

Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence

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Traditional theists in our environment, and Christians in particular, tend to endorse libertarianism about free will, according to which we have the free will required for moral responsibility, free will of this sort is incompatible with determinism, and determinism is false. Divine determinism is nonetheless well-represented in the history of traditional theism -- and by 'divine determinism' I mean to specify the position that God is the sufficient active cause of everything in creation, whether directly or by way of secondary causes such as human agents. This position is either obviously or arguably held by Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Schleiermacher, among others. Yet despite the historical prominence of this view, there is an obvious and compelling reason for rejecting it. The consequence that God is the sufficient active cause of all the evils that occur threatens to make divine determinism unconscionable from the very outset. Now if an available alternative were the position that we have libertarian free will, that God is not omnipotent, and that there are evil forces in the universe, other than mere willings, against which God needs to *struggle*, then one can see why rejecting the determinist perspective would seem attractive. Yet even if this Zoroastrian alternative remains the de facto position of some, it is outside the bounds of traditional Christian, Jewish, and Islamic orthodoxy. But affirming libertarianism while retaining a commitment to divine omnipotence, while attractive indeed, is not obviously and decisively superior to certain

options open to the divine determinist. At least so I shall argue.

For some theists, an important motivation for accepting the libertarian view of free will has been that the doctrine of eternal damnation is difficult to reconcile with determinism, and divine determinism in particular. In addition, libertarianism also promises a solution to the problem of evil, and this yields another motivation. However, libertarianism has also been thought to pose a threat to divine providence, God's beneficent governance of the world. But this last problem would be solved by Molinism, according to which God can know what every possible libertarian free creature would choose in every possible circumstance, and then with this knowledge, God is able to direct the course of history with precision.¹ Indeed, it would seem that all things considered, from the point of view of theological desirability — setting aside considerations of plausibility — libertarianism supplemented by Molinism is without equal. But both libertarianism and Molinism are controversial positions. What if they were, in the last analysis, false? Is the fate of Christian theism tied to the truth of these two positions? One possibility that appears to be gaining currency is that libertarianism is true and Molinism is false, and as result divine providence is relatively weak; Thomas Flint calls this position 'openism.' But what if libertarianism itself is false, and I don't think we can take for granted that it isn't. Would Christianity thereby be rendered implausible?

Moral Responsibility and Theism

The most prominent trend in traditional Calvinism, and more broadly, in the Augustinian strain in Christianity, maintains a strong doctrine of divine providence. In the hands of some, the development of this doctrine includes the claim that God determines everything that occurs in

creation. At the same time, another prominent trend in traditional Calvinism and Augustinianism has it that human beings are morally responsible for their sinful actions, and that they deserve punishment – even eternal damnation – by virtue of having acted sinfully. Together, these doctrines strongly suggest a theological compatibilism between moral responsibility and divine determinism. This theological compatibilism has historically been a concern to those raised in traditions. From Molina and Arminius on, the most common avenue of disagreement has been to adopt a libertarian view of free will. (From here on, the term ‘free will’ shall refer to libertarian free will, unless otherwise noted.) But another option, typically only hinted at, is to endorse hard determinism or a similar position, according to which determinism is true and as a result we are not morally responsible for our actions.²

A serious misgiving one might have about this view is that it would undermine the notions of sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude so central to the ethical framework of traditional theistic religions. But there are good reasons to think that this worry is ultimately unfounded. What is claimed to be incompatible with determinism is moral responsibility. For an agent to be *morally responsible for an action* is for it to belong to the agent in such a way that she would deserve blame if the action were morally wrong, and she would deserve credit or perhaps praise if it were morally exemplary. The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve the blame or credit just because she has performed the action, and not, for example, by virtue of consequentialist considerations. It is commonly supposed that moral responsibility is an absolutely central ethical notion, so that morality itself stands or falls with it. In my view, this is a misconception.

First of all, note that being morally responsible is distinct from *behaving responsibly*, that

is, behaving morally, and from *taking responsibility* for something -- making a sincere commitment to a task in one's community, for example, or to care for someone. It is also different from the legitimacy of holding oneself and others *morally accountable*, where this amounts to the legitimacy of demanding that agents explain how their decisions accord with the moral point of view, and that they consider what their decisions reveal about their moral character and dispositions. The notions of behaving responsibly, taking responsibility, and moral accountability are independent of moral responsibility, and can survive without it.

Furthermore, absence of moral responsibility is compatible with our actions being good and bad, or right and wrong. By ordinary intuitions, the actions of a small child can be good or bad, right or wrong, before she qualifies as morally responsible. A legal analogy also indicates why this might be so. Suppose that someone has unbeknownst to you slipped a drug into your seltzer that makes you compulsively speed in your car – so much so that it causally determines you to speed. Suppose that an officer stops you as you are speeding on the freeway. Even if you are not blameworthy for speeding in this case, what you were doing was manifestly legally wrong. By analogy, moral wrongdoing is also consistent with the absence of blameworthiness. Even if an agent is not blameworthy for lying, it can still be wrong for him to lie.

