God in the Dock
The Case for the Defense

Peter Brunette
Victoria, British Columbia
February 2025

1. Introduction

I am in several respects an unlikely person to try my hand at a theodicy, which is to say, a vindication of God or of one's belief in God.[1] I was not brought up in a community of faith and have not seen fit to join one since. During much of my life I was an atheist. Having read Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian" and one or two similar tracts in my youth, I allowed myself to be persuaded that religion was false and that it did more harm than good. While I no longer find those views as compelling as I once did, my attitude toward organized religion remains ambivalent at best. And while I no longer actively disbelieve in God, I cannot say with complete assurance that I believe in her either. I guess that makes me an agnostic, but a rather unhappy one who finds sitting on this particular fence neither a comfortable nor a dignified position to have to occupy.

I hasten to add that the atheism I once espoused was never the militant, aggressive sort promulgated more recently by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. I was not so willing as those writers to cut myself loose from that great majority of mankind who practice a religion or adhere to a theistic creed—not so arrogant as to believe that, because I took my instruction from a scientist or a philosopher, I was privy to truths inaccessible to the benighted multitudes who took theirs from a prophet or a saint. It did not occur to me that, just because words like "God" and "heaven" and "salvation" had no place in my

[1] Only after completing this essay did I learn of a short, occasional article by C. S. Lewis, published in the theological journal *Lumen Vitae* in 1948, that bears the same title (though without the subtitle used here). It was anthologized posthumously in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970). Little read today, the article lacks the power or polish of Lewis's more familiar works of Christian apologetics, one of which I cite herein.

intellectual vocabulary, those who did use them—and who, I could not help noticing, included most of the greatest thinkers the world had ever known—must be talking nonsense. Instead, I gave them the benefit of the doubt, assuming they might very well be expressing important thoughts that, once I had grasped them, I could formulate as well or better in secular terms. It is perhaps this last point upon which my thinking has most evolved since then. Whether it is necessarily the case that truths captured in theistic language can survive translation into secular language, I am now inclined to doubt. The connotation of the word "God," in particular, seems not to coincide very closely with that of any other common noun,[2] and if the word has a denotation as well as a connotation, then the reality it picks out must likewise be one of a kind.

My opposition to theism gradually waned as I came to see that the proponents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam taught many of the same lessons I had learned from the more secular thinkers I had come to admire—including Russell himself, bless his unbelieving soul. At the same time, I came to see that atheism, which I had supposed to be a less dogmatic creed than theism, was in fact more so (a point on which I shall expand presently); that science, admirable though it was in its respect for the facts of nature, could not reveal the truth that, in virtue of our own human nature, we hope to discover behind or beyond those facts, and hence could not answer the deepest yearnings of the human soul; and that a strictly secular philosophy, since it necessarily held the better part of mankind's store of wisdom and knowledge at arm's length, could not do so either. Those secular teachers who did offer useful guidance on how we ought to live, I realized, had inherited most of it from their religious forebears. Thus, Kant's "categorical imperative" turned out to be a formalization of the Golden Rule, and what he called a "kingdom of ends" to be no more and no less than what Jesus had called the Kingdom of God. On what grounds, I wondered, was the Kantian terminology to be preferred over the Christian? Surely, Jesus had spoken more clearly and directly to the human heart than Kant had done, and his message had

[2] "Deity" may be passed over, as it merely translates the Germanic "god" into Latin. As will be seen below, I endorse John the Apostle's view that "love" (*agape* in the original Greek of the New Testament) is a tolerably close synonym; to say that "God is love," however, invests love with a sacramental dimension that goes unremarked in standard definitions of the word.

reached more souls than Kant's ever would. The prophet—for whatever else one takes Jesus to be, he was arguably the last and greatest of the Hebrew prophets—had revealed the will of God to us (albeit elliptically, in the form of parables) and had enjoined us to obey it, whereas the philosopher had explained the imperative of human reason in much more abstract language and told us to obey that. But if, as the Bible teaches, God has made man in her own image, might not the dictate of reason and the will of God turn out to be one and the same?

