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Human beings are continually confronted with the existence of suffering, pain, and evil. The deepest desires of the human heart are continually frustrated, their fulfillment perpetually thwarted. Moments of beauty and joy are quickly followed by new trials, or at least by boredom. With all the difficulties of the human condition, it is no wonder that the problem of evil has been a major focus of theology, and for many a major hindrance to taking part in any faith tradition. The problem of evil continues to disturb many, and not only every theologian but every evangelist—professional or personal—must come to terms with it in his or her own way.

Many responses have been offered to the question of how an all-good, all-powerful God could permit the evil we know so well. And though I believe most of these responses are greatly lacking, their inadequacies are not always easy to articulate. This leaves many of the people who appropriate them unable to respond to those who don’t have clear reasons for rejecting these answers but only a continuing sense of unease, a feeling that their concerns have not yet been adequately dealt with.

The difficulty perhaps stems from the fact that many thinkers have answered the problem of evil in such a way that they have created new, though more subtle, incoherences in the theological picture. The formal problem of evil may have been solved, but only by drawing a new picture of God and God’s relationship to the world that contains some hidden elements disturbingly different from the traditional picture and also different from the God I think most of us—theist or atheist—desire. These disturbing elements do not necessarily stand out to the layman or the casual philosopher, but they can still cause unease to the point of fermenting deep-seated distrust of the theological (and theistic) enterprise as a whole.
In defending God against charges of being less than omnipotent or less than completely good and loving, theologians have sometimes glossed over the problems their solutions cause in other areas of theology. Focusing on particular methods of exonerating God has led to disregarding what the “solutions” do to the conception of divinity as a whole. Particularly, traditional answers to the problem of evil have led to incoherent conceptions of God’s work in the world. In an effort to maintain God’s omnipotence and guiltlessness in the face of evil, theologians have surrendered God’s most important act of love: delivering us from evil.

For example, Calvin, in his desire to assure himself that there was a God powerful enough to overcome all evil, came to affirm a God so sovereign that he ended up responsible for the very evil Calvin originally wanted him to destroy. On the other hand, free will theists, in their desire to keep God from being at all responsible for evil, attribute evil’s existence to freedom in so directly logical a way that it appears that God will never be able to overcome evil without taking away freedom, and we should hardly expect God to do this if freedom really is a good so much greater than evil.

In this paper, I will discuss the inadequacies of both classical free will theism and traditional theological determinism. Because of their dependence on either the necessity of evil or God’s acceptance of evil for the accomplishment of a greater good, both of the positions must abandon traditional doctrines of deliverance and salvation from evil (though only some acknowledge this loss). The traditional conception of God’s deliverance, I will argue, is of much greater worth to theism than traditional conceptions of omnipotence and freedom of the will, and therefore a different answer to the problem of evil is called for, one that enables a person to maintain belief in God’s certain and meaningful salvation. After discussing Calvinism and free will theism and the ways in which they render God’s delivering work incoherent or God
impotent, I will present a third response to the problem of evil and explain how its conception of God’s work in the world avoids attributing evil to God and at the same time allows God enough power to overcome evil in a final way.

Theological Determinism

As I mentioned in the introduction, Calvin was centrally concerned with God’s sovereignty. He desired the assurance that God is personally involved in every detail of human life, leaving nothing to chance, nor even to purely natural processes. In his view, God should sustain all things and determine every detail of their existence. Anna Case-Winters summarizes Calvin’s foundational commitments in this way: “the world is ordered, not by chance or by necessity, but personally, by the constant and particular care of a ‘loving Father’ who by effectual action controls and determines all things according to ‘his’ good will.”

Calvin was not at all ignorant of the fact that this extreme view of divine sovereignty committed him to attributing to God the events we call evil. In a way, this was one of the purposes of Calvin’s view. He wanted to know that any evil in the world was actually part of the divine plan, was only in existence because it enabled a greater good foreseen and orchestrated by God.

Calvin is certainly reasonable to attempt to deal with the problem of evil by explaining how certain things are not really evil after all but rather necessary, though unpleasant, steps to creating a far greater good. But although this view looks promising in the abstract, it becomes highly problematic when coupled with revelation we have of God’s action in the world and especially with considerations of what God’s “far greater good” for humanity would be.

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I want to argue that making all evil and suffering part of a greater cosmic plan does not work when we relate the idea to revelation and common experience. It seems clear in Scripture that God’s greatest purposes for mankind are subverted by evil, not enhanced by it. In the garden of Eden, evil and disobedience ruin what was already “very good.” In this particular story at least, God had not had to create evil in order to get what was “very good.” Everything was good, in itself and taken as a whole. Everything was a positive end in itself, nothing simply a means, as evil is according to Calvin. As the Biblical story progresses, God over and over instigates new beginnings—after the flood, with Abraham, with the Exodus, with the return from exile—each time setting up a society that is pregnant with the possibility of perfection. And yet every time evil and sin destroy the start of the new order. Evil does not appear to be a necessary step in God’s plan but rather an abortion of God’s purposes. God uses evil and suffering to chastise God’s people, yes, but chastisement is precisely that which would not have been necessary had there not been evil to begin with.

To argue that God has greater purposes which necessitate God’s inflicting suffering and pain on the creation is to ignore what seems a clear Biblical message that God’s purpose in human history has been precisely the eradication of evil and suffering, especially that which is directly caused by the hardness of human hearts. To say that evil is part of God’s plan to eradicate evil is not a solution to the problem at all. It does not explain the original existence of evil, or why God would make humans hurt each other to begin with.

