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Source: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Jun., 2001, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Jun., 2001), pp. 133-154

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40018871>

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Evil and theistic minimalism

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The classic problem of evil causes little trouble for belief in Zeus; it poses a major difficulty for belief in the theistic God.¹ Of course there's not a whole lot to be said in favor of Zeus, aside from his comparative advantage on this score; but this much can be said, and it's hardly negligible. The problem of evil is the most serious difficulty confronting believers, and all other things being equal (of course they seldom are) a rational believer ought to prefer a concept of God which makes this difficulty easier rather than harder to face.

The case of Zeus *v.* the theistic God illustrates a general presumption, famously associated with Hume but widely accepted on all sides in philosophical discussions of theistic belief. This is that the problem of evil, just by itself and apart from other considerations, favors minimal over maximal conceptions of deity, where 'minimality' and 'maximality' may be defined in terms of such factors as the number, excellence, and specificity of the divine attributes. The purpose of this paper is to develop, and ultimately to question, the argument supporting this presumption.

I

Evil catches the theist both coming and going. By impugning the cosmic order cited in standard *a posteriori* arguments from world to God, it blunts the theist's offense; by providing ammunition for an atheistic counterattack on the divine attributes, it throws the theist on the defense. Following J.C.A. Gaskin, let us call these the "inference problem" and "consistency problem" respectively.² In the *Enquiry* Hume offers a compelling reason for thinking that the inference problem favors theistic minimalism. The *a posteriori* or "design argument" is one from effects to cause(s). But

[w]hen we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect. A body of ten ounces raised in any scale may serve as a proof, that the counterbalancing weight exceeds ten ounces, but can never afford a reason that it exceeds a hundred (145–146).³

Likewise, in reasoning from the world to God, we must avoid ascribing to God greater excellences than are required by the phenomena: it should take less in the way of evidence to show that the world's designer has an I.Q. of at least 200 than that he has an I.Q. of at least 2000.⁴ "Allowing, therefore, the gods to be the authors of the existence or order of the universe; it follows, that they possess that precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their workmanship; but nothing farther can ever be proved, except we call in the assistance of exaggeration and flattery to supply the defects of argument and reasoning" (*Enquiry* 146). When we consider, in particular, "the present scene of things, which is so full of ill and disorder," we must admit that "superlative intelligence and benevolence are entirely imaginary, or at least, without any foundation in reason" (*Enquiry* 147). Ignoring for the moment any objections we might have to Hume's pinched and narrow understanding of reason, his point about the implications of evil for the inference problem seems fairly plausible. Insofar as we think that God's existence can be demonstrated on grounds provided by the design argument (whether or not our own belief is so based), we can maximize the argument's chances of success at the cost of minimizing God, or we can maximize the concept of God at the cost of minimizing the argument's chances of success. We can't have it both ways.

Matters are somewhat less straightforward when we move from the inference to the consistency problem, since the latter is not tied to a particular theistic argument and its attendant strictures on proportionate belief but concerns evil's implications for belief in God *however* such belief is reached. Given a belief in God (rooted in childhood indoctrination, a religious conversion, Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, an *a priori* proof, etc.), is it irrational to maintain this belief in face of the evidence from evil? This is the problem of evil *tout court*, and the question is whether the theistic minimalist will have an easier time addressing this consistency problem than the theistic maximalist. If the answer to this question is indeed affirmative, as there may be some *prima facie* reason to suspect, the theist is confronted with some debilitating constraints when it comes to the business of theological theory-construction. One author sums up the situation this way: "The more God-like God becomes, the more difficult it seems to be to get God off the hook for evil; conversely, the easier it is to get God off the hook for evil, the less God-like God seems to become."⁵ But are things really the way they seem, and what is the argument?

It will be helpful, in thinking about this question, to have before us an actual example of a theological dispute in which the problem of evil appears to favor the side defending the more modest claims about God's nature. The example that follows comes from recent debates between "Molinists" and "Free-Will Theists" over divine risk-taking. These debates involve (among

other things) differing conceptions of the scope of divine knowledge, which are supposed in turn to have differential implications for the problem of evil. The issues between the two sides are complex, and are not in any case the focus of the present paper; in the following section, then, I say only enough about the dispute to make it available for purposes of illustration.

II

“Free-Will Theism” is a recent movement of Christian philosophers and theologians who dissent from traditional perfect-being theology at a number of points where it is allegedly incompatible with a robustly libertarian understanding of divine and human agency.⁶ There are various grounds for this dissent, perhaps the most important being a desire to safeguard a conception of the divine-human relationship which is faithful to Scripture and adequate to the demands of religious life. What is most distinctive about Free-Will Theism, however, is not its motivation but the special significance it attaches to the “openness” of the future and its consequent resistance to the notion of “specific sovereignty” or “meticulous providence,” under which events are predetermined in all their detail by God’s power and/or knowledge. With respect to the latter, Free-Will Theists agree with their opponents in ascribing to God complete “present knowledge” (exhaustive knowledge of the past and present and everything inferrable from them); but they part company with them in denying to God complete foreknowledge, holding in particular that he lacks knowledge of future actions which agents will perform of their own free will. Why do Free-Will Theists believe it necessary to deny such knowledge to God? A number of them, as it happens, accept some version of standard arguments designed to show that complete (infallible) foreknowledge rules out an “open” future of the sort required by divine agency and human freedom.⁷ But a further reason is the conviction that a metaphysically inflated conception of divine omniscience makes the problem of evil (even) harder to handle than it would be otherwise. What gives Free-Will Theism its supposed advantage on this score is not so much its denial of foreknowledge *per se* as it is its rejection of an even more impressive cognitive resource – a resource which, if coherent, provides the ground for foreknowledge itself.⁸

