

JAMESIAN FINITE THEISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING

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Abstract. William James advocated a form of finite theism, motivated by epistemological and moral concerns with scholastic theism and pantheism. In this article, I elaborate James's case for finite theism and his strategy for dealing with these concerns, which I dub the problems of suffering. I contend that James is at the very least implicitly aware that the problem of suffering is not so much one generic problem but a family of related problems. I argue that one of James's great contributions to philosophical theism is his advocacy for the view that adequate theistic philosophizing is not so much about cracking this family of problems, but finding a version of the problem to embrace.

I. INTRODUCTION

In "The Dilemma of Determinism," William James recalls the case of a horrific murder in Brockton. In this case, a bored husband, tired of his wife, "inveigles her into a desert spot and shoots her four times." As she is laying on the ground she says to her husband "You didn't do it on purpose, did you, dear?" And the husband replies "No, I didn't do it on purpose," as he raises a rock and smashes her skull.¹² James's point in reciting this grizzly case is to evoke our moral sympathies, and especially our sense of moral regret. For James, moral regret is something we are obliged to express when confronted with cases such as the Brockton murder, but it is made unintelligible in most attempted solutions to the evidential problem of suffering.

James is primarily concerned with two views for which the evidential problem of suffering most prominently emerges, and he endeavors to avoid both by revealing their moral and epistemological inadequacies. The first view is classical theism, or a view James calls "dualistic" or "scholastic" theism.³ The second view is pantheism or a view James calls absolute monism.⁴ Both views are versions of what contemporary philosophers of religion call perfect being theism. Perfect being theism involves the belief that "God is the being who possesses all and only the perfections" where the "perfections" include such properties as "omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence" and "immutability."⁵ The difference between the two views amounts to a difference in how they view the relationship between God and the world. The scholastic or dualistic view imagines God as outside and of a different cloth than the world. The pantheistic or absolute monistic view imagines God as and of the same cloth as the world. James argues both are inadequate.

For James, both views have trouble reconciling their conception of God with the existence of suffering in the world. The point James wants to make in "The Dilemma of Determinism" and elsewhere in

1 William James, *The Will to Believe* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), 125.

2 All references to James's original work in this article refer to the Harvard Univ. Press critical editions.

3 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), 16.

4 Ibid.

5 Jeanine Diller, "A proposal to change the tradition of perfect being theology," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 15, no. 1 (1999): 233.

his work is that the solutions advocates of these two views appeal to when confronted with the existence of suffering in the world often make a “mockery” of our moral and epistemological commitments.⁶ Of special concern to James is the inconsistency between these moral and epistemological commitments and theodicy in general. Theodicies are attempts to reconcile perfect being theism with the existence of suffering by appeal to the value generated when suffering occurs. James’s view is that theodicies make our moral and epistemological reactions to suffering and immorality, specifically, our feeling or judgments of regret, unintelligible. He recounts, with a palpable degree of mortification, the student who, under the influence of theodicy, declares “his willingness to sin like David, if only he might repent like David.”⁷

To escape these difficulties, James rejects perfect being theism in both scholastic and pantheistic forms and embraces a version of finite theism.⁸ He takes judgments and feelings of regret as indications of the truth of indeterminism and pluralism. For James, our feelings of regret suggest that things could have gone another way, that suffering is something better not to have happened rather than something which allows for the expansion of greater value. Thus, James thinks these feelings presuppose the truth of indeterminism. But James also thinks this entails pluralism. If things could have gone another way- if the husband in the Brockton murder could have done differently- then, the actors are real and individual, not illusions concealing a hidden and perfect totality into which they are absorbed, as the pantheist might imagine.

In this essay, I elaborate James’s case for finite theism and his strategy for dealing with the problem of suffering. I contend that James is at least implicitly sensitive to the view that the problem of suffering is not so much one generic problem but a family of related problems,⁹ and I argue that one of James’s great contributions to philosophical theism is his advocacy for the view that adequate theistic philosophizing is not so much about cracking this family of problems, but finding a version of the problem to embrace. To this end, I first articulate the evidential problem of suffering and explain how it presents a difficulty for perfect being theism. I demonstrate how this difficulty applies to scholastic theism and I explain the special moral concerns James also has with scholastic theism. I next explicate James’s case against absolute monism, explaining how the view deals with the evidential problem of suffering and emphasizing James’s case for thinking the monistic solution to the evidential problem runs into other moral and epistemological difficulties. I then explain how James’s sketch of finite theism circumvents both the evidential and moral problems of suffering and I demonstrate how James came to embrace what I call the practical problem of suffering.

To add some detail to James’s sketch, I conclude by comparing James’s theism to polytheism and I ask whether James would have found panentheism, a view he never clearly distinguished from pantheism, acceptable. I suggest that under certain conditions, James may have very well found panentheism coherent, but that for James, coherence is only one theoretical desideratum. Another, just as important, desideratum is the need for theory to terminate into practice. I suggest this is the reason James embraces the practical problem of suffering and I contend that even if we find James’s model of God unacceptable, we should consider whether theistic philosophizing is not very much about finding a version of the problem to embrace.

II. SCHOLASTIC THEISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING

There are two classical ways of formulating the problem of suffering. The first is a strictly logical problem. Here, the question is whether it is even possible to conceive a world with both a perfect being and

6 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 135.

7 James, *The Will to Believe*, 132.

8 For a defense of finite theism, see: Frank Dilley, “A Finite God Reconsidered”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, no. 1 (2000). For a defense of pantheism, see: Michael P. Levine, “Pantheism, Theism, and the Problem of Evil”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35, no. 3 (1994).