The argument advanced below aims to demonstrate that it is perfectly reasonable, not only to believe in God, but to believe that she created the world. The reader may object that science has thoroughly debunked the biblical doctrine of creation. My reply, admittedly based on a liberal rather than a literalist interpretation of that doctrine, is that the capacity of science to supplant scripture in this regard has been greatly exaggerated. Given the limitations of human knowledge, as Plato pointed out in the *Timaeus*, any tale we might spin regarding the origin of the universe is at best a "likely story." The current Big Bang cosmology, its claim to empirical validation notwithstanding, is no exception to Plato's rule,[3] and neither are the just-so stories of the hyper-Darwinian evolutionary psychologists. Our thirst for knowledge of the universe, of its origin and destiny, and of our place in it is one that science alone can never quench. For science can only ever answer a portion of our questions on that score, and the questions it does answer are far from being the most interesting or the most pressing ones. Does this world in which I find myself have an order, a design, a purpose, a maker? Does it, or anything in it, or indeed anything beyond it, merit my reverence, devotion, or obedience? Does my life have a meaning? How ought I to live? Through the ages, women and waymen have sought answers to these questions.[4] That enterprise, for the most part, has gone by the name of religion, and in smaller measure by

[3] That cosmology, after all, is at best radically incomplete, inasmuch as it requires us to postulate two unobservable entities, dark matter and dark energy, whose nature remains largely or wholly unknown but which are nonetheless supposed to comprise some ninety-five percent of the stuff of the universe.

[4] Since I reserve the term "man" to designate "a human being (irrespective of sex or age)"—its original meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—I use the neologism "wayman" for "an adult male human being." For a detailed explanation and defense of this usage, see the Prologue to *The Artful Animal* (peterbrunette.ca/essays).

the name of philosophy. I doubt whether I could abandon the enterprise even if I tried, and I see no point in trying.

2. The Case against God

A theodicy, as I remarked at the outset, is a defense or vindication of God. Of what transgression, one might ask, has God been accused, that she should stand in need of vindication? Her alleged crime turns out to be that of fraud, of imposture, of misrepresenting her identity to her worshippers and thus leading them astray. Let us imagine, then, a case at law in which God stands in the dock, accused of this crime—accused, in short, of not being God after all. While a number of gambits may be open to the prosecution, its safest bet is undoubtedly to rest its case on the traditional "problem of evil." In claiming to be God, the prosecutor will argue, the defendant must claim the attributes traditionally ascribed to God; she must claim, in short, to be all-powerful and wholly good, whereas the evidence to be presented will prove that she cannot be both of these things at once. It is worth noting that the prosecution's argument, should it succeed, would set a powerful and sweeping legal precedent: it would convict not only the accused but any agent of any description who claimed to combine the divine attributes of omnipotence and perfect benevolence. What is really on trial, therefore, is belief in the very possibility of a being such as the God of Abraham, of Jesus, and of Muhammed. In short, the prosecution's case is a case for atheism. Its putative evidence, which it offers to produce in great abundance and exquisite detail, is the host of evils that occur in the world the accused is supposed to have created and over which her writ is supposed to run.

It is in the context of such a trial that the need for a theodicy arises: the theodicy will be the case for the defense. Now, before presenting that case, a competent attorney will doubtless want to examine the prosecution's argument and evidence with a critical eye. Does its argument hold water? Does its evidence prove what it is alleged to prove?

We have seen that the prosecution's case rests on its professed ability to demonstrate, not merely that the defendant's claim to divinity is fraudulent, but that it must necessarily be so—that a legitimate claim to divinity is a contradiction in terms, because there can be no entity answering the traditional description of God in a world such as the one we

inhabit. The prosecution's argument takes the form of what appears at first glance to be a rigorous application of the so-called scientific method, a chain of reasoning and observation comprised of five sturdy links. First, the prosecutor will offer to take at face value the proposition that the accused really is God, treating it as if it were an hypothesis worthy of serious consideration; second, she will deduce a consequence of that hypothesis which she holds to be empirically testable; third, she will present the evidence that is supposed to test the consequence; fourth, she will conclude from the alleged failure of the test that the consequence must be false; and finally, fifth, she will deduce from the imputed falsity of the consequence that the hypothesis itself must likewise be false.

