

Biblical Divine Determinism and the Problem of Evil

by
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1. **Introduction**

The problem of evil is typically understood to be the problem of how to reconcile the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God with the extent and nature of evil that exists in the world. Given the amount and kind of evil that we see around us, how can we maintain that a God exists who is both absolutely sovereign and perfectly good?

A variety of “arguments from evil” are based on this philosophical problem. They have diverse agendas. Some purport to prove that God does not exist, others that he is not good, others that he is not sovereign, and yet others that he is not worthy of honor. This paper is interested, specifically, in the argument from evil against biblical divine determinism. This argument purports to show that, given the amount and kind of evil in the world, there cannot exist a truly good God who has absolute determinative control over all things. In other words, the doctrine of divine determinism must be false. This paper will explore the soundness of this specific argument. While the issues discussed will have relevance for the various other arguments from evil, none of those other arguments are the focus of this paper. The sole focus of this paper is a specific argument from evil against divine determinism.

Divine determinism is the philosophical doctrine that God is the cause and source of absolutely everything that is and of absolutely everything that occurs. However, in this paper, the doctrine I propose to defend is the somewhat more specific and more nuanced doctrine that I will call “biblical divine determinism.” The doctrine that, I believe, underlies the worldview of biblical teaching is defined by the following tenets:

- (1) God transcends created reality.
- (2) From his transcendence, God determines every aspect of everything that is and of everything that occurs.
- (3) Created reality has a narrative structure. (Created reality is a story that God is creating.)
- (4) God is the author of reality.
 - (4.1) God’s relationship to human beings is analogous to an author’s relationship to the characters in a novel he is writing.
 - (4.2) God effects human choice by *transcendently* causing the free-will choices of human beings; he does not cause human choice through ordinary causation.
- (5) Created reality is a “story” whose purpose is to give expression to the goodness of God. The purpose of this story is not to promote the well-being of each and every creature within the story; it is to reflect the character and person of God, its author.

And, to complete the doctrinal position that I am calling “biblical divine determinism,” we must add yet one more tenet to the tenets of divine determinism listed above:

(6) God is flawlessly and absolutely good.

BIBLICAL DIVINE DETERMINISM, then, is a belief in *divine determinism* (as that is specifically understood in the biblical worldview) in conjunction with a belief in *divine goodness*. This paper is a defense of biblical divine determinism (so defined) against the argument from evil.

There are different forms of theism within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Biblical divine determinism would appear, on the face of it, to be the one most vulnerable to the argument from evil.¹ By the very nature of its tenets, it does not have recourse to some of the argumentative strategies that other theistic positions typically employ.² However, biblical divine determinism (as defined above) has resources that are not available to other theistic positions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to prove it, but I believe that biblical divine determinism is the only theistic position with the philosophical resources to adequately answer and resolve the problem of evil. Indeed, I believe that its ability to answer the problem of evil could be advanced as an argument in its favor, against other forms of theism.

In this paper, I am not primarily concerned to defend biblical divine determinism against the formal arguments of philosophers. Rather, my purpose is to defend it against the argument from evil as that argument is advanced by *ordinary* people, untrained in philosophy. Three things of note follow from this purpose:

(i) Some of the arguments that I will respond to in this paper are arguments and perspectives that no trained philosopher would ever be inclined to defend. Many of the underlying arguments and perspectives adopted by ordinary people who reject biblical divine determinism are specious. Once they are articulated, they can readily be seen to be such. Nonetheless, I make the effort to articulate and critique these arguments and assumptions in this paper. It can be highly instructive to analyze and evaluate the actual reasons that real people give for why they find the argument from evil compelling. While some of these arguments would never be advanced by trained philosophers, I believe they play a significant role, tacitly, in what trained philosophers are inclined to believe and find plausible. Because they can be influential at a tacit level, I believe it is helpful to articulate and explicitly evaluate them.

¹ The nature and extent of evil in the world poses significant difficulties for biblical divine determinism. On the surface, it would appear that one cannot believe in divine determinism and divine goodness at the same time. The reality in which we exist contains horrendous evil and suffering. If God causes all of that evil and suffering—*a la* divine determinism—then certainly he cannot be judged to be good. Alternatively, if God is wholly and completely good, then clearly he cannot cause the horrendous evil; hence (*contra* divine determinism), he does not cause *everything*. In any event, it readily appears that the nature and extent of evil in the world does not permit one to believe—with logical consistency—in both divine goodness and divine determinism at the same time.

² It cannot, for example, use the “free-will defense” as that is typically employed—for biblical divine determinism does not acknowledge free (autonomous) will. Nor can it blame evil on Satan, demons, or random occurrence. No matter what or who might serve as an intermediary cause, biblical divine determinism maintains, without qualification, that God is the final and ultimate cause of everything that is and of everything that occurs.

