

A Strange Goodness?

God and Natural Evil

Stephen Ames

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For

Ella, Lara, Thomas, Oliver, Eva, Gabriel

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Preface

This book comes from lecturing for twenty years in the subject, 'God and the Natural Sciences', a second-year subject in the History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) programme at The University of Melbourne, Australia. For the last eight of those years I have been working with my colleague, Dr Kristian Camilleri, in the HPS programme. We were joined by Dr John Wilkins in 2016. Previously I have worked with Dr Neil Thomason and with Dr Keith Hutchison also from the HPS programme, with whom I co-designed the subject, which was initially funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Kristian, John, Neil, and Keith are atheists, and I am a Christian, a priest in the Anglican Church, at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne. I am a fellow of ISCAST, Christians in Science and Technology. I have a PhD in physics and a PhD in philosophy of science, both from The University of Melbourne.

In designing and improving this university subject, we wanted to show that an intelligent, public conversation about science and religion is possible and illuminating for all. Such seems to be the case because between sixty and one hundred students enrol each year. Generally, about forty percent are committed atheists, forty percent are committed to a religious tradition, mainly Christian with some Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist students, and twenty percent are agnostics.

One important feature of all the years working together is that there has been complete agreement on affirming the results of the natural sciences. There has been clear disagreement on the philosophy of science concerning naturalism, especially the claim that the natural sciences reveal or will one day reveal all of reality. We have had almost no disagreement on the history of science. There

have been fundamental disagreements about God. It is also worth saying that while we are immersed in a culture saturated with science, technology, and the economy all deeply interwoven, this has not become a theme either in our discussions or in our lectures. I think of this as rightly part of a third or fourth year HPS subject.

Some Christian students have asked what kind of Anglican I am. I regard myself as a theologically orthodox Christian. For example, as part of the Christian community I recite the Nicene Creed on Sunday mornings at the celebration of the Eucharist. As a Christian, I live from the 'good news' of the vulnerable, yet invincible Triune God revealed through Christ. This revelation of God includes the good news of the divine economy for the whole universe, from creation to consummation. As well, this understanding of the good news is critically formed from Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience available within the Anglican Church and from the testimony of the wider Christian tradition, as well as from the diversity of scripts, traditions, reasoning, and experiences available to me within and beyond Australian society. Like everyone else, I stand in a position critically formed by and in response to particular traditions.[1]

The book is written from this theological standpoint. It is written for students and for the wider public interested in an intelligent and constructive conversation about science and religion, in particular Christianity. I hope that many, who are looking for something more substantial, even more subtle, than the mutual dismissal between 'new atheists' and fundamentalists, find here something of what they are looking for.

In my opinion one of the things many students and others are looking for is a large 'frame' or 'worldview' or 'grand narrative' or simply a 'way' in which to locate and hold together the many

1. One stream of theological thinking that informs me is the Radical Orthodoxy movement, yet another is the work of Rowan Williams, and a third is the work of Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan. I have been greatly helped by the work of the Centre for Theology and Natural Sciences in Berkley California and its founder Robert J. Russell, http://www.ctns.org/; the work of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, in Oxford, http://www.ianramseycentre.info/; The Ordered Universe Project at Durham University, https://ordered-universe.com/nd; The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, https://www.faraday.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/; and the work of ISCAST here in Australia, http://www.ianramseycentre.info/.

different aspects of their thinking and living. They sense that sorting out questions about 'science and God' is important for finding what they seek, whatever shape it may eventually take. All this without mentioning any postmodern problems with 'grand narratives'.[2]

For many people, the problem of natural evil is a very significant obstacle to identifying with the God Christians worship and so they cannot find in Christian faith and theology such a 'framing'.

As an introduction to the book, I want to say it is about the problem of natural evil meaning all the suffering and death brought about by natural processes. These natural processes are judged to be a problem for the belief that they are the creation of a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, who created the world *ex-nihilo* for some purpose. Many people find the actual world contradicts the kind of world they expect an omni-God to create. This contradiction gives them strong grounds for choosing not to believe in such a God. The book aims to give people good reason to revisit that decision.

My first step in Chapter I provided a critique of the standard argument from natural evil to rejecting belief in God. The critique is that describing natural processes as 'evil' and using that to argue against the existence of God the creator of the actual world, presupposes that these natural evils contradict the kind of world a wholly good God is expected to create.

The critique is that no proper basis is provided for that expectation. The proper basis required is to argue *from* the idea of the omni-God *to* the kind of world we should expect that God to create. Without such an argument, there is no basis for speaking about natural processes as 'natural evils', which contradict the existence of God. I have not found this critique stated anywhere else. On the other hand, students claimed to meet this requirement and still have good grounds for rejecting belief in the omni-God. Their statements s(a) to s(d), in Chapter I claim to meet this requirement and to do so obviously.