But denying moral responsibility might be thought to threaten the attitudes of guilt and repentance, since these attitudes would seem to presuppose that we are blameworthy for what we have done. Here there is much at stake, for these attitudes lie at the core of the traditional theistic conception of the formation of moral and religious character, and of what it is to have the right relationship with God. Without guilt and repentance, an agent would be incapable of restoring relationships damaged because she has done wrong. She would be kept from re-establishing her

moral integrity and the kind of relationship with God that these changes make possible. For other than the attitudes of guilt and repentance we would seem to have no psychological resources that can play these roles. But giving up on moral responsibility would appear to undermine guilt because this attitude essentially involves the belief that one is blameworthy for something one has done. Moreover, if guilt is undermined, the attitude of repentance would also seem threatened, for feeling guilty is not implausibly required for motivating repentance.

However, imagine that you behave immorally, but because you do not believe that you are morally responsible, you deny that you are blameworthy. Instead, you agree that you have done wrong, you are saddened your having behaved immorally, and you thoroughly regret what you have done. In addition, because you are committed to moral improvement, you resolve not to behave in this way in the future, and you seek the help of others in sustaining your resolve. None of this is threatened by giving up moral responsibility. Indeed, I suspect that given what is ordinarily meant by a sense of guilt, since moral sadness and regret are not undermined, the sense of guilt would thereby still count as legitimate.

Forgiveness might appear to presuppose that the person being forgiven is blameworthy, and if this is so, it would indeed be undermined if one gave up moral responsibility. But forgiveness has central features that would be unaffected, and they are sufficient to sustain the role forgiveness as a whole typically has in good relationships. Suppose a friend repeatedly mistreats you, and because of this you have resolved to end your relationship with him. However, he then he apologizes to you, in such a way that he thereby signifies that he believes he has done wrong, that he wishes he had not mistreated you, and that he is sincerely committed to refraining from the offensive behavior in the future. Because of this you decide to renew rather

than to end the friendship. None of this conflicts with giving up moral responsibility. The aspect of forgiveness that is undercut by the denial of moral responsibility is the willingness to disregard deserved blame or punishment. But if we were not morally responsible and did not believe we were, we would no longer need the willingness to overlook deserved blame and punishment to have good relationships.

Gratitude might well presuppose that those to whom one is grateful are morally responsible for beneficial acts, and for this reason gratitude would be threatened. At the same time, certain aspects of this attitude would not be imperilled, and I contend that these aspects can play the role gratitude as a whole has in good relationships. Gratitude involves, first of all, thankfulness towards someone who has acted beneficially. True, being thankful toward someone often involves the belief that she is praiseworthy for an action. But at the same time one can also be thankful to a toddler for some kindness, even though one does not believe she is morally responsible. Even more, one can be thankful to a friend whose beneficent actions proceed from deeply held commitments. The aspect of thankfulness could be retained even if the presupposition of praiseworthiness is rejected. Gratitude also typically involves joy occasioned by the beneficent act of another. But a rejection of moral responsibility fully harmonizes with being joyful and expressing joy when others are considerate or generous in one's behalf. Such expression of joy can bring about the sense of goodwill often brought about by gratitude, and so in this respect, abandoning moral responsibility does not produce a disadvantage.

What has traditionally been the greatest difficulty for divine determinism is the consequence that God is the cause of sin. Libertarians can hold that God does not cause sin at all (in the sense of actively bringing it about), but instead that free creatures cause it. Divine

determinists have tried to avoid God's being the cause of sin by distinguishing different ways in which God determines our decisions, but I find all such attempts that I have encountered unpersuasive. A few, such as William Mann, advocate accepting all of the consequences (given compatibilist presuppositions) of the claim that God is the cause of sin.³ Now both theistic compatibilists and hard determinists face this difficulty. But in an important respect the problem is worse for compatibilism, for this position is threatened not only with the claim that God deterministically causes sin, but that God deterministically causes our blameworthiness and our being deserving of punishment. Of these, the hard determinist need countenance only that God causes sin, and not also our blameworthiness and our deserving punishment. For the hard determinist, sin has more of the features of natural evil than usually supposed, and as a result God's causing sin is much more like God's causing natural evil as it is typically conceived.

Salvation

Libertarian free will might seem to provide an especially crucial advantage to Christian theism in the area of soteriology. For the most widespread view as to how Christ's suffering, death and resurrection save us is the standard substitutionary atonement theory, and it must be relinquished if moral responsibility is denied. On this theory, we deserve extensive punishment just by virtue of our sinful actions, and Christ, by his suffering and death, bears this punishment in our place. But if we do not deserve even blame, let alone punishment, just by virtue of our sinful behavior, then an essential component of this theory is false. One should note that this substitutionary theory has familiar problems of its own – even without concerns about free will the retributive theory of punishment is not without its difficulties,⁴ and the notion that retributive

justice allows one person's punishment to count for another's is difficult to reconcile with ordinary moral intuitions. Moreover, other theories of Christ's atonement are consistent with this view. Among them is Abelard's moral example theory, according to which Christ's obedience unto death serves as a motivating example for us to emulate. By Jürgen Moltmann's view, through Christ's suffering and death, God manifests solidarity with us in our worst sufferings, thereby identifying with us in our most difficult and painful experiences.⁵ As far as I can see, nothing in this position depends crucially on our being morally responsible. Or consider Richard Swinburne's position, according to which the perfect life of Christ is a gift that God gives us so that we can pay the compensation we owe for our wrongdoing. It is not at all clear that any feature of this view conflicts with the denial of free will and moral responsibility.⁶

