

## God and Evil

The world contains *much* moral wrongdoing and *much* suffering. Is this what one would expect if a perfectly good God is in control of the world? Many people think not. This is the problem of evil, in a nutshell.

The problem of evil is generally considered the most important objection to traditional theism, the belief that there is exactly one God who is almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good. “Evil” here refers to badness, as in “Bad things happen to good people.” And we can distinguish two general types of evil (in the sense of badness). First, moral evil, i.e., the wrongdoing for which humans are responsible (e.g., murder, theft, assault) and the harm or suffering that results from it. Note that both the wrong action and the resulting harm or suffering count as evils by this definition. Second, so-called natural evil, i.e., the harm or suffering that results from non-human factors, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, mudslides, extreme temperatures, diseases, animal attacks, and so on. Note that the harm or suffering is what counts as bad here, not the cause thereof. Thus, if a hurricane occurs in the middle of the ocean and no one is harmed, the event does not count as a natural evil.

### Rowe’s Formulation

A well-known critic of theism, William Rowe, has offered the following succinct formulation of the problem of evil, one which focuses on suffering in particular:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. [So,] There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. <sup>1</sup>

Why accept premise (2)? Consider an example. Suppose you have been seriously injured and a physician knows she could heal you in either of two ways: (a) simply by having you take one pill that has no harmful side effects or (b) by performing invasive surgery which would involve much post-operative pain over several months. A physician who opted for (b) in these circumstances would rightly be regarded as morally flawed—definitely not “wholly good.” In the light of examples such as this, (2) seems quite plausible.

Rowe’s defense of premise (1) has become a focal point in philosophical discussions of the problem of evil:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. <sup>2</sup>

Clearly, an almighty God could prevent the fawn’s suffering, e.g., by painlessly euthanizing the fawn. What greater good would be lost if God did that? Theists have struggled to locate plausible

answers to such questions. Of course, premise (1) can be defended by many examples involving human suffering too. To put it mildly, it is hard to believe that every case of child abuse is necessary for some greater good; and the same can be said about every instance of a serious injury and every case of a dread disease.

### **Types of Theistic Responses**

Theists may respond to the problem of evil in at least four basic ways. First, they can offer a theodicy, i.e., they can suggest reasons God has, or might have, for allowing evil and suffering. We'll consider some theodicies momentarily.

Second, theists may offer the "overrider" response, i.e., they might simply admit that the suffering and evil in the world count as evidence against theism, but insist that this evidence against theism is overridden by other evidence that favors theism. Of course, this response is only as good as the evidence for theism. And a discussion of the case for God's existence is beyond the scope of this paper.

Third, many theists are so-called "skeptical theists," i.e., they call into question the assumption that we humans would be likely to know God's reasons for allowing suffering, assuming God has such reasons. We humans are perhaps a bit like a novice chess player who cannot fathom why a chess master has made a certain move. The novice would be foolish to reason thus: "I see no good reason for the chess master to move his rook *there*; hence, the chess master has no good reason to move his rook *there*." Similarly, because God is omniscient and the world is very complex, we would be foolish to infer that God has no good reasons for allowing suffering since we are unable to conceive of any such reasons.

Skeptical theism is not without plausibility, but it is open to some important objections. First, Christian theism is a worldview and a worldview is supposed to help us make sense of our lives and of our place in the world. And while no worldview can explain everything, failing to explain a major feature of our experience, such as suffering, is a serious deficit, especially if there are other worldviews that can explain such phenomena well. Thus, the most plausible versions of skeptical theism claim only that we should be skeptical about our ability to grasp God's reasons for allowing *every* instance of evil and/or the *total amount* of evil. These versions of skeptical theism can be combined with other responses to the problem of evil, e.g., with theodicies that offer explanations of much (but not all) evil. Second, skeptical theism is arguably unduly skeptical. From a Christian point of view, the list of beings who might conceivably benefit from the suffering of Rowe's fawn is in fact rather short: (a) God, (b) human beings, (c) non-human animals, and (d) non-human created intelligences (either angelic or extraterrestrial).<sup>3</sup> And it is extremely difficult to see how any of these entities could possibly benefit from the suffering of Rowe's fawn. The suggestion that God may see such a benefit seems far-fetched. In general, highly implausible claims cannot be defended simply by appealing to God's omniscience. Imagine someone saying, "Torturing the innocent seems wrong to most people, but it may well be right for reasons known to God." Such an appeal to omniscience can hardly be taken seriously. So, while it seems reasonable to suppose that we humans may not always be able to understand why God permits certain evils, the appeal to divine omniscience and human epistemic limitation, all by itself, hardly seems an adequate response to the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, theists might offer the comparative response, i.e., they might argue that although theism does not explain every case or type of evil, the main alternatives to theism also falter in explaining evil *in terms consistent with their philosophical underpinnings*; hence the problem of

evil is not a good reason to reject theism in favor of the main alternative views. The comparative response is illustrated below in the case of philosophical naturalism.

### Popular Theodicies

Let us now turn to some theodicies that have seemed plausible to many. I will argue that these theodicies are seriously deficient, but they merit careful scrutiny.

