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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The deal at the dawn of time

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Abstract

Being deeply embedded in the mythological framework of old-school Christian angelology, the theodicy presented in this article outlines a thoroughgoing and unexpectedly simple solution to the problem of evil. Unlike other Satan-oriented theodicies, whose central idea is that natural evil is reducible to moral evil by taking the malevolent actions of demons into consideration, it accounts for both natural and moral evil in perfectly familiar deal-making terms. Of particular interest is that it makes no appeal to the overriding importance of free will nor to the inscrutability of God's ways. Instead it envisions a primordial agreement on which everything depends. If it stands up to scrutiny, it offers an intriguing explanation for why God permits such an awful lot of badness.

Keywords: problem of evil; theodicy; deal-making; angels; Satan

So, why does God, who is supposed to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, tolerate such an immensity of evil and suffering? Attempts to answer this question are known as theodicies.[1] There is no agreed-upon understanding of what exactly would be required for a theodicy to be successful, or at least worthy of serious consideration. However, this much is clear: unlike a mere defence, a theodicy is never just about rebutting some version of the argument from evil.[2] Rather, a theodicy is concerned with the *problem* of evil.[3] It tries to outline a world view in which the coexistence of God and evil makes sense.[4] Or to borrow John Milton's famous line, it sets out to 'justifie the wayes of God to men'.[5] Hence, to the extent that it actually purports to *solve* the problem of evil, a theodicy needs to offer a plausible explanation for why God tolerates – among other things – eons of blood-stained evolutionary struggles, the development of parasitic wasps and malaria infected mosquitos, famines and pestilence, fatal child accidents, irretrievable processes of mental fragmentation, debilitating chronic diseases, and countless instances of insane human brutality. The prospects of coming up with such an explanation may be non-existent, and the whole enterprise of theodicy-making may be considered immoral.[6] Even so, I cannot help myself. I can only apologize in advance if the result is as bad as one might expect.

Having said that, the theodicy I am about to propose has at least one interesting feature. For all I know, anyway, it has not been hinted at before. It also has a distinct limitation, I hasten to add, because its theoretical foundation is immersed in Christian mythology. It presumes a dazzling array of extremely speculative angelological ideas. But since most of these ideas belong to what Christians believe (or at least often used to believe) anyway,

and since all of them sit comfortably within a classical Christian world view, it should be of relevance nevertheless.

In the next section I will outline my proposal by simply telling it as a mythological story. Then, in the main section, this story will be elaborated and analysed. My aim will be to substantiate its philosophical credibility, but along the way (however briefly, and mostly through footnotes and biblical references) I will also try to indicate its Christian credentials. At the end, some conclusions will be drawn.

Before we get going, however, I should make a brief grammatical clarification. Even in independent academic journals of analytic philosophy, 'he' is still very much the default pronoun when referring to God.[7] As a modest challenge to this awkward praxis, I will be using the feminine pronoun instead.

The deal-making theodicy

Now then, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. But this was a two-stage process: the immaterial realm of angels was created prior to the material universe. The first part of creation resulted in a stunningly good world. By contrast, the second part of creation resulted in a shockingly bad one: a world plagued by suffering, waywardness, and death.[8]

To understand why the second phase of God's creation was so much worse than the first, or rather why it *had* to be so much worse, we need to look more closely behind the scenes of stage one. When creating the immaterial world, God arranged the hosts of angels in a hierarchical order. For purposes of imagination, we might as well utilize the tripartite structure suggested by the medieval sages of the Church. Hence of the lowest orders we find all the ordinary angels, but also the archangels (including the Biblical celebrities, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael) and the heavenly principalities. Above them, of the middle orders, are the venerable powers, virtues, and dominions. Even more exalted are the angels of the highest orders: the ophanim (thrones), cherubim, and seraphim.[9] To this time-honoured, nine-layered hierarchy, however, we need to add a theologically well-known but not as established idea. At the top, in sole majesty, God appointed Lucifer, 'the morning star' (Isa. 14:12), 'the seal of perfection' (Ezek. 28:12), as 'ruler of this world' (John 12:31), subjecting 'all the kingdoms' under his command (Luke 4:5). Perhaps it was the exceedingly lofty status of this monarch that made him succumb to pride, instigate a rebellion against God, and fall irreversibly into sin.[10] From that fateful moment, at any rate, Lucifer became known as Satan, or simply the devil, and his angelic followers as demons.[11]

For all its familiarity, of course, the story so far is riddled with enigmas. How could the fall of angels occur in the first place? If they were created sinless and situated in a splendid spiritual environment, how could the angels even feel any kind of temptation to rebel against God, the ultimate good? And why did only Lucifer and his cohort fall prey to temptation? Luckily for me, I do not have to answer or even address questions like these in order to advance my proposal. Mysterious as it is, the esoteric story of the fall of angels is part and parcel of Christian theology. The age-old conundrums it gives rise to are ones that Christians will have to live with whether or not they care about any particular theodicy.

One feature of the original world of angels is worth pointing out, however. For all its splendour, the immaterial world of God's initial creation was not a prehistoric version of that which is properly called 'heaven'. Though they were created in a sinless state, the angels did not yet enjoy the beatific vision: the all-engulfing experience of divine glory. Only those who remained loyal to God through an initial time of trial were transferred into that everlasting state of complete happiness and crystalline clarity from which no sane person could freely choose to leave.[12] Though this certainly does not answer the above riddles,

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it should at least make the story thus far a little bit less bewildering. The Christian vision of heaven, in which nothing bad could ever happen, need not be jeopardized by the idea of a primordial catastrophe in the immaterial world.