9 For a contemporary form of this approach, see: Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1999).

the existence of evil, or suffering.¹⁰ Most philosophers of religion are of the view that there is no strictly logical problem of suffering. This is because the mere existence of suffering may follow from the free acts of agential beings, such as human moral agents.¹¹ That is, one can conceive a world created by a perfect being, and containing free agents, who fail to respect each other's well-being without contradiction. So strictly speaking, it is logically possible to conceive a world with both a perfect being and the existence of suffering. And yet, this solution does not necessarily imply a strategy for reconciling a commitment to the existence of a perfect being with the existence of suffering in our world. This is the evidential problem of suffering. I formulate the problem as follows:

Premise One: God contains the greatest possible goodness, greatest possible power, and the greatest possible knowledge, is immutable, and is the Creator of the World.

Premise Two: A God with the greatest possible goodness, power, and knowledge would not create a world with suffering

Premise Three: The world contains suffering

Conclusion: Therefore, God does not exist

This argument counts as an evidential problem of suffering insofar as it appeals to an empirical premise, namely, Premise Three. One reason this evidential problem of suffering has bite is that the agential, or free will, solution to the logical problem of suffering is not of obvious help when dealing with the evidential problem. That's because many of the instances of suffering we can invoke in support of Premise Three are not the obvious result of agential actions. Much of the suffering in our world occurs because of environmental phenomena, such as cancer, storms, and scarcity. Many of these problems can be, and in fact are, exacerbated by the moral negligence of human agents, but it is not clear that these phenomena can be accounted for solely by appeal to agential action. These phenomena seem to occur given the structure of the world.¹² The most obvious way to leverage the agential solution to the logical problem of suffering is to suggest that a supernatural adversary is response for the defects in the structure of the world, that this adversary disrupted the creation of our world. But, if God contains the greatest possible knowledge, it is difficult to imagine how God would have both failed to perceive this impending disruption and failed to respond accordingly. So, the strictly logical solution to the strictly logical problem of suffering is no clear *de facto* solution to the evidential problem of suffering.

To reinforce the bite of this evidential problem of suffering, it will help to examine it in a bit more detail. Premise One contains a description of God *qua* perfect being. Now, perfect being theists often qualify God's perfection by claiming that God contains only the greatest logically possible goodness, power, and knowledge.¹³ In this way, perfect being theists deny that God can do absolutely anything, anyway whatsoever. God, on this view, can only do what is logically possible. By making this move, perfect being theists attempt to create space for a rejection of Premise Two, the premise that a perfect being would not create a world containing suffering. That is, by qualifying God's perfection, and restricting perfection to the realm of logical possibility, perfect being theists create an argumentative aperture, one with room to argue that it is not logically possible to create a world without suffering.

But while this strategy does seem to reduce some of the logical tension the evidential problem of suffering draws our attention to, it raises the question of whether God's decision to create a world with suffering is morally justified. If God contains the greatest logically possible goodness, then God will seemingly never act in a way contrary to the interests of a single moral subject, when it is logically possible to act in ways consistent with these interests. If we are ethical consequentialists, this means that God

10 The classical formulation of this problem is first attributed to: J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955).

11 For the classical formulation of this defense, see: Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Clarendon Univ. Press, 1974).

12 For a classical formulation of this claim, see: H.J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).

13 See: C. Stephen Evans and R. Zachary Manis *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2009) 161.

promotes the interests of all moral subjects as much as is logically possible. If we are ethical deontologists, this means that God honors the interests of all moral subjects as much as is logically possible.¹⁴ But if God can do only do what is logically possible, and it is logically possible for God to anticipate the existence of suffering in the world, then, it seems God should only create the world if the world is such that God can either honor or promote the interests of all moral subjects as much as is logically possible.

Perhaps the actual suffering in our world just is the suffering God cannot yet logically eradicate. Perhaps God honors or promotes all the interests of all moral subjects as much as is logically possible. Perhaps then God is morally justified in creating the world, even with the anticipation that it will contain suffering. Perfect being theists of the scholastic type will want to insist on each of these claims. Nothing I have said in the preceding amounts to an outright refutation of perfect being theism. But salvaging perfect being theism in the face of the evidential problem of evil involves more than avoiding outright refutation, it also requires an adequate responsiveness to fact. For James, scholastic versions of perfect being theism are insufficient in this regard.

In “The Present Dilemma of Philosophy,” James argues philosophy has been dominated by two contrasting temperaments. This is often “expressed in the pair of terms ‘rationalist’ and ‘empiricist,’” where an empiricist is “your lover of facts in all their crude variety” and a “rationalist” is “your devotee to abstract and eternal principles.”¹⁵ But James thinks the contrast in temperaments is broader than this. He notices that the empiricist’s “optimism is apt to be decidedly conditional and tremulous.”¹⁶ The rationalist, by contrast, is “most frequently ... idealistic and optimistic.”¹⁷ The empiricist is also often “more sceptical and open to discussion” and the rationalist is often “more dogmatic in temper.”¹⁸ To mark this broader set of contrasts, James introduces the terms “tender-minded” in place of “rationalist” and “tough-minded” in place of “empiricist.”¹⁹

“Most of us,” James contends, “have a hankering for the good things on both sides of the lines.”²⁰ We want both facts and principles. “But our esteem for facts has not neutralized in us all religiousness.”²¹ The problem is that “religious philosophy ... is not empirical enough.”²² It provides “escape” from “the materialism that goes with the reigning empiricism,” but this escape is paid for by the loss of “contact with the concrete parts of life.”²³ Scholastic theism, James says, “has the air of fighting a slow retreat.”²⁴ Scholastic theists “accept the facts of darwinism” and “cerebral physiology,” but do “nothing active or enthusiastic with them.”²⁵ God, on the scholastic view, is narrowly construed as a “*modus vivendi* above all things.”²⁶

