

# God, Evil, and Human Learning

A Critique and Revision of the  
Free Will Defense in Theodicy

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“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image and likeness’...”  
(Genesis 1:26)

The task and joy of life lies in learning to become what we are meant to be.

# Chapter 2

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## The Central Importance of the Free Will Defense

The so-called free will defense is of central importance to any theodicy because the other main arguments, which have been put forward, are quite weak in themselves: that is, unless they are made an integral component within the free will defense.

No Christian theodicy denies the reality of many evils in the world.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging these evils, the most general strategy of Christian theodicy has been to try to show that God permits these evils because it is logically impossible for him to achieve his great goal, the Kingdom of God, without granting free will to humans; and, having granted them free will, it is logically impossible for Him to prevent them from doing what is in itself evil and also productive of further evils.

Apart from the free will defense, the two other main arguments that have been put forward do not even come close to showing that there is a necessary connection between God's great goal and the evils of the world. If one cannot show there is such a necessary connection, then the evils of the world are gratuitous. By a gratuitous evil I mean one that is either not necessary or that is avoidable, in connection with God's attainment of his great goal. If God permits, or causes, a single evil that is gratuitous, it would seem to follow that He is, just to that extent, less than perfectly good, and, therefore, not the God proclaimed by the Christian faith.

As we shall see, it is not clear that even the traditional free will defense is able to show that there are no gratuitous evils. But it does purport to do this, and it has seemed to many that it has succeeded in doing so.

## THE TRADITIONAL FREE WILL DEFENSE

In the most general sense the free will defense involves the claim that the evils of the world are not due to a defect in God's creation, or a lack of benevolence on his part, but rather to the misuse of free will on the part of his creatures. There have been many variations on this theme by many writers. In order to describe and assess what I call the traditional free will defense, without producing a long historical treatise, I propose to focus on the version articulated by one theologian, Aurelius Augustine. This, I contend, is much less arbitrary than it might seem, because Augustine's thought dominated the western tradition to an extraordinary degree. I shall give a summary of his views in my own words, supplemented by a number of quotes from his works.

### A SUMMARY OF AUGUSTINE'S THEODICY

God is the sole creator of the world, which is an expression of his abundant and overflowing love. Since God is perfect in goodness, wisdom, and power, the world He creates is perfect. The perfection of the world is not, however, identical with God's own perfection, for that would be, *per impossibile*, to create a second God. The created world is made up of many things in a harmonious order of graded perfections, each thing exhibiting its peculiar good and contributing to a totality, which as a whole is perfect. Each created thing also differs from God in a crucial respect, His goodness is immutable, whereas the goodness of all created beings is mutable. Among the most excellent of created beings are angels and humans, and their excellence consists especially in their rational capacities and their free will. Free will is essential so that their virtues may properly be called their own, and so that they may freely choose to love God and one another. The latter is genuine only if chosen by free will. The choice of love is the greatest good for these created beings, for it is in loving that they attain the image of God in and for which they were created<sup>2</sup> and also because love, along with justice, is the chief constituent of God's great goal, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a society of rational beings who freely love God and one another and who live together in justice. But since these creatures are mutable, it is possible for them to turn their love not to God but to lesser things, or to themselves. There is nothing in the created world that is essentially evil; yet turning towards a lesser good on the part of a rational creature constitutes an evil will. When this is done, the perfect harmony of creation is disrupted

and corrupted. For some reason<sup>3</sup> some of the angels turned away from God, and this was the first origin of evil in the world.

The cause of evil is the defection of the will of a being who is mutably good from the Good that is immutable. This happened first in the case of the angels and, afterwards, that of man.<sup>4</sup>

This sin, turning away from God, first by Satan and then by Adam and Eve, is the source of all evil in the world. For this sin, as we shall see, is the root of all subsequent sin. "All that we call evil is either sin or the punishment for sin."<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, we need an explanation of why an omnipotent and perfectly good God would create a world with the potentiality for such great evil, all the while foreseeing that these evils would in fact be realized. Augustine's theodicy was so influential in part because he was the first major theologian to provide an answer to this question in the context of an absolutely all-embracing world history in which God's great plan for the world constitutes the leit motif.

When we see the total picture, we understand, so Augustine believed, that the creation of beings with free will, even though aware they would misuse their free will and cause the rise of such great evils, is not only justified but is an expression of the perfect benevolence of God. For God's great goal is the realization of the Kingdom of God, a good so great that it more than compensates for all evil; and, given that goal, the creation of angels and humans with free will was necessary.