More specifically, the case will proceed as follows: "Let us suppose," the prosecutor will argue, "that the accused really is what she claims to be, a perfectly benevolent and all-powerful being. A being in whom those two attributes are combined must be both willing and able to prevent moral or natural evils from occurring—which is to say, to eliminate suffering of any and every kind. The evidence we shall enter shows, however, that moral and natural evils, along with the suffering they cause, abound in this very world which the accused claims to have created and over which she continues to assert her authority. From this we conclude that she is either unwilling or unable to eliminate these evils, or both; and from this in turn we conclude that she cannot be the God of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim faith."[5]

Now, it seems to me that this chain of reasoning is nowhere near as robust as the prosecution would have us believe. An able defense attorney should therefore have little trouble obtaining an acquittal. Break the chain, or merely expose its fragility, at any of its links, and her case is made. For atheism, unlike agnosticism, is a claim to knowledge, and in a criminal case the prosecution's knowledge claims, insofar as they bear upon the

[5] The brief outlined here is now more or less standardly dubbed "the logical argument from evil," even though, as I have pointed out, it depends upon an appeal to empirical evidence as much as on logical reasoning. The less ambitious "evidential argument from evil" claims only to prove that God's existence is improbable, not that it is impossible. See Michael W. Hickson, "A Brief History of Problems of Evil," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2013).

guilt or innocence of the accused, are held to the highest standard: their validity must be established beyond a reasonable doubt.

In the case in point, as we have seen, the proposed method of validation is a combination of logical reasoning and an empirical test. The prosecution aims to convict on the basis of what it claims to be, on the one hand, a sound inference from the nature of divinity (absolute goodness and power) to the nature of divine action (prevention of suffering) and, on the other hand, the evidence of human experience, which is said, on the most incontrovertible of grounds, to include the widespread experience of suffering. Now, the defense need dispute neither the evidence itself nor its admissibility, but it can and should dispute its relevance. Evidence of the kind entered by the prosecution will serve as proof of its conclusion—the nonexistence of God—only if the jurors accept the inference it purports to test. But to accept that inference they must likewise accept the covert assumption on which it is based: namely, that we human beings—"finite spirits," as Hegel calls us—are capable of determining what an infinite spirit is bound, in accordance with her infinite nature, to do or not to do.

3. The Case against Atheism

Presently, I shall be casting doubt upon that assumption and, more broadly, upon the notion that anything in our sensory experience, anything located in space and time, can be brought to bear, whether positively or negatively, on the question of the existence of God. I shall even suggest that the question itself be dismissed as ill conceived. But let us shelve these considerations for the moment and ask, instead, whether the prosecutor's strongest argument against the accused really lies, as I stated above, in the so-called problem of evil. We have seen that the evidence she will present in making that argument cannot constitute direct proof of guilt. It will be probative only to the extent that the argument as a whole, in which it constitutes but a single step, is valid. Why, however, shouldn't the prosecutor introduce direct evidence and base her case on that?

It might seem only fair that such a strategy should be open to atheists, since it is so often adopted by their opponents. If we take the natural world to be God's handiwork, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims have traditionally done, then perhaps we need not think the notion of empirical

evidence being brought to bear on the question of God's existence altogether misguided. Certainly many believers do profess to find signs, traces, or manifestations of God in her creation, while disbelievers profess to find no such suggestions there or at least none they regard as persuasive. For present purposes, I leave aside the question of whether a successful defense of *theism* can be mounted on empirical grounds (roughly speaking, the question of natural theology). What I do insist, however, is that *atheism* is wholly indefensible on such grounds, for the simple reason that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. If, therefore, we rule out such an "argument from ignorance," and if we likewise discredit the argument based on the problem of evil—as I shall try to do—then it seems to me that atheism is an inherently and irreducibly dogmatic creed. For, while I can at least imagine what might count as an empirical test of God's existence, I can conceive of nothing that might count as an empirical test of her nonexistence. One need not, perhaps, agree with the psalmist that "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1); one might think they declare nothing more exalted than matter's blind obedience to the laws of physics. But the one thing that neither the heavens nor anything else in the natural world can ever declare is that an entity we contemplate but which we are unable to see, hear, feel, smell, or taste—be it God, or the graviton, or some hypothetical galaxy beyond the limit of the observable universe, or some race of civilized reptiles inhabiting a planet outside our solar system—does not exist. Proof of the thing's reality we may very well fail to obtain, but proof of its unreality lies utterly beyond our grasp.

But the next point I should put to the court, were I the counsel for the defense, is that God cannot be anything like a graviton, a galaxy, or a reptile, and our knowledge of her cannot, on that account, be anything like our knowledge of things of that sort.

