Inference to the Best Explanation and the Problem of Evil*

Jeff Johnson / Eastern Oregon State College

Atheists typically point to evil as proof of, or evidence for, the non-existence of God. What is the logical relationship between evil and atheism? In this paper I will suggest that the relation can be helpfully seen as an explanatory one: the hypothesis that an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being does not exist provides a good, though abbreviated, explanation for the widespread pain, suffering, misery, moral depravity, and general disorder we find in this world. Such a view of the problem of evil allows us to make sense of it as it occurs in everyday religious contexts. At a more theoretical level, the explanatory interpretation provides a way of plausibly reconstructing the arguments of many philosophical atheists. Before attempting a defense of this interpretation, it will be useful to begin with reasons for rejecting a competing theory of the relationship between evil and atheism.

THE DEDUCTIVE INTERPRETATION

The most common view of the link between evil and atheism, at least by atheists in the philosophical literature, is that the former provides deductive proof of the latter. Consider Hume's paraphrase of the Epicurean statement of the problem of evil: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"1 The last question has the form of a request for an explanation of evil. But it is clearly a disingenuous request, since the earlier questions and answers predetermine a single answer. For Hume, and for many others who have since addressed the same issue, the skeptical answer is the only one which is logically possible. Very similar reasoning is presented on the contemporary scene by J. L. Mackie:

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In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good, and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions, the theologian, it seems must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three. . . .

However, the contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good,' 'evil,' and 'omnipotent.' These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.  

Mackie's argument has received a great deal of critical analysis. It is worthwhile to review some of this familiar ground, both because the article constitutes the classic contemporary statement of the deductive argument from evil and, more importantly, because there is much to be learned about the overall deductive strategy by careful analysis of the reasoning.

A good place to begin is with a schematic representation of the deductive argument from evil:

1. An omnipotent being would always be able to eliminate evil completely.
2. A morally perfect being would always try to eliminate evil completely.
3. Hence, if God exists, there would be no evil.
4. But there is evil.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

The argument purports to deduce God's nonexistence from the contingent, but undeniable, fact that evil exists, along with a logical examination of the traditional Western concept of God. The heart of this argument is the first two premises and the meaning of the concepts of omnipotence and moral perfection. Mackie's "quasi-logical rules" focus on these divine attributes:

R₁: Good (moral perfection) is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
R₂: There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

If these rules are accepted, the deductive case against God easily follows. Unfortunately, both of the rules are problematic.

This is easiest to see in the case of R₂. Many critics have pointed out that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do: logical limits.

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Even a being with infinite power cannot create an even prime number greater than two, or predetermine the free choice of a free agent. Mackie himself seems willing to grant these logical limitations on God's power. His definition of 'omnipotence' in a later article makes this clear: "'God is omnipotent' means that God can do anything that is logically possible; . . . omnipotence includes the power to make X to be only where there is no contradiction either in X itself or in making X to be."3 Rule R₂ can easily be amended to incorporate this restriction on the concept of omnipotence:

\[ R₂^*: \text{There are no nonlogical limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.} \]

This change, though not directly affecting premise 1, is still quite important.

Rule R₁ is even more problematic. Given the most natural reading of the qualifying phrase, "as far as it can," as something like "as far as its power permits," the rule seems patently false. There are many instances where a good person knowingly allows, and often causes, pain and suffering. The person is still considered good because the evil-producing action is excused on the grounds that it was performed for the sake of some greater good. Consider Pike's example of such a case:

A parent forces a child to take a spoonful of bitter medicine. The parent thus brings about an instance of discomfort—suffering. The parent could have refrained from administering the medicine; and he knew the child would suffer discomfort if he did administer it. Yet, when we are assured that the parent acted in the interest of the child's health and happiness, the fact that he knowingly caused discomfort is not sufficient to remove the parent from the class of perfectly good beings. If the parent fails to fit into this class, it is not because he caused this instance of suffering.⁴

The parent has what Pike calls a "morally sufficient reason" for allowing this instance of evil. Rule R₁ is defective because it ignores the possibility of morally sufficient reasons. The amendment is obvious:

\[ R₁^*: \text{Good (moral perfection) is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates any evil it can which is not logically required for some greater good.} \]

This change has serious consequences for the deductive argument from evil. Rule R₁ provided good support for the second premise:

2. A morally perfect being would always try to eliminate evil completely.

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Clearly our discussion of morally sufficient reasons shows that this premise is overstated; a more modest formulation is required:

2. * A morally perfect being would always try to eliminate completely any evil which was not logically required for some greater good.