*The Afterlife Theodicy: the joys of heaven will outweigh or compensate for the sufferings of this earthly life.* The main problem with this theodicy is that it does not tell us *why* God allows us to suffer in this earthly life; and this is what a theodicy must do. To see the problem here, imagine a husband who neglects his wife for many years and then suddenly begins to treat her nicely. While the change in his behavior is good, it obviously doesn't excuse the years of neglect. A further problem with the afterlife theodicy is that it seems to assume universalism, the idea that everyone will go to heaven eventually. If some people who suffer will not go to heaven, then obviously their suffering will not be compensated by the joys of heaven.

*The Counterpart Theodicy: if good exists, then evil must also exist. Good and evil are logical opposites; the one cannot exist without the other.* As a rough analogy, suppose construction workers build a skyscraper. The skyscraper is unavoidably big relative to, say, its first floor. A big building unavoidably has small areas within it. So, the idea here is that if God creates something good, then God also unavoidably creates something evil.

There are at least three problems with the Counterpart Theodicy (CT). First, it is inconsistent with Christian theology. Christians hold that God created the world freely. And God was good prior to creating anything. (If God is outside of time, we can rephrase this point as follows: God is good independent of creation.) So, according to Christian theology, God's goodness does not necessitate any evil at all. Good and evil are not logical opposites. The point here is that Christians cannot reasonably employ the CT since it is logically inconsistent with Christian theology.

Second, the CT does not seem to explain the *amount* of evil and suffering in the world. Go back to skyscraper example. Relative to one big skyscraper, there are a vast number of small areas within it. Similarly, even if good and evil are logical opposites, it might be the case that just one evil thing is sufficient to guarantee the existence of all the good in the world. But in fact the world is full of wrongdoing and suffering.

Third, the CT seems to rest on the principle that *if something has a property P, then something must have the opposite of that property, non-P*. For example, if something is red, then something must be non-red. There are a couple of problems here. (a) Even if we accept the principle, it doesn't really support the CT. If something is morally good, its non-morally-good counterpart might be, say, a rock or an electron. Rocks and electrons are not morally good things, but they surely aren't morally evil things, either. Non-good things are not necessarily evil things; they may be morally neutral. (b) The principle seems to be false. For example, absolutely everything has the property of being self-identical, i.e., of being identical with itself. Nothing lacks the property; nothing can lack it. Furthermore, it seems we can conceive of a world containing only non-physical entities, such as God, angels, and numbers. The presence of such non-physical entities does not necessitate the presence of any physical entities.<sup>5</sup>

*The Knowledge Theodicy: we humans cannot recognize goodness unless there is evil to contrast it with; and recognizing goodness is itself a very great good, worth the evil necessary for it.* It's important not to confuse the Knowledge Theodicy (KT) with the CT. The CT says nothing about our knowledge of good and evil; rather, CT posits a metaphysical or logical

linkage between good and evil. On the other hand, KT posits no such metaphysical linkage; instead it makes a claim about how humans know about good and evil. Namely, we know about goodness by contrasting it with evil.

Even if there is some truth in the KT, it is open to serious objections. First, it is not plausible to claim that we could not understand goodness unless we could contrast it with genocide, child abuse, and torture. There would still be plenty of evil in the world without these extreme *kinds* of evil. Surely they are not needed for moral knowledge.

Second, even if some evils are needed for knowledge of goodness, the *amount* of evil is not needed. Just consider how many thefts occur in a modern city on a given day. It is not plausible to suppose that every theft is needed in order that we humans might understand the difference between good and evil.

Third, God surely understood the nature of evil prior to (or independent of) creating anything. Being omniscient, God knew that love is good, so God surely knew that very unloving attitudes and actions are evil ones. Evil is simply a departure from the standard of goodness. But if God can know the nature of good and evil apart from the existence of actual instances of evil, why can't God give humans that same ability? To say this is impossible is apparently to deny that God is omnipotent.

*The Punishment Theodicy: every instance of suffering is divine punishment for sin(s) committed by the person who is suffering; since the punishment is deserved, it is justified.* This theodicy runs into immediate problems. First, it certainly appears that innocents sometimes suffer, e.g., infants, the mentally impaired, and non-human animals. So, the Punishment Theodicy (PT) is not plausible as an explanation of suffering in general.

Second, PT does not explain why God allows moral wrongdoing. It merely says that God justly punishes wrongdoing. But a theodicy must explain why God allows people to perform morally wrong acts and PT is deficient in this regard.

Third, from a Christian point of view, PT seems to place too much emphasis on divine retribution. God's primary moral attribute is love, according to the Christian faith. From this perspective, God's wrath is like the anger of a loving parent whose patience has been severely tried by disobedient children. The parent will confront the disobedient children and perhaps punish them, but the goal will not be simply to "make them pay" (retribution), it will be to instruct them and to help them make better choices. In this connection it is worth noting that the main point of the book of Job in the Bible is that it is wrong to infer that those who suffer always deserve to suffer because of sins they have committed. Job suffers terribly, but within the biblical story it is made clear that his suffering is not punishment for sin. And Jesus reportedly denies the PT: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him'" (John 9: 2-3).