This resource is described and elaborated in “Molinism,” so-called from its seminal formulation by the 16th-century Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina.⁹ On the Molinist account, God has, in addition to present knowledge, not only foreknowledge but also “middle knowledge.” The objects of middle knowledge are subjunctive conditionals whose consequents state what incompatibilistically free agents would do under the conditions specified in their antecedents. Call such conditionals ‘counterfactuals of freedom.’ It is

controversial whether there could be any true counterfactuals of freedom, strictly speaking.¹⁰ But this much is clear: if there *are* true counterfactuals of freedom, there will be more for an omniscient deity to know than would be the case if there were no such truths. Moreover, this extra knowledge appears to be relevant to divine decision-making. Suppose that God, as he surveys the possible worlds (temporally or logically) “prior” to creation, finds that the very best worlds include incompatibilistically free agents; he therefore sets his sights on bringing about such a world. Now God brings about a world by (as Alvin Plantinga puts it) “strongly actualizing” some complex state-of-affairs – roughly, *causing* it to be actual.¹¹ For any world *W*, let ‘*T(W)*’ designate whatever states-of-affairs God strongly actualizes in *W*. Now the nature of incompatibilistic freedom is such that God cannot strongly actualize the incompatibilistically free actions of other agents; consequently, if *W* is a world containing such actions, $W \neq T(W)$. Depending on how incompatibilistically free agents use their freedom, *T(W)* can be filled out in many different ways to yield a complete world. If middle knowledge is coherent, there are true subjunctive conditionals stating what each of these agents would freely choose to do in each of the circumstances confronting them, and the totality of these subjunctive conditionals determines a unique world as the one that *would* come into being were God to strongly actualize *T(W)*. Such a world is *feasible* for God, since there is something he can do (namely, strongly actualize *T(W)*) to bring it about; but the other possible worlds which include *T(W)* are unfeasible for God. A God equipped with middle knowledge knows exactly which worlds are feasible for him, knowledge which is not only invaluable to him in deciding which states-of-affairs to strongly actualize, but also available to him in the course of deliberation, since it does not derive from an apprehension of the actual future and thus does not presuppose the consequences of his deliberation.

So the addition of middle knowledge to divine omniscience appears to make a difference, not just to God’s intelligence, but also to his ability to bring about a world reflecting his purposes. This ups the ante when it comes to the atheological argument from evil. Insofar as the world does *not* reflect God’s purposes, the affirmation of middle knowledge would appear to exacerbate the problem of evil, while its denial would alleviate it. As one might expect, this is just the position of a Free-Will Theist like William Hasker. What may be surprising, however, is to find Alvin Plantinga, a friend of middle knowledge whose use of it in his formulation of the free will defense was largely responsible for the contemporary revival of interest in Molinism, in essential agreement with Hasker. Plantinga states his position as follows:

Without the assumption of middle knowledge it is much harder to formulate a plausible deductive atheological argument from evil; and it is

correspondingly much easier, I should think, to formulate the free will defense on the assumption that middle knowledge is impossible. If no counterfactuals of freedom are true, then God could not have known in detail what would have happened for each of the various courses of creative activity open to him. He would not, in general, have known, for a given world W , which world would be actual if he were to strongly actualize $T(W)$. He would have had detailed acquaintance with each possible world W , but he wouldn't have had detailed knowledge, for any such world, of what would happen if he were to strongly actualize $T(W)$. But this should make the free will defender's job easier, not harder.¹²

Plantinga, of course, regards the more difficult task it poses for the free will defender as one that can be discharged successfully and at an affordable price (given that the alternative is an unacceptable diminution in divine omniscience). Free-Will Theists disagree with this assessment.¹³ But despite their differing conclusions regarding the actual extent of divine knowledge, both Plantinga and the Free-Will Theists agree in taking the consistency problem of evil, just by itself, to favor the metaphysically leaner God endorsed by the anti-Molinist camp (though Plantinga regards the presumption as one that is outweighed by other considerations).¹⁴

There is a strong *prima facie* case that can be made on behalf of this position, though it is not completely clear from these brief remarks just what that case is and how it might be generalized. This is the business of the next section.¹⁵

III

In setting forth the brief for theistic minimalism based on the consistency problem of evil, it is useful to understand this problem as a conflict between expectations and reality: expectations based on beliefs about God's goodness, power and knowledge, and the reality of a world in which evil occupies a prominent place. Hume, not surprisingly, cast the problem in this form in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, where he has Philo respond as follows to Cleanthes' cheerful insistence that human life involves a net surplus of good over evil:

But allowing you . . . that animal, or at least, human happiness, in this life, exceeds its misery; you have yet done nothing: For this is not, by any means, what we *expect* [emphasis added] from infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness. Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to

his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive . . . (201)¹⁶

While Hume may have credited this reasoning with more solidity than it deserves, he at least presents the reasoning in a perspicuous way. It can be elaborated as follows.

Let 'G' stand for God's goodness, 'P' for God's power, and 'K' for God's knowledge. Now if any problem of evil is to be formulable, a particular assignment of values to G, P and K must produce at least some expectations for how God would (and would not) act with respect to creation. One could, of course, opt out at this point, denying (with Demea) that any expectations at all are warranted since finite beings are ill-suited to making inferences regarding the behavior of an infinite being; but this does not solve the problem so much as it prevents it from arising in the first place.¹⁷ Insofar as there *is* a problem of evil, facts about the divine attributes must give rise to expectations about divine behavior, including expectations regarding the sort of world God would create, were he to create a world. Let 'E' stand for these latter expectations. Finally, let 'A' designate a proposed assessment of the world as we actually find it. Such an assessment will presumably bring together judgments of many different types, including the following: that good/evil exists; that some person/thing/state/event X is good/evil; that X is good/evil to degree M; that X is an instance of natural or moral good/evil; that X is or is not the best that could be achieved in condition C; that X is more or less good/evil than some other person/thing/state/event Y; that the whole constituted by X and Y is good/evil; that the total value or disvalue of the good/evil in region R is on the order of N; and so on. Of these, the most relevant are judgments on matters also addressed by E, since it is here that meaningful comparisons between A and E can be made.

While a due sense of the precariousness of such judgments may result in the values assigned to E and A being relatively soft and their content thin, there is nevertheless the potential for a serious conflict between E and A. The problem this leads to is a problem of *evil* if the conflict consists of reality *falling short* of expectations. (If reality *exceeded* expectations, there would instead be a problem of *good*.) That is,

Definition: The problem of evil =*df.* the existence of a gap between E and A, where $E > A$.