The problem for the atheist, of course, is that premises 1 and 2* no longer imply 3. The key subinference in the deductive argument from evil is unsound. This raises serious questions about the entire deductive strategy.

It is easy to fail to appreciate the full significance of the deductive argument from evil. Consider how the issue of atheism is often discussed. The atheist begins with a statement of the argument from evil. The theist acknowledges a problem and attempts a solution. The usual strategy is to produce some account of evil which includes the existence of God and implicitly excuses his failing to eliminate the evil. (These theistic explanations of evil are given the technical name "theodicies.") The atheist counters with a criticism of the proposed theodicy, arguing that it is false or at least widely implausible. The theist now responds with a defense of why the explanation is actually quite reasonable. And so the debate continues. Neither side seems to notice that, if the original argument was a version of the deductive argument from evil, the whole exchange is irrelevant. It makes no difference whether the theist's account of evil is plausible or implausible. It does not even matter whether it is true or false. The whole issue turns on the question of logical possibility. If the deductive argument from evil is sound, any proposed theodicy must be rejected as contradictory, not merely as implausible or false. Mackie's discussion of evil is one of the first to articulate this point clearly. The latter part of his article is an attempt to expose the logical impossibility of several of the traditional Christian theodicies. But, as we shall see, this is a heavy burden for the atheist to accept, since it suggests an obvious strategy for defending theism from the deductive argument from evil. Given the logic of the exchange, the theist need only produce a logically possible explanation of evil in order to defeat the atheist's argument.5 There is no need to worry about the truth or plausibility of the theodicy.

Let us return to the notion of a morally sufficient reason for evil. It is now easy to articulate a very general theodicy:

I. God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing some evil.

Such an account is somewhat unsatisfying, since it lacks specificity as to the nature of the morally sufficient reason. Still, this concern is dis-

5 This point is nicely articulated in E. H. Madden and P. H. Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968).
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tinct from the question of logical possibility. If statement I articulates a
general description of a logically possible state of affairs, this will
succeed equally as well as a detailed description in destroying the
deductive argument from evil. The only avenue open to the defender of
the deductive argument from evil is to argue that statement I is not
logically possible. The atheist would have to demonstrate the following:

II. ~◇ (God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing some evil.)

But this is logically equivalent to:

III. ◇~ (God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing some evil.)

If the atheist is to salvage the deductive argument from evil, some
plausible defense of III must be offered.

There seem to be two general strategies for supporting III. As
Nelson Pike has noted, the most common strategy seems to be a kind of
inductive procedure. Here individual theodicies are examined one by
one. In each case the atheist discovers what is taken to be a logical
oversight in the statement of the explanation of evil, which, when
exposed, shows that the account is not really logically possible. Such a
procedure, of course, assumes that the existing theodicies are all
actually contradictory, though perhaps subtly so. Needless to say,
many theists would disagree with this diagnosis. But this is not the
most serious problem with the strategy. Even if we assume that each of
the traditional Christian theodicies is logically impossible, this does not
seem to count at all toward the strong modal claim which is made in
III. The sort of inductive generalization which the atheist offers might
count as good reason for supposing that an omnipotent and morally
perfect being, in fact, does not have a morally sufficient reason for
allowing evil. But this kind of enumerative procedure in no way
justifies the claim that this is necessarily so. The atheist's deductive case
is crucially dependent not merely on God's having no morally sufficient
reason but on its being logically contradictory to suppose that he has.

The atheist might now offer some direct proof that the notion of an
omnipotent and morally perfect being having a morally sufficient rea-
son for evil is contradictory. Mackie's argument can be seen as one
such attempt. The problem is that such a proof must establish III
without tacitly assuming it at an earlier stage in the demonstration. As
we have seen, this is precisely the problem that Mackie's argument
encountered. Perhaps some new proof may one day be constructed. On
the other hand, perhaps such a proof is impossible. The point is that at
present we do not have such a proof. And, in its absence, the claim that

6 Pike.
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atheism follows deductively from evil is surely extravagant. Some other treatment of the logical relationship between evil and atheism is, at the very least, worthy of exploration.

