

Where the conflict really lies: Plantinga, the challenge of evil, and religious naturalism

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In this paper I argue that, although Alvin Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy appears on only two pages of his recent book *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* (2011) (i.e. 58-59), it is of pivotal importance for the book as a whole. Plantinga argues that there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and monotheism, and that there is superficial concord but deep conflict between science and naturalism. I contend that the weakness of the *Felix Culpa* theodicy lends support to the view that there is more than superficial conflict between science and monotheism, and offer an alternative response to the challenge of evil which suggests that there might be, after all, concord between science and (religious) naturalism.

1. Plantinga and the challenge of evil

In order to show that, although there is superficial conflict, there is deep concord between science and monotheism, central to which is 'the thought that there is such a person as God: a personal agent who has created the world and is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good' (ix), Plantinga argues that God creates by means of the process of natural selection (39), that Michael Behe's writings about irreducible complexity constitute a series of 'design discourses' for which there aren't any defeaters (258), and that God's miraculous interventions are not incompatible with an interpretation of natural laws as 'descriptions of the material universe when God is not treating what he has made in a special way' (119). By contrast, Plantinga argues that there is superficial concord but deep conflict between science and naturalism, 'the thought that there is no such person as God, or anything like God' (ix), on the grounds that evolution cannot explain why our cognitive faculties are mostly reliable; this can be explained only if we have been created in the image of an omniscient God who bestows upon us reliable cognitive faculties (chapter 10).

If, however, God creates by means of the process of natural selection, why did God choose a process which causes so much suffering to so many sentient creatures? If, as Plantinga argues, God was able to preserve populations from perils of various kinds (11, 308), why have so many populations suffered so many perils across so many thousands of years? Even Behe acknowledges that an argument for an intelligent designer is not an argument for the existence of a benevolent God, and admits that the designer might just as well be 'an angel fallen or not; Plato's demiurge; some mystical new-age force; space aliens from Alpha Centauri; time travellers; or some utterly unknown intelligent being' (Behe 2003, 277, quoted in Plantinga 2011, 236). Similarly, even if miracles are not incompatible with natural laws and should be understood simply as unusual events which God brings about for a purpose, why does God not see fit to bring about such events more frequently in order to prevent extremes of suffering?

Plantinga argues that it was well-known before Darwin that nature is ‘red in tooth and claw’ (56) and that animals have suffered throughout the long history of the earth. He claims that God permits natural evil and the atrocities perpetrated by human beings ‘because he has good reason – one that we may not be able to discern – for permitting them’ (58). Plantinga also adopts the sceptical theist’s stance in responding to the objection of George Ellis that, if God can intervene in order to turn water into wine, heal the sick, or raise the dead, why does this happen so rarely? If God is able to intervene in order to achieve some good, why doesn’t God intervene to relieve suffering of all kinds, from the pain of toothache to the atrocities of Auschwitz? (Ellis 2000, 383, quoted in Plantinga 2011, 100). Ellis seeks a criterion which would explain why God intervenes in some cases but not others, but Plantinga thinks that this asks too much; ‘God will intervene ... when he has a good reason for doing so; but why suppose we human beings would be in a position to know when he does and when he doesn’t?’ (101) Likewise, Plantinga suggests that, although the reason for Jesus’ resurrection is ‘obvious’ – i.e. it marks Jesus’ special status (106) – in other cases God might have had reasons for ‘dealing in two different manners’ with the cosmos (i.e. for intervening in some cases but not others), and asks how we could be ‘even reasonably sure that he doesn’t’ (107).

Plantinga is, nevertheless, well-known for his version of the freewill defence (e.g., 1974), in which he suggests what God’s reasons for permitting evil might be, and, in *Where the Conflict Really Lies* and his earlier paper ‘Supralapsarianism, or “O Felix Culpa”’ (2004), he develops a bolder response, a theodicy which attempts to determine what God’s reasons for permitting evil are.

2. The *Felix Culpa* theodicy

Plantinga’s *Felix Culpa* theodicy is described by Kevin Diller as ‘the most philosophically nuanced defense of a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, born out of serious theological reflection’ (2008, 88). Plantinga provides an outline of this theodicy in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. He argues that the best possible world is one in which God ‘was willing to undergo enormous suffering in order to redeem creatures who had turned their backs on him’ (2011, 58) – i.e. ‘to enable human beings to be reconciled to God, and to achieve eternal life’ (59). Any world which contains atonement must contain ‘sin and evil and consequent suffering and pain’ (59). If the remedy is to be proportionate to the sickness, ‘such a world will contain a great deal of sin and a great deal of suffering and pain’ (59), and the sin and suffering may be perpetrated and experienced by all creatures.

The detail of the argument may be found in his earlier paper, ‘Supralapsarianism, or “O Felix Culpa”’. The theodicy is derived from the debate between two types of Calvinism: Supralapsarianism, which holds that God’s decree to save some of the fallen precedes the decree to permit sin, and Infralapsarianism, which claims that the decree to permit sin precedes the decree to save some of the fallen (2004, 1).

