**Suffering as Divine Punishment**

**Abstract**

This article presents a theodicy based on a revision of the popular concept of God’s benevolence. If we follow the Protestant tradition by assuming that God is the exclusive source of virtue, the benevolence of God has to be radically different from the benevolence of a human being. A benevolent and almighty God who wishes to reward virtue and punish evil would design the world order similar to that in the allegory of the long spoons. Divine punishment is unforgiving, merciless, individually non-retributive, holistically retributive, and quantitatively unpredictable. All sufferings are divine punishment. Several popular arguments from evil, including animal suffering, victims of evil deeds, natural disasters, and children’s diseases, can be resolved within this framework.

# Introduction

Philosophers of religion generally agree that the difficulty about the problem of evil is evidential rather than logical (Howard-Snyder 2008). There exist widely-acknowledged refutations of the logical incompatibility between the existence of evil and the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God, such as the free will defense (Plantinga 1974) and the ‘greater good’ argument (Geach 1977; Swinburne 1988). However, refutation of the incompatibility formulation only assures the logical possibility of the existence of God while providing no ground for reasonable faith (Khatchadourian 1966). In probabilistic terms, it only establishes $Prob\left(evil exists\right)>0$ without showing $Prob\left(evil exists\right)>ε$, where $ε >0$ is some threshold probability for reasonable faith. To refute the evidential problem of evil, it is also necessary to reconcile the evidential distribution of evil with the existence of God (Fitzpatrick 1981: 24):

Granted that there is no contradiction between the existence of God and the presence of evil as such, is there not a contradiction involved in accepting both God's existence and the existence of the particular kinds, degrees and multiplicities of evils which are present in the world? Is not, for example, the amount of apparently pointless suffering which takes place totally inexplicable on the supposition that an omnipotent and perfectly good God exists?

Notable evidential problems of evil include animal suffering, victims of evil deeds (Rowe 1991), natural evil (Boër 1978), and children’s diseases (Conway 1988). Many attempts have been made to resolve them (Plantinga 1974; Hasker 1992; Swinburne 1998; van Inwagen 2008), but how much they have succeeded remains contested (Tooley 1980; Chrzan 1994; Draper 2001; Rowe 2008).

The holism thesis (Quine 1951) shows that whenever a theory is confronted by evidence, it is not just the theory itself that is put to test, but also an interconnected web of implicit beliefs and assumptions. Regarding the hypothesis of theism, namely there exists an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God, there are many implicit beliefs that are often taken for granted in the argument from evil. One such belief is the definition of benevolence.

Both the proponents and opponents of theism seem to equate the benevolence of God with that of an infinitely powerful and knowledgeable ‘good guy’, and impose the desirable traits of the latter on God. For example, a benevolent human should be tolerant, retributive, compassionate, and predictable—he cannot punish those refusing to follow his will with poverty, illness, or even death, make an evil person live more happily than a virtuous one, leave new-born babies to die of agonizing diseases, or punish petty extravagance with utter decimation and reward little diligence with immense prosperity. It is then declared that a benevolent God should also be tolerant,[[1]](#footnote-2) retributive, compassionate, and predictable, and that the world, which is the jurisdiction of God, should show none of the above anomalies.

Is this humanist concept of benevolence generalizable to God? Recall that God is more than a morally perfect, infinitely powerful, and infinitely knowledgeable human being. It is a unique transcendental entity who is also typically recognized as the creator of the universe, the first cause, the primal mover, the source of knowledge, the source of virtue, an object of faith (bearer of meaning of life), etc. Could any of these attributes render the conventional definition of benevolence inapplicable?

