

Article

How Did Evil Come into the World? A Primordial Free-Will Theodicy

Mark Johnston

Department of Philosophy, Princeton University, Princeton NJ 08544, USA; johno@princeton.edu

Abstract: James P. Sterba has provided a compelling argument to the effect that given the extent of significant, and indeed even horrendous, evil that an all-good and all-powerful being could have prevented, there is no God. There is a hidden assumption in Sterba's reasoning, involving an inference from God being able to do anything metaphysically possible (omnipotence) to his being, after creation, able to prevent evil. As what follows shows, that isn't a purely logical matter. It depends on ruling out a determinate theological account of how creation limits what is then metaphysically possible for God, an account set out in detail below. So Sterba's argument is not deductively valid, unless that account is incoherent. Accordingly, we are back in the realm of total judgments of theoretical plausibility, and the effects of God-given grace on what then will strike one as the right view to live by.

Keywords: God; Neo-Platonism; the problem of evil; the free will defense; God's reason for creating; the Principle of Sufficient Reason; why there is something rather than nothing; modal argument for God's existence; the origin of evil; omnipotence; abjuration; the mismatch between God's reasons for creating and the total face of the material universe; fine-tuning as demiurgic work; negative demiurgy; holiness; the Beatific Vision; God's redemptive back-up plan; grace; the importance of a community of grace

Error circa creaturas redundat in falsam de Deo scientiam.

Summa Contra Gentiles; II, 3.

James P. Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019) presents one of the most detailed developments in the analytic tradition of the *moral* argument against God's existence. He claims that given the extent of significant and indeed, even horrendous,¹ evil—which an all-good and all-powerful being supposedly could have prevented—it follows *deductively* that there is no God.

If Sterba is correct, then—in contrast to all the other central and disputed questions of life—when it comes to the question of whether there is a God, we are *not* left adrift in the epistemic “rag and bone shop” of mere plausibility, of credences here and credences there, armed only with the “Bayesian”, and no doubt reasonable, permission either to adjust our prior credences or instead conditionalize on them in the light of new evidence; in this case, evidence concerning the extent of significant, and indeed horrendous evil.

On the matter of God, many do find themselves in the epistemic rag and bone shop, whether they then go on to call themselves believers, agnostics or atheists. Not Sterba. He claims to have decisively ruled God out. The right credence is zero. The door that once seemed open is now decisively closed.

That is important, if true. As argued in “Why Did the One not Remain Within Itself?” if there is a defensible non-zero credence associated with the existence of God, understood as Absolute—that is, Unsurpassable and Undiminishable—Goodness, then the expected utility of any one of our acts, i.e., the chance weighted measure of that act contributing to the goodness of total reality impersonally considered, is the same as the expected utility of any other. Namely zero. Consequentialism, and even the consideration of consequences,



Citation: Johnston, Mark. 2023. How Did Evil Come into the World? A Primordial Free-Will Theodicy. *Religions* 14: 402. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030402>

Academic Editor: James Sterba

Received: 25 November 2022

Revised: 18 February 2023

Accepted: 3 March 2023

Published: 16 March 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

when understood just in terms of the potential impact of available acts on impersonal goodness, then provides no rational guide to action (Johnston 2019).

We must then look for a standard of right action other than that of *meliorism*, the standard of trying to make reality better. A certain kind of Neo-Platonic theism, of the sort articulated below, provides that standard. My thought was that we then have a novel practical argument for believing in the kind of God which that form of theism brings into view. For such a God provides the required standard for action, namely *holiness* understood as excellence in manifesting the Good, which in its turn requires radical abandonment to the Good, including the proper subordination of one's own good to the Good. Such *holiness* is the orientation which is the internal necessary condition of entering into the Beatific Vision, the participation in the joyful affirmation of Goodness Itself that makes up the Divine life.

If Sterba is right, that novel practical argument does not leave the starting gate. The mere chance of God existing, where God is understood as the Good itself, and hence as absolutely and so unsurpassably good, does not render expected utility maximization otiose. For there is no such chance.

Sterba employs two argumentative strategies. The first begins by defending three "exceptionless minimal prevention principles" in accord with the plausible core of the Pauline Principle: Never do evil so that good may come of it. The second involves an invidious comparison between what God, if he exists, has failed to prevent, and what a just and powerful political state would prevent, if it could.

Sterba argues for the following refinement of the Pauline Principle, the first of three such refinements, which he takes to be acceptable to consequentialists, non-consequentialists, atheists and theists alike.

Prevent, rather than permit, significantly and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done.

Sterba goes on to observe that given that there are unprevented significant and indeed horrendous evils which God could have prevented, it follows that God is less than morally perfect. And that appears to show there is no morally perfect being that would deserve the title "God".

Explicit in Sterba's reasoning is his conclusion that the so-called free will defense, due to Alvin Plantinga,² namely that evil exists as an inevitable upshot of our libertarian freedom, is inadequate. Agreed. Yet, the free will defense is not logically, or metaphysically, incoherent. As Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* makes clear, incoherence is not one of Plantinga's strong suits.³

Even so, the standard free will defense has three familiar soft spots.

First, we need an explanation of just why having *libertarian* free will is crucial in God's creative plan—so crucial that the risk of horrendous moral evil is not a reason against creating beings that can freely choose even horrendous moral evil. Why wouldn't the creation of beings that are rationally coerced by the Good have been sufficient for God's purposes?

Secondly, the free will defense is presented as an account of why *we* are able to be sources of significant, and indeed horrendous, *moral* evil. It thus seems to come too late to be the full account of source of those *natural* evils, such as the system of predation, which long preceded our free choices.

Thirdly, having and misusing libertarian free will seems compatible with being in, perhaps unwittingly, a moral playpen i.e., a situation in which one's free decisions aimed at significant, and especially horrendous, moral evils would be rendered relatively harmless. Why didn't God make aiming at serious evil a quixotic enterprise, that just seems for no discernible reason not to get very far?

Here, Sterba's comparison with a just and powerful political state is an embarrassment for the thought that evil free wills could not, or should not, be "play-penned". For that is precisely what a just state would do *if it could*.

That illustrates Sterba's method. He is not concerned to claim that the free will defense is metaphysically or logically incoherent. He is not *that* interested in ontotheology. Rather, he thinks that clearly true moral principles are enough to cut through the details. His view is that it would be morally illegitimate not to playpen free agents capable of significant evil, if one could.

My argument will be that when it comes to the question of moral illegitimacy, the ontotheology of the Theodrama of Creation and Redemption turns out to be pivotal. I shall present an account of the Theodrama that (i) is not incoherent (a lowish bar, which is set by Sterba's own ambitious aim of demonstrating incoherence) and (ii) would, if true, explain why God's not play-penning his dangerous creatures is morally legitimate, in that it does not violate any obvious moral principle. Though no mere ontotheology can save us, there is an ontotheology that can save us from Sterba's argument.

That might give the impression that the following is just an analytic exercise of finding a way to block an argument.

I suspect that any such impression will dissipate as we proceed.

1. The Main Problem with Sterba's "Logical" Argument: God Can't!

Sterba adroitly develops the worry as to why God has not prevented significant and indeed horrendous evil into a *moral* argument against the existence of God, one tranche of which is this:

- (i) There are significant, and indeed horrendous, evil consequences of immoral actions which an all-powerful being could have prevented without violating anyone's rights;
- (ii) If God exists, then he is all-good and all-powerful;
- (iii) An all-good and all-powerful being would prevent, rather than permit, all significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done;

Therefore, there is no God.

That is an argument that God does not exist from (a) the extent and depth of moral evil, (b) necessary truths concerning what would lie in the essential nature of God, were God to exist, and (c) necessary moral truths. If it is valid and the premises are true, then we would have "a logical argument from evil" in Sterba's intended sense.

I accept premise (i). God could have prevented evil arising by remaining within himself. That would not have violated anyone's rights. No creature had a right to exist. And when we examine God's reason for creating, we will see that God also had an *adequate* reason to remain within himself, perhaps a reason deriving from the very risk of evil arising, a risk he would have to take on in manifesting his nature by creating free creatures who might reject him.

Whereas a decisive reason for an action is one for which the reasons outweigh the reasons in favor of all the alternative actions, an *adequate* reason for an action is a reason that is not outweighed by the reasons in favor of any of the alternative actions.

God's creating was a contingent matter. Indeed, it was closer than a close call; though it wasn't a mere toss-up, or a mere opting, as in a Buridan's ass case. There were adequate but not decisive reasons for God to create, and adequate but not decisive reasons for God to remain within himself, the latter perhaps having to do with the very possibility of evil arising. If God had chosen to create or alternatively to remain, there would have been an adequate reason for that choice. His choice was the intelligible choice to act on the one reason rather than the other. Hence creation is contingent. God could have remained within himself.

I also accept premise (ii) with the caveat that being all-powerful means being able to do anything *metaphysically* possible, anything compatible with the essential natures of the things and events in question. Compare being all-knowing, which is knowing everything that it is metaphysically possible to know. The scope of metaphysically possible knowledge expands as free creatures by their free choices close off branches in their open futures.

So too, the scope of what is metaphysically possible contracts with creation. To take a trivial contraction, it is then no longer metaphysically possible for God to have not created. A non-trivial contraction which turns on what I call God's necessary "abjuration" is the central focus of this paper.

Sterba's argument fails by his own "logical" standard because (iii) is not a necessary truth. There are accounts of the nature of an all-good and all-powerful God, and of why he created, on which (iii) is false.

The flaw in the argument lies with the contextually sensitive notion of being "all-powerful". God is all-powerful or omnipotent in that he can do anything that is metaphysically possible. But what is metaphysically possible for God changes as a result of creation. He remains all-powerful, even though the scope of what is metaphysically possible narrows thanks to creation. There is a coherent theological model of how reality stands on which (iii) is false. For that premise applies to immoral acts and their consequences which occur after creation.

The same flaw attends Sterba's appeal to his other two "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements", as applied to an all-good and all-powerful being, and which could, either of them, drive Sterba's argument, by taking the place of (iii).

An all-good and all-powerful being would not permit, but would prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

An all-good and all-powerful being would not permit, but would instead prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

God would prevent such things *if he could*. But as things stand after creation, God *doesn't* prevent such things, because he *can't*.

In broad strokes, the thought is that it is somehow internal to his creation that he then can't prevent significant, even horrendous, evil consequences of immoral actions. He remains all-powerful, able to do anything that is metaphysically possible, even though the scope of what is metaphysically possible is contracted by his very act of creation.

That, I hope, will come alive as a real theological option when we dwell on the nature of God, on his available reason for creating, on what sort of creation accords with that reason, how evil arose within God's first creation, how that evil played a role in the creation of the material universe, and God's redemptive Plan B, i.e., God's response to evil.

2. A Neo-Platonic Conception of God

To get anywhere with the question of *why* God created, and how it is that creation constrained what was metaphysically possible for God, we will have to make some initial assumptions about the nature of God, and then explore the question of his reason for not remaining within himself relative to those assumptions.

The assumptions that follow are close to central, and enduring, though sometimes controverted, elements in one traditional theistic conception of God. These assumptions are pressed into service here because their implications are well understood, thanks to a long history of sophisticated thought and commentary. If true, the assumptions express *de re* necessary truths concerning God and creation. In the background is the basic picture: while God exists necessarily, creation is a contingent operation. There might have been no creation at all.

I do not say that the Neo-Platonic theism that follows is the core or essence of theism. Given the tangled history of theism, that kind of claim is extremely problematic, and perhaps even insulting. Still, we have to work with assumptions. I present them now as characterizing the best "God of the Philosophers" that I happen to know. (I am happy to be shown a better one.)

