between remaining united with him in bonds of love and turning away from him to follow the devices and desires of their own hearts, was not able to

ensure that they have done the former—although we may be confident he did everything omnipotence could do to raise the probability of their doing the former. But, before there were human beings, God knew that, however much evil might result from the elected separation from himself, and consequent self-ruin, of his human creatures—if it should occur—the gift of free will would be, so to speak, worth it. For the existence of an eternity of love depends on this gift, and that eternity outweighs the horrors of the very long but, in the most literal sense, temporary period of divine-human estrangement.

Here, then, is a defense, the expanded free-will defense. I contend that the expanded free-will defense is a possible story (internally consistent, at least as far as we can see); that, given that there is a God, the rest of the story might well be true; that it includes evil in the amount and of the kinds we find in the actual world, including what is sometimes called natural evil, such as the suffering caused by the Lisbon earthquake. (Natural evil, according to the expanded free-will defense, is a special case of the evil that results from the abuse of free will; the fact that human beings are subject to destruction by earthquakes is a consequence of a primordial abuse of free will.) I concede that it does not help us with cases like “Rowe’s fawn”—cases of suffering that occurred before there were human beings or that are for some other reason causally unconnected with human choice. But I claim to have presented a defense that accounts for all actual *human* suffering.

That was a long speech on the part of Theist. I now return to speaking in propria persona. I have had Theist tell a story, a story he calls the expanded free-will defense. You may want to ask whether *I* believe this story I have put into the mouth of my creature. Well, I believe parts of it and I don’t disbelieve any of it. (Even those parts I believe do not, for the most part, belong to my faith; they are merely some of my religious opinions.) I am not at all sure about “preternatural powers,” for example, or about the proposition that God shields us from much of the evil that would have been a “natural” consequence of our estrangement from him. But what *I* believe and don’t believe is not really much to the point. The story I have told is, I remind you, only supposed to be a defense. Theist does not put forward the expanded free-will defense as a theodicy, as a statement of the real truth of the matter concerning the coexistence of God and evil. Nor would I, if I told it in circumstances like Theist’s. Theist contends only, *I* contend only, that the story is—given that God exists—true for all anyone knows. And I certainly don’t see any very compelling reason to reject any of it. In particular, I don’t see any reason to reject the thesis that God raised a small population of our ancestors to rationality by a specific action on, say, June 13, 116,027 BC, or on some such particular date. It is not a discovery of evolutionary biology that there are no miraculous events in our evolutionary history. It *could* not be, any more than it could be a discovery of meteorology that the weather at Dunkirk during those fateful days in 1940 was not due to a specific and local divine action. It *could*, of course, be a discovery of evolutionary biology that the genesis of rationality was not a sudden, local event. But no such discovery has

been made. If someone, for some reason, put forward the theory that extraterrestrial beings visited the earth, and by some prodigy of genetic engineering, raised some population of our primate ancestors to rationality in a single generation (something like this happened in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*), this theory could not be refuted by any facts known to physical anthropology.

12. ATHEIST TURNS TO THE CONSIDERATION OF A PARTICULAR HORRIBLE EVIL

How might Atheist respond to the expanded free-will defense, given that this defense is, as I argued, consistent with what science has discovered about human prehistory? If I were in her position, I would respond to Theist in some such words as these:

You, Theist, may have told a story that accounts for the enormous amount of evil in the world, and for the fact that much evil is not caused by human beings. But I don't think you appreciate the force of the argument from horrors (so to call it), and I think I can make the agnostics, at any rate, see this. Let me state the argument from horrors a little more systematically; let me lay out its premises explicitly, and you can tell me which of its premises you deny.