Historically, perhaps the most effective reason for rejecting any sort of divine determinism, and endorsing instead libertarian free will is the unconscionability of God's damning people to hell after determining them to sin. But another response is Schleiermacher's -- to maintain the divine determinism and accept instead the doctrine of universal salvation.⁷ Indeed, the best reading of the texts of the Christian scriptures might well be on the side of universalism. Here are a number of passages that count in its favor:

1. *Romans 5:18*. ¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

2. *Romans 11:32*. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

3. *I Corinthians 15:22*. For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

4. *Colossians 1:19-20*. ¹⁹For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Universalism is an option for the Christian who is a divine determinist, and in my view it is far from obvious that on the whole the scriptural texts count against this position.⁸

The Free Will Theodicy

A potential drawback for the rejection of libertarianism is that it rules out the free will theodicy, which is often thought to be the most powerful defense we have of divine goodness in the face of evil. The free will theodicy in systematized form dates back at least to early Christianity and perhaps to Zoroastrianism, and remains the most prominent of all theodicies. On the most common version, God had the option of creating or refraining from creating libertarian significantly free beings -- beings with libertarian free will that can make choices between right and wrong. A risk incurred by creating such beings is that they might freely choose evil and the choice be unpreventable by God. Benefits include creatures having moral responsibility for their actions and being creators in their own right. Since the benefits outweigh the risks, God is morally justified in creating such significantly free beings, and he is not culpable when they choose wrongly.

But how plausible is this as a theodicy for the most horrible evils? If it isn't very plausible, perhaps not much is relinquished by accepting a view that rules it out. A familiar problem is that many of the more horrible evils would not seem to be or result from freely willed decisions. People being injured and dying as a result of earthquake, volcanic eruptions, diseases -- including mental illnesses that give rise to unfree immoral choices -- would not seem to result

from freely willed decisions, and for this reason are standardly classified as *natural* as opposed to *moral* evils. But a further objection, raised by several critics, is that even if we have free will of the libertarian sort, and many of our choices are freely willed in this libertarian sense, the consequences of those decisions are preventable by God. In general, evil consequences are preventable effects of freely willed decisions.⁹ Or, God might intervene earlier on in the process. Given the nature of libertarian free will, short of killing them or disabling their wills, God might not have been able to prevent the Nazi leadership from deciding to perpetrate genocide, but God could have nonetheless prevented or limited the genocide, by, say, by rendering the Nazi guns, trains, and gas chambers ineffective. One answer to this is Richard Swinburne's, that if God were to regularly prevent such evils in this way, then we would not fully understand the kinds of consequences our decisions could have, and this would have considerable disvalue. But, one might argue, God might have intervened earlier yet in the process, by, for example, healing the bad effects of childhood abuse and trauma. Or rather than intervening, God might have designed us so that we were not nearly as vulnerable to experiences of this sort, and, more generally, less vulnerable to the kinds of psychological problems that play a role in motivating evil decisions.

Swinburne has developed a thorough response to these sorts of objections. He argues that it is not just freely willed decision *tout court* that has the relevantly high intrinsic value, but two characteristics in addition: freely willed decision's accomplishing what the agent intended -- what he calls *efficacious* free will, and freely willed decision's adjudicating between good and evil options each of which genuinely motivate the agent -- *serious* free will, in his terminology. Swinburne contends that it is serious and efficacious free will that has the intrinsic value high enough to justify God in sometimes not preventing the decidedly evil consequences of immoral

decisions. His account is significant, for it does not avoid a proposal for the kind of value free will must possess to sustain the role in theodicy that so many believe it has. In his view, first of all, “the very fact of the agent having a free choice is a great good for the agent; and a greater good the more serious the kind of free will, even if it is incorrectly used.” Moreover, an agent “is an ultimate source in an even fuller way if the choices open to him cover the whole moral range, from the very good to the very wrong.” And indeed, “an agent who has serious and efficacious free will is in a much fuller way an ultimate source of the direction of things in the world” than one who does not.¹⁰ Furthermore, in preparation for his theodicy, Swinburne contends that:

It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them, which will at least in part compensate for those experiences. It follows from this insight that it is a blessing for a person if the possibility of his suffering makes possible the good for others of having the free choice of hurting or harming them ... and of choosing to show or not show sympathy.”¹¹

To illustrate the import of these claims for theodicy, Swinburne discusses the example of the slave trade from Africa in the eighteenth century. About this practice he writes -- in what is by now a well-known passage:

But God allowing this to occur made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not and to treat them well or ill; for ordinary white people and politicians to campaign for its abolition or not to bother, and to campaign for compensation for the victims or not to

bother; and so on. There is also the great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless, their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices, and thereby so many steps towards the formation of good or bad character.¹²

One problem for this line of thought is that it finds itself in opposition to strongly ingrained moral practice when horrible evil is at issue. First, as David Lewis points out, for us the evil-doer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration.¹³ When the slave traders come to take your children, and you are contemplating violent resistance, we do not expect you to consider the value of the slave traders' efficacious but immoral free will, which would be high indeed if value of this sort could have the role in justifying God's allowing the slave trade that Swinburne suggests it does. Moreover, if he is right, then when twenty slave traders have freely decided to try to take your children, ten times as much value of the sort he describes would be at stake as when there are only two, and there would be that much more reason not to resist. Moreover, all else being equal, there would be significantly less reason to harm in self-defense an opponent who appears to have free will than one who is known to be mentally ill and incapable of free decisions.¹⁴ None of this has a role in our ordinary moral practice.¹⁵