Having created beings with free will, God permits evil; for, having created beings with a will that is free, God can not logically prevent them from choosing what is evil. Of course, God, being Himself free and omnipotent, and already perfect, without any addition of a created world, and foreseeing the evils which would arise in the world he planned, could have refrained from creating any world at all. Then there would have been no evil at all. Why, given the grievous evils he knew would arise, did not God refrain from creating this world?

Under these conditions, does not His creation indicate some lack of goodness on God's part? No! For God also planned and foreknew that out of all this evil an even greater good would arise.

By his omniscience, God could foresee two future realities: how bad man whom God had created good was to become, and how much good God was to make out of this very evil.<sup>6</sup>

For God never would have created any, I do not say angel, but even man, whose future wickedness he foreknew, unless he had equally known to what uses in behalf of the good he could turn them, thus embellishing the course of the ages, as it were an exquisite poem set off with antitheses.<sup>7</sup>

The greater good is manifest in two ways: through the grace by which he redeems those whom he has elected to save; and by the justice he exhibits in punishing those who remain in sin.

According to Augustine, the eternal punishment of the reprobate contributes not only to the psychological bliss of the redeemed but to the ontological perfection of the universe!

Since there is happiness for those who do not sin, the universe is perfect; and it is no less perfect because there is misery for sinners. . . . The penalty of sin corrects the dishonor of sin.<sup>8</sup>

I turn now to a consideration of the other two main arguments that have characterized traditional Christian theodicies: the argument which depends upon the contrast theory, and an eschatological argument.

## THE CONTRAST THEORY

In some of Augustine's works, the so-called contrast theory is articulated as an independent argument, even though it is implicit in his free will defense. After having developed the concept of free will, I shall indicate how and why elements of the contrast theory are necessary parts of an adequate free will defense.

The contrast theory argues that in order for God to attain his great goal it was necessary for him to create a world in which contrasts between good and evil would arise. What sort of contrast is implied?

Let us quickly set aside as unacceptable (in any Christian context) the notion that there can be no good without contrasting evils. The language used by some writers might seem to suggest this.<sup>9</sup> However, Christian tradition has insisted that even before anything else existed, God alone existed and that he was and is perfectly good.

Sometimes the contrast theory is articulated with reference to states of human awareness or appreciation. The general notion is that we would not be aware of the good or appreciate it if there were no contrasting evils. For example, if there were no dangers of any kind, we would not be aware of any actions as being courageous, nor would we have any reason for developing

a concept of courage. If there were no instances of poverty or hunger we would not think of any actions as being generous.

I have two objections to this line of reasoning. First, this sort of contrast does not support the argument that God, in order to attain his great goal, had to create a world with contrasting goods and evils. If the world were such that we never had any reason to formulate a concept of courage, for example, this would seem to indicate how perfectly good such a world would be! Second, it is simply not the case that humans could not be aware of and appreciate the most important virtues, from a Christian standpoint, in the absence of contrasting evils. Perhaps there is, somewhere, a person who has only had contact with other persons who are always generous and loving. Such a person would, I suggest, be fully conscious of generosity and love, and fully appreciative of it, even if he or she had never formulated the concepts of generosity or love. If in fact there is no such person, there is no reason why the omnipotent God might not have made such to exist, or indeed to be the universal situation for humans.

God could have made humans so that everyone would be musicians and all enormously enjoy fine music. Some might be able to produce or perform only mediocre music, while others might have the genius of a Mozart or a Yo Yo Ma. The music of the latter would bring exquisite joy even in the absence of very poor and annoying counterexamples.

It is probably true that in the world as it is, and with humans constituted as they are, we appreciate good more keenly after experiencing contrasting evil. But in the context of mainline Christian tradition, this argument lacks cogency because there is no good reason why an omnipotent God should not have constituted the world and humans differently.

There is, however, another form of the contrast theory, which is more convincing: namely, in terms of the Christian perspective, some of the very highest goods are essentially and necessarily linked to opposing evils. In the interest of brevity I shall articulate this point with reference to only one such highest good. Over and over again, Christian thinkers have insisted that love is the highest good.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, love is regarded as the most essential attribute of God's own being and nature; and it is the power that motivated the creation of the world; and it is the supreme virtue which is to adorn the Kingdom of God. Clearly, too, from the Christian perspective, the very highest form and expression of love is the forgiving love of Jesus Christ.

