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## 2. Horrendous Evil and Christian Theism: A Reply to John W. Loftus

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ABSTRACT: In his recent article, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” John W. Loftus argues that what he calls horrendous suffering is incompatible with traditional theism. The extent of horrendous suffering in the world, he says, “means that either God does not care enough to eliminate it, or God is not smart enough to eliminate it, or God is not powerful enough to eliminate it.” For Loftus, however, the problem is not simply *evil*, but horrendous suffering, a particularly acute form of evil which renders theism completely untenable. Here I will argue in reply, first, that because horrendous suffering is itself a form of evil, it cannot be easily reconciled with naturalism, since naturalism actually precludes the existence of evil. Then I will argue that horrendous suffering is not only compatible with theism, but is best explained in the context of Christian theism in particular. Finally I will suggest that because God’s work of creation is not yet complete, we have good reason for maintaining hope even in the face of horrendous evils.

IN HIS ARTICLE from the previous issue of this journal, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” John W. Loftus has argued that what he calls *horrendous suffering* is an absolute defeat for theism. As he describes it, horrendous suffering is plainly incompatible with the attributes of God in traditional theism; and yet the world we live in is shot through with the undeniable reality of horrendous suffering. Therefore horren-

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dous suffering is “one of the most powerful refutations of the theistic God as can be found.”<sup>2</sup>

While he refers to the “evidential problem” of horrendous suffering, Loftus places horrendous suffering against the attributes of God and suggests a logical inconsistency among them. The extent of horrendous suffering in the world, he says, “means that either God does not care enough to eliminate it, or God is not smart enough to eliminate it, or God is not powerful enough to eliminate it.” In its basic form the above line of reasoning, commonly recognized as the traditional or logical argument from evil, has been both defended and debunked with various degrees of success by philosophers since Epicurus.

Nonetheless, for Loftus the problem remains not simply the reality of *evil*, but of *horrendous suffering*. So we will need to turn our attention from the logical problem of evil to the evidential problem of horrendous suffering. This is, as he defines it quite simply, “the kind that turns our stomachs.” As opposed, presumably, to everyday, run-of-the-mill suffering, horrendous suffering has the power to render theism incoherent. In other words, this kind of suffering is so revoltingly excessive, soul-crushingly painful and unjust that no argument could possibly warrant theistic belief in the face of it. But again this is not really a novel argument, and appears to be a less formal, if more rhetorically powerful, version of the “evidential argument from evil” first outlined by William Rowe some forty-five years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Essentially, then, Loftus has borrowed elements from each of the two most common versions of the argument from evil or suffering in order to create a sort of “double whammy”

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<sup>2</sup> John W. Loftus, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” *Trinity Journal of Natural & Philosophical Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 2023), pp. 53-68. All further quotations by Loftus are from this same article.

<sup>3</sup> See William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (October 1979), pp. 335-341.

polemic against theism. Therefore in reply I will briefly address both versions of the argument from evil in light of horrendous sufferings. Rather than simply offer a “defense” along the lines of skeptical theism – suggesting the inscrutable logical possibility that theism might still be true even if horrendous evil and suffering appear to weaken it – I will first counter that to the extent that horrendous suffering is a form of *evil*, it presents a worse problem for naturalism than for theism, because naturalism actually precludes evil. I will then argue that the evil of horrendous suffering is not merely compatible with theism, but is specifically predicted by (and thus best explained by) Christian theism in particular. Finally I will suggest that because God’s work of creation is not yet complete, we have good reason for maintaining hope even in the face of horrendous evils.

### *Horrendous suffering and arguments from evil*

Again, while Loftus for the most part prefers to address the problem in terms of *suffering* rather than *evil*, he invokes what students of philosophy and theology will recognize as the logical or traditional argument from evil – the idea that the attributes ascribed to God in classical theism are logically inconsistent with the reality of evil in the world. After reviewing the presumed incompatibility of horrendous suffering and the attributes of God, Loftus concludes: “The stubborn fact of horrendous suffering means something is wrong with God’s goodness, his knowledge, or his ability.”