Does God exist? That is the question the prosecution claims to have asked and answered. But what exactly does it mean to assert or to deny the existence of God? The prosecution's answer cannot be worth much if its question is misconstrued—if, for example, by posing it in the form of those three little words the prosecution has committed a logical fallacy, as indeed appears to be the case. For God cannot be a thing that exists in the same sense that things like my umbrella or your dog or Mt. Everest exist, if God is also supposed to be the ground of all existence, the essential

precondition of the thinghood of existent things. Thus, as Hegel suggests, talk about "God's existence"—he uses the term *Dasein*, which is the ordinary German word for existence but also has the more literal meaning of "being there"—may well involve "some distortion. . . . 'Existence' is determinate, finite being. But God's being is in no way a limited being."[6]

To ask whether God exists seems, indeed, tantamount to asking whether God can be located in space and time. If I inquire, for example, whether unicorns exist, what I mean is, roughly, "Are unicorns the sort of things that occupy particular regions of space and persist during particular periods of time?" Now whatever exists in this sense must necessarily be, in Hegel's words, determinate and finite: to "be there" is not to be here, to be now is not to be then, to be a unicorn is not to be a dog, an umbrella, or a mountain. If God is infinite reality, then we should not expect to find her occurring in space and time alongside the finite things that populate those limited and limiting dimensions of being; rather we should expect to find space, time, and the things that populate those dimensions occurring in God.

It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to suppose that the existence of certain finite beings we encounter in space and time might have an evidentiary bearing upon the possible existence of other finite beings in space and time. If, for example, we find that life based on carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen occurs on Earth, it is a safe assumption that life as we know it does not occur wherever—or whenever—these elements are absent or vanishingly rare. What is far less reasonable to suppose, however, is that our knowledge of finite beings that occur in space and time should have an evidentiary bearing upon the existence or the nature of an infinite being who encompasses but also transcends space and time.

An analogy may help to illustrate my point. I cannot say what, if anything, an earthworm experiences when I inadvertently tread on its tail, but I can assert with some confidence that any conclusion it might draw from that experience upon the subject of human nature or human morality would be less than fully warranted, so great is the gulf that separates a man

---

[6] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984–1987 [1824–1831]), vol. 1, p. 417. "It would be better," Hegel adds, "to say, 'God and his being, his actuality or objectivity.'"

from a worm. Yet that gulf, running as it does between two finite natures, can provide but a faint suggestion of the unspeakable chasm that necessarily yawns between Man and God—across which, if any bridge be extended, it must surely be extended from the divine and not the human side. Can the prosecution blame us, then, if we find our breath somewhat taken away by the presumptiveness of its claim to draw a reliable inference across that very chasm, and to draw it (having, of course, no other choice) in the human-to-divine direction?

4. The Reality of God

In the light of these considerations, therefore, I suggest that we describe the question at issue between the defense and the prosecution, or between the theist and the atheist, as that of God's reality or unreality rather than of her existence or nonexistence. With Hegel, I take this to be the same as the question of whether we should regard the universe as, in the final analysis, coherent or incoherent, purposeful or purposeless, alive or dead. Are we justified, in other words, in positing a "true infinity," an infinite being that is not just an endless procession of finite beings but a unitary whole in which the natures of those beings are conserved but at the same time consecrated and transcended? Are we justified in our search for a big picture, a grand scheme of things in which our lives find their place and have their meaning—in which, to borrow Hegel's phrase, our spirits can be, or can learn to be, "at home?" Or is there only atomization, only physical process? Is the universe a mere hodgepodge of pointless encounters, random fluctuations, or probabilistic quantum interactions lacking any intelligible pattern or direction? In that final analysis of which I spoke a moment ago, do things hold together or do they fall apart?

Posed in these terms, the inquiry seems to concern the philosopher rather than the theologian. Or, more precisely, since philosophers of the first rank—Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Spinoza, Hegel—have always regarded theology as a department of philosophy, it seems to concern the philosopher in her ontological rather than her theological capacity. But the line between ontology and theology, between Nature and God, begins to blur the moment we reflect on the holistic response to the question raised in the previous paragraph, the moment we entertain the thought that things might ultimately hold together rather than fall

apart, and God rears her beautiful head, so to speak. For we are persons, and an infinite reality that conserves (even while it simultaneously transcends) our personhood cannot itself be impersonal.