2 Ironically, fitting everything into God’s sovereign plan seems in the end to distance God from creation rather than make God continually personally active in it as Calvin desired. The God who is everywhere is nowhere evident. Calvin’s view shares some of the faults of pantheism.
3 I should say a word about the way in which I plan to use Scripture in my discussion and arguments. I view the Bible as the Christian’s primary source for testimony about God’s major acts in history. However, it is not always clear how to interpret large portions of Scripture, even to professional scholars. I am therefore hesitant to use particular passages to support an argument. I try to stick to the broadest strokes of the Bible’s painting of God, the aspects of the Biblical revelation most vital to the Christian faith. I aim to introduce only these less controversial elements of Scripture into my arguments. Only my readers can tell me how successful I have been.
To continue developing his view, Calvin must conceive of some other good that is greater than the eradication of evil and that would necessitate evil’s introduction, even if God has to work later to get rid of it. Other theologians, in attempting to find such a good, have constructed various “soul-building” theodicies in which God’s ultimate aim is to bring about certain character traits such as patience, perseverance, and love of enemies, qualities that are only possible to instill through practice in suffering. This, too, is a good idea in the abstract, but I think Biblical revelation and personal intuition tell against it. Perseverance and love of one’s enemies are excellent tools, *vital* tools, for persons who wish to eradicate evil from our world. But the thrust of Biblical history is not toward God making us face infinitely more suffering. If this were the case, Christians should expect God to send those God loves to hell not heaven, for it is only in hell that they would have the chance to continue developing ever greater capacities for perseverance. However, the Biblical picture is one of final *relief* from suffering and the effects of evil. God’s promise is of a future and a hope, something *for which* to persevere. God encourages us to remain faithful and steadfast in the face of evil in order finally to overcome and vanquish it. Our hope is not that we shall be able to endure suffering forever but that by our endurance we shall overcome and achieve the best which God has for us, a best that never *had* to include suffering but was only hindered by it.

The problems for Calvin’s view of evil as God’s means to a greater end only deepen the more closely we examine Biblical revelation and the ideas it contains related to God’s action in the world. There is a particularly complex problem related to moral responsibility. The problem could at the most basic level be spelled out thus: God seems to act in history to hold individuals and societies responsible for their evil deeds. God declares their guilt for such acts and often punishes them. But it seems that if (1) God is ultimately causally responsible for their actions
and (2) their actions are necessary to bring about God’s greater good, there is no reason for God to call them “guilty” nor to punish them, nor even to try to deter them from doing similar things in the future. If their acts are truly evil, then God is just as guilty as they are, if not more so; if their acts are instrumentally good, then no one has done anything wrong.

Calvin’s response to this objection is rather involved. He makes a clear distinction between acts carried out with good intentions and those carried out with evil intentions, the will being what ultimately makes an act good or evil. Calvin counts human beings morally guilty for evil acts (and even punishable for them) because they meant them for harm. God, on the other hand, is not guilty for the same acts—although God determined them to happen—because God means them to bring about good.

The problem with such a response is that it does not acknowledge that God made human beings cause suffering with evil intent rather than with positive intent like God’s. If the only truly evil things in the world (the only things not even instrumentally good) are evil intentions, there is a new problem of evil which asks why God is not responsible for their existence. It has been suggested that it is not only evil deeds and suffering but the very evil intentions themselves which Calvin is positing are necessary for the greater good. If this is true, I still do not see why God should blame creatures for doing those things which are instrumentally good and highly necessary. Why should God reprimand them for their evil intentions when God really feels that in the long run they will be beneficial? Under Calvin’s view, all of God’s speech to humankind throughout the Old and New Testaments is a sort of double-talk. The majority of God’s interaction with human beings urges them to repent from their evil ways and embrace a new way of life consistent with God’s character. But under Calvin’s view, all of this has to be some sort of ruse, or elaborate game. It is as though God is pretending that human beings are independent of
God and responsible for their acts. God pretends as though people should give up their evil ways when in reality to give them up would be to abandon the only way of achieving God’s greater plan. Though according to Calvin God is outside of the system of cause and effect determining all things according to God’s own plan, God still enters the system and pretends as though God is bound by it.

Such a view of the God-Human relationship seems to make relating to God problematic. Are we to take God at God’s word when God says things are bad? Yet many people have done things that God has said are bad, and if Calvin is right, then those acts are good since God obviously did determine them to be part of God’s greater plan. How can the very same, specific actions that God has said are bad also be good? How can God tell us not to do things and then determine us to do them? If God doesn’t appear downright dishonest, God does appear difficult to have an intimate, trusting relationship with. How are we ever to find true communion and unity with God if God constantly says one thing and does another, if God never comes out and truly says what it is God desires of us? And why does God’s speaking to us even matter if God determines what we do in a completely different, metaphysical way? Theological determinism makes God’s ways so high above our ways that we can’t even trust that the things God asks of us are really good things to do. When Calvin’s God says that we should not steal, what does Calvin’s God mean by “should not”? Calvin’s God cannot mean “it would be better if you never stole,” since God does determine some people to steal and anything a loving God determines to happen is for the better.

I feel Calvin’s view is, ironically, inadequate for those who desire the personal, intimate involvement of God in their daily decisions and who desire to seek the heart of God and become unified with God in purpose. Calvin’s God only speaks to us in dissemblance of the fact that he

\(^4\) To me by Randall Basinger.
has made us—and wants us—exactly as we are. Calvin’s solution to the problem of evil creates difficulties for the greater Christian picture of God’s redemptive, salvific work in the world because if Calvin’s God is saving us from anything, it must be from something he himself created.