For James, the scholastic God thus “lives on ... purely abstract heights.”²⁷ To evade the evidential problem of suffering, scholastic theists suggest that God has planned the universe with as much moral concern as is logically possible. On this view, the actual evil, or suffering, in the world is logically necessary, but guaranteed to be overcome. The problem, for James, is that this account fails to appreciate the concrete details of the human struggle with suffering. Scholastic theism is too “tender-minded,” too optimistic. Scholastic theists suggest “the world’s salvation” is “inevitable.”²⁸ But the moral regret we express at cases such as the Brockton murder suggests otherwise. Our moral regret implies that things could have been different, that human effort makes a difference in the outcome of the universe. Our regret suggests

14 Virtue ethics, and other versions of value pluralism complicate this formulation, but the issue is largely the same.

15 William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1975) 12.

16 *Ibid.*, 13.

17 *Ibid.*, 12.

18 *Ibid.*, 13.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 14.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 15.

23 *Ibid.*, 16.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, 17.

28 *Ibid.*, 137.

that our efforts are “the actual turning-places and growing-places ... of the world.”²⁹ Scholastic theism suggests the opposite, that deliverance from suffering is just a matter of “waiting it out.” For James, this is inconsistent with the “seriousness ... we attribute to life.”³⁰ The optimism of scholastic theism implies that the world is “already saved *in toto*” that the struggle with suffering is just a passing phase.³¹ But our regret suggests that there are “real losses and real losers,” that we live in a “moralistic and epic kind of a universe.”³² Scholastic theism implies that suffering will be “*aufgehoben*,” or repealed, by the effort of God.³³ But the facts of human moral regret suggest that the “way of escape from evil” is by “throwing it overboard and getting beyond it,” by “helping to make a universe that shall forget its very place and name.”³⁴

Scholastic theism thus retreats to abstraction by positing an order to the universe that only faintly accounts for the facts of human life. Scholastic theists recognize the existence of suffering and its impact on human beings, but that suffering is treated as something that will be made up for by the operation of extant conditions. James is aware that suffering can be necessary to bring about a greater good. He admits that “certain evils minister to ulterior goods, that the bitter makes the cocktail better.”³⁵ And we can think of many examples. Ache is antecedent to muscle growth. Children fall from bikes before they learn how to ride them. Rejection paves the way for success. All of this is true. But in most, if not all, of these cases, suffering brings about a condition that brings one closer to its absence. Scholastic theism implies that suffering is something we can expect to be repealed as we suffer from it. James’s claim is that this is not how we experience it. We experience suffering as something that we must work to “overcome.”³⁶ Our hope is that we can defeat it, but our hope isn’t just a “shot in the dark.” It is a hope buoyed by the recognition that some “conditions of the world’s salvation are actually extant.”³⁷ The order of the universe implied by scholastic theism goes wrong when it suggests that all of these conditions are present. The problem is that we don’t treat suffering so happily. We treat escape from suffering, “as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”³⁸ This is “the doctrine” James calls “meliorism.”³⁹ James says it stands between optimism and pessimism insofar as it “treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible.”⁴⁰ For James, our moral regret and experience of suffering is most consistent with this doctrine. The cosmic order posited by the scholastic theists is, by contrast, “out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows.”⁴¹

III. ABSOLUTE MONISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING

In “The Types of Philosophical Thinking,” James says that “God as intimate soul and reason of the universe has always seemed to some people a more worthy conception than God as external creator.”⁴² The external creator God, the God of scholastic theism, is immutable and presents various epistemological difficulties insofar as an immutable being is not obviously a responsive being. For James, this is hard to square with our need to draw spiritual strength in the struggle against suffering, but it is also out of step with “the vaster vistas” of “scientific evolutionism” and “the rising tide of social democratic ideals.”⁴³ Freedom from absolute

29 Ibid., 138.

30 Ibid., 141.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 142.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 70.

36 Ibid., 142.

37 Ibid., 137.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 17.

42 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 18.

43 Ibid.

coercion is only something loyal patrons of the monarch shrink from. Change is only something the empirically ignorant can doubt. In James's day, the "the older monarchical theism" thus appears "obsolete."⁴⁴ It is this space that pantheism, or absolute monism, tries to fill.

In taking the place of the obsolete scholastic theism, absolute monism modifies the conception of God I formulated in Premise One of the evidential problem of suffering. That God contains the greatest possible knowledge, goodness, and power, is immutable, and Creator of the world. Absolute monism, by positing God as the world, modifies the scholastic notion of creation and rejects the notion that God is unchanging. Because absolute monism identifies God with the world, it thus rejects the doctrine of "creation out of nothing."⁴⁵ Absolute monism therefore envisions change in the world as a change in God. In "On Some Hegelisms," James says this involves "the notion of a being" who must "change in order to exist at all," a view James praises as "a very picturesque symbol of... reality," and one that makes "young readers feel as if a deep core of truth lay in the system."⁴⁶ In "Hegel and his method," James reiterates this praise. There, James says that if you "take any concrete thing and try to hold it fast," you find that "you cannot" because what you hold "proves not to be concrete at all, but an arbitrary extract or abstract which you have made from the remainder of empirical reality."⁴⁷ Thus, the Hegelian, or absolute monistic view, which maintains that "there is a dialectic movement in things" is, when "taken in the rough... harmless" and "accurate."⁴⁸