But there could be no forgiving love if there were nothing to forgive. Love is at its greatest, according to this view, when at great cost it reaches out to those who are living in sin, alienated from God. It should come as no surprise that Christians have thought in terms of this contrast, for they

have held that the most complete and perfect revelation of God's nature and will is to be found in Jesus the Christ, and most strikingly in his sacrificial death to redeem sinners. This contrast is celebrated in a striking passage in the Roman Catholic mass for the evening before Easter, in words frequently, but questionably, attributed to Augustine: "O most happy fault [or sin], which made possible and necessary such and so great a redeemer."<sup>11</sup>

We must concede that this claim is valid within the context of a Christian theology framed to reconcile faith in God with the evils in the world as it actually is. From the Christian point of view, this claim is valid in its contention that the very highest good could not exist in this world in the absence of opposing evil. But does this version of the contrast theory do the job for theodicy which has been claimed for it?

We might note that this argument, even if valid, does not help meet the challenge presented by natural evils. But, apart from that, two objections occur to me: (1) the cost is too great, especially since (2) the same great good could be achieved in a world which includes things that need to be forgiven, but in a world in which these are fewer and less grievous than those which obtain in the actual world.

1. The cost is too great. There is, according to the Christian faith, to be an eventual triumph of good over evil. There is to be the experience of and joyful appreciation of the peace, justice, and love of the Kingdom of God. Here, we must remind ourselves that most of the traditional theologians, like Augustine, thought that the vast majority of humankind would experience not this bliss but rather unspeakable suffering. *When we consider the vast extent and enormity of the evils which exist in this actual world, it is reasonable to ask whether the eventual victory for an exclusive few is worth the cost.*

The plausibility of the traditional free will defense clearly depends, among other things, upon certain basic value judgments. The claim is made that God has permitted (or caused) evil to exist in order that from it he might bring about a greater good. Is that good good enough to compensate for all of the evils of our actual world? I shall discuss the nature of basic value judgments, and what is required to justify them (in chapter 7), where I shall present my revised free will defense.

2. *The great goal could be achieved in a world which contains fewer and less grievous evils. It seems to me that, if we retain the traditional concept of divine omnipotence, this conclusion is inevitable.*

After developing a more adequate concept of free will than generally found in the tradition, as in chapter 6, we will see that some natural and

moral evils are necessary if humans are to be able to learn the capacities of free will. Of course, some are necessary in the *O Felix Culpa* scheme of things, but, given divine omnipotence, I see no reason why there need be so many and such horrible evils as exist in our world. I see nothing illogical in the notion that the world and humanity might have been constituted by an omnipotent God in such a way that there were some evils in the world, but of a milder sort, and that humans might have been so made as to be much more inclined to learn from their experience of those evils to become far more helpful and loving towards one another than humans in fact are in our world.

If God is omnipotent, as that has been understood traditionally, he could have arranged a world in which there are indeed actual evils, but not so many of them and not such virulent ones. Actual evils are necessary, according to the view now under discussion, so that persons might themselves freely learn to choose what is right and so that they would come to understand and appreciate the virtues of the Kingdom of God. But surely one could learn to distinguish between good and evil, and to appreciate the good, through some rather limited number of experiences. Even if the number were rather large, it would be better than the situation in our actual world, where the evils seem never to end, but perhaps even to multiply. In any case, the evils of the world seem to be out of control. And that is the point: God could, if omnipotent, keep evils under control yet permit sufficient evil for persons to learn to freely embrace the good—yes, even to learn through struggle and suffering, but not to such an extent as in the actual world.

There is a significant strand in the Christian tradition that suggests a possible way to reply to my objections. It has to do with a basic value judgment, which is implicit in much that Christians are won't to say about the evils of this world. What I think of as a super heroic version of the Christian life would look with scorn upon what I have suggested. A puny, untested, and weak kind of life, they would conclude, wholly unworthy of those who are supposed to be disciples of Christ, whose struggle and sacrifice overcame the power of Satan. No! To become worthy of citizenship in the Kingdom of God, a saint must endure the greatest battles imaginable against the powers of evil, that his or her virtues may be tested and tempered.