*The Demon Theodicy: evil and suffering are caused by the activity of fallen angels (Satan and his cohorts).* This theodicy raises many questions. First, the Demon Theodicy (DT), as stated, does not explain why God permits evil. DT merely posits the cause (or a cause) of evil. Why does God allow demons to wreak havoc in the world?

Second, Christian theology emphasizes that humans are responsible for their sins. "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezekiel 18: 20). So, even if we allow that demons play a role in tempting

people to sin, humans remain responsible for their own wrongdoing. And again DT provides no explanation in regard to why God permits humans to do wicked things.

Third, while the DT may seem promising as an explanation of natural evil (i.e., the suffering and harm that result from non-human factors such as hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and disease), there are two immediate problems with this suggestion. (a) Through advances in science, we know that natural evils are caused by the operation of laws of nature. For example, much is known about the conditions under which hurricanes form, and much is known about how bacteria and viruses cause disease. Given that natural evils are caused by the operation of laws of nature, is it plausible to suppose that demons are also the cause of natural evils? Why would demons operate in the patterned and predictable ways we call laws of nature? In describing laws of nature, such as the law of gravity or the law that gases expand when heated, are scientists in fact describing the work of demons? In short, given that natural evil is caused by the operation of laws of nature, it is not very plausible to suppose that natural evil is also caused by demons. (b) According to Christian theology, God is the creator of the universe. From this perspective, God not only created matter *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), God also sustains it in existence and causes it to behave as it does. Simply put, what we call the laws of nature are part of God's creative activity. To ascribe these laws to the work of demons is to deny that God is the one who determines the way the physical world operates.

*The Consequences-of-the-Fall Theodicy: according to this theodicy, there was no evil whatsoever until Adam and Eve sinned; as a consequence of their sin, humans are born with a tendency to sin and the world is replete with suffering.* The main problem with the Consequences-of-the-Fall Theodicy (CFT) is that it does not explain why the sin of Adam and Eve had just these consequences. And these consequences could only occur if God causes them or at least permits them. Why would God cause or permit such consequences? If the consequences are regarded as punishment, then we are back to the Punishment Theodicy.

Some have suggested that the consequences of the fall are meant to play an educational function. They are meant to teach us how much we need God and how desperate our situation is without God's help. This seems more promising than the Punishment Theodicy, but still raises several questions. First, throughout the world, a great many people do not believe that a God of the Christian type exists, i.e., one who is perfectly good and almighty. What lesson can they draw when a tsunami strikes or a loved one dies of some dread disease? Aren't they likely to see such events as evidence against the idea that a loving Being is in control of the universe? That seems to be the lesson that is often drawn. So, taken as a form of education, evil seems apt to backfire, leading people to the wrong conclusions.

Second, in the course of history, a vast number of little children (including babies) have died long before they were capable of drawing any theological conclusions about the suffering and evil in the world. So, what is the point of their lives and of any suffering they experienced? Did they live, suffer, and die just so others could learn to draw the right conclusions about the human predicament? If so, it seems the little children were used *merely* as a means to an end. And that would call God's perfect goodness into question.

Third, as noted previously, natural evil is caused by the operation of laws of nature. And the laws of nature are part of God's work as creator. Are we supposed to believe that God changed the laws of nature when Adam and Eve sinned? There is reason to doubt this. Scientists now know that our universe is "fine-tuned" for life. This means that a world containing slightly different laws of nature probably would not support life at all. From this perspective, it seems

likely that natural evils, or at least their causes (lightning, volcanic eruptions, etc.), have been present as long as there have been forms of life capable of suffering.

Fourth, the specific suggestion that, as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, God caused human nature to change, so that subsequently humans were born with a tendency to sin, is problematic. For one thing, it doesn't seem to fit with the educational program envisioned. Making us sin-prone would only make us more likely to rebel against God. But there is a more fundamental problem here. The idea that Adam and Eve were originally created as spiritually perfect beings with no motivation to sin whatsoever does not hold up under scrutiny. (a) How did they fall in the first place if they had no motivation to disobey God? That's a mystery. Furthermore, the Genesis account presents Adam and Eve as having a desire to do something—namely, eat the forbidden fruit—which God had commanded them not to do. So, the idea that they were free of all sin-prone desires seems contrary to the biblical account. (b) In order to freely choose good over evil, one has to find evil attractive sometimes or in some way. If a wrong course of action never seems the least bit attractive, such an action would never be a genuine option. It appears, then, that if God wants us to choose good over evil, God must give us a motivational structure that makes evil sometimes or in some ways attractive. And in fact it is plausible to suppose that from the very beginning human beings had a capacity for self-love, which is good in itself, but which can easily lead a person to favor himself or herself over others depending on the circumstances. To sum up, the CFT seems to make very implausible assumptions about the motivational structure of the earliest human beings.

Fifth, the CFT does not explain the suffering of animals. Unless we deny what science claims based on the fossil record and the techniques of radiometric dating, animals existed millions of years before humans came on the scene. There were predators killing other animals and there was disease and death. It can hardly be doubted that predation and disease sometimes caused suffering in the animal world long before there were any humans in existence.