A further problem for the free will theodicy is occasioned by Swinburne's view that to choose freely to do what is right one must have a serious countervailing desire to refrain from doing what is right instead, strong enough that it could actually motivate a choice so to refrain.¹⁶ Swinburne thinks that this point supports the free will theodicy, since it can explain why God allows us to have desires to do evil, and, by extension, why God allows choices in accord with

those desires. But this claim rather serves to undermine the force of the free will theodicy as an explanation for many horrible evils. For we do not generally believe that the value of a free choice outweighs the disvalue of having desires to perform horribly evil actions, especially if they are strong enough to result in action. For example, the notion that it is more valuable than not for people to have a strong desire to abuse children for the reason that this gives them the opportunity to choose freely not to do so has no purchase on us. Our practice for people with desires of this sort is to provide them with therapy to diminish or eradicate such desires. We have no tendency to believe that the value of making a free decision not to abuse a child made in struggle against a desire to do so carries any weight against the proposal to provide this sort of therapy. Furthermore, were we to encounter someone with a strong desire to abuse children but who nevertheless resisted actively seeking to do so, we would not think that his condition has more value overall than one in which he never had the desire to abuse children in the first place. Moreover, I daresay that a significant proportion of people alive today – well over 90% – has neither intentionally chosen a horrible evil nor had a genuine struggle with a desire to do so – they have never, for instance, tortured, maimed, or murdered, nor seriously struggled with desires to do so. But we do not think that their lives would have been more valuable had they possessed such desires even if every struggle against them had been successful. Thus it is questionable whether God would allow such desires in order to realize the value of certain free choices. This aspect of Swinburne's theodicy may have some credibility with respect to evils that are not horrible, but much less, I think, when it comes to horrible evils. Here I would like to emphasize that if we thought free will did in fact have the proposed degree of intrinsic value, our moral practice would be decidedly different from what it is now — in ways that, given our moral

sensibilities, we would find very disturbing.

I should note that some versions of the free will theodicy do not essentially require the libertarian version of free will. For example, Eleonore Stump argues that suffering from moral and natural evil contributes to a humbling recognition of oneself as having a defective will, which in turn can motivate one to turn to God to fix the defect in the will.¹⁷ The defect in the will is that one has a bent towards evil, so that one has a diminished capacity to will what one ought to will. Now, as far as I can see, no feature of this account demands libertarian free will, nor even a notion of free will of the sort required for moral responsibility. Indeed, hard determinism can accommodate the causal process that Stump specifies. Nothing about this process, as she describes it, requires an indeterministic conception of free will, nor does it require that the agent be morally responsible, in this case praiseworthy, for turning to God on the occasion of suffering.

The Retributive Punishment Theodicy

Another traditional theodicy that potentially requires libertarian free will is that God brings about or allows evil as punishment for sin. Now no feature of hard determinism per se rules out a deterrence theory or a moral education theory of punishment, but retributivism, as it is usually conceived, would be precluded. What is lost as a result? It is implausible to think that in William Rowe's example, the five-year-old girl deserves to be punished by being raped and beaten by virtue of anything she has done.¹⁸ Does an ordinary person, never having committed a serious crime, and who is not in any other respect an extraordinary sinner, deserve to suffer from a lengthy painful and fatal disease as punishment for the wrongs he has done?¹⁹ Our judicial

system would regard punishment of this sort *for serious crimes* as monstrous. Imagine if we were to punish *murderers* by inducing such suffering – who would find that conscionable? Someone might reply that since each of us deserves an eternity of torture, *a fortiori* each of us also deserves suffering of this sort. But since it is doubtful that anyone genuinely understands why we all might deserve punishment of this degree as a matter of retributive justice alone, this line of thought does not promise a plausible theodicy. Let me emphasize that even thinking of ordinary people as deserving a long and painful disease, for example, would constitute a serious revision in our moral practice, for in that practice sympathy without reservation is the appropriate response.²⁰

Doing and Allowing

The libertarian view would appear to enjoy a considerable advantage precisely in making possible a theodicy for the consequences of freely willed evil decisions. For it need only grant that God allows these consequences, while divine determinism seems constrained to accept that God actively brings them about. When one envisions some particularly egregious past horror, it might be especially difficult to accept that God actively brought it about. I find it very difficult to reconcile myself to such particular claims. But is it any easier to reconcile oneself to the claim that God *allows* that specific horror? Suppose that you are subjected to abuse by someone who hates you. If the abuser had libertarian free will, then even though God did not actively bring about the decision to abuse you, God nevertheless allowed the consequences of this decision to occur while at the same time having the power to prevent them. In the divine determinist view, by contrast, God actively brings about these consequences. Factoring in providence, on the

libertarian view, God allows the abuse to occur in order to realize a greater good, while on the determinist view, God actively brings it about in order to realize a greater good.