This article argues that if we follow the Protestant tradition by assuming that God is the exclusive source of virtue, the benevolence of God has to be radically different from the benevolence of a human being. Under this assumption, the will of conscious beings is pure evil. The only way for conscious beings to be virtuous is to kill self-will and follow the will of God. It is then shown if God has the power and will to reward virtue and punish evil, it will (1) be intolerant and merciless towards the unfaithful, (2) punish the virtuous and reward the evil individually (the virtuous is punished for the sins of the evil, not for their own virtue, as will be elaborated in Section 3), (3) reward virtue and punish evil holistically, (4) be quantitatively unpredictable with its reward and punishment. This establishes all sufferings as divine punishment for moral evil, and shows that the evidential distribution of suffering is consistent with the existence of an omnibenevolent God. In what follows, Section 2 articulates the assumptions on human/animal will, God’s will, and the meaning of God’s benevolence, Section 3 discusses the law of reward and punishment of an almighty and benevolent God, Section 4 revisits the meaning of God’s benevolence, Section 5 addresses several popular evidential arguments from evil, and Section 6 concludes.

# Decoupling Human Will and God’s Will

The sections make three assumptions to formalize the idea that God is the exclusive source of virtue and wants to reward virtue and punish evil. It aims to adhere to the conventional account of the nature of God and its relationship with humankind as closely as possible. Of course, some discretion is necessary, as under the umbrella of Abrahamic religions are many religious denominations which hold distinct and often contradicting accounts of God. The assumptions to be presented will resemble the Protestant account more than the others. These assumptions are stated in the following three statements.

## Total Depravity of Human Will

Statement 1 (The Total Depravity of Human/Animal Will)

 Individual conscious beings, including animals and humans, naturally seek pleasure and power (power is understood as the ability to acquire life-sustaining resources) for themselves. God considers this pure evil.

Statement 1 posits that human will (which will be used interchangeably with animal will from this point onward) strictly conflicts with God’s will. From God’s perspective, human nature is totally depraved, without any redeeming quality whatsoever. This is a core doctrine of Protestant theology. ‘Man cannot claim a single particle of righteousness to himself, without at the same time detracting from the glory of divine righteousness’ (Calvin 2008: 499). ‘The flesh seeks pleasure and peace, the world seeks riches, favor, power, and honor, the evil spirit seeks pride, glory, that a man be well thought of and other men be despised’ (Luther 2017: 61). ‘We have a frenzied desire, an infinite eagerness, to pursue wealth and honor, intrigue for power, accumulate riches, and collect all those frivolities which seem conducive to luxury and splendor’ (Calvin 2008: 454).

By ‘naturally seek pleasure and power,’ we mean that conscious beings always seek pleasure and power out of their own will without the guidance of God, not that conscious beings are created by a ‘nature’ beyond God’s jurisdiction. God intentionally ‘strips man of righteousness’ and ‘sound intelligence’ (Calvin 2008: 179). That God created conscious beings to be totally corrupted does not counter the omnibenevolence and omnipotence of God. As will be shown in the following subsection, this is purely intentional and indispensable for God’s plan.

## The Will of God

Statement 2 (The Will of God)

God wants conscious beings to renounce their will to pleasure and power, which God considers pure good.

Statement 2 posits the strict complementarity between human will and God’s will, meaning that the self-denial of human will is equivalent to the fulfillment of God’s will. This doctrine was first proposed by a group of Song dynasty (AD 960-1279) Confucian scholars, notably Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi.[[2]](#footnote-3) It maintains a strict complementarity between the desires of human (人欲) and the law or way of Heaven (天理) in humans’ meaning of life. ‘[The meaning of life of] a human only has Heavenly law and human desires; if one advances, the other recedes, and vice versa’ (朱熹 1270: 二二四). ‘If one completely extinguishes their human desires, they achieve the way of Heaven’ (程颐程颢 2000: 369). In Protestantism, this is the doctrine of self-denial: ‘the sum of the Christian life is denial of ourselves’ (Calvin 2008: 995). Human ‘has no free will, but is a captive, slave, and servant, either to the will of God or to the will of Satan’ (Luther 2011: 24); ‘man, abandoning his own will, devote himself entirely to the service of God’ (Calvin 2008: 448).

The implication of Statement 2 is that evil from God’s perspective, which is the desire for pleasure and power, differs from evil from an individual human’s perspective, which is pain and suffering. The creation of totally depraved conscious beings does not counter the benevolence of God because good is defined by if they choose to renounce their natural will to evil. It is logically impossible for humans to be good if they are not born evil: ‘we cannot be God’s children unless first we are the Devil’s children’ (by Martin Luther, cited in Bainton 2014: 218).