Even relative to the assumptions stated above, finding an answer to our questions of why God created and why he can't prevent evil will prove difficult. Without them, or some other set of equally constraining and historically well-understood assumptions, the questions as to why God created and why he can't prevent evil arising in creation even though he is omnipotent, indeed is Power Itself, are best passed over in silence.

The Neo-Platonic element in what follows has at its core a model of the ground of the truth of certain kinds of predication. For some predicates *F*, things are predicatively *F* by standing in an appropriate relation to the *F*, a thing that is constitutively *F*—equivalently “an eminent exemplar of *F*-ness”. When there is one such exemplar, we may speak of the Form of *F*, the unique thing that is constitutively *F*, such that other things get to be *F* in virtue of standing in an appropriate relation to it. When the relation in question is necessary, such as the relation of numerical identity, the thing in question is essentially *F*. When the relation is contingent as with the relation between a created thing and a creator that is constitutively *F*, then it is contingent that there is a thing which is predicatively *F*.⁴

Some examples, simply to convey the general idea. Spatiotemporal regions are constitutively “sized shapes”. For a material object to have a physical shape of a certain size is for *its outermost parts to be bounded by or “abut”* a spatiotemporal region constitutively that size and shape. Or consider an updated version of something like the sense-data theory. There are visual expanses, which are constitutively some determinate shade of color bounded by a visual shape. For a surface to be colored is for it *to habitually appear to be pervaded by an expanse of that color*. In this way, surfaces are predicatively colored in virtue of a relation to something constitutively colored, an expanse of a determinate shade of the color in question.

Taking seriously that model of a distinctive class of predications and their ground, here is the framework within which I am operating:

1. God is Subsisting Existence, i.e., the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, with respect to which all other existents are, via creation, derivative participants in Subsisting Existence. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him: as the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, he lacks nothing in the way of existence, it lies in his essence to exist. So the question of the ground of his existence, the question of why it is that a thing with his nature or essence exists, does not arise. (Which is not to say that we have, in the fashion of the ontological argument, an a priori basis for asserting the existence of God. Instead, the situation is this: if God, so conceived, exists then he is an autonomous existent, i.e., the fact of his existence does not require a ground.)
2. God is the Good, the Form⁵ or Preeminent Exemplar of Goodness, with respect to which everything else that is good is a derivative participant in that Goodness. This account of what God *is* has consequences concerning what is properly predicated *of* him. He lacks nothing in the way of goodness. He has, by his essence, every positive value or perfection it is possible for him to have simply (i.e., not in virtue of some relation to other things) and he has these to a degree that is unsurpassable.
3. God is Power Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Power. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him. As the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, he lacks nothing in the way of power; it lies in his essence to be able to do anything metaphysically possible, i.e., anything consistent with the consequences of his essence and the essences of other things. (Contrary to Descartes, it is not a limitation on God's power that he can't make $2 + 2 = 5$. That is because of the essences of 2, the function of addition and 5.)
4. God is Knowing Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Knowing. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him: as the Preeminent Exemplar of Knowledge, he lacks nothing in the way of knowledge, he knows everything that can be known.

5. God is Rational Willing Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Rational Willing, he lacks nothing in the way of rational willing; so his will is perfectly responsive to reason.
6. Now we come to creation. God's creation was *ex nihilo*; it was not some operation on preexisting materials, whose natures placed an antecedent limitation on God's will. Nor was it some operation on some preexisting *abstracta*, such as the laws of what would be matter, were those laws instantiated. There was nothing over and above God to which he had to accommodate his creative power.
7. God's creating was a contingent act; he had libertarian freedom to remain within himself: there could have been no creation at all.⁶

On this Neo-Platonic conception, God is not just the so-called Omni-god, i.e., something predicatively all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing. To leave it at that suggests that the standards of goodness, power and knowledge are not grounded in God but somehow stand over and above him and are such that with respect to those standards he receives the highest possible mark. For then, as a rational will, God's choices would be proscribed by what is independently good, and proscribed by what is independently bad. He would be under an axiological constraint that does not derive from his nature. The same worry arises for so-called Perfect Being Theology. Does God just get receive perfect scores by some independent standards of goodness, power and knowledge? The Neo-Platonic conception says no; God's predicative perfections—being perfect in goodness, in power, in knowledge and in rational willing arise from what God constitutively *is*. (Self-identity is the purest case of participation.)

Claims 1–5 begin with identities. Identity is symmetric, and more relevant here, reflexive and transitive. So, it follows that the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, and of Goodness, and of Power, and of Knowledge, and of Rational Willing is numerically one and the same thing! The corresponding predicative features had by creatures, i.e., their existence, goodness, power, knowledge and will, seem to be quite disparate things. Just how they converge when we trace them back to The Source of all things is beyond me. The only thought I have is that Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing are abstracted out aspects of Self-Affirming Activity Itself, the Preeminent Exemplar of Self-Affirming Activity. There would be some defect in Self-Affirming Activity Itself, if it was not also the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing.

I do not offer that as an explanation of anything. From our vantage point, the only grip we have on Self-Affirming Activity Itself is by way of these notions of Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing.

As Preeminent Rational Willing, perfectly responsive to value, God fully affirms his own Goodness, Power and Knowledge. Hence the thought made vivid by Aquinas, that the inner life of God is filled with something like unsurpassable joy in response to things being exactly as they should be. The promise of the Beatific Vision, as I understand it, is that God's creatures, to the extent that they approach holiness, will somehow participate in that joy.

The crucial thought is that holiness is the freely chosen orientation of one's will to the valorizing of the Good above all, thereby subordinating one's own good to the Good. Holiness is the metaphysically necessary condition for coming to participate in the inner life of God. Finding God's offer rationally coercive, and so having no rational freedom to choose to reject it, is not enough.

Holiness is the proper exercise of libertarian free will in response to the non-coercive offer of grace.

3. God's Existence and Creative Freedom as the Ground of Original Contingency

There is pro tanto evidence that the God just characterized exists. The evidence takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. Such a God would provide an adequate explanation of contingency.

The guiding premise of the “modal” cosmological argument, which I believe can be given a sound form, is that if something is existentially contingent, i.e., exists, but might not have existed, then its existence requires some explanation, ultimately not a causal explanation, but in the end an ontological or *grounding* explanation.

Yet there is an immediate problem in appealing to an essentially existing being, such as God, as the ground or ontological explanation of contingency. Grounding, or ontological explanation, appears to have the following character: the full ground of some state of affairs or fact is such that its obtaining necessitates that fact. But we were looking for an ontological explanation of contingency *as such*.

It appears that the so-called Principle of Sufficient Reason, namely the principle that every non-autonomous fact—every fact whose holding does not have an explanation in terms of the essences of the items figuring in that fact—has a complete ontological explanation, in terms of autonomous facts, generates the central claim of Spinoza: everything is as it must be. For a complete ontological explanation *necessitates* what it explains.

4. The Principle of Adequate Reason

To explain contingency as such, we should set aside the Principle of Sufficient Reason in favor of a Principle of Adequate Reason. The idea of adequacy comes from the context of choice. Whereas a decisive reason for acting is a reason that is stronger than any reason for the alternative courses of action, an adequate reason is one that is at least as strong as any of the reasons supporting alternative courses of action.

(The basic idea) Autonomous facts are those facts whose obtaining arises from the essence of the constituents. (For example, the fact that Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens are numerically identical.) Such facts require no explanation. All non-autonomous facts are explicable, in the sense that there must be completely adequate reasons for them.

(The crucial gloss) However, these reasons can take different forms. Sometimes, such reasons are found in a necessitating ontological explanation, which would show how derivative things must be as they are, given more fundamental things. Alternatively there can be completely adequate but non-decisive and so non-coercive *practical* reasons for choice and intentional action, reasons which provide a non-necessitating explanation of the choice and the corresponding action.

The idea that we have rational freedom in a choice situation is the idea that we can face choices in which there are merely adequate reasons for acting in any of the differing ways that the choice situation presents. A rational will is free to choose to act on any of those reasons, which then can be cited as the reason from which that will acted.

That is how contingency originally appears. God is rationally free to create, or alternatively, to remain within himself. His reason for creating is an adequate but not a decisive reason to create. That is how the ontological explanation of original contingency, explains contingency *as such*. There is no “modal collapse”, no reduction of everything to a necessity, as with Spinozism.

The trivial case of rational freedom is that of mere opting, as in a “Buridan’s ass” case. Say you need a fountain pen and there you are at the pen shop equidistant from two *Jacques de Molay* mediums, both priced the same and indistinguishable one from the other. You take one of the *Jacques de Molay* mediums to the counter and pay for it. There was no decisive reason to buy the pen you bought, rather than the other; but there is a completely adequate reason for buying that pen: you needed an affordable fountain pen and *this*—the one you bought—is an affordable fountain pen. You also had a completely adequate reason for buying the other pen instead; namely, you needed an affordable pen and *that*—the other one—is an affordable fountain pen. You have adequate reasons for choosing either pen; you are *rationally free* to go either way.

There is a more interesting sort of case in which one might find oneself with completely adequate, but no coercive or decisive reasons. Some choice situations may present

conflicts of incommensurable values, or more generally incomparable values—to drop the implication that is commensuration or quantitative comparison of the relevant values that is really at issue. These would be values that are of such different kinds that it seems artificial to regard them either as equivalent in weight or rank, or as involving one value that is weightier than, or to be ranked more highly than, the other.

Creation was not a Buridan's ass choice, for the value of God's remaining within himself, and the value of God's creating, do not exhibit equal helpings of the very same sort of value. God could have had rational freedom to create, or alternatively, to remain within himself, either from the counterbalancing weight of some reason not to create, or from the incomparable values presented by the option of remaining within himself, and the option of creating.⁷

Suppose as is argued below, that God's reason to create was to manifest his own nature, i.e., his Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and his Free Rational Will. In acting, God always affirms the Good, and his own Good, for he is the Good. Consequently, there is no distinction between God's Good and the Good.

Yet any creaturely manifestation of free rational willing, however perfect of its kind, will face a choice of fundamental orientation—a choice God cannot face—namely whether to subordinate its own good to the Good, or to subordinate the Good to its own good. The latter is the choice definitive of a morally evil will. Suppose then that any adequate manifestation of God's nature involves the creation of free rational wills, as perfect of their kind as they can be compatible with their being creatures. God will know that in any such manifestation, there is the *possibility* that some of these creatures will make the free choice definitive of an evil will. Accordingly, God has a strong reason against creating, namely that even in any indefective manifestation of his nature the possibility of lucid evil has the possibility of arising.

God's foreknowledge is here understood to concern merely the possibility of lucid moral evil arising, not of its actually arising. The latter depends on an act of libertarian free will on the part of God's first creatures. There we are in the realm of fact-less future contingency. There is no "thin red line"—no set of truths about what *will* in fact happen, already there to be known by Omniscience. Antecedent to such free choices there is nothing settled as to how they will turn out.

Thus, God does not create free rational wills while knowing that they would make the evil choice. Accordingly, those among the first-created who conform their will to evil cannot reasonably object—"Why did you make me, knowing I would freely reject you?"

5. Why Did God Create?

"Who can fathom the mind of God?" That is deeply appropriate as an expression of intellectual humility. Yet, it is often used as a cover for intellectual laziness. For given what God *is*, we can know something significant concerning what his mind is *not*. When it comes to the available reasons for God to act upon, his ways are not our ways. For many of our reasons to act derive from our finitude, incompleteness and need. God has no such reasons. In the best case, our reasons derive from attachments to and compassion towards specific existing beings. But even that could not be God's reason for creating, for the specific existing beings have to be there anyway to be loved or cared for, and so be the source of such reasons. Nor, in creating was he aiming to improve reality. Reality was already unsurpassably good. Why then did God not leave well enough alone?

What then was the reason *from which* God created, rather than remain within himself? Coming to clarity on that is crucial to understanding how evil came into the world. And only when we have a satisfactory etiology of evil can we reasonably consider the prospects of a theodicy.