Plantinga argues that God’s aim in creating ‘is to create an extremely good feasible world’ (6). Such a world might contain a great deal of creaturely happiness, along with ‘beauty, justice, creaturely goodness, performance of duty’ (6-7), and creatures who love God and their neighbour as themselves (7). The two most important good-making characteristics, however, are the existence of God – although if God exists

necessarily there cannot be any worlds in which God does not exist – and ‘the unthinkable great good of incarnation and atonement’ which ‘towers enormously above all the rest of the contingent states of affairs included in our world’ (7). Plantinga argues that ‘Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine Trinity, incomparably good, holy, and sinless, was willing to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate, and to suffer and die so that we human beings can have life and be reconciled to the Father’ (7). This is despite ‘the fact that we have turned our back upon God, have rejected him, are sunk in sin, indeed, are inclined to resent God and our neighbour’ (7). Plantinga suggests that there is no good-making feature of the world which could rival this.

Since God exists in every possible world, and God is good, ‘[a]ll possible worlds are very good’ (8); a good God could not have created a world which is not very good. Even if God did not create, God would still have existed, and thus the world would still have been very good; indeed, Plantinga argues, ‘the value of any state of affairs in which God alone exists is itself unlimited’ (9), in the sense that there are no nonlogical limits to God’s goodness, love, knowledge and power, and ‘the good of God’s existence is incommensurable with creaturely goods’ (9). It is also incommensurable with creaturely evils in that, no matter how much evil and suffering a world contains, ‘it is vastly outweighed by the goodness of God’ (9).

Nevertheless, some possible worlds are more valuable than others because only some possible worlds contain ‘the towering and magnificent good of divine incarnation and atonement’ (9). God was not obliged to provide a way in which sinful creatures could be reconciled to God, which means that there are possible worlds in which free creatures suffer the consequences of their wrong-doing and are cut off from God. But, in those worlds which do contain incarnation and atonement, the value of these ‘cannot be matched by any aggregate of creaturely goods’ (10). And no matter how much evil a world contains, ‘the aggregated badness would be outweighed by the goodness of incarnation and atonement, outweighed in such a way that the world in question is very good’ (10).

Plantinga therefore adopts ‘the strong value assumption’, according to which ‘the value of any world which displays incarnation and atonement will exceed that of any world without those features’ (11). But all the worlds which contain incarnation and atonement also contain sin and suffering because without sin there would be no need for salvation, and therefore no atonement – hence the exclamation ‘O Felix Culpa!’ (O happy sin!). Thus, the world contains evil because God wanted to actualize one of the best possible worlds, and all of these contain atonement, and therefore sin and suffering.

Plantinga concludes that Supralapsarianism is right; God’s first intention was to actualise an extremely good possible world, but all of these contain incarnation and atonement and therefore sin and suffering; thus ‘the decree to provide incarnation and atonement and hence salvation is prior to the decree to permit fall into sin’ (12).

Finally, following Pope John Paul II in ‘*Salvifici Doloris*’ and Paul in Colossians 1:24, he argues that in suffering we can ‘participate and take part in, can contribute to the divine suffering by which humankind is redeemed’ (13). Thus, ‘for a highly eligible world to be actualized, more is needed than just the suffering of Christ’ (13);

all of these worlds contain atonement and therefore divine suffering, but the goodness of a truly good world can be satisfied only by the suffering of both Christ and creatures.

3. Objections addressed by Plantinga

In his article, Plantinga addresses the following three objections:

i. Why does God permit suffering as well as sin and evil?

Plantinga argues that God permits moral evil because creatures who are free to do both good and evil are more valuable than creatures who are free but have limited power. God therefore created a world in which creatures have a great deal of power, including the power to work against God, and the freedom to reject God. Thus, free creatures cause suffering by opposing God, or as a by-product of the attempt to achieve their own ends.

Plantinga also addresses the problem of natural evil, exemplified by the behaviour of the Ichneumonid wasp which lays its eggs inside a live caterpillar to enable the pupae to eat the caterpillar from the inside. He argues that natural evil is an instance of moral evil – i.e. that evil and suffering of this kind may be ‘attributed to the actions of Satan and his cohorts’ (16; cf. 2011, 59). He suggests that worlds which contain free, powerful creatures who do not sin might be less good than worlds in which they cause suffering, because suffering is of instrumental value (17). Some suffering improves the character of God’s people and prepares them for life in his kingdom, and some suffering may be the price we pay for living in a regular world. Again following Paul (II Corinthians 4:10-11, 14, 17; Romans 8), Plantinga argues that suffering also contributes towards eternal glory for God’s followers, because sharing in Christ’s suffering is, first, ‘a means to attain “the resurrection from the dead”, i.e. salvation’ (18), secondly, ‘a means of fellowship with him at a very profound level and a way in which [Christians] achieve a certain kind of solidarity with him’ (18), and, thirdly, a means by which they come to resemble Christ by displaying the image of God more fully (18).