Though many notable philosophers, from Epicurus in the fourth century B.C. to the late twentieth century logician J. L. Mackie, have found the logical argument from evil compelling, most observers these days would agree that from a technical standpoint the argument is a failure. That is, even given that there is an objective, identifiable reality of evil in the world, the presence of such evil does not, strictly speaking, *contradict* the existence of God as described in classical the-

ism (or entail a failure of his attributes). More often than not, Alvin Plantinga is credited with successfully refuting the logical argument from evil in his celebrated article, “The Free Will Defense.”<sup>4</sup> There Plantinga first goes to some lengths to spell out the formal logical implications of the problem of evil. As he explains, the set of propositions

God is all-good.

God is all-powerful.

Evil exists.

is neither formally nor implicitly inconsistent – meaning those propositions are not logically incompatible. From there, and against Mackie’s claim that an omnipotent God could have (had he so desired) created morally free creatures who never actually committed moral evil, Plantinga rather ingeniously draws on modal logic and possible worlds semantics to demonstrate “that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world He pleased.”<sup>5</sup>

Now given the emphasis Loftus places upon *horrendous suffering*, it’s fair to ask what exactly this kind of suffering adds to the original logical argument. To that I would simply say: not much. It should be noted that in the traditional argument from evil, “evil” has always been meant to encompass

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say there aren’t critics of various aspects of Plantinga’s position. According to Bruce Little, Richard Swinburne for instance rejects Plantinga’s argument because it depends on middle knowledge, and yet “it is logically impossible for God to know what the future decisions of his moral beings will be.” – *God, Why This Evil?* (Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2010), p. 52. But Plantinga’s main contention, that the logical argument from evil itself is demonstrably unsuccessful, remains largely unchallenged.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense,” from Michael Peterson, et al, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2007), p. 330. Against Plantinga, I actually believe it *is* possible for God to create a world in which humans are substantially morally free and where no suffering occurs, but that such a world entails our present world (or one like it) being created first. More on that later.

extreme (horrendous) suffering, just as extreme suffering has always been associated with evil. Also an argument could be made that because many forms of suffering can be considered objectively good, or at least not evil – e.g. penalties imposed for criminal activity, consequences arising from immoral behavior, self-sacrificial service and heroism, and pains associated with growth, bodily exercise or learning a new skill – only suffering that appears excessive or unjustifiable (horrendous) can really be considered *evil* in the first place. Some would say that suffering is really the *consequence* of evil, rather than evil in itself.

For most observers, horrendous suffering is itself a form of evil. That evidently includes Loftus, who states that “there are two categories of horrendous suffering that must be adequately explained by apologists for God”:

- (1) Moral evils (that is, suffering caused by the choices of moral agents). Examples include: the Holocaust, the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, terrorist beheadings, childhood molestation, torture, slavery, gang rapes, wars, and so on. Then there’s (2)
- (2) Natural evils (that is, suffering caused by natural disasters). Examples include: pandemics, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, earthquakes, massive wildfires, and so on...

As the “and so on” implies, both of the lists above could unfortunately be greatly expanded.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Adams, for example, includes among “paradigmatic examples” of horrendous suffering: “the rape of a woman and axing off her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of the personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one’s own offspring, child abuse..., child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, participation in the Nazi death camps...” – Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society*, Vol. 63 (1989), p. 300.

While all this suffering (evil) cannot be reconciled with traditional theism, says Loftus, it's entirely to be *expected* on an atheistic view of the world: "By contrast, for atheists who don't believe any God exists, the fact of horrendous suffering is not an intellectual problem at all. Suffering, even horrendous suffering, is what we expect to find in a world that evolved by natural selection." Atheism technically says nothing about evolution by natural selection, so let's instead say that the idea for which horrendous suffering is supposedly not an intellectual problem is really *naturalism*.<sup>7</sup> So Loftus argues that horrendous suffering is expected on naturalism but not on theism. But is that true?

Given that horrendous suffering is considered a form of evil – as Loftus seems to acknowledge – and given that we can objectively identify instances of horrendous suffering in the world, the inescapable reality of horrendous suffering would presumably count among the observations that make "Evil exists" a true premise in the classical logical formulation of the argument from evil. But if "Evil exists" is a true premise, it could potentially give rise to other arguments, for example what I have called the argument from evil against naturalism, drawn from the premises:

Nature is all that exists.

Nature is amoral (neither good nor evil).

Evil exists.<sup>8</sup>

The above appears to be a genuinely inconsistent set. That is, for nature to be all that exists, and for nature to be non-evil,

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<sup>7</sup> "Naturalism" here means the philosophical or metaphysical view that the observable universe is a completely self-contained system, so that nothing outside the observable universe exists, or at least nothing outside the observable universe can affect or alter it "from beyond." Naturalism thus entails atheism, though atheism does not strictly entail naturalism.