The bare voluntarist answer to the effect that God just willed creation without having any reason to create ignores the fact that God's willing, as opposed to a being's merely emanating, is the operation of a pre-eminently *rational* will; a will that is always consonant

with the intellect's appreciation of at least a completely adequate reason that favors the choice in question. Otherwise we will have no ground for contingent creation.

What then was God's reason for creating? In asking this question, we are not looking for a rationally decisive or coercive reason for creating. For a central aim of the present effort is to explain how God, in creating, genuinely had the option to create, or alternatively remain within himself. Moreover, we are not looking merely for *prima facie* or *pro tanto* considerations that might favor creation, but would not in themselves provide a completely adequate reason to create.⁸ What we are after is illumination as to the kind(s) of reason(s) which could make up a completely adequate reason to create, something that could make rational sense of creation, even while allowing for the rational option of refraining from creation.

To summarize: if God had a reason to create then it would be a completely adequate reason, a reason that would justify his creating. This reason could justify his creating, even if it was not a decisive or rationally coercive reason, i.e., a reason that required him to create. Creation would thus be grounded; its occurrence would be explained by a free choice of God's, but it would not thereby be necessitated by God's nature.

On traditional theistic views, God in creating was not perfecting his nature. Nor was he advancing his own self-interest, i.e., fulfilling some need of his which otherwise would have been unmet. Nor was he under an authoritative command (explicit or implicit) to create, or if he was it can only have come from himself, which simply pushes the question back to the reason for that command.

Nor was he morally obliged to create. To whom? By whom? Kantians might reject those two questions, by urging that the source of moral obligation is not in directed duties toward others but in the requirements of rational willing; so that moral requirements are the upshot of clearheadedly giving the law to oneself as a free being. But on such a Kantian view, in the case of a preeminently rational will such as God, moral reasons would coercively or decisively support whatever they support. So, if God had a moral reason to create, creation would not be contingent. But we are here trying to make real sense of the traditional notion that contingency arises from God's rationally free choice.

Did God create out of reasons of personal attachment? Such reasons though they take the form of propositions concerning how the act in question would benefit some given person, require a basis in virtue of which they count as, and have rational force as, reasons of personal attachment. The basis involves some significant personal relationship already existing between the agent and the beneficiary. The basis must be in place, in order for there to be a reason of this kind in play. In that sense, the basis must be in place *prior to* the act in question being a reasonable act to perform in the light of the reason of personal attachment. The same applies to reasons of special responsibility; the incurring of the special responsibility must be in place prior to the reasons arising from what is good for some already given group of people. Let's concentrate on reasons of personal attachment; the considerations evinced will apply *mutatis mutandis* to reasons of special responsibility. The basis requirement is then this:

The basis B for some proposition P being a reason of personal attachment for an agent to perform some act will involve some personal relationship between the agent and the potential beneficiary or beneficiaries described in P. The basis B must be in place prior to the act in question for P to be a reason of personal attachment for that act.

Typically, but not always, the required priority is realized by temporal priority, i.e., the basis B is in place before the act emerges as an option. If the act has to be already performed for the basis to be in place, then the relevant proposition is not a reason of personal attachment.

However, the requirement of priority, the requirement that is usually realized by temporal priority, is inherently ontological. The act cannot be ontologically prior to the basis. That is, the particular basis B for some proposition's being a reason of personal attachment for an agent to perform some act cannot be ontologically dependent on the agent's performance of the act.⁹

Consider for example, God and Gabriel. God's loving Gabriel ontologically depends on Gabriel's existing, and Gabriel's existing ontologically depends on God's creating Gabriel. So, by transitivity, God's loving Gabriel ontologically depends on God's creating Gabriel. It follows that God's loving Gabriel, or indeed his having any personal attachment to Gabriel, cannot be the basis for the proposition—creating Gabriel would benefit her—being a reason of personal attachment for God to create Gabriel.

The upshot is that God cannot have reasons of personal attachment to create particular persons. They are not yet *there* to be objects of attachment!¹⁰

6. What Then Was God's Reason to Create?

The Baltimore Catechism presents the following Q&A:

Q. "Why did God make us?"

A. "God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven."¹¹

The doctrine seems clear enough. God created for this reason: to show forth his Goodness, to manifest his glory, *inter alia* to us, in this life and in the life to come by drawing us by way of his non-coercive grace toward Heaven, which I understand as the Beatific Vision, the participation in his own self-affirming joy. Thus, in his commentary on the sentences of Peter Lombard, Bonaventure highlights the "doubled" movement of God's self-manifestation, remarking that God created all things "not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it".

Creation is not there to improve things in any impersonal way; there is no sort of melioristic consideration that would recommend it, for since Absolute Goodness already exists reality is already *unsurpassably* good. Nor is creation an expression of God's antecedent love for us, for love metaphysically presupposes the existence of its object. Instead, God's reason to create is to manifest his glory, to show forth his infinite goodness to his creatures whom he lovingly invites into his inner life.

To enter a clarification concerning the implications of Manifestationism: it is an account of God's *reason* for creating. In no way is it at odds with the idea that God is loving or generous or just *towards his creatures*. The point is only that those attitudes cannot be the grounding reasons for his creating, since they themselves are partly grounded in the existence of his creatures.

As Bonaventure's remark indicates, there are two separable "moments" in God's self-manifestation. First, the creation of other beings that manifest his glorious nature. Then, the closing of the circle of manifestation via God's invitation through grace to those creatures, to freely enter into the joy of his inner life, the joy that affirms Goodness itself. Nothing could be more loving than that.

Yet therein lies the rub. Fully entering into the joy of God's inner life has a constitutive necessary condition that no degree of forbearance or forgiveness on God's part can waive or suspend. That condition is what we might call *holiness*, the free and full affirmation of the Good, even at the expense of subordinating one's own narrow good to that affirmation.

Why can't God suspend that requirement? Is he not a God of love? Yes, but he is not a God who can do the metaphysically impossible. A will's being fundamentally self-valorizing metaphysically excludes its entering into the joy of God's own self-affirmation, the full and complete affirmation of the Good. Only a holy will, a will that has freely subordinated its good to the Good, can do that.

Full-blown holiness is beyond most of us, as we presently stand. As I have argued elsewhere, if holiness is a viable project for us then even though we are essentially embodied wills, our present embodiments must be contingent. Other future embodiments must be available for the quality of our wills to develop appropriately in response to grace.¹²

7. The Mismatch between Divine Manifestation and the Material Universe

On the face of it, the foregoing serves to intensify the problem of evil. Given God's nature and given that God's reason for creating was for the sake of self-manifestation,

creation should be nothing like the material universe as we now know it to be thanks to the science of astrophysics. The Psalmist was mistaken: the heavens—at least if understood as the vast reaches of the material universe—do not proclaim the glory of God.

My friend Edward Turner, an astrophysicist at Princeton University specializing, among other things, in planets in the “Goldilocks zones” of their suns, and a man of no evident theological leanings, once said to me, half-jokingly:

The creator, if there is one, seems to have been fascinated with huge gappy structures, violent collisions, spheroids of boiling metal, colossal explosions, gigantic self-sustaining fireballs, sinkholes that devour everything in their vicinity, enormous temperature variations, and ever-thinning gas. It is as if the universe were just some incredibly self-indulgent display of power over matter, on an unimaginably massive scale.

Astrophysics tells us that the material universe is gargantuan. It is so large, and so gappy, that considered as a four-dimensional whole *almost* none of it contains, or will come to contain, anything that could plausibly be taken to be intrinsically valuable. Moreover, the natural telos of the material universe—the future that it is moving towards given its initial conditions and the laws of matter—is ever-thinning gas *per secula seculorum*. Furthermore, the basic structure of the laws of matter is deeply unfriendly to life—as the argument from fine-tuning *starts out* by recognizing! Even given fine tuning, the planetary period, let alone the much shorter period during which there is planetary life, is no longer than the blinking of a cosmic eye in the forward-infinite history of the ever-expanding universe.

On most reasonable calculations, the apparently fine-tuned universe meanders around for billions upon billions of years before there appears anything approximating to life, let alone anything capable of embodying wills. That is puzzling if it was God who created the material universe. Having fine-tuned the laws of matter, he could have begun things in an initial universal condition that was already hospitable to life, consciousness, and the appearance of wills.

Moreover, we now know that the appearance of life is both adventitious and precarious. When life appeared on Earth most of it was wiped out during several discernible periods. For example, 2300 million years ago, during the Great Oxidation event, 75% of all anaerobic species were lost, due to a toxic rise in atmospheric oxygen. The geological record tells us that during the Permian Extinction, 200 million years ago, Earth’s biodiversity in the sea plummeted by 95%. And 70% of terrestrial mammal species were lost. There is no reason to suspect that the Earth itself is especially vulnerable in these ways. Life’s presence on any planet is adventitious and precarious.

Then there is the as-if-demonic character of the evolutionary route to the appearance of embodied rational intelligence, i.e., the blood-soaked struggle for survival, the system of predation, the pitiless cycle of hatching, matching and dispatching, the charnel house of hunger, sickness and predation that makes up much of wild nature.

Then, there is human incurvature, i.e., the natural corruption of the human will, due to the self-protective character of our evolved hominid embodiments, as shown in our habitual tendency to put our finger on the scales in favor of ourselves and our own. In my view, our hominid embodiments account for the original character of our sinfulness, or natural resistance to the Good. The appeal to a supposedly specific human fall from grace on the part of privileged ancestors of ours is quite necessary.

Then there are the large-scale structural defects of human life; including arbitrary suffering, the decay of corrosive aging, our profound ignorance of our condition, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and finally, to untimely death.

Let us not omit the negative correlation between having a good will and being happy, thanks to the ruthless competitive system which favors predatory bad wills, the system known as human history, whose briefest and not too inaccurate summary is “The bastards tend to get away with it.”

And then there is the hiddenness of God (if God exists).¹³

To be clear, matter is not evil. The material universe itself is not malignant, nor malign. In looking for the right word, I was drawn to an old contrast that ancient Astrology made among the planets. The material universe is not benefic; it is malefic, i.e., unfavorable to the manifestation of Goodness.¹⁴

Despite this malefic character of the universe, there is still much room in human life for great love and life-affirming joyfulness.¹⁵ But that room has to be found in the interstices of the malefic progression from the vast original explosion to the ever-thinning gas. As we know, from even a quick glance at human history, any such found-room will be fragile, all-too-fragile. Hope and joyfulness are entirely compatible with the obvious thought that whether or not we have a true home, *this* is not our true home.

Given its malefic character, the material universe is obviously not a *theophany*, a manifestation of God's goodness and power.

One might cast that point in the form of a new anti-theistic argument, an argument from the mismatch of God's available reason for creation, and the form creation appears to have taken.

- (A) If there is a God, his reason for creating would have been to manifest his glorious nature, his Existence, his Goodness, his Power,
- (B) God's act of self-manifestation would have been *indefective*, i.e., perfect as an act of that type. (For any imperfection in that act would be traceable to a prior limitation in God's Goodness or Power or Knowledge or Will.),
- (C) God's glory is not manifest in the heavens, understood as the total face of the material universe as Astrophysics, and other settled sciences reveal it to be,
Therefore,
- (D) Either the material universe is not God's direct creation, i.e., not part of his creative self-manifestation, or there is no God,
- (E) But if God exists then God is the direct creator of the material universe. (A central commitment of orthodox theism),
Therefore,
- (F) There is no God.

Given manifestationism, we have the pivotal premise (B)—there can be no defect in God's *act* of self-expression that is his creating. Given the unlimited power that God can deploy in creating, God's creation therefore must be an *indefective expression of God's nature*. Crucially, as we shall see, that inference remains in place even if the *indefective* expression comes with a self-limitation on God's part, at least that if self-limitation is necessary for that *indefective* expression.