While this definition may be less familiar than ones couched in terms of a *reductio* argument for atheism, differences between the two formulations are only skin deep. Consider, for example, the following "inconsistent triad" based on William Rowe's influential rendering of the evidential problem of evil:

- (1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.
- (2) If God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, there should be no instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent and omniscient being could have prevented without thereby preventing the occurrence of any greater good.
- (3) There are instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent and omniscient being could have prevented without thereby preventing the occurrence of any greater good.¹⁸

The problem exhibited by this triad of propositions clearly satisfies our definition, inasmuch as a particular assumption about God (proposition 1) generates an expectation (the consequent of proposition 2), and the problem consists in reality (as proposition 3 assesses it) apparently diverging from this expectation. The definition does add the requirement that reality diverge from expectation by *falling short* of it, but this simply spells out why the divergence amounts to a problem of evil (rather than some other kind of problem).¹⁹

Before employing this definition to develop a case for theistic minimalism, we should say something about the idea that a gap between E and A constitutes a *problem*. In what *sense*, and for *whom*, is this a problem? These are important questions, since there are some senses in which an E-A gap is not necessarily problematic at all. When the test is *easier* than I expected (given what I had heard about the instructor), this might *solve* a problem (the fact that I'm unprepared for the anticipated exam) rather than create one. But there is at least one sense in which every E-A gap, even one that is fortuitous and welcome, generates a problem. In each such case we find two considered judgments in conflict, indicating that there is something *wrong* (somewhere) in our belief-system.²⁰ But it is a desideratum of rationality that we reduce conflict among our beliefs, insofar as this is possible without jeopardizing other desiderata. So there is at least a *theoretical* problem, even in the fortunate test case, inasmuch as we have to decide what (if anything) to do about this doxastic conflict; and this theoretical problem is (or should be) a problem for *anyone* who holds the conflicting judgments and realizes (or should realize) that they are in conflict. Of course problems can turn into non-problems. A problem might rest on a simple mistake, discovery of which causes the problem to disappear without residue (instead of engendering new problems or lingering around under a new guise); or a problem might be discarded without solution because there just aren't enough hours in a lifetime to resolve all doxastic conflicts (perhaps I'm simply grateful for the unexpectedly easy exam and leave it at that, taking no steps to find out whether my informants misled me, I was better prepared than I thought, the instructor recently dumbed-down his exams to garner better teaching evaluations, etc.). But this only shows that some problems get solved or ignored; it provides

no reason for thinking that these problems never existed in the first place. Understood as a theoretical problem, a gap between E and A presents us with a happy situation from the philosophical standpoint, since it is precisely these tensions among our considered judgments that lead to philosophical reflection and progress. (This is not to say, it hardly bears mentioning, that the problem of evil won't *also* be problematic in some further, possibly unhappy, sense(s).)

Clearly the problem of evil, so defined, can be more or less difficult or serious; it is, in short, more *problematic* under some assumptions (about the world, the divine attributes, etc.) than under others. The same is true of the gap between E and A, which can vary in size with changes in these same assumptions. It should be obvious (shouldn't it?) that the degree of "problematicity" and the size of the E-A gap are connected, and that the latter provides one important way to gauge the former. This suggests

Assumption 1: The problem of evil (under different background assumptions) can vary in the degree to which it *is* a problem, and the degree of the problem (all other things being equal) is directly proportionate to the size of the gap between E and A.

The reference to "size" should not encourage false hopes of quantifiability. Assumption 1 provides no method for determining the values of A and E or computing the difference between them, nor does it presuppose that there even *is* any common measure by which E-A gaps can be compared (e.g. "10¹⁷ excess turps of evil for the God of Molinism v. 10¹⁶ excess turps for the God of Free-Will Theism"). Indeed, in the absence of a common metric, it may be dauntingly difficult to compare E-A gaps, except in cases where only E or A varies (with the other remaining fixed). But in these respects Assumption 1 simply reflects difficulties we already have in comparing rival approaches to the problem of evil; it does not offer a magic bullet for solving these difficulties.

It is also important that Assumption 1 not be read as proposing a *reduction* of the problem's seriousness to the relative size of the E-A gap. This would probably make it a nonstarter, and the *ceteris paribus* clause of Assumption 1 is designed to forestall this misreading. The fact is that a number of factors, other than gap size, appear relevant to determining whether the problem of evil is worse under one conception of God than it is under another. Such factors as the firmness of one's expectations based on G, P and K, the confidence of one's assessment of the world's actual value, and the nature of the conflict between the two, are important enough that entire versions of the problem may be defined with reference to them. On the logical problem of evil, for example, E = the expectation that there will be no evil (of type T) and A = the bare assertion that evil (of type T) does exist; the problem is

then supposed to arise from the fact that (i) G, P and K *entail* E, (ii) A is *undeniable*, and (iii) the conflict between E and A is one of outright logical *contradiction*. It is, however, implausible to suppose that (i) is true, and the logical problem of evil is not much raised anymore. But weaker conditions define other (more vexing) versions of the problem. Here the assignment of values to E, and especially to A, will be somewhat speculative; the same will be true of the size of the gap and the problem of evil defined by it. But whether the gap is large or small, vague or precise, hard or elastic, speculative or apodeictic, any strategy which closes the gap should (to that extent) alleviate the problem, while any strategy which widens the gap should (to that extent) exacerbate the problem. Of course such strategies may have other effects as well, and some of these may cancel out the ameliorative effects of a narrower E-A gap. But Assumption 1 only says what happens when these effects are ignored; it doesn't give theodists license to ignore them.

Insofar as the gap is one in which E exceeds A, the size of the gap can be diminished only by raising A, lowering E, or both. Since E is a function of G, P and K, it can be lowered only by reassessing the values assigned to these divine attributes. Consider, for example, the debate over the theodical implications of middle knowledge. Some counterfactuals of freedom – e.g., that Jones would purse his lips if asked to chair the finance committee – are such that God's knowing them seems likely to leave E completely *unaffected*. Knowledge of others – e.g., that in C₁ Jones would, and in C₂ Jones would not, sell all that he has and give it to the poor – would *prima facie raise* our expectations for the sort of world God would create (were the world to contain Jones). But what seems quite out of court is that any counterfactuals of freedom could be such that divine knowledge of them would *lower* our expectations for the world. The same is surely true for any augmentation of divine knowledge in particular, and of the divine attributes in general. (Certainly the problem set forth in the inconsistent triad on p. 7 would not be alleviated by making God even “more” omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent!) Thus it is reasonable to hold that

Assumption 2: Given a set of values G₁, P₁, and K₁ which are candidates for the relevant divine attributes, and another set of values G₂, P₂, and K₂, such that the two sets differ only in that some member(s) of the second set is greater than the corresponding member(s) of the first set, then E₁ ≤ E₂, where E₁ represents the expectations based on the first set and E₂ the expectations based on the second set.