INFECTION TO THE BEST EXPLANATION

There are many examples of inference making where evidence and conclusion stand in a particular relationship: the conclusion explains the evidence. I return home in the evening and discover that all of my electric clocks are ten minutes slow. I infer that there was an electrical outage sometime during the day which lasted ten minutes. The power failure hypothesis explains the data which is being offered as evidence. A random phone sample discloses that over 60 percent of those called think that the president will not balance the budget. I conclude that over 60 percent of the population at large agrees. Again, my thesis explains the data I take as evidence. You tell me it is raining outside. I conclude that you believe what you have said; this is an explanation of why you said it. I further conclude that it really is raining outside; this explains why you believe that it is. Based on the fact that the sample gains weight during combustion, the scientist concludes that a chemical substance (oxygen) combines with the sample during the reaction. The oxygen theory explains the laboratory results. The remarkable number of different contexts in which this sort of nondeductive reasoning takes place has led a number of philosophers to speculate that the explanatory relationship is basic to inductive (nondeductive) reasoning and that it can be generalized to form a reliable procedure for evidence evaluation.7

According to the theory of inference to the best explanation, a nondeductive inference counts as a good one (sound, reasonable, valid [?], etc.) just in case the conclusion to the argument provides the best explanation of the data which is used as, or contained in, the evidence. Thus, in the above arguments, it is not simply the fact that the conclusion explains the data, but that it explains it better than other possible theories. In each of the above inferences there are rival explanations of the evidence: my wife’s having reset the clocks explains the change in the time shown, a statistical fluke in the makeup of the sample explains

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the results of the poll, your playing a joke on me explains why you told me it was raining, and the laboratory sample's giving off phlogiston (with its negative weight) explains the results of the experiment. Inference to the best explanation depends on a comparative procedure: the original explanation is tested against other possible rival accounts of the data. If the original is judged the best, the inference is a sound one. If any one of the rivals is better than the original, the argument is unsound.

The obvious question at this juncture concerns the criteria for being the best explanation of the data. Is this a purely subjective judgment, or is there a mechanical procedure for comparing competing explanations? The correct answer, I believe, is a little of both. Consider Gilbert Harman’s thoughts on the criteria for being the best explanation: “There is, of course, a problem about how one is to judge that one hypothesis is sufficiently better than another hypothesis. Presumably such a judgment will be based on considerations such as which hypothesis is simpler, which is more plausible, which explains more, which is less ad hoc, and so forth.” Harman’s criteria constitute a kind of mental checklist for deciding on the best explanation. They seem to do an adequate job in the above simple inferences. We treated the hypothesis that over 60 percent of the population had doubts about a balanced budget to be a better explanation of our poll results than the explanation in terms of statistical fluke. Presumably this is because we thought that appeal to statistical fluke, in a sample we had already characterized as random, was an ad hoc attempt to deny the original explanation. It is, of course, a possible explanation; we all know that there are statistical flukes. Still, in the absence of further evidence, such an appeal seems arbitrary and artificial. The account of the reset clocks suffers from two deficiencies. It is not as simple an account of the data since it introduces another entity (my wife) into our theory of what happened. This may not be a serious problem, however, since it may be part of our shared background knowledge that I have a wife. A more troublesome problem is why the clocks are slow. The original power outage account explains both why the time shown has changed and why it is now incorrect. The rival only explains the change, and this is particularly problematic because one ordinarily resets a clock in order to make a time shown more accurate. Thus, the original is better because, among other things, it explains more of the data. A similar worry can be raised about the phlogiston account. It seems to leave unanswered the question of why, if the sample gave off a chemical substance during combustion, the sample gained weight after the reac-

8 Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation,” p. 89.
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tion. For this reason, the phlogiston theorist explicitly includes the unusual property of negative weight in the account. But this seems to be a serious violation of the simplicity condition. We have now introduced a very mysterious property into our theory. Furthermore, the only evidence we have for negative weight is the type of reaction we are trying to explain. For this reason, we might also consider the phlogiston account somewhat ad hoc. Finally we come to the joke hypothesis about why you told me that it was raining outside. This account explains all the data, is simple, and does not seem particularly ad hoc. The problem is that it is intrinsically implausible. People do tell jokes. But it is highly unlikely that an idle comment about the weather is offered for the purposes of humor. To suppose so would threaten the whole institution of linguistic communication.