The depressing fact is that we do not see such an *indefective* expression around us. If this is all, if this material universe is the whole of non-divine reality, then we are done. There is no self-manifesting divine reality. As I see it, this is a decisive argument against pantheism. The material universe is not the body of God. It is not a *theophany*—which also tells against my former commitment to panentheism (Johnston 2009).

The theological reply, if there is one, must lie in the unseen aspect of God's created reality. There we may find an answer as to just how it is that (E) is false.

8. What Then Did God *Originally* Create?

Recall what we were led to understand God's nature to be, in order for his creative act to provide an adequate ontological explanation of original contingency. He has to be a free rational will with an adequate though not decisive reason to create. That reason to create is to manifest the glory of his nature, i.e., his being the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Knowledge, Power and Free Rational Will. God's self-manifestation occurs not just to display his nature to an admiring audience, but to draw his sentient creatures into the joy of his inner life.

God's act of self-manifestation is utterly free of defect. Otherwise, we have the contradictory result that the defect originated in him. What then would God's *indefective*

self-manifestation have to be, as far as it concerns the nature of the creatures he intends to lure by grace?

Being indefective, it would have to consist of beings who are as good,¹⁶ knowing, powerful and freely rational in their wills as they can be, compatible with them being creatures. Material embodiment imposes its own arbitrary limitations on the scope of free will. So, it would be no part of the essential natures of such creatures. These first creatures therefore would be “pure spirit”, i.e., free rational wills whose nature and activity requires no material embodiment.

The first creation was thus indefective relative to God’s reason for creating. There was no defect in God’s creative act. The first creation, the *pleroma*, would be unimprovable *along the relevant dimension* of giving expression to God’s nature as the eminent exemplar of Good-Affirming, Powerful, Knowing, and Free Rational Willing.

Again, God’s self-manifestation has a doubled aspect. The first created wills are themselves manifestations of God’s nature. But further, their vocation is holiness, i.e., to manifest in their turn God’s nature, by freely valorizing the Good over their own good, over the sheer enjoyment of their own power and might.

They, like all created free wills, are called to be holy, each to be a *theotókos*; one who in accord with the lineaments of its nature bears forth or manifests Goodness itself in thought and action.¹⁷

A possible outcome is that the first creatures by their freely chosen orientations, locate themselves at various places along the spectrum from self-valorization to God-bearing. What each of the first creatures in their turn create will manifest the determinate orientation of its will.

To state the obvious, we are not to be found among these first creatures. We are very far from being at the center of created reality. The thought that we are is a narcissistic anthropocentric error, one perhaps abetted by a theological misinterpretation of the meaning of the Incarnation as somehow being a response to the supposed special ontological dignity of humanity. It wasn’t. It is simply absurd, if not obscene, to suppose that anything with a hominid embodiment could be at the center of created reality. The Incarnation is not a responsive appreciation of our hominid condition; it is a gratuitously loving outreach whose purpose is to redeem that condition.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is at the very heart of revealed Christian theology. The claim that we are not among the first creatures is instead a consequence of rational reflection on the nature of God, on contingency, on creation and on God’s available reason for creating. If it is a result, i.e., if the argument so far has been good, it is a result, not in revealed, but in natural theology.

It is however a result that may bring to mind a confusing distractor that appears in different religious traditions. I refer, of course, to the so-called angels. In the culture circle that surrounds me, talk of angels and demons is regarded as ludicrous, perhaps even a sign of incipient psychosis. Given my friends’ conception of what angels and demons would be, if there were any, I entirely sympathize.

As Gregory the Great reminds us, the Latin “angelus”, meaning messenger or representative, is not the name of a nature, or kind of being. It is the name of a function, the function of being a messenger of God.¹⁸ A better name for the first creatures might be the name Paul uses in Ephesians, ἄρχοντες—the archons—the most ancient of created wills. It is odd enough to free us from images of babyish putti symbolizing Cupid, or of those winged beauties modeled on the Roman messenger god Mercury.¹⁹

If our argument has been good, the first creatures are nothing like that. To use “angel” as a characterization of their *nature* amounts to a theological slur! The archons are not cherubic in form. They do not have wings. Indeed, they are not by nature embodied at all. They would have to be as good of their kind, as knowing, as powerful and as freely rational in their wills as they can be, compatible with being creatures. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite draws the natural conclusion: “their firstness of origin endows them with the power to originate” i.e., to create.²⁰

Accordingly, my assumption is that at least some of the archons are powerful enough to be universe creators, and that such an archon's choice of creative medium and just how they mold that medium into a universe reflects the archon's freely chosen orientation with respect to the Good, i.e., the extent to which the archon has escaped self-valorization in favor of God-bearing.

Hence it would not be a surprise if one of the archons at the self-valorizing end of the spectrum was sufficiently knowing and powerful to play the Demiurgic role, i.e., to try its hand at fine-tuning the basic laws of matter in order to originate a stable material universe. In doing this, that archon would not be manifesting God's glory, but only its own power and might.

The result would accord with what we observe: the material universe occludes the glory of God, not only in respect of its tediously gargantuan character, but most notably by including natural, and then, moral evil.

9. Sin and Natural Evil

A free will's failure to manifest God, in proportion to its own knowledge and power, is a defect in that will. That failure is definitive of *hamartia* or *sin*, a defective orientation of the will, which involves valorizing in mental and bodily action the manifestation of one's own good, i.e., one's own degree of nature-relative perfection, one's own power, one's knowledge, over the manifestation Goodness itself.

We shall explore just how such a defect could arise in an archon, a being that is an ineffective manifestation of God's glory. But if it did arise in a will as powerful as it can be, compatible with it being a specific kind of first creature, and if that will chose to manifest its power by creating the material universe, then we would have the basis for an etiology of evil.

It would be this: natural evil arose from sin, but it was not our sin.

That is, natural evil along with its container, the material universe, entered reality as a result of archonic sin, the willed subordination of manifesting Goodness, Power and Knowledge, to the display of the archon's own goodness, knowledge and power. The material universe came into being as a result of an archon's self-valorizing act of manifesting its power by creating in the medium of matter, a medium that occludes, rather than manifests, God's Goodness.

Talk of archonic, and in particular Demiurgic, sin only makes sense within the Theodrama of Creation.²¹ (Otherwise, it falls somewhere between pure fancy and outright lunacy.) The point of God's creating was the manifestation of his nature—his Existence, his Goodness, his Power, his Knowledge, his Rational Freedom—in his creatures, who could in turn manifest these features of the Divine nature in their own creative action, in accord with their own natures.

Sin is the failure of a free rational will to freely orient itself toward God-bearing. It consists in deploying one's gifts, one's goodness, one's power, one's knowledge and rational freedom fundamentally for one's own good rather than for the sake of manifesting Goodness. Simply put, to be in sin, is to be a self-valorizer rather than a God-bearer; to freely valorize the achievement and manifestation of one's own good over one's manifesting Goodness Itself. The opposite of sin is thus not conventional righteousness, but holiness.

Knowing that matter is a medium that naturally occludes rather than manifests his Goodness, and creating in order to manifest that Goodness, God could not have created the material universe. Instead, he manifested his Goodness, Power, Knowledge and Free Rational Will by creating free wills, each in its kind-relative way, as good, and as powerful, and as knowledgeable, as is possible compatible with it being a creature of God.

The material universe was the result of a freely chosen repudiation of holiness by some archonic will bent on displaying its power, even at the cost of occluding God's Goodness.²²

10. A Fortunate Fault That Should Not Have Been

We must refuse the temptation to go on to think of the material universe itself as somehow evil. True, the more a will approaches perfection the more horrendous its sin, if it sins. In the case of the archon who took upon itself the Demiurgic role, the sin in question therefore deserves its familiar name—*evil*. That evil is a defective condition of the will of the Demiurge.

It does not follow that the material universe itself is evil. The material universe is not a will.

Nor does it follow that the flesh is somehow evil. We should rejoice in our present embodiments despite their obvious limitations. For they are the means by which our wills are subserved and implemented.²³

The thing that follows from the material universe being the product of archonic evil is that the material universe is a mistake; it should not have been.

The Theodrama of Redemption, in particular the free provision of grace to help resist the incurvature that comes with our hominid embodiments; all that, along with the pivotal moment of salvation history, the embodiment of the Christ, is a response to that “should not have been”. In the totality of creation and redemption, the creation of the material universe becomes a fortunate fault, in part because it provides us with embodiments which enable us to exist and find our way to God.

I suspect that this is close to something that a certain kind of Neo-Platonic Christianity would say in response to the malefic progression that is the material universe. Perhaps the so-called *Secret Revelation of John* is a mythic anticipation—via the descent from the archonic marvel Barbelo to the disaster that is Yaldabaoth, the myth’s creator of the material universe—of something like this account of the etiology of evil.²⁴ But unlike *Secret John*, the present account is not well-characterized as Gnostic. Salvation does not come from *gnosis*, or secret knowledge, but from the acceptance of grace.

The role of *gnosis*—of knowledge of God’s reason to create, and the subsequent quite bumpy progression of his doubled aim of manifesting himself in creatures who would freely choose to manifest his Goodness in their own creativity and thereby enter into the joy of his own inner life—is to fend off those intellectual discouragements, such as the argument from evil, which close our hearts to grace. The deliverances of *gnosis* are thus just counterweights to the discouragement of the intellect. They do not add up to an adequate form of response to those suffering badly, or fatally. That’s for grace alone. A theodicy should not take the form of a justification of suffering, but rather the offer of a detailed understanding of how suffering is compatible with the existence of a loving God.

God is not the creator of the material universe. Instead, he simply found therein the kind of neural, or functionally equivalent, complexity that enabled the embodiment of his second creation, namely independently created but necessarily embodied *wills*, i.e., conscious valuers of value, who can act to secure those values.

We are such embodied wills, whom God now aims to draw to himself through the offer of grace. The irony at the heart of the Theodrama is that we would not have been, but for original Demiurgic self-valorization.

The fall of the archon who then became the Demiurge was, for us, the real *felix culpa*, or fortunate fault.

11. As Yet Unanswered Questions

God did not originally will the fortunate fault. He is not the direct cause of natural evil. Since archonic sin is the outcome of a genuine free will, the liberty to settle some part of the ontologically open future, God could not have foreknown that any particular archon would make the evil choice. For there was, as yet, no fact to be known.

The fault was made fortunate—even though it should not have been, it was *redeemed*—by God’s Plan B, the creation of embodied wills, and the Theodrama of their redemption from hominid incurvature. But what went wrong with Plan A? How was archonic sin even possible given the original perfection of the archons?

Why did God allow archonic sin, and having allowed it, why did he not limit its naturally evil effects? Why were the archons not play-penned?

Moreover, how could any archon think it could hope to valorize its own good over the Good, and then flourish by taking on the Demiurgic role, when that would put it at odds with Goodness, Power, Knowledge and Free Rational Will itself?

12. The Fall of the Archons

“Lucifer” has become a name for a prince of evil or “darkness”, the very exemplar of what should not have been, namely one who lucidly employed his own gifts to reject the call to holiness, instead deploying his freedom to do what served his own good, including the unbridled exercise of his power and knowledge in the domination and temptation of other wills, including latter-day embodied wills such as our own.

Let us also follow the tradition in supposing that “Michael” is a name for a preeminent archonic will who freely accepted the call to be a manifestor of Goodness itself, i.e., to be a God-bearer.

Why did God make Michael and Lucifer, and the other archons, free to reject him, free to form their nature as self-valorizers rather than theotokoi? It must have been that what was most valuable in creation was precisely the free, i.e., rationally uncoerced, acceptance of that call, the free identification with the Good; i.e., the response to God’s self-manifestation by way of becoming a being that would further manifest the Good, i.e., God himself. That would be a free acceptance of an invitation to participate in the joyful life, i.e., the self-manifestation of God.