And yet, despite the advantages it might enjoy over scholastic theism, James thinks simultaneously similar and deeper problems befall absolute monism. While absolute monists modify the scholastic theist's view of creation and reject the scholastic theist's description of God as immutable, absolute monists accept several other perfections, such as omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience. But then this means that the evidential problem of suffering applies to absolute monism. With absolute monism, as much as with scholastic theism, there is need to reconcile the existence of a perfect being with the existence of suffering. Scholastic theists attempt to do so partly by appeal to logical restrictions on the process of creation and by suggesting that the suffering in this world is the consequence of this restricted process. For instance, scholastic theists may suggest that God *qua* perfect being must create an imperfect world lest God violate the logic of identity. But James thinks this option is not open to the absolute monists. As James sees it, the all-pervasive One does not have an environment and so "nothing alien can be forced" on it.⁴⁹ All that is must be "spontaneously chosen from within." But the absolute is "the ideally perfect whole" with perfect parts.⁵⁰ So, if the absolute "commingles" itself into "coexisting inferior fragmentary visions," such as ourselves, it ceases being the ideally perfect whole.⁵¹ Thus, absolute monism engenders its own set of epistemological difficulties. When faced with the "speculative 'problem of evil,'" absolute monism drafts a "conception that" not only "lacks internal consistency," but "yields us a problem rather than a solution."⁵²

The preceding also raises the moral problem of justifying creation. If God is the perfectly ideal whole, then, it seems "the world" would have been "more perfect by having the affair remain in just those terms."⁵³ That's because the "ideally perfect whole is... that whole of which the parts are also perfect."⁵⁴ So, the deci-

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 James, *The Will to Believe*, 208.

47 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 45.

48 Ibid.

49 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 57.

50 Ibid., 60.

51 Gale charges James with the "fallacy of division," of assuming that the parts of a whole must share the properties of the whole (Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999) 83.) But fallacies are defeasible and some wholes, like a perfect test score, must have perfect components.

52 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 58.

53 Ibid., 60.

54 Ibid., 57.

55 Ibid., 60.

sion to create the world is a decision between perfection and imperfection. But in this case, it would have been better not to entertain any “finite spectators” with “their innumerable imperfect manners.”⁵⁶ Thus, James argues, the “absolute” should have never “lapsed from the perfection of its own integral experience of things, and refracted itself into all our finite experiences.”⁵⁷

The only way out of this difficulty, it seems, is to deny that the fragmenting of the absolute into finite experiences amounts to a degradation in overall value. Here, the absolute monist appeals to the resources of theodicy. If the absolute produces more total value by fragmenting and then reconciling finite experiences, then, the decision to entertain finite experiences may be justified. The problem is that this fails to account for our experience of suffering and moral regret. Considered in isolation, the absolute monist’s theodicy may seem to reduce the logical tension absolute monism engenders, but when considered in conjunction with our judgments of regret, the tension returns.

The absolute monist’s theodicy suggests that evil is a precondition for a greater good. This theodicy, therefore presupposes determinism. Determinism, James says, involves the claim that “those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be.”⁵⁸ On this account, God plans creation so that evil may precondition the greater good of reconciled moral agents. The absolute monist thus appeals to theodicy in the form of “soft determinism,” which James defines as “the determinism which allows consideration of good and bad to mingle with those of cause and effect.”⁵⁹

The problem, for James, is that even this weak form of determinism is at odds with the implications of our judgments of regret. Those judgments suggest that “possibilities exist, and form a part of truth.”⁶⁰ As James says in “On Some Hegelisms,” judgments of regret suggest that “the bad is that which takes the place of something else which ... might have been” while “the better is that which ... might be where it ... is not.”⁶¹ And yet, “in the universe of Hegel,” where the absolute determines the outcome of the world, “there can be neither good nor bad” because the world is such that the “parts have no loose play.”⁶² All that occurs is just “one dead level of ... fate.”⁶³ This view of things is at odds with the implications of our judgments of regret, which suggest that there is “real contingency and ambiguity,” or indeterminacy, in the world.⁶⁴

Thus, in endeavoring to escape the problem of suffering, the absolute monist posits an order to the universe that, like scholastic theism, fails to account for the “actual world of finite human lives.”⁶⁵ Consider again the Brockton murder. For James, the incident cannot be redeemed, or saved. It is “something permanently drastic and bitter.”⁶⁶ But Absolute monism suggests that “the world must and shall be ... saved.”⁶⁷ This implies that even the Brockton murder will be redeemed, that its redemption is just a matter of the culminating of conditions already operant. But our moral regret suggests the opposite, that the incident is a *lost* opportunity. Where love, beauty, and respect might have emerged horror, pain, and suffering took their place. Our regret over this suggests an “edition of the universe” that is “unfinished” and “growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work.”⁶⁸ By guaranteeing the salvation of everything, the absolute monist, like the scholastic theist, suggests a vision of cosmic order that is too tender-minded, too optimistic. Absolute monism thus entails a view of the

56 Ibid., 57.

57 Ibid., 58.

58 James, *The Will to Believe*, 117.

59 Ibid., 129.

60 Ibid., 118.

61 Ibid., 216.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, 17.

66 Ibid., 141.

67 Ibid., 135.

68 Ibid., 124.

world that fails to respond to the details of human experience and, by contrast, appears as a “monument of artificiality.”⁶⁹