(ii) This paper will defend biblical divine determinism in terms of its own tenets. The argument under consideration maintains that biblical divine determinism can be shown to be *internally inconsistent* when it is confronted by the realities of the evil and suffering in the world. In other words, since the nature and extent of evil and suffering could never be purposed by a truly good God, biblical divine determinism cannot be true in terms of its own tenets. So, since the argument is that biblical divine determinism cannot be true, *in terms of its own tenets*, I will defend biblical divine determinism *in terms of its own tenets*. It is not my purpose to prove or defend everything that defines biblical divine determinism. In other words, it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the truth of biblical divine determinism in general. Rather, I will assume its basic framework and seek to show that, in terms of its own assumptions and beliefs, it is not demonstrably irreconcilable with the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Many of my arguments will assume, and will arise from, perspectives that are distinctive to biblical divine determinism. I submit that this is valid within the narrow purposes of this paper.

(iii) It is not the purpose of this paper to encourage the reader to adopt biblical divine determinism. Many of the tenets of biblical divine determinism are frankly somewhat offensive and obnoxious. I make no attempt to convince the reader not to be annoyed, offended, or outraged by biblical divine determinism and its implications. Whether it is an attractive viewpoint is beside the point. My purpose is to show that, in all its obnoxious glory, biblical divine determinism is not clearly and decisively refuted by the nature and amount of evil in the world.

1.1. Some Preliminary Points of Clarification

(i) Biblical divine determinism involves the concept of God's goodness. It must be made clear that, in assessing whether God is good, we shall employ the same concept of goodness that we would employ anywhere else. We must judge God by the same concept of goodness by which we would judge any other person. It does no good to argue, in effect: God is perfectly good, but his goodness is different from ours. It becomes meaningless to defend the "goodness" of God if it is not in *our ordinary sense of goodness* that it is being defended.³ Biblical divine determinism holds that God is good in the sense in which we ordinarily mean it. Therefore, the following argument rejects any strategy that suggests that God's concept of goodness is different from our own.⁴

³ The very question posed by the problem of evil is this: Is God good by *our* concept of goodness. Clearly, therefore, it does no good to answer, "He is not good by *our* concept of goodness, but he is nevertheless purely good by his own divine standard of goodness."

⁴ According to biblical divine determinism, we human beings are created in the image of God. Arguably, that means that he created us to be personal beings. Because God is a person, he made us to be persons. We are not, like animals, instinct-driven, organic simulacra of persons. We are *bona fide* persons. Further, it is arguable that part of what it means to be a person is to have the capacity for moral judgment. If so, then it only stands to reason that being a *person* (a creature made in the image of God) involves having a concept and understanding of moral goodness that reflects the very concept and understanding of moral goodness that is intrinsic to God himself. On the other hand, while it is true that human beings are intrinsically capable of working with the same concept of moral goodness as the one that exists in the mind of God, that does not mean that actual human beings—in their subjective moral judgment—do not have a skewed understanding of that concept of goodness and a distorted perspective on how it applies in moral judgment. According to biblical divine determinism, human beings are evil and depraved; they have

Having said that, it is important to realize that God, as he is conceived by biblical divine determinism, is radically unique. He is the only person who transcends ordinary, created reality. So while we must apply our ordinary concept of goodness to God, yet we must not overlook this very important fact: as the transcendent author of all reality, God is capable of things of which no ordinary person is capable, and God has prerogatives that no ordinary person has. It may appear at times that we are not holding God to the same standard as other persons—and, in a sense, that would be true—but it is decidedly not because we are employing a different concept of goodness. Rather, we are simply acknowledging that he has unique capabilities and prerogatives.

(ii) A second point needs to be emphasized. All moral judgment depends on how the act being evaluated is characterized or described. If an act is poorly, inadequately, or incompletely characterized, it can easily be misjudged. If an act is described as opening up another's abdomen with a knife, how can one make a meaningful moral judgment about it? Is it good or evil to open up another's abdomen with a knife? Obviously I cannot answer that question without a more accurate and complete description of the act. Is it a surgeon wielding a surgeon's scalpel during a life-saving operation? Or, is it a mugger seeking to enrich himself at my expense?

This point is vitally important to our moral assessment of God. As the determiner of everything that occurs, God is the ultimately cause of a murderer murdering his victim. How, then, are we to assess God's role in that murder? He caused it! Was it good or evil for him to have done so? Our moral assessment of God is significantly affected by how we describe and characterize what he has done. Did God *do* the murder? Or did God *create* the murder? Did God *commit* a murder? Or did he *cause a murderer to commit* a murder? My contention is that these descriptions do not describe the same act: *creating* a murder is a different act from *doing or committing* a murder. Furthermore, these are subject to very different moral assessments.⁵

(iii) A third point needs to be clearly understood. One cannot accurately judge an act to be evil (or good) without first understanding rightly the role, authority, position,

suppressed the truth. The truth that they have suppressed includes the truth about moral goodness. So, while it is fundamentally true that human beings have access to the one and only objective concept of moral goodness and are capable of thinking clearly about what is morally good, yet, as depraved rebels against what is right and good, they are also capable of having a very distorted judgment about what is and is not morally good. As a consequence, it is always wise to be self-critical of one's own moral judgments. Just because something *feels* or *seems* morally right does not automatically mean that it is objectively morally right. And just because something *feels* or *seems* morally wrong does not automatically mean that it is objectively morally wrong. Accordingly, with regard to assessing God in the light of the problem of evil, we need to have a humble self-awareness of how distorted and perverse our actual moral judgments can be. If we are going to judge God evil, it is important that we remain open to the possibility that our judgment reflects our own evil rebelliousness and does not reflect what is objectively true.