Yet that choice would come at the cost of radical abandonment to the will of God, the forgoing of any self-expressive project at odds with that will.

13. The Problem with the Standard Etiology

The problem with tracing the etiology of evil to the fall of one of the archons, say Lucifer, is easily stated: Given their degree of perfection, their standing as the first fruits of God’s self-expression, how *could* any of the archons have made the mistake which constituted their fall?

Here we find two distinguishable but interrelated sources of puzzlement. The first begins with the question: How could the perversion of archonic *rational wills* have arisen, since they are the first and best finite expressions of God’s nature as the preeminent exemplar of Rational Willing? How could the fallen first created wills have *rationally* chosen evil, without that choice being the result of some already present defect in their wills or in their intellects? But if the archons who fell were either antecedently perverted or ignorant of crucial matters that were available by the light of natural reason, how then could they be fully culpable, and, as we are told, unforgivable? Worse, wouldn’t those supposedly explanatory defects be imputable to a defect in God’s own self-manifestation? Still worse, wouldn’t God’s defective self-manifestation then be the original source of evil?

The second source of puzzlement has been given much less play by the tradition. To my mind it is the deeper source. It survives even if the first set of questions is fully put to rest; say by admitting that there is no coercive or decisive reason not to valorize one’s own good above all.

The second source of puzzlement begins with an appropriate appreciation of the elevated status of the archonic intellects—the first created wills are, we must suppose, maximally great natural theologians, since they are ignorant of nothing attainable by the light of natural reason. (Again, otherwise there would have been an antecedent defect in God’s act of self-manifestation, a contradiction given what has been established.) How then could a choice to be evil have appeared to the first created wills to be even so much as a *viable* option? Could they not have reasoned that the choice of subordinating the Good to their own good would immediately make them enemies of the Good, i.e., enemies of God, so that their Creator would be obliged by his nature to immediately undermine any further elaboration of that choice? How could the fallen first created wills reasonably have

expected to *reign anywhere*; that is, to effectively bring about the detailed entailments of their choice, *even in a Hell of universal egoism*?

Knowing what the first created wills, as the greatest natural theologians, seemingly must have known, wouldn't each of the archons be in a position to recognize that there is a coercive reason *not* to choose to be evil? Namely, that any such choice would incur the wrath of God, so that any implementation of that choice would be frustrated, or rendered ineffective. Predictably and obviously, there would be no chance to "reign" in Hell, or anywhere else.

Nor could the first created wills, the archons, these first fruits of creation, have been weak-willed, and certainly not so weak-willed as to choose evil, in the teeth of a coercive reason against making the demonic choice. So the choice that supposedly constituted the Great Fall, it seems, was just not an option for the first created wills. How *could* they have fallen?

Indeed, how could those who remained faithful to the Good have faced any real option of rationally doing otherwise? Why do we credit the archangel Michael for faithfulness to the Good, when given *what he must have known*, it was the only rational option, and so that given *what he was*, his faithfulness was the coercively rational choice, which he could not help but make?

So far, we have located the etiology of evil in the metaphysically evil choice of an archon to refuse the call to be one of the theotokoi, rather than a self-valorizer. But we have yet to make sense of how it was a possible choice.

Once we see how *that* is possible—how God must abjure in order to make it possible as part of securing in creation the very thing he created to secure—we shall be understand just why God can't.

The very thing that makes sense of an archonic etiology of evil, opens up the possibility of a theodicy.

14. The Possibility of Evil as a Condition of Creation

In creating—in freely manifesting his nature as the Eminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Power and Rational Willing—God created powerful, uncoerced, free rational wills, as close to him in nature as their being creatures allow.

God himself has libertarian freedom to create, or alternatively, remain within himself. Therein lies the ground of the contingency of creation. It would thus be a defect in God's self-manifestation if in manifesting his nature he created beings who lacked libertarian freedom. The first created, the "archons", face a choice that God could not face. For God, there is no distinction between affirming his own good and affirming the Good; for he is the Good. But created rational intelligences encounter a fundamental choice of orientation with respect to the Good. Shall they subordinate their own good to the Good, or shall they subordinate the Good to their own good?

In this choice of orientation, the archons have rational freedom, as God did when it came to creation itself. There is no decisive reason on either side. Either choice of fundamental orientation would be rational, and either choice could be lucidly conducted under the guise of the good, i.e., in each choice, intelligible goods are affirmed and sought. How could the self-valorizing choice present itself as an intelligible good to a rational will?

Here it may be helpful to recall a modern thought. Either choice on the part of the archons exploits one or another side of what Henry Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics* called the dualism of practical reason (Sidgwick [1874] 1981).²⁵ As he put it, there is no rationally coercive ground to organize one's life around "the Universal as opposed to around the Egoistic principle", or vice versa. Sidgwick despaired that this meant that "the Cosmos of Duty is reduced to Chaos".²⁶ I agree, if we mean by morality a moral system which omits the offer of grace as part of the invitation to holiness, i.e., being a manifestor of the Good rather than a valorizer of one's own good. Perhaps that is what Sidgwick unwittingly discovered, a radical incoherence in a morality unmoored from an understanding of grace and its relation to the will.

Sidgwick did say that his “Chaos” arose because there was no God who would orchestrate a system of Cosmic Justice to resolve the dualism of practical reason *de facto*, as it were, by offering the Egoist a coercive reason to act as a Universalist. But that is precisely what God does not do.

In the lurid sermons that peppered my youth, Hell, the bottomless, shoreless pit of fire, somehow inhabited by “the worm that dieth not” and the likes of the demonic face-grinder—don’t ask!—was presented as just such a threat. The real “Hell” is not a place or a threat. “Hell” is better understood as a name for the inner condition of the purely self-valorizing will that remains resistant to grace. Sidgwick’s *de jure* dualism of practical reason remains. It is not the sort of thing that could be resolved *de jure* by Divine threats or promises directed at a will’s narrow self-concern.

Given the dualism of practical reason, there is nothing *per se* irrational in lucidly subordinating the Good to one’s own good. *It is just that this is the very definition of having an evil will.* An evil will is not *per se* an irrational will. The fault in such a will is much worse than irrationality. The fault just is that it is a will that places its own good above the Good. Hence the metaphors, inadequately anthropomorphic as they are, of Lucifer’s defiant disobedience, of his overweening self-assertion—“I will scale the heavens, I will set my throne above the Most High”—as Isaiah 14:14 has Lucifer (or is it Nebuchadnezzar II?) put it.

Despite the best attempts of philosophers to show otherwise, orienting one’s life around the Egoistic principle is not *per se* condemnable by natural reason limited to its own domain. It all depends on your power relative to other agents, and your vulnerability relative to other agents. In calling that orientation evil, one is correctly siding with the opposing orientation, but not on grounds that can be made adequate by natural reason, as Sidgwick himself came to conclude.

In originally manifesting his own nature, God’s project is to make beings as perfect in natural reason and will as they can be compatible with their being creatures, and yet have them settle the quality of their wills *utterly freely* by facing the fundamental choice as to whether to subordinate their good to the Good. Not only are the archons not coerced by natural reason to make that choice—the egoistic choice would not *per se* be a naturally irrational choice—but also, and crucially, they must be left uncoerced by any possible natural understanding of the downstream advantages and disadvantages of their choice.

God’s knowledge does not involve foreknowledge of the outcome of genuinely free choices, for those outcomes are not “yet” settled. There is nothing to be known about just how the choice of fundamental orientation on the part of this or that archon will turn out.

Still, God has taken on a great risk in manifesting his nature in creation, for he must know what lucid evil wants—as we now know as a result of many evil human wills tipping their hand throughout human history. *Evil wants self-glorification, domination and emulation of its egoistic maxim on the part of less powerful wills.* In this way, evil diffuses itself, potentially creating a realm of evil.

Why would God take on such a risk of his first creatures making the evil choice of valorizing their own good over the Good? The reason must lie at the heart of God’s self-manifestation. His self-manifestation is not just an extraordinary display to his first creatures, as if they were just a created audience there to appreciate it. It is a standing invitation to their wills, to freely reject the project of self-valorization, and choose holiness, *i.e.*, to be God-bearers in all that they think and do, in that way enter into the Beatific Vision, and experience the joy of God’s own inner life.

That invitation comes in the form of grace. Grace is the invitation to a will to move in the direction of holiness. But the invitation is not coercive; there must be acceptance of the invitation on the part of the will.

It must be then that God, in manifesting himself in creation, aimed for creatures who might freely accept the grace to be God-manifestors, in effect *theotokoi*, and thereby be suitable subjects of the Beatific Vision.

It has all been for the sake of freely accepting, at the cost of one's own self-valorization, the underserved gift of entering into the joy at the heart of God's inner life, the joy of affirming his Goodness, as he himself necessarily does.

The terrible risk of holiness lucidly refused, by creatures as powerful as they can be compatible with being creatures, may have been the adequate but not decisive offsetting reason against creation. If so, therein lies the source of contingency in creation. God's adequate reason for creating, the reason he went with in creating, is his self-manifestation in creatures who themselves might freely choose to manifest his Goodness, within the limitations of their nature.

In identifying the perfect completion of holiness as the Beatific Vision, we must not think of that as a rationally coercive incentive for the will that is yet to choose between self-valorization and holiness. The will that is yet to make that choice finds self-valorization equally rationally compelling, and so finds itself in the condition of facing a momentous choice, with adequate but non-coercive reasons on both sides.

15. The Obvious Worry

Is there not a rationally coercive reason available to each archon to avoid self-valorization, one available prior to any such choice? Given the power of their intellects, wouldn't the archons have immediately arrived at something like this.

(Overriding Negative Incentive) If I subordinate the Good to my own good then I will have made myself the enemy of the Good, who is all powerful, and who will then effectively negate my project of evil, namely the project of seeking self-glorification, domination, and emulation of my maxim by the part of lesser wills, by putting me in a moral playpen, where none of that is actually realized.

No; quite the opposite. Since they have no defect in their reason, the archons would know that if Overriding Negative Incentive were true, then God would have failed to create free beings as perfect as they can be compatible with their being creatures, who then would face the rationally uncoerced choice internal to the point of creation—the choice of becoming God-bearers. And their own self-knowledge would tell them that God did not fail; for there they were.

To elaborate that point, given the archon's undoubted grasp of natural theology, the archons, both those who would be faithful and those who would fall, already knew something which we may model as the conclusion of a discursive argument.