Back to Lucifer. Having fallen 'like lightning' (Luke 10:18), he became the devil, 'the murderer from the beginning' (John 8:44). Yet his God-given power did not diminish, because 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29), and he was still very much in charge. Even to this day, as attested by one of the apostles, 'the whole world lies under the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). Not until Judgment Day, we are told, when he is cast into the 'lake of fire and brimstone' (Rev. 20:10), will Satan finally be stripped of his authority. And then, at long last, will God's material creation be liberated from its 'bondage to decay' (Rom. 8:21).[13]

But why was the universe subjected to decay in the first place? This is the crux of the matter. If the story so far is little more than a summary of some of the principal aspects of Christian demonology, we must now introduce a few mythological novelties. After the primordial time of trial, during which Satan instigated his rebellion, God wanted to reward the angels who had remained firm and who were now and forever absorbed by beatific bliss. Hence she decided to gift each one of them with a godchild, as it were, or 'mini-god' (cf. Ps. 8:5). Like their spiritual parents, these additional angelic beings would be meant for an eternity in heaven, and so they too first needed to be put to the test.

Here is the thing, however. Since the devil already had been installed as king over the entire order of creation, God needed to get his approval to carry out her plans. Hence, as a matter of respecting his God-given rights and authority, she summoned Satan to acquire his permission. But the devil, ever 'the adversary' (Job 1:6), always wanting to incite as many as possible to 'curse God' to her face (Job 1:11), would only grant his maker's request on one condition: that life in the new realm of reality, throughout its pre-eschatological phase, would be shockingly bad. In effect, then, despite being omnipotent, God only had two choices: either to create a new subset of reality which at first would be rather gruesome, or not to create a new subset at all.[14] Faced with these options, she stuck to her plan. Due to the devil's demand, however, the angels-to-be had to be more vulnerable and susceptible to suffering than their godparents. God therefore made them corporeal, and the entire new realm of reality became steeped in matter. Indeed, what Satan required was a world plagued by struggles and suffering throughout its pre-eschatological duration, and what God brought forth was planet Earth and the universe in which we live.

At the dawn of time, then, before creating the material world, God struck a deal with the devil. My proposed theodicy might as well be named after that all-important agreement.[15] And this is it. Having introduced its essential ideas, however sketchily, it is time to start putting some philosophical pressure on its critical parts.

Philosophical analysis

As forewarned in the introduction, the deal-making theodicy makes a staggering amount of speculative assumptions. These need not trouble us much, however, as long as they belong to what is traditionally affirmed by Christianity anyway. Rather, what we need to focus on here is the said theodicy's inherent rationale. To do so in a systematic manner, I suggest that we address two overarching sets of questions. First, does the above story make sense? That is, within its Christian mythological setting, does the deal-making theodicy offer a philosophically coherent and psychologically credible narrative? And second, assuming for argument's sake that it is true, does it solve the problem of evil (as outlined in this article's opening paragraph)? Does it really provide a satisfactory explanation for why God allows so much evil and suffering in the world? Altogether, these two sets of questions cover a good

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fifteen issues (objections, reflections, causes for concern, or points in need of clarification) as enumerated below.

Does it make sense?

1. Perhaps the first question that needs to be addressed is this. Why did God create the world in two stages? Indeed, why did she not create everything all at once, the immaterial realm together with the material one, thus seemingly bypassing the risk of having to make a scary deal with the devil later on? Surely, whatever omniscience entails about future contingents, she must have anticipated the danger that lay ahead when she crowned a single individual as king over all creation.

As suggested in the above outline, God wanted to reward the angels who had remained firm during the primordial time of trial, and thus she decided to gift each one of them – or at least each one of the ordinary, lowest ranked angels as an extra recognition of their devotion – with a godchild: someone to care for and connect with in a unique way. (Thus, indeed, on the deal-making view, every human being has its own guardian angel.) And this much is clear: it would make no sense to celebrate an act of moral uprightness before it has actually occurred. So, given that God wanted to reward her steadfast angels in this strikingly personal way, it follows by necessity that she had to wait until the end of the primordial probation before she could continue with the second phase of creation. On the worst-case scenario, if the first generation of angelic beings had all gone astray, no second generation of angelic beings (i.e., the human godchildren) had ever been made. And this goes to explain why all members of the rational order were not created simultaneously. The existence of some of them presupposed the steadfastness of others.

As for the dangers involved in appointing someone as supreme ruler over all creation, God evidently took a considerable risk. But the hierarchical structuring of the angels would seem to serve her overall purpose for creating anything at all. We will return to this in relation to issues 3 and 4 below, and then we will be better prepared to readdress the present concern.

2. The suggestion just made, that the creation of human beings depended on the faithfulness of angels, is interestingly at odds with a notable line of Christian diabology. Going back at least to Origen (*c.* 185–*c.* 254) and championed by towering figures like Augustine and Anselm, the idea has been put forward that (part of) God's motivation for creating humans was to replace the fallen angels with new rational beings. Thus Origen, perhaps 'the most inventive diabologist of the entire Christian tradition' (Russell 1984, 123), suggested not only that 'the sin of the Devil and of the angels who followed him occurred before the creation of the material world', which is what the deal-making theodicy also suggests, but moreover that 'God created the material universe in order to compensate for the loss of goodness resulting from their sin' (Russell 1984, 130). In the same vein, Augustine taught that God created human beings so that they should 'fill up the loss which that diabolical disaster had caused in the angelic society' (*Enchiridion*, § 29); and later Anselm echoed the same idea, stating that 'it is agreed that it was God's plan to replace the fallen angels from out of the human race' (*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 1, § 19). Astute as ever, however, Anselm realized that there was something amiss with this theory. For if human beings were created for no other reason than for the replacement of fallen angels, 'it is plain that, if the angels had not fallen from their former state of blessedness, humans would not be ascending to it' (*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 1, § 18). In other words: had it not been for the demons' insurrection and consequent perdition, no humans would have been made. Unwilling to embrace this awkward conclusion, Anselm argued at length that 'human beings were not created solely for the restoration of a number which has been depleted, but also to make up a number which was not yet complete'