It is, however, questionable whether suffering improves character; one might, perhaps, say that it provides an opportunity for improving one’s character, but then one might expect an all-powerful and benevolent God to ensure that there is an equitable distribution of such opportunities, which is apparently not the case. Even if suffering enables resurrection from the dead, solidarity with Christ, and display of the image of God, the question regarding the inequitable distribution of suffering – and therefore, presumably, of its benefits – remains. Further, if ‘Satan and his cohorts’ are permitted to cause natural evil because suffering is of instrumental value, it is difficult to understand how this might explain the behaviour of the Ichneumonid wasp. Perhaps suffering of this kind is explained as the price which sentient beings must pay for living in a regular world, but this raises the question of why God permits so much sin and suffering.

ii. Why does God permit so much sin and suffering?

Plantinga argues that, since we cannot know whether a world as good as ours has to contain as much freedom and thus as much sin and suffering as ours (20), and ‘suffering is of instrumental value in a variety of ways’ (21), there is no way in which we can estimate how much suffering the best possible worlds must contain. He suggests that this objection is therefore inconclusive.

iii. Does God suffer from the divine equivalent of Munchausen syndrome by proxy?

Lastly, Plantinga considers whether the *Felix Culpa* theodicy implies that God suffers from ‘a sort of cosmic Munchausen syndrome by proxy’ (21) – i.e. that God requires creatures to suffer, without their permission, not for their own good but to enable him to achieve his own purposes; he does not behave lovingly towards them, but treats them merely as means rather than ends.

Drawing on the work of Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump, Plantinga argues that God would not require creatures to suffer in order to actualize an extremely good world unless the suffering leads to some good for those who suffer (23). He notes, however, that at least some suffering appears to be unconnected with the good of those who suffer. Here, he suggests that God might allow us to suffer for the benefit of others if we freely consent. But, just as human beings must sometimes make decisions on behalf of those who are unable to give their consent, so God might decide that, if we had been able to make the decision, we would have chosen freely to accept suffering which benefits others or enables God to ‘achieve his end of actualizing a highly eligible good world’ (24). Even if we are able to make the decision and would not accept the suffering, perhaps God knows that our unwillingness is due to ignorance of the relevant facts or ‘disordered affections’ since, with the relevant knowledge and right affections, we would have accepted the suffering (24).

It could, however, be argued that Plantinga has no need to offer an explanation for suffering which appears to be unconnected with the good of those who suffer since he has already argued, in response to the first objection, that suffering has several instrumental functions. The inequitable distribution of suffering and the enormity of the price which some must pay are difficulties which remain, however.

4. Further objections to Plantinga’s *Felix Culpa* theodicy

Two substantial responses to Plantinga’s *Felix Culpa* theodicy have been offered by Kevin Diller (2008) and Marilyn McCord Adams (2008). They consider the following objections:

i. Atonement was not necessary

Diller argues that the incarnation is of great-making value not because it enables atonement, but because it ‘creates an opportunity for human intimacy and fellowship with God which would not otherwise be possible’ (2008: 91). He argues that the New Testament ‘seems to advance the notion that, because God became human, believers are grafted together *in Christ*, and enabled thereby to commune with God in a way

that would not otherwise be possible' (91). Although suffering may enable us to participate in Christ's suffering, this does not entail 'that there is a unique quality and value to this kind of intimacy or avenue to intimacy that could not otherwise have been achieved, perhaps by the incarnation alone, without suffering and evil' (91). Thus, the incarnation alone could have served as God's method for 'drawing us into the kind of closer communion with him that transforms us and our relationships' (2008: 91), and incarnation alone is therefore 'a towering and magnificent act of divine condescension and self-giving, incommensurate with creaturely goods and evils' (91), which means that a world containing incarnation but no fall might have been just as good as a world containing atonement, evil and suffering (91).

If the purpose of drawing us into closer communion with God is to transform us and our relationships, however, this implies that human beings and their relationships *require* transformation – i.e. that they are less than perfect as a consequence of sin. In a world with no fall, human beings and their relationships would not require transformation. Thus, perhaps incarnation cannot, after all, be separated from atonement, and sin and suffering are either prerequisites for incarnation and atonement, or, as Plantinga suggests, that which enables incarnation and atonement.

ii. Atonement is not a towering good

Diller argues that Plantinga's theodicy rests upon the assumption that 'the enactment or display of love that we see in the atonement is a great-making state of affairs' (Diller, 92). But, Diller asks, 'would the depths of God's love for creation have been any less if sin and evil had not entered the world?' (92) He acknowledges the possibility that 'the enactment of God's love in redemption gives us a view of the nature of that love which we would not otherwise have had' (92), but asks how we could know the constraints under which God was working while communicating knowledge of the nature of divine love.