A crucial point here is that God considers the desire for pleasure and power evil, and the renouncement of the desire for pleasure and power good. God differentiates good and evil by motives, not by actions or consequences; there are no functional rules of good and evil. The actual possession of pleasure or power, or engaging in actions that lead to such outcomes, is not necessarily evil. Conversely, the actual experience of pain and suffering, or engaging in actions that lead to such outcomes, is not necessarily good. This is Luther and Calvin’s doctrine of justification by faith and not works (Luther 2017: 33; Calvin 2008: 473): ‘we are not bound before God to any observance of external things which are in themselves indifferent but we are now at full liberty either to use or omit them’ (Calvin 2008: 552). For example, the desire for money for power or pleasure is evil, but the possession of money and wealth accumulation are not evil, which is the essence of what Weber calls the Protestant capitalistic spirit.[[3]](#footnote-4)

## The Intention of God

Statement 3 (Benevolence of God)

God wants the virtuous to prosper and multiply. That is, God will reward the virtuous with pleasure and power and punish the evil with less pleasure and power.

What fate does God intend for the conscious beings in the universe it created? Statement 3 posits that God desires the virtuous to triumph over the evil, populate the universe, and live happily and abundantly. Moreover, God is not a passive observer but an active ruler. God does not leave the material world to be after the creation, as claimed by deism, but actively intervenes in earthly affairs to ensure the course of history aligns with its intention. This position also agrees with Protestant theology:

It were cold and lifeless to represent God as a momentary Creator, who completed his work once and for all, and then left it. Hence, especially, we must dissent from the profane, and maintain that the presence of the divine power is conspicuous, not less in the perpetual condition of the world than in its first creation. (Calvin 2008: 114)

Statements 1-3 are metaphysical assumptions that can be challenged in various ways. A sociobiologist may declare that humans live exclusively for survival, and all self-denial actions are ultimately due to reciprocity, thereby rejecting Statement 1. An advocate of good works may claim that faith alone are not enough to please God and must be accompanied by certain functional actions, thereby rejecting Statement 2. A hedonist may identify pleasure as the only end of human life, thereby denouncing a God punishing pleasure-seeking as evil. At this level of abstraction, all beliefs are epistemologically valid as long as there are no internal logical contradictions, so no meaningful discussions about Statements 1-3 can be furthered for now (this is not to immunize Statement 1-3 against critiques, as will be elaborated in Section 3.3). It is now necessary to show the logical implications of these assumptions for the argument from evil.

# The Law of Divine Punishment

With the separation of human/animal will and God’s will, the problem of evil is reduced to the problem of suffering alone, as moral evil is a matter of free choice of conscious beings. From now on, good and evil will always refer to moral good and evil. Assuming that Statements 1-3 are true, how would God want virtue to be rewarded and evil to be punished, if God is also almighty? The answer is far from obvious, because there is an inherent tension between Statements 1-2 and Statement 3. Statements 1-2 say that God designs the world to be a trial for each individual conscious being: choose between follow their self-will to pleasure and power, or follow God’s will and renounce their desire for pleasure and power. Statement 3 says that God is pleased with conscious beings choosing to renounce their will to pleasure and power, and wants to reward them with pleasure and power for doing so.

Therefore, God cannot design the world to simply deprive the virtuous of pleasure and power entirely, because it would violate Statement 3. However, God also cannot grant the virtuous more pleasure and power individually, as it renders self-denial a mere gesture without the actual need to sacrifice, thereby nullifying the trial in Statements 1-2 and depriving humans of the possibility of genuine faith. To ensure that virtue and evil are genuine, God has to ensure the individual pain and suffering of the virtuous and the individual pleasure and power of the evil.