One should first note that while it is often held that actively bringing about or *doing* evil is *prima facie* morally worse than merely *allowing* evil, of course it is not as if allowing evil is generally morally permissible. Rather, in comparing the libertarian and determinist theological conceptions on this issue, the important question is this. Supposing that on the libertarian position God is justified in allowing evil consequences for the sake of some greater good, would it be morally worse for God actively to bring them about for the sake of that good? The answer to this question depends at least in part on the nature of the good to be realized. In some cases God might well be justified in allowing the evil consequences, but not in actively bringing them about. By analogy, a parent might justifiably allow a child to play with matches, foreseeing that he might well incur a slight burn as a result, while it would be wrong for the parent to actively bring about that burn.²¹ But consider, for instance, the purported good of retributively justified punishment where the evil consequences in question are actively brought about by agents other than God who are not appropriate authorities for inflicting the punishment at issue. If these evils are to be justified as retributive punishment, it would actually seem *better* for God actively to bring them about than merely to allow these other agents to do so. By analogy, if Lee Harvey Oswald did in fact kill John F. Kennedy, and if Oswald did deserve the death penalty, it would have been better for an appropriate authority to administer the penalty than for that authority to allow Jack Ruby to kill him. Assuming that God is an appropriate authority for punishment, it would then be better that God actively bring about some punishment than merely allow a person who is not an appropriate authority to do so.

Consider, furthermore, the good of soul-building that John Hick discusses.²² Suppose God knew that someone's character would be significantly improved morally if he suffered in a certain way, and that God were justified in allowing the person to suffer on such grounds. Wouldn't God then also be justified in actively bringing about the suffering on those grounds? An apt analogy would seem to be that of say, Civil War surgery. Suppose the doctor knows that the patient will not survive unless he undergoes painful surgery. It is clearly not morally worse for the doctor to actually perform the surgery himself than it would be for him to allow another doctor to perform it.

Now indeed the intrinsic value of serious and efficacious free will would not be realizable if God actively caused rather than merely allowed the consequences of evil free decisions. But several key goods could be realized whether God actively brought about or merely allowed the suffering required for those goods, and for them it would appear at least as good for God to bring about the suffering as to allow it.

Skeptical Theism

What position on the problem of evil is open to the divine determinist? A non-retributive punishment theodicy is available, as is a modified form of the soul building theodicy, as well as a version of Alvin Plantinga's theodicy according to which sin and suffering are required for the greater good of the incarnation and atonement.²³ But rather than advocate a full-fledged theodicy, I prefer to side with skeptical theism, developed in recent times by Stephen Wykstra and William Alston, among others.²⁴ Skeptical theism claims that due to the limitations of our cognitive capacities, the nature of the good is or might well be beyond our understanding to such

a degree that we should not expect to understand how it is that God's governance of the universe accords with divine goodness. Various problems for skeptical theism have been raised. To my mind an especially serious one is that it might occasion further skeptical analogues and consequences that we would want to avoid. I shall argue that one main version of this threat is especially serious for possible goods that essentially involve libertarian free will, but not for certain possible goods that are independent of this sort of free will.²⁵

The version of this challenge to skeptical theism on which I want to focus has been advanced by Bruce Russell, and it claims that this view will have skeptical consequences for our moral practice.²⁶ If the theist claims that there are goods not fully understood by us that could not have been realized had God prevented various horrible evils, and that God might well be justified in allowing these evils in order to realize those goods, then there might well be situations in which we fail to prevent evils of these kinds where we do no wrong. In fact, we may on some such occasions be obligated not to prevent these evils. Or at very least, on certain occasions we might have to give serious consideration to reasons not to prevent those evils when ordinary moral practice would not give serious consideration to such reasons. Let us call this *the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality*.

Now Alston, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Michael Bergmann have replied to this objection by claiming in effect that in morally justifying our actions, we are limited to goods that we understand, while the possible goods the skeptical theist is adducing are at least to some degree beyond our understanding.²⁷ But this does not seem right; our moral justifications should not be limited to goods we understand -- as Russell in fact argues. Let me amplify Russell's contention. Consider first an analogy to the skeptical theist's situation that features only human

agents.²⁸ Fred assists doctors in a clinic that specializes, among other things, in a painful bone disease. He is careful to note what the doctors do to help the patients. Suppose that Fred has excellent reason to trust the doctors as thoroughly competent. The clinic stocks morphine as a pain killer, and Fred knows that if morphine were administered to the bone disease patients, their acute pain would be relieved. But the doctors never, in his experience, have given morphine to patients suffering from this disease, even though they, in his experience, have given it to other patients in the clinic. Fred has no inkling why they do not administer the morphine to the bone disease patients. However, for all he knows, they might have given it to such patients in certain circumstances in the past, although he has no reasonable guess as to frequency, and he has no idea of what these circumstances might be. One day, due to a hurricane, all the doctors are away from the clinic, but Fred is there. A patient is suffering from the bone disease, and Fred has the opportunity to administer morphine. It would seem that he has some significant moral reason not to do so.