There are many horrors, vastly many, from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn't have got without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all. Here is a true story. A man came upon a young woman in an isolated place. He overpowered her, chopped off her arms at the elbows with an axe, raped her, and left her to die. Somehow she managed to drag herself on the stumps of her arms to the side of a road, where she was discovered. She lived, but she experienced indescribable suffering, and although she is alive, she must live the rest of her life without arms and with the memory of what she had been forced to endure. No discernible good came of this, and it is wholly unreasonable to believe that any good could have come of it that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without employing the raped and mutilated woman's horrible suffering as a means to it. And even if this is wrong and some good came into being with which the woman's suffering was so intimately connected that even an omnipotent being couldn't have got the good without the suffering, it wouldn't follow that that good outweighed the suffering. (It would certainly have to be a very great good to do that.)

I will now draw on these reflections to construct a version of the argument from evil, a version that, unlike the version I presented earlier, refers not

to all the evils of the world, but just to this one event. (The argument is modeled on the central argument of William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" [1979].) I will refer to the events in the story I have told collectively as "the Mutilation." I argue:

- (1) If the Mutilation had not occurred, if it had been, so to speak, simply *left out* of the world, the world would be no worse than it is. (It would seem, in fact, that the world would be significantly *better* if the Mutilation had been left out of it, but my argument doesn't require that premise.)
- (2) The Mutilation in fact occurred and was a horror.
- (3) If a morally perfect creator could have left a certain horror out of the world he created, and if the world he created would have been no worse if that horror had been left out of it than it would have been if it had included that horror, then the morally perfect creator would have left the horror out of the world he created—or at any rate, he would have left it out if he had been able to.
- (4) If an omnipotent being created the world, he was able to leave the Mutilation out of the world (and was able to do so in a way that would have left the world otherwise much as it is).

There is, therefore, no omnipotent and morally perfect creator.

You, Theist, must deny at least one of the four premises of this argument; or at any rate, you must show that serious doubts can be raised about at least one of them. But which?

So speaks Atheist. How might Theist reply? Atheist has said that her argument was modeled on an argument of William Rowe's. If Theist models his reply on the replies made by most of the theists who have written on Rowe's argument, he will attack the first premise (see, for example, Wykstra 1996). He will try to show that, for all anyone knows, the world (considered under the aspect of eternity) is a better place for containing the Mutilation. He will try to show that for all anyone knows, God has brought, or will at some future time bring, some great good out of the Mutilation, a good that outweighs it, or else has employed the Mutilation as a means to preventing some even greater evil; and he will argue that, for all anyone knows, the great good achieved or the great evil prevented could not have been, respectively, achieved or prevented, even by an omnipotent being, otherwise than by some means that essentially involved the Mutilation (or something else as bad or worse).

13. THEIST DISCUSSES THE RELATION OF THE EXPANDED FREE-WILL DEFENSE TO THE QUESTION WHETHER AN OMNIPOTENT AND MORALLY PERFECT BEING WOULD ELIMINATE EVERY PARTICULAR HORROR FROM THE WORLD

I am not going to have Theist reply to Atheist's argument in this way. I find (1) fairly plausible, even if I am not as sure as Atheist is (or as sure as most atheists who have discussed the issue seem to be) that (1) is true. I am going to represent Theist as employing another line of attack on Atheist's response to his expanded free-will defense. I am going to represent him as denying premise (3), or, more precisely, as trying to show that the expanded free-will defense casts considerable doubt on premise (3). And here is his reply:

Why should we accept premise (3) of Atheist's argument? I have had a look at Rowe's defense of the corresponding premise of his argument, the entirety of which I will quote: "[This premise] seems to express a belief that accords with our basic moral principles, principles shared both by theists and non-theists." (1979, 337)

But what are these "basic moral principles, shared both by theists and non-theists"? Rowe does not say, but I believe there is really just one moral principle it would be plausible to appeal to in defense of premise (3). It might be stated like this.

If one is in a position to prevent some evil, one should not allow that evil to occur—not unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh it or preventing it would result in some other evil at least as bad.

Is this principle true?