This monument, James argues, is an even fainter account of human existence than the one erected by the scholastic theist. In “Monistic Idealism,” James complains of philosophers’ tendency to clean “up the litter with which the world is apparently filled.”⁷⁰ Applied to absolute monism, this problem is both moral and epistemological. As James sees it, the God of absolute monism is a “great derealizer of the only life we are at home in.”⁷¹⁷² On this view, “we supplement our experience by relating it to a totality . . . and this totalization . . . alters the form of experience.”⁷³⁷⁴ We consequently take the plurality of entities as illusory, including “evil” which “logically related to a totalizing experience” guarantees “a final resolution to all finite difficulties.”⁷⁵ As Sprigge puts it “absolute idealism forces us to think that all partial evil is greater good misunderstood.”⁷⁶ In this way, James thinks the theodicy of the absolute monist “whitewashes” the devil and “disinfects” the universe.⁷⁷ Thus, absolute monism permits agents to take what James calls a “moral holiday,” “ever and anon,” to rest assured knowing that evil is always an illusion guaranteed to be overcome by divine efforts.⁷⁸⁷⁹ The problem is that this “fosters the fatalistic mood of mind.”⁸⁰ Therefore, if we accept the theodicy of absolute monism, we lose a needed sense of moral urgency. Without this moral urgency, we cannot fully appreciate just how much is at stake when we act.⁸¹ As James says in “On Some Hegelisms,” an “evil frankly accepted loses half its sting and all its terror.”⁸²

IV. FINITE THEISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF SUFFERING

The preceding two sections demonstrate that James was implicitly, if not explicitly, aware that the problem of suffering is not so much one problem, but a family of related problems. The evidential problem of suffering raises conceptual problems internal to scholastic theism and absolute monism, the moral problem of justifying creation, as well as epistemological and moral difficulties for us human moral agents. Jamesian finite theism is motivated, at least in part, by the difficulties with both these views. In this section, I describe some of the central commitments of Jamesian finite theism and I demonstrate how the view circumvents many of the objections applicable to scholastic theism and absolute monism.

In “The Types of Philosophical Thinking,” James contrasts materialism with spiritualism and subdivides spiritualism into “two species” a “more intimate one” called “monism” and a “less intimate” one called “dualism.”⁸³ “The dualistic species,” James tells us “is the theism that reached its elaboration in the scholastic philosophy,” while the “monistic species is the pantheism spoken of . . . as idealism.”⁸⁴ The more intimate spiritual monism, for James, subdivides into “two subspecies” one “more monistic, the

69 Ibid., 18.

70 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 26.

71 Ibid., 28.

72 James says, on the Hegelian view, we are part and parcel of a “ghostly unreality” (James, *The Will to Believe*, 216).

73 Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), 354.

74 James quotes Hegel as writing “The true knowledge of God begins . . . when we know that things as they immediately are have no truth” (James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 29).

75 Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, 354.

76 T.L.S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Open Court Publishing Company, 1993), 183.

77 James, *The Will to Believe*, 129.

78 James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, 41.

79 James admits, “the universe is a system of which the individual members may relax their anxieties occasionally” (Ibid.). The problem is that absolute monism suggests that this is always the case.

80 James, *The Will to Believe*, 132.

81 As Myers notes, it is crucial, for James, that “evil is our constant enemy” (G.E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, 447).

82 James, *The Will to Believe*, 203.

83 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 16.

84 Ibid.

other more pluralistic in form.”⁸⁵ Here, the contrast, James tells us is between “form and substance.”⁸⁶ The distinction, as Carpenter noted, is now between absolutism and pluralism.⁸⁷ Both species of monism “identify human substance with divine substance,” but for the absolutist the “said substance” takes the “all-form” and is not entirely real in any other form than this. For the pluralist, on the other hand, “the substance of reality” may take the “each-form.”⁸⁸

Here, James is suggesting that the identity between human and divine substance posited by absolute monism effectively eliminates human substance altogether. Pluralistic spiritual monism, on the other hand, posits this identity in substance without the elimination of either. On the absolute monist view, the substances are numerically one: there is just God. On the pluralistic view, the substances are numerically distinct: there is both God and humans, and both are, at least partly, constituted by one another. James thus rejects Leibnizian type conceptions of the universe as a plurality of windowless atoms. On his view, there are in fact a plurality of entities, but these entities are not windowless atoms, but overlapping individuals with ever-shifting, fuzzy boundaries.

In an article published three years after James’s death, Moore says of James’s theism that “James’s view is probably as near to pantheism as it is possible to get without actually becoming such.”⁸⁹ And in “Hegel and his method,” James does say that his God “may conceivably have almost nothing outside of himself... but that fraction” which lays outside of him “reduces him to the status of a relative being.”⁹⁰ But it is not so clear that James actually endorses this version. In the final lecture of *Universe*, James does say that humans are “internal parts of God and not external creations.”⁹¹ And this is no doubt consistent with the claim made in “The Types of Philosophical Thinking” that human and divine substance are to be identified. But this is also consistent with thinking that there are some things with which the divine substance is not identified.