If this assumption is to be of real use to the overall argument for theistic minimalism, it is important that G, P and K be understood to reflect more than the simple degree or amount of the corresponding excellences (e.g., the

number of truths known by God); they must also incorporate the theories of divine goodness, power, and knowledge which give G, P and K their content and without which one wouldn't know *what* to expect from God's creative and providential use of these attributes.²¹

That E_1 is less than *or equal* to E_2 may have disappointingly little bite in theodical disputes. But given the particulars of a proposed augmentation of the divine attributes, it should sometimes (often?) be possible to argue that $E_1 < E_2$, and not simply that $E_1 \leq E_2$. For example, if K_2 includes all (and not just some) of the counterfactuals available to middle knowledge, it is sure to include some that would raise our expectations, supporting the stronger conclusion maintained by Plantinga. Assuming that divine middle knowledge is in this way complete, God can identify which complex state-of-affairs $T(W^*)$ would, when strongly actualized by him, issue in the best feasible world W_B (or in one of the best, if there is no single best), and the natural expectation (assuming standard accounts of divine goodness and power) is that he would proceed to actualize W_B by strongly actualizing $T(W^*)$. How good is this world? If Plantinga's thesis of transworld depravity is true, W_B will contain at least some evil attributable to misuses of free will, in addition to whatever doses of natural evil are found to elicit the comparatively valuable responses made by the inhabitants of W_B . But whatever the value of E on the assumption of middle knowledge, the value of E on the assumption that there is no middle knowledge will be lower, since God would not know that strongly actualizing $T(W^*)$ would yield W_B , nor would he know that W_B is the best feasible world (indeed, he wouldn't know such things because, on the assumption that an omniscient being lacks middle knowledge, there can be no truths of this sort to know). Lacking such knowledge, his decision about which world to create cannot be guided by this knowledge. Thus it is only by the most stupendous luck that God might happen to actualize a world as good as W_B . One's expectations would surely be pitched lower than this.

So much for the effects on E of differing assumptions about the divine attributes. But this is relevant to the problem of evil only to the extent that it affects the gap between E and A, and it will affect this gap only if changes in E reflecting alternative conceptions of the deity are not matched by compensating changes in A. This requirement is not addressed in the passage from Plantinga quoted earlier, but one way to secure it is *via* the reasonable assumption that any fair, non-question-begging assessment of the world's value must consider the world on its own merits, independent of one's expectations regarding the sort of world God would create; that is,

Assumption 3: The value of A must be determined independently of the value of E.

This assumption expresses a principle of non-bias which lies behind, e.g., the practice of blind review. Prejudgments regarding another's work are at best irrelevant, and at worst inimical to accurate evaluation. To the extent that such prejudgments are just, they should be validated by the work itself. This is no less true when the author is God and the work is the world.

Assumption 3 can be further motivated in the following way. Suppose that the assumption is rejected, so that it is legitimate to take one's beliefs regarding E into account when determining A. Then consider the following "solution" to the problem of evil, which can be attributed to Pangloss rather than Leibniz in order to avoid scholarly disputes over whether Leibniz's own position is more nuanced. "Pangloss's Ploy," as it might be called, goes this way: If one is supremely confident that a particular assignment of values to G, P and K is correct, and this assignment of values entails a particular expectation E, then despite appearances to the contrary, the value of A must be consistent with the value of E – there is no gap, and thus no problem of evil. (This move "works", most notoriously, even when E = the best possible world.). But this seems all wrong. Marilyn Adams makes a useful distinction between taking the problem of evil *atheistically* – i.e., as offering "a positive disproof of divine existence" – and taking it *aporetically* – i.e., as "generating a puzzle" for the one who accepts its premises.²² Now Pangloss's Ploy, by eliminating the gap between E and A in such peremptory fashion, not only preempts the atheistic problem of evil but the aporetic problem of evil as well. The latter, however, cannot be dismissed so easily – even believers, I should think, face at least the aporetic problem of evil. Indeed, what makes Pangloss such an appallingly ridiculous figure in Voltaire's novel is not his belief in a Leibnizian God, nor even his belief that we are living in the best of all possible worlds; it is the fact that there appears to be no real aporetic problem of evil for him. Note that Pangloss's Ploy is most naturally reported this way: "If G, P and K, then this *must* be the best possible world." The word 'must' here is the giveaway, indicating that A is being derived directly from G, P and K, without any input from the world itself. This is surely unacceptable, and Assumption 3 quite properly rules it out.

With Assumptions 1–3 in place, we can infer the following presumption in favor of theistic minimalism:

Minimalist Presumption: Given a set of values G_1 , P_1 , and K_1 which are candidates for the relevant divine attributes and which, in conjunction with A, generate the problem of evil, and another set of values G_2 , P_2 , and K_2 , such that the two sets differ only in that some member(s) of the second set is greater than the corresponding member(s) of the first set, then (all other things being equal) the problem of evil is at least as if not more serious under the second set of values than it is under the first.

Thus Plantinga's (and Hasker's and Swinburne's *et aliorum*) doubts about the utility of middle knowledge for theodicy appear to be sustained, where these are just a special case of the more general presumption against the theodical advantages of *any* augmentation of the divine attributes.

IV

This is the best case I can devise for the conclusion that the consistency problem, like the inference problem, provides presumptive support for theistic minimalism. What this case does, in sum, is forge the following links between divine excellence and the problem of evil:

- (1) As God's excellence is inflated, E goes up (or remains the same). (See Assumption 2)
- (2) As E goes up, the E-A gap widens. (See Assumption 3)
- (3) As the E-A gap widens, the problem of evil worsens. (See Assumption 1)

While it would be difficult to show that this is the *only* way to construct the case, it is hard to see how else it could go.