I think not. (I can, in fact, think of several obvious objections to it. But most of these objections would apply only to the case of human agents, and I shall therefore not mention them.) Consider this example. Suppose you are an official who has the power to release anyone from prison at any time. Blodgett has been sentenced to ten years in prison for felonious assault. His sentence is nearing its end, and he petitions you to release him from prison a day early. Should you? Well, the principle says so. A day spent in prison is an evil—if you don't think so, I invite you to spend a day in prison. Let's suppose that the only good that results from putting criminals in prison is the deterrence of crime. (This assumption is made to simplify the argument. That it is false introduces no real defect into the argument.) Obviously, nine years, 364 days spent in prison is not going to have a significantly different power to deter

felonious assault from ten years spent in prison. So: no good will be secured by visiting on Blodgett that last day in prison, and that last day spent in prison is an evil. The principle tells you, the official, to let him out a day early. This much, I think, is enough to show that the principle is wrong, for you have no such obligation. But the principle is in more trouble than this simple criticism suggests.

It would seem that if a threatened punishment of n days in prison has a certain power to deter felonious assault, a threatened punishment of $n - 1$ days spent in prison will have a power to deter felonious assault that is not significantly less. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of 1,023 days in prison. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of 1,022 days in prison. There is, surely, no significant difference. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of 98 days in prison. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of 97 days in prison. There is, surely, no significant difference. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of one day in prison. Consider the power to deter felonious assault that belongs to a threatened punishment of no time in prison at all. There is, surely, no significant difference. (In this last case, of course, this is because the threat of one day in prison would have essentially *no* power to deter felonious assault.)

A moment's reflection shows that if this is true, as it seems to be, then the moral principle entails that Blodgett ought to spend no time in prison at all. For suppose Blodgett had lodged his appeal to have his sentence reduced by a day not shortly before he was to be released but before he had entered prison at all. He lodges this appeal with you, the official who accepts the moral principle. For the reason I have set out, you must grant his appeal. Now suppose that when it has been granted, clever Blodgett lodges a second appeal: that his sentence be reduced to ten years minus two days. This second appeal you will also be obliged to grant, for there is no difference between ten years less a day and ten years less two days as regards the power to deter felonious assault. I am sure you can see where this is going. Provided only that Blodgett has the time and the energy to lodge 3,648 successive appeals for a one-day reduction of his sentence, he will escape prison altogether.

This result is, I take it, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the moral principle. As the practical wisdom has it (and this is no compromise between practical considerations and strict morality; it *is* strict morality), You have to draw a line somewhere. And this means an *arbitrary* line. The principle fails precisely *because* it forbids the drawing of morally arbitrary lines. There is nothing wrong, or nothing that can be determined a priori to be wrong, with a legislature's setting ten years in prison as the minimum punishment for felonious assault—and this despite the fact that ten years in prison, considered as a *precise span of days*, is an arbitrary punishment.

The moral principle is therefore false—or possesses whatever defect is the analogue in the realm of moral principles of falsity in the realm of factual statements. What are the consequences of its falsity, of its failure to be an ac-

ceptable moral principle, for the “argument from horrors”? Let us return to the expanded free-will defense. This story accounts for the existence of horrors—that is, that there are horrors is a part of the story. The story explains why there are such things as horrors (at least, it explains why there are postlapsarian horrors) although it says nothing about any particular horror. And to explain why there are horrors is not to meet the argument from horrors.