To clarify this point, allow me once again to resort to an analogy. Whatever else she is, a man is an organism composed of cells, which are composed of molecules, and so forth. The reality of a human being cannot therefore be sub-organic or sub-molecular, though it can be super-organic and super-molecular. Just so, an infinite reality of which men are supposed to be part cannot be subhuman, though we should expect that it can and will be superhuman. A true infinity in which we finite spirits participate cannot conceivably be less spiritual than we are ourselves; it can only be more so.

The idea of God which I have just outlined is, as I said, ontological. It conceives her not as an existent thing but as the ground of all existence and all thinghood: the infinitely real, infinitely true being from which all finite beings derive whatever degrees of reality and truth they may justly be said to possess. If there's a nice, knock-down argument on logical or ontological grounds for or against the reality of an infinite spirit, I have yet to come across it. Philosophers, alas, are somewhat notorious for having tossed such arguments back and forth for centuries without signing on to a majority report, much less reaching a consensus on the matter. With respect to ontology and logic, then, the theists seem to me to stand on no firmer ground than the atheists. Moreover, with respect to empirical evidence, where they initially seemed to have the advantage, the considerations I have just rehearsed seem to have nibbled most of that advantage away, or at least to have hedged it about with qualifications.

Nonetheless, I continue to think the vindication of God not only a worthy enterprise but one that has every prospect of being carried off with a substantial degree of success. At this point, therefore, I shall leave off picking holes in the case for the prosecution and begin putting forward the positive case for the defense. To that effect, I shall need to confront the prosecution's argument not at its weakest but at its strongest point, which is to say at its logical crux. A God who tolerates evil, that argument went, cannot be infinite in both power and goodness—or, as I prefer to put it, she cannot be a God in whom absolute power and absolute love coincide. If her power were absolute, she *could* ensure that her creatures neither did evil nor suffered evil. And if her love were equally absolute, that is

precisely what she *would* ensure. The logic of these assertions seems unassailable, yet assail it I shall.

5. Creation as the Self-Alienation of God

In the theodicy I espouse, perfect power and perfect love can without contradiction be held to coincide in the nature of God, but only *before* she sets out to create a universe or to govern that universe once created.

Having made this remark, I must qualify it forthwith. If, as remarked above, space and time are grounded in God, then the concepts of *before* and *after* must not apply to God in the same way that they apply to creatures like us, who are grounded in space and time. Our nature constrains us to conceive of activities as occurring in temporal sequence; hence we are prone to construct a narrative in which God's activity in creating the world occurs at a certain point in time, even though time is presumably among the *products* of that activity. To us, the character of an activity that transcends time and space must necessarily remain obscure. Even to speak of it, we must resort to phrases that are self-contradictory: "outside of space," "before the beginning of time." In this as in so many other respects, we doubtless know God "through a glass darkly" rather than "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). That said, and bearing this limitation of human understanding in mind, let us continue framing our discussion in the sort of terms we do understand, terms in which it makes sense to speak of God's nature before and after she created the world.

Were God content to remain in her original state of unsullied perfection, keeping herself to herself, alone and aloof in her heaven, so to speak, one might suppose that her love and her power could remain undiminished, side by side together, for ever and ever. In that case, however, she would be only a notional God, a "God of the philosophers" whom no one would go to the trouble of worshipping—in short, a God like the one described in Hegel's Logic, who rests content in her "eternal essence . . . as it is before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit."[7] As the same Hegel writes elsewhere, however:

[7] Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1831]), Introduction, p. 29.

> Thus the life of God and divine cognition may well be spoken of as love disporting with itself; but this idea sinks into mere edification, and even insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative. *In itself*, [God's] life is indeed one of untroubled equality and unity with itself, for which otherness and alienation, and the overcoming of alienation, are not serious matters. But this *in-itself* is abstract universality, in which the nature of the divine life *to be for itself* [is] altogether left out of account.[8]

In short, God's power and love, if they are supposed to be truly infinite, can hardly remain throughout all eternity focused inwardly on her own being. Rather they must find an outlet for external expression. No power is absolute that is never exerted upon an other, no love absolute that is never extended to an other. Simply and immediately, perhaps, God can be real *in herself*, but only as mediated by her other can she be real *for herself*. Now, in order to permit this outward consummation of the reality of God, God's other, even though she herself has created it, must be really and truly other than God. And if God is to create such a genuine other, her act of creation must be an act of self-denial and self-renunciation. Only by alienating herself from herself can God create an other that is truly other.