The Christian New Testament often pictures the struggles of Jesus Christ, and his disciples along the lines of a great literary tragedy. The ultimate victory of the hero is incomparably great because he battles with and overcomes the greatest powers of evil. Thus, Christ must win the victory not only over his human opponents but also against those principalities and powers against which his disciples must now contend (i.e. "against the

principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”). Against these evils we must “take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”<sup>12</sup>

One might take the line that the true and proper greatness of the great goal is attainable only through a terrible and costly struggle against evil, one in which the hero (saint) must endure the greatest suffering possible, suffering not confined by divine fiat and overcome only by the valor of the hero. This is to push the contrast theory to its highest pitch.

In the great classical tragedies and even in the most banal modern TV thriller, the victory of the good guy(s) over the forces of evil is enhanced, when the bad guy(s) are portrayed in the most demonic and evil manner possible.

Is it legitimate to transfer this sort of aesthetic judgment to the realm of moral values? Or, indeed, does not the value of the aesthetic victory over evil derive from our basic moral value judgments?

It seems to me to strain our credulity to a considerable degree, but not to be downright irrational, to argue that the incomparable nature of the good which the Christian faith celebrates can be attained only by victory over incomparable evils, and, moreover, that we humans can appreciate the greatness of the value only when we see it in the context of that great struggle. Nevertheless, this whole line of defense is rendered dubious, in my view, by the enormous amount and virulence of the evils of this world, and by the fact that so relatively few experience the victory and so many experience only defeat and misery.

Clearly this super heroic view depends, as I have said, upon a basic value judgment. That such judgments are not clearly demonstrable by reason as correct, or as incorrect, is discussed in chapter 7.

## AN ESCHATOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Another argument often put forward might be called the eschatological argument. This argument is usually tacked on to the free will defense. It goes like this. God permits evils in this world, because his great goal, the Kingdom of God, requires that humans have free will; and, having granted free will, God necessarily also allows its misuse, otherwise the will would not be truly free; and it is from this misuse of free will that evils arise. But ultimately all of the evils of this world will be more than balanced by an incommensurable good, for in the Kingdom of God all persons will freely

love one another and God, and will live in perfect justice, enjoying moreover the joy of the presence of God.

We may note in passing that this argument seems to assume that the contrast theory, as presented above, is inadequate or weak. It assumes, namely, that without some radical correction in the world to come, the balance of good and evil, as we know it in this world, seems to count against the goodness and justice of God.

Clearly this eschatological argument has no place in a rational theodicy, which seeks to justify the ways of God to man through arguments based upon reason and evidence. It is, indeed, at home in a fideist context, with those who argue that a rational theodicy is presumptuous and that we must rely upon faith alone. For the belief that there will be a more than compensating good in the Kingdom of God is clearly based upon faith, which in turn rests upon the authority of the Bible.

Even if we accept the notion that there will be such a glorious ultimate outcome, we must ask whether the great sufferings of so many in this world are necessary. As noted earlier (see p. 7), it is not sufficient to show that evils are more than compensated for by greater goods; one must also show that there are no gratuitous evils. The eschatological argument, even when supplemented by the traditional free will defense, does not provide an adequate answer to this problem.

So, given the focus of this work, I should perhaps give this argument extremely short shrift. The eschatological argument, however, especially in the way in which it has been often elaborated in the tradition, gives rise to several grave difficulties for those who are trying to work out a rational theodicy.

One difficulty arises for all traditional free will defenders: namely, if God will ultimately bring about a good so great as to compensate for all of the evils of the world, why does he not arrange for all to participate in this good? The traditional answer is that this would not be just for there are those who deserve to be punished by the torments of hell. It is necessary here to note that there are two variations of the traditional answer: one is found in what I identify (for simplicity) as the augustinian/calvinistic variation and the other as the thomistic variation. Neither variant is convincing.

It would seem that God, if wholly loving and good, would save from damnation all he could save. Given the augustinian and calvinistic systems, it would seem he certainly could save all. All are born in sin and naturally so corrupted that they deserve the punishment of hell. God gratuitously redeems some by his unmerited grace. Since there is no condition in the sinner that is a necessary condition for election to salvation by God, and

since it is wholly arbitrary so far as any deserving is concerned, why could not (and would not) a loving God extend this saving grace to all? There is no good answer to this question in the system under discussion. Such theologians say it is blasphemous to pry into the judgments of God, but this of course is just another expression of the fideist attack upon all theodicy. It is also sometimes said (without benefit of prying?) that God allows some to be condemned in order to add to the total perfection of the universe (see p. 10 above for Augustine's statement on this). That this would add to the perfection of the universe seems not only doubtful but perverse!