16. The Archons' Deduction from Their Own Situation to God's Abdurance

What Anselm, in *The Fall of the Devil* said of Lucifer is true of the other archons. They are not "obtusae mentis" (dull-witted).²⁷ They have a lucid understanding of their own situation. For example, they are naturally able to know the following propositions:

1. In creating, God was aiming to manifest his own nature as The Good, as Power, as Knowledge and as Uncoerced Rational Willing, and invite them by grace to share in the joy of his inner life, on the constitutive necessary condition of holiness, namely the free, i.e., even rationally uncoerced, subordination of one's own good to the Good,
2. There could be no defect in God's act of self-manifestation, so it must involve creating rationally uncoerced free beings as perfect in power and natural knowledge as they can be compatible with their being creatures,
3. We are such creatures,
4. We will face a rationally uncoerced choice of fundamental orientation; i.e., whether to subordinate our own good to the Good, or vice versa,
5. But then, since God's project in creating us was to create rationally *uncoerced* free beings who would freely choose holiness, if one of us were to subordinate the Good to his own good then God would not effectively negate that being's project of creative self-display,

6. Thus we know that God cannot, consistent with his creative intent, “play-pen” the downstream effects of any archon’s self-valorizing project, such as (say) the joyful self-display of realizing its own universe,
7. That is, we know that God would *abjure* if one of us were to subordinate the Good to his own good. He will not negate that being’s entailed project of employing its creative power in self display. God will allow the full use of that being’s power and might, to do precisely that,
8. To be sure, each of us is now presented with grace, with the invitation to be holy. But this too must be a non-coercive offer, an offer we can *viably* refuse,
9. Only God can create a will, only God can offer non-coercive grace to that will. Only God can exploit material or other functionally equivalent complexity to embody a will that requires embodiment for its operations,
10. So, if we were to subordinate the Good to our own good, if we were to be self-valorizers rather than God-bearers, then the most God can do to interfere with our self-valorizing creations, would be to offer the other created wills he embodies in the universes we create their the non-coercive grace not to adopt the maxim of self-valorization,
11. It is rational to hope that even given the offer of grace, many wills may choose self-glorification, domination, and will hope for the emulation of their self-valorizing maxim on the part of other wills. Likewise, it is rational to hope that given the offer of grace, many wills will move toward holiness,
12. Reality may thus become a battle for the allegiance of wills; in this battle we have an uncoerced free choice as to which side to take,
13. Betting against the acceptance of the offer to grace is not a rational error. If it were, we would not face that choice, for our rational will is an ineffective manifestation of God’s nature,
14. Some of us have the power to create material or other realms in which sufficient complexity appears for the embodiment of a newly created will if God so decides to create such a will,
15. In that case, the project of self-valorization has a reasonable chance of being emulated. Materially embodied wills are especially likely to valorize their own good over the Good, so those of us who chose self-valorization are likely to find in the created material realm, a widespread emulation of our maxim of self-valorization,
16. So, resisting the offer of holiness, in the name of valorizing one’s own good, is a completely viable project.

This archonic deduction is just our way of discursively representing what each archon must have always already naturally known in order to have a *free uncoerced* and non-quistoxic choice, a choice which settles that archon’s basic orientation with respect to the Good.

Thus, the archons who valorize their own good over the Good know they possess an unbreakable non-interference pact, arising from a necessary condition on the very purpose of creation: God’s abjuration. God will not interfere in their created realms except by way of grace’s non-coercive offer to the wills that have been embodied in that realm by God, if any there be.

The archons realize that only God can create wills, and that some wills require for their existence a material, or functionally equivalent, embodiment, to subserve the inputs to, and implement the operations of, their wills. A self-valorizing archon’s creation, however magnificent as a form of self-display, and however much a source of joyful achievement, will be devoid of other wills unless there arises within the archon’s created realm sufficient material, or functionally equivalent, complexity to subserve and implement the operations of some will that requires just such an embodiment.

So, a self-valorizing archon who seeks the emulation on behalf of another will of its maxim—“Let my own good be prioritized over the Good”—will naturally seek to bring about within its created realm just such complexity, as a kind of invitation to God to create, and there embody wills, that cannot exist without embodiment. The archonic invitation is

also a challenge, an opportunity to demonstrate again the ineffectiveness of non-coercive grace, and the viability of self-valorization.

There begins the struggle for the allegiance of wills, the battle between self-valorization and grace.

Why should God take up the challenge, why does he not leave the archons with their lonely realms, or as it might be, their universes? Why engage in a second creation.

First, for the sake of those wills that would not exist but for being originally embodied in the way made possible by the complexities of the archonic realm. But second, in the hope that the developing holiness of the embodied wills so created, will shame the self-valorizing archon into repentance of its choice, into acceptance of grace and subsequent spiritual development. This is the great motif of the recuperation of the fallen archons, a variant of which has been recently revived in Peter Forrest's *Developmental Theism*.²⁸

Here then is the Theodrama of Creation. God's *naturally knowable abjuration* is a necessary condition of his indefective self-manifestation, of his creating fully free beings as perfect in will, power and intellect as they can be, compatible with being creatures, creatures who then face the rationally uncoerced choice as between holiness, or self-valorization.

God's abjuration follows from the point of his creation, namely his manifesting his glory in and to creatures who might in their turn *freely choose holiness*, that is making themselves manifestations of God's Goodness. That is why he cannot intervene or prevent, but only offer his grace.

Holiness cannot be rationally coerced. Nor can it be waived as a condition of the success of the second movement of God's creation, namely luring his creatures by grace into accepting the invitation to enter into his inner life. Here the "cannot" arises *from the nature of holiness*, and *from the nature of what it is to enter into God's inner life*. In that sense, the "cannot" represents not a limitation on God's power, but a limitation on what is metaphysically possible.

That is the etiology of evil. Moral and then natural evil originally arises because of the rational rejection of God's non-coercive offer, via grace, of holiness, the internal necessary condition of entering into the joy of his inner life.

17. The Theodrama of Redemption

What does any of that have to do with us? At best it depicts us, along with other animal wills, as being embodied on a planet in a malefic material universe that should not have been—a universe that is the product of the self-display of some enormously powerful archon who chose to valorize its own good over the Good.

Being embodied is essential to us; we owe our present existence to our animal embodiments. And those embodiments owe their existence to evolution, which in its turn owes its existence to the cooling of the Earth within a certain range, and that owes its existence to . . . and so on, until we arrive at the creation of a material universe that should not have been. Doesn't that mean *we should not have been*?

Worse, from the point of view of moving toward holiness, our wills are maimed by our hominid embodiment. Hominid wills are directed at their own species-relative good, and at reproducing the species, and the valorization of the kin structure that is the local and familiar source of reproduction and support of the young of the species. And even among the primates, we are remarkably status-obsessed, second only perhaps to the chimpanzees. In all these ways, we habitually subordinate seeking the Good to our own securing of species-relative goods—the phenomenon described by Martin Luther, when he wrote "Homo incurvatus in se"—the human being is turned in upon itself. We are naturally disposed to put the finger on the scale in favor of ourselves, and ours. Given our hominid embodiment, we are singularly ill-suited to answer the call to holiness.

Still worse, there is something in the archonic deduction that should trouble us. It lies in the nature of evil to want self-glorification, domination *and emulation of evil's maxim, on the part of lesser wills*. This is how evil diffuses itself, by seducing other lesser wills into solidifying themselves around the evil maxim: let my good be valorized over all other

Good. And we are such lesser wills. Has God, by abjuring, then simply abandoned us to the depredations of the evil ones?

By exploring the Theodrama of Creation, and indicating how evil came into the world, we now have an *etiology* of evil. But without an exploration of the Theodrama of Redemption we have as yet no *theodicy* of evil, and so no complete response to Sterba-like moral qualms about God's First, and Second, Creation.

18. Should God Have Created, Given That Creation Required Him to Abjure?

God, though omniscient, i.e., knowing all that it is metaphysically possible to know, does not have foreknowledge, or middle knowledge, of the outcome of libertarian free choices, including those of the archons. For antecedent to the choice there is no outcome to be known. (Cf. Open Theism.)

Nor need we accept the doctrine of Divine concurrence, namely that an evil free choice requires God's upholding it in existence. His abjuration is *inter alia* the renunciation of any capacity to veto the existence of certain choices, and their implied projects. That proposition is also derivable from the premises of the archon's deduction from their knowledge of what God, in creating, wanted. For otherwise, the archons would lack the rational option of self-valorization. For then choice of holiness, of free self-constitution as a God-bearer, in response to non-coercive grace, would not be available to them. There would be no rationally uncoerced choice to valorize the Good over one's own good. Yet that is a necessary condition of entering into the inner life of God. And I am supposing that this is the telos of God's self-manifestation, of the reason from which he created. He created in order to manifest his inner life to his creatures by sharing it with them. But again, the possibility of their sharing his inner life has a necessary condition; their free, uncoerced turning towards the Good in a radical way, so that their manifestation of the Good takes priority over their own good.

The necessary condition for God's direct or first creation being indefective as an inviting manifestation of his own nature to his creatures, and so *the necessary condition for creation itself*, is that he knowably abjures from acting to decisively prevent the choice of self-valorization, and from decisively frustrating the characteristic projects of the self-valorizers.

Knowledge is factive. So God *does* abjure, i.e., limits his power to intervene to frustrate the projects of the self-valorizers. Consequently, after creation he *cannot* prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Importantly, his non-prevention of "horrendous evil consequences" of immoral actions does not amount to his *permitting* those consequences.

Is abjuration *itself* a kind of permission for all the acts that would not have occurred without it? I do not see that. Two parents may reasonably abjure from the strict oversight of their 16-year-old son. Suppose the son purchases a baseball bat and uses it to bash a schoolmate. A teacher who could intervene looks on and does nothing. The teacher's failure to intervene is, or is at least morally equivalent to, his permitting the act to occur. He could have intervened, but he let it happen. In that sense, he permitted the bashing of the schoolmate to take place. But the parents have not *permitted* the bashing of the schoolmate. What they permitted was scope for their son's free action not hemmed in by their oversight.

However, and here we come to the nub of the matter, in some variants of the case, the parents may be highly blameworthy. Say the son had known psychopathic tendencies. Then they had no right to abjure, no right to allow him scope for destructive action not controlled, or "play-penned", by them. Still, the object of appropriate blame is not that they *permitted* the bashing, but that in abjuring, they wrongly took a significant *risk* of such things occurring. Taking that risk is the morally indefensible thing.

This is where the argument against God's existence *might* be effectively pressed—(i) through (v) comprise an inconsistent set of propositions. Should we not reject (i)?

- (i) God exists and God is the creator of original contingent reality,
- (ii) Given the reason that God created *from*, and what form God's creation therefore must take, creation essentially involves both creating free wills and God's own abjuring

- from decisive intervention, on behalf of the good, in their self-constituting choices and the entailed projects,
- (iii) The act of creating a powerful free will whose action is unrestricted by God's own decisive intervention on behalf of the good is morally indefensible,
 - (iv) Therefore creation is morally indefensible,
 - (v) God is free of any moral fault.

Something needs to be said about (ii). Couldn't God have settled for less than giving his creatures the dangerous opportunity of freely choosing holiness, the necessary condition of entering into his inner life? Could he not instead have created an impressive range of creatures which manifested all the great powers enumerated above, except for libertarian freedom. Presented with the Good they would have no viable choice not to prioritize their life around it.

Such creatures would not make a mistake with respect to value, but they would not be capable of satisfying the condition for entering into God's inner life. They would, none of them, be free self-valorizers with all the potential for self-indulgent, and destructive display. By the same token, they would, none of them, be free God-bearers.

There would have been nothing resembling holiness, but only universal rational admiration for the Good.

What then would be defective about that form of self-manifestation?

Creation itself would then just have been an enormously impressive display on God's part, with God's creatures being mere admiring onlookers—ideal *pets*, as it were. That creation would have been an impressive Divine performance, but not the expression of Divine love. God's self-manifestation was loving precisely in this: it took the form of a non-coercive invitation to enter into his inner life.

God, we are told in the first epistle of John, is Love. In the present context, I take that to mean that because of his nature, God's self-manifestation could only take the risky form of the invitation to holiness, addressed to beings with libertarian freedom, who could without any rational failing reject the invitation to enter into the joy of his inner life in the name of valorizing their own good above all else.

Then there is the import of God's Plan B—the Theodrama of Redemption—which offers all, including the victims of significant and even horrendous evil, the non-coercive grace to move towards holiness, i.e., to become God-bearers rather than self-valorizers, and thereby enter into the Beatific Vision, participation in the inner life of God, to the degree that they do become holy.

So now, the premise required to lock in logically the moral proof that God does not exist would be something like this:

It all should not have been: Considering the scope of significant and especially horrendous evil, no all-good being would abjure even if there would be no creation without that being's abjuration.

That is not clearly the correct moral reaction. It is hardly a reaction required by obvious principles of morality, especially given the Theodrama of Redemption.