Chapter II examines whether s(a) to s(d) does follow from the idea of the omni-God which together show that the actual world is not what we should expect if this idea of God were true. I will argue that s(a) to s(d) does not necessarily follow from the idea of the omni-

2. J Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by G Bennington (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [*La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979].

God. I also argue *from* the idea of the omni-God *to* a different account of the kind of world we should expect this God to create and that it is a *better* kind of creation than that represented by s(a)–s(d).

Initially I do this without using any idea of the purpose of God in creating. I then argue *from* the idea of God as perfectly good *to* how we should identify the divine purpose in creating and show what impact this has on the kind of universe we should expect this God to create. There follow two sections where I place this theology of creation in relation to the natural sciences and then in relation to the Christian tradition. I then address in Chapter V eight objections or reality checks against my argument.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the many people for the conversations that have helped me in developing the ideas in this book, especially my colleagues at The University of Melbourne, Dr Neil Thomason, Dr Keith Hutchison, Dr Kristian Camilleri, Dr John Wilkinson, especially Dr Bruce Langtry, Dr Paul Carter and the many students who engaged with me in God and the Natural Sciences from 2001 to 2020; from the University of Divinity, Professor Mark Brett, Rev Dr Robyn Whitaker, Dr Call Ledsham, Rev Dr Mark Lindsay, Rev Dr Bob Derrenbacker, and from ISCAST, Rev Dr Chris Mulherin, Professor emeritus John Pilbrow and the members of the Melbourne Lonergan Group, especially the late Fr Tom Daly SJ. I accept complete responsibility for any errors in the book.

PART 1

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM IN THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL EVIL?

Chapter I
What is The 'Problem' in The Problem of Natural Evil?

In engaging students and my colleagues, I find it important to take the time to come to an agreement on what is the 'problem' in the problem of natural evil. Otherwise, we might just be talking past each other. One way of identifying the problem in the problem of natural evil came from an atheist student who said, 'Looking around the world, both the natural world and the human world, and remembering that people say this world was created by a perfectly good God, I think it would have to be a very strange goodness'. I commended the student for allowing this possibility. My atheist colleague Kristian said, 'If it is too strange, we might not want to call it 'good''. Another question is, what is it compared to, to which the goodness of God would be so strange? In the end I will return to this claim about the 'strange goodness' God would have to be for this world to be created by such a God, and whether it is so strange that we would not want to call it good.

The problem of natural evil traditionally takes two forms: the logical problem and the evidential problem. The latter is the evidence of dreadful pointless suffering in the world which challenges belief in God. William Rowe[1] is widely seen to have presented this problem in sharpest form, which I will discuss later when the ground has been prepared. The logical problem is the presence of evil in the world as logically contradicting the claim that God exists and that God is said

1. William Rowe IX, 'The Problems of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16/4 (1979): 335–341 and 'The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look', in D Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana University Press, 1996).

to be all powerful, all knowing and wholly good, the omni-God.[2] I begin by responding to this form of the problem.

1a. The logical problem of evil

This is the claim that the idea of the omni-God is logically contradicted by the presence of evil in the world. It is common for students to present some version of the logical problem. For example, they cite the following statement by Michael Tooley.[3]

Thus, if we focus on a conception of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, one very concise way of formulating such an argument is as follows:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. Evil exists.
6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

This as a logically valid argument, meaning necessarily if the premises are true the conclusion is true. A response to this logical problem of evil, widely recognised as successful, is Alvin Plantinga's free

2. Philosophers of theism have long distinguished between defences and theodicies. A defence purports to show that some truth involving evil is compatible with the existence of God. A theodicy aims to show that God is in fact justified in causing or permitting this or that specific kind, or amount of evil. I am preparing the ground to work out a theodicy, which is presented in Chapter III.
3. Michael Tooley, 'Problem of Evil', in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.* Section 1. (Original, 2001. Substantially revised 2015). For a critique of Tooley's 'The Argument from Evil', in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (1991): 89–134, see B Langtry, *God, The Best, And Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Langtry's work offers a formal philosophical response to the problem of evil in defence of God.

will defence[4] showing that the existence of evil in the world is not necessarily a contradiction of the idea of the omni-God.

Tooley's argument obviously holds for the problem of 'natural evil' as a particular form of evil. As noted above, 'natural evil' is taken to refer to the dreadful suffering and death of living things due to natural processes like tsunamis, extreme weather events, genetic disorders, and all the suffering and death in the evolution of life, which natural processes God has freely created and sustains in existence. We have a contradiction between the understanding of God as creator and what God has created. The conclusion (7) to Tooley's argument remains: 'Therefore God does not exist.' I have been greatly helped by Plantinga's defence, to resist the critique of many people that any instance of evil in the world contradicts belief in the omni-God. However, I do not find it helpful regarding the problem of natural evil, in which it is God freely creating the circumstances and events widely recognised as natural evil.