Now consider the skeptical theist's analogous situation. Sue, a doctor, knows that there have been thousands of cases of people suffering horribly from disease X. She is a skeptical theist who believes that God is justified for the sake of goods beyond her ken in not preventing these thousands of cases of suffering (she trusts God in a way analogous to the way in which Fred trusts the bone specialists). Suppose that her belief in God is rational, and also that her belief regarding the God-justifying goods is rational. In addition, for all she knows, God in the past might have prevented people from suffering from this disease under certain circumstances, although she has no reasonable guess as to how often God might have done this, and he has no idea of what these circumstances might be. Now a drug that cures disease X has just been

developed, and Sue is deciding whether to administer it. Sue's situation seems similar to Fred's: it would seem that insofar as Sue is rational in believing that God has significant moral reason to allow thousands of people to suffer from disease X, she has significant moral reason not to administer the drug that cures disease X – even if in the last analysis she should administer the drug because the reasons she has to heal the sick and to relieve suffering are stronger.²⁹

Stump raises an objection of this sort as a possible rejoinder to her “fixing the will” theodicy. She says “someone might object ... that this solution to the problem of evil prohibits us from any attempt to relieve human suffering and in fact suggests that we ought to promote it, as the means to man's salvation.” In reply, she argues that

Because God can use suffering to cure an evil will, it does not follow that we can do so also. God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot... Furthermore, God as parent creator has a right to, and a responsibility for, painful correction of his creatures, which we as sibling creatures do not have. Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good to any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can. At any rate, the attempt to eliminate suffering is likely to be beneficial to our characters, and passivity in the face of others' suffering will have no such good effects.³⁰

The analogy between Fred and Sue casts some doubt on some of these contentions. In Stump's view, the evil will can be cured through both moral and natural evil. To the extent that we are

capable of bringing about moral evil and preventing natural evil, it would seem that we can indeed help to bring about the suffering that would cure the will. Moreover, our duty not to produce but rather to prevent suffering is in a sense not absolute; a doctor might actually be obligated actively to bring about suffering if it is required for the sake of a great enough medical good. And even if we do not know with any high degree of probability whether suffering is likely to be beneficial, this fact would not all by itself remove the obligation to take this consideration seriously in moral deliberation. Still, as we shall now see, in a skeptical theist account, the good Stump adduces has an advantage over those that require libertarian free will.

There is a continuum of possible God-justifying goods that potentially serve the aims of skeptical theism, ranging from goods of which we haven't the least knowledge, through those of which we have some but nevertheless incomplete knowledge. As I have argued, skeptical theism does suggest a general threat to ordinary moral practice. However, of those goods of which we have some inkling, some would yield a more substantial threat than others. Consider the skeptical theist's claim that the following hypothesis is true for all we know: The intrinsic value of serious and efficacious free will justifies God in allowing certain horrible evils — whose point we cannot otherwise see. Weight given to this hypothesis would pose a clear and immediate threat to our moral practice. For we would have reasonable beliefs as to where this intrinsic value is to be found and how to secure it, and this would then give rise to certain prima facie obligations. For example, we could have a reasonable belief as to whether a slave trader was freely willing his aims, and we would have a prima facie obligation to take the intrinsic value of his serious and efficacious free will into consideration in deciding what to do by way of defense against him. But again, as Lewis remarks, the value of free will is now a weightless

consideration for us, and thus we would face a disruptive effect on our moral practice.

Consider, in addition, the skeptical theist's claim that the following hypothesis is true for all we know: The value of retributive punishment justifies God in allowing certain horrible evils, whose point we cannot otherwise see. Suppose a skeptical theist were to suggest the hypothesis that ordinary people suffer from painful diseases as retribution for sinful inner lives.³¹ It might well be that we are in no epistemic condition to tell whether any ordinary person's inner life merits suffering of this kind. But weight given to this hypothesis would give rise to reasons to abandon the unreserved sympathy we have for ordinary people who suffer from painful diseases. This, again, would constitute a clear and immediate threat to our moral practice.

But there are skeptical theist hypotheses regarding other goods of which we have some inkling, which would not yield such a clear and immediate threat, and the reasons are epistemic. Stump's proposal is a case in point. As she herself points out, it would never be reasonably clear to us when suffering would have the beneficial effect of motivating the agent to turn to God, nor how much would be required to have this effect. So in this case the undermining threat to our moral practice would not be clear and immediate. The good of our identifying with God in suffering that Marilyn Adams discusses is like this as well. We would be completely in the dark, I would think, whether someone would be able to re-envision her suffering as point of identification with God.³² The same is true for the good of the incarnation and atonement that Plantinga adduces. Suppose we believed that God might well allow evils as a requirement for the atonement in particular, the purpose of which is to reconcile the world to God. We would have very limited knowledge as to where or to what degree such evils would be required. So on the assumption that this hypothesis is true, the threat of our moral practice being undermined is

not clear and immediate. It must be acknowledged that even if for these sorts of goods the threat to moral practice is not clear and immediate, the prospect of realizing these goods might still occasion some loss of resolve to prevent suffering.³³ However, here a consideration raised by Swinburne, William Alston and Steve Layman is pertinent, that the difference in powers and in authority between God and us, or facts about God's relation to us that derive from these differences, might have significant consequences for the justification of allowing or bringing about suffering.³⁴ For example, given God's epistemic capacities relative to ours, there are goods for the sake of which God's allowing or bringing about evil might well be justified while our doing the same would not. Accordingly, I would draw the following tentative conclusion: skeptical theism that adduces goods essentially involving libertarian free will gives rise to an especially serious version of the challenge from skeptical consequences for morality, while this is not the case for several prominent examples of goods that do not essentially involve free will.