<sup>8</sup> Don McIntosh, *Transcending Proof: In Defense of Christian Theism* (San Antonio: Gerizim Publishing, 2021), p. 16-17.

evil cannot exist. Thus the reality of evil in the world appears to work pretty well as a premise in the service of arguments against naturalism. Moreover, the reality of evil arguably presents a greater problem for naturalism than for theism. While there is reason to doubt, as observers from Augustine to Plantinga have noted, whether good and evil strictly contradict – and thus whether a limitlessly good and powerful God cannot co-exist with evil in the world God is said to have created – it’s clear that the world cannot contain some evil and no evil at the same time.

Granted, naturalists could counter that what we *call* evil is really only an *epiphenomenon*, a sort of perceptual by-product of sentient organisms struggling to perpetuate their species in a world that emerged from strictly amoral forces of natural selection and physics. But theists could argue along similar lines that what we call evil is an epiphenomenon of a world created by a purely good God of unlimited power. In neither case would evil be a defining feature of the universe. From a Christian theistic perspective this “epiphenomenal” understanding of evil may further call to mind Augustine’s conception of evil as “privation of good,” where evil is not something that can really *exist* independently of an already existing good.

Even if Loftus were correct, and horrendous suffering were indeed the result of a “world that evolved by natural selection,” it would not follow that as organisms thus evolved we would “expect to find” such a state of affairs. In other words, there is no reason to expect that we, as the products of mindless natural processes, would come to *recognize* any moral or philosophical implications of horrendous suffering. Reflecting upon or bewailing the evil of horrendous suffering, or any other manifestation of evil, is the kind of activity more befitting spiritual beings created with a mind, a will and a conscience than evolved primates instinctively struggling for survival in a pitiless material universe. Again that’s be-

cause the reality of evil is not easily reconcilable with a strictly amoral, naturalistic view of the world.

An atheologian committed to the argument from horrendous suffering thus faces a dilemma: if evil is an objective reality, then it poses at least as much a problem for naturalism as it does for theism.<sup>9</sup> If evil is *not* an objective reality (if there is no actual “evil” to speak of), then even the most horrendous of suffering provides no discernible grounds for a sound argument against theism, because there is nothing about *suffering* (to any degree) that contradicts theism. In the latter case the most we can say is that theism and horrendous suffering do not appear to match up well intuitively; and in that case the strongest argument the atheologian could make is that theism is *internally* inconsistent – not that it conflicts with any features of the world. But as Stump suggests, even if a set of beliefs *appears* inconsistent on generic theism, “our reinterpretation of them in light of a larger system of beliefs to which they belong may dispel the appearance of inconsistency.”<sup>10</sup> We will examine one such “larger system” – Christian theism – shortly.

In response to objections (mainly Plantinga’s) against the logical form of the argument, many philosophers and skeptics have taken more stock in the *evidential* argument from evil, which stipulates not that theism *contradicts* the reality of horrendous, or seemingly gratuitous,<sup>11</sup> suffering, but that certain instances of horrendous suffering render theism highly improbable. While agreeing with most observers that “the

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<sup>9</sup> On similar grounds Loftus’ former instructor, William Lane Craig, has offered a positive argument for theism which basically says that if “objective moral values” exist, then God exists.

<sup>10</sup> Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Iss. 4 (1985), p. 398.

<sup>11</sup> An instance of gratuitous suffering is said to be one for which God does not have a greater, outweighing or compensating good. While thinkers like Michael Martin have argued that a single demonstrable instance of gratuitous suffering would be enough to falsify theism, William Hasker and others disagree.



existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God,” William Rowe suggests the improbability of theism given the sheer scale of horrific suffering in the world:

It seems quite unlikely that all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad; and even more unlikely, should they somehow all be so related, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods (or prevented some of those evils) without permitting the instances of intense suffering that are supposedly related to them.<sup>12</sup>

Loftus agrees, saying that “in terms of probabilities, the more horrendous suffering that exists, the less probable an omniscient God exists...” This does seem reasonable at a glance. After all, there are some cases of horrendous suffering, such as the torture of small children, for which greater goods can scarcely be imagined. On the reasonable premise that scarcely imaginable concepts are also highly *improbable*, the probability of God having in store an outweighing good would seem to be pretty low. Taking a cue from Plantinga, Adams acknowledges that “where horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God’s *actual* reason for permitting them; we cannot even *conceive* of any plausible candidate sort of reason...for human participation in them.”<sup>13</sup>