⁵ According to biblical divine determinism, God—being the author of all reality—has the right to determine when life will begin and when life will end. It is God's prerogative to grant biological viability to each of his creatures. It is also his prerogative to bring that biological viability to an end; and, to determine *how* it will be brought to an end. When God brings my life to its end, he is not being evil. He is just being God. That is precisely what it means to be God: namely, to be the one who shapes all of reality in accordance with his will. The human being who commits murder is "playing God." He is taking a divine prerogative to himself.

relationships, and prerogatives of the one performing the act.⁶ The act of being sexually intimate with a woman is assessed one way if the actor is the woman's husband, another way if it is the woman's adulterous neighbor. Or, again, the act of treating a female as a child is assessed one way if the female is the actor's adult wife, quite another way if the female is the actor's very young daughter. When passing moral judgment on God, one's judgment must include a recognition that, as the author of all reality, there are certain prerogatives that belong to him that do not belong to any human creature. To examine this point further, consider two examples:

A murderer commits a murder by tampering with the mechanism of an automobile and purposely causing a fatal car crash. Compare this to God causing a failure in the mechanism of an automobile in order to purposely cause a fatal car crash. Are these morally equivalent? If biblical divine determinism is true, they are not morally equivalent. God purposely ends every human being's existence. As the author and creator of reality, it is his prerogative to do so. God ends human life in a variety of different ways. There is nothing inappropriate—morally or otherwise—in his doing so. So, in light of this fact, note how misleading (and false) it would be to describe what God did as "murder." God did not *inappropriately* end the life of another; he did not "murder" him. He exercised his unique prerogative as God.

In the debate over God's goodness, much confusion results from the use of inaccurate, incomplete, and misleading descriptions of God's actions.⁷ These misleading descriptions are often based on a failure to appreciate and take into account God's unique role and prerogatives. However, my first point above still stands. If we judge it morally permissible for God to do something that we would condemn a human being for doing, it does not follow that—when we exonerate God—we are employing a different concept of goodness. More likely, we are simply acknowledging his unique relationship to reality—a claim that is foundational to the doctrine of biblical divine determinism, the view we are defending in this paper.

2. ***The Argument from Evil against Biblical Divine Determinism***

In the following argument (and in the remainder of the paper), I will employ the concept of *inexcusable evil*. When I describe evil as "inexcusable," I mean the following: evil is "inexcusable" just in case it is of such a nature, quantity, or extent that a truly good creator who had absolute determinative control over the whole of created reality could offer no acceptably good purpose for having included it in the reality he created. (In the vernacular, he "has no excuse" for having created it.) "Inexcusable" evil is evil that is of such a nature that a truly good God would never have purposed to bring it into existence.

⁶ Moral judgments clearly differ relative to the situation—that is, they differ relative to a fuller and more complete characterization of what the action might be. If we attempt to judge an action under an inadequate and incomplete description (especially one that does not define the relationships that pertain between the persons involved), then it is entirely possible that we will make a mistake in judgment. This is NOT because there is something wrong or mistaken about the concept of moral goodness we are using. Rather, it is because there is something about the action being judged that is not adequately understood.

⁷ So, for example, in the comparison discussed above, we are not actually passing judgment on one and the same act. A human being causing a fatal car crash is not one and the same act as God causing a fatal car crash.

Here then is a formal articulation of the argument against biblical divine determinism on the assumption that there exists *inexcusable evil* in the world:

(1) If a divine being exists who is perfectly good, then it is not possible for both of the following to be true: (i) divine determinism is true (that is, God is the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs), and (ii) created reality contains inexcusable evil.

[First premise]

(2) As a matter of fact, created reality DOES contain inexcusable evil. > **Premise A**

[Second premise]

(3) Therefore, if a divine being exists who is perfectly good, then it follows that divine determinism is not true (that is, that God is NOT the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs).

[Deduction from step (1) and step (2)]

(4) As a matter of biblical teaching and faith, a divine being exists who is perfectly good.

[Third premise]

(5) Conclusion of argument. Therefore, it follows that divine determinism is not true (that is, that God is NOT the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs).

[Deduction from step (3) and step (4)]

However, if the above argument against biblical divine determinism is valid, then, on the basis of the principles of deductive logic alone, the following argument is also valid:

(1) If a divine being exists who is perfectly good, then it is not possible for both of the following to be true: (i) divine determinism is true (that is, God is the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs), and (ii) created reality contains inexcusable evil.

[First premise]

(2) Therefore, if biblical divine determinism is true (that is, if divine determinism is true and God is perfectly good), then it follows that created reality does not contain inexcusable evil.

[Deduction from step (1)]

(3) One can assume, on the basis of biblical teaching and faith in conjunction with sound philosophical reflection, that biblical divine determinism is true (that is, that a divine being exists who is the author and determiner of everything and who is perfectly good). > **Premise B**

[Second premise]

(4) Conclusion of argument. Therefore, it follows that created reality does not contain inexcusable evil.

[Deduction from step (2) and step (3)]

The first valid argument proves that biblical divine determinism is not true *on the assumption that* created reality contains inexcusable evil. The second valid argument proves that created reality cannot contain inexcusable evil *on the assumption that* biblical divine determinism is true.