It is thus God's very nature as absolutely powerful and absolutely loving that impels her to embark upon her world-making project, which however proves at once to be an adventure not only in creation but in self-creation or self-transformation. For—so I suggest, at any rate—the moment she begins to conceive that project, a tension must arise within the nature of God: the two sides of her nature to which we have been attending, the powerful side and the loving side, are bound to start pulling in opposite directions.

To see why this is so, let us try to imagine ourselves in the position of God as she considers the options that are open to her in the design and creation of the world—as she contemplates, that is to say, the nature of the universe she is about to create and the nature of her action in creating it. At that crucial juncture, it seems to me, a rather stark dilemma must present itself to the mind of God. She is bound to realize that her creation

---

[8] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977 [1807]), Preface, p. 10, emphasis in original.

of the world can be an act of absolute power, or it can be a act of absolute love, but it cannot be both at once. In order to create any world at all, therefore, God must voluntarily privilege one part of her nature over the other. Either she must allow her power to constrain her love, or she must allow her love to constrain her power.

6. The God of Love and the God of Power

We are left with the following paradox. Because absolute love and absolute power coincide in her nature, God ventures to create the universe; and because she ventures to create the universe, absolute love and absolute power cease to coincide in her nature.

To see how the creator's dilemma works itself out, let us first consider a scenario in which she takes the first option: that of constraining her love. In that case, her power will remain absolute and the universe she creates will be wholly subject to that power. Her love, meanwhile, even though necessarily limited by her power, must lead her to create a world not merely free of evil but free of the very possibility of evil. Never in the universe of God's absolute power will there arise a cry of anguish, fear, or grief; never an occasion for shame, regret, or penitence; and, consequently, never an occasion for hope or prayer. The inhabitants of that universe will not think of entreating God to forgive them their trespasses, for they will be incapable of committing trespasses in the first place, incapable even of harbouring the thought of doing so. Nor will God ever hear from those compulsively obedient creatures of hers the plaintive wish that observant Christians address to her every day: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." Indeed, the Lord's Prayer is rendered completely superfluous in the scenario we are considering, because the kingdom of an absolutely powerful God *necessarily* extends over the Earth as well as the Heaven, and on such an Earth the will of God is *necessarily* done.

Put another way, the creatures that inhabit such an Earth can have no wills of their own in contradistinction from the will of God. They live in what C. S. Lewis has called a "a toy world which only moves when [God] pulls the strings."[9] What form, then, ought we to say that the relation

[9] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (n.p.: Samizdat, 2014 [1952]), p. 30.

between God and her creatures will assume in such a world? Lewis's metaphor suggests that of puppet-master and puppet. But puppets do not live or breathe; more to the point, they do not feel or think. In human terms, then, we may take the relationship between creator and creature to be more nearly analogous to the relation between master and slave. But then, in equal measure, it must be disanalogous to the relation between lover and beloved. For love has no place in the master–slave relation. A loving master, a beloved slave—these are plain and simple contradictions in terms, because it is only in the state of mutual freedom that true love between human beings can be either given or received. Master and slave can, to be sure, share various forms of animal affection, including sexual affection, but they cannot share love in the human sense of the word. If I truly loved my slave, the very first of my loving actions would be to emancipate her, for I should realize straightaway that I could not love her and hold her in bondage at the same time. And only in the state of freedom could she requite my love, should she find it in her heart to do so, for love by its nature can be neither purchased nor compelled.

Let me expand a bit on the characteristics of the toy universe God might create should she allow her power to trump her love. The properties and dispositions of its various creatures would be fixed, and the future of the world they inhabited would be predetermined. Such a world would be wholly transparent to God: it could hold no surprises for her, for every event that occurred in it would be foreseeable and foreseen. Her creatures would do no evil and suffer no evil. But neither, however, would they do any good, and neither could any good be done unto them. For the doing of good is a moral act, and moral considerations could gain no traction in a world from which evildoing had been preemptively and permanently excluded by divine fiat. Morality presupposes a knowledge of right and wrong and a capacity to choose between them. Creatures who lack that knowledge or that capacity are not moral agents, and their actions, therefore, cannot justly be said to merit either blame or praise. In short, the inhabitants of God's toy world would have no moral stature of their own. Their goodness would be the goodness of their maker and hers alone. What, then, would be the point of enacting the Creation, of giving material existence to a world whose every possibility and actuality she knows in advance, of breathing life into creatures devoid of agency, whose

otherness from God must be spurious at best? Surely God has no need of a mirror in which to admire her own reflection.

