

Theology of Gratuitous Evil:
Examination of Theological Approaches to the Existence of Gratuitous Evil

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BBST 456: God, Evil, and Suffering

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May 3, 2023

I. Introduction

Gratuitous evil lies at the heart of the evidential problem of evil; that is, the existence of so much pointless evil makes the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God *prima facie* less likely. Concomitant with this probabilistic argument is the assumption that God could prevent pointless evil without the loss of a greater good or prevention of a worse evil. Two main theological approaches exist for the theist to counter the problem of gratuity, assuming an orthodox apprehension of the divine attributes of God: (i) show there exists no probabilistic inconsistency between the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God and the existence of gratuitous evil, or (ii) deny the existence of gratuitous evil.¹ Rather than argue against the atheistic argument of gratuity directly, my concern is with answering the fundamental theological question, does gratuitous evil exist? In the end I will argue in favor of (ii)—that gratuitous evil does not exist—based on my revision of the greater good (G-G) theodicy.

II. Greater Good Theodicy

Theodicies seek to enunciate the moral justification for why God allows evil. In advocacy of (ii), G-G theodicy can be properly defined as God only allowing evil from which He can bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil. This view necessarily rejects the existence of gratuitous evil while fully acknowledging the *appearance* of much gratuitous evil. Moreover, G-G theodicy may be thought of as the ‘parent’ to particular theodicies, all of which

1. The denial of gratuitous evil entails both *moral* and *natural* evil, however, for the benefit of this paper I will primarily address gratuitous moral evil. Although, I will briefly address gratuitous natural evil in a later section. Moreover, another possible theistic response entails relinquishing one or many of the divine attributes of God, but I will not consider this response as a viable option in this paper. My concern is to evaluate the existence of gratuitous evil without the diminishment of basic orthodox theistic beliefs, if possible.

may vary in terms of what sort of good obtains or *when* and *where* the good obtains.² It must be understood that G-G theodicians do not claim to *know* the purpose for every individual evil, rather they claim that such a purpose nonetheless exists in *every* instance of evil.

III. Skeptical Theism

I have been wont to address the contention between G-G theodicy and the existence of gratuitous evil, although there remains a third, relatively neutral response for the theist. Despite its misleading name, skeptical theism contends that human beings are not able to make inductive probability judgments about gratuitous evil. According to William Lane Craig, we are simply not in a good epistemic position to make *a posteriori* judgments with any confidence upon whether pointless evil exists. He rightly acknowledges our spatiotemporal setting and finite cognition as support for this claim.³ God, conversely, through his omniscience, would know if evil appearing as gratuitous to finite human beings actually does achieve a greater purpose. This view is theologically viable yet contradictory to what I argue is the most plausible theological response. Although, we may contemporaneously consider skeptical theism as a benefactor for the proceeding sections.

IV. Gratuitous Evil

Theists who accept (*i*) the reality of gratuitous evil claim that there are cases where evil is pointless; hence they categorically reject the notion that all evil produces a greater good. These

2. Bruce A. Little, *A Creation-Order Theodicy: God and Gratuitous Evil* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 2. Some of which include soul-making, free will, and heavenly bliss theodicies. I do not have the wherewithal to evaluate each theodicy in this brief exposition.

3. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 546.

theists would not deny the belief that a greater good obtains from evil in *some* cases, nor do they claim that evil is gratuitous in *every* case, rather that in *some* cases evil is gratuitous.

Furthermore, one must not err in synonymizing gratuitous with horrendous. Gratuitous evil is appropriately defined by its pointlessness or unnecessariness, not by the magnitude of its effect. Therefore, upon this apprehension one may rightly characterize stubbing one's toe as gratuitous evil. This broader understanding of gratuitousness plausibly strengthens the case that such evils do exist. Gratuitous evil proponents, eager to accept the skeptical theist's endorsement of finite human intellect for the rejection of G-G theodicy, will likely appeal to the principle of credulity—that we see so many examples of what looks like pointless evil, therefore we have no reason to think otherwise.⁴

At first glance it may seem like gratuitous evil obstructs the goodness of God, leading the theist to accept (ii); for how can a good God allow pointless evil? However, theist Bruce A. Little assures “*if or when* gratuitous evil exists it would necessitate no denial or redefinition of any of the attributes of God, nor would it subvert the moral perfections of God” (Meister and Dew Jr. 2013, 39). Little's primary justification lies within the reality and significance of human free will. For if free will involves the possibility of bringing about gratuitous evil, God cannot prevent gratuitous evil without eliminating or at least significantly diminishing free will. Ronald Nash concludes that the presence of gratuitous evil is entirely consistent with God's intention of creation; and it is exactly what we would expect given a world containing free creatures with moral responsibility.⁵ If gratuitous evil truly is compatible with God's nature, then it is entirely

4. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled With Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 38.

5. Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 221. William Hasker takes a step further with his provocative view that gratuitous evil is

within the theists prerogative to advocate for (i). I will further examine whether this is the most plausible approach.

V. Objections to Greater Good Theodicy

Now that I have explained the positions of (i) and (ii), it is time to consider objections. The glaring objection to G-G theodicy lies in its inability to be shown to be true. While the proponent of gratuitous evil must only show that in *some* cases no greater good obtains, G-G theodacists must show that a greater good obtains in *every* case. Hence the burden of proof drastically lies with G-G theodacists. In order to grant warrant for G-G theodicy, it ought to be shown that at least in *most* cases a greater good is accomplished through evil. Even this is highly implausible which leads some theists to suggest that G-G theodicy actually favors the atheistic position and, therefore, should dissuade theists from holding such view. Contrariwise, by accepting the reality of gratuitous evil the heavy burden of proof is subsequently extinguished from the theist's shoulders.⁶ Taken in isolation this objection to G-G theodicy is theologically inconsequential, since holding a particular theological view for apologetic advantages, without additional justification, seems morally indefensible.

Bruce Little attacks the explanatory power of G-G theodicy by suggesting that allowing evil for the purpose of *preventing* a worse evil is a display of diminished omnipotence and without substantive meaning.⁷ Granted, preventing a worse evil is epistemologically different

necessary. He maintains that there is absolutely no moral binding on God to prevent gratuitous evil even if He can do so (William Hasker 1992, 37).

6. Ronald Nash goes even further by saying that if gratuitous evil is shown to exist "there would seem to be good reason to believe that the stalemate is over and that the probabilities favor theism [regarding the evidential problem of evil]" (Ronald Nash 1988, 221).

7. Bruce A. Little, 3. This argument addresses the latter aspect of the classical definition of G-G theodicy.

from *bringing about* a greater good due to its hypotheticality, but why must that entail the absence of substance? Even though finite beings may not definitively know whether God allows evil for the prevention of a worse evil, it does not follow that its conceptualization does not contain ontological meaning. Moreover, the notion that God is justified in allowing evil for the prevention of a worse evil requires no hindrance on God's omnipotence; perhaps this was God's only means of preventing such evil without impacting human free will. While we may consider the former aspect of G-G theodicy—bringing about a greater good—as substantively weightier than the latter, Little's challenge appears dubious.

As an additional objection to the compatibility of G-G theodicy and the attributes of God, one may argue that either (a) God cannot bring about the good without the evil, thus challenging His omnipotence, or (b) God orchestrated the evil to bring about the good, thus challenging His omnibenevolence. It is inconceivable for God to be the author of evil, therefore the G-G theodicy will automatically reject (b) the challenge to omnibenevolence. The question arises in conjunction with (a) the challenge to omnipotence, is it possible for God to bring about an identical or equivalent good without evil? Answering affirmatively seems unwarranted. As Alvin Plantinga writes: “among good states of affairs there are some that not even God can bring about without bringing about evil: those goods, namely, that *entail* or *include* evil states of affairs” (Alvin Plantinga 1974, 29). Consequently, this objection promulgates a false dichotomy between an impotent God and a morally defective God, hence it poses no threat to G-G theodicy.

For G-G theodicy to become an actual state of affairs, methodologically speaking, it requires what is known as “meticulous providence,” through which God providentially supervises every potential evil, actualizing only those evils which bring about a greater good or prevent a worse evil. The point is not that God merely limits the number of choices a person may

have, rather, meticulous providence requires that if a person makes a freely willed decision resulting in evil from which God could not bring about a greater good, He then prevents that evil from obtaining.⁸ Meticulous providence affirms a strong view of divine sovereignty at the expense of free will. When taken to its logical conclusion, meticulous providence consequents that some moral agents are prohibited from exercising their free choice to do evil. Therefore, it is logically impossible for God to prevent gratuitous evil without significantly degrading or outright eliminating human freedom of the will. This theological price tag is far too great for the theist who believes in the existence of free will.⁹