## Allegory of the Long Spoons

Since the reward for virtue and punishment for evil are ruled out at the individual level, they must be delivered collectively and to other individuals. Therefore, Statements 1-3 imply that an almighty God would design the world in a way such that

1. by being virtuous, an individual will, in expectation, deprive himself of pleasure or power while, with certainty, bringing other people more pleasure and power than he deprives of himself; conversely, by being evil, an individual will, in expectation, bring himself pleasure or power while, with certainty depriving other people of more pleasure and power than he brings himself. Moreover, the more virtuous he is, the more expected pleasure or power he will deprive of himself; the more evil he is, the more expected pleasure or power he will bring himself.

A human is not omniscient, so he faces uncertainty when making decisions. The ‘expectation’ is conditional on all the information available to him at the time of his moral choice. A man who killed someone out of his own power thirst may end up getting caught by the police and losing power. However, this does not contradict the possibility that, at the time of his decision to kill, he was correct in expecting the profit of killing to outweigh the risk. Meanwhile, God is omniscient, and, upon observing his moral decision, decides on the corresponding reward or punishment, which will be delivered with certainty.

This idea that individual good and social good can be mutually exclusive was already present in the Allegory of the Long Spoons (ALS) by Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, and has been extensively studied in modern game theory in the name of the prisoner’s dilemma or the tragedy of the commons (Kuhn 2019). Here an illustration of a modified version of ALS is presented.

Example 1 (Modified Allegory of the Long Spoons)

Two persons at a dinner table are each given a long spoon, which is the only tool they can use to eat the food on the table. It is easy to feed the other person but difficult to feed oneself with the long spoon. Both persons have to choose to feed themselves or the other person at the beginning of the dinner, and the decision is irreversible. A person’s choice results in the following payoff for himself and the other person.

* If he chooses to feed himself, the payoff is 1 for himself and 0 for the other.
* If he chooses to feed the other, the payoff is 0 for himself and 3 for the other.
* The payoff is additive.

The payoff matrix of the modified ALS is shown in Table 1. The modification compared with the original ALS is that feeding oneself yields positive payoff instead of nothing.

Table 1: Payoff Matrix for the Modified Allegory of the Long Spoons

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Person 2Person1 | Feed person 1 | Feed himself |
| Feed person 2 | (3,3) | (0,4) |
| Feed himself | (4,0) | (1,1) |

Although both persons feeding the other is the socially desirable outcome, it is in neither person’s personal interest to do so. From the perspective of person 1, he gets 3 for feeding person 2 and 4 for feeding himself if person 2 chooses to feed person 1; he gets 0 for feeding person 2 and 1 for feeding himself if person 2 chooses to feed himself. In either case, person 1 is strictly better off feeding himself, which is called a dominant strategy in game theory. The same goes for person 2. In ALS, if we consider feeding the other the virtuous choice and feeding oneself the evil choice, virtue is punished individually but rewarded collectively, and evil is rewarded individually but punished collectively.

## World as an Altar

To implement the order in Statement a), God would design the entire world as an ALS dinner table, around which sit all conscious beings from the past, the present, and the future. The game theory literature (Axelrod 1984) shows that, with repeated interactions, symmetric information, and perfect record keeping, the conflict between individual and social interests in ALS can be undone through reciprocity. Therefore, God would like to prevent conscious beings from understanding the precise consequences of their choice between good and evil to prevent reciprocity. They may know that their virtue will lead to reward and evil punishment for other beings at uncertain times in the future,[[4]](#footnote-5) but they are prohibited from knowing exactly what the reward and punishment will be, to whom they will be delivered, and at what time. Moreover, individuals are prohibited from being able to verify the morality of others directly.[[5]](#footnote-6) Consequently, they can never be sufficiently compensated or punished individually through earthly arrangements and never rest content with ‘partial’ virtues.

Statement a) has implications for social evolution. Since the virtuous are collectively rewarded and the evil are collectively punished,

1. the more virtuous a society is, the more pleasure and power it is likely to acquire; the more evil a society is, the less pleasure and power it is likely to acquire. This uncertainty gradually disappears with increased size of the society and time span.

This statement is probabilistic because one society’s choice between good and evil can still affect other societies, although to a lesser degree. If several societies are perfectly isolated, the correlation between morality and prosperity should be exact in the long run.

1. For perfectly isolated societies, the more virtuous a society is, the more pleasure and power it will acquire; the more evil a society is, the less pleasure and power it will acquire.