It is, however, questionable whether Plantinga makes this assumption. Plantinga argues not that it is the enactment or display of love in the atonement which is the great-making state of affairs, but that it is Christ's willingness 'to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate, and to suffer and die so that we human beings can have life and be reconciled to the Father' (7), despite 'the fact that we have turned our back upon God, have rejected him, are sunk in sin, indeed, are inclined to resent God and our neighbour' (7).

Perhaps Diller is correct, however, in claiming that Plantinga assumes that it is worth breaking the relationship between God and creation to enable God's action to restore it (93). Diller acknowledges that in our fallen world it may be true that relationships which follow loss and redemption sometimes have a special quality, but, he asks, '[h]ow would we establish the general principle without suggesting, for instance, that the strongest marriages are those that have involved a period of divorce, or that the deepest mother-daughter relationship is enabled once the daughter commits patricide or the like?' (93)

iii. In a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, evil is the will of God

Diller points out that, while a free will defence suggests a reason why God might have *permitted* evil, in a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, 'evil is made a *necessary* component of achieving a higher good' (95). God desires evil to emerge so that he can achieve his purposes, and this 'has a dangerously distorting moral and theological impact. We can no longer condemn evil and injustice as wholly antithetical to what is good. Evil is ultimately the will of God' (96).

It might be objected that even the free will defender must argue that God foreknew that free creatures would produce evil and so, on this scenario too, evil is ultimately the will of God. Thus, the *Felix Culpa* theodicy is at least no worse in this respect than the free will defence. Diller's point, however, is that there is a significant difference between permitting evil as an unfortunate by-product of the creation of free creatures, and creating a world in which evil is necessary for God to achieve his purposes. In the first case, evil is something which God cannot prevent; in the second, evil is a means to God's ends. Diller admits that the difference between the two positions is minimal but, he suggests, while it is 'a razor's breadth' it has 'a chasm's depth' (96). In a free will defence, the permission of evil is essential to the greater good, whereas in the *Felix Culpa* theodicy the evil itself is essential to the greater good (96).

iv. A loving God would not require suffering which is of no benefit to the sufferer

Both Diller and Marilyn McCord Adams argue that Plantinga's theodicy requires suffering which is of no obvious benefit to the sufferer. Adams suggests that Kant's maxim that people should be treated not as means but as ends in themselves implies that 'it is not morally permissible to use one another in ways that are degrading or depersonalizing' (2008: 131), and that this applies whether or not a person consents to being used in this way. But, even if God knows 'what an "ideal consentor" with full knowledge and perfectly ordered affections would choose' (130), and is not subject to the moral obligation not to treat his creatures as means rather than ends in themselves, it is difficult to understand how God could be said to be loving and merciful towards the persons that God uses in these ways (131).

In particular, Diller argues, it is difficult to understand how a loving God could permit someone 'to suffer *eternally* because their suffering is an element in the best world God can actualize' (93). And yet, Adams suggests, Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy does seem to require that 'God calls on individual created persons to be or become agents who are not and cannot be pleasing to God according to the criteria published by the bible and the Christian religion!' (133) Despite his claim that creatures with the freedom to choose good or evil are more valuable than those who are free but have limited or non-existent power, Plantinga's theodicy 'has God decide on what careers incompatibilist free creatures will have prior in the order of explanation to their existence' (134). But, Adams argues, if 'God chose for Pharaoh the career in which repeated heart-hardening rains ruin on the land of Egypt; for Judas, the career in which he betrays Christ; for the Gospel Pharisees and Sadducees, the careers in which they betray their deepest purpose by killing the Messiah Whose way they worked so scrupulously to prepare' (134), in what sense could such 'wrecked and ruined agency' have had instrumental value for those agents? (134) She suggests that it would not

have been ‘a sign of disordered affections’ to withhold consent to becoming ‘a God-hater, a people-hater, a mass murderer, a Christ-betrayer, [or] a God-killer’ (134) and that, if this is what God requires of some of his creatures, this seems to imply that God hates some of the people God has made (135).

Both Diller and Adams note Plantinga’s claim that perhaps God would not permit such suffering unless he could use it to bring about some good for the sufferer, but argue that Plantinga must require that the good which is brought out of the evil is sufficiently valuable ‘to offset the personal toll’ (Diller 94), and must explain how this might be achieved (Adams 137-138). Adams suggests that, even if ‘wreck and ruin have no instrumental value for wrecked and ruined agents’ (135), God might be able to arrange a compensating benefit which would involve healing transformation and conversion, but questions whether this would be sufficient ‘to save Divine love and mercy to wrecked and ruined agents’ (135). She argues that ‘a God who predestines us to be ante-mortem Hitlers or child sex murderers’ (135) in order to create a world which contains the towering good of atonement, but tries to compensate us by turning us into St Francis or St Clare in the life to come, is no better than the man who beats his wife on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but gives her chocolates and roses on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (135-136).