And scripture teaches, in any event, that God is love (1 John 4:8), not that God is power. Let us therefore turn to the universe God would create if she allowed her love to remain absolute at the expense of her power—to the world which, according to the three Abrahamic faiths, she did in fact create. In her world-making act, God would thus relinquish some of her power and turn it over to her creatures.[10] She would not subject them entirely to her will but would rather endow them with wills of their own. In so doing, she would likewise necessarily relinquish some of her knowledge regarding the basis of their decisions and some of her foresight regarding the actions that would follow upon those decisions. If my actions are truly free, and if, as often happens, I don't quite know what I will do until I'm on the verge of doing it, then God does not know either, even though my mind be an open book to her.

For better or worse, the God of love would thus leave the future of her creation open, undecided, unknown and unknowable even to herself. More properly speaking, the openness of the world made by the loving God necessarily makes room for better *and* for worse. A creation liberated from the sway of God's absolute power, a creation endowed with powers of its own—such a creation is itself creative, capable of innovation, able to become what it was not at its inception, what it is not yet, and even what it was never conceived or designed or intended to be. The world God builds with her absolute love is a real world, not a toy. It's a world that is truly other than God, a world she can create only by alienating herself from herself, by relinquishing some of her power and turning it over to her creatures, a world that therefore necessarily escapes her control and in so doing takes on that very moral dimension which, as we saw, the world she built with her absolute power inherently lacked. In the loving creation, the doing of good *and* the doing of evil become genuine possibilities. There, God's creatures, at least to the extent that they are

[10] In Christian theology, this act of relinquishment or *kenosis* (literally, "emptying out") is held to characterize the Incarnation: "Christ Jesus . . . , though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5–7, NRSV). I here suggest that it must have characterized the Creation as well.

rational, are moral agents, and as such they are capable of transforming themselves into saints *or* sinners, angels *or* demons.

7. The Tree of Knowledge and the Fall of Man

Now the God of absolute love does not, of course, wittingly create sinners or demons. It is not she who brings evil into the world she fashions, which in its original condition, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, is indeed an earthly paradise, a Garden of Eden, a place that knows neither pain nor anxiety, neither hunger nor sickness nor death. But, as we have seen, the God of love does not hold her creatures in captivity in the garden she has created for them. She instead sets them free, voluntarily alienating a portion of her divine power of creation and self-creation in order to hand it over to them. By virtue of this act of love and self-abnegation, God plants, in the midst of the garden, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Wisely and lovingly, she cautions her creatures against eating the fruit of that particular tree; and yet, precisely because she has allowed her love for them to trump her power over them, because she has kept the former absolute by willingly accepting a constraint upon the latter, her creatures are free to disobey their creator and partake of the forbidden fruit should they so choose.

In the story of Genesis, of course, Eve and Adam do so choose, and all manner of evil is visited upon them as a result. Their fall from grace is remarkably precipitous. They begin at once to cower before God, feeling a previously unknown shame in their bodies that induces them to cover their nakedness. Expelled from the garden, where their every need had been readily satisfied, they are subject to necessity and scarcity; worse still, they and their progeny become susceptible to sickness, age, and death. Adam, condemned to toil in order to provide for himself and his family, suffers the indignity of eating bread in the sweat of his brow, while Eve is meanwhile tormented by the pangs of childbirth. In the climax of their personal tragedy, the terrible passions of pride, envy, and jealousy creep into the bosom their family, driving one of their sons to murder the other.