A general account of the existence of horrors does not constitute a reply to the argument from horrors because it does not tell us which premise of the argument to deny. Let us examine this point in detail. According to the expanded free-will defense, God prevents the occurrence of many of the horrors that would naturally have resulted from our separation from him. But he cannot, so to speak, prevent all of them, for that would frustrate his plan for reuniting human beings with himself. And if he prevents only some horrors, how shall he decide which ones to prevent? Where shall he draw the line—the line between threatened horrors that are prevented and threatened horrors that are allowed to occur? I suggest that wherever he draws the line, it will be an arbitrary line. That this must be so is easily seen by thinking about the Mutilation. If God had added that particular horror to his list of horrors to be prevented, and that one alone, the world, considered as a whole, would not have been a significantly less horrible place, and the general realization of human beings that they live in a world of horrors would not have been significantly different from what it is. The existence of that general realization is just the factor in his plan for humanity that (according to the expanded free-will defense) provides his general reason for allowing horrors to occur. Therefore, preventing the Mutilation would in no way have interfered with his plan for the restoration of our species. If the expanded free-will defense is a true story, God has made a choice about where to draw the line, the line between the actual horrors of history, the horrors that are *real*, and the horrors that are mere averted possibilities, might-have-beens. The Mutilation falls on the “actual horrors of history” side of the line. And this fact shows that the line is an arbitrary one, for if he had drawn it so as to exclude the Mutilation from reality (and left it otherwise the same) he would have lost no good thereby and he would have allowed no greater evil. He had no reason for drawing the line where he did. But then what justifies him in drawing the line where he did? What justifies him in including the Mutilation in reality when he could have excluded it without losing any good thereby? Has the victim of the Mutilation not got a moral case against him? He could have saved her and he did not, and he does not even *claim* to have achieved some good by not saving her. It would seem that God is in the dock, in C. S. Lewis’s words; if he is, then I, Theist, am playing the part of his barrister, and you, the Agnostics, are the jury. I offer the following obvious consideration in defense of my client: there was no nonarbitrary line to be drawn. Wherever God drew the line, there would have been countless horrors left in the world—his plan requires the actual existence of countless horrors—and the victim or victims of any of those horrors could bring the same charge against him that we have imagined the victim of the Mutilation bringing against him.

But I see Atheist stirring in protest; she is planning to tell you that, given

the terms of the expanded free-will defense, God should have allowed the *minimum* number of horrors consistent with his project of reconciliation, and that it is obvious he has not done this. She is going to tell you that there *is* a non-arbitrary line for God to draw, and that it is the line that has the minimum number of horrors on the “actuality” side. But there is no such line to be drawn. There is no minimum number of horrors consistent with God’s plan of reconciliation, for the prevention of any one particular horror could not possibly have any effect on God’s plan. For any n , if the existence of n horrors is consistent with God’s plan, the existence of $n-1$ horrors will be equally consistent with God’s plan. To ask what the minimum number of horrors consistent with God’s plan is is like asking, What is the minimum number of raindrops that could have fallen on England in the nineteenth century that is consistent with England’s having been a fertile country in the nineteenth century? Here is a simple analogy of proportion: a given evil is to the openness of human beings to the idea that human life is horrible and that no human efforts will ever alter this fact as a given raindrop is to the fertility of England.

And this is why God did not prevent the Mutilation—insofar as there is a “why.” He had to draw an arbitrary line and he drew it. And that’s all there is to be said. This, of course, is cold comfort to the victim. Or, since we are merely telling a story, it would be better to say: if this story were true and known to be true, knowing its truth would be cold comfort to the victim. But the purpose of the story is not to comfort anyone. It is not to give an example of a possible story that would comfort anyone if it were true and that person knew it to be true. If a child dies on the operating table in what was supposed to be a routine operation and a board of medical inquiry finds that the death was due to some factor the surgeon could not have anticipated and that the surgeon was not at fault, that finding will be of no comfort to the child’s parents. But it is not the purpose of a board of medical inquiry to comfort anyone; the purpose of a board of medical inquiry is, by examining the facts of the matter, to determine whether anyone was at fault. And it is not my purpose in offering a defense to provide even hypothetical comfort to anyone. It is to determine whether the existence of horrors entails that God is at fault—or, rather, since by definition God is never at fault, to determine whether the existence of horrors entails that an omnipotent creator would be at fault.