## Statements a)-c) summarize God’s law of reward and punishment in the material world. They are more than logical constructions but also social laws with empirical predictions. Significantly, they challenge two core dogmas of modern social science: materialism and Darwinism. They contend that the fundamental determinant of social evolution is morality and that human society progresses by individuals sacrificing their pleasure and power rather than by individuals fighting each other for survival (power). The world is not a battlefield for individual struggle, but an altar where the sacrifices of the virtuous are collectively rewarded and the sacrileges of the evil collectively punished. A Mathematical Representation

We can formulate Statements a)-c) mathematically, which presents some of the ideas more clearly. However, the mathematical formulation should be viewed as a qualitative illustration rather than a quantitatively precise prediction. Let $m$ denote the morality of the agent, where a lower value indicates more evil. There is a cutoff value of $m$, without loss of generality normalized to 0, that divides good and evil. Let $w$ denote the pleasure or power of the agent, where a lower value indicates less pleasure or power. Omitting the mathematical technicalities, Statement a) can be formulated as follows:

1. for an individual $i$,

$0<E\left[w\_{i}|\_{m\_{i}}\right]<-w\_{\~i}|\_{m\_{i}}$, if $m\_{i}<0$

$-w\_{\~i}|\_{m\_{i}}<E\left[w\_{i}|\_{m\_{i}}\right]<0$, if $m\_{i}>0$

$$\frac{∂E[w\_{i}|\_{m\_{i}}]}{∂m\_{i}}<0;$$

1. for a society $s$,

$$\frac{∂E[w\_{i}|\_{m\_{i}}]}{∂m\_{i}}<\frac{∂E[w\_{s}|\_{m\_{s}}]}{∂m\_{s}}<\frac{∂w\_{h}|\_{m\_{h},t\rightarrow \infty }}{∂m\_{h}}$$

$$\frac{∂E[w\_{s}|\_{m\_{s}}]}{∂m\_{s}∂s}>0, \frac{∂E[w\_{s}|\_{m\_{s}}]}{∂m\_{s}∂t}>0; $$

1. for humankind, denoted as $h$,

$$\frac{∂w\_{h}|\_{m\_{h},t\rightarrow \infty }}{m\_{h}}>0.$$

## Epistemological Status of the Law of Divine Punishment

It is necessary to clarify the epistemological status of Statements a)-c), which describe the law of divine punishment. Firstly, they are a logical construction: starting with Statement 1-3, they are derived with logical deduction. Section 4 proceeds to examine further logical implications of Statement a)-c), and Section 5 shows that some evidential problems of evil are consistent with an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God under Statements a)-c). Therefore, part of the validity of this article’s theodicy lies on the soundness of the logical deduction in Section 3.

Meanwhile, Statements a)-c) are also presented as a social law, so another part of their validity rests upon their empirical performance in explaining human behavior social evolution. Due to their metaphysical nature, they can only serve as core beliefs rather than peripheral statements. To confront empirical evidence, they need to be complemented by a large set of auxiliary concepts, statements, and hypotheses (Zhang 2023: 18-19). Ultimately, the hope is to expand them into a full-fledged theist social science paradigm. This is a colossal, ongoing task that cannot be accomplished within one article.

The purpose of the above clarification is not to inflate the merit of this article by flaunting its sociological potential: it is written as a philosophical piece and should be judged so. Rather, the point is to address potential critiques based on ‘well-established’ social science beliefs. For example, one might be tempted to refute Statement a) by invoking the neoliberal doctrine ‘individuals acting in their self-interest further the general goals of society’ (Lazear 2000: 101) or refute Statement b) by claiming that it is a certain material factor rather than morality that determines the fate of large-scale societies (Marx 2010; North and Thomas 1973; Diamond 1997). These types of critiques are scientific critiques, and in this case, inter-paradigmatic scientific critiques, which can only be countered with a whole scientific paradigm. Since this article only presents the metaphysical core of a paradigm, it is naturally defenseless against such critiques. This is not an indication of its flaw but an intrinsic characteristic of the structure of science.[[6]](#footnote-7)

# The Benevolence of God Revisited

The previous Section derived, from Statements 1-3, God’s reward and punishment law a)-c). It is easily seen that the law of divine punishment differs radically from what can be expected from a powerful, knowledgeable, and benevolent human being.