It might be objected that God does not predestine some to become ‘agents who are not and cannot be pleasing to God according to the criteria published by the bible and the Christian religion’, on the grounds that, although God has foreknowledge of creatures’ free choices, God does not decide these choices. At best, then, God’s decision is only indirect, insofar as he decides to create a world in which he knows that free creatures will create evil. Adams’ argument, however, is that Plantinga’s theodicy requires sin in order to justify the great-making atonement. Thus, even if God is not directly responsible for each sin which is committed, if God has created a world in which he knows that some agents will perpetrate extremes of evil in order that atonement might be justified, there remains a sense in which God is responsible for creating ‘wrecked and ruined agents’. Indeed, they are necessary to God’s plan since, without them, atonement would not be necessary.

Secondly, it might be objected that, on Plantinga’s theodicy, even ‘wrecked and ruined agents’ benefit from atonement, and thus that there is no suffering which is not beneficial to the sufferer. Both Diller and Adams argue that Plantinga’s theodicy requires that the good which is brought out of the evil must be sufficient ‘to offset the personal toll’, but Adams suggests that no compensation could be sufficient. Here, no doubt, Plantinga would simply disagree, but this raises a related objection which we will consider in the next section.

v. If only horrendous evils enable incarnation and atonement, would it not have been better not to create human beings?

Adams claims that Plantinga ‘shows an insufficient appreciation of the category of horrors’ (136) – i.e. ‘evils participating in the doing or suffering of which constitutes prima facie reason to believe the participant’s life cannot be a great good to him/her on the whole and in the end’ (136). Horrors destroy persons because they ‘threaten to swallow up the positive meaning of the participant’s life’ (136). Adams notes that the world is full of such horrors, and argues that any credible Christian theodicy must

address the questions of why God would make us vulnerable to them, and how God can be said to be good even when we experience them (see also Adams 1999). Plantinga suggests that sin and suffering are instrumentally necessary for God's chosen end, and that human suffering is instrumentally necessary for the sufferer him/herself, but Adams argues that 'horrors do not have instrumental value for the horror participant' (136). Indeed, she argues, Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy 'assigns a meaning to our horrors that deepens the horror participant's problem by explaining that God's attitude towards him/her is as bad or worse than s/he feared' (136). On Plantinga's view, horror participants are brought 'to the verge of despair' since, 'if I am by nature the kind of person who cannot be benefited without being prima facie ruined, then I am a cursed kind of thing indeed' (136). If God cannot prepare us for glory, or enable us to understand the Trinity or enter into intimate fellowship with the divine Persons without ruining us, one might reasonably conclude that God is unloving and unmerciful in creating human beings at all (136-137).

5. Adams' apocalyptic theodicy

Adams recommends, instead, that we seek an answer to the problem of evil in apocalyptic theology, in which the faithful endure horrors 'because heavenly bliss awaits them as a reward'. She argues that '[t]he suffering has positive meaning because it proves the martyr's loyalty and is recognized and honoured by God' (137). She suggests 'that what gives positive meaning to horror participants' lives is that God's primary aim in creation is Divine solidarity with us in a material world such as this. Divine identification with us in horror participation (most notably through incarnation and crucifixion) weaves up our horror participation into our overall – on the whole and in the end – beatific relationship with God' (137). In this scenario, God is not equivalent to the spouse-beater because, even if God's creation exposes us to horrors, God does not 'directly and deliberately perpetuate individual horrors' (137). Secondly, 'God shares the cost by exposing Godself to horrors' (137). Horror participation is not 'a necessary means to beatific intimacy with God', but 'going to hell and back with God is one shape that an overall beatific intimate relationship with God can take' (137).

It might be argued that this is not so much an alternative to Plantinga's theodicy as a way of fleshing it out. If the great-making feature of Plantinga's theodicy is atonement, does this not lead to the 'heavenly bliss' which Adams deems suitable compensation for extremes of suffering?

There are, however, further difficulties. Even if God is not like the spouse-beater who 'directly and deliberately' brings about horrors, perhaps God *is* like the irresponsible parent who leaves his small child alone with an unguarded fire; in such a situation, harm is not directly perpetrated but is nonetheless likely. Secondly, if, as Adams suggests, the pain of a visit to the dentist in the afternoon is not assuaged by the pleasure of a concert in the evening (137), it is not clear that a reward of heavenly bliss cancels out pre-mortem extremes of suffering. Thirdly, even if God also suffers such horrors, how does this help the horror participant? If I am experiencing excruciating toothache, it does not help me to know that you, too, have agonising toothache. Indeed, if you, too, are in great pain, you might be less able to help me with my suffering. Lastly, we return to the objection that such suffering is inequitable. Even if 'going to hell and back with God' is just 'one shape that an overall beatific

intimate relationship with God can take’, why would a loving God create a situation in which only some of his creatures achieve an intimate relationship with God in this way? One might respond that God develops an especially intimate relationship with creatures who suffer horrors undeservedly as a consequence of other creatures’ free choices, but if it is possible to develop an intimate relationship with God without experiencing horrendous evils, would it not have been better to create a world in which every creature has the opportunity to achieve such a relationship without the experience of extreme suffering?