As skeptical theists like Stephen Wykstra have pointed out, however, the flip side to that argument is that the probability of our having sufficient knowledge to fully understand (or *imagine*, for that matter) God’s overall, long-term, eternal

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<sup>12</sup> Rowe, pp. 337-338.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, p. 304.

purposes for human souls would also seem to be pretty low.<sup>14</sup> That is, the experience of *seemingly* gratuitous suffering is not unexpected given human epistemic limitations and divine omniscience, and therefore cannot be evidence against theism. In that case God may have in mind outweighing goods for all the instances of horrendous suffering in the world (or yet greater sufferings that would occur if the sufferings in question were not permitted to occur). And in that case the probability of his *not* having such factors in mind while seemingly “failing to act” could not be reliably estimated.

### *Horrendous suffering in Christian theism*

But suppose God had no greater goods in store, and thus there were numerous instances of gratuitous suffering in the world. At this point I will turn my focus to *Christian* theism in particular, to suggest that because evil is the expression of disobedience to God’s commandments – the rebellious exercise of independent human wills – evil (as opposed to moral freedom itself) is directly contrary to God’s purpose; and because evil is directly contrary to God’s purpose, there’s really no reason to expect that God would *create* a purpose for each instance of evil.

The idea that humans can continually flout God’s commandments and behave as wickedly as they please, while God is obligated to continually supply “greater goods” to compensate for the horrendous sufferings that arise from human wickedness, may be consistent with some generic version of theism or other – but is completely foreign to Christian theology. It is not true on Christian theology, for example, that if a man in a foul mood shoots up an elementary school, God bears moral responsibility for the act and must create a greater good (or already have one in place) to justify

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<sup>14</sup> See Stephen Wykstra and Timothy Perrine, “Foundations of Skeptical Theism: Cornea, Core, and Conditional Probabilities,” *Faith & Philosophy*, Vol. 29, Iss. 4 (2012), pp. 374-399.

it. The greater good view appears incoherent, in that humans, by committing ever worse evils, can put God on the hook to create an ever greater world. As Johnson and Falconer have pointed out, “According to the greater good theodicies, God requires one evil in order to prevent another evil, making evil necessary for God.”<sup>15</sup>

If there’s any point to what we call pointless suffering, then, it may be just this: because evil is moral irrationality, evil is not and never was supposed to be rationally managed by anyone – least of all by God, who is morally pure and wants nothing to do with evil. Again and again the Bible records God warning the people of Israel that horrendous suffering would follow upon disobedience, the people disobeying anyway, and the unintended consequence of horrendous suffering following just as promised. A biblical-historical view of Christian theology thus entails the compatibility of God and horrendous, or even gratuitous, suffering.

Why then doesn’t God simply *eliminate* evil? The problem there is that on Christian theology, evil resides in the hearts and minds of sinful humans, which means that to eliminate evil would be to eliminate humanity. But to eliminate humanity entirely would appear to be an evil in itself. Christian or not, most of us would maintain that it is good for humans to *not* be eliminated (despite the evil in them), where good is understood to mean something like *grace*. So in one sense at least, it could be said that evil is allowed to persist precisely because God is good.<sup>16</sup>

Even if that is so, the question then remains why God would give such potentially destructive power to his people

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<sup>15</sup> Connie Johnson and Robert Falconer, “Creation Order Theodicy: The Argument for the Coexistence of Gratuitous Evil and the Sovereignty of God,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*, Vol. 27 (March 2019), p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Loftus suggests that “a heart attack could have killed Hitler” before he had a chance to commit his atrocities; but that would seem to mean Hitler dying of a heart attack while he was apparently innocent of any serious wrongdoing, and so would appear an instance of evil in itself.

in the way of such wide-ranging moral freedom. I believe part of the answer is that God has granted us tremendous responsibility as his image-bearers and as the appointed stewards of his creation. Along these lines Swinburne has developed what he calls the *argument from providence*, which suggests that “the enormous scope of the responsibilities possessed by humans” is evidence for, not against, the existence of a good God.<sup>17</sup> One of the running jokes in our family is to cite Uncle Ben’s famous line from the first *Spiderman* movie – “With great power comes great responsibility” – whenever one of us has the TV remote and is searching for a program we can all enjoy. But as trite as that saying may seem, it does reflect an important spiritual and moral truth: that as God’s image-bearers, we unleash far more power upon the world by our decisions – for good *or* for evil<sup>18</sup> – than we understand. “A God has the power to benefit or to harm,” says Swinburne. “If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, they must have that power too...”<sup>19</sup>