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(*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 1, § 18). Given that 'the angels were not created in their full complement' to begin with, he thus concluded that, 'even if no angel had perished, human beings would none the less have had their place in the heavenly city' (*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 1, § 18). And so there would be no reason for anyone in heaven to gloat over the eternal damnation of others.[16]

Lying behind this ancient Christian speculation, both in its Anselmian and pre-Anselmian version, is the idea that there is 'a rationally calculated and perfect number [of rational beings] known in advance by God' (*Cur Deus Homo*, bk 1, § 16) – an idea that would later be inherent also in Leibniz's thesis that the actual world is the best possible world (more on this below). But the deal-making theodicy, not being committed to any such thing, completely turns the tables on this venerable line of thought. Rather than being created as substitutes for the angels who went astray, human beings were created in celebration of the angels who remained firm. On the deal-making view, indeed, what prompted God to create the human race along with the material universe was the angels' virtue, not their sin. On this joyous view, the problem of saintly gloating in heaven – the problem that Anselm so strenuously tried to solve – does not even arise. It is precisely the other way around: all human saints will be eternally grateful to their spiritual godparents. Without them they would not even exist.

3. Whether or not there is a perfect number, however, the deal-making theodicy clearly suggests that the first part of God's creation resulted in a stunningly good world. What exactly does this mean?

To see this, let us clarify what it does *not* mean. Unlike Leibniz, who famously argued that the actual world must be the best of all possible worlds because otherwise there would not have been a sufficient reason for God to actualize this particular world rather than another,[17] the deal-making theodicy makes no claim about God's initial creation being uniquely best.[18] Nor is it committed to the weaker optimist contention that God chose to create an unsurpassable world from among the range of perfect, equally good possible worlds.[19] What it *does* mean is precisely this: the immaterial world was stunningly good – *even for having been created by an all-perfect being*. That is to say, despite knowing for certain that the world had been created by God, the primordial angels were awestruck by the result. To them, the academic possibility of the world having been even better – since (presumably) there is no logical limit to how good it could have been – borders on absurdity. Not even the most astute observer would have any reason to hope for, let alone expect, a better world. Hence, for all accounts and purposes, we could say that God initially created a perfect world, as long as the upper limits associated with perfection are interpreted in phenomenological rather than logical terms.[20]

But here we must make an important qualification. The original world was stunningly good (or even perfect, as it were), not in virtue of the way it was in itself, but rather in virtue of the way it was related to God's overall purpose for creating anything at all. Hence, whatever awesome qualities it might have had, they must be analysed extrinsically, not intrinsically. And God's overall creative purpose – on this score the deal-making theodicy is adamant – was to prepare the most godlike of all possible beings for an eternity in heaven together with her. Now it will be recalled that the angels did not enjoy the beatific vision from the start. Since wrongdoing in heaven is impossible, God first had to determine their moral characters by putting them to the test outside of heaven. Hence the need for an initial time of trial: an enigmatic state of affairs which brings us to another issue.

4. According to the deal-making theodicy, God arranged the angels in a hierarchical order at the outset. But how is this kind of inequality supposed to contribute to a stunningly good world? *Ceteris paribus*, would not a world in which all angels had been given the same status or level of authority have served God's overall purposes better?

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I suggest the following line of reply. Moral evaluation requires some kind of challenge, difficulty, or obstacle to be overcome, and the hierarchical differentiation among the angels would appear to foster such assessment. Presumably, the higher one's status, the stronger one's proclivity towards pride; and the lower one's status, the stronger one's proclivity towards envy.[21] The primordial probation was set up with the purpose of giving the most godlike of all possible beings the opportunities to make the most important, character-defining decisions of their lives, and a time limited hierarchy among the angels would seem to serve that purpose. It was divinely instituted, not to make the world intrinsically better, and certainly not to manifest the 'great chain of being', but rather to make it intrinsically worse and more challenging for everyone.

5. We are now in a better position to readdress the question raised by issue 1: Why did not God create everything all at once?[22] Let it be granted that *if* God decided to reward the faithful angels with human godchildren, it follows that the former had to be created and trialled prior to the latter. But one might question the rationality of this divine decision. Is godparenting really of such value that God was willing to risk the entire second stage of creation being thrown into disarray?

By way of response, let me first point out that angelic godparenting is much more like real parenting than human godparenting is. Again, on the deal-making view, human beings depend ontologically on the primordial devotion of their angelic godparents. Our existence is the unique reward of their acts of love, and surely, to our guardian angels, we are the most precious things in the world. To them, the suggestion that the world in its totality would have been better if all rational beings had been created simultaneously might well come across as rather cold.

And then consider it from God's perspective. All else being equal, a world with angelic godparenting would be axiologically preferrable to one without angelic godparenting. And if all the angels had done their duty, part two of creation would have been just as excellent as part one. When deciding to create in two stages, then, God merely aimed at an ideally good world, and thus I conclude that her creative decision cannot be charged with irrationality.[23]

6. Another issue that needs to be addressed concerns the devil's specific authority. Even if we assume that Lucifer was originally installed as king, why did not God, the all-powerful Queen of Queens, simply dethrone him after his fateful revolt? She had created and crowned him in the first place, after all, so why not just strip him of his power after he had wilfully misused it so gravely?

The straightforward answer, I think, is that the very idea of kingship entails lifelong authority. Once a king, always a king, irrespective of one's moral standing. He can lose his privileges only through death or abdication. Since God had created all angels immortal, however, and since the devil himself certainly did not want to abdicate, neither of these options were available. God had expressly ordained Lucifer as sovereign over the entire created order until everything were to be replaced (and the monarchical institution finally abolished) by a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21:1). Being necessarily as good as her word, this ordination she could not possibly undo.