Let’s explore an alternative view.

**Free Will Theodicy**

Free will theists are able consistently to contend that when God says, “Do not steal,” God means it. Free will theists believe God is not only saying that it would be better not to steal but also implying that those to whom God is speaking actually have a choice about the matter. Though this is a great difference between free will theodicy and Calvin’s position, free will theodicy also mirrors Calvin in seeing evil as the product of working towards a greater good. On both views, God is justified in allowing evil because God plans to create some counterbalancing good. Yet free will theodicy does not agree that evil itself is necessary for this greater good. Only the *possibility* of evil is so necessary.

Free will theodicists have a definite idea of the greater good God chooses to bring about. That greater good is *freely choosing the good*.

According to classical free will theists, God is completely sovereign but chose to limit God’s power in order to create free creatures. God’s determining creatures to choose the good is worthless according to free will theodicy. Or, if it is not worthless, it is at least worth much less than free creatures choosing the good. Love is the most common analogy used to support this assumption. The justification for free will depends on the idea that it is better to have someone love you by libertarian free choice than by determination. Some might even say that determined affection cannot really be called love at all.
Though it might feel the same as real love to the recipient, some proponents of free will theodicy would view it as having a completely different metaphysical status.

So God chooses to bring about the greatest possible good which is freely chosen good (synonymous with freely chosen love for God and others). The only hitch is that with the possibility of the greatest good comes the possibility of the greatest evil. It is precisely the capacity to do evil that, for free will theists, makes doing good valuable. Under this scheme, God is not directly responsible for creating evil. Though God opened up its possibility, God did so with the intention of making the greatest good possible. It is the free creatures themselves who choose between good and evil, and any evil that is actual and not only possible is completely their responsibility.

The free will theodicy has a lot of *prima facie* merit. Its case for accepting a logically necessary link between the potential for good and the potential for evil is much stronger, I feel, than the case Calvin presents (or fails to present) for the link between evil and greater good. The free will theodicy also relieves God from responsibility for evil; evil’s actual existence is entirely out of God’s hands and in ours.

Yet I feel the strengths of the free will position only mask deeper weaknesses. My first criticism of free will theodicy is directed toward its fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between good and freedom. The free will position derives its intuitive support from the idea that the only truly worthwhile love is a choice, not something into which we can be forced. Ironically, we do not think of love as the sort of thing into which people are capable of being forced precisely *because* love is not a choice (at least not a direct one). I cannot instantaneously feel love toward you just because someone puts a gun to my head. Love is not something into which I can be coerced. On the other hand, if you act very kindly toward me and

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5 Or some might simplify this and say the greater good is freedom *tout court.*
show me your fine personal qualities, I might become unable to prevent myself from loving you. One might say your qualities had determined me to love you, but I dare say you wouldn't feel that my love was less valuable simply because I couldn't help succumbing. Love seems to remain true love when it is a surrender to the praiseworthy qualities of the loved one. It may be determined in that sense and yet be the most valuable, appreciated sort of love. Though there is a sense in which we must learn to love even those who do not attract us or evoke admiration in us, each of us most desires from others not the sort of love that comes in spite of our qualities but love that comes as a result of our character and personality.⁶

Free will literature often propagates the idea that if we were determined to love, our actions would be as worthless as those of a robot or a marionette. This picture does not properly represent the reality of the determinist view, since robots and puppets are incapable of anything we would call love, determined or free. Among other things, love requires emotion, affection, and sacrifice, all of which robots and puppets cannot experience, but all of which are logically compatible with determinism. Human love, if determined, would not be like relating to robots. The determinist proposes that human love is exactly as pleasurable and meaningful as it feels, though it is determined by our natures and our circumstances. And though determinists are not necessarily fatalists, perhaps it would help proponents of the virtues of free will to remember that in some of the greatest love stories, the love of the couple is fated. This does not make their love any less beautiful or satisfying. A sense of inevitability can, in fact, infuse love with more meaning because it is seen as one necessary piece in a giant cosmic plan.

I think cases like the fatalistic one show that there are some strong intuitions supporting the value of determined, even inevitable, love. If it is argued that there is also strong intuition supporting the crucial premise of free will theodicy, I think the intuition in mind may be

misappropriated. We all do agree that love is something that cannot be forced, something that
must grow in one’s heart of hearts in its own time and in its own way. This, I think, is the true
nature of the intuition sometimes thought to support the free will theodicy. But the fact that love
does not result from coercion does not mean that true love cannot be determined by the natures
of the individuals involved, or that one’s choice to do good is worth little because it is
determined by the very fact that the thing is good.

Good actions needn’t be free in an indeterminate way to be worthwhile but only
determined by the proper things. In her book *Freedom Within Reason*, Susan Wolf explains,

If people had to select their spouses or careers by picking names out of a hat, it would be
a cruel joke to say they were choosing them for themselves. One wants to choose with
one’s eyes open, so to speak. Choosing blindly would not satisfy one’s desire at all. In
other words, one wants to be able to choose in light of the knowledge of one’s options
and in light of the comparative reasons for and against these options. To want this,
h owever, is just to want to choose in light of the True and the Good.\(^7\)

The best actions are precisely those which are best in an objective sense, bringing the most good
into the world. It seems silly to say that one must have been able to do wrong for one’s actions to
be truly good. If we have raised children to behave well and care for others, surely we would not
think their behavior less good if our teaching ended up determining them to behave in this
pleasing manner. The actions of those who were never introduced to the concept of wrongdoing
are surely not less valuable than the actions of those who know evil well. What matters is doing
good out of the goodness of one’s heart; how one’s heart came to be good surely does not change
the value of its being so. Perhaps it will be said that I am simply begging the question against
free will theodicy, but at the very least, it does not seem obvious that undetermined loving
actions are more valuable than loving actions determined by one’s nature and character. The
strength of free will theodicy’s primary premise is at best highly questionable.