At the same time it seems that most humans do not *want* this kind of responsibility, let alone the potentially devastating power that comes with it. Evil thus will remain a much greater problem than it needs to be so long as humans continue to abdicate their moral and spiritual responsibility before God. C.S. Lewis put it memorably: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>20</sup> – *deaf*

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford, 2004), p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> For perspective’s sake, we should bear in mind that experiences of *good* can also be powerful. Along with experiences of deep suffering, even horrendous suffering, our world also includes experiences of grace, healing, hope, compassion, generosity, heroism, love, friendship, beauty, inspiration, adventure, discovery, creativity, joy, laughter, and related pleasures, all of which tend to “make life worth living.”

<sup>19</sup> Swinburne, p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996; orig. 1940), p. 91.

here meaning not only to the reality of God's awesome power, but to the deadly power of sin and our own powerfully responsible place in God's created order. On this view, the more horrendous the suffering unleashed by human sin, the more desperately humans need to take responsibility for that sin, repent, and seek God's grace to forgive us and heal us.

Despite all this, Loftus seems to suggest that theistic defenses against the argument from evil, Christian or otherwise, fail to take a sufficiently hard and sober look at what horrendous suffering really entails and what it really means for theism. Here let me say that I fully agree with Loftus that the reality of horrendous suffering is stomach-turning. No amount of theologizing, philosophizing or apologizing can soften the hard reality of the evil that is horrendous suffering.

Though it's been some years now, I have suffered episodes of clinical depression that left me with no appetite (for food or anything else), unable to sleep or concentrate, overcome with sadness and dread, constantly feeling that I was losing my mind, trembling with anxiety, and susceptible to terrifying panic attacks. All this would continue for months on end. As a result I had to sometimes step down from leadership roles or complex tasks at work (and once got fired outright); at other times I had to try to explain to people why I had so rapidly dropped three pant sizes, or why I was so lethargic (yet nervously agitated), or why I looked like a zombie. On top of all that, friends and associates sometimes suggested that what most physicians consider a medical condition accompanied by a distinct set of symptoms was really just a failure to "pull it together" and face life's challenges squarely.<sup>21</sup> The unrelenting pain, hopelessness and humilia-

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<sup>21</sup> This sounds a little like saying that Alzheimer's disease is just a failure to pay attention or care enough to remember things. But in both clinical depression and Alzheimer's, considerable evidence (like PET scans) indicates the main culprit to be physical changes in the brain itself. "Depression is debilitating, progressive and relentless in its downhill course, as worthy an opponent as any doctor might choose to combat." – Peter D. Kramer, *Against Depression* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 7.

tion of it all sometimes tempted me to suicide. In short, my waking life was as terrible as my worst nightmare – which may explain why now I have a recurring nightmare in which I find myself sinking back into a major depression.

Others have suffered worse still, many of them believers. Job from the Old Testament is the paradigm example. Further examples span the history of the church, from the apostles and martyrs in the early church to Christians suffering violent persecution in present-day Nigeria, North Korea, and various nations where Islam is the official state religion and Sharia is essentially the law of the land.

So again, I agree that horrendous suffering is a real and serious problem, as much for Christians as for anyone else.<sup>22</sup> And I agree that such suffering *seems*, at times, to be not just pointless but completely unjust (unjustifiable). During such times it can appear that God, if he exists at all, is actively tormenting us, on one hand, or is a million miles away and can't be bothered, on the other. Just how God can love us and yet refuse to intervene during such times is admittedly well beyond my understanding. But does all that suffering make Christian theism irrational or untenable? Not from anything we've seen so far. Again if there is a problem here it's not with logical inconsistency or improbability, no matter how horrendous the suffering may be.