### **The Soul-Making Theodicy**

In my estimation, John Hick's "soul making" theodicy is the most promising theodicy on offer. According to Hick:

. . . God's purpose was not to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. [Instead] the world is . . . a place of "soul making" or person making in which free beings, grappling with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God" and "heirs of eternal life."<sup>6</sup>

From this perspective, God has given us the power of making significant free choices. We can choose to help or harm one another. God could have made robots, without free will. But God wants us to freely choose the way of love—love of God and love of neighbor. Our freedom makes human life profoundly meaningful and provides the opportunity to develop virtues such as love, compassion, patience, courage, prudence, and moderation. God might have made a world in which suffering was excluded, but in such a world humans would arguably have lives of much less moral significance than in the actual world. While we may at times envy those who have relatively easy lives, we tend to admire those who have faced serious hardship and suffering with courage, patience, and hope. Similarly we admire and honor those who have sacrificed to help

others who are suffering and in need. In short, a world with the many challenges and evils our world contains is one in which human beings can develop their best traits and capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

But theists claim that there won't be any suffering in heaven. So, why didn't God put us in heaven to begin with and skip this vale of suffering? From a Christian point of view, this question overlooks the great value of becoming a certain kind of person, namely, a virtuous person. As Hasker notes:

A courageous woman is different from a coward, even when no danger is present; the love of a person who has learned compassion and self-sacrifice has a distinctive quality even when no one is presently suffering. [. . .] Heroes in many walks of life are often . . . honored long after age and/or changed circumstances have made a repetition of their heroic achievements impossible . . . . Such persons are valued for what they *are* and for what they *have done*, rather than for what they may yet do.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this, Christians typically believe that a virtuous character is necessary for the sort of close relationship with God which heaven involves. And many Christians believe that the moral rigors of this earthly life prepare us for important spiritual tasks we'll be called upon to perform in the life after death.

If God wants us to be virtuous, why didn't he create us as virtuous in the first place? By giving us free will, God "gives us a say" in the kind of persons we will be. Our character is not imposed on us by another.

The soul-making theodicy, however, does seem to come up short in some cases. For example, it seems inapplicable in the case of Rowe's fawn. And the deaths of small children, who have had little or no chance to develop the virtues, do not seem to be explained by the soul-making theodicy.

But the soul-making theodicy can and should include the idea that natural evil is caused by the operation of laws of nature. After all, an environment governed by laws of nature seems to be needed for soul-making because free action requires an environment that is predictable to a significant degree. Just consider a simple act such as walking across a room to give another person a slice of bread. Such an act is taken on the assumption that the bread won't suddenly evaporate, that gravity won't fail, and that the recipient won't suddenly turn into a stone. Furthermore, the challenges and dangers of the natural world provide much of the stimulus for soul-making.

But surely almighty God could create an environment governed by natural laws that do not produce devastating hurricanes, debilitating diseases, and so on? With this suggestion, however, the critic of theism wanders into highly speculative territory, for contemporary science tells us that our universe is "fine-tuned" for life. Extremely minor changes in the fundamental laws of nature would very likely produce a universe that would not support life at all. So, no one can say with confidence that God could create a physical universe that both supports life and is governed by laws of nature that do not produce natural evils.

But almighty God can do miracles, so God can always intervene to prevent suffering (e.g., God could relocate Rowe's fawn so that it doesn't get burned). Yes, but as Hasker points out, God's "constant interference . . . would negate the uniformity of natural order," which seems necessary for free action and soul-making.<sup>9</sup> At this point the critic of theism may claim that a wholly good God would be obligated to intervene in order to prevent the most intense instances

of suffering. As Hasker points out, however, this claim needs to be backed up by some plausible moral principle that distinguishes the natural evils God is obligated to prevent from those God is not obligated to prevent. And drawing up a plausible principle of this type is no easy philosophical task.<sup>10</sup>

At this point it is also worth noting that reflections on the moral life may lead theists to deny Rowe's second premise, which I will here simplify slightly: *An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good.*<sup>11</sup> Suppose a theist—let's call him Theo—who accepts Rowe's second premise is considering whether to inflict suffering on someone. Theo reasons as follows: "If the suffering is not necessary for a greater good, God will prevent me from inflicting it. But if I am successful in inflicting the suffering, then it is necessary for some greater good—a greater good that will be lost if the suffering does not occur." Hasker points out that this way of thinking about suffering seems to undermine morality. Virtuous acts would then often or even routinely be contrary to the greater good. And when we think about people inflicting suffering (or harm) on others, we do not generally suppose that if the suffering (or harm) is inflicted, it was necessary for some greater good. So, from this perspective, if God allows us to choose between good and evil, we ought to think that the evils are often gratuitous, i.e., not necessary for any greater good.<sup>12</sup>

But if the evils are necessary for the moral life, then they are not gratuitous after all, right? Here we must make an important distinction. Taken collectively, as a group, evils are necessary, but taken individually they are not. That is, no specific instance of suffering, harm, or evil is necessary for the moral life. In that sense, evils are gratuitous. Furthermore, it is not plausible to suppose that there is some optimal amount of harm or suffering that God must allow, so that if God allowed even one less case of harm or suffering, the moral life would not be possible. Thus, Christian reflection on the moral life provides reasons to doubt Rowe's second premise.<sup>13</sup>

The above discussion, though brief, illustrates several important things, it seems to me. First, it shows that the problem of evil raises many challenging questions for theism. Second, many popular theodicies are deeply flawed. Third, the soul-making theodicy explains quite a bit of evil, both moral and natural. But fourth, theists have difficulty in producing a theodicy that explains all instances of harm and suffering in a satisfying way. For example, it seems to me that the question, "Why doesn't God intervene more often to prevent suffering?" is not given a fully satisfying answer.