I used to think this case was pretty good, but I'm afraid now that it suffers from irremediable defects. It isn't just that scenarios can be constructed where the Minimalist Presumption gives the wrong result, since an occasional exception to the rule is only what one expects from a mere presumption. It's rather that the argument for the presumption is too shaky at too many points to warrant confidence in the story it tells even in those (unexceptional?) cases where it delivers the "right result." Each link in the chain, I now believe, is defective to one degree or another. I consider each in turn.²³

(1) When Molinists face the charge that their defense of meticulous providence implicates God in the evils that he foresees through middle knowledge, they sometimes make the countercharge that anti-Molinism involves God in unacceptable risk-taking.²⁴ Bereft of the resources of middle knowledge, how could God be certain that an experiment in libertarian world-making wouldn't end in disaster? Some Free-Will Theists respond by celebrating God's risky venturesomeness, but such insouciance is surely unwarranted: risk-taking may (sometimes) be admirable when the risk is confined to the risk-taker himself, but it becomes deeply problematic as soon as the risk gets distributed among other parties, as it does when God creates a world of free agents who (for all he knows) might tragically misuse the powers he has granted them. The anti-Molinist is better advised to take the problem of risk seriously, and to develop an account of how God can reduce it. This account will obviously be easier to construct, and the resulting risk-reduction greater, the more resources of power and knowledge God has at his disposal. So the

problem of divine risk-taking, just by itself and apart from other considerations, appears to count against theistic minimalism. This problem can be treated as an independent entry on the maximalist-minimalist balance sheet, to be weighed against the other costs and benefits of the rival positions; but it can also suggest a flaw in the argument for the Minimalist Presumption.

E was defined as the expected value of the world God would create, were he to create a world. But how should we think of E when our expectation is that God would not create a world at all? Some point on the scale used in plotting A and E is presumably such that any world whose value fell below that point would best be left uncreated. Let W be one such world. Now imagine a candidate for the theistic God – call him “mini-God” – whose excellences are so underfunded that he would get something on the order of W if he engaged in world-making; and imagine further that mini-God retains enough knowledge to realize that W would (probably) result, and enough goodness to disapprove this outcome. Then our expectation for mini-God is not that he would create W, but that he would refrain from creating altogether. The same is true if we complicate the picture to accommodate libertarian free will. So let W, rather than designating a particular world, designate instead the entire range of (libertarian) worlds any of which might result from mini-God’s strongly actualizing T(W), and imagine mini-God’s excellences to be of the following order. His power and knowledge are such that W includes at least some worlds which would best be left unactualized, with C designating the chance that one of these sub-par worlds would in fact result from T(W); his goodness is such that the risk of getting a sub-par world is regarded by him as unacceptable when that risk rises above some level R, where $R < C$; and his knowledge, however diminished, is such that he knows that $R < C$. In this case mini-God can be expected to refrain from strongly actualizing T(W), and so to refrain from creating the world we would expect from him if he were to create a world.²⁵

This points to a serious problem with mini-God’s candidacy for the title of theistic God. Our expectation, if mini-God were God, is that there wouldn’t be a world at all (at least not a libertarian world); but there *is* a (libertarian) world. This is clearly an E-A gap of some sort, but it’s different from the one constituting the classic problem of evil, and it’s hard to know how to make meaningful comparisons between the two kinds of gaps. Suppose you are comparing two concepts of God with respect to the problem of evil, such that under the first (maximizing) concept there is a whopping E-A gap while under the second (minimizing) concept God’s power and knowledge have been curtailed to a point where it is expected that he wouldn’t create a (libertarian) world at all. (Reaching this point won’t require curtailing the divine attributes much at all, if $R = 0$.) Does this curtailment in divine attributes make the

second E-A gap smaller? It's not clear that it does. On the first concept of God I expected the world to be really splendidiferous (but it isn't); on the second I expected there wouldn't be a world at all (but there is). How should these gaps be ranked relative to each other?²⁶ Perhaps E-A gaps can be usefully compared, in the way required by the argument for theistic minimalism, only when P and K are high enough to support the expectation that God would create a world. If this is the case, then unless the minimalist can show that R need not be set at 0 or very close to 0, the argument (at best) will favor the minimal member of a narrow range of maximal deities. This has the ironic consequence that the argument for theistic minimalism might have its only use in intramural disputes among theistic maximalists.

(2) While it may indeed be illegitimate to allow E a direct influence on A, as in Pangloss's Ploy, Assumption 3 overlooks the possibility that both A and E might legitimately fluctuate in response to variations in some third factor. In this case, a rise in E, insofar as it reflects changes in this third factor, might be accompanied by a rise in A, thereby undermining our confidence (which Assumption 3 is supposed to bolster) that the E-A gap will grow whenever E goes up. It is not hard to think of examples of expectation-reality gaps in which a third factor of this sort is present. Eagerly anticipating a new film by David Lynch, my expectations primed by earlier *tours-de-force* like *Eraser-head* and *Blue Velvet*, I subject myself to something called *Lost Highways*. One way my knowledge that this is a David Lynch film might affect my judgment is if the high expectations based on this knowledge simply usurp my critical faculties, short-circuiting direct consideration of the film itself. "It's by David Lynch, so it *must* be great!" This would be the film-critical version of Pangloss's Ploy. But another way this knowledge might affect my judgment is by providing me with an interpretive framework. Insofar as this framework directs my attention to stylistic and thematic elements of the film which help me make sense of what I am viewing, I might even appreciate the film somewhat more than if that interpretive framework had been unavailable. Here the very factor (knowledge of the director's identity) that pushes E higher than it would otherwise be also nudges A higher than it would otherwise be.

The role of interpretive frameworks is no less significant when it comes to the problem of evil. It is impossible to arrive at any global estimate of good/evil without relying on various background theories and commitments. How much should animal pain count in the equation? Not much, if you adopt Descartes' mechanistic account of animals; a whole lot, perhaps even more than human pain and suffering, if you are a follower of Peter Singer. How about my pain *versus* the pain of others? That depends on whether you are

an egoist or an altruist. Will pain and suffering even constitute the largest part of evil? Not if you take the Stoic view that no (real) harm can come to a good man. How about the pointlessness of so much human striving? For some this may be the chief ground of complaint against the cosmos; for Camus, on the other hand, Sisyphus is to be judged “happy.” Add to this list Cleanthes’ cheerful optimism, Philo’s sober realism, Victorian sentimentalism, postmodern “transgressivism,” the views of de Sade v. Masoch . . . It is unreasonable in the extreme, and will surely never be acceptable to the theist, to allow A to be influenced by any of the items on this list, but not at all by theistic frameworks like Thomism, Molinism, Calvinism, and so on. But this means that the very concept of God which determines E might also contribute to the interpretive framework by which A is established.