\(^7\) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 92.
The position provokes further critique related to God’s delivering, redemptive work in the world. When asked in what God’s redeeming work consists, the free will theist might point to the offer of forgiveness for our evil acts which opens a way for us to come back to God’s original plan. However, human beings still have to make the choice to repent, and it is unclear how an offer of forgiveness makes it any more likely that a being with libertarian freedom will choose good rather than evil in the future. It has often been proposed that God acts persuasively on human beings, drawing them to Godself, increasing the probability that we will choose to love God while never completely determining that we will do so. In my paper “Influence and Free Will,” I argue that the idea of influence or persuasion makes no sense in a libertarian framework, and while I feel that those arguments alone provide good reason to reject the free-will viewpoint, there is the additional consideration that leaving good up to indeterminate human wills makes the final deliverance of creation from evil completely uncertain.

There are free will theists who realize this implication of their view. Many of them call themselves proponents of “openness.” In their minds, the ultimate victory of good over evil cannot be certain on principle. Uncertainty is part of the risk God takes in creating free creatures. While I appreciate that openness theists acknowledge and accept the full consequences of the free will viewpoint, I do not find openness completely in accordance with Biblical teaching nor with my own deepest intuitions and hopes, hopes which prevent me from seeing the gospel of free will as very good news at all. I believe that the God of the Bible is certain of ultimate victory. That is the hope that God extends to those who suffer now but will one day find it has all been worth it, that our “light and momentary troubles [have] achiev[ed] for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”8 God promises a time when death and sorrow and violence will be at an end. If there is one thing that belief in God is supposed to bring us, surely it is the comfort
that no matter what happens, no matter what trials have to be faced now, there will one day be deliverance.

Traditional free will theists do affirm the ultimate triumph of good over evil. They defend the view that God will one day destroy, or at least exile, those who have chosen evil and so allow those who have chosen good to live forever in peace with God. However, these theologians still have a rather thorny question to answer: will there be freedom in heaven? If there will be freedom, then there will be the possibility for evil; the “ultimate triumph” of good will be an illusion. If there will not be freedom, there will not be—according to the free will theists’ own definition—the highest kind of love or good that God set out to make possible. It seems that if the free will theists are going to connect the possibility for good and the possibility for evil closely enough to make their theodicy viable, they are simultaneously going to have to surrender the idea that we can ever know final, conclusive victory over evil.

An Alternative

If Calvin’s theodicy makes God responsible for the very evils God rebukes and punishes, and free will theodicy makes God’s final victory over evil either incoherent (because freedom must endure eternally to allow real love to endure) or at least uncertain, some alternative must be found. In this section, I will present a view that affirms God’s rejection of evil not only as an end but also as a means\(^8\) at the same time that it affirms our hope for ultimate victory over such evil.

On this alternative view, evil and suffering are facts of the world, but they are not facts that God determined or chose. They are those aspects of the world that God continually works to

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\(^8\) 2 Cor. 4:17, NIV.
\(^9\) I do not mean this statement to rule out the possibility that God may use some forms of evil as a means to the final eradication of evil. I mean only that God would not, under the view I will defend, introduce evil (as either possibility
eliminate and will finally succeed in eliminating. This sort of view rests on two primary assumptions: (1) the world has some measure of reality apart from God and (2) the world behaves according to certain “natural” laws so that whenever specific conditions are met, a certain outcome can be expected.

The first assumption is necessary for locating evil and suffering completely outside of God. God is not to have created evil, is not to have permitted its creation for a greater good, and is to be working with all God’s power to eliminate it. If these statements accurately describe God’s relationship to evil, then it is completely sensible to accept that there is a degree to which the world is not yet completely under God’s dominion. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” is a call for the coming of God’s reign and sovereignty over the world, a reign acknowledged as currently incomplete.

It might be pointed out that this assumption contradicts the very creation story that I previously used as evidence against Calvin’s view, that it contradicts the idea that God created all things and in the beginning said they were “very good.” I agree that under my view of evil one cannot take this creation story completely literally. One must give up the idea that the perfect world it describes has already existed. Yet I feel it is better to surrender this point of literality in the creation story than to give up what I think may be its greater point about the desirability (and achievability) of a true, evil-less paradise.

It might be argued that postulating evil’s existence apart from God and contrary to God’s will is a form of Manichean dualism. Yet my view differs greatly from Manicheism because my view does not grant evil and good equal power or lock them in eternal conflict. On my view, evil and good both exist but there is no reason to believe they are equally strong. The simple fact that

or actuality) into an evil-less world as a means to some “greater” good. I assert that in a world without evil, God would have no desire to introduce it, even for instrumental purposes.
evil exists apart from God does not mean there will not come a time when God will have completely eradicated evil, when God will have transformed the substance of the world into something entirely and maximally good.