Furthermore, Michael L. Peterson gives two arguments in favor of gratuitous evil: (1) it is more consonant with our present experience and (2) logically flowing from its acceptance is the rejection of meticulous providence which enables a fuller apprehension of God's nature.¹⁰ While (1) is plausibly true, it only attempts to show that one is epistemically justified in holding to the truth of their experience of gratuitous evil, however it does nothing to accomplish the ontological grounding of gratuitous evil. Skeptical theism has already shown that one cannot judge the existence of gratuitous evil *a posteriori*. Regarding (2), there does not appear to be any contradiction between meticulous providence and God's *nature*. The question is whether meticulous providence is consistent with what we know of God's *desires*; does God desire this kind of a world? I would respond unfavorably and subsequently mend Peterson's argument by stating (2') *the rejection of meticulous providence enables a fuller apprehension of God's desire*

8. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., 42.

9. I will not argue the nature of free will nor argue against determinism in this paper. To give a simple definition of free will: Where *P* is any person, and *X* is any action performed by *P*; if *P* can freely perform *X* or freely refrain from performing *X* without any conditions or causes determining *X*, *P* has free will.

10. Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1982), 89.

for mankind, namely, His desire for free creatures. (2') shows that meticulous providence is implausible, which I believe provides enough warrant to reject classical G-G theodicy.

VI. Revised Definition

G-G theodicy as classically defined, given its weakness of meticulous providence, also falls short because of its entailment of some good *thing* proceeding out of evil which was otherwise nonexistent. Rather than argue for classical G-G theodicy, I can provide a revisional definition to demonstrate the full explanatory scope of greater goods obtained from evil while working concomitantly with the free will theodicy:¹¹ *God only allows that evil from which He can bring about a greater good, prevent a worse evil, or through which He preserves and maintains a greater good.* I argue that God is morally justified in permitting evil *appearing* as gratuitous, in order to preserve and maintain a greater good—free will. Free will is a greater good in virtue of being the sole means whereby one may attain the ultimate good for human beings which is to develop an eternal love-relationship with God.¹² Absent free will, receiving the ultimate good is impossible. It follows that the ability to exercise freedom of the will ontologically outweighs any possible evil produced by a moral agent.

11. A defense aims to show that God has possible reasons for permitting evil; a theodicy, by contrast, attempts to give the reason for why God allows evil (Nick Trakakis, "The Evidential Problem of Evil"). The Free Will Defense is "the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil" (Alvin Plantinga 1974, 30). Plantinga is interested in providing possible reasons for the existence of evil. This is subtly different from the Free Will Theodicy which explains that moral evil is a result of the misuse of our free will, providing a morally justified reason for God's permissibility of evil. The objectives of the free will defense and of the free will theodicy are appropriately distinguishable. The free will defense is commonly used to attack (dare I say solve) the logical problem of evil while the free will theodicy attempts to disrupt the evidential problem of evil. My effort is geared towards the evidential problem of evil; hence I will focus on the free will theodicy.

12. The ultimate good as described is plausibly true according to Christian theism. Eleonore Stump appears to argue something similar as she writes, "Because it is a necessary condition for union with God, the significant exercise of free will employed by human beings in the process which is essential for their being saved from their own evil is of such great value that it outweighs all the evil of the world" (Eleonore Stump 2002, 417).

When a person is in a position to bring about gratuitous evil (or any evil for that matter), God can either prevent that evil from materializing or allow that evil to materialize. In any normative sense, the former presupposes meticulous providence which I have already shown to be inconsistent with God's intentions. Corresponding to the latter, I argue that God's decision to allow that evil to materialize for the purposes of preserving and maintaining free will achieves a greater good. Whence gratuitous evil, permitted to materialize, is not gratuitous in any literal sense. My argument acts an intrinsic defeater of gratuitous evil, for all evil actualized by human free will, regardless of its *appearance* of gratuitousness, shows that gratuitous evil does not exist. If sound, I have directly undercut the existence of gratuitous evil in confirmation of my thesis—denying the reality of gratuitous evil based on my revision.

VII. Objections to the Revised Definition

My revised definition is insusceptible to the objection to G-G theodicy from the inconsistencies of meticulous providence, hence, a moot objection. It is also unaffected by skeptical theism due to its deductive logic, and necessarily opposed to skeptical theism due to its claim to know what good obtains in every case.¹³ I will anticipatedly evaluate and attempt to refute five potential objections to my revised definition conjoining with the free will theodicy. According to John S. Feinberg free will cannot be formulated into a G-G theodicy because the good is not “subsequent to and produced by the evil, nor is there a tie of logical necessity between the good and the evil” (John Feinberg 2004, 181). Both objections are easily refuted by

13. I have formulated a possible deductive argument following *modus ponens* in support of my definition.
Premise 1: If God preserves and maintains human free will by permitting evil which appears gratuitous, then a greater good obtains.