First, God is intolerant and unforgiving. Abraham’s God is ‘jealous ‘and ‘vengeful’: ‘for the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God’ (Deut. 4:24 AV). No good will go unrewarded and no evil will go unpunished, although the reward and punishment always fall upon other people. No transgression of the evil will be forgiven without the sacrifice of the good.

Second, Statements a)-c) put no restrictions on the forms of divine punishment. God is merciless and will not hesitate to punish evil with all kinds of misfortunes, including disease, starvation, and death: ‘I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, and the burning ague, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart: and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it’ (Lev. 26:16 AV). If God sees enough wickedness, it will even ‘destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air’ (Gen. 6:7 AV).

Third, God’s reward and punishment are non-retributive individually. Conditional on their natural endowment, an individual receives less pleasure and power by choosing to be good, and receives more pleasure and power by choosing to be evil. This is why Job, ‘that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil’ (Job 1:8, AV), lost his wealth, family, material comforts, and even health. This is also why it makes sense to say ‘Jesus died for our sins.’

Fourth, God’s reward and punishment are retributive holistically. The reward for virtue and punishment for evil can be delivered to any conscious being at any time now or in the future. For a people following God’s will, God will grant them ‘great and goodly cities,’ ‘and houses full of all good things,’ ‘and wells digged,’ and ‘vineyards and olive trees’ (Deut. 6:10, 11 AV). For a people disobeying God’s will, God will destroy them ‘from off the face of the earth’ (Deut. 6:15 AV). The larger the size of the people and the longer the time span, the more likely this will hold true.

Lastly, God’s reward and punishment are quantitatively unpredictable. Minor virtue may lead to great reward and minor evil may incur great punishment. Humans can never be at peace, thinking they are faithful enough, but must always live in ‘fear and trembling’ (Kierkegaard 1986), ‘as if standing in front of an abyss, as if walking on thin ice’ (朱熹 1190: 一〇三). One person’s sacrifice can lead to the prosperity of millions, and one person’s sacrilege can lead to the destruction of millions. As in Genesis (22 AV), after Abraham was genuinely ready to sacrifice Isaac for God, God was pleased

16 And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

17 That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

18 And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

As Levenson (2014: 84) points out, ‘God’s amazing promise came as a kind of bolt out of the blue; there was nothing Abram had done to merit it.’ Such kind of quantitatively unpredictability is an indispensable property of God’s reward and punishment law.

The cited Biblical verses are not meant to supplement logical arguments with scriptural authority, as these properties of God logically follow from Statements 1-3. Rather, they serve as a reminder that what we consider moral intuition today is replete with implicit assumptions that are by no means infallible moral truths. After the ‘Secular Revolution’ during ca. 1870-1950, not only did God disappear from the public sphere (Smith 2003) and academic social studies (methodological atheism, c.f. Peter Berger 1967: 100), but also the perception of God underwent significant revisions among the religious community (Meador 2003). God is no longer perceived as the end of the universe, but rather a transcendental caretaker whose merit is judged by how well it serves human flourishing. ‘God’s purposes for us are confined to the encompassing of the common interest, and mutual happiness of his rational creatures’ (Taylor 2018: 222).

This humanist understanding of God’s benevolence contradicts the very core doctrines of Protestant theology. Since human nature is totally corrupted, they deserve no mercy if they refuse to follow God. ‘God owes nothing to man. His hatred against those who are corrupted by sin is the most just’ (Calvin 2008: 624). The world is an altar where each individual faces the following trial of God: ‘Will you follow my commandment, even if there is nothing for you to gain but pain, suffering, and even death?’ If one answers positively, God will be pleased, but the reward for the virtuous is delivered to other people to ensure the trial is genuine. Faith is a solemn object more weighty than ‘this peace and tranquility of the flesh’ that ‘it ought to be maintained and defended through death itself’ (Luther 2011: 17). The answer that ‘I will follow you, so you should reward me with pleasure and power, or at least prevent pain, suffering, and death from befalling me’ is self-idolatry that places oneself above God.