If one takes the thomistic stance, there seems to be a somewhat more reasonable solution to the problem under discussion. All are not saved, because some are not worthy. Some are justly condemned because their sins are a result of their own freely chosen evil actions. We are not just born into total depravity, as with the other line of thought. We have sufficient power of free will to choose the good. True, we need the aid of divine grace, but it is freely offered to all, and we can choose to accept it. So, if we remain in sin, it is our own fault, and we are worthy of damnation. The problem with this is that given the thomistic and the generally traditional notion of God's omnipotence, there is no reason why God could not and should not have constituted human beings to be less prone to choose what is evil; or that he should not pour out his redeeming grace upon all in such abundance as to persuade all to freely accept it.

The traditional notion that humans are born totally depraved (Augustine/Calvin) or so morally weakened that they often choose what is wrong (Aquinas), holds that this moral depravity, or weakness, is a consequence of the sin of Adam (and Eve). The ideas that (1) Adam and Eve committed a sin so heinous as to deserve all of the punishment brought upon them and their descendents, and (2) that all subsequent humans inherit the depravity and therefore justly deserve the punishment—these ideas are essential to the free will defense as developed in western Christianity. The notion that Adam and Eve committed a crime worthy of such dire punishment cannot be sustained. For full culpability presumes free will, and, as depicted in the tradition, they lacked the conditions necessary for the development of free will (see p. 17).

Moreover, the notion that their sin and punishment can properly be inherited by subsequent humans cannot be sustained. Here I summarize the cogent critique articulated by Soren Kierkegaard. The traditional view of Adam, says Kierkegaard, places him "fantastically outside the human race."<sup>13</sup> He is the only one who does not become a sinner by inheriting the original sin. He begins his life in innocence and makes the transition to

sinfulness by his own free choice. Subsequent humans, on the other hand, begin their lives as sinners and unlike Adam, they possess no free will unless and until redeemed by the grace of God in Christ. In view of the enormous importance given to sin and to free will, it is doubtful that prelapsarian Adam and postlapsarian humans are of the same species. This indicates that the notion of the solidarity of the human race, as determined by Adam, is seriously flawed. The notion that humans subsequent to Adam properly inherit his sin is also without warrant.

Consequently, every attempt to explain Adam's significance for the race as *caput generis humani naturale, seminale, foedrale* (head of the human race by nature, by generation and by covenant), to recall the expression of dogmatics, confuses everything. He is not essentially different from the race, for in that case there is no race at all; he *is* not the race, for in that case also there would be no race.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of free will developed in chapter 6 should also make it clear that free will is not some sort of faculty that can just be given to a person, even by God. It is rather a complex set of abilities, which are learned as one's rational capacities mature and in the context of experience in dealing with various actual goods and evils, and their consequences. One's free will is not truly free unless it is autonomous; and if it is not, then one cannot be held responsible, certainly not fully responsible so as to warrant the dire consequences meted out to Adam and Eve and all their progeny.

Kierkegaard also points out that the traditional description of Adam not only places him fantastically outside the human race, but also implies that Adam was innocent in such a way that he could not be held fully responsible for his actions.

When it is stated in *Genesis* that God said to Adam, "Only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat," it follows as a matter of course that Adam has not understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit?<sup>15</sup>

In summary: the other two main arguments, other than the free will defense, which have been put forward in traditional theodicies, suffer serious flaws. The contrast theory cannot stand on its own but makes a contribution when properly included in an adequate formulation of the free will defense. The eschatological argument does not properly belong in a theodicy at all, and moreover, in its traditional form, raises insurmountable problems.

Therefore, it is all the more unfortunate, that the free will defense in its traditional form also has serious flaws. The most serious of these flaws arise from the fact that the theologians who developed it worked with an inadequate concept of free will itself. In chapter 6, I develop a more adequate concept of free will and indicate how, in its light, the traditional free will defense is unacceptable. Then I move on to a reformulation of the free will defense (chapter 7). In chapter 3, I discuss another line of criticism that must be faced both by the traditional free will defense and by the version I shall ultimately propose. I want to deal with this criticism at this point because I regard this criticism as the most devastating argument that can be brought against the traditional free will defense.