Now there may also be worries about the metaphysical problems with dualism itself. Aquinas and others have argued that logic prescribes that there be one ultimate and necessary being. The universe I describe begins with God as well as something existing besides God, something that God works with, forms, and relates to. Someone convinced by Aquinas’ arguments is going to have difficulty accepting this view. First let me say that I am not convinced the Thomistic arguments work. There are many people who believe ultimate reality is simply the world or universe itself, inexplicable on our terms or any terms we can conceive of existing. There seems to me no difficulty in allowing someone to believe that the universe itself is as far as we need to go in talking about ultimate reality. But even if the Thomistic arguments do hold, it seems that there exists the possibility that they can be satisfied by a single, necessary, ultimate reality that holds for both God and the world separate from God. This might be understood as the very system of laws—logical and metaphysical—that govern all action in the universe, including God’s interaction with the rest of the world: a true “theory of everything.” Of course, these are simply preliminary suggestions. They will not satisfy deep misgivings about the feasibility of metaphysical dualism, but I am comforted by the fact that the problems of my view (and I am not sure it is really a metaphysical dualism rather than a moral dualism or continuum) are no greater than the problems faced by the large portion of the philosophical community which is atheist. In any case, I don’t have the space here to investigate the problem further but will concede that it would be a worthwhile future project.
So the first assumption of my view is that, even if there is a single, unified necessity to the world, God is not it. God is an incredibly powerful being, but since God is also completely good, God cannot be responsible for everything we experience. God affects us a great deal, but God works with raw material\textsuperscript{10} that keeps God from doing just anything God pleases. By positing that God is not the ultimate source of all reality (though God has affected reality a great deal), we are able to preserve our belief that God is completely good and bears no responsibility for evil.

However, to be Christians, we need to believe more than the simple fact that God is completely good. A major part of Christian belief is hope and faith that evil will finally be gotten rid of. I think it is acceptable for us to believe this based on God's assuring us of the fact in revelation, but if we are going to develop a philosophical framework for our theology, it should be able to explain or at least support the idea that God actually has the \textit{ability} to know those things God supposedly reveals to us. The second assumption of my view—the deterministic assumption that the world behaves according to laws which assure that certain conditions lead to certain outcomes—assures us that, if a being knows the state of the entire world and all of the deterministic laws, it can know the actual outcome of things (as well as be able to use knowledge of those laws to bring about that outcome). And it is also conceivable that such a being could tell us of the outcome, perhaps to give us hope and a desire to persevere. Determinism explains God's knowledge of the end of evil and thus makes it coherent for us to believe in God's revelation of this end.

Let me note that I am not asserting that mere determinism \textit{makes} the end of evil inevitable. Only a certain set of deterministic laws could make that the case. We may believe that the laws actually in place make evil's demise inevitable. We may even draw that conclusion

\textsuperscript{10} This material is not necessarily matter. It might be as abstract as metaphysical laws.
based on our experience of love’s effects on evil or simply from revelation. But just to explain how God can know the future, whatever it is, we need to know only that there are deterministic laws. Their nature can be left for another discussion.

Now there are suggestions other than a deterministic one for how God could know what the end will be. Free will proponents often postulate that God is outside of time and so able to see all of eternity and know the end as well as the beginning. I find it plausible that God is outside of time, and I find it plausible to propose that God can thus know that finally all evil is eradicated. But we must consider a further complication brought on if we restrict ourselves to this timelessness explanation of God’s knowledge. The timelessness of God does not allow God to act so that, and with prior knowledge that, evil will eventually no longer exist. In addition to God being able to know the final state of the world, it is important that it be meaningful to say God brought about that end intentionally, mostly because this is what it seems God is doing in Scripture. But if God only sees timelessly, God also acts timelessly, and thus God acts in the same moment that God sees the results. God does not act after God understands what will result from God’s actions. On the free will view of the timelessness of God, God can be expected to see only the actual future, just as we see only the actual world. God cannot choose which free creatures to create based upon which creatures will produce the best outcome, since God only knows the outcome produced by those creatures God actually creates. Timeless knowledge is not foreknowledge in the sense that God can know outcomes before God acts and such outcomes can inform God’s decision to act. God only knows the outcome in acting. Thus even if God happens to create just the right beings such that evil will eventually disappear, it cannot be said that God acted from the knowledge that the eradication of evil would result.
Understanding this problem has led some to endorse the “middle knowledge” of God, God’s knowledge of counterfactuals. With counterfactuals, God knows not only what actually happens throughout all of time but also what would happen in an infinite number of other scenarios. Counterfactual knowledge is easy to accept within a deterministic picture. Because God knows causal laws perfectly, God can calculate what would follow from any hypothetical situation. This knowledge allows God to act with complete certainty of the consequences. Some might wonder if this action of God does not violate the deterministic picture I’ve already set up, in which the end follows necessarily from the beginning. It does not violate deterministic assumptions because God is part of the system. God’s actions are deterministic links necessary to get the world from an evil state to a morally perfect one. God acts as a result of God’s determined character (love) and God’s determined knowledge of the world. God’s acts resulting from counterfactual knowledge are an integral part of the deterministic system God knows completely and thoroughly. They are no more exceptions to determinism than are human actions resulting from our beliefs about consequences, though God’s knowledge is perfect.

So I agree that God does have knowledge of counterfactuals, a fact which makes it meaningful to say that God brings about the eradication of evil intentionally, but I think such vital counterfactual knowledge is only possible because the world is deterministic. If God can know for certain what someone would do in a given situation even though that situation never arises (and thus never gives God the chance simply to observe the action from outside of time), then that person must be determined to perform the action. There must be something in his or her character or essential self that makes such a reaction inevitable. God simply could not know what would follow from a hypothetical situation if the consequences did not in fact follow according to laws but only coincidentally. The free will view, to deserve its name, must reject the idea that
any outcome can be derived from preexisting entities. Prediction is antithetical to indeterminate freedom.