The most striking thing about the simple inferences we have been discussing is the remarkable degree of intersubjectivity we discover. Almost anyone with reasonable background knowledge about the everyday operation of the world will agree that the explanations included in the conclusions to the arguments provide better explanations of the data contained in the premises than the rival accounts. This kind of intersubjectivity occurs in practical everyday diagnoses as well as among experts in more specialized contexts like the individual sciences. The wide range of situations where we appeal to explanatory procedures and the intersubjectivity we find as to which explanations are the best have led Larry Wright to suggest that the ability to judge explanatory plausibility is a basic human skill, akin to, or perhaps a kind of, perceptual skill. We are very good at seeing what is going on in the world; we can see objects and events, and we can “see” explanations for these goings-on. There is no need to overstate the degree of explanatory intersubjectivity we find. Obviously, we occasionally disagree about what the best explanation of something is, and we sometimes misdiagnose what has happened. Saying that we have a skill at X does not commit us to saying that we never fail at trying to perform X. Failure to agree about the best explanation is a problem for the theory of inference to the best explanation only if we tend to be unreliable in judging the plausibility of rival accounts. The fact that we usually agree justifies the claim that we have a polished enough skill to be reliable. Thus, I am assuming that inference to the best explanation provides an objective theory of evidence evaluation: objective because the subjective judgments regarding plausibility tend to be intersubjective. Furthermore, we can say some helpful things about what constitutes this skill: for example, Harman’s criteria for the best explanation.

9 Wright, “Induction and Explanation,” and Better Reasoning.
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Still, an individual may well be quite ignorant of the details of how she makes a given plausibility judgment, just as a golfer may not realize which muscles he uses when he swings his club.

Consider the following reconstruction of the atheist's nondeductive case against God's existence. The hypothesis that God does not exist provides the best explanation of all the evil we find in this world. We are not saying that evil is incompatible with theism, only that it provides evidence that theism is false. The controversy is now focused. It is clear what has to be debated in order to assess the atheist's reasoning. We must compare the atheist's account of evil to some of the traditional theistic explanations. Atheism and the theodicies must be evaluated as explanatory theories.

Before turning to this task, however, one possible misunderstanding must be addressed. Atheism is a metaphysical theory about the universe as a whole. Evil is an empirical fact about this world. It is not immediately clear what these two notions have to do with one another. Typical explanations offer causal accounts of the way things are.10 How does a negative metaphysical theory provide a causal diagnosis for pain, suffering, and the like? We must notice that explanations always presuppose a context. The most common context for the problem of evil is not the question, Why is there evil? but, Why does an omnipotent and morally perfect being allow evil? One way of answering this latter question is by denying the crucial presupposition which it contains. There is an analogy here with the old joke question, Have you stopped beating your wife?11 Suppose that someone claims to have evidence that I have stopped beating my wife. They point to such facts as her apparent willingness to be in my company, her lack of fear, and most importantly, the lack of any bodily signs of being beaten. They go on to ask the further question, Why has Johnson stopped beating his wife? They offer some hypotheses: he has seen the error of his ways, she got a gun, the police have been called, her new boyfriend weighs two hundred and fifty pounds, et cetera. Where in this context does my denial of ever having struck her fit? My answer is responsive to the latter question only as a rejection of the presupposition that I used to beat her. Still, my theory explains the data we have about my wife. Not directly, of course, because it does not offer a positive theory about her appearance and behavior, but indirectly, since several positive theories are now rejected. Further, my account is a better explanation of the data because it is simpler, is less ad hoc, explains all the

10 For a nice discussion of the causal nature of explanation, see Nancy Cartwright, "When Explanation Leads to Inference," Philosophical Topics (in press).

11 I do not mean to imply, of course, that spousal abuse is in any way humorous.
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data, and is more plausible. The atheist’s hypothesis works in much the same way. Theism offers positive explanations for why God allows evil. The atheist rejects all of these accounts by denying that there is an omnipotent and morally perfect being who is in any position to do anything about evil. No positive account of evil is offered; maybe evil is to be explained naturalistically, and maybe in some other way.  

All the atheist claims is that the negative explanation in terms of God’s non-existence is better than any of the theistic accounts.

SOME RIVAL EXPLANATIONS OF EVIL

The free will explanation of evil has received the most attention in the contemporary literature on evil. This theodicy traces responsibility, both causal and moral, for the pain and suffering in this world to the free choices of divinely created agents. God could intercede in these choices, but they would no longer be free, and the agents could no longer be held responsible for them. Genuine moral responsibility and, hence, genuine free will outweigh, on some axiological scale, the pain and suffering which necessarily result from the exercise of free choice by imperfect agents. This account of evil depends on several controversial presuppositions. First, it must be granted that genuine moral responsibility entails a nondeterministic form of free will. Second, we must agree with the ethical balancing which says that moral responsibility is more important than the total elimination of evil. Third, and most controversial, we must concede that nondeterministic free will is logically incompatible with God’s eliminating evil. I am not convinced that all of these assumptions are self-evidently true. Still, I intend to grant them without further quarrel. I will treat the free will theodicy as a logically possible explanation of evil. My only question is whether it counts as a better explanation than the atheist’s hypothesis.