19. Why the "Second" Creation?

In what sense are *we* God's creatures? Is it only that we are creatures of his creatures, as with the various breeds of *Canis familiaris*? No, God directly creates, and finds available embodiments for, our wills.

The natural workings of the Demiurge's material universe eventually generate our bodies. Doesn't the internal development and operation of those bodies metaphysically guarantee that we come to be embodied in them?

No, that reductionist view of the body-mind relation is deeply dubious on empirical, and philosophical grounds (Johnston Forthcoming). Moreover, in accord with the long-standing Christian rejection of Traducianism—the doctrine that the human will is created by sex alone—I take it that *only God can create a will*. So, I take it that God finds in the lineage

of the hominids enough neural complexity to provide for the embodiment of independently created human wills. God creates and embodies each embodied will upon the appearance of an adequate material embodiment for that will. The generation of a body with sufficient neural complexity is but an “invitation” for God to create a will so embodied.

Elsewhere, by way of providing a general theory of embodiment, I have argued that although we are essentially embodied wills, our present embodiment is not essential to us (Johnston Forthcoming).²⁹ In finding embodiments in this material universe for our created wills, God places us in jeopardy of being buffeted by the wind and the waves of matter, but that is the condition of our coming into being and beginning our own movement toward the inner life of God, through these embodiments and future embodiments other than these.

If a material universe had a form which offered no prospects of embodied wills moving toward the inner life of God under the encouragement of his grace, then there would be no point in God’s accepting any natural invitation to create and embody wills in that universe.

Importantly for the present account, that places a lower limit on how bad, how antipathetic to spiritual development, the work of a universe-creating archon can be, if wills are to be embodied in that archon’s created universe. There must be a chance of the effective workings of grace, if there are to be embodied wills found in that universe. Not being capable of creating wills, no archon can create an irredeemable hell of suffering.³⁰

Still, God has taken on a great moral risk in creating our wills and embodying them in hominid form. For as we know all too well, with our hominid nature comes a great propensity for reactive, and worse, calculated violence (Wrangham 2019). Even if the fallen archons cannot be play-penned, why can’t *we* be play-penned, in effect rendered relatively harmless, and so left incapable of doing so much evil?

The objection is that even if the present account exculpates God when it comes to natural evil, it does not explain why God does not intervene in order to limit the destructive effects of human moral evil.

The answer lies in what lucid evil wants, something we know as a result of many evil human wills, throughout human history, tipping their hand. *Evil wants self-glorification, domination, and the emulation of its egoistic maxim on the part of other wills.* In this way, evil diffuses itself, potentially creating a realm of evil wills, those who share the maxim in their own de se way: let *my* good take priority over the Good.

That, I take it, is part of the point of the Demiurgic creation of the material universe. It is not just a self-satisfying display of the power to realize a gargantuan material realm. It is something much more sinister—a necessary first move in the battle for the allegiance of materially embodied wills. That allegiance is not a matter of idle devil worship. It results in the diffusing of the evil maxim through the community of embodied wills, in part by way of the demoralizing character of their evolved destructiveness.

That is an inherent part of the goal of the fallen archons’ original choice. They battle for the allegiance of embodied wills, a battle in which the destructive and demoralizing character of the moral evil of those embodied wills works to produce a realm of evil, a realm in which their maxim “Let my good be valorized above all else, even the Good itself” is emulated. That suffices for evil to triumph; its minions need not worship the good of their masters in order to become blind to the Good.

Given that part of the inherent goal of the fallen archons who chose self-valorization, then for God to play-pen us then would be, impossibly, to renege on his original abjuration, the very thing that made for free acceptance, or alternatively rejection, of holiness.

Though having others emulate their maxim is part of the inherent goal of the fallen archons, our being among the targets of that goal is conditional on our existing; i.e., on God creating a will which he then embodies.

God could have turned down the offer to put embodied wills in such jeopardy. Then we would not have existed, we would never have faced the gracious offer of entering into the inner life of God. There would have been no Second Creation.

The moral indictment of God now turns on the claim that there should not have been a Second Creation, at least not one involving human beings.

But of course, that claim will not be found plausible by those who have encountered the transforming effects of grace in their own lives, and who hope for growth in grace in their present embodiment, and those to come.

Indeed, God's taking the risk of the Second Creation is an absolute precondition of everything we value.

Should he not have taken that risk, even given his redemptive plan?

20. Is the Possibility of Profanation a Decisive Reason against Any Creation?

By a profanation I mean a great moral wrong that should not have been, no matter what subsequently happens. Pure consequentialists who make the wrongness of an act turn on its total consequences deny that there are profanations in that sense. I reject that view, and with it an associated view of the effects of redemption.

That is, I reject the idea of redemption being a compensation so great that the consequentialist calculation obliterates the "should not have been". Imagine a crazed pseudo-believer who murders a child immediately after her baptism, in order to guarantee her entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. That is a profanation, it absolutely should not have been, even if the intended result *were* to be secured.

Great moral wrongs remain what they were; they are not made right or acceptable by redemption. Even so, the victims of such wrongs can be made more than whole by being led to the Beatific Vision, perhaps through many embodiments and exposures to grace.

Important here is that God did not allow, rather than prevent, any particular profanation. True, he could have "prevented" creation and all that it involves. He could have remained within himself. There would have been no profanations. There would have been no creatures. And there would have been no sharing of the joy of his inner life with his creatures.

Recall the ground of the contingency of creation. God had an adequate reason to create, one that included a plan to redeem them if his creatures go badly wrong. He also had an adequate reason to remain. Was it the risk of evil triumphing?

Should God not have created? Did the possibility of profanations arising within creation constitute a decisive reason not to create?

Sterba, by insisting that he has a "logical argument against the existence of God" has implicitly taken on the burden of explaining why, if the God described here existed, there would have been a *decisive* moral reason for him not to create, and in particular not to create us. My challenge to Sterba may now be simply stated: Articulate an obvious moral principle which implies that conclusion.

In doing that it is not enough to emphasize the range and depth of evil. It itself, emphasizing that may amount to no more than filling out God's *adequate* reason to remain within himself, the other part of the ground of the contingency of creation.

That would be the thing that made creation closer than a close call.

21. A Weak God?

Sterba, at the end of his book, considers an objection to his whole approach: "Might it not help to avoid the conclusion of my argument against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God to hypothesize a limited god?"

He replies:

Unfortunately, such a god would have to be either extremely immoral or extremely weak. Such a god would either have to be extremely immoral, more immoral than all of our historical villains taken together, because he would have permitted all the horrendous evil consequences of those villains when he could easily have prevented them without permitting a greater evil or failing to provide us with some greater good. Alternatively, such a god, while morally good, would have to be extremely weak either because he is logically incapable of preventing the evil consequences that we are only causally incapable of preventing or because he is logically incapable of providing us with goods to which we are not

entitled without permitting us to suffer especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, something that we ourselves are only sometimes causally incapable of doing. Surely then no useful purpose would be served by hypothesizing such a limited god who would either *be so much more evil* than all our greatest villains or, while moral, would *be so much less powerful* than ourselves.³¹

Sterba mentions Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne as defenders of a God of limited power. (Whitehead 1926; Hartshorne 1967). There is, of course, much more going on in both Whitehead and Hartshorne.

God never ceases to be omnipotent, i.e., capable of doing anything metaphysically possible. He is omnipotent, but because of what creation understood as indefective self-manifestation metaphysically requires—his knowable abjuration—he is unable to do what is then impossible, i.e., to help by directly changing the wind and the waves, or by directly staying the hand of the evildoer. That is the extent of his abjuration; the extent of what is required for him to manifest his nature in and to his creatures.

Though God in creating necessarily abjures, God is not powerless to help us resist evil. He continually offers non-coercive grace to our wills; grace which, if accepted by a will, can lead that will to change the winds and the waves, and stay the hands of evildoers, for the sake of the Good.

That's entirely consistent with the archonic "deduction" and hence with the scope of God's abjuration. Especially concerning for us is that the fallen archons appear to like their chances. The victory in the battle for the allegiance of wills is not a foregone conclusion.

Shall the non-coercive offer of grace be indefinitely resisted by enough of us to make God's redemptive project a failure in the end? I hope that this is not true, and that by the power of this grace, perhaps in our case over many embodiments or lifetimes, all will be brought to share in God's inner life to the extent that they have become holy.

God has placed his cause in our hands. To that extent his "weakness" has become commensurate with ours. Such is the cost of his loving invitation to enter into his inner life by the path of deepening holiness. Nevertheless grace, the sufficient means to move toward holiness, i.e., God-Bearing, is continually on offer. Grace bids us welcome. Its message in the face of our own sense of defeat, guilt and self-accusation is "Who made you, but I?"³²

What would it be for us to be God-bearers, to have a will oriented around manifesting God's Goodness? It is not a hard scholarly question. Look to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5; 1–12), and to Paul's paean to love in 1 Corinthians (13; 4–8). Of course, the thing one finds when one is presented with that ideal form of life is that it is not within one's natural power to be like that. Grace is required for it to be even so much as an option.

The case I have made here, turning as it does on grace and its effects, perhaps over many embodiments or lifetimes, is only a sliver of what needs to be said. I have dwelt only on the interior workings of grace in turning an individual will toward the Good. For an individual, the signs of grace are joyful gratefulness for what one has already been given, compassion for all who share our fallen condition, turning up for those in urgent need, and trust in Goodness, even *in extremis*.

That said, the great collective task is finding or forming communities built around sources of grace. The reverberation of grace within a face-to-face community is what makes God-bearing visible and viable. The genuine grace-based communities are those whose members have already signed up for the healing of the broken world by manifesting God's Goodness.

It is a litmus test for genuine religion, whether or not it calls itself religion. And it is day-to-day work, mostly involving falling and getting back up again for the sake of others.

22. In Conclusion

In order to arrive at a systematic answer to the question posed by Sterba's clarifying and ambitious arguments, I have worked to provide an alternative to the theologically jejune specter that many in the analytic philosophy of religion have called "God". Doing that required developing a much more detailed account of what God is, and of what he

is up to in creating. I have also hinted at the significance of Plan B, the Theodrama of Redemption.

Given this background, I do not see how to construct a viable deductive argument from clear moral truths and the facts concerning evil against the existence of God, understood as Existence, Goodness, Knowledge, Power and Free Rational Will Itself, the One who contingently created to manifest his nature by having his creatures freely enter into the joy of his inner life, by the necessary path of holiness, i.e. freely becoming God-bearers rather than self-valorizers.

Though I suspect Sterba may disagree, I say that creation, as it is here explained, was—even given its risks—morally legitimate, particularly in the light of God’s redemptive plan. Saying that does not involve the denial of an obvious moral truth. By my lights, we therefore do not have a “logical” argument from evil, in Sterba’s intended sense.

Epistemically speaking, we are back in the old rag and bone shop. Humanly speaking, we are left with of the comparative plausibility and the comparative inspirational force of total interpretations of what it is all about. The worry about the uselessness of expected utility maximization as a rational guide in action remains in place.

Even so, I take Sterba to have accomplished something significant. He has refuted *a god*, a god whose creating does not significantly change the scope of what is metaphysically possible. Thereby, I think he has succeeded in providing an argument against further consideration of the theologically jejune specter that has haunted analytic philosophy of religion since 1955. I mean the thing bequeathed to us by John Mackie’s argument in “Evil and Omnipotence” concerning the “Omni-god”-creator of the material universe, a being who is all-good and all-powerful and *for some undisclosed reason* creates a malefic material universe with extensive evil in it (Mackie 1955).

That is a god without an evident Plan A, let alone a Plan B.

God *is* all-good and all-powerful. But he is also the God of a specific creation. And he has a particular plan of redemption. It is to such a God—to his reason for creating, to what he accordingly created, and to the possibility of redemption from the effects of misused freedom on the part of his first and second creatures—that philosophy of religion might now look.