Openness and process theologians, though they believe we have free will, agree with me on the incoherence of counterfactuals of freedom. Molinists, however, continue to contend that counterfactuals of freedom are accessible to God. Perhaps a full argument against counterfactuals of freedom is needed in light of the molinist view. But though I have some preliminary ideas about how such an argument could be formulated, I don't see it as central to my justification in rejecting molinism. I reject molinism for the reasons I reject free will more broadly: the fact that I believe it unnecessary for true loving relationship as well as that it's inconsistent with the influence we accept as part of everyday experience. A full argument against counterfactuals of freedom might make the case against molinism even stronger, but I will not take the time to develop one here.¹¹

However, if we assume that counterfactuals of freedom are incoherent, we must conclude that God can only act intentionally to eradicate evil if the world is deterministic. The world (along with all beings that are a part of it) must act according to some universal principle or principles that allow God to choose a certain course of action and depend with certainty on its effectiveness. And once God has the ability to act in this way, God can know for certain that, if

¹¹ I might, however, indicate the direction I would attempt to go in developing such an argument. It seems to me that it might be useful to analyze counterfactuals of freedom in relationship to a Goldman-style causal theory of knowledge. On such a view, if one is to be considered to "know" something, one's belief must be caused either by the fact which makes it true or by a fact which caused the belief and the fact that makes it true, or one's belief must be necessarily deducible from one of these facts. Such a view would allow knowledge of counterfactuals of determined actions since, if we hypothesized a particular counterfactual situation, that hypothetical situation would be causally linked to what would follow from it and would also cause our belief in what would follow from it.

For a libertarian, however, there is no causal connection between the hypothetical situation (the actualization of person A, for example) and the situation that would result (A's actions). If there is no necessary causal connection, it is difficult to see how one could know A's actions from A. Of course, it could certainly be argued that employing a causal theory of knowledge here begs the question against the libertarian who might also have trouble using it to explain how anyone knows anything in an indeterministic world, even things that have actually occurred. I do wonder, however, if libertarians can produce a theory of knowledge fitting our intuitions as well as Goldman's.
final victory over evil is possible, God will ultimately achieve it. It is of this possibility and this reality that God assures us by revelation.

On this view, God need not (though could) be timeless in the sense that God exists and acts in some “eternal moment.” It is possible that God lives in each successive, temporal moment as all other beings live, experiencing the pain or the pleasure at each point and then moving on to the next. Such a God would experience the present but also know both the past and the future completely, this knowledge being possible because God has complete knowledge of causal laws and the present state of all things. Thus God would interact with humans in the present, but God would have such complete knowledge of the consequences of any of God’s possible actions that God could always act in the absolutely best way, the way that in fact allows a final arrival at supreme good and the eradication of evil.

In summary, it seems that preserving God’s perfectly good nature and assuring God’s final victory necessitate a view in which (1) evil is a reality neither created nor willed by God (though by revelation we believe it is not an eternal reality) and (2) the world operates deterministically. Such a view keeps God completely from responsibility for evil. It allows God to deal honestly with human beings. That is, when God tells us that we should not do something, we can believe that God is being straightforward, not actually determining us behind the scenes to do that very thing. To the extent that God is able to influence and transform us, God moves us always toward the good. And in the end, the view I’ve outlined provides a philosophical framework allowing the firm and coherent belief that God will finally eradicate evil.

Yet although my view escapes some of the problems of the theodicies of Calvin and the free will theists, I can’t deny that it will also raise a host of new questions for many people. For example, many will ask whether it isn’t simply wrong to deny that God had complete control
over the world in creation and to deny that God has complete control now. Isn’t omnipotence an essential part of what makes God God? How can God deserve the title if God is not in complete control of all things? Additionally, is there not a new question about the coherence of God’s communication with the world if the world operates in a deterministic way? That is, how can God hold us accountable for the evil things we do if evil is simply how the world—and we ourselves—are? Both of these concerns are essential to address thoroughly, and in doing so, I hope to reveal more fully the benefits of such a view of God and God’s work in the world.

Traditional Attributes of God: Especially Omnipotence

Let me first address the question of whether the being my view describes is worthy of the name “God.” Let me repeat that I have come to this view of God because it preserves, in the face of the evil that we cannot deny exists, the most essential quality of the Christian God: God’s effective and certain transforming work. I believe this being to be all-good, completely loving, omniscient, omnipresent (in the sense that God is able to act and be acted upon in all places at all times), personal, and powerful enough to vanquish evil. I think these qualities are quite sufficient for this being to deserve the name “God.” This being is all-good and the most powerful being in existence.

Of course, in much ancient and medieval philosophy, God was attributed even more specifically ultimate qualities. It seems possible that some of these were attributed, or at least accorded greater importance, as a result of the desire to develop a priori proofs for God’s existence. Thus there is the idea that God is the first mover, the origin of all matter and motion. There is also the idea that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” It has always been difficult to see why, if there is a first mover and not an infinity of movers, that mover should automatically be thought to deserve the title “God” rather than simply “first
mover” or “original state of the universe.” Why should the idea of the very first thing necessarily be connected to either the most powerful thing or a fully good and loving personal being? It is precisely the point of the problem of evil that it seems obvious that if there is one single ultimate reality, it cannot be wholly good.