Divine Providence

Does divine determinism undermine the comfort and the meaning in life that a belief in divine providence potentially provides? The understanding that everything that happens is causally determined by God in accord with a divine plan for the world could indeed be a comfort to us. A problem one might raise for this conception is that any individual person would be participating in that plan without freely willing that participation -- where freely willing participation includes not only choosing it without being determined to do so, but also adequately understanding in advance what one is participating in. But there is reason to hold that believing

one has a role in a great divine plan, even if one does not freely will one's participation, could provide comfort in one's suffering and a sense of meaning for one's life. It is well known that during the early years of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's leading purpose was to preserve the Union, and not to end slavery.³⁵ But later he began to waver on this issue, and, what is more, to have a sense that God had a purpose for the war that he, Lincoln, did not initially have. A few years into the war he wrote:

I am almost ready to say this is probably true — that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, he could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun, He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.³⁶

And then in 1864 we find Lincoln saying:

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years's struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man, devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.³⁷

One's sense is that Lincoln's conception of the Civil War as a key component in God's plan to end slavery in the United States reconciled Lincoln to the evils of that struggle and gave it immense significance for him, despite the fact that he did not initially choose to fight the war for

the reasons he came to believe God had for ordaining it, and thus even though at first he did not freely participate in the divine plan as he later conceived it.

But what about the suffering that God's plan might involve -- suffering that given divine determinism, none of us endorse with free will? Would one's conviction that everything that happens is determined in accord with that plan nevertheless provide adequate comfort in suffering? According to the Stoic view, God determines everything that happens in accord with the good of the whole universe, and the nature of this good is incompletely understood on our part.³⁸ There is an all-encompassing divine plan, neither whose nature nor means of realization we understand very well if at all, but yet we can know that everything that happens is determined by God with an aim to the realization of that plan. One can reconcile oneself to the suffering in one's life by abandoning one's merely personal concerns -- that is, one's ordinary human aspirations for personal survival, happiness, and success -- by identifying with these divine aims. Descartes, in a letter to Chanut, eloquently expresses the Stoic idea (that is, if we take his reference to free will to be compatibilist). In this excerpt, he sets out "the path one ought to follow to arrive at the love of God:"

But if... we heed the infinity of his power, through which he has created so many things, of which we are the least part; the extension of his providence that makes him see in one thought alone everything that has been, is, shall be, and could be; the infallibility of his decrees which, although they do not disturb our free will, nevertheless cannot in any fashion be changed; and finally, if, on the one hand, we heed our insignificance, and if, on the other hand, we heed the grandeur of all created things, by noting the manner in which they depend on God and by considering them in a fashion that has a relationship to his

omnipotence... meditation upon all this so abundantly fills the man who hears it with such extreme joy that, realizing he would have to be abusive and ungrateful toward God to wish to occupy God's place, he thinks himself as already having lived sufficiently because God has given him the grace to reach such knowledge, and willingly and entirely joining himself to God, he loves God so perfectly that he desires nothing more in the world than that God's will be done. That is the reason he no longer fears either death, or pains, or disgraces, because he knows that nothing can happen to him save what God shall have decreed; and he so loves this divine decree, esteems it so just and so necessary, knows he ought so entirely to depend upon it, that even when he awaits death or some other evil, if *per impossibile* he could change that decree, he would not wish to do so. But if he does not refuse evils or afflictions, because they come to him from divine providence, he refuses still less all the goods or licit pleasures one can enjoy in this life, because they too issue from that providence; and accepting them with joy, without having any fear of evils, his love renders him perfectly happy. (to Chanut, 1 February, 1647, AT IV 608-9).³⁹

In Descartes's understanding, if one's love for God were of the right sort, one's identification with the aims of God would be so thorough that even if one could, one would not refuse one's own death or other personal suffering, since one understands them as proceeding from the decree of God.

In the Stoic conception, we should align ourselves with the divine perspective so that we will enjoy equanimity no matter what happens, even if the divine plan conflicts with the good as conceived from one's personal point of view. This vision seems a little glassy-eyed; one might

doubt whether such a reason is sufficient to motivate many of us. As Thomas Nagel remarks, normally "one is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of *coq au vin*."⁴⁰ To consider an extreme case, if one believed in divine determinism and in eternal damnation then one's comfort and sense of meaning might well be compromised, certainly in the case of the person who was convinced that he himself was eternally damned, but even for the believer who feels assured of his salvation. For then God's care for the universe would allow for God's deterministically causing the lives of certain persons to be endlessly miserable. The comfort that might result from believing that everything that happens is determined by a being with this sort of character would not, in my estimation, be unequivocal.

However, what if the point of the divine plan were to reconcile everything -- including every person -- to God. The Christian scriptures state that this will happen through the incarnation and atonement of Christ. So what if --

Ephesians 1: 8-10: [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth?

And what if for each of us:

Romans 8:18: Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us?

Then God would not determine any of us to a life of endless misery. Moreover, what if, as Marilyn Adams suggests, God is in the end good to every person by insuring each a life in which

all of the suffering experienced contributes to a greater good within that very life?⁴¹ Then it might even be, as Plantinga states it, that God would know that if I were able to make the decision whether to accept the suffering, and knew enough about the divine plan, and had the right affections, then I myself would accept the suffering.⁴² Then each of us would say, by analogy with Lincoln on the Civil War, that the suffering was worth the result even if we did not in fact freely endorse either the suffering or the result.