At first glance the free will explanation seems woefully incomplete. The atheist’s negative account of why God fails to do anything about evil applies to all instances of pain and suffering, whatever their source. But the free will account does not seem to explain all cases of evil. Much of the pain and suffering which is manifest in the world is unquestionably the direct, or indirect, result of human agency. From the minor instances like the pain caused by an unkind remark, to the

12 Nothing in the above argument precludes a supernatural (or in otherwise divine) account of the world, including evil. The argument only addresses traditional theism: the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being.

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major ones like the all-encompassing misery and agony which results from war, human beings bring a great deal of evil on themselves. It is obvious, however, that there are countless instances of evil which have nothing to do with the actions and choices of human agents at all. One need only consider the death, destruction, and misery that result from natural occurrences like earthquakes, disease, and birth defects. This important difference in the apparent origin of evil is reflected in the technical distinction between moral evil (that which results from the actions and choices of moral agents) and physical evil (that which results from the operations of the natural world). Armed with this distinction, it may seem that we can bypass the free will theodicy entirely. The atheist could grant the free will theodicy as a plausible explanation of moral evil and restate the argument exclusively in terms of physical evil. Implicit in such a strategy is the view that the free will account provides no explanation of physical evil at all; hence, the hypothesis that God does not exist must be judged better without any real contest. The claim that the free will explanation is logically irrelevant to physical evil is as we shall see, much more controversial than would first appear. With respect to this account of moral evil, however, the atheist is well advised to concede the free will hypothesis as a reasonable explanation. The strongest case against the existence of God is to be made in terms of physical evil, and it is this sense of evil with which I will be primarily concerned in the remainder of this discussion.

The standard distinction between moral and physical evil assumes that the two are logically exclusive. Plantinga has shown that this formulation is open to question. It is logically possible that physical evil, rather than being different in kind, is actually a special case of moral evil. The key to this account is the possibility of angels. If there are superhuman moral agents who are capable of directly affecting the operations of the physical world, a hypothesis which seems logically possible, then responsibility for physical evil could be traced to the exercise of angelic free will. There is ample biblical precedent for such an account. Responsibility for physical evil is often attributed to the free actions of Satan. The Satan theodicy is usually discussed as a distinct explanation of evil. But, in this context, it is merely an expansion of the reasoning presented in the free will account. We need, therefore, to compare it to the atheist's hypothesis in order to see which provides the better explanation of physical evil.

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Perhaps the most obvious place for the atheist to attack the expanded free will theodicy is on grounds of simplicity. The atheist's ontological commitment is much less than the theist's. The defender of the free will explanation has a much more complicated picture of the world, including the existence of God, angels, Satan, and satanic motives. As attractive as this strategy is, the atheist is ill-advised to pursue it too vigorously in this context. There is something intrinsically question-begging in insisting on ontological simplicity as a decisive means of resolving theological controversy. Western theism explicitly endorses a much richer ontology. Atheists may feel that the simplicity of their ontology is a virtue. But theists could certainly counter with the charge that it is too simple; atheism presents an oversimple picture of the world. I see no neutral way of resolving this kind of disagreement.

A more promising place to begin our examination of the free will theodicy is by asking what evidence we have for the Satan hypothesis. The only answer would seem to be the tremendous amount of physical evil in the world. But this is a strange thing to point to as evidence. Physical evil first entered our discussion as an explanatory problem of theism. The account of physical evil in terms of the activities of Satan was an attempt to solve this problem. Do we not now need some independent evidence for the existence of Satan? The major worry that is being expressed here is whether the expanded free will explanation is ad hoc. There is a comparison with the inference from the telephone sample. We had discovered that over 60 percent of those contacted in a random sample felt that the president would be unable to balance the budget and concluded that about an equal percentage of the population at large had the same pessimistic prediction. A rival explanation postulated that the makeup of the sample was anomalous and the results of the poll were a statistical fluke. We wondered what evidence there was for this hypothesis. We had no independent evidence that the sample failed to be representative. Thus, when it was suggested that the sample, though random, was not representative of the population as a whole, this move seemed artificial and contrived. The charge of being ad hoc questions the sincerity of the proposed explanation. We implicitly accuse the person who proposes the statistical fluke hypothesis of not "wanting" to accept the results of the poll and trying to "find" some way of denying these results. A similar charge in the case of the free will account of evil may seem overly harsh, particularly since the Satan story has long been a part of Western religion. It must be remembered, however, that evil has always been recognized as a theoretical embarrassment to theological systems that postulated the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect being. Hence, in the absence of any
independent reason for accepting the existence of the devil, we must suppose that this hypothesis made its way into the biblical sources for the explicit purpose of mitigating the problem of evil.