6. Plantinga’s sceptical theism

Plantinga concludes his article by claiming that, while the *Felix Culpa* theodicy ‘does not dispel all the perplexity surrounding human suffering and evil’, perhaps, at the very least, it ‘reduces the perplexity’ and ‘provides the means for a deeper grasp of the salvific meaning of suffering and evil’ (2004, 25). Ultimately, however, in both *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000, 494-498) and *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, he returns to the sceptical theist’s stance. In his article, he refers briefly to the ‘no-see-um response’ to the problem of evil. A no-see-um is a very small midge with a very large bite. Failure to see a no-see-um does not constitute evidence that it does not exist. Likewise, failure to understand God’s reasons for permitting or causing evil does not give us grounds for claiming that God does not or could not have a reason (2004, 4, note 6). In *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, he suggests that the reason why it might be the case that ‘no theodicy we can think of is wholly satisfying’ (2011, 59) is that ‘our knowledge of God’s options in creating the world is a bit limited’, and if God does have a good reason for allowing sentient creatures to suffer, ‘why think we would be the first to know what it is?’ (59).

For Plantinga, evil does not constitute a defeater for belief in God because it is outweighed by the strength of belief in theism. This arises because ‘human beings display a natural tendency to believe in God or something very much like God’ (60); God has, according to John Calvin, created human beings with a ‘*sensus divinitatis*’, i.e. ‘a natural tendency to form belief in God’ (60). Thus, he suggests, most Christians would agree with the Heidelberg Catechism, according to which:

Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty – all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand’ (Question 27, quoted in Plantinga, 65 and 272).

Plantinga glosses this as: ‘God so governs the world that whatever happens is to be thought of as “coming from his fatherly hand”; he either causes or permits whatever does in fact happen; none of it is to be thought of as a result of mere chance’ (67). Thus, for Plantinga, most Christians believe that sickness and poverty are not the unfortunate products of chance but are brought about or permitted by God. He holds that God has a good reason for creating the world in this way; we do not know what it is, but it is plausible to think that the best possible world is one in which God suffers in order that human beings might be reconciled with God and achieve eternal life.

If God does have a reason for causing or permitting evil and suffering which we might hope to understand, at least in outline, however, the *Felix Culpa* theodicy seems unsatisfactory. We can only adopt the sceptical theist's position and claim that we are not in a position to judge whether atonement represents sufficient compensation for the quantity and intensity of evil if we accept Plantinga's claim that there is a *sensus divinitatis* which enables a belief in theism which outweighs the quantity and intensity of evil. But it is not irrational to claim that, even where the *sensus divinitatis* is present, any support for belief in theism which it provides is outweighed by the quantity and intensity of evil.

7. The challenge of evil, and religious naturalism

In this section I explore the possibility that the challenge of evil might be met more effectively by a form of religious naturalism. Mikael Stenmark identifies three types of religious naturalism, which may be distinguished by ascertaining to which of the following tenets of religious naturalism they subscribe:

'RN1: There is nothing beyond or besides nature, and consequently everything that exists is part of nature' (2013, 535).

'RN2: There is no personal God or anything like God, nor any non-natural entities such as ghosts, spirits, or an immaterial human soul' (536).

'RN3: Religious meaning, value, or significance can be attributed to or found in nature or in some aspect of the natural order' (ibid).

'RN4: There neither is nor is not a personal God or anything like this God, because what we call God is not a being of some sort but is (completely or almost completely) beyond human categories and conceptions' (537).

'RN5: God is the best metaphor or symbol we have to sum up, unify, and represent what are taken to be the highest and most indispensable human ideals and values, and no other abstract concept such as Nature or the Universe can replace it' (539).

The three types religious naturalism are:

1. Religious naturalism 1 (accepts RN1, RN2, RN3 and RN5) (541).
2. Religious naturalism 2 (accepts RN1, RN3, RN4 and RN5) (ibid).
3. Religious naturalism 3 (accepts RN1, RN2 and RN3) (542).

The first two types are characterised as 'God-talking religious naturalism', while the third is described as 'no-God-talking religious naturalism' (542).

Donald A. Crosby offers a form of religious naturalism which provides a response to the challenge of evil. He defines religious naturalism as 'the view that nature is metaphysically ultimate' (2008, ix), which might be fleshed out in terms of RN1 and RN2, 'and that nature or some aspect of nature is religiously ultimate' (ix), which might be explained in terms of RN3. In Stenmark's taxonomy, Crosby is therefore a religious naturalist of the third type – i.e. a no-God-talking religious naturalist.

Crosby acknowledges that evil is 'a central, if not *the* central problem with which all religions must wrestle'; indeed, he thinks, it 'goes a long way toward explaining why there is a need for religion in the first place' (xi). He argues that our capacity to suffer is partly a consequence of the fact that we are the outcomes of complex natural

processes which originated in the remote past. Although nature ‘will eventually bring about our own deaths, the deaths of all those we love, and the final dissolution of all we have striven to accomplish’ (107), our task is ‘to come to terms with the inevitability and finality of death as part of the system of nature as a whole’ (59).