Of course, James does describe his view as a pluralistic monism, he does mention panpsychism in *Universe*, and he does develop a theory of “pure experience” in the posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* volume, particularly in the opening essay “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” So, there is reason to think he advocates for a version of panpsychist monism and it is tempting to imagine James’s God as this very substance. But on my view, to attribute this position to James is to risk sliding too far into the absolute monism James endeavored to resist. For James, the unity of things, that which makes our “multiverse” a “universe,” is found in the fact that “every part... is... in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion”⁹² It is not, therefore, to be found in a unifying substance all things share. For James, everything that exists may have mental aspects, or be constituted by combinations of protomental substances, but James’s finite God is not to be identified with protomental substance in general or in total. James’s God rather is a unifying substance amongst protomental substance in general. This permits forms of unification and identification, such as the one James posits between human and divine substance, within the world, without construing the world itself as a unifying substance. As Cooper succinctly puts it, for James, “God is a pattern of good purpose *in* the world of primal stuff.”⁹³

So, James’s God is literally bigger than a Beetle, but it is not quite clear that it asymptotically approaches pantheism. It is, however, clear from Lecture 20 of *Varieties* that James imagines God as a spiritual “more” one can enter communion with and draw strength from.⁹⁴ In fact, Lecture Five of *Universe*, “The Compounding of Consciousness,” is an explicit retraction of James’s earlier commitment to the “logic of identity,”

85 Ibid., 19.

86 Ibid.

87 Frederic I. Carpenter, “Points of Comparison between Emerson and James,” *The New England Quarterly* 2, no.3 (1929): 459.

88 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 20.

89 Jared S. Moore, “The Religious Significance of the Philosophy of William James,” *The Sewanee Review* 21, no. 1 (1913): 48.

90 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 61.

91 Ibid., 143.

92 Ibid., 146.

93 Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought* (Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2002): 32, my emphasis in italics.

94 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1985): 401.

which denied the possibility of such a communion.⁹⁵ But irrespective of how much of the universe God can enter communion with, James is clear that he imagines God to be finite in power and strength. In the final lecture in *A Pluralistic Universe*, for instance, James says that the “line of least resistance . . . is to accept . . . that there is a God” and “that he is finite, either in power or knowledge, or in both at once.”⁹⁶ Notably, this leaves open the possibility that God possesses the greatest possible goodness.⁹⁷ For James, a God finite in power and knowledge, but with infinite goodness is a God with, at the very least, a potential excuse for suffering.

In this way, James’s solution to the evidential problem of suffering is not so much a solution as it is a circumvention.⁹⁸ To avoid the conclusion that God does not exist, James rejects the premise that God is a perfect being possessing the greatest possible power, knowledge, and goodness. This permits James to accept the premise that such a being would not create a world which contained suffering and the premise that our world contains suffering. But, for James, the problem now becomes one of worthiness and how evil, or suffering, can be overcome.

It is here that we meet James’s practical problem of suffering. In “Hegel and his method,” James says the question now is not “why evil should exist at all, but how we can lessen the actual amount of it.”⁹⁹ In Lectures Six and Seven of *Varieties*, on “The Sick Soul,” James suggests that the universe may be “composed of many original principles.”¹⁰⁰ In this case, James says “God is not responsible for the existence of evil” but only responsible for evil if it is not “overcome.”¹⁰¹ This, of course, leaves the origin of evil mysterious, perhaps as mysterious an issue as the fall is for scholastic theists and pantheists alike. The advantage of James’s view is thus not in the total vanquishing of mystery, but in the remedying of a burdensome logical tension and in the circumvention of the moral problems created by theodicy.

In James’s *Pragmatism* volume, he foreshadows the account of spiritualism in *Universe* as “the affirmation of an eternal moral order.”¹⁰² As described earlier, James contends that it is possible to navigate between the extremes of pessimism, defined as the view that “the salvation of the world” is “impossible,” and optimism, defined as “the doctrine that thinks the world’s salvation inevitable.”¹⁰³ The middle-approach is “meliorism,” which maintains that “some conditions of the world’s salvation are actually extant” and that the world’s salvation is thus a real “possibility.”¹⁰⁴ In the Postscript to *Varieties*, James imagines an absolutist’s response to this suggestion. James says, “upholders of the monistic view . . . will say that unless there be one all-inclusive God, our guarantee of security is left imperfect.”¹⁰⁵ But James dismisses such an objection. “For practical life,” he says, “the chance of salvation is enough.”¹⁰⁶ Besides, James argues, “monotheism, so far as it was religious and not a scheme of class-room instruction . . . has always viewed God as but one helper . . . in the midst of all the shapers of the great world’s fate.”¹⁰⁷ And, as demonstrated earlier, it is this view that best accommodates the “face-value” of our experience of our participation in the world’s salvation, experiences which suggest that they are “the actual turning-places and growing-places . . . of the world.”¹⁰⁸

Thus, the practical problem of suffering is the problem of endeavoring to eradicate evil from the world. The world, for James, is a place of “real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through.” The question now is “Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough

95 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 93–4.

96 *Ibid.*, 141.

97 It seems James would agree with McCloskey’s contention that God may be finite in power and knowledge, but God must possess perfect goodness (McCloskey, *God and Evil*).

98 As Cooper puts it, James “accepts the limits imposed by the problem of evil rather than purporting to explain [them] away” (Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought*, 151).

99 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 60.

100 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 112.

101 *Ibid.*

102 James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, 55.

103 *Ibid.*, 137.

104 *Ibid.*

105 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 413.

106 *Ibid.*, 414.