In Christian theology, beginning with St. Augustine, the sin of our first parents and the consequent Fall of Man is traditionally taken as a premise, with moral evil being the consequence of sin and natural evil God's

punishment for sin. This is bound to strike many moderns as unfair. Why should I be penalized for the misdeed of my remotest ancestors? Why did God not simply replace Adam and Eve with better human beings who would not sin, "so that the stain should not be transmitted to posterity"? This is a question Leibniz imagines himself being asked. His reply is that people who would thus impugn God's justice overlook one little point:

> If God had thus removed sin, a very different series of things, very different combinations of circumstances and people and marriages, and very different people would have emerged, and hence if sin had been taken away or extinguished, they themselves would not be in the world. And therefore they have no reason to be angry at Adam or Eve for sinning, much less at God for permitting the sin, since they ought rather to set their own existence to the credit of this very toleration of sins.[11]

This point, moreover, is not dependent on the biblical narrative in which it is traditionally framed but rather lends itself to generalization. That is, we need not believe in the Bible's literal truth to recognize that we all of us owe our existence to God's—or, at any rate, to humanity's or Nature's—toleration of sin. For what lineage can claim to be free of moral failure of one kind or another? Indeed, if we are honest with ourselves, or so Christians believe, we shall see that we are sinners too, and we should therefore admit the likelihood that our own posterity will bear the burden of our present sins. Yet we do not pray God to remove us from her creation, nor do most of us elect to do so ourselves by the ready enough expedient of suicide. The upshot of this line of argument is that we think our lives worth living, tainted by immorality though they be; hence, by implication, we think this world good, despite the presence of evils in it.

8. The Best of All Possible Worlds

Ought we to concur with Leibniz, however, in thinking that this is the best of all possible worlds? Before hazarding an answer to this question, we should be clear about what we mean by "possible." To say that God is

[11] Quoted in Robert Merrihew Adams, "Love and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophia* 34 (2006): 243–251, pp. 243–244.

absolutely powerful is not to say that she can do anything at all; it is only to say that she can do whatever is not logically impossible. God is not crazy, and she does not and cannot create a crazy world in which darkness is light, melody is harmony, yesterday is tomorrow, and two plus two makes five. When we ask whether the world God creates is "the best of all possible worlds," the emphasis should therefore be on the word *possible*, not on the word *best*.

If we take Leibniz's assertion to mean that the world in its current state does not admit of improvement, then I think we should reject it. Anyone with eyes and a conscience must see that unjust actions and unnecessary suffering occur all around her, must believe that these evils can be remediated at least in part, must desire that they be remediated to whatever extent they can, and must be willing to act upon that desire. If this world were the best possible in the sense of being incapable of improvement, that perception would be illusory, that conviction false, that sentiment uncalled for, and that resolution futile. But would such a world, a good world that *did not admit of improvement*, be as good as another world, equally good to begin with, that nevertheless *did admit of improvement*? Imagine yourself in the first world, the one with a closed-off future. Of your life there you could only ever say, "This is as good as it gets." In the second world, however, you could sometimes say, "This is good. This is really, really good. But it can get even better, and perhaps in my own limited way I can do something to assist in its betterment." Weighing these alternatives leads me to conclude that a world whose nature was fixed and incapable of enhancement or amelioration, however good it might be, would not be the best possible world. It would not be as good as a world whose future was open. For the latter world, however good *it* might be, would hold in its bosom the seeds of still greater goodness, of goodness previously inconceivable, perhaps even to its creator.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, the best possible world turns out to be a world that carries within itself the possibility of its own betterment, the power of self-transcendence. And what is God to us but that power?—that divine, creative power which, in her infinite love, she willingly relinquished and gave over to her creatures?—that still, small voice within the depth of our souls which enjoins us to pursue the betterment of the world? What is the Kingdom of God but our free decision to heed that

voice, to reconcile our will with God's, to let our actions be guided by faith rather than doubt, by hope rather than fear, by love rather than pride? What is religion—I mean, of course, true religion as distinct from idolatry and charlatanism—but the overcoming of our otherness and alienation from God, and hence of her alienation from herself? What is salvation but our journey back to God within the community of the faithful? For faith, as St. Paul wrote, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 1:1). In the courtroom I have asked the reader to imagine, faith is therefore the evidence for the defense, the positive vindication of God and her creation. What we do not see we may yet hope for, and what we hope for we may help bring to fruition by following the "new commandment" Jesus enjoined upon his followers, which rolls the ten Mosaic commandments into one: "that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Our before-and-after story has thus a final chapter—one that remains to be written and can be written only with us, God's creatures, as her coauthors—wherein the power she emptied into the creation is restored to her. In that glorious denouement, moreover, we may look upon our maker "face to face," no longer "through a glass darkly," seeing her as she is in her eternal nature, beyond time and space: all-loving *and* all-powerful, once and forever.