This leaves open the theoretical possibility that an elevated conception of the divine attributes might produce a rise in E which is more than matched by a rise in A. Here are a couple of examples to suggest that this possibility is more than theoretical.

Example 1. I see a crowd gathered around a table in a local park. As I walk up, a bystander informs me that this is the final round of a neighborhood chess tournament. This leads me to expect a certain level of play. As I observe a half-dozen moves, however, I’m surprised to see one player step into traps and overlook openings which are obvious even to me, a relative neophyte. My assessment A is now considerably below my expectations E. (Surely this incompetent could not have survived to the final round!) But then my informant whispers in my ear: “This poor guy [he points to the one who appears to be winning] doesn’t stand a chance. He [the apparent blunderer] is a grandmaster who lives in the neighborhood. I hear that he’s trying out loopy lines of play in preparation for a match next month with IBM’s latest chess-playing computer.” This changes everything. E, in particular, goes way up. (I expect more from a grandmaster than from a finalist in a neighborhood tournament.) If A were completely unaffected, as it should be under Assumption 3, this would result in the E-A gap widening; but instead it shrinks. Perhaps the best way to explain what has happened in terms of E and A is that my confidence in the original A is shaken. Given the information now available to me, it would only be prudent to reassess the situation in such a way that A encompasses a wide range of possibilities, with the original A as a lower bound (allowing for the possibility that my informant is pulling my leg). The new E, though higher than the old, nevertheless falls within the new A, and the problematic gap disappears. (Further information may of course reinstate the gap – e.g., I follow the game to its conclusion and the supposed “grandmaster” is crushed like a gnat.)

Example 2. I turn on the car radio in time to hear the announcer declare that he is about to play the finest string quartet ever written. This sets E, relative to this quartet, quite high. The piece that follows is unfamiliar; as I listen, it strikes me as pleasant enough, if perhaps a bit trite in places, and tending to be too “pretty,” even saccharine. This creates a disparity between E and A. At the conclusion of the piece, the announcer identifies it as one of the Schubert string quartets. What effect, if any, might this information have on E and A and the gap between them? It might raise E, since expectations based on the (possibly quite eccentric) opinion of a single classical radio station announcer are now undergirded by some basic quality control: this is not Debussy or Villa-Lobos, let alone Glass; it’s *Schubert*. Such a shift in E, if it occurs, is allowed under Assumption 2. But according to Assumption 3 there should be no change at all in A. This seems wrong. In fact, my whole attitude toward the piece I just heard might change. (I am now confident, for example, that repeated listening will reveal the “Schubertian” depths beneath the surface sweetness.) It is not obvious how best to characterize this shift in A. Perhaps it would be craven authority-worship simply to change the content of my earlier judgment, to deny that it seemed to me the way it did when I first heard it. But it would not be irrational to place that judgment in the context of the information now available to me, thereby qualifying it in ways that serve to reduce the gap between E and A.

What is happening in these two examples is that I must determine A from a position of limited knowledge, and changes in knowledge will often lead to changes in *both A and E*. When the hypothesized excellences of the person whose behavior is being assessed are increased, this will certainly not reduce a problematic gap between E and A from the E end (E can only go up); but it might reduce it from the A end. Make the chessplayer more knowledgeable, and this increases the chances that, in ways I do not understand, his moves in the game before me constitute a winning line of play (where “winning” is defined in terms of the game of chess). Make God more impressive (e.g., by augmenting divine omniscience with middle knowledge, explicating divine goodness in high metaphysical terms borrowed from Neoplatonism, fortifying divine omnipotence by making conceptual truths dependent on the divine will), and this increases the chances that, in ways I do not understand, his arrangement of conditions in the actual world constitutes a winning line of play (where “winning” is defined in terms of the ends of a supremely good creator).

(3) There is more than one way to understand what is problematic about a particular problem, and the argument trades on this ambiguity. The interpretation under which Assumption 1 is plausible is unhelpful to the larger

argument, and the interpretation that is needed for the larger argument renders Assumption 1 implausible.

One way is to understand the severity of a problem solely in terms of the problematic situation itself. In this sense, moving a 1000-lb. load is harder than moving a 10-lb. load, just because it has more of that feature (namely, weight) which makes *any* load-moving task problematic (to however small a degree). The other way to understand relative “problematicity” is in terms of possible solutions and their availability. Here the 1000-lb. load is more problematic because the conditions under which the problem could be solved (the amount of effort that would have to be expended, the kinds of equipment that would have to be available, and so on) are more limited – I can’t, e.g., just bend over and pick it up, like I can with the 10-lb. load. (Of course the conditions are more limited *because* the load is heavier; but it is still the restricted conditions, not the relative weight of the loads, that make it problematic on this second account.)

With respect to the particular kinds of problems generated by E-A gaps, the two senses of ‘problematic’ can be made a little more precise. Think of A and E as located on a value-continuum divided into “solution-ranges”, where a solution-range (relative to a particular A) consists of all the potential locations for E such that the gap between E and A is amenable to the same solution (or set of solutions). Then given two problems P1 and P2, problem P2 is more or less problematic than P1 in the first sense (outlined in the preceding paragraph) just in case its E-A gap is larger or smaller, while it is more or less problematic in the second sense just in case its E falls into a different solution range. The difference this makes can be brought out as follows. Suppose two competitors in a weight-lifting contest perform significantly below par, managing to hoist nothing heavier than 200 lbs. This is puzzling to judges and spectators alike, because the one contestant was expected to lift at least 400 lbs. (based on recent performances at other contests) and the other contestant was expected to lift at least 500 lbs. Since it is excess (unused) lifting capacity that generates the problem, one can think of the second case as being even more problematic than the first, inasmuch as it exhibits more of this excess capacity. But suppose the best explanation of why the first of these sub-par performers did so poorly is that he was bribed to underperform by another contestant, and that this same explanation is also adequate to account for the shortfall in the second case. Then each case is no more (or less) problematic than the other. Both E’s fall into the same solution-range.