### **The Comparative Approach**

At this point theists might have recourse to skeptical theism. Should we really expect to be able to discern God's reason for permitting *every* instance of evil? No world view can explain everything. Or theists might offer the comparative response, that is, they might admit that they lack a fully adequate theodicy but claim that the main alternatives to theism also falter in explaining evil *in terms consistent with their philosophical underpinnings*; hence the problem of evil is not a good reason to reject theism in favor of the main alternative views. I will now illustrate the comparative response in the case of philosophical naturalism, which I take to be the chief contemporary rival of theism. Naturalism is the view that there is no God or anything like God (e.g., no angels or non-physical souls) and everything is physical.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to elaborate a bit on the phenomena of pain and suffering. It is widely agreed that the phenomena of suffering commonly include at least the following:

- A. Certain subjective conscious experiences, for example, the hurtfulness of physical pain, the feeling of being miserable, the agony of anxiety, the dreadful feeling of depression, and the raw fear of more suffering to come.
- B. Pain and suffering enter into a variety of causal relations. For example: (1) A person experiencing severe chronic pain may opt for suicide as a means of avoiding any further feelings of an extremely unwelcome sort. Here pain and suffering seem to be among the causes of behavior. (2) The belief that others have been harmed or killed can cause suffering in the form of deep sadness, anxiety, or despair. Here a mental state (a belief) is apparently the cause of (or among the causes of) mental pain and suffering. (3) After an earthquake, a family may sleep outside and suffer in the bitter cold because they fear that aftershocks will cause their house to collapse. Here physical pain and suffering apparently result (in part) from the mental state of fear.

Just as theists falter in their attempt to explain why God would permit certain types of suffering, naturalists arguably falter in providing an adequate explanation of A and/or B. But for naturalists the problems arise because of weaknesses in their theories of the mind. To see this, we must examine a series of naturalistic theories of the mind. Of course, we cannot here examine every possible naturalistic theory, but perhaps enough can be said to highlight the challenging sorts of questions naturalism faces.

### **Epiphenomenalism**

Epiphenomenalists hold that mental states are caused by physical states, but mental states themselves cause nothing. From this perspective, mental states are analogous to the shadows cast by a car as it moves down a road; the shadows are caused by the car's blocking the sun's rays but the shadows do not in turn have any causal effect on the car's motion. (Mental states do not cause physical states, such as brain states.) Nor is the shadow at a given moment caused by the shadow from the preceding moment; the shadows are caused by the car. (Mental states do not cause other mental states.)<sup>14</sup> Epiphenomenalists admit the reality of mental states, including the reality of subjective conscious experiences of pain. But by denying mental states any causal powers, epiphenomenalists must deny all of the phenomena included in B above. Relatively few naturalists endorse epiphenomenalism; the clash with common sense is simply too great.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to believe, for example, that pain does not cause victims of torture to scream or to feel fear. Nevertheless, as we shall see, some commonly held naturalistic theories of the mind seem to lead to epiphenomenalism by implication.

### **Nonreductive Physicalism**

Nonreductive physicalism is a position favored by many philosophers, including many naturalists. It typically involves four theses:<sup>16</sup>

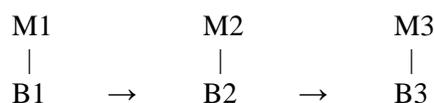
- a. Humans are entirely physical entities; they do *not* have non-physical souls.

- b. Mental states are not wholly reducible to (and not identical with) physical states. (By contrast, reductive physicalists claim that mental states are nothing over and above physical states.)
- c. Mental states *supervene* on physical states, i.e., if one is in a mental state M, one is in that state by virtue of the fact that one is in a certain physical state P, and “anything that has P at any time necessarily has M at the same time.”<sup>17</sup>
- d. Mental states (or events) are causes; they can cause both physical states (or events) and mental states (or events), e.g., a decision (mental event) can cause my leg to move (physical event). And the desire for food (a mental event) can cause the thought, “Some sushi would taste good” (another mental event).

Notice that nonreductive physicalism allows for a dualism of *states* (mental and physical), but not for a dualism of soul and body. It counts as a version of physicalism because it denies that humans have non-physical souls. Keep in mind that an individual thing can be in various states, e.g., an individual human being can be healthy or sick, tense or relaxed, happy or sad. According to the nonreductive physicalist, a human brain can have (or be in) both physical and mental states. Jaegwon Kim has formulated an important objection to nonreductive physicalism, called the Exclusion Argument, which can be outlined as follows:<sup>18</sup>

1. If a physical event has a cause, then it has a sufficient *physical* cause.
2. So, each brain-event (that has a cause) has a sufficient physical cause.
3. If a given brain event has a sufficient physical cause, it does not also have a mental cause.
4. So, mental events never cause brain events (and hence they never cause physical events, including bodily movements).