So what do we know from these two arguments? The first argument proves that biblical divine determinism cannot possibly be true *if we assume* that the evil that exists in the world is inexcusable. (But must we assume that it is inexcusable?) The second argument shows that, if we can know that biblical divine determinism is true independently of any direct judgment about the nature and extent of evil in the world, then it follows that there cannot exist any inexcusable evil. In other words, it shows that there cannot exist inexcusable evil in the world *if we have a sound basis for knowing* that biblical divine determinism is true. (But can we assume that biblical divine determinism is true?)

It is clear, therefore, that no deductive proof arguing that biblical divine determinism is false on the basis of the nature and extent of evil in the world is definitive and incontestable. Whether the proof succeeds depends on the truth of a controversial premise. It depends on whether the evil in the world is *inexcusable*. One can readily assume and assert that it is. But is it? That is the disputed claim.

2.1. *The Impasse*

We have seen that the formal argument fails to conclusively refute biblical divine determinism. Rather, it leads to an impasse. One is faced with a choice between two premises. And it is not immediately clear whether philosophical reflection and argument will decisively compel one to choose one premise over the other. Hence, the only thing that the formal argument demonstrates definitively is that the following two premises cannot both be true:

Premise A: *Created reality does contain inexcusable evil.*

Premise B: *Biblical divine determinism is true.*

So, herein lies the difference between the proponent and the opponent of biblical divine determinism:

- *The proponent of biblical divine determinism embraces Premise B because he thinks that the data of biblical revelation and the results of philosophical reflection cannot be adequately explained and reconciled by any other view. Logically, therefore, he must reject the judgment that there exists inexcusable evil in the world.⁸*
- *The opponent of divine determinism embraces Premise A because he thinks our experience in the world makes it OBVIOUS that there is inexcusable evil in the world. Logically, therefore, he must reject biblical divine determinism.*

Most of the remainder of this paper is devoted to an assessment of whether the evil that exists around us can be judged to be inexcusable (as the opponent of divine determinism presumes). My contention is that it is not so clear and obvious that inexcusable evil exists, as the critics would maintain. And, hence, the opponent of divine

⁸ It is outside the scope of this paper to make the case for biblical divine determinism. For a reasonably thorough defense of most of the important tenets of biblical divine determinism, see my book *The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism*. My purpose in this paper is not to show that biblical divine determinism is true. It is to show why the objections to biblical divine determinism based on the existence of evil are not decisive, because they are significantly problematic.

determinism does not have the solid ground that he presumes to have, when he embraces Premise A.

3. **Assessing Premise A: Inexcusable Evil Exists in Created Reality**

The fact of suffering in the world is incontrovertible. If it could be established that all and any suffering is *ipso facto* evil, then, because suffering exists, evil exists. Alternatively, if clearly *inexcusable* suffering could be shown to exist, then, clearly evil would exist. But surely one cannot draw a straight equation between suffering and evil. Suffering has a very distinctive place in the fabric of reality—a place that should make it clear that not all suffering is evil.⁹ Hence, for the purposes of this paper, I will discuss separately the question of inexcusable evil from the question of inexcusable suffering.

I divide the following discussion into these two parts: First, I inquire whether inexcusable evil *per se* exists in created reality. Then I turn to an examination of whether there exists any inexcusable suffering in created reality.

3.1. *Does Inexcusable Evil Exist? (And Why Might One Think So?)*

Typically, the opponent of divine determinism has not embraced the premise that inexcusable evil exists on the basis of a carefully reasoned argument. He feels no need of an argument. It just seems *obvious* to him that it does. In the following discussion I will examine and evaluate the various factors that I believe contribute to why he feels it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists.¹⁰

3.1.1. First Factor

On the specious assumption that a good God could not be the origin of any evil, some opponents of divine determinism tend to think that *any evil whatsoever* is incompatible with biblical divine determinism. If no evil thing could originate from a purely good creator, it follows that, if God were perfectly good (as well as the cause of everything in reality), then no evil whatsoever would exist. Hence, any evil at all is “inexcusable” evil for the purposes of this argument. But this perception is based on a specious assumption.

Why would we assume that a perfectly good God cannot be the origin of any evil? It seems to be based on the false assumption that a creator has to be X, or to contain X, in order to create X. But this is certainly not the case. Does anyone really think that God had to be a material being, or contain matter within his being, in order to create matter? Did

⁹ Though not all suffering is evil, I shall assume (in the spirit of Ivan Karamazov) that, regardless of how we assess the moral nature of suffering *per se*, the existence of *inexcusable suffering* in created reality would rightly be judged to be inexcusably evil. In other words, a creator who has created a reality that contains inexcusable suffering has created a reality that ought not to exist—a created reality whose existence is evil.

¹⁰ Remember, the proponents of Premise A that are in view are not primarily trained philosophers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the moral and theological judgments of the common man, not the rigorously derived conclusions of trained philosophers. Hence, in what follows, I will discuss factors that a professional philosopher would immediately recognize as specious. But, in my experience, every one of these factors has played a significant role in the thinking, the conclusions, and the confusion of real, ordinary people as they wrestle with the problem of evil.