What I have offered, simply in that exploratory spirit, might be termed a *Primordial Free-Will Theodicy*. Creation is God’s free, rationally uncoerced, self-manifestation, and it has a doubled aspect. Its first movement is the bringing into being of created wills, its second is the invitation to them via grace to deploy their libertarian freedom to enter into the joy of God’s own inner life. An internal necessary condition of the acceptance of that offer is holiness, the free uncoerced subordination of one’s good to the Good.

For the two movements to succeed, God must knowably abjure. Specifically, he must knowably intend to let those archons who choose to valorize their own good over the Good have free reign in the use of their creative powers, even up to not interfering in any of their created universes, except by way of grace’s effect on the wills, if any, that God then embodies in those universes.

God, consistent with his aim in creating, cannot play-pen his first creatures. They know that. Though only God can create a will, there is the possibility that a Demiurge creates a universe where possible wills that require some embodiment or other could find suitable embodiments. If God then creates and embodies a will in such a universe, the Goodness of God guarantees that however things go for that will in that embodiment, the concrete offer of grace will continually remain. This aspect of the Theodrama of Redemption is, I believe, a source of great hope.

For it means that for each of us, there will always be a path to our true home.³³

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Sterba follows Marilyn Adams in using the term “horrendous evil” for evil that renders the life of its victim not worth living, absent compensation in an afterlife. [Adams \(1989\)](#).
- 2 For the canonical statement of the free will defense, see [Plantinga \(1978\)](#).
- 3 ([Plantinga 1974](#)) develops an idea of individual essence, on which the essential specification of a possible individual is available to God. In ([Johnston 2019](#)) I argue that this does not reinstate the thought that God created us because he loved us before we existed.
- 4 As is evident already in the *Parmenides*, the principle needs to be restricted to be plausible. For the ground of being dirt is a mere arrangement of matter, while the ground of being a bed is a mere arrangement of matter in conformity with the will of the person that made it, or designed the machine that made it. There is no Form of dirt or of the bed. What is the required restriction, and why does the restriction hold? A guess—any predication where the arrangement matter is not essentially part of the ground of its truth, in the sense that there are cases where the predicate applies, in which this is not so, has a ground partly in terms of participation in a Form.
- 5 As with spatiotemporal regions and expanses of color, Forms are *particulars not properties*. Properties—understood as things picked out by canonical property designators of the form “the property of being F” are mere reifications of the corresponding predications. We can do without them, and simply work with real predicables, such as color, pitch, shape, size, charge, spin, location, etc. See ([Johnston MS1 Forthcoming](#)) for a full discussion of the consequences of recognizing that properties are “pleonastic” entities.
- 6 This is the conviction Aquinas aims to defend in Book 1 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Chapters 75–86. Still, there is an undeniable tendency shown in those very chapters, toward implying that creating *something or other* is necessary for God.
- 7 For a fourth way in which God could have rational freedom to create, or alternatively to remain within himself, see [Johnston \(2019\)](#).
- 8 If one has a prima facie reason to do something, then unless the prima facie reason is able to be undermined, i.e., shown not to be a reason at all, that reason is then a pro tanto reason, i.e., one that contributes to a complete case for doing the thing in question. Pro tanto reasons differ from mere prima facie reasons in that they retain their force, even if outweighed, whereas mere prima facie reasons may be undermined and so may make no contribution to a complete objective case for performing the act. A complete case for performing an act may be compatible with having rational options, i.e., there may be other acts in the choice situation, such that the agent has a complete case for performing them as well. So, complete reasons may not thereby determine the rational will; they need not be decisive reasons.
- 9 For a useful discussion of the notion of ontological priority, see [Fine \(1995\)](#).
- 10 Which is not to say that his act of creation was not loving. It conferred on his creatures, i.e. wills both unembodied and embodied, the possibility of entering into the joy of his inner life.
- 11 *Baltimore Catechism No. 2* Question 3, at Project Gutenberg, and Vatican I, in its characteristically blunt tone, declares something like manifestationism de fide: “If anyone denies . . . that the world was created for *the glory of God*, let him be cut off [from the community of the faithful and the saving grace of the sacraments].” Session 3 of Vatican I, *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith: On God the Creator of All Things*, Canon 5.
- 12 On how it could be that this is not our only embodiment, see the account of the mind-body problem in [Johnston \(Forthcoming\)](#).
- 13 On divine hiddenness, see [Schellenberg \(2015\)](#). I believe that the materials for a reply to Schellenberg are to be found below. God has to be hidden, with the crucial exception of grace, for redemption to be what it is, the freely rejectible invitation to approach the inner life of God on the internal necessary condition of approaching holiness.
- 14 What of those magnificent images of deep space, first from the Hubble Space telescope, and now from the James Webb Space telescope, which NASA has provided for public consumption. Aren’t they beautiful, even awe-inspiring? Yes they are. They were selected by NASA from hundreds of thousands of shots, and then photoshopped for public consumption. No one should think the original images of deep space are fakes. It is just that the colors have been added either for artistic reasons, or for aiding in the scientific interpretation of the original grey scale images in question. There is nothing dodgy about that, it is just inevitable. The images are originally in the grey scale because black and white cameras have more resolution than RGB-color registering cameras, which disregard a good deal visible light in reconstructing colored images. The Webb telescope specializes in the infrared range. What color are the things omitting such infrared radiation? There is no viable scientific answer. Pythons use a kind of infrared vision to “see” prey based on the heat they omit. What color are their thermal images? The pythons are not telling us, and even if they did, we would only have analogical knowledge of the colors in question. Though we sometimes see heat rising, we have no idea of what it is like to have a visual system that is significantly sensitive to infrared radiation. If we consider the appearance of the humanly visible light emitted by the stars, dust and clouds of gas in deep space, the color range produced by sampling that light with the human retina would be in the whitish beige range. That is not exactly an ugly palette, but it is a bit drab when it comes to motivating Congress to maintain NASA’s huge budget.
- 15 See the “ode to joy” at the end of [Johnston \(2014\)](#).

- 16 This is metaphysical goodness, i.e., having the perfections appropriate to the kind of thing you are. The archons' initial freedom leaves the question of their moral goodness ontologically open, to be determined by their fundamental choice.
- 17 In the Eastern churches, "*Theotókos*" is a title given to Mary, the human being regarded as the preeminent exemplar of holiness, abandoning, in response to the Annunciation, all prospects of a self-valorizing life, in order to take on her offered role in salvation history, including seeing her son savagely beaten and bleeding to death upon the cross. It is, among other things, a wonderful pun. For she is also taken to have been a God-bearer in an utterly literal way.
- 18 Gregory, *Homilia* 34.8 (PL 76.1250): "Sciendum quoque quod angelorum vocabulum, nomen est officii, non naturae."
- 19 The context in which Paul uses that term does have the ominous implication that some of them are our spiritual enemies, that they are dark powers that work to occlude God. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the archons (the Greek is ἄρχοντες), against those princes of this world, those cosmic powers of darkness that are the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." *Ephesians* 6: 12.
- 20 See the 2005 St. Petersburg translation of ([Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 2005](#), p. 127).
- 21 To adapt a term from the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.
- 22 For a brilliant exploration of the early Christian development of this idea, see ([Litwa 2021](#)). Upon reframing the whole question of Marcionism, and defending Marcion against his orthodox opponents, Litwa introduces the term "negative demiurgy" to describe the views of Marcionite and Sethian Christians. Litwa writes:
Negative demiurgy, I think, should not be understood as the central idea of a separate religion or religious phenomenon. Instead, I take it as a particular view possible in several discrete traditions. It is, to be sure, a minority position in the Abrahamic traditions. Yet it should not be left unstudied, not only since it is important for early Christian history and the history of biblical interpretation, but also because it is alive and well in modern times.
- 23 For an account of embodiment in terms of the relations of subserving and implementing, see [Johnston \(Forthcoming\)](#).
- 24 As [King \(2009\)](#) argues, "gnosticism" is not a very useful scholarly term.
- 25 ([Sidgwick \[1874\] 1981](#)). For an attempt to restore the "Cosmos of Duty" within the context of "a non-religious ethics" see the argument against the self-interest theory in Part 3 of [Parfit \(1984\)](#). For an account of why it fails see [Johnston \(1992\)](#).
- 26 Sidgwick, op. cit. p 473.
- 27 See the Schmitt translation of Anselm's *De Casu Diaboli*, [Anselm \(1946\)](#)
- 28 Peter [Forrest \(2007\)](#), best read in conjunction with [Bergmann et al. \(2011\)](#).
- 29 See [Johnston \(2020, Forthcoming\)](#) for an account of what we would have to be for ethical life to be viable.
- 30 What of the suffering of non-human animals? If they are embodied wills, do they not then deserve embodiments other than these? See [Johnston MS2 Forthcoming](#).
- 31 [Sterba \(2019\)](#), p 192. Here it seems that Sterba's considerations against a weak God do not have the required *logical* character to meet the standard of deductive proof Sterba has set himself. "Surely, no useful purpose." Surely? With a credence of 1?
- 32 Cf. George Herbert's poem *Love Bade Me Welcome*, which some have found to be a door to grace. Others may find the door more inviting, thanks to Ralph Vaughn Williams' musical setting of the poem in his *Five Mystical Songs*. Myself, I prefer the poem.
- 33 Thanks to Lara Buchak, David Builes, Andrew Chignell, Marcus Gibson, Sherif Girgis, Alex Kerr, Harvey Lederman, Sarah-Jane Lesle, Daniel Rubio, Gideon Rosen and to members of the audience at my 2021 Keynote Address at the inaugural conference of the Princeton Project in the Philosophy of Religion, for helpful questions and suggestions. Special thanks to James Sterba for helping me see the ambitious scope of his argument, and to Gabriel Citron for illuminating correspondence concerning the similarities and differences between God's abjuration as I see it and the Divine *tzimtzum* described in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1989. Horrendous Evils and The Goodness of God. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 63: 297–323. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Anselm. 1946. *De casu diaboli. Opera omnia* 1. Edited by F. S. Schmitt. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Bergmann, Michael, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea, eds. 2011. *Divine Evil: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit. 1995. Ontological Dependence. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95: 269–90. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Forrest, Peter. 2007. *Developmental Theism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hartshorne, Charles. 1967. *A Natural Theology for Our Time*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Johnston, Mark. 1992. Reasons and Reductionism. *Philosophical Review* 101: 589–618. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Johnston, Mark. 2009. *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Johnston, Mark. 2014. Is Life a Ponzi Scheme? *Boston Review*, January 2.
- Johnston, Mark. 2019. Why Did the One Not Remain Within Itself? *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 9: 106–64.
- Johnston, Mark. 2020. Is Hope for Another Life Rational? In *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Paul Draper. Oxfordshire: Routledge.

- Johnston, Mark. Forthcoming. Surviving Death, Again. *TheoLogica*.
- Johnston MS1. Forthcoming. The Property Mistake. In *Objects and Properties*. Edited by Alex Moran. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston MS2. Forthcoming. On the Basis of Morality: Will in a World of Species Relative Value. *submitted book-length manuscript*.
- King, Karen L. 2009. *The Secret Revelation of John*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Litwa, M. David. 2021. *The Evil Creator*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mackie, John. 1955. Evil and Omnipotence. *Mind* 64: 200–12. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1978. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy.
- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. 2005. *Jacob's Ladder*. St. Petersburg: Amfora.
- Schellenberg, John L. 2015. *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sidgwick, Henry. 1981. *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. London: Hackett. First published 1874.
- Sterba, James P. 2019. *Is A Good God Logically Possible?* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1926. *Religion in the Making*. New York: Macmillan.
- Wrangham, Richard. 2019. *The Goodness Paradox: The Strange Relation Between Virtue and Violence in Human Evolution*. Rome: Pantheon.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.