Premise 2: God preserves and maintains human free will by permitting evil which appears gratuitous.

Premise 3: Therefore, a greater good obtains.

It follows that gratuitous evil does not exist based on a greater good obtaining.

my calculated definition. First, the preservation and maintaining of free will is logically posterior to the incurring evil. While evil does not *produce* free will, my definition does not require this. In support of his second argument Feinberg writes, “no one could rightly claim that the existence of moral evil is logically necessary for us to have free will” (John Feinberg 2004, 181). Feinberg’s supporting statement is superfluous to my proposal; I have not argued that if we have free will we necessarily enact moral evil, rather that it is logically necessary to have free will if moral evil is to obtain. In other words, when one freely chooses to do evil, it follows logically that one has exercised their freedom of the will which I argue is an intrinsic good. Thus, free will and moral evil appear to be logically linked. Therefore neither of Feinberg’s objections carry any substantive weight against my thesis.

Second, one may intuitively object to my proposal by claiming that it fails to cover the entirety of evil—that certain evil is not fabricated by a moral agent, known as natural evil. My counterargument is to reject the concept of natural *evil*. Natural occurrences such as earthquakes and viruses, although harmful, are byproducts of the laws of nature and are therefore amoral.¹⁴ If one were to accept the notion of evil occurring independently of a moral agent, one may argue that natural evil is necessary if men are to have the knowledge required to bring about moral evil.¹⁵ On this view, it follows that free will is not independent of natural evil. Therefore, I believe the argument may proceed confidently according to several acceptable responses to the second objection.

14. While I do not ascribe to it, many theists believe natural evil results from original sin. If true, it is dependent upon a moral agent, hence, tying the existence of natural evil to the immoral action of a free agent. This theological addendum is perfectly compatible with my argument.

15. Richard Swinburne. “Natural Evil.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Oct., 1978, Vol. 15, No. 4 (University of Illinois Press), 296.

As for the third objection, I anticipate the charge that my proposal is highly *ad hoc*. However, the traditional G-G theodicy fails to cover the full range of possible greater goods, whereas my revised definition does appear to cover all possible greater goods, providing sufficient warrant. Having some degree of *ad hocness* seems unavoidable but this explanation circumvents any discreditation.

Fourth, one may unintentionally misinterpret my proposal by thinking one's free action, however good or evil, *is* a greater good. This is morally unconscionable and is certainly not what I am proposing. What one may choose to do with their free will is irrelevant to the argument, for I argue that the *ability* to express human free will contains an intrinsic greater good, regardless of what one does with that ability.

Fifth, William Hasker objects to my position by challenging the moral significance of free will. Hasker writes, "But there is no reason to suppose that even the most extreme evil consequences of human actions are automatically outweighed by the simple fact of those consequences' having been freely chosen" (William Hasker 1992, 27). If Hasker's claim is true, it would provide a fatal blow to my revised definition corresponding to the free will theodicy. Fortunately, I foresee no theological warrant for the claim that finite, temporal suffering and evil outweighs the means by which one may eschatologically receive the only infinite, morally perfect good. To no avail, Hasker's objection likely carries emotional significance but remains unsupported theologically.

I have considered and refuted five potential objections to my proposed formulation of the G-G theodicy. Doubtless there will be other objections but until my proposal is shown to be inefficacious or implausible, I have given good reasons to uphold its theological veracity, and to accept my thesis.

VIII. Conclusion

In this synopsis of the theology of gratuitous evil, scholars initially gave evidence to deny G-G theodicy, that is, until my revised definition of G-G theodicy. I argue that *God only allows that evil from which He can bring about a greater good, prevent a worse evil, or through which He preserves and maintains a greater good*. This theological approach precludes the reality of gratuitous evil on account of the intrinsically good nature of our possessed free will. The additional strength of this approach is its exclusivity from human beings' inadequate epistemic position to know why God allows evil. Although the traditional G-G theodicy fails in this respect, my revision allows one to *know* what sort of good obtains from evil in *every* case, thus rejecting skeptical theism. This explanatorily significant argument, shown to be cogent, gives positive justification to accept (ii) and deny the existence of gratuitous evil.

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