This is argument against the existence of God arising from a contradiction between this understanding of God and the lack of any recognisable divine activity in response to natural evil.[5] Atheist students and colleagues regard this as a strong argument. The point is pressed to me, 'If *you* had the knowledge and power to help someone in terrible need, you would of course help them. Not to do so could also be said to fail to follow God's second commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.' Students make the point that by not intervening in the myriad of situations of terrible pain and suffering God fails to lead by example, by not keeping God's own commandment. (Certainly, their points express 'attitude', but how is that surprising?) In some quarters, theology would not accept the idea of God being subject to the laws that God commands human beings to keep. But I regard that as too defensive of God and hardly meeting the challenge.

4. Alvin Plantinga, 'The Free Will Defence', in Max Black, *editor, Philosophy in America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965); God, Freedom, and Evil (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).*
5. This argument could charitably be taken to mean God should have eliminated natural evils as an option. Evil should not have been allowed to arise in the first place. I take this to mean God should have created a different kind of universe in which natural evils do not arise. See below, where this option is proposed by students.

The point being made by students is that such natural processes are rightly said to be 'evil' because they can and do blindly undermine the 'good' of life through an overwhelming pain and suffering, or premature death, which, we as moral agents would ordinarily try to prevent in order to preserve this good. It seems obvious that while such natural processes are crucial in bringing about the good for living things, they can go against the value of this good and therefore these 'disvalues' should be the concern of the omni-God to prevent or redress. Notice that students appeal to a common sense understanding of 'good', which they believe applies to such a God as (supposedly) the wholly good moral agent.

Tooley's valid argument presents the problem of natural evil, concluding that God does not exist. The conclusion can be resisted by denying the idea of God in (1), for example by denying that God is all-powerful or all-knowing.[6] Also, Tooley's statement in (6) is open to challenge. Could there be circumstances where suffering and death are required to bring about some greater good or to prevent some greater evil? If so, then (6) is not true. The omni-God could be understood as permitting suffering in these circumstances.

Of special interest is Murray's question, 'what would it take to have a morally sufficient reason for permitting an evil?' Murray argues three conditions must be met.[7]

(A) The Necessity Condition: the good secured by the permission of the evil, E, could not have been secured without permitting either E or some other evils morally equivalent to or worse than E.
(B) The Outweighing Condition: the good secured by the permission of evil is sufficiently outweighing.
(C) The Rights Condition: it is within the rights of the one permitting evil to permit it.

(A) allows us to see a particular line of argument against the existence of God. Is there evidence of suffering due to natural processes that cannot be understood as required to bring about some greater good or prevent some greater evil? If so, this would contradict (A) and so

6. For example, DR Griffin, *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977).
7. MJ Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), including Murray's defense of these conditions, 14–16.

argue against the existence of God. An argument for such evidence against God is known as the 'evidential argument'.

Another response to Tooley's valid argument is to ask whether it is it sound. I explain to students that I have two concerns. One is whether one accepts the understanding of God used in Tooley's argument and the other is the understanding of 'natural evil'. Tooley uses an understanding of God that does not mention God as the creator of the universe. I am at least working with the idea that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good, who creates the universe *ex nihilo*[8] and sustains it in existence for some purpose.[9] What effect does this have on understanding the 'problem' in the problem of natural evil?

Tooley's argument would lead us to expect an omni-God would be intervening everywhere to correct or prevent natural processes producing so much natural evil. But if God is the creator of the universe, then God intervening that way would mean God was good but deeply irrational, since God is supposedly the creator of these natural processes! Not intervening would mean God was rational and cruel, not good. This idea of God as the all-powerful, all-knowing,

8. This says that God creates the universe from 'nothing' meaning not from prior existing 'stuff', as if God were like an architect and builder ordering prior existing material to manufacture the universe. This *ex-nihilo* prevents any answer to the problem of natural evil along the lines of blaming poor materials for God to work with in forming a world. God is wholly responsible for bringing the universe into existence and sustaining it in existence. God creates the universe *ex nihilo* means all that God brings into existence is good. Thus, evil is traditionally understood as not existing in its own right, that is, not created by God. Evil is the corruption or privation of some created good that properly belongs to the created world. See J Hick, *Evil and The Love of God* (London: MacMillan, 1966), 65.
9. This difference and a certain vagueness about the idea of God in the problem of natural evil has prompted me to prepare Appendix 1 as a clarification of the idea of God in the problem of natural evil. It may help to add that in the early centuries of our common era the Christian Church had a sustained argument with the various schools of Gnosticism who held to a view of the true God as the redeemer of the elect from this world, who was definitely not the creator of this garbage heap of a world. Theologians of the Church maintained that the creator and redeemer are one. The difference was important then in the attitude to the world. While I don't regard Tooley as a latter-day Gnostic I do want to be explicit about including in the argument the idea of God as the creator of the world. It helps make explicit a requirement noted above on those who affirm and those who deny the problem of natural evil.