God have to be (or contain) yellow in order to create yellow? Nonetheless, when it comes to evil, many are still inclined to think that God would have to be evil himself in order to have the resources to invent or imagine any evil. But this is simply not so. Assuming that God has a sufficiently creative imagination, it is quite believable that God could imagine (and create) evil by imagining the antithesis of who and what he is. He wouldn't need to BE evil. He would merely need to be able to imagine something that is contrary to him.

3.1.2. Second Factor

Another factor is the false assumption that God must be culpable for all the evil done by free-will beings. That God has created human beings who freely do evil is uncontroversial. But if (according to divine determinism) God causes everything, then he is the ultimate cause of every free-will choice that a human being makes. Accordingly, God must be culpable for every evil free-will choice made by a human being. Hence, if divine determinism is true, God cannot be good; he is to blame for all human evil.

The mistake underlying this assumption is a failure to appreciate the important difference between God's being a transcendent cause of evil and his being an ordinary cause of evil. Divine determinism does not suggest that God is the *ordinary* cause of human choice. Rather, he is its *transcendent* cause. As the transcendent cause, God is not morally accountable for the evil that he causes his creatures to do. I will explain.

Using force, God could cause Jack to do an evil act—that is, he could coerce Jack to commit an evil deed. In that event, God would be causing Jack to do evil through “*ordinary* causation.” According to the logic of ordinary causation, if Jack coerces Jill to do evil, then it is Jack, and not Jill, who is to blame for the evil. (At the very least, Jack must share in the blame for Jill's evil deed. Depending upon a number of factors, it is possible that Jill bears no blame at all, and that Jack is solely to blame for her deed.) So, if God causes Jack to do evil by way of ordinary causation, then it is God (and not Jack) who is to blame for Jack's evil deed. (At the very least, God must share some of the blame.)

But God could cause Jack to do this evil deed in another way. He could cause Jack to do it, not through coercion, but by creating within Jack the free-will choice to do it. In that event, God would be causing Jack to do this evil deed by way of what I shall call “*transcendent* causation.”

Note that only a transcendent creator is capable of transcendent causation. Jack could never transcendentally cause Jill to do anything. Ordinary causation is the only way one human being can cause another human being to act. A human being can never create a free-will choice within the will of another human being. That is the sole prerogative of the transcendent creator of all human beings. In general terms, transcendent causation is the sole prerogative of a transcendent creator.

Now the logic of transcendent causation is very different from the logic of ordinary causation. If the transcendent creator creates the free choice to do an evil act within Jack, *he shares none of the blame* for Jack's evil act. God has caused Jack's choice through transcendent causation, not through ordinary causation; and the logic of transcendent causation is importantly different from the logic of ordinary causation.

How do we know that this is true? We know this from our own moral judgments with regard to transcendent causation. God may be the only transcendent creator of human beings, but he is not the only transcendent creator. A novelist is the transcendent creator of everything he scripts in the novel he is writing. Indeed, every human being is the transcendent creator (and transcendent cause) of everything that he imagines within his imagination. Hence, every human being has the experience of being a transcendent cause. As a consequence, we can know the logic of transcendent causation from firsthand experience. I will explore that briefly.

When we consider the logic of the relationship between a novelist and the events that occur within his novel, we can note the following features of transcendent causation:

(a) The author of a novel is not the one morally culpable for the evil deeds done by the characters in his novel. Each character is morally culpable for every free-will act that he performs in the novel. The author shares *none* of the blame for any evil act a character performs.

(b) The moral character of the author of a novel cannot justly be evaluated on the basis of the deeds performed by the characters in his novel. A morally good novelist can create characters who perform horrendous evils in his novel. The evils performed by his characters do not, in and of themselves, reflect negatively on the moral character of the novelist.

It is my contention that what we can glean about the logic of the relationship between a novelist and the events that occur within his novel can be generalized to the logic of transcendent causation generally. Then, this logic can be applied to understanding the relationship between our reality and God, the transcendent author (the transcendent cause) of our reality:

(a) God, the transcendent cause of every evil free-will act, is not the person who is morally culpable for that act. The free-will agent who performed an act is the person who is morally culpable for it. God, the transcendent author of reality, shares *none* of the blame for any evil act a free-will being performs.

(b) The moral character of God, the transcendent author (the transcendent cause) of reality, cannot justly be evaluated on the basis of the deeds performed by the free-will creatures in our reality. A morally good God can create free-will creatures who perform horrendous evils in the reality he creates. The evils performed by his creatures do not, in and of themselves, reflect negatively on the moral character of God, the transcendent author.

(c) There is a very important distinction to be made between God *creating* evil and God *doing and being* evil. If the transcendent author *creates* an evil being who performs evil deeds, it is not morally and philosophically equivalent to his doing and being evil himself. The transcendent author has performed an act of creation, not an act of evil. Hence, God's act must be judged as the act of creation that it was, not as the evil act performed by the human who did it.¹¹ There is an important and decided difference between *committing* an act of evil and *creating* an act of evil.