Premise 1, the “Closure Principle,” is routinely assumed by scientists in all their researches (including neuroscientists) and naturalists are generally committed to it. Step 2 merely applies the Closure Principle to brain events. At this point it may be useful to construct a sort of picture to help us think about Kim’s argument:



Suppose B1, B2, and B3 are brain states and that M1, M2, and M3 are mental states. The vertical lines tell us that the mental states supervene on the brain states. For example, M1 supervenes on B1—if a person is in B1, then he or she must be in M1. The arrows tell us that B1 is a sufficient cause for B2 and that B2 is a sufficient cause for B3. (This is just a simplified way of picturing the point that brain states have sufficient *physical* causes.) The question, in essence, is this: If B1 fully causes B2, and B2 fully causes B3, what causal role do the mental states M1, M2, and M3 play, if any? Step 3 gives Kim’s answer: the mental states do not cause any brain states at all. How does Kim arrive at this answer? It is of course *logically possible* for an event to have two sufficient causes. For example, two assassins might strike a lethal blow at the same person and at the same moment. But given that B1 is a sufficient cause of B2, *what distinctive causal role does M1 play?* It seems to merely ride piggyback on B1, given that it supervenes on B1.<sup>19</sup> Thus,

nonreductive physicalism seems, by implication, to force us to deny that there are mental causes of physical events—including actions.

An example may help to clarify Kim's point. Imagine that the functions of my smart phone supervene on the matter that constitutes it. I throw the phone at the window and the window breaks. Did my phone cause the breakage? It is natural to answer, "Yes." But obviously, any physical object having the size, shape, weight, and solidity of my phone would also cause the window to break (if I threw it at the window). The information-processing functions of the smart phone make no distinctive causal contribution to the breaking of the window. They simply ride piggyback on the matter that constitutes the phone. Therefore, it seems we are speaking very loosely when we say the smart phone caused the breakage. The true causal account has nothing to do with the distinctively smart-phone-ish aspects of the object. And Kim's point is that supervening mental states would similarly make no causal contribution to physical events in the brain.<sup>20</sup>

The Exclusion Argument also seems to force the nonreductive physicalist to deny that one mental state ever causes another mental state. For, given that mental states depend on physical (brain) states for their existence, causing a mental state requires causing the brain state it depends on. For example, in order to cause M2, M1 must cause B2. Thus, mental-mental causation presupposes mental-physical causation. But as we have just seen, the Exclusion Argument rules out mental-physical causation. In short, the Exclusion Argument seems to show that nonreductive physicalism inadvertently leads to epiphenomenalism.<sup>21</sup>

Can nonreductive physicalists dodge the Exclusion Argument by denying the Closure Principle? Not without cost. First, to deny this principle is presumably to suggest that many brain events are caused, not by physical states or events alone, but by some combination of physical states (or events) and non-physical mental states or events. And this would imply that there is no complete natural scientific account of the brain. The laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and neurobiology would be unable to account for a vast number of brain events, namely, those caused or partly caused by non-physical mental states or events. But physicalists generally hold that a complete, natural scientific account of the brain's activity is possible, and may someday be achieved. Second, how is it that mental states or events cause anything? One motive for being a physicalist is to avoid the supposed mysteries of substance dualism—how can a non-physical soul causally interact with a physical body or brain? But causal interaction between non-physical mental states and brain states would seem to be as mysterious as causal interaction between a non-physical soul and the brain. In short, it's not clear that physicalist views that deny the Closure Principle have any advantage, from a philosophical perspective, over substance dualism.

### **Reductive Physicalism**

Reductive physicalists claim that mental states are wholly *reducible* to physical states, i.e., mental states are nothing over and above physical states. An example of reductive physicalism is the mind-brain identity theory, i.e., the view that mental states are identical to brain states. A standard objection to this theory is that it fails to account for subjective conscious experiences. No amount of information about the brain, neurons, dendrites, axons, and so on, tells us *what it is like* to feel a sharp pain or to smell ammonia. We might put the point this way: Suppose we could provide an extraterrestrial visitor with a complete set of biological facts about the human body, including all the neurobiological details about the workings of the human brain. If we confine ourselves to these physical facts, we leave out something important, namely, such subjective conscious experiences as the feeling of pain or the experience of smelling ammonia.