107 James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, 143.

108 *Ibid.*, 138.

to face the risk?¹⁰⁹ The solution to the problem of evil is no longer out there in the metaphysical flux because the problem is no longer how to reconcile a perfect being with the existence of suffering. We need not search for the errors of our perception, as the absolute monists do. The solution to the problem of evil now lies within God because the problem is now between us and the metaphysical flux. We need to search for strength to overcome suffering and God is the spiritual more waiting to answer our call, eager to realize the prospect of redemption.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James describes two basic characters: the healthy-minded person and the sick soul. The healthy-minded person, James tells us, is a person for whom “happiness is congenital and irreclaimable” such that “when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them” they “positively refuse to feel it.”¹¹⁰ This is a person for whom the “tendency to see things optimistically is like a water of crystallization in which the person’s character is set.”¹¹¹ The sick soul, by contrast, is a person who “cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil,” but is “congenitally fated to suffer from its presence.”¹¹² Ultimately, James concludes that “healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality.”¹¹³ For James, healthy-mindedness is the frame of mind which gives expression to theodicy, and it thus suffers from all of the problems described in this article. But then this means that it is better to have a sick soul, to perceive and feel the suffering in the universe. This much is needed if we are to defeat suffering, but it is not all that is needed. The sick soul is prone to melancholia. To defeat suffering in the world, the sick soul must draw strength from the spiritual “more.”¹¹⁴ Thus, James says the “completest religions . . . are essentially religions of deliverance.”¹¹⁵

Of course, for James, we need God as much as God needs us. Our communion with God draws attention to the spiritual universe and unseen order of which the “physical” universe is just a part. As Proudfoot says, this is an “objective” order “in that it is an order that is, in part, not ourselves.”¹¹⁶ But it is also a constructed order. It depends on the culture and activity of humans. So, while James’s God in a real sense antedates human beings, the power to truly redeem the world does not. In this sense, “any higher powers working to save the world . . . must be understood as emergent social products of the beliefs and desires and actions of men and women.”¹¹⁷ God is part construction, but for James, constructs can be just as real as that which antedates our activity, and in some cases, even more powerful.

This may not seem like a God worth believing in, but for James the proof is always in the pudding, in the fruits of the conception. James’s finite God is neither the God of scholastic theism nor the all-pervasive One of pantheism. But James’s finite God is a model not defeated by the evidential problem of suffering and free from the moral hang-ups of absolute monism. It is worthy of worship because it is still the most powerful force in the universe.¹¹⁸ Whereas absolute monism licenses moral holidays and “takes our head out of the game,” James’s God spurs us into the fight, and is the game’s best player.¹¹⁹ James’s God is the proverbial difference-maker. James thus possesses an answer to the complaint that his God is not

109 Ibid., 139.

110 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 72.

111 Ibid., 109.

112 Ibid., 114.

113 Ibid., 136.

114 Ibid., 403.

115 Ibid., 138. 115 Gale says that “the insufficiency of meliorism and the healthy-minded outlook” is a theme of *Varieties*, that salvation is not found in “the morally strenuous life, but . . . in . . . absorption into . . . spiritual reality” (Gale, *The Divided Self of William James*, 17). But meliorism is the live option for the sick soul, whose very sickness implies the need for deliverance and the absence of guarantee. The spiritual more can deliver the sick soul from melancholia, but salvation from evil requires the strength of agents drawing on God to sustain the strenuous life.

116 Wayne Proudfoot, “William James on an Unseen Order,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 93, no.1 (2000): 61.

117 Proudfoot, “William James”, 64.

118 In “Reflex Action and Theism, James stresses the view that “God be conceived as the deepest power in the universe” and “under the form of a mental personality” (James, *The Will to Believe*, 97).

119 As Sprigge says James’s God is “the great cosmic fighter for goodness whose cause we can genuinely help or hinder” (Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, 197).

one worth believing in or worshipping. We should believe in and worship James's God because when we do so, we save the world, and ourselves.

V. CONCLUSION

If the preceding is correct, Jamesian finite theism circumvents the logical, evidential, and moral problems of suffering while embracing what I have called the practical problem. This is a welcome result, but many may yet wonder whether the price James pays to accomplish these feats is too high. One concern is that James has not given a defense of monotheism at all, but has relapsed into a polytheism. This is an issue James himself seems to have waffled on. In “The Sick Soul” lecture in *Varieties*, James, as I mentioned last section, imagines that the universe is “composed of many original principles.”¹²⁰ This is, as Hall notes, a “metaphysical ‘pluralism of principles’” as opposed to “a theistic pluralism of divine persons.”¹²¹ However, in the Postscript to *Varieties*, James does seem to entertain a more straightforward polytheism. As Funkenstein observes, there “James says . . . that one need not imagine (the) divine domain . . . as necessarily one in number.”¹²² “All that the facts (of religious experience) require,” James says, “is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves . . . It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary.”¹²³ This conception is reinforced in Lecture Four of *A Pluralistic Universe*, “Concerning Fechner,” where James defends something like the Gaia hypothesis. And in the final lecture of *Universe*, James explicitly says that “Fechner with his distinct earth-soul functioning as our guardian angel, seems to me clearly polytheistic; but the world ‘polytheism’ gives offence, so perhaps it is better not to use it.”¹²⁴

As I see it, there are several ways to define polytheism and whether James defends a version of polytheism depends on which definition we emphasize. One way to define polytheism is as any metaphysical scheme which posits a plurality of divine persons. If James endorses Fechner's metaphysical vision, as opposed to merely entertaining it, then, on this definition, James is a clear polytheist. Another way to define polytheism is as any metaphysical scheme which posits a plurality of divine persons with more or less incommensurable capacities. On this view, a metaphysical scheme might posit a plurality of divine persons, but so long as one of these persons has coercive or persuasive power over the others, it need not count as polytheistic. James clearly holds to a view of a God finite in knowledge and power, but this is not to say that James's finite God is not the most knowledgeable and most powerful being in James's pluralistic universe. If that's the case, then, James's finite God will possess coercive or persuasive power over other divine beings, and so, on this definition, fail to count as a form of polytheism. A third definition of polytheism is functional. On this view, a metaphysical scheme is polytheistic if it posits a plurality of divine persons and this plurality, or some subset of this plurality, shares the axiological, eschatological, and soteriological roles posited by the scheme. If James endorses Fechner's vision, then, on this view, James counts as a polytheist only if divine entities, such as Fechner's earth-soul, play a part in our salvation and redemption.