¹¹ If one rejects the above analysis and insists that to transcendentally *cause* an evil act is the moral equivalent of actually *doing* the act, then the argument is over. Under the assumption that the bare fact that

So, in considering the critic's assumption that, given divine determinism, God must be held to blame for all the evils committed by human beings, we can now see the mistake that underlies this false assumption. It misunderstands the claim that divine determinism is making. Rightly understood, divine determinism does not maintain that God is the *ordinary* cause of the free-will choices of human beings. Rather, it maintains that he is the *transcendent* cause of those choices. If God were the *ordinary* cause of every free-will choice, then he would be culpable for every evil free-will act. But he is not. He is their *transcendent* cause. And, by the logic of transcendent causation, he bears no culpability whatsoever for those free-will choices that he transcendentally causes. However, if we were to mistakenly apply the logic of ordinary causation to God, then we would falsely conclude that God must be held to blame for every evil act performed by every human being. And if that were true, God is morally accountable for an immense amount of evil in the world.

Now divine determinism does *not* suggest that God bears *NO responsibility whatsoever* for the evil he has created. Indeed, it fully acknowledges that God must bear responsibility (and must be assessed) for the nature of created reality. But he bears responsibility as the creator of that creation, not as the responsible agent of countless, individual deeds. So, God can be held accountable as the *creator* of each and every evil act committed by human beings, but he cannot be held accountable as if he had done them all. Humans are the responsible agents. God is the creator, who must be held responsible for what he has created.

But what is the appropriate way to evaluate the creation of an evil act? It is too facile to reason, "It was an evil act. An evil act ought not to exist. Therefore, it was evil for God to have created it." Rather, the creation of an evil act needs to be evaluated after full consideration of exactly what it is that was created. Yes, it was evil. But it was more than that. It was a constituent element of a larger narrative.

It is important to remember that the more nuanced form of divine determinism that I am defending in this paper includes the tenet that created reality has a narrative structure. It is a "story" that God is telling. Accordingly, when we evaluate God's creation of an evil act by a human being, we need to take into account its context. God is creating innumerable individual narratives that all interlock and are united by (and integrated into) a larger, overarching narrative. Hence, we cannot evaluate God's creation of an evil act by a human actor without understanding it in this context. An act of human evil is an element within a larger narrative.

God, the transcendent author of all reality, has caused evil means that he has *done* evil, it follows that God has done evil. And if God has done evil, it follows that he must *be* evil. But why would one insist that to transcendentally *cause* an evil act is the moral equivalent of actually *doing* the act? Does this insistence stem from true philosophical insight? Or, does it stem from dogmatic philosophical prejudice? Is it a judgment based on a true and accurate understanding of the real relationship between God and his creation? Or, is it a judgment that stems from the mistaken notion that God is merely a bigger version of a human being? I stand by the above analysis: there is *NO moral equivalence* between *creating* or *transcendentally causing* an evil act, on the one hand, and *doing* or *committing* an evil act, on the other. To create evil is NOT the moral equivalent of doing and being evil. Otherwise, every storyteller in all of human history has shown himself evil just by virtue of having told the stories he has. That, I think, would be absurd.

To offer a correct moral judgment with regard to God's creation of such an act, I must first answer the following questions: (i) Does this evil act make a necessary contribution to the larger narrative? (ii) Is the narrative of which it is a part a narrative that ought to have been created? That is, is it a good and worthy story—a story that a morally good author would tell? If the answer to either of these questions is “no,” then God's creation of this act of evil is itself evil. But, if the answer to both of them is “yes,” then it is not evil. It would be evil for God to create any act of human evil that does not contribute meaningfully to a morally worthy story.¹² But it is not evil to create an act of human evil if it *does* make a meaningful contribution to a morally worthy story.

Let me summarize. Some opponents of biblical divine determinism reason as follows: There is a great deal of human evil in the world. Therefore, if God causes everything (including the human evil), he must be evil. This line of reasoning, while understandable, is mistaken. It begins from the false assumption that, according to biblical divine determinism, God is the *ordinary* cause of everything. That is not what biblical divine determinism maintains. Rather, it maintains that God is the *transcendent* cause of everything. As the transcendent cause of everything, God must be judged by the goodness or evil of what he has created. He has created a story, a narrative. That story contains evil human acts within it. But those evil human acts do not, in and of themselves, make the story evil. In order to justly accuse God of evil for this creation, one would have to demonstrate (i) that some of those acts of human evil were not necessary to the meaning and significance of the story as a whole, and/or (ii) that the narrative, taken as a whole, is not a morally worthy narrative.

Now some opponents of biblical divine determinism would charge God with evil on just such terms. They would maintain that either (i) the narrative of created reality is not one that is morally worthy; it ought never to have been created, or (ii) there exist acts of human evil that are meaningless; they are not essential to the meaning and significance of the narrative of created reality. It is easy enough to make one or the other of these assertions. But it is an entirely different thing to show that it is true. To advance his argument, the critic of divine determinism must demonstrate that it is true.

I submit that neither assertion represents a well-considered philosophical judgment. Rather, they are expressions of the critic's personal dislike of the evil in the world. Not liking created reality is fundamentally different from knowing that it is morally unworthy. Not liking the human evil that God has created is quite another thing from proving that it makes no meaningful contribution to the story of created reality. Until one has demonstrated that created reality is not a morally worthy story, or until he has shown that the evil contained in it makes no necessary contribution to the meaning and significance of its narrative, then to charge God with evil for having created human evil is morally and rationally unfounded. Not *liking* the human evil in the world cannot serve as a serious philosophical objection to biblical divine determinism.