7. Let us now shift focus. According to the deal-making theodicy, God had to comply with Satan's terms for embarking on stage two of creation. But what if these terms would have been even worse, indeed, *much* worse? Just to make the point, what if Satan had insisted that all new creatures be relentlessly tortured by demons for at least a million years? Would God have agreed also to those grisly conditions? If not, where would she have drawn the line? How bad would have been too bad?

I believe that the correct answers to questions like these are as simple as they are sobering. As long as we are talking about time limited, pre-eschatological states of affairs, there really is no limit to how much suffering God could have accepted. (Regardless of the deal-making theodicy, after all, one merely needs to read a few newspapers to realize that

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God – if she exists – tolerates a stupendous amount of it.) It would make no sense to find two World Wars acceptable but not three, for example. Indeed, if it is morally acceptable for God to tolerate the vile beating to death of even one child (something that happens every day in this wretched world), why would it not also be morally acceptable for God to tolerate the vile beating to death of, say, ten million children? It would certainly be absurd to suggest that there is a kind of moral threshold or tipping point somewhere between one murder and ten million murders. The stark conclusion thus seems unavoidable: no amount of suffering would have been too bad – it still would have been worth it. If permitting ever so much earthly, time limited agony would have been the only possible way for God to enable beings to go to heaven, a mere glimpse of which is said to completely compensate for even the most horrendous cases of evil, it would have been a price worth paying. The awesomeness of our celestial home, in which 'God will wipe away all tears' (Rev. 21:4), is something for which no time limited suffering could possibly be too great.

8. At this point, Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* would emphatically disagree. In what is likely the most poignant passage ever written about the problem of evil, Dostoevsky lets Ivan ask his little brother Alyosha, a pious novice, the following question:

> Tell me yourself, I challenge you – answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance … Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth. (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk 5, ch. 4)

Alyosha's softly voiced answer ('No, I wouldn't consent') echoes the moral sentiments of generations of struggling theologians. And yet, if the deal-making theodicy is true, that baby beating its breast with its fist would not have existed unless God had agreed to create a world in which the torturing to death of babies were allowed to happen. In fact, since God is the delimiter of metaphysical space, that baby *could* not have existed – nor could anything else of a material character. What are we to make of this startling counterfactual?

What would seem to strike Ivan as reprehensible is the idea that the breast-beating baby's suffering were somehow a necessary precondition for 'peace and rest at last', that is, never-ending happiness in heaven: the greatest possible good. But how exactly is this meant to be understood? In memory of William Rowe's seminal articles on a related note, let us call the baby 'Sue'.[24] Here are some possible interpretations:

A. All else being equal, a world in which human beings cannot go to heaven would be preferrable to one in which they can go to heaven but in which Sue's brutal killing is a necessary condition for anyone's doing so.
B. All else being equal, a world in which human beings cannot go to heaven would be preferrable to one in which they can go to heaven but in which God's allowing (or ensuring that it is possible for) Sue to be brutally killed is a necessary condition for anyone's doing so.
C. There being no world at all (i.e., nothingness) would be preferrable to a world in which human beings can go to heaven but in which God's allowing (or ensuring that it is possible for) Sue to be brutally killed is a necessary condition for anyone's doing so.

Of these three propositions, I think it is pretty clear that A ought to be granted. In fact, the denial of A would seem to be doubly objectionable. Not only would it single out a particular

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baby for torture, but it would imply that her torturers helped to open the doors to heaven precisely by torturing her. But A is perfectly compatible with the deal-making theodicy, and Ivan probably had more in mind.

Proposition B, by contrast, is much more dubious. On either of its two scenarios, no matter which world is preferred, Sue is brutally killed. What Ivan is claiming, if indeed he meant to argue along these lines, is that the idea in question (that God's allowing Sue to be brutally killed is a necessary condition for anyone's going to heaven) is so repulsive that a world in which human beings cannot go to heaven would be better – despite Sue's being brutally killed anyway. The force of Ivan's case notwithstanding, I think it is fair to say that this claim is rather improbable.

Proposition C, finally, would seem to be less controversial than proposition B. It is easy to grasp why nothingness could be seen to be preferrable to a world full of suffering. But then again, on the Christian view, the alternative to nothingness is not a world full of suffering, *full stop*, but a world that is full of suffering only temporarily (although for a very long time), during its pre-eschatological era, after which it will be transformed into everlasting qualities. And if the Christian (and deal-making) hope for eternity is well founded, those qualities are impossible to properly appreciate or even to comprehend from an outside-of-heaven perspective. To the heavenly citizens (including Sue), the mere idea of nothingness being preferrable to a world in which God's allowing Sue to be brutally killed is a necessary condition for anyone's eternal bliss would be utterly unbelievable.

Ivan, however, would not rest his case here. 'Even if I were wrong', he vowed, 'I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation' than join the heavenly choir of never-ending harmonies:

> I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be, when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' … But I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk 5, ch. 4)

In other words (if I interpret him correctly): even if Sue and her parents and every other celestial citizen would find the entire cosmic edifice superabundantly worthwhile in the end, *and even if Ivan himself would be positively irrational to suggest otherwise*, he would still dismiss it as fundamentally absurd. For all its moral fervour and heroic determination, this existentialist conclusion strikes me as ultimately sad and forlorn (and the fact that Ivan becomes increasingly despairing and mentally fragile later on in Dostoevsky's book only serves to bolster this impression). To prefer utter nothingness to a world that (1) had to be tormented by suffering in order to exist at all, and (2) will be eventually transformed into never-ending grandeur and sublimity, is to position oneself on the wrong side of philosophy.

9. Still, to press it a bit further, if no amount of pre-eschatological suffering would have been too much for God to tolerate, why did the devil settle for a world like ours? We could easily imagine any number of worlds that would have been much worse. Indeed, at the risk of being repetitive, why not demand that all sentient creatures be unremittingly tortured for a million years? From a satanic point of view, at least in hindsight, God got off the hook too easily.