One might still argue that given the reality of horrendous suffering, God should never have created beings like us in the first place. Loftus himself seems to suggest something

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<sup>22</sup> My first depressive episode actually began just a few months *after* my conversion. Through that deeply painful experience I began to appreciate that Christianity entails more than simply “theism,” but the agonizing and humiliating crucifixion of the Son of God himself as the means of our salvation. The cross tells us that God “so loved the world” (John 3:16) that he was willing to endure the depths of evil *with* us, and more importantly *for* us; and now he calls us to “take up” our own cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). Though not a popular teaching, this means that Christians are sometimes called to suffer (Acts 14:22; Romans 8:17; Hebrews 10:32; 1 Peter 4:19; etc.).

like this in laying out the first of four “moral concerns” facing God: “that we don’t abuse the freedom given to us”: “The giver,” he says, “is blameworthy if he or she gives gifts to people who will terribly abuse them.” The idea seems to be that if moral freedom meant unleashing horrendous sufferings in the world and exposing humanity to those sufferings, God should never have given it to us. Yet Loftus not only (like me) continues to live in a world that includes all kinds of horrendous suffering, and appears to often enjoy it here, but also (like me) brought children of his own into the world, not knowing whether they might one day either inflict or endure horrendous suffering themselves. This doesn’t mean that Loftus’ “moral concern” objection is necessarily invalid; but it does suggest that he has overstated his case, maybe for rhetorical effect.

Simply declining to create beings like us would have been a logical option for God, certainly, but for most observers – Loftus included, apparently – it’s not self-evident that sheer nonexistence would be morally preferable to remaining alive in a world that includes instances of horrendous evil. As Plantinga argues, a world in which humans are free to do evil as well as good may be “more valuable, all things being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.”<sup>23</sup> Even when initiated by God himself, a relationship of love entails a risk of rejection; and rejecting the very source of all goodness unfortunately yields painful unintended consequences. That’s admittedly small consolation for anyone actually in the throes of horrendous suffering, however. Free will may explain the introduction of sin and evil into the world on theism: it does little to resolve the manifold, exceedingly painful and seemingly intractable problems that presently remain with us as a result. So next I want to consider the possibility that the present operation of free will actually serves a higher and happier *eternal* purpose.

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<sup>23</sup> Plantinga, p. 328.

***Beyond horrendous suffering: heavenly hope and the promise of completeness***

All parties can agree, I think, that our world is shot through with pain, and is not the kind of world one might expect a perfectly beneficent and powerful God to create. On that score, Loftus goes to some lengths to show that even if God wanted to correct our behavior or build our character (in keeping with a “soul-making” theodicy), he *could* have done so without permitting atrocities and overwhelming pain. For example, he could have made us with a natural revulsion to committing grotesque evil;<sup>24</sup> we could have been created with a higher pain threshold and stronger immune systems; our bodies could have been made with consistently self-healing properties, with gills to prevent drowning and wings to prevent falling hazards; God could have revealed himself to us so overwhelmingly and convincingly that there would be no more religious conflicts or terrorism; and so on.

Of course, on Christian theology there was a time before Adam’s transgression when God’s children *were* both morally free and perfectly happy. Nonetheless, Loftus suggests with the examples above that even if God wanted us to learn of his ways in a world now inhabited by fallen, morally corrupted people, that world *could* have been kept a much safer and happier place. Though I have doubts about whether many of his proposed solutions are viable (since there is no way to test what sorts of unintended consequences they might produce), and whether people would actually repent or grow spiritually under less painful conditions, I still tend to agree with Loftus on this. Fallen or not, our world often does feel

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<sup>24</sup> Since we have a conscience which tells us that horrendous suffering is often the consequence of wrongdoing, we *should* have all the revulsion we need. The problem is that smaller transgressions tend to lead to gradually greater commissions of evil. So pathological liars, for example, usually begin their careers telling “little white lies.”



woefully and even horrendously out of balance in terms of justice and well-being.

That brings us to another major theme of Christian theology, the hope of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Skeptics might regard the very mention of heaven as evidence of *wishful thinking*, since heaven is an unverifiable tenet of faith. But whether certain unverifiable propositions prove worthy of belief is the question at hand, specifically whether the evil of horrendous suffering (not the sort of thing rational people would *wish* for themselves or anyone else) is more compatible with Christian theism or naturalism – two unverifiable views of the world. In principle, Christian theism entails not only the existence of God, who created a world temporarily fraught with suffering, but the existence of his heavenly kingdom, in which there is complete restoration and everlasting joy. In any case it seems less than consistent to say that too much evil in the world makes Christian theism false, whereas the great hope Christian theism holds out for us makes it too good to be true. Consistency requires that we accept or reject the “whole package.”