¹² In other words, it would be evil for God to create an evil act by a free-will creature if (i) the evil act was not necessary to the narrative that God is creating, and/or (ii) the narrative that God is creating is itself morally unworthy and ought never to have been created.

3.1.3. Third Factor

There is yet a third factor that can contribute to the critic's perception that it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists: namely, the false but specious assumption that created reality is itself evil just to the extent that it contains any evil within it. Many will assume that a good and morally worthy reality must necessarily be void of any moral evil.

Again, we must remember that the nuanced form of divine determinism we are assessing in this paper insists on the narrative structure of created reality.¹³ Therefore, in the context of this particular form of divine determinism, to suggest that a morally worthy reality must necessarily be void of any and all evil is tantamount to claiming that a morally worthy story must necessarily be void of any and all evil. But this is clearly false. Some of the most morally worthy novels ever written contain many acts of evil. By the same token, God's created reality could contain many acts of evil and still be a morally worthy reality. So long as the evil deeds in created reality are necessary and essential to the meaning and moral worth of the narrative being created, their presence within it would not render it evil. An individual act need not be morally good, in and of itself, to contribute meaningfully to the goodness and moral worth of the larger narrative of which it is a part. I must explore this further.

If biblical divine determinism is right, then the moral worthiness of created reality must be judged according to its moral worthiness as a story, and the moral character of God must be assessed on the basis of created reality in just the same way that we would assess the moral character of a human author on the basis of a story he has created. And how would we do that? How would we assess the moral character of an author from the story he has created? Or, more specifically, the character of a novelist from the novel he has written?

A novelist should be judged by the moral worthiness of his story. And we should judge the moral worthiness of his story by an assessment of its overall meaning and significance. Therefore, we should judge the novelist by the moral worthiness of his story, *taken as a whole*, and not by the moral worthiness of any particular deed within it. Furthermore, we should not judge the moral worthiness of his story by the outcome for any particular character in it. (A good and morally worthy story may very well contain a bad outcome for some particular character.) In sum, we should judge a novelist by the meaning and significance of the grand, sweeping, overarching story that he has created, and not by any particular action or outcome contained within it. The only way we could judge a novelist's creation of his novel to be evil would be under the following conditions: (i) if the novel ought never to have been written, and/or (ii) if the evil actions described in the story do not make a necessary contribution to the intrinsic meaning, substance, and significance of the overarching story.

¹³ The grand narrative of human (and, ultimately, cosmic) history is a set of interlocking narratives of thousands upon thousands of individual human stories. Each story has its own intrinsic message and meaning. The net effect of all those individual stories also has its own intrinsic message and meaning. God is first and foremost a storyteller. The reality God is creating is best viewed as the story he is creating with and about us.

A story is a great example of something that exists as an organic whole.¹⁴ In an organic whole, it is possible for one of its essential constituent elements to be inherently evil (if that element were to be evaluated for what it is in and of itself) and yet to make a *necessary* contribution to the goodness of the organic whole. A story is an organic whole in just this sort of way. Evil deeds by evil persons make a *necessary* contribution to the goodness and moral worthiness of a good story, even if each deed, taken by itself, would be purely and inherently evil. Such evil elements within a story are good only in the sense that, and to the extent that, they are necessary constituent elements of a truly good and morally worthy organic whole. This is exactly what biblical divine determinism suggests. Evil is present within God's created reality because God's created reality, being a story, is an organic whole in which the evil that is contained within it makes a necessary contribution to the goodness of the organic whole.

The argument here is not that God is justified in using evil as a means to some good end. In the concept of an organic whole, the evil element does not contribute to the good of the whole because it results in a good outcome. Rather, the evil constituent element of the whole is itself a necessary and essential element of that whole. It is an element without which the whole would not possess the goodness it possesses. The evil need not lead to good consequences. (In most stories, an evil act will typically lead to innumerable bad consequences.) Rather, quite apart from any consequences that may result from it, without its existence within the story, the story would not be the story that it is. And, more importantly, without that particular evil, the story would not contain the goodness that it does. The particular evil in question is somehow essential to the story being good in precisely the way it is good. So, as biblical divine determinism views it, it is entirely plausible to suggest that particular evils exist within the reality that God is authoring precisely because they are necessary constituents of the good organic whole that God has purposed to create—specifically, the good organic whole of an overarching narrative that he is creating.

Accordingly, we can see how specious is the assumption that a created reality that contains evil is *ipso facto* evil. The fact that horrendous evil exists in created reality does not necessarily—in and of itself—mean that God is evil.

3.1.4. Fourth Factor

Granting the legitimacy of what I have argued so far—and hence conceding that some evil might be necessary to the narrative of reality as a whole—the detractor of divine determinism might nonetheless argue that the following is obvious: some of the evil in the world is utterly meaningless, completely unnecessary, and makes no essential contribution to the overall meaning and significance of the “story” of created reality. This, then, is the fourth factor that contributes to the perception that it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists in the world: the false, but common, assumption that, from the standpoint of my own perception of reality, I can know definitively that some of the evil in the world is meaningless and unnecessary.