We can see this in another way by considering the intrinsic plausibility of the two accounts, particularly from a scientific point of view. In order to take the free will explanation seriously we must suppose that there is active participation by the devil in the day-to-day affairs of the world. Focus, for example, on a particular earthquake which results in a certain amount of pain and suffering. According to the present theodicy, a complete causal account must include the actions of Satan as well as the geological activity along the fault line. Given even minimal scientific sophistication, this seems inherently unreasonable. Modern science—and the commonsense picture of the world which we inherit from it—simply has no room for the devil in theoretical accounts of physical phenomena. This is partly because of a prejudice against mysterious supernatural explanations and partly because, as mentioned above, we have no independent reason to suppose that such a creature as Satan exists. We must, therefore, judge the negative explanation in terms of God’s nonexistence a better account of physical evil.

Pain and suffering have, so far, been treated as “necessary evils”—an undesirable but logically necessary price we must pay for freedom and moral responsibility. Presumably the world would be better-off if agents, both human and angelic, were to choose wiser courses of action which resulted in significantly less misery. We now turn to an account of evil which suggests a much more direct connection between evil and those good states of affairs which justify its existence. According to this explanation evil is logically required for the existence of the counterbalancing good and not simply a logical by-product. The “soul-making” theodicy claims that evil is logically required for the building of virtuous character traits in free moral agents and, in the end, serves as the important test of personal goodness and faith. Those agents who are lucky enough to pass this axiological final examination are rewarded with eternal ecstasy, while those who fail are punished with eternal torment. Such a system of cosmic justice and responsibility is seen as moral justification of the necessary pain and suffering required for the building and testing of these virtuous souls.

The foremost contemporary spokesman for this explanation of evil is John Hick.\(^{15}\) He is careful to note that this account presupposes the free will explanation of moral evil, since soul building seems to require genuine moral responsibility and, hence, free action. We have already

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guaranteed that the free will account can be accepted as a reasonable explanation of moral evil; hence, we will focus on the soul-making theodicy as an attempt to explain physical evil.

I will argue that the atheistic hypothesis is a much better explanation of physical evil than the soul-making theodicy. I suggested a similar evaluation of the Satan's free will account of physical evil. It should not be inferred, however, that I rate these two theistic rivals equally. The free will theodicy, as an account of physical evil, is contrived and inherently implausible. The soul-making hypothesis, on the other hand, is a more subtle and reasonable attempt to explain physical evil within the ethical context of Western theism. The expanded free will account of physical evil was logically possible, but not serious competition as an explanation; the soul-making theodicy is a much more challenging rival to the atheist's hypothesis. Nevertheless, atheism is a better explanation of evil than that provided by the soul-making theodicy. I concede that the account is not particularly ad hoc, and we have already agreed not to press the issue of simplicity. My major complaint will focus on the explanatory completeness of the hypothesis. It fails to explain adequately three items in our shared background knowledge: a biological fact, a psychological fact, and a strong normative intuition.

Evil counts as strong evidence for atheism not merely because it exists but because it exists in such diversity and in such tremendous quantity. Consider the biological kingdom as a whole. Only a very small percentage of the total pain and suffering experienced by sentient creatures affects human beings at all, even indirectly. It is very hard to understand why an omnipotent and morally perfect being would be interested in allowing the continued agony of biological survival for creatures that are not moral agents and have no souls to be made or tested. The problem of animal pain counts as a serious explanatory hurdle for the soul-making theodicy. We are never told why this evil is logically required for shaping of human and angelic souls. It seems quite implausible to suppose that the pain experienced by prey and predator in the depths of the ocean has anything to do with the fabrication or confirmation of human virtues. For this account to work, the total amount of animal pain must be a logical precondition of soul making. Until the nature of this logical connection is made much clearer, an adequate account of animal pain is not even addressed in the soul-making approach. Perhaps the soul-making theodicy can be expanded to cover animal pain; I am not denying the logical possibility of such a move. But, at present, the account is surely inadequate as an account of physical evil, since it is silent about such a significant
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amount of the pain and suffering which seem irrelevant to the actions of human agents.