But here I would like to say two things. First, whatever terms Satan would have insisted on, he could always have demanded ones that were a million times more awful. The actual world really does contain an alarming amount of suffering, the infinite possibilities of ever worse scenarios notwithstanding.

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Second, more importantly, the harsher one is afflicted, the less culpable one becomes. But the very motive for the devil to let God create the material world was to incite as many new persons as possible to rebel against God – that is, to act culpably – and thus to end up in hell.[25] Hypothetically, on a scenario in which human beings were faced with unimaginably long stretches of torture, no one could really be held morally accountable for anything and thus no one would deserve eternal damnation. Satan, being the shrewdest dealer that God ever made, knew perfectly well not to overplay his hand. He wanted to optimize the prospects of wrongdoing, and thus the overall conditions of the new world should not be too bad. Gruesome, indeed, but not excessively so.

Does it solve the problem of evil?

10. But now we must go on. Turning to our second set of questions, let us assume that the deal-making theodicy is basically correct. It is still not clear whether we have arrived at a satisfactory solution to the problem of evil. For one thing, even if we assume that the material universe had to be a shockingly bad place, plagued by hardship and pain throughout its pre-eschatological phase, why is the total amount of suffering so extremely unevenly distributed? Would not the second part of God's creation have been significantly better if everyone had to suffer roughly as much?

Yes, but that is precisely the point! Assuming that the total amount of suffering and the number of sufferers had remained the same, a world in which the division of disasters, diseases, losses, and pain had been uniform would not have been bad enough and thus would not have satisfied Satan's terms.

11. If so, however, it might be reasonably objected that the small print of the deal needs to be spelled out. When demanding that the additional creation be 'shockingly bad', what exactly did Satan require? In order to assess whether the conditions of our material world tell against God's all-perfect character, which is what the problem of evil is all about, we need to know how the devil's demands are supposed to have restricted the range of creative possibilities available to God.

In response, trying to specify the terms, we first need to look at the situation from the devil's point of view. According to the deal-making theodicy, as reiterated in issue 9 above, Satan's motive for being obstructive was to incite as many new persons as possible to join the primordial uprising. Essentially, this rebellion consisted in not affirming God's worship-worthiness (or holiness). Ideally, as it were, this objective would be reached by making people doubt God's very existence; but making them doubt at least one of God's omni-attributes would also serve this purpose since (presumably) only an all-perfect being could be worthy of worship.[26] Accordingly, to reach his goal, Satan made use of elementary logic: the worse or more disappointing their conditions were, the more susceptible to his proposals the new group of individuals would be, and the longer these gruelling conditions lasted, the more likely it would be that they started to question God's character, or even her existence. Aiming to arrive at the overall impression that the new world is a shockingly bad place – that is, *shockingly bad for having been created by an all-perfect being* – his guiding principle was to ensure that it be strikingly disappointing in a wide variety of respects. Hence, more precisely, when he signed the deal with God, he implicitly had at least the following seven requirements in mind:

R1 that the new world be plagued by suffering;
R2 that its basic structures be liable to malfunction;
R3 that its environments be harsh and hostile to life;
R4 that its pre-eschatological period be extremely long and gruelling;
R5 that its total amount of suffering be extremely unevenly distributed;

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R6 that God conceal her existence from its inhabitants; and
R7 that she allow all inclinations towards evil free rein.

By requiring God to accept these terms, Satan wanted to sow as much doubt as possible in the minds of the future world citizens regarding her attributes and existence. And by doing so, he was hoping to maximize the appeal of his rebellious campaign: to stop as many as possible from giving to God what only she is due.

12. We are now in a better position to reconsider the issue of inequality briefly raised in issue 10. Again, the total amount of suffering in the world is extremely – shockingly – unevenly distributed. If the deal-making theodicy is true, it is now clear why this upsetting state of affairs is tolerated by God. Not only is she bound by R5 to arrange the world in such a way that its total amount of natural suffering (i.e., suffering resulting from diseases, accidents, ageing, disasters, and the like) befalls its inhabitants most erratically, but she is also bound by R7 to give full rein to human selfishness or greed resulting in unjust societies, destructive structures of power, unfair treatments, and corrupt affairs. Hence, when it comes to inequality, as well as to any other cause of suffering, her hands are effectively tied.[27]

13. Speaking of R7, we might also briefly revisit the hideous fate of 'Sue', the tortured, breast-beating baby in Dostoevsky's book. The reason why God allowed her to be brutally killed is precisely because God had agreed to the terms of R7. In this revolting case and in countless others, her shocking passivity even in the face of unbelievable bestiality is a prerequisite for our very existence. Had she not struck a deal with the devil, a deal that included R7, neither Sue nor any other corporeal being could ever have seen the light of day, let alone experience the dawn of eternity.[28]

14. But there is still something to be said about the issue of inequality. Following a useful convention, let a unit of suffering be called a 'dolor',[29] and let us assume that the total amount of suffering follows a normal distribution (bell curve). Let us further assume that 95 per cent of all sentient beings suffer between twenty and eighty dolors each during their lifetimes, meaning that the average amount of suffering is fifty dolors. Accordingly, since one standard deviation in this case is fifteen dolors, it follows that 68 per cent of the population in question suffer between thirty-five and sixty-five dolors. (It also follows that 2.5 per cent suffer more than eighty dolors, just as 2.5 per cent suffer less than twenty dolors). Now, while it is agreed that this world – call it W_A (the actual world) – is plagued by suffering (cf. R1) and that its total amount of suffering is extremely unevenly distributed (cf. R5), it is not clear that God could not have created a much better world, that is, a world that would have satisfied all the above seven requirements and that still would have been axiologically preferrable to W_A. Suppose for example that the total amount of suffering in W_A would have been distributed, not normally, but along three fixed levels such that 16 per cent of the population suffered thirty-five dolors each, 68 per cent of the population suffered fifty dolors each, and 16 per cent of the population suffered sixty-five dolors each. In such a world – call it W_B – Satan's requirements could still have been met, the total amount of suffering would have been the same, and yet it would seem to be a better option than W_A. Not only is the inequality in W_B less palpable than in W_A, since the extreme positions are closer to each other, but the unfortunate individuals who are worst off in W_B are not nearly suffering as much as those who are worst off in W_A in which 0.15 per cent of the population (i.e., 3 out of 2,000 individuals) suffer at least 95 dolors. All else being equal, then, W_B would seem to have been preferrable to W_A, even taking R1–R7 into account, and thus the deal-making assertion that our material world does not tell against the all-perfect character of God is cast into serious doubt.