¹⁴ I am here employing the concept of an organic whole as G. E. Moore introduces and expounds upon it in his *Principia Ethica*, particularly in part D of Chapter 1.

Such an assumption is false. As a matter of fact, I clearly lack an adequate standpoint from which to judge whether an instance of evil within created reality is necessary to the overall meaning and significance of its overarching story. My standpoint is inadequate in two important respects:

(a) From my particular standpoint, I cannot possibly hope to know all the various ways that a particular occurrence is connected to all the other occurrences in created reality. Reality involves an exceedingly complex and intricate web of interrelated events. Can any human being seriously claim that he is in a position to understand every one of the storylines that happen to run through any given event? To make such a claim would be presumptuous, at best.

(b) Furthermore, the story of created reality is not over. Each and every human being exists in the middle of an unfolding story. Not every storyline has been resolved. Not every element of the story is complete. So, when the story has not reached its end, on what basis could we judge the meaning and significance of any event within created reality? And, more importantly, how could we possibly conclude that an event is without meaning or significance within the story, when the story is not yet over?

If created reality is what the biblical divine determinist claims that it is, then, in order to make a reasonable and plausible claim that some evil within it is “meaningless,” “absurd,” and/or “unnecessary,” one would have to know the whole story of all of created reality, from beginning to end. Surely, no one can have such knowledge. So the above assumption is false. No human being can reasonably claim, from his own standpoint in reality, to know that there is evil in the world that is utterly meaningless, completely unnecessary, and absurd (insofar as it makes no essential contribution to the overall meaning and significance of the story that is created reality). Certainly, the detractor can dogmatically assert such a claim. But a mere dogmatic assertion provides no basis for a serious philosophical objection. One needs to demonstrate such a claim.

3.1.5. Fifth Factor

A fifth factor that contributes to the perception that it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists is the following false, but understandable, assumption: I can know, from my own observation of the world, that the amount of evil that exists in created reality is inexcusably excessive. On this assumption, what is clear and obvious is this: while each individual occurrence of evil, by itself, may very well make a meaningful contribution to the story of reality taken as a whole, the sheer amount of evil in this world is clearly inexcusable. That is, given the amount of evil in the world, it is obvious that this reality ought not exist. No truly good creator—with absolute determinative control over reality— would have ever brought this evil world into existence.

Once again, this assumption is false. It is false for all the same reasons as the last assumption. I clearly lack an adequate standpoint from which to judge whether the evil that exists is excessive. When I consider the ways (detailed above) that my own standpoint is seriously limited and restricted, can I seriously claim to know that the amount of evil that actually exists in the world exceeds the amount that would be necessary to tell the story that reality will ultimately tell? Without being able to see the whole story, from beginning to end, and without being able to see all the ways that any one constituent event contributes to the meaning of innumerable other constituent events,

how could I possibly assess the amount of evil that would be necessary to create the good and meaningful story that God has purposed to create? Nothing but self-deceived hubris could presume to make such an assessment.

No human being can reasonably claim to know, from his own standpoint in reality, that reality contains too much evil. He can, once again, dogmatically assert that it is so. But to advance this claim as a serious philosophical objection to biblical divine determinism, he needs to demonstrate that it is so. Once again, it appears to be more a declaration of the opponent's dislike of the evil in the world than it is a serious basis for concluding that created reality is objectively evil. Hence, it does nothing to call the doctrine of biblical divine determinism into serious question.

3.1.6. Sixth Factor

A sixth factor that contributes to the perspective that it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists is the faulty assumption that, so long as it contains a detrimental outcome for some particular person, created reality cannot be judged to be good. This needs some clarification.

The opponent of biblical divine determinism, as a rhetorical stratagem, focuses our concern on a particular victim of evil and asks, "How can this world be good in the light of how it turned out for him?" For example, suppose a young child was born into suffering and poverty, lived a few years of misery, and then died a tragic death at the hands of an utterly evil person. The opponent of divine determinism might ask, "What was the point? Look how absurd this world was for that poor child! If the story that God is telling had such a tragic and harmful end for this young child, how can reality be good? Clearly it is absurd and meaningless. Just ask the child."

It doesn't matter who the victim of such a detrimental outcome might be. Call him person P. If the outcome of God's reality is not good and beneficial for person P, then—as the opponent of biblical divine determinism sees it—one has clear evidence that God's created reality is not good.¹⁵

This stratagem appeals to a completely understandable emotion, but the conclusion the opponent derives from it is utterly false. It is false for two reasons: (i) it adopts an invalid, creature-centered perspective, and (ii) it (probably) relies on an equivocation with regard to the word "good." I will discuss each of these in turn.

(i) In embracing this assumption, the opponent of biblical divine determinism has adopted a very different perspective from its proponent. For the proponent of biblical divine determinism, the only question that is relevant to the issue of God's goodness is the moral worth of the organic whole that God is creating. One cannot conclude that the organic whole of created reality is morally evil just because there is a detrimental outcome for one particular creature. If a particular creature goes to his destruction, that

¹