Setting aside the problem of animal pain—though, of course, it cannot be ignored—let us focus on the physical evil which is experienced by human agents. According to the soul-making theodicy, this pain and suffering provide a spiritual challenge which allows free human agents to rise to ethical heights and earn divine reward. Such a view seems to presuppose that adversity leads to personal excellence. This is occasionally true; accounts of personal courage, heroism, charity, and moral perseverance give testimony to isolated instances of the human ability for greatness in the face of disaster. As a general psychological rule, however, the correlation seems to be negative: the more adversity people experience, the greater the chance that they will abandon hope and cease to be morally virtuous. The soul-making theodicy claims that evil is logically required for the development of virtuous souls; I question whether this connection is even contingently true. The soul-making hypothesis needs to offer some account of why so few human agents succeed in having their souls made in the right way. This problem is particularly acute, since God is omniscient and foreknows that most of the souls which undergo this soul-making process will have to be rejected as unfit for heavenly reward.

The above problem leads directly to the last one I will address for the soul-making theodicy. Can God be spoken of as morally perfect when the soul-making process is so difficult and individuals have so little chance of succeeding? The soul-making account must offer some explanation of the apparent injustice of the entire soul-making process. God creates fallible human agents and turns them loose in a world where evil pervades. These agents are expected to use the worldly existence to develop moral virtues which will eventually allow some of them to win redemption in a heavenly afterlife. God knows, in virtue of his infinite foreknowledge, that most of these agents will not succeed in having virtuous souls made by their encounter with pain and suffering in this world. Worse still, those agents who have failed must now be punished with eternal damnation.16 Is such a situation fair? Consider an academic analogy. An instructor gives an examination in a class and most of the students fail. There are three obvious explanations for this: the students were at fault, either by lack of preparation or by not having the necessary skills and background; the instructor was at fault and has failed as a teacher; or the examination itself was at fault and is unrealistically difficult as a measure of what had been learned. Obviously the first account is the one which would be preferred by the

16 Hick (in ibid.) denies this aspect of traditional Christianity.
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instructor. It is not clear that a similar move is open to the theist. God is the one who has created the agents in the first place. Further, he knew as he was creating them that most would fail his test. The soul-making theodicy, rather than explaining the apparent injustice of this account of divine morality, simply presupposes it.

The final theodicy I want to look at is not really an explanation of evil at all, but rather a placeholder for an explanation. Consider some of John Hick's concluding thoughts on the soul-making account:

Moreover, I do not now have an alternative theory to offer that would explain in any rational or ethical way why men suffer as they do. The only appeal left is to mystery. This is not, however, merely an appeal to the negative fact that we cannot discern any rationale of human suffering. It may be that the very mysteriousness of this life is an important aspect of its character as a sphere of soul-making. . . Our 'solution,' then, to this baffling problem of excessive and undeserved suffering is a frank appeal to the positive value of mystery. Such suffering remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive. The mystery of dysteleological suffering is a real mystery, impenetrable to the rationalizing mind. It challenges Christian faith with its utterly baffling, alien, destructive meaningfulness. And yet at the same time, detached theological reflection can note that this very irrationality and this lack of ethical meaning contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur and in which loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can take place.17

Hick's strategy in this type of mystery theodicy is typical. The theist justifies the appeal to the unknown and eschews a concrete explanation, on both epistemological and ethical grounds. It is pointed out that the universe as a whole, as well as God's intellectual abilities, are infinite. We are then reminded that our own cognitive skills are limited and obviously fallible. How can we reasonably expect, the theist challenges, to understand the complete workings of the divine mind in dealing with the entirety of the world? At the moral level, human inability to explain evil is justified as furthering religious purposes. Hick suggests that the mystery of evil contributes to soul making. This is something like the standard gambit, which claims that a certain amount of ignorance is necessary to leave room for religious faith. Thus, the theist seems to claim that our inability to explain evil is actually a good thing.