So with the hope of heaven in mind, I want to consider the often overlooked biblical-theological fact that God’s creative work is not actually complete. Given the incompleteness of the creation, a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of evil and suffering may have to await its completion. One implication of this is that when he argues that God “could have” done this, or not done that, Loftus may well be referring to a creation that in principle is not actually *done*.

Most everyone is familiar with the account of creation of “the heavens and the earth” in Genesis. That account culminates with the creation of Adam and Eve in a garden paradise, and is followed by their fall into sin and the releasing of a curse of death and pain upon the earth. Hence all the horrendous suffering under discussion. But there is also an account of creation in the Revelation of John, of a “new heaven and a new earth.” That seems to suggest that there are two

major divine creation “projects,” one that ended just prior to the advent of human history and one that is to commence at the end of that history. In between is the present age, which is marked by death as well as life, corruption along with goodness, and often, horrendous sufferings.

In other words, the original earthly paradise, the present fallen age infected with death and corruption, and the final consummation of all things in the heavenly paradise are three distinct phases of what might be called a vastly comprehensive creation “program.” According to this overarching theological vision, the reason sufferings are so persistent and God’s blessings seem so fleeting is that we are only in the middle phase of the program. As New Testament scholars sometimes say, the kingdom of God is both *already*, having arrived on earth in Jesus, and *not yet*, with the final judgment and restoration still awaiting us in heaven. Horrendous sufferings are bewildering, then, mainly because we haven’t yet reached the end of the story.

Consider Godel’s first incompleteness theorem as an analogy. For those unfamiliar with Godel’s theorem, Scott Aaronson explains it succinctly in terms of a Turing machine,  $M$ . For any  $M$ , he says, there is a sentence,  $S(M)$ , written in the language of  $M$ , but which  $M$  cannot compute. For  $S(M)$  that sentence might be: “Machine  $M$  will never output this sentence.” Aaronson describes the paradox that results: “There are two cases: either  $M$  outputs  $S(M)$ , in which case it utters a falsehood, or else  $M$  doesn’t output  $S(M)$ , in which case there’s a mathematical truth to which it can never assent.”<sup>25</sup> Because  $M$  cannot decide whether  $S(M)$  is true, it doesn’t output the sentence – and thus  $S(M)$  turns out to be true after all. So it is that certain statements may be generated within a mathematical system that are true, yet not actually provable within that system. Because those statements are *undecidable*, the system is *incomplete* with respect to them.

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<sup>25</sup> Scott Aaronson, *Quantum Computing Since Democritus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 153.

What does Godel's theorem have to do with God and horrendous suffering? Well, as we've seen, Scripture indicates that God's work of creation is not actually complete. Suppose God created our world, W. Although God is all-good and all-powerful, the statement "World W must include horrendous suffering" may well be true – even if its being true appears baffling, or unprovable, or undecidable. In other words it's only undecidable within the "system" of W, our present world. In principle the truth of it will become clear in the larger system of the future paradise, because then the creation will be complete. While this is certainly a less *formal* sort of undecidability, the basic truth of incompleteness is much the same. The compatibility of horrendous evil and divine benevolence, of free will and eternal blessedness, may be unprovable within this world, yet ultimately proven in the larger transcendent kingdom of heaven.

This "theodicy of incompleteness," as I have called it, may help explain the primary spiritual function of human free will in the world – not simply to have a meaningful life, or to make choices that result in happiness (since suffering so often wrecks our happiness anyway), but to decide where we want to spend eternity. In the context of such a grand theological perspective, "this-worldly existence is necessary as the arena in which eternally binding choices are made, and where evil – *especially* the irrational, excruciating sort we call pointless and gratuitous – serves as a powerful inducement to seek God rather than sin."<sup>26</sup>

So it is that in the new paradise in Revelation there is the Tree of Life, but no sign of the old Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That's arguably because those entering the new paradise have *already* tasted of the bitter fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, including the harsh reality of horrendous suffering, and have chosen eternal life with Christ instead. In heaven, for those of us who choose it, there will no longer be freedom to choose evil, precisely because

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<sup>26</sup> McIntosh, *Transcending Proof*, p. 25.

we will have already chosen (willed freely) by faith to surrender that particular freedom. Consequently, in heaven every trace of evil and its painful effects will be removed from our experience: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Revelation 21:4 (NKJV).