Let the God of the Free-Will Theists be the first underachiever and the God of the Molinists the second. (In such company Zeus would be the 90-lb. weakling who defies all expectations and manages to lift 200 lbs. as well!) Solving the problem of evil for the God of Free-Will Theism is already so difficult

that any solution, supposing one to exist, might turn out to be adequate for the God of Molinism as well – in which case evil would provide no ground for preferring the former over the latter. Consider, for example, the death last year of my little nephew, barely one year old. He spent the last few months of his life in a hospital battling cancer. He endured several operations and even more rounds of chemo- and radiation therapy; near the end he was in constant pain. My brother and sister-in-law, whose hopes were raised with the apparently successful completion of each stage of the prescribed treatment only to have them dashed by the late discovery that the cancer had spread to his bone marrow, suffered along with him; they will continue to suffer long after his death. Even the God of Free-Will Theism, deprived of middle knowledge, knew enough to save this boy; but he didn't. Why not? Let the missing reason be X. Then the problem of evil is less serious for the Free Will Theistic God than it is for the Molinist God only if X cannot provide a reason why the Molinist God would fail to save him. It's hard to see why that should be so. (It is also hard to see what X could possibly be! But this is all the more reason to wonder whether it could really be available to Free-Will Theism and not to Molinism.) The Free-Will Theist can certainly claim (and he might be right) that he faces a smaller E-A gap than the Molinist. But this favors the God of Free-Will Theism only if the solution required to close this gap is not also sufficient to close the larger gap confronting the Molinist. This would require some additional argument, which no one (to my knowledge) has successfully provided. This problem may be easier to solve for Zeus; but it's not clear that it's easier to solve for a minimalist God who is at least big enough to qualify as the God of theism.

V

The argument for theistic minimalism fails, in sum, at three points. (1) Even when E changes in response to changes in God's excellences (rather than remaining the same), it might not change in ways that make the new E-A gap comparable to the old gap (given the problem of divine risk-taking); (2) even if the gaps are comparable, a rise in E might not generate a wider gap (given that the theistic theory-adjustment driving the rise in E might also have consequences for A); and (3) even if the E-A gap does widen, the problem of evil might not worsen (since it might fail to push E into a new solution-range).

Should we conclude from this that the argument misses its mark altogether? Perhaps that would be going too far. Given a field of 20 tennis players, it's doubtful that there is any presumption in favor of the most intelligent player being the best; but sometimes the most intelligent player will be the best, and sometimes she will be the best (at least in part) *because* of her

intelligence. Likewise, the problem of evil is sometimes easier under a leaner concept of God, and there is little doubt that it is sometimes easier *because* the concept of God is leaner. The case of Zeus v. Yahweh is surely of this sort. But a presumption must be true as a (breakable) rule, and it's hard to see how a generally reliable rule could come out of the argument in section III, given the difficulties with that argument that have been identified in section IV. So even if things sometimes fall out as the argument says they should, there is little reason to presume that they will do so.

It should be added that nothing in this conclusion undermines in any way the force of the consistency problem for traditional theistic belief. All the objections Hume offers in the *Enquiry* and *Dialogues*, and that others have offered before and since, remain to be addressed. The only question that has been considered is whether the theist is better off, when addressing these objections, to operate with a minimal or a maximal conception of the deity. Despite the initially impressive case that can be marshaled on behalf of a general presumption favoring theistic minimalism, this case must finally be judged a failure.²⁷

Notes

1. At least as Zeus is portrayed in popular stories of the sort collected in *Bullfinch's Mythology*. Where Zeus is understood in a more elevated manner, as in some of the Greek tragedians, the existence of evil (particularly horrific evil) becomes an explicit problem.
2. *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2d. ed. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), ch. 3. 'Consistency' here clearly amounts to something broader than mere *logical* consistency, inasmuch as the atheistic use of the problem of evil includes the so-called "evidential" as well as "logical" forms of this problem.
3. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. & intro. Charles W. Hendel (1779; reprinted Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955).
4. Strictly speaking, since an I.Q. is supposed to represent the ratio of one's mental age to chronological age, it's not particularly helpful or even meaningful to think of the cosmic designer's intelligence in terms of I.Q. So suppose the question is instead whether the world's designer is at least as smart as John Stuart Mill (who was estimated by psychologist Catherine Morris Cox, in a study published in 1926, to have an I.Q. of 200), or whether he is a good deal smarter than that.
5. Kenneth J. Perszyk, "Free Will Defense with and without Molinism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (Feb. 1998), p. 30. Perszyk, it must be noted, goes on to challenge this assessment of the situation.
6. The philosophical leaders are David Basinger, William Hasker, and John Sanders, who (with Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice) authored the movement's manifesto, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Each has also offered independent defenses of the position, including Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), ch. 10, and Sanders' *The God Who Risks*

- (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Others who accept enough of the package to count as honorary Free-Will Theists include Richard Swinburne and J. R. Lucas.
7. Hasker, Lucas and Swinburne explicitly endorse such an argument, while Basinger declares himself to be agnostic.
 8. Free-Will Theists tend to deny that simple foreknowledge by itself gives God any advantage at all over mere present knowledge. Hasker, for example, has famously claimed that “the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, in its most widely held form, is of *no importance whatever* for the religiously significant concerns about prayer, providence, and prophecy” (*God, Time, and Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 55). For a discussion of this issue, see my “Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (July 1993), pp. 394–414, followed by comments from Tomis Kapitan, “Providence, Foreknowledge, and Decision Procedures” (pp. 415–420) and David Basinger, “Simple Foreknowledge and Providential Control: A Response to Hunt” (pp. 421–427), with my response, “Prescience and Providence: A Reply to My Critics” (pp. 430–440).
 9. *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Part IV of the *Concordia*), trans., with intro. & notes, Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1988).
 10. See my “Middle Knowledge: The ‘Foreknowledge Defense,’” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 28 (August 1990), pp. 1–24, for one case against the coherence of middle knowledge.
 11. *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 173.
 12. “Replies,” in James E. Tomberlin & Peter Van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga*, Profiles: An International Series on Contemporary Philosophers and Logicians, vol. 5 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 379.
 13. Free-Will Theists who hold not only that middle knowledge makes theodicy harder, but who also cite this as (partial) grounds for rejecting middle knowledge, include Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 127–130, and especially William Hasker – see, e.g., his “Providence and Evil: Three Theories,” *Religious Studies* 28 (March 1992), pp. 97–100, and *God, Time, and Knowledge*, op. cit., pp. 199–205. Others (free will theists but not Free-Will Theists) who reject middle knowledge at least in part because of the greater difficulties it poses for theodicy include W. S. Anglin, *Free Will and the Christian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 80; David P. Hunt, “Middle Knowledge and the Soteriological Problem of Evil,” *Religious Studies* 27 (March 1991), pp. 3–26; Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 68–73; and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 150.
 14. Not all Molinists would join Plantinga in this concession. Ken Perszyk’s paper, “Free Will Defense with and without Molinism,” cited in note 3, is a critical examination of Plantinga’s position. See also Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 106–107. Interestingly, these defenders of middle knowledge are joined in this assessment by the anti-Molinist David Basinger, who maintains (in *The Case for Freewill Theism*, op. cit., p. 92) that the denial of middle knowledge might worsen God’s situation vis-à-vis evil, a liability which (in the mirror-image of Plantinga’s position) he regards as outweighed by other advantages in Free-Will Theism.
 15. Ken Perszyk reconstructs the case as follows:

Anti-Molinist Free Will Defenders think they’re better off than their Molinist counterparts. To indict the Molinist God . . . , they appeal (in part) to the intuition that

the more an agent knows, the higher we set the standards for the agent's actions. To exonerate a God without middle knowledge, they appeal (in part) to the intuition that the less an agent knows, the less responsible the agent is for his actions. ("Free Will Defense with and without Molinism," p. 49)

I agree with Perszyk that this is a key intuition underlying the view that middle knowledge makes theodicy harder. To support a real argument for theistic minimalism, however, this intuition needs to be analyzed and justified, and it must be extended to other relevant attributes (beyond divine knowledge). These are among the goals of the argument developed in section III.

16. *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, edited and with an introduction by Norman Kemp Smith (1779; reprinted Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).
17. Though the Demean alternative is passed over at this point in the paper, it will resurface in section IV (point 2).
18. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335–341.
19. There is one other difference between the two formulations that bears mention. Suppose that one's best effort at assigning values to A and E leaves it indeterminate whether $E > A$. Consider, as an example, a triad in which (2) is replaced with
(2') If God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, there should be a net surplus of good
while (1) and (3) remain the same; or one in which (3) is replaced with
(3') There are many instances of intense suffering
while (1) and (2) remain the same. In both cases the problem of evil, understood as an inconsistency supporting a *reductio*, has disappeared, since the new triad is no longer inconsistent. Understood as a gap between expectations and reality, however, the problem of evil (given the new A and E) cannot be evaluated one way or the other, since it is now impossible to tell whether $E > A$; *a fortiori*, it cannot be said to have been solved. This means that there may be situations in which it takes less to defeat the *reductio* version of the problem than it does to defeat the "E-A gap" version. The advantage of the latter, however, is that it allows for the problem to be treated as a matter of degree rather than a simple either-or, and it must be so treated if we are to construct a case for theistic minimalism.
20. This does not, however, appear to be true when the expectation is merely statistical. Since there is only a 1/36 chance that a pair of dice will come up 2 on any given roll, I expect (and may even bet money on the expectation) that my next roll of the dice will yield a 3 or higher; but in fact I get 2 ("snake eyes"). This is no evidence of a problem in my belief-system, and I don't treat it as such. The reason is that this difference between expected and actual outcomes does not rest on any conflict among my beliefs: the belief that a particular outcome is statistically likely does not conflict with the belief that this outcome did not in fact eventuate, nor does finding myself in possession of both beliefs motivate me either to withdraw one of them or to cast about for some third belief whereby they can be reconciled (though this might happen if the statistical improbability is sufficiently extreme). But this sort of exception can be safely marginalized in the present context. Certainly the E-A gaps in the creation case and exam case do not present themselves as principally statistical in nature.
21. Some (partial) solutions to the problem of evil are better thought of as proposals for rethinking one of these theories rather than as proposals for diminishing or augmenting one of the divine attributes. For example, when Robert Adams proposes that God might

not be obligated to create the best feasible world, he is suggesting that supreme goodness does not have one of the implications that has traditionally been ascribed to it (most famously by Leibniz); he is not best thought of as proposing that God is not as good as we might otherwise have thought him to be. Nevertheless, for simplicity's sake, I would like to fold these theories into the corresponding attributes. It is not entirely unnatural to think of the value of G under Adams' proposal as lower than its value under the Leibnizian alternative, inasmuch as a certain moral requirement has been deleted: the standards for divine goodness, we might say, have been lowered. See Adams' "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), pp. 317–332.

22. See her introduction to *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
23. This is an unusual paper in that its first iteration, presented at a meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at the University of La Verne, defended the argument for theistic minimalism. A subsequent rendition, delivered at the University of Colorado at Boulder, ended by identifying some difficulties with the argument while suggesting that these did not do irreparable damage to the argument's cogency. By the time I formulated the final version of the paper for a Gifford Conference on Natural Theology at the University of Aberdeen, I had completely abandoned my initial position.
24. See, e.g., Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence*, op. cit., pp. 102–106, and Kenneth Perszyk, "Molinism and Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44 (December 1998), pp. 163–184.
25. It seems to me quite possible (though Free-Will Theists would deny that this is the way things actually are) that God's goodness is such that $R = 0$. In this case any chance at all of a sub-par world eventuating from $T(W)$ would preclude God's actualizing $T(W)$. Middle knowledge, of course, allows God to eliminate this kind of risk altogether. This is a powerful consideration in favor of Molinism, unless it can be shown that there is some coherent non-Molinist conception of God and some libertarian $T(W)$ such that God can guarantee that the world resulting from $T(W)$ is not sub-par.
26. It was already acknowledged, when discussing the definition of the problem of evil as a gap between E and A, that it may not always be possible to order A and E in such a way that the question whether $E > A$ is decidable. At that time the concern was dismissed, since the question whether there is a gap between E and A is undecidable at just those points where it's indeterminate whether a problem of evil exists, and a good definition *should* be vague at just those points where the phenomenon is itself vague. But this perfectly proper indeterminacy in the definition causes trouble when the definition is put to use in the argument for theistic minimalism.
27. In arriving at this conclusion, I have benefited enormously from audiences at the places mentioned in note 23, as well as comments from Alvin Plantinga, Tom Flint, Dan Howard-Snyder, Frances Howard-Snyder, Franklin Mason, and other participants in the philosophy of religion discussion group at the University of Notre Dame, where I held a fellowship in 1999–2000 at the Center for Philosophy of Religion.

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