Someone who argues that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” has the same trouble. The human mind is awfully good at imagining and conceiving, to the extent that I think we’ve conceived a picture of God that demands too much abstract “perfection” to have an actually existing counterpart. I think the existence of evil—and the problem of evil formulated from it—does destroy one’s justification for believing in such a God. But I don’t think we should therefore give up theism. I think Biblical revelation and much modern-day experience provides strong evidence for the existence of a very powerful, loving being, and I think we should accept that evidence without adding a lot of fanciful notions about what we think God should be like, notions drawn from abstract notions of ontological perfection. I think experience, of evil among other things, belies such simplistic notions of God. I think that affirming the Christian hope of God’s salvation and sanctification should lead us to a picture of God more like the one I’ve advocated in this paper.

Before I talk specifically about omnipotence, perhaps I should quickly address the idea that God is a necessary being among many contingent ones. Some have questioned whether the God I describe is necessary and, derivatively, whether it is necessary that evil be eradicated in the end. I’m not sure how to answer this question since I’m not sure what “necessary” means in this context and thus don’t understand the significance of the question. Given the way the world is, it is determined—and thus, in that sense, necessary—that God destroy evil. Could the world have been different? I don’t see how such a question even makes sense. To say whether it could
be different, we would need some rules that would allow certain things and not others. But when we’re talking about the most basic facts of the universe, on what could we base a comparison? For me, it’s enough to know that God does exist and will successfully eradicate evil without worrying whether it’s possible for things to have been different. They are what they are. Isn’t the fact of the matter enough?

Now, in regards to the specific property of omnipotence, let me say that I don’t believe the idea that God can do anything logically possible accords with Scripture. God can do a great many things, much more in a single moment than human beings have done in all the time of their collective existence. We have some evidence that God can work in nature in amazing ways by performing bodily healing, sending ravens to feed prophets, and raising people from the dead, among many other things. God has great power to know the events of the world and to organize them in such a way as to effect some incredibly complex plans. But there is good reason to believe that God cannot do all that God desires instantaneously. God seems to have to work within certain limits. A great deal of the time, these limits are those of self-centered human beings. If God desires to form not just a world free from suffering but a world with the good that comes from relationship and love, much of God’s work will be focused on transforming persons, to develop in them loving and devoted hearts that can care about others just as much as about self. This transformation and opening out of personality is a matter of process. There is no flick of the wrist and suddenly everyone is perfectly holy and loving. God has to interact with those God wants to transform, just as human beings have to interact with those they want to persuade. God changes our actions by changing our hearts, and this latter goal God accomplishes by appealing to us as persons. Redemption and healing are processes, the speed of which is affected not only by God’s work but by the existing state of the persons involved. Even the most powerful
being cannot bring its desires to pass instantly, for even that being must work with the given raw material which we know from experience has great strength of its own.

God’s power on my view is great, as great as possible in a world with certain laws that necessitate that if one thing is going to happen, there are necessary conditions and preliminary steps. The fact that God cannot do everything God desires right now is not only in accordance with Scripture and history (where we see God has not completed redemption of the world instantaneously) but still allows us to have the certain hope that God will definitely one day fulfill God’s vision for the world. God has all the power necessary to bring about God’s purposes, and that is the power worth affirming when traditional philosophical notions of omnipotence break down in the face of real evil.

One might now agree that the evidence justifies the belief that God can’t immediately eradicate evil, and one might yet wonder exactly why it is that God cannot do so. What is evil, and why has it been able to resist God’s transforming, sanctifying power for so long? This is a huge question, one I don’t think any of us is equipped to answer in an adequately specific and definitive way. I will, however, venture some general remarks in the hope that they will give the reader a better understanding of my theological picture as a whole.

It seems to me that a necessary component of evil is pain and suffering. The presence of suffering is perhaps not sufficient for something to be called evil, but without some suffering (whether physical, emotional, or psychological) felt by either the actor or someone being acted upon, it is difficult to see how evil could be said to exist in the situation.\textsuperscript{12} Calvin suggested that evil may not be pain alone but pain inflicted with evil intention. This “evil intention” I would

\textsuperscript{12} As a side note, though evil may involve more than suffering, suffering by itself makes a theodicy necessary. The question of how a perfectly good, omnipotent God could allow suffering is just as difficult and pressing as the more specific problem of evil, and the theodicy I am defending in this paper is designed to work equally well in answering both.
describe as disconnection between actor and object. There is a lack of identification and empathy, a lack of recognition that what one would not wish for oneself, one should not bring on another. While we consider it obvious that our own suffering is to be avoided and act consistently in accordance with this principle, it is not always as equally obvious to us that the suffering of others is also to be avoided, and we are often able to disregard this principle with little inner conflict. Evil seems often, if not always, to take the form of one being’s ignorance of the good of another being and the former pursuing its own interests at the expense of the latter.

Let us speculate that at the “beginning” of the world there is relative chaos. There are many separate beings able to affect one another, able to cause pleasure and pain in one another. Each being is conscious only of its own pleasure and pain and instinctively seeks the former while avoiding the latter. As one of these beings, one is, unfortunately, not going to be fully—or even very—successful since one is affected by the actions of many other beings who don’t have one’s good in mind. The most effective way of achieving pleasure and avoiding pain would be to make all the beings who affect one aware of one’s pleasure and pain to the extent that they desire one’s pleasure and avoid one’s pain just as one does oneself. What is needed is a connection of consciousness and interest: empathy and identification among all beings that have the capacity to affect one another.