Our capacity to suffer is also an unfortunate by-product of the good things which we experience. So, for example, ‘[t]he good of being a rock does not require the bad of suffering, but the good of being alive and sensate necessarily includes susceptibility to it. To be capable of joy is also to be capable of pain’ (28). Many of the goods of human life would be impossible without the possibility of suffering. Even ‘[t]he pleasure of doing philosophy stems from the extreme difficulty of most of its problems and the satisfaction of making some progress, however small, in trying to solve them’ (32). Indeed, one might develop this further to argue that most, if not all, of the activities of a human life would be unnecessary without evil, defined in its broadest sense. There would be no point in sitting an examination without the possibility of failure, there would be no need to generate an income if we otherwise would not lack food, shelter and warmth, and there would be no need for doctors if there were no diseases. Even our leisure activities would be affected; for example, there would be no point in watching a film if there were no ‘peril’ to be overcome and a happy ending was guaranteed. Thus, without evil, human beings would have nothing to do.

Crosby suggests that, even though our encounters with evil can lead to suffering, they ‘can sometimes be events of grace that give us new insight into the sufferings of the world against which our paltry daily frets and worries pale into insignificance. Such encounters can reorient our values and motivate us to attend to what we come to recognize as important’ (82). Crosby notes that three of Siddhartha Gautama’s ‘Passing Sights’ were transformative encounters with natural evils – disease, old age, and death – and that these led him to begin a religious search which led to his enlightenment and Buddhahood (82).

Thus, Crosby argues, our capacity to suffer should not lead us to despair, since his religion of nature can help us react to the evils we encounter, both natural and moral, in ‘appropriate, constructive, and transformative ways’ (ibid). He claims that faith should be construed as the staking of one’s life ‘on something of momentous value and importance’ (45); it is ‘a matter of *being*, not just of believing’ (47). This means that we must ‘fight continually to counterbalance the evils with as much good as we can help to secure in the world’ (37), and learn to come to terms with the evils over which we have no control (106).

Crosby suggests that there are a number of resources on which we can draw. For example, we can find in nature ‘the splendour, dynamism, and rejuvenating powers of the natural world’ and in ourselves as creatures of nature ‘reliable sources of both sustaining and demanding hope, purpose, and value for the living of our lives’ (xi). In the battle against moral evil, the sources of our greatest hope ‘are the capacity for and impulse toward goodness that lie within each of us’ (111). We may not be fundamentally good by nature, but

we have a powerful *potential* to be good if we can learn to act in accordance with our deep ... sense of moral obligation, responsibility, and opportunity ... Religious faith, including a

religion of nature, can motivate, encourage, and inspire us to build upon this capacity for and tendency toward moral goodness in ourselves and to work together for their actualization and incorporation into our institutions and societies (111).

Crosby also recommends spiritual practices such as

regular meditation; repentance for past failures and weak resolve; aspiring in one's heart to do good and to find ways to do so effectively; giving fervent thanks for all the good things of the world; preparing oneself to be open and responsive to events of grace; searching for strength in oneself and in fellowship with others for encounters with systemic and moral evils; reaching out to help others – especially humans and nonhuman creatures most in need of our assistance and concern – and thereby focusing less intently upon oneself and one's own needs and desires; finding instruction and inspiration in the lives and teachings of exemplary moral and religious persons; and participating actively in the collective rituals, traditions, teachings, stories, songs, and work of religious communities that are sympathetic with, supportive of, or at least not inimical to the outlook of religion of nature (106).

Thus, although Crosby's religion of nature does not guarantee that good will triumph over evil, this does not render our lives meaningless. It means that the future is not fixed and therefore needs our efforts and accomplishments, which includes our struggles with evil (100). The value of human life is enhanced by our awareness of our mortality (10), but personal survival of death no longer matters; it is the contributions which we can make before we die to present and future generations of living beings which are important (9).

8. Objections to Crosby's response to the challenge of evil

In this section I consider two objections to Crosby's religious naturalism and argue that they require further modifications of religious naturalism. This, however, leads to a version of religious naturalism which might be able to provide a response to the challenge of evil which avoids the central difficulty of Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy.

i. Crosby fails to offer an adequate response to horrendous evils

Crosby argues that our suffering is partly a consequence of the fact that we are the outcomes of complex natural processes and partly a by-product of the good things which we experience, and that a religion of nature provides us with resources which help us to regard suffering as an opportunity to learn about the sufferings of the world, to attend to what is most important, to work to promote good, and to come to terms with death. But to what extent does this constitute a better response to the problem of horrendous evils than that offered by Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* theodicy? Might it not be argued that Crosby's religious naturalism, too, makes an inadequate response to the quantity and intensity of suffering? If these features of the world make the existence of an omnipotent, good God improbable, do they not also count against the view that 'nature or some aspect of nature is religiously ultimate'?