It is perhaps important to point out that we might easily find ourselves in a moral situation like God’s moral situation according to the expanded free-will defense, a situation in which we must draw an arbitrary line and allow some bad thing to happen when we could have prevented it, and in which, moreover, no good whatever comes of our allowing it to happen. In fact, we do find ourselves in this situation. In a welfare state, for example, we use taxation to divert money from its primary economic role in order to spend it to prevent or alleviate various social evils. And how much money, what proportion of the gross national product, shall we—that is, the state—divert for this purpose? Well, not none of it and not all of it (enforcing a tax rate of 100 percent on all earned income and all profits would be the same as not having a money economy at all). And where we draw the line is an arbitrary matter. However much we spend on social services, we shall always be able to find

some person or family who would be saved from misery if the state spent (in the right way) a mere \$1,000 more than it in fact plans to spend. And the state can *always* find another \$1,000, and can find it without damaging the economy or doing any other sort of harm.

14. CONCLUDING REMARKS: EVALUATING THEIST'S RESPONSE TO THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

So Theist replies to Atheist's argument from horrors. But we may note that Theist has failed to respond to an important point Atheist has made. As he himself conceded, his reply takes account only of *postlapsarian* horrors. There is still to be considered the matter of *prelapsarian* horrors, horrors such as Rowe's poor fawn. There were certainly sentient animals long before there were sapient animals, and the paleontological record shows that for much of the long prehuman past, sentient creatures died agonizing deaths in natural disasters. Obviously, the free-will defense cannot be expanded in such a way as to account for these agonizing deaths, for only sapient creatures have free will, and these deaths cannot therefore have resulted from the abuse of free will—unless, as C. S. Lewis has suggested, prehuman animal suffering is ascribed to a corruption of nature by fallen angels (1940, 122–24). Interesting as this suggestion is, I do not propose to endorse it, even as a defense. I confess myself unable to treat this difficult problem adequately within the scope of this chapter. I should have to devote a whole essay to the problem of *prelapsarian* horrors to say anything of value about it. I must simply declare this topic outside the scope of this chapter. I refer the reader to my essay “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence,” (van Inwagen 1991), which contains a defense—not a version of the free-will defense—that purports to account for the sufferings of prehuman animals. I will remark that this defense shares one important feature of the expanded free-will defense. This defense, too, requires God to draw an arbitrary line; it allows God to eliminate much animal suffering that would otherwise have occurred in the course of nature, but it requires him, as it were, to *stop* eliminating it at some point, even though no good is gained by his stopping at whatever point he does stop at. I would thus say that God could have eliminated the suffering of Rowe's fawn at no cost and did not, and that this fact does not count against his moral perfection—just as the fact that he could have eliminated the Mutilation at no cost and did not does not count against his moral perfection. But the nature of the goods involved in this other defense is a subject I cannot discuss here.

Let me put this question to the readers of this chapter: Has Theist successfully replied to the argument from horrors *insofar as those horrors are events that involve human beings*? Well, much depends on what further things Atheist might have to say. Perhaps Atheist has a dialectically effective rejoinder to Theist's reply to the argument from horrors. But one must make an end somewhere. The trouble with real philosophical debates is that they almost never come to a neat and satisfactory conclusion. Philosophy is argument without end. I do think this much: if Atheist has nothing more to say, the Agnostics should render a verdict of "not proven" as regards premise (3) of the argument from horrors and the moral principle on which it is based, namely, that, if it is within one's power to prevent some evil, one should not allow that evil to occur unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh it or preventing it would result in some other evil at least as bad.