It is my view that God’s action to eliminate evil and suffering consists of creating just such connection. God acts in the world to draw all beings into connection with each other, to make each conscious of each other’s good and act with the good of all in mind. I suspect that God brings about such connection by beginning a sort of chain reaction. God reaches out to other beings with love, showing a connection of God’s interests with theirs. That is what it means for God to be perfectly good; God identifies fully with the good of all other beings. So God reaches
out in identification and connects to one being. That connection causes the being to see the value of connection, and this being in turn reaches out to another, identifying its interests with theirs.

To summarize, the world begins disconnected; suffering and pain are natural outgrowths of individual beings trying to achieve their ends in ignorance of the needs of other beings. God changes this picture by introducing connection, identification, and love which form only a few weak links at first but in the long run cannot be prevented from expanding. Once begun, love cannot be extinguished. Connection is, according to the deterministic laws of the universe I am postulating, simply stronger than disconnection. Once beings have felt sufficient identification, they will expand that identification. Once beings have been exposed sufficiently to love, they will choose it over disconnection just as surely as they will choose pleasure over pain. Complete and final connection, though not able to be brought about immediately, is inevitable.

I find excellent metaphors for this process in the New Testament. Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as the smallest of seeds that when fully grown is a tree big enough for animals to take refuge in. He describes the kingdom as a little bit of yeast that works through the whole batch of dough. In the same way, God’s love is such that when it touches one being, the feeling of connection and wholeness is so strong that it causes that being to affect another and that one another until finally the whole world is united by the love that originated in God.

With this concept of God’s work in the world, we need a definition of God’s omnipotence very different from the traditional ones. On the view I’ve been describing, God’s great power is not the ability to do anything logically possible but an innate force of character greater than anything else that exists. God’s loving character is stronger than any other force in the universe. This is the understanding of God’s power that is ultimately critical for maintaining
the hope of transformation in the face of a world that obviously does not now appear to be completely under the control of a loving God.

*The Coherence of God Holding Us Accountable for Determined Actions*

If the world operates deterministically so that, given the way things began (including God’s existence), the world had to move through phases of great suffering and disconnection but will eventually reach a time of beatific unity, what relevance does moral responsibility have? More particularly, how is it that God is justified in holding human beings accountable for their actions, even to the point of punishing them? As I put it earlier, how can God hold us accountable for the evil things we do if evil is simply how the world—and we ourselves—are, at least for now?

I think the answer to this question is quite simple. First it must be understood that there is an enormous difference between a deterministic universe which God controls and a deterministic universe of which God is a part. My view posits the latter, and this is crucial for understanding how it escapes the charges of incoherence often leveled at a Calvinistic view. It is incoherent for a God who completely determines a being’s actions to be dissatisfied with the way the being behaves. If this sort of God expresses dissatisfaction with his creatures or punishes them for their actions, he is guilty of having a double-faced character. At the very least, his relationship with his creatures is less than straightforward.

On my view, however, God does not determine the actions of other beings from outside the system. Rather, God must work within the system, that is, by interacting with the beings themselves. God sees the harmful actions of beings that result from their disconnection from one another, and God may perhaps speak to one of these beings and tell her that she should not act to harm others. Now, those who claim that such an admonition is incoherent (since the being was
obviously determined to do what she did) miss the fact that God’s speech is not meant to deny that the being had to act the way that she did in the past. It is rather meant (1) to make a negative statement about the value of that past action and (2) to encourage that being, by the very act of speech, to behave differently in the future. God’s commands and encouragement are not meant to imply that human beings always have the capacity to carry them out. Rather, they are meant to deliver knowledge about and perspective on certain actions that affect oneself and others and, by delivering such knowledge and perspective, to bring one ever closer to having the capacity to carry them out. God’s punishment (if indeed God uses punishment) is not retribution in the sense that the beings punished were metaphysically guilty and deserving. Instead, punishment is only justified as a tool to help beings understand in themselves the effects their purely self-serving actions have on others.

Thus God’s attribution of guilt to a certain individual should not be perceived as reference to some sort of metaphysical responsibility resulting from that individual having had the freedom to do otherwise. Rather, God’s attribution of guilt is only a statement of the fact that it was that individual who performed the action and of the additional fact that the action caused suffering, so giving it a negative moral quality and meaning it should be avoided in the future.

So the simple answer I promised is this: God doesn’t hold us metaphysically accountable for our actions in the way proponents of free will conceive. God rather uses God’s interaction with us to push us continually towards identification with one another and actions that bring pleasure rather than suffering to all.

Conclusion
In conclusion, I offer a brief summary of my view and its advantages over two predominant theodicies. On my view, the world began in a state of disconnection which allows beings to cause suffering in one another. God existed as part of this world but did not cause its state of disconnection. God rather constantly acts to connect all beings through love. And because the world behaves according to deterministic principles, God can be sure that this connection will eventually be complete.

This view escapes the Calvinistic problem of making God responsible for the very evils God is supposed to be using all of God’s power to eradicate. It also allows God’s commands, admonitions, and punishments to make sense as true, straightforward efforts to help us see the negative moral value of our past actions and encourage us to better future acts.

This view also escapes the free will theists’ problem concerning the certainty of God’s final eradication of evil. On the free will view, freedom as the highest good must eternally endure and so the possibility of evil must also eternally endure. My view rejects the idea that metaphysical freedom is necessary for the highest good and thus allows that God may know with certainty that God’s actions will finally vanquish evil.