A common reply is that the complete physical description does not leave out these subjective conscious experiences, it merely refers to them under a different (i.e., neurobiological) description. But here many philosophers agree with John Searle: A description of the world under third-person physical terms, such as scientists provide, is not a complete description of the world. What is left out is precisely the subjective, first-person, conscious phenomena, e.g., *what it is like* for a person to experience pain or the smell of ammonia.<sup>22</sup> And Thomas Nagel is making the same point with his famous question, “What is it like to be a bat?” Imagine a researcher who can fully describe, in neurobiological terms, the workings of a bat’s brain. Her account leaves out what it is like to experience the world in the way a bat does. And thus an interesting and important *feature of reality* has been omitted.<sup>23</sup> *Facts about first-person, conscious experiences are not metaphysically reducible to facts about neurobiology.*

Furthermore, the identity theory explains mental causation by reducing it to physical causation. But does this provide us with a satisfying explanation of mental causation? Consider that one mental state can apparently be causally linked to another mental state partly by virtue of their informational contents. For example, think of undergoing a sequence of thought such as the following:

Some pasta would taste good tonight → I think I’ll go to an Italian restaurant

In such cases, one thought plausibly gives rise to (i.e., causes) the next. But the causal links surely somehow involve the *informational content* of the mental states. For example, no one with a minimal knowledge of ethnic cuisines is apt to move from “Some pasta would taste good tonight” to “I think I’ll go to a Japanese restaurant.” Brain states, however, are linked by neurobiological factors; the account is given in terms of axons, dendrites, chemical synapses, electrical synapses, neurotransmitters, ion channels, and so on. So, we *seem* to have two very different causal chains here: one that involves the informational content of the mental states and one that involves the purely neurobiological factors.

An analogy may be helpful at this point. Suppose you pop a CD into your computer to listen to some music. The lyrics are classic: “My baby left me. I’m so sad. And life is bad.” Now, there are two sequences here. First, the CD contains a long spiral track of data, consisting of miniscule reflective and non-reflective segments which can be detected via a laser (and transformed into sounds by the CD player). Second, the lyrics of the song form a sequence of thoughts involving informational content, one thought leading to the next. The two different kinds of sequences coincide perfectly because the spiral track on the CD was specifically *designed* to produce sounds which correspond to the lyrics of the song. But plainly there are two distinct kinds of sequences here and the CD analogy strongly suggests that a thought-sequence is a very different thing than any sort of causal sequence that can be spelled out in terms of the mechanisms of chemistry, physics, biology, and/or neurobiology.

Reductive functionalism is another form of reductive physicalism. According to functionalists, a given mental state can be defined as an *internal state* of a person that serves as the causal link between inputs from the environment and outputs in the form of behaviors and other mental states. For example, pain can be defined as an internal state that serves as the causal link between tissue damage (e.g., a dog bite), behaviors (e.g., screaming, running away), and other mental states (e.g., being afraid or angry). Functionalists who are reductive physicalists would of course insist that the relevant internal states turn out to be physical states, such as brain states. To see the difference between the mind-brain identity theory and reductive functionalism, consider the possibility that doctors may someday be able to replace parts of the brain with

artificial components, say, silicon components. Such artificial components might play the same causal role as the brain-parts they replace, in which case, according to functionalism, the person would be able to have the same mental states, without having the same brain states as before. This possibility is ruled out by the mind-brain identity theory, since it claims that mental states just are brain states; from this perspective, a mental state that is not a brain state is no more possible than is a unit of water that is not a unit of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Unfortunately, reductive functionalism faces a problem similar to that of the mind-brain identity theory. John Heil makes the following observation about functionalism:

Consider . . . the experience of a throbbing pain in my toe. Is this simply a matter of my being in a certain functional state (one that results in my believing that I have a pain in my toe, for instance, and disposes me to rub my toe)? If that were so, it would seem a simple matter to program a computing machine to be in a similar functional state. Yet it is odd to imagine that such a device might, solely because of the way we have programmed it, *feel pain*. What seems missing from the functionalist account is the *feeling* of pain. [ . . . ] And feelings, whatever they are, seem not to be functionally characterizable.<sup>24</sup>

Here the point is that the functionalist approach seems unable to capture “what it is like” to be in certain types of mental states. In short, functionalist analyses of certain mental states are deficient; this seems especially clear in the case of subjective conscious experiences such as the *feeling* of pain, *the fear* of death, or the *feeling* of sadness. Thus, it appears that functionalism falters in accounting for the phenomena of suffering (especially the phenomena listed under A above).

Our examination of naturalistic theories of the mind is of course merely illustrative. But objections similar to those I’ve summarized have been raised against all the main naturalistic theories. Of course, many naturalists think that there are ways of getting around the problems I’ve summarized. So, they may think they face no serious problem of evil. But it’s not as if there is a consensus among philosophers as to how physicalists can refute the well-known objections to their views. And notice that many theists also think that they have ways of getting around the problem of evil, e.g., many theists *think* they have an adequate theodicy. Many other theists believe that a combination of theodicies (which explain much but not all evil) together with a moderate version of skeptical theism gives them an adequate response to the problem of evil. So, do neither naturalists nor theists face a serious problem of evil? Or would it be more correct to say that both face difficulties in explaining the phenomena of suffering and evil? Proponents of the comparative approach claim that both do.

### **Theism and Mental Causation**

Just at this point, however, naturalists may claim that theism, with its dualism of a non-physical God and a physical creation, and its historical tendency to back soul-body dualism, has severe difficulties in explaining mental causation (and hence difficulties in explaining phenomenon B above). And this is *in addition to* the more familiar problems in reconciling the existence of a good God with the facts about suffering. We cannot explore this claim in detail here, but let us note some factors that significantly complicate defending it.