The proper response to this objection, however, at least for all I can see, is to deny one of its crucial assumptions, namely, that W_B would have satisfied R5. Though its distribution

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of suffering would have been uneven (albeit in a strangely uniform way), it would not have been extremely uneven. Its doloric span from thirty-five to sixty-five dolors per individual is only 30 per cent off its mean value of fifty dolors per individual, and this simply does not count as an extreme range.

Of course, the doloric span could easily be extended. Let W_C be a world in which it ranges, not from thirty-five to sixty-five dolors per individual, but from twenty to eighty. Hence, in W_C, 16 per cent of the population suffer twenty dolors each, 68 per cent suffer fifty dolors each, and 16 per cent suffer eighty dolors each. In this case the doloric span is 60 per cent off its mean value, and its claim to being 'extreme' is clearly a lot strengthened compared to the situation in W_B. On the other hand, W_C's claim to being preferrable to W_A is conversely a lot weakened. I guess that we could spend the rest of our lives making metaethical value comparisons between W_A and W_C and still not arrive at a unanimous decision – which is not a problem, as far as the deal-making theodicy is concerned, since (as will be recalled from issue 3) it does not require the doubtful idea that the actual world is logically unsurpassable, let alone the best. In order to challenge the deal-making theodicy in this respect, one rather needs to show that W_C would be clearly better than W_A, all things considered. The mere conclusion that it would be just about as good, or even arguably a bit better, will not do.

15. Here is one last issue to consider. The deal-making theodicy is strikingly anthropocentric. To put it crudely, God's sole reason for creating the material universe was to add human beings to the existing angelic population. Why, then, on this view, did God bother to create animals? If life in the new world had to be liable to malfunction (R2), harsh (R3), extremely gruelling (R4), extremely unequal (R5), and overall plagued by suffering (R1), why add more sentient creatures to it than necessary? Indeed, would not a world devoid of animals have been clearly better, all else being equal?

By way of reply, let us try a sci-fi thought experiment. Imagine a universe-generating laboratory in which there a two buttons. When either button is pressed, a baby universe is quantum tunnelled into the multiverse without consequences for any other universe. It will expand and develop into a universe very similar to our own (its mother universe). If the black button is pressed, the resulting universe will eventually bring forth life that gradually evolves into innumerable species, except that the human race (or any comparably advanced life forms) will never appear. By contrast, if the white button is pressed, the resulting universe will remain completely sterile. Now suppose that we had access to this high-tech laboratory but that we only had one try. Which button would be the morally preferrable choice?

Presumably, the only answer that could have a negative bearing on the deal-making theodicy would be 'the white one'. That is, only if we assume that it would be morally better to press the white button, resulting in a lifeless universe, would it follow that God ought to have created our actual world without animals. This assumption is anything but obvious, however. Why not rather assume the opposite: that a universe in which non-human life would be given the opportunity to evolve in countless ways would be preferrable to a completely lifeless one – despite the former being subjected to R1–R7? Or perhaps we should rather say that the choice is morally indifferent? Either of these latter alternatives would be perfectly compatible with the deal-making theodicy.

To this is might be added that, as far as the deal-making theodicy is concerned, there is nothing to prevent us from postulating an eschatological eternity for every sentient or even living being. But even without such a postulate, which is a bit speculative even from a theological point of view, the objection that God in our deal-making scenario should have opted for a world devoid of animals is one that I find rather dull.

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Taking stock

Now we must draw to a close. Nothing that I have said so far suggests that the deal-making theodicy is actually true. But unlike for example the hypothesis of 'transworld depravity', which Alvin Plantinga (1974, 188) deploys to substantiate his free will defence against John L. Mackie's (1955, 209) logical argument from evil, the deal-making story is a 'live hypothesis', to borrow a useful phrase from William James (1897, 2). It is one that many old-school Christian believers may actually be prepared to assert, or at least find worthy of serious consideration. And this much I conclude: to the extent that it happens to be affirmed, it offers a strikingly simple and cogent solution to the problem of evil.

Many or most people, of course, will just see it as a legendary saga. Its mythological underpinnings will render it too esoteric, obscure, or intellectually old-fashioned to warrant any factual assent – or it may come across as just another 'dead hypothesis' (James 1897, 2) for various cultural, philosophical, or religious reasons. Even so, precisely because its mythological underpinnings are deeply immersed in classical, widely held Christian beliefs, it should be of interest to anyone (believer or not) to whom the problem of evil is still an issue worthy of serious reflection. Moreover, if it offers an intelligible and theologically viable explanation for why God tolerates so much darkness in the world, this too would seem to follow: the problem of evil does not undermine the Christian faith. Clearly this is a big if, but the deal-making theodicy cannot be dismissed simply because it is congenial to a certain religion.