Conclusion

So it may be that traditional theistic religion does not require libertarian free will. It might be that Molinism is theologically preferable, but I believe that there is a deterministic perspective that is not decidedly worse. At least, given our limited cognitive capacities and our lack of ability to understand divine purposes, we should not be confident in judging that the deterministic perspective is decidedly worse. It is indeed difficult for us to believe that God brings about the horrors of this world, but it is perhaps no less difficult to believe that God merely allows them, especially if, as I have argued, it is implausible that the goods that essentially involve free will can justify God's allowing these evils. But if we focused instead on the good that the traditional theistic religions view as the goal of history, then, despite initial appearances, a deterministic conception of the plan for realizing that good might well turn out to be as attractive as a Molinist alternative.⁴³

NOTES

1. Luis de Molina, *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione Concordia* (1595); tr (of Part IV) A.J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). For an excellent exposition and defense of Molina's position, see Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
2. Perhaps Friedrich Schleiermacher had hard determinist views, at least early in his career. I was made aware of this possibility by Andrew Dole's "Schleiermacher's Early Essay on Freedom" a paper he presented at a conference of the Society for Christian Philosophers in Bloomington, Indiana, in September 2002. The manuscript version of Schleiermacher's essay has no title. It was originally published in excerpted form in Wilhelm Dilthey's *Leben Schleiermachers* under the title 'Über die Frieheit des Menschen'. In the *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1983) it appears as 'Über die Frieheit' (KGA I.1, 1984, pp. 217-357), which has been translated into English as *On Freedom* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992),
3. William Mann, "God's Freedom, Human Freedom, and God's Responsibility for Sin," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 182-210.
4. For my view on retributivism, see my *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 159-61. In this book I develop my more general perspective on free will and moral responsibility.
5. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1974).
6. Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. Mackintosh and Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1928), pp. 550-1.
8. See Keith De Rose's "Universalism and the Bible," on his website, <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~kd47>.
9. Steven Boër, "The Irrelevance of the Free Will Defense," *Analysis* (1975), pp. 110-12; J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955), pp. 200-12.
10. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 82-9.
11. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, p. 103.
12. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, p. 245.
13. David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake," *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993), pp. 149-72, at p. 155.
14. Mark Moyer made this point in conversation.
15. When this paper was presented at Yale University, Swinburne argued that only God has the authority to allow people to suffer intensely in order to secure the intrinsic value of free will, drawing on the analogy of parents and children. However, there is at least no epistemic problem here for us. There are epistemic reasons that non-doctors should refrain from performing painful operations on patients in order to secure medical goods. Non-doctors usually don't know enough to be successful at realizing medical goods by such means. But there is no analogous problem for allowing or causing

people to suffer for the sake of securing the intrinsic value of serious and efficacious free will, for all adult human beings can typically understand well enough where that value is to be had, and how to secure it.

616. Swinburne actually makes a stronger claim than this, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 85-6.

717. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 392-418.

818. William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 262-85.

919. For an opposing perspective, see William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), pp. 27-67; reprinted in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 97-125, section V.

020. This general issue is raised in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, which begins as follows:

John 9:1-3. As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

121. Thanks to Andrew Chignell for this point and example.

22. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1978).

323. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism or *O Felix Culpa*," ms.

424. See, for example, Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Human Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73-94, and "Rowe's Nosecum Arguments from Evil," *The Evidential Argument from Evil* pp. 126-150; also William Alston's "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition." These skeptical theist accounts were occasioned by William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335-41. Immanuel Kant developed a version of this strategy in his late essay "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," of which an English translation appears in *Kant: Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see my "Kant on God, Evil, and Teleology," *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), pp. 508-33.

525. I discuss skeptical theism in more detail in "The Problem of Evil," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William E. Mann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 148-70, at pp. 159-6.

626. Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 193-205, at pp. 197-8.

727. Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Nous* 2000, Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument From Inscrutable Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 286-310, at pp. 292-3.

828. I present an example of this sort in “The Problem of Evil,” op. cit., pp. 164-5.

929. Thanks to David Christensen, Michael Bergmann, and Daniel Howard-Snyder for discussions that helped formulate this example and that influenced what follows.

030. Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” pp. 412-3.

131. See William Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” Section V.

232. Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

33. Thanks to Andrew Dole for prompting this clarification.

434. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, p. 243; the comment by Steve Layman is in Daniel Howard-Snyder’s “The Argument from Inscrutable Evil,” p. 292; William Alston, “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 311-32, at p. 321.

535. Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some of the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because it helps to save the Union.” (In Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Towards None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 340.)

636. Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Towards None*, p. 343.

737. Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Towards None*, p. 416. Lincoln wrote in the Second Inaugural Address of 1865:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

838. I discuss these issues in "Stoic Psychotherapy in Descartes and Spinoza," *Faith and Philosophy* 11, (1994), pp. 592-625.

939. (AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-76.) The translation is from John J. Blom, *Descartes, His Moral Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: NYU Press, 1978), pp. 206-7.

040. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 16.

141. Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, p. 55.

242. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism or *O Felix Culpa*," ms.

343. This paper benefitted from questions and comments at the conference at Yale University at which it was first presented, and from discussions at the University of San Francisco and at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Thanks in addition to Michael Bergmann, David Christensen, Mark Moyer, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Andrew Chignell and Andrew Dole for helpful commentary.