1. It has often been argued that there is no conceivable way that a non-physical God (or non-physical soul) could interact causally with physical entities. Therefore, such causal interaction cannot occur. But is it safe to assume that what we humans cannot conceive cannot occur? Just consider this question: “Prior to the rise of science, could humans *conceive* of the causal relation between a magnet and small bits of iron?” The answer is, “No, they could not.” Prior to the rise of science, humans were *familiar* with the phenomenon of magnetism, but they had no understanding at all of the underlying mechanisms. Magnets were mysterious. And yet, clearly, this fact would *not* have provided a good reason to deny that magnets attract iron filings.
  
2. But theists and soul-body dualists face an energy-conservation objection, don’t they? How can a non-physical God (or soul) cause an event in the physical world without violating the law of conservation of energy, i.e., *that the total amount of energy in a causally isolated system remains constant*? But this question contains a question-begging assumption. The universe is not a causally isolated system if God exists. Nor is it a causally isolated system if souls exert causal influence on the brain. Moreover, as Robin Collins has observed, the law of conservation of energy is based on the study of purely physical systems and thus it is not clear that the law applies to systems involving *both* physical causes *and* such non-physical causes as God and the soul.<sup>25</sup>
  
3. Theists may have resources for avoiding some of the problems of naturalistic theories of the mind. Theists can and should agree with physicalists that human mentality is dependent on brain activity; a blow to the head may cause a loss of consciousness and brain injury may permanently impair mental functioning. But the dependence relationship may not be as strong as physicalists claim (e.g., supervenience or identity), with physical events always “running the show.” The brain might be more like a radio receiver: smash the receiver and the music stops, but the receiver is not, all by itself, the source of the music. Given theism, God creates the physical world and sets in place those regularities we call laws of nature. Might God also be able to actualize the following sorts of relations between the mental and the physical?
  - a. Some mental states or events are caused by a combination of both mental and physical states, neither of which are, by themselves, sufficient causes. For example, one thought--together with supporting brain activity--causes another thought.
  - b. Some physical states or events are caused by a combination of both mental and physical states, neither of which are, by themselves, sufficient causes. For example, a decision (in combination with supporting neural activity) causes an action.

If such relationships are logically possible, God could presumably actualize them, and the causal connections of phenomenon B could be accounted for.

To sum up, the problem of evil is a very important objection to traditional theism. Theists try to respond in various ways. Though many theodicies fail badly, the soul-making theodicy

explains quite a bit of evil. The overrider response is only as good as the positive evidence for the existence of a perfectly good God. Skeptical theism seems weak unless it can be successfully combined with a plausible theodicy that explains much of the evil in the world. Finally, via the comparative response, theists seek to put the problem of evil into perspective by arguing that rival metaphysical positions face quite significant problems of evil of their own.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, n. 4 (October, 1979), 336.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>3</sup> This point is borrowed from William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (NY: Routledge, 2004), 53-54.

<sup>4</sup> For a defense of skeptical theism, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil" in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 286-310.

<sup>5</sup> Can we conceive of a world containing only physical entities? Many would say no because in a world containing physical entities, there must be some number of them, and numbers do not seem to be physical entities. For example, it seems one could not eliminate the numbers by destroying physical objects.

<sup>6</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, fourth edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ., Prentice Hall, 1990), 45-46. The soul-making theodicy may be hinted at in some biblical passages, e.g., "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46. I am here loosely paraphrasing Hick.

<sup>8</sup> Hasker, *op. cit.*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>11</sup> I've omitted the last clause of Rowe's premise for the sake of brevity. The argument that follows in no way exploits this omission.

<sup>12</sup> Hasker, *op. cit.*, chapter 4, 58-75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 and 71.

<sup>14</sup> The shadow analogy is borrowed from Jaegwon Kim, *The Philosophy of Mind*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2006), 179.

<sup>15</sup> For a defense of epiphenomenalism, see Thomas H. Huxley, "On the hypothesis that animals are automata, and its history," *Fortnightly Review*, 22, (1874), 555-580.

<sup>16</sup> My characterization of nonreductive physicalism is borrowed from Jaegwon Kim, *op. cit.*, 290-291.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-197.

<sup>19</sup> I am here paraphrasing Jaegwon Kim *Physicalism, Or Something Near Enough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 48. I have borrowed the phrase "ride piggyback" from Kim.

<sup>20</sup> The smart phone example is borrowed from Jennifer Corns via email correspondence (Nov. 23, 2015), but the analysis of the example is mine and I must take responsibility for it.

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<sup>21</sup> For an overview of attempts to respond to the Exclusion Argument, see David Robb and John Heil, "Mental Causation," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring, 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/mental-causation/>>.

<sup>22</sup> John Searle, *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97-98.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to be a Bat?," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 83 (1974): 435-450.

<sup>24</sup> John Heil, "Philosophy of Mind," in Leemon McHenry and Frederick Adams, eds., *Reflections on Philosophy: Introductory Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 177.

<sup>25</sup> Robin Collins, "Modern Physics and the Energy-Conservation Objection to Mind-Body Dualism" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 45, n. 1, (January, 2008), 33. For a defense of soul-body dualism, see Alvin Plantinga, "Materialism and Christian Belief," in Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (eds.), *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 99-141.