Before beginning a direct examination of the mystery theodicy, it is necessary to say a few words about the above justification. We are always well served when we are reminded of the virtues of epistemic modesty. We are limited in intelligence, we are fallible, and we

17 Ibid., pp. 333-35.
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certainly make a lot of foolish intellectual errors. Nevertheless, the process of rational theology (and rational atheology) requires that we do the best we can with our admittedly limited resources. The atheist may be wrong in claiming that God's nonexistence is the best explanation of evil; we have admitted as much by treating the inference as explanatory rather than deductive. The procedure of inference to the best explanation says that it is rational to believe whatever theory best explains what we know. The most we can expect is that concerned individuals will carefully consider the data we have regarding evil in this world and attempt to arrive at the best account of it. The atheist believes that, when the project is viewed in these terms, the rational individual will explain evil in terms of God's nonexistence. The suggestion that the mystery of evil produces religiously desirable consequences is extremely puzzling. The problem of evil is one of the few philosophical problems which directly connects with the day-to-day lives of the nonphilosopher. Religious people begin to question their faith in situations in which they are brought into contact with significant pain and suffering. On the basis of evil, many abandon their belief in God. I have to wonder how sincere the theist really is in suggesting that our failure to understand evil is a religiously good thing. Encounters with the "utterly baffling, alien, destructive meaningless" of evil seem to weaken, not strengthen, souls and destroy, not further, religious belief. To characterize this state of affairs as theologically desirable is queer indeed.

There are contexts where we have a number of competing explanations of certain phenomena, yet the rational thing to do is to reject all of the existing accounts and to continue to look for a new one. The following murder mystery is such a case. A dead body is discovered in Smith's basement. The police investigate and, having no suspects outside the Smith family, theorize that one of the family members is the murderer. Further investigation fails to uncover any connection between the Smiths and the victim, let alone any motive for the murder. Thus, all of our individual explanations—Smith did it, Mrs. Smith did it, Smith's daughter did it, the uncle and the son working together did it, et cetera—seem unlikely. Obviously the police should conclude that there is some other explanation for the murder which they have yet to consider and should continue their investigation. There are other murder cases, however, where it would be quite unreasonable to keep the investigation open past a certain point, since it has become clear that the best explanation of the crime is that the butler did it. The difference seems to be that in the first case, we have evidence that there is some further explanation which will be better than any of those we presently have. The evidence for this is the inadequacy of each of the existing
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explanations. Since all of the hypotheses suffer from incompleteness because they fail to explain the motive, this is good evidence that there is a better explanation to be found which will include a motive. Inference to the best explanation must explicitly acknowledge that for any given set of explanations there is always a logical possibility that there will be some new, as yet unconsidered, explanation which will better account for the data than any in the original set. This logical possibility does not count as an argument for general skepticism about inference to the best explanation.\textsuperscript{18} In order to take seriously the possibility of the new explanation's being a better one, we need reasons for rejecting the existing accounts.

The theist usually appeals to the mystery theodicy when problems have surfaced with the other more direct attempts to explain evil in theistic terms. Little is said, however, about the atheist's hypothesis. If we are to treat the mystery theodicy as the best account of evil, we need reasons for preferring it, not only to the other theodicies, but also to the atheist's account. The burden is thus on the theist to expose explanatory inadequacies in atheism. Presumably such a strategy would appeal to the so-called problem of good or some other reason for rejecting atheism on evidentiary or explanatory grounds. Such a gambit would momentarily shift the burden back to the atheist. I am confident that the atheist would have no problem in accounting for all of the data we have about this world, including goodness, teleology, order, and other positive states of affairs, in nontheistic terms—for example, by the principle of natural selection. Some theists would no doubt disagree, but the noteworthy fact is that the challenge is seldom extended. The theist usually appeals to mystery and some unknown, or unknowable, explanation for God's allowing evil without ever suggesting what is wrong with the atheist's account. In the absence of an explicit catalog of the deficiencies in the atheistic hypothesis, the suggestion that some undiscovered explanation of evil will be better seems to be an ad hoc attempt to avoid acknowledging that atheism is better supported by the evidence we have about the world.

A complete survey of all the rival accounts of evil is obviously beyond the scope of the present project. Even the three theodicies which have been examined were not given the detailed attention they deserved. The focus of the present section was programmatic. I believe that there are good reasons for preferring the atheist's explanation of evil to any of those suggested in the traditional theodicies. This is, nevertheless, a more extravagant thesis than I claim to have established. My hope was

\textsuperscript{18} A similar point is made about scientific explanations in Lawrence Sklar, "Do Unborn Hypotheses Have Rights?" \textit{Pacific Philosophical Quarterly} 62 (1981): 17–29.
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to demonstrate that potential solutions to the problem of evil can be examined profitably within the context of the theory of inference to the best explanation.