Now, James would question whether anything is at stake in this matter at all. In his later, more philosophical period, he is quite consistent in claiming that many religious persons are more polytheistic in their commitments than philosophers have let on. In “The Sick Soul,” James says that “popular or practical theism . . . has ever been more or less frankly pluralistic, not to say polytheistic.”¹²⁵ And in the Postscript to *Varieties*, James says that “polytheism . . . has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still today.”¹²⁶ This sentiment is echoed in “Hegel and his method,” where James claims that the

120 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 112.

121 Richard A.S. Hall, “The Polytheism of William James,” *The Pluralist* 4, no. 1 (2009): 24.

122 Amos Funkenstein, “The Polytheism of William James,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 1 (1994): 104.

123 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 338.

124 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 140.

125 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 112.

126 *Ibid.*, 413.

“God of our popular Christianity is but one member of a pluralistic system. He and we stand outside of each other, just as the devil, the saints, and the angels stand outside of both of us.”¹²⁷

James, of course, is no clear advocate of popular Christianity and so these remarks should not be taken as clear-cut evidence that James endorses polytheism, although they certainly pass as evidence that James entertained it. The important point, for James, is that should we lose confidence in our capacity to defend a strong monotheistic conception of God, most believers will have lost nothing at all. The complementary point I want to emphasize is that, logically speaking, there is nothing to prevent contemporary philosophers from advocating for a metaphysical scheme consisting of a finite God and a plurality of metaphysical principles. Such a scheme would circumvent the many problems of suffering discussed in the previous sections and yet not amount to polytheism.¹²⁸

Another option might be to adopt a panentheistic model of God, a view James never entirely distinguished from pantheism. To adopt a Jamesian panentheism, one would need to show that panentheism is consistent with finite theism and does not need the resources of theodicy.¹²⁹ At times, James seems resistant to this model. In “Hegel and his method,” for example, James says “‘God’ ... is the name not of the whole of things ... but only of the ideal tendency in things.”¹³⁰ Here, we see James grant the possibility that the universe is becoming more complete while denying that God should be identified with the world or the totality of all that is. Still, there are places where James expresses some sympathy with either the pantheistic view, the panentheistic view, or both. For example, in the title essay of *The Will to Believe*, James says that on the theistic view the “universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*.”¹³¹

Of course, one central problem for James with respect to pantheism is that it denies his unflinching commitment to the idea that cognition requires an environment. One wonders whether the notion of God that Hartshorne & Reese see in Plato’s *Timaeus* would have given James reason to consider panentheism.¹³² That God is a “world soul” and possesses an internal, rather than external, environment. It is hard to say whether this would have satisfied James’s demand.¹³³ I see little reason to think it does not. Of course, to satisfy James, any form of theism needs more than sheer coherence of conception.¹³⁴ For James, the true test of a philosophy was whether it contained descriptions “thick” enough to capture and guide us through everyday life.¹³⁵ Any philosophy which relies on thin abstractions that only faintly capture the details of everyday life is sure to insufficiently guide us through it and thus to be discarded. Chief among these important details is the endurance of mystery. Though it is better to vanquish mystery, it is unrealistic to expect complete victory. Any philosophy pretending to be free of mystery would not only

127 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 54.

128 James, the pragmatist, might even endorse this move. One can imagine James saying to contemporary thinkers wrestling to reconcile his polytheistic and monotheistic tendencies, “It is not what I have said, or even what I believe, that matters as much as what you can do with me.”

129 Or, alternatively, one might try to demonstrate that panentheistic theodicy does not involve the difficulties James raises for scholastic and pantheistic theodicy. David Ray Griffin’s process theodicy, for instance, recognizes the reality of possibility James thinks scholastic and pantheistic theodicy deny, and James would welcome this, to be sure (see: David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil* (Univ. Press of America, 1991)). But whether that theodicy pays sufficient moral attention to the suffering of individuals is a topic I cannot entirely explore here, although I suspect James would see an improvement, but not a victory.

130 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 60.

131 James, *The Will to Believe*, 27.

132 Charles Hartshorne and William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Humanity Books, 2000), 55.

133 Cooper suggests that James is a pantheist “in the sense that the world is God” and “each part of God is God” just as “each part of my body is me” (Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought*, 148). I disagree with this characterization for the reasons I have given above. James’s God is only a “world soul” if the “world soul” is a part of the world. The question I am asking here is whether James could accept the view that the world soul subsumes the world. On my view, the case against absolute monism suggests he would reject any identification. What I think Cooper meant to draw attention to here is the identification between human and divine substance James posits, and that, as I have explained, is correct.

134 In “Hegel and his method,” James says “rationality has at least four dimensions, intellectual, aesthetical, moral, and practical; and to find a world rational to the maximal degree in all these respects simultaneously is no easy matter” (James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 55).

135 This view is most evident in the final lecture of *Universe* where James claims “it is high time for the basis of discussion ... to be broadened and thickened up” (James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 149).

vastly overstate the potential of human understanding, it would vastly distort the realities of everyday life. Some subjects, such as the exact nature of God and the precise origin of evil, are subjects we only foolishly try to completely illuminate. All problems are not destined to be solved, at least not intellectually. Some problems are meant to be wrestled with. This, to my mind, is one of the great contributions of Jamesian theism. Philosophize, sure! But be just as sure to fight!¹³⁶

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