This criticism might, indeed, be levelled at Crosby's claim that 'nature or some aspect of nature is religiously ultimate', but Crosby's subsequent discussion suggests that it might be more accurate to characterise his position as the view that nature determines that which is religiously ultimate, and provides us with resources with which to create

meaning. The question of how we are to identify that which is religiously ultimate is by no means insignificant, of course, and there is insufficient space to address it here, but this position does at least have the advantage that there is no need to attempt an explanation of why an omnipotent and good God made a conscious decision to create a world containing so much suffering. On Plantinga's view, God permitted the Nazis to commit genocide at Auschwitz so that he might create a world in which Jesus atoned for their sins, and, as mere creatures, we are unable to claim that the atonement was not worth the price of such suffering. On this view, there is a conflict between the goodness of God and the reality of suffering which we are ultimately unable to resolve. By contrast, on Crosby's view, suffering is the consequence of evolution, and a by-product of the good which we experience. On Crosby's view, the horror participant can draw on the resources which a religion of nature provides, without the need to accept that an omnipotent and benevolent God might be ultimately responsible for her suffering.

ii. In what sense is religious naturalism religious?

Lastly, one might object to Crosby's view that, if 'nature or some aspect of nature is religiously ultimate', to what extent might this be construed as religion? Stenmark considers the question of how no-God-talking religious naturalism might be said to differ from the position of a non-religious naturalist like Richard Dawkins who is known for his 'reverence and awe of nature' (543). Stenmark draws on the work of Thomas Nagel, from which he appropriates the notion of the 'religious temperament'. He suggests that the religious naturalist is 'one who thinks there is a naturalistic answer, or at least is one who desires such an answer, to the *cosmic question*: how can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole? The religious temperament regards a merely human life as insufficient and asks for something more encompassing. This is what it means to have a religious attitude to life' (543). By contrast, non-religious naturalists regard the cosmic question as meaningless. They 'feel no yearning for harmony with the cosmos, but rather think that the world which the natural and social sciences present is a world to which the religious attitude or the religious quest for meaning or sense has no application' (543-544). It is, however, debatable whether Crosby is concerned with the question of how one can bring into one's individual life recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole, but he does think that recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole explains suffering and provides us with resources with which to address it.

But perhaps it is not, after all, necessary for a no-God-talking religious naturalist to dispense with the notion of God. Both versions of God-talking religious naturalism identified by Stenmark subscribe to RN5, however, which claims that God is a metaphor/symbol for our ideals and values which cannot be replaced by an abstract concept such as Nature or the Universe. But perhaps Crosby might be persuaded to accept a modified version of RN5, as follows:

RN5b: God is the best metaphor or symbol we have to sum up, unify, and represent the highest and most indispensable ideals and values, and the character of these ideals and values is determined by Nature and the Universe (which is implied by RN1 and RN3).

If, as I suggested in response to objection i., nature is not in itself religiously ultimate, but does determine that which is religiously ultimate, God may be conceived of in personal terms (and thus the religious naturalist does not need to subscribe to RN2), provided it is understood that, given that God is beyond human categories and conceptions (RN4b), divine personhood is a metaphor. Thus a ‘religious naturalism 4’ might look something like this:

RN1: There is nothing beyond or besides nature, and consequently everything that exists is part of nature.

RN2b: Where God is conceived of as personal, divine personhood is a metaphor for the interaction between the divine and the human, and the importance of relationship.

RN3: Religious meaning, value, or significance can be attributed to or found in nature or in some aspect of the natural order.

RN4b: God is beyond human categories and conceptions.

RN5b: God is the best metaphor or symbol we have to sum up, unify, and represent the highest and most indispensable ideals and values, and the character of these ideals and values is determined by Nature and the Universe (implied by RN1 and RN3).

This, I would suggest, is a version of religious naturalism which is more compatible with the claims of monotheism than Crosby’s religious naturalism, but offers a better response to the challenge of evil than Plantinga’s *Felix Culpa* theodicy. Whether or not this version of religious naturalism might be regarded as a legitimate interpretation of the Abrahamic faiths is, however, a question which space does not permit me to address here.

8. Where the conflict really lies

I have argued that Plantinga’s attempts to illustrate a deep concord between science and religion lead him to espouse a version of theism which, despite – and, to some extent, as a consequence of – the *Felix Culpa* theodicy, remains vulnerable to the problem of evil. Although Plantinga argues that there is a conflict between science and non-religious naturalism, I have argued that a version of religious naturalism provides one possible response to the challenge of evil. On such a view, we can marvel at the beauty of the universe while acknowledging the suffering to which the universe also gives rise. God is a metaphor for the highest ideals and values, the character of which is determined by nature, which also provides us with resources to overcome or come to terms with the challenge of evil. We thereby avoid the difficulties associated with belief in an omnipotent and benevolent deity and the reality of human and animal suffering – which is where the conflict really lies.

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