Finally, by way of delineation, it may be useful to clarify what the deal-making theodicy is *not*. Thus, for example, despite its focus on the fall of angels, it is emphatically not about natural evil being directly or indirectly caused by demons who wilfully mess around and meddle in the course of evolution.[30] Nor is it about soul-making and the importance of character development.[31] Nor is it about the overriding value of free will. Even though the latter may well be one of the most important angelic characteristics, it plays no significant explanatory role in the deal-making theodicy. Indeed, it bears repeating that God tolerates moral evil, not because she respects our freedom, but because she respects her own promise – that is the very point of the deal.

Moreover, the deal-making theodicy is not about the material world being the hubristic creation of an ignorant or passionate demiurge.[32] Nor is it about suffering being a just punishment for our sins, let alone the inevitable consequences of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Nor is it about the great value of relationship building, or about suffering mysteriously uniting us with God even deeper, or about the alleged psychological necessity of evil in order to appreciate goodness, or about sin being *felix culpa* – a necessary condition for the subsequent, wondrous redemption of humanity.[33] And last but not least, it is absolutely not about suffering being a necessary means to some inscrutable, greater good.[34]

On the deal-making view, by contrast, it should be unequivocally clear that the massive amount of badness in our world is permitted, not because it is a mysterious part of God's plan, but in spite of not being part of God's plan at all. God tolerates it for one very simple reason: without it, we would not be allowed to exist. The distinctive contribution of the deal-making theodicy is to offer a straightforward explanation for this absurd-looking claim.

Notes

1. Coined by Leibniz in his *Essais de Théodicée* (1710), the term is put together from the Greek words for 'God' and 'justice'. For a recent and straight-to-the-point introduction to the most important schools of theodicy, along with the challenges facing each version, see Ekstrom (2024). For a wide range of more detailed studies, see McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (2013, part 2).
2. Cf. Adams and Adams (1990, 3).

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3. As for the need to distinguish the problem of evil from the argument from evil, see Howard-Snyder (1996, xi–xii).

4. This is one way of putting it, at least. As noted by Thomas P. Flint (2013, 251), a 'constant difficulty in discussing the issue of theodicy is that of terminology'. For some diverse uses, see Plantinga (1977, 28), Swinburne (1995, 75, 89–90), Draper (1989, 349), van Inwagen (2006, 6–7), Stump (2010, 18–20), Speak (2015, 7–9), Forrest (2024, 5).

5. Milton (1674) (*Paradise Lost*, bk 1, line 26).

6. As confirmed by N.N. Trakakis (2018, 99), 'a typical anti-theodical claim' is that 'theodicy subverts aspects of morality or specific moral concepts we would not wish to do without', and 'it is sometimes argued that certain streams in theodicy trivialize and diminish the reality and horror of evil, and thus surreptitiously end up altering, if not disfiguring or destroying, our moral compass'. In his own candid judgement, indeed, 'the theodicist's way of proceeding evinces a failure to take suffering seriously' (Trakakis 2008, 166 f.).

7. As Michael Rea (2016, 99) notes, 'those working in the analytic tradition have mostly opted simply to ignore the [feminist] critique'.

8. Following the recommendations of Augustine and Aquinas, the theological hypothesis that God's creation took place in two stages never gained wide support in the Christian West. In the early Christian East, by contrast, the reception was a lot warmer. Aquinas himself had to admit that one of the pillars of orthodoxy, Gregory Nazianzen, along with all the other 'Greek Fathers' held 'the creation of the angels to have taken place previously to that of the corporeal world' (*Summa Theologiae*, § 1.61.3).

9. The nine-level choir of angels goes back to Pseudo-Dionysius (*The Celestial Hierarchy*, § 6) and was essentially approved in the early Middle Ages by Pope Gregory I. For a systematic defence, see Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, § 1.108). This venerable scheme started to crumble during the Renaissance when it was settled that the author of *The Celestial Hierarchy* was not the real Athenian Areopagite of Acts (17:34). See Patrides (1959) for a historical account.

10. This at least is the traditional account. I would venture to suggest that the cause of Lucifer's fall is more plausibly and specifically describable in terms of *wounded* pride; see more on this in note 21.

11. That Lucifer was the highest-ranking angel (and not only the top demon) is affirmed e.g. by Aquinas (see *Summa Theologiae*, § 1.63.7), who again cites Gregory Nazianzen in support of this view.

12. The suggestion that the angels did not enjoy the beatific vision right from the outset is not a novelty. Aquinas, for one, clearly affirmed it, concluding that indeed 'the angels were not in beatitude from their creation' (*Summa Theologiae*, § 1.62.1).

13. For a comprehensive introduction to the copious biblical references to Satan, demonic powers, and celestial conflicts, see Peckham (2018, ch. 3).

14. One might suspect that there is some kind of paradox of the stone involved here, or even that the very idea of God delegating authority that she then *cannot* disregard is flatly incompatible with her alleged omnipotence. But of course that depends on how exactly 'omnipotence' is to be defined. Elsewhere (Lembke 2012), I wrestle with this issue.

15. The idea of some kind of deal having been reached between God and the devil was for about a millennium part of the predominant Christian theory of atonement. Unlike this age-old ransom theory, however, the deal-making theodicy involves not a shred of divine trickery, bait, or deception.

16. Anselm's reasoning is not entirely cogent, however. Even if there is no one-to-one relation between the human saints in heaven and the demons in hell, it would still be the case that the more angels who fell, the more humans would be needed to complete the perfect number. Hence, even on Anselm's improved account, there would seem to be some incentive left for saintly gloating.

17. As Leibniz (*Theodicy*, § 8) puts it, 'there is an infinitude of possible worlds among which God must needs have chosen the best, since he does nothing without acting in accordance with supreme reason'.

18. But for a fine against-the-tide defence of Leibniz's thesis, see Strickland (2005).

19. I am not suggesting that either version of optimism is necessarily false. However, the idea that some worlds are unsurpassable has fallen on hard times. As Lloyd Strickland (2005, 37) observes, it is widely assumed nowadays that 'for any given world there is always another that is better'. See e.g. Adams (1972, 317), Elliot (1993, 533), Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1994, 260), Plantinga (1977, 60 f.), and Swinburne (2004, 115).