Let me put a similar question before the readers of this chapter as regards the extended free-will defense and the problem of the vast amount of evil (including the vast amounts of natural evil): Does Theist's presentation of the extended free-will defense constitute a successful reply to Atheist's contention that an omnipotent and morally perfect God would not allow the existence of a world that contains evil in the amount and of the kinds we observe in the world around us *insofar as this contention involves only evils that befall human beings*? Again, much depends on what further things Atheist might have to say. My own opinion is this: if Atheist has nothing further to say, an audience of agnostics of the sort I have imagined should concede that *for all anyone knows*, a world created by an omnipotent and morally perfect God might contain human suffering in the amount and of the kinds we observe.³

NOTES

1. In the novel, there are several minor illiteracies in the poem (e.g., "whose" for "who's" in the first stanza). (The fictional author of the poem, a well-educated man, was trying to hide the fact of his authorship.) I have corrected these, despite the judgment of Martin Amis that the illiteracies are an intended part of the literary effect of the poem (intended, that is, by its real author, Kingsley Amis, not by its fictional author).

2. Almost all theists who reply to the argument from evil employ some form of the free-will defense. The free-will defense I am going to have Theist employ derives, at a great historical remove, from Saint Augustine. A useful selection of Augustine's writings on free will and the origin of evil (from *The City of God* and the *Enchiridion*) can be found in Melden (1955, 164–77).

For a *very* different approach to the problem of evil (to the purely intellectual problem considered in this chapter *and* to many other problems connected with trust in God and the very worst evils present in his creation), see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Hor-*

Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God (1999). I find this book unpersuasive (as regards its general tendency and main theses; I think Adams is certainly right about many relatively minor but not unimportant points), but endlessly fascinating. I hope that my friend Marilyn, if she reads the sentence to which this note is appended, will take special notice of the words “seems to me,” and will accept my assurance that their presence in that sentence is not a mere literary reflex.

For another important but *very* different discussion of the problem of evil, see Eleonore Stump’s Stob Lectures, *Faith and the Problem of Evil* (1999).

Many recent versions of the free-will defense (including the version developed in the seminal work of Alvin Plantinga) can be found in Pike (1964), Adams and Adams (1990), and Peterson (1992), collections that contain excellent and representative selections from the important philosophical work on the argument from evil that had been published as of their copyright dates.

Three important book-length treatments of the problem of evil, all in the Augustinian (or “free will”) tradition, are Lewis (1940), Geach (1977), and Swinburne (1998).

3. For another version of Theist’s argument (in which something like the story here called the expanded free will defense is presented not as a defense but as a theodicy—a “theodicy” in a weaker sense than the word is given in this chapter), see van Inwagen (1988).

A longer version of the debate between Atheist and Theist concerning the “argument from horrors” is contained in van Inwagen (2000).

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1999. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Adams, Marilyn McCord, and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds. 1990. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Amis, Kingsley. 1966. *The Anti-death League*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Geach, P. T. 1997. *Providence and Evil*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, ed. 1996. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. 1940. *The Problem of Pain*. London: Macmillan.
- Melden, A. I., ed. 1955. *Ethical Theories*. 2nd edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1875. *Three Essays on Religion*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Peterson, Michael L., ed. 1992. *The Problem of Evil*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pike, Nelson, ed. 1964. *God and Evil*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Rowe, William L. 1979. “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 335–41. Reprinted in Adams and Adams, 1990.
- Stump, Eleonore. 1999. *Faith and the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Stob Lectures Endowment.

- Swinburne, Richard. 1998. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. 1988. "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy." *Philosophical Topics* 16: 161–87. Reprinted in van Inwagen 1995; in Eleonore Stump and Michael Murray, eds., *The Big Questions: Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); in Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds., *Reason and Responsibility*, 11th edition (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thompson, 2002); and in William Lane Craig, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Reader*, forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press.
- . 1991. "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence." *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 5, *Philosophy of Religion*: 135–65. Reprinted in Howard-Snyder 1996, and in van Inwagen 1995.
- . 1995. *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . 2000. "The Argument from Particular Horrendous Evils." *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (annual supplement to the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*) 74: 65–80.
- Wykstra, Stephen John. 1996. "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil." In Howard-Snyder 1996, 126–50.