# Addressing Popular Evidential Arguments from Evil (Suffering)

With the clarifications in the previous section, Statements a)-c) can resolve several popular arguments from evil (suffering).

## Animal Suffering

The problem of animal suffering refers to the seemingly meaningless sufferings of animals. For example, a fawn undergoes ‘intense suffering over several days as a result of being severely burned in a forest fire started by lightning’ (Rowe 1991: 72). To address this problem, note that animals never renounce pleasure-seeking and power-seeking, so they are pure evil in the eyes of God. Pure evil deserves all kinds of divine punishment, such as hunger, disease, pain, and death. This resolves the classic argument from animal suffering.

The arguments used in this article raise a novel dual problem for animal suffering: how can we explain the relative prosperity of humankind compared to animals? Logically, the observation that humans are capable of genuine self-sacrifice is sufficient to resolve it. Animals have no effective means of understanding and mimicking human activities, so the development trajectories of their societies can be viewed as almost perfectly isolated from human societies. According to Statement c), all material factors that contribute to humankind’s pleasure and power, including language, technology, institutions, and the economy, can be explained as the divine reward for humans’ virtue.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Obviously, difficult empirical problems remain. Is the development of language evolutionarily disadvantageous for individual animals? Does the progress of science and technology require a spirit of sacrifice from the scientist, or does it align with the scientist’s individual glory? Do superior institutions need the support of morality or only reciprocity (social contract)? Was the Protestant ethic of self-denial (Weber 1905) a mere coincidence in the Industrial Revolution, or was it the cause of the latter? However, an answer to these questions is unnecessary for the philosophical augments of this article.

## Victims of Evil Deeds

Why does God punish the good rather than the evil when the latter commit evil deeds? For example, consider the actual case of a 5-year-old girl who was raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled by her mother's boyfriend (Rowe 1991: 72). This problem was already addressed in the argument for Statement a). God’s reward and punishment are non-retributive individually. The evil always inflict pain and suffering on other people rather than themselves. Only the sacrifices of the good can alleviate the punishment for evil.

While logically unnecessary for justifying the sufferings of the good, it is worth emphasizing that Statement a) by no means implies that the good should just submit to evil obediently. Defending against evil can be motivated by self-preservation as well as self-sacrifice. Therefore, protecting each other against evil is considered virtuous by God, and the good are obliged to do so. For example, in the little girl’s case, the tragedy might have been prevented had the mother or the law enforcement been more vigilant, or had there been better efforts of religious preaching. Of course, this is purely speculative, as the punishment of God is holistic, and accurate individual attribution is impossible.

There again remain nuanced empirical problems about the role of the sacrificial spirit in the protection against evil. For example, is an army more effective at protecting its people when the soldiers are motivated by self-preservation or self-sacrifice? Is a police force more efficient in combating crimes when the officers are motivated by career concerns or an altruistic sense of justice? Can a religion persuade more people from evil when its priests are motivated by wealth accumulation or divine calling? These are left for future inquiries.

## Natural Evil (Disasters) and Children’s Diseases

The arguments from natural disasters and children’s diseases are easily resolved once we recognize technologies and institutions as divine rewards. In the beginning, humans were no different from animals and were subject to the same caprices of natural disasters and diseases, which are divine punishment. Since humans chose to renounce pleasure-seeking and power-seeking and to follow God, they have been gradually rewarded with technologies and institutions that allow for better protection against natural disasters and diseases. However, humans are not morally perfect, so they are not granted complete protection.