20. Followers of Leibniz may insist that, if indeed no best possible option was available to God, she would risk being paralyzed like Buridan's ass. See Strickland (2006) for a fascinating discussion about this scenario. Others will say that God's choosing to actualize a logically surpassable world still (for some reason) casts a shadow on her moral character or even disproves her existence; see e.g. Perkins (1983) and Wielenberg (2004). For arguments to the contrary, see e.g. Adams (1972) and Hasker (1984). For a top-quality book-length treatment of the entire issue, see Langtry (2008).

21. One of my anonymous reviewers urges me to specify Lucifer's primordial motive for turning against God. I thus hazard the following account. When she had created the immaterial angels, God turned to them and said:

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'If you want to have a love relationship with me, you must fall down and worship me.' Hearing this, Lucifer felt belittled. 'Why should I have to bow and scrape to earn anyone's love?' he thought. 'Am I not good enough as I am, without having to crawl?' So he refused to worship God, thus forever forfeiting any possibility of divine intimacy. Finding himself locked out of heaven, his hurt turning into hate, Satan began to seek revenge. On this account, then, what initially prompted Lucifer's rebellion was not *hubristic* pride so much as *wounded* pride.

22. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to readdress this issue.

23. Here it might be replied (with one of my anonymous reviewers) that my proposal presupposes that God lacks foreknowledge of future contingents. I agree thus far: the deal-making theodicy makes more sense if indeed that is the case. (For a relevant and thoughtful philosophical-theological defence of open theism against the view that God possesses exhaustively definite foreknowledge, see Boyd 2001, ch. 3.) Still, even if omniscience entails such foreknowledge, God's decision to create in two stages may still be morally defensible. Suppose that God foreknew (or timelessly knows) that Lucifer would fall and that his requirements would later wreak havoc on stage two. She would still have morally expected him to do what is right. And for all I can see, it is far from clear that she would have acted more rationally if she had let go of the two-stage creation project (with its angelic godparenting) due to this foreknowledge than if she had held on to it because of her righteous expectations. (On this score at least deontologists may agree.)

24. See Rowe (1988, 120); cf. Rowe (1979) in which his evidential argument from evil was first and most effectively launched. (The fictitious name 'Sue' was not given by Rowe himself, however, but by William Alston (1991, 32).)

25. Any reference to hell in a proposed solution to the problem of evil might seem like the ultimate case of 'out of the frying pan into the fire'. And I completely agree: if hell is supposed to be anything like what it has all too often been supposed to be, it has no place in any kind of sensible discussion. For my own account, inspired by George Mivart's from 1892, see Lembke (2024).

26. Note the 'could' – I am not saying (though I am not denying it either) that an all-perfect being *would* be worthy of worship. Exactly what might ground worship-worthiness is a tricky question; see Bayne and Nagasawa (2006) for an interesting discussion.

27. Does this mean that it would be irrational for a believer in the deal-making theodicy to pray for God's protection against one's evil-minded enemies? (My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this very sensible question.) Here I can only hint at a couple of responses that might be available to those who want to preserve the possibility of miraculous interventions. One way would be to distinguish between, say, positive and negative interventions, pointing out that, even having signed on to R1–R7, God could still work occasional miracles of the positive kind (as long as the material world did not cease to be shockingly bad overall). Another way would be to modify R7 as follows: 'that, unless otherwise is agreed, she allow all inclinations towards evil free rein'. Presumably, the latter way would seem to indicate that God must offer something in return, the obvious Christian candidate being the voluntary passion of Christ.

28. Here I would like to draw attention to John C. Peckham's *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Peckham 2018). As far as I know, this is the only other theodicy that makes use of the idea of some kind of deal-making between the devil and God. It is very different from the one espoused in this article, however. Basically, it is a free will theodicy that incorporates fallen-angel theodicies (to account for some of the natural evil) and certain views related to sceptical theism (to remind us that God's reasons for allowing specific instances of evil are beyond our ken). But to this Peckham adds the idea that Satan has brought charges against God's character before a celestial tribunal. God, who is unable to falsify these charges through sheer power, has to agree with the devil on certain 'rules of engagement' in order to publicly defend herself. Even if the content of these rules is unknown to us, they for some reason (which Peckham unfortunately does not explain) severely restrain God's temporary jurisdiction to intervene in earthly affairs.

29. See Feldman ((2010, 25). While Feldman uses 'dolor' as a unit of pain, I follow Russell (2022), 2) in using it as a unit of suffering.

30. The main idea of this so-called 'fallen-angel theodicy', or the 'Satan hypothesis', is that natural evil is analysable in terms of moral evil by taking the malevolent actions of demons into account. For a nuanced and very interesting outline of this particular theodicy, which happens to have a long and venerable history in Christian theology, see Emberger (2022); but see also Kelly (1997) and Forrest (2024). For a remarkable book-length explication, see Boyd (2001). For a recent critique, see Dunnington (2018).

31. But see Hick (1966, parts 3 & 4) for the modern reinvigoration of this age-old Irenaean theodicy.

32. The anti-Gnostic character of my proposal is worth pointing out. On the deal-making view, indeed, the material cosmos is created directly and freely by the ultimate One and is thus thoroughly good, despite being subjected to the devil's malignant schemes.

33. As e.g. the great optimist Leibniz argued, just as occasional intrusions of dissonance make the ensuing relief of consonance more agreeable, or just as the use of contrasts heightens the beauty of a painting, so 'a sequence of things where sin enters in … has been, in effect, better than another sequence without sin' (*Theodicy*, § 11).

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34. For a wide collection of articles related to the position known as 'sceptical theism', according to which God's reasons for allowing evil are categorically beyond our ken, see McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (2013, part 3).

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