One could argue that labeling certain natural disasters as divine punishment, such as the Turkey-Syria earthquake on February 6, 2023, is unreasonable, considering that some disasters appear to unavoidable. However, the notion of truly unavoidable disasters is questionable. The damage of an earthquake could be avoided if we could perfectly predict earthquakes or invent earthquake-proof buildings. Whether a natural disaster is avoidable depends on the existing human knowledge, which is determined by God based on the morality of humans. According to Statement c), the inability of humankind to perfectly predict earthquakes now might just be the divine punishment for the self-love of some scholars of the past or present.[[8]](#footnote-9)

# Summary

This article proposes a theodicy based on a redefinition of God’s omnibenevolence. It shows that if human/animal will strictly conflicts with and complements God’s will, an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God would design the world order similar to that in the allegory of the long spoons. All sufferings all divine punishment, which is unforgiving, merciless, individually non-retributive, holistically retributive, and quantitatively unpredictable. Several popular arguments from evil, including animal suffering, victims of evil deeds, natural disasters, and children’s diseases, can be resolved within this framework.

This theodicy is meant to be a prologue rather than a conclusion. Its central thesis, outlined in Statements a)-c), is presented as a philosophical proposition as well as a social science law. Therefore, its plausibility only grows if its power to explain human behavior and social evolution can be gradually demonstrated. Ultimately, the objective is to construct a theist social science scheme to show that ‘history was a theodicy in which progress was measured by an awareness of God’ (Perry 1989:101) and ‘all animals, but especially mankind, are proofs, evidences, and examples of the providence of God’ (Calvin 2008: 113); history cannot be explained by the interaction between humans, and between humans and nature, because it is also “the interaction of God and Man” (Lampert 1945:45). Regardless of whether such a project can succeed, it will be a long-term commitment that goes well beyond the scope of this article.

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1. For example, Gale (2008:215) claims: ‘the whole idea of a deity who is so vain that if his children do not choose to love and obey him he will bring down all sorts of horrible evils on them and their innocent descendants is horrendous. Think of what we would say about a human father who treated his children in this way.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In Confucianism, the counterpart to the Abrahamic concept of God is 天 (Heaven). In 尚書 (Book of Documents), one of the core Confucian scriptures, 天and 上帝 (the Supreme Lord) are used interchangeably (孔安国， 孔颖达 2008). In ancient China, the imperial decree starts with the phrase ‘奉天承运, 皇帝诏曰’ (According to the will of Heaven, the emperor decrees); the Chinese way of saying ‘Man proposes, God disposes’ is ‘尽人事, 听天命’. In Chinese Christian literature, God is translated into ‘上帝’ or ‘神’ (程小娟 2007), with the former because the more accurate because ‘神’ traditionally means spirit and demigod. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In fact, the summum bonum of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudæmonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. (Weber 1905: 15) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. They are allowed to know Statement a) because the knowledge of it will not change the conflict between individual and social interests. However, the ignorance of it does not deprive them of divine reward or exculpate them from divine punishment. Statements 1 and 2 made it clear that virtue is defined as the unconditional and voluntary sacrifice of individuals, in which the knowledge of the collective reward and punishment is inessential. For example, the Protestants in the sixteenth century did not read Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but God would reward their self-denial all the same. Today’s liberal humanists believe in the harmony between ‘enlightened’ self-interests and social progress, but God would punish their selfishness all the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. They can partially understand another individual’s morality indirectly by observing their actions through repeated interactions, but the cost is prohibitively high for institutional building. For example, a wife may have a good understanding of her husband’s morality through decades of interactions, but there are no effective ‘quick tests’ (e.g., inquisition) to differentiate between good and evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. To appreciate the difficulty of inter-paradigmatic scientific dialogues, see Kuhn (1977) and Feyerabend (1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Why and when did the paths of humans and animals diverge? The amount of text here cannot do justice to such a grand anthropological question. However, the challenge it poses to this article is less severe than it appears. The principle of quantitative unpredictability implies that small virtue may lead to great reward. In the beginning when humans and animals were both purely selfish creatures, it might be a very weak and vague urge of self-sacrifice of a small group of primitive humans that earned the favor of God. Afterward, this spirit of sacrifice, so long as it was preserved, led to a series of human development that categorically distinguished humans from animals. It is possible some primitive human groups reverted to animals after losing this spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Zhang (2022b) for an argument of how the will to individual success can cause scientists to be content with normal science within the existing paradigms without seeking scientific breakthroughs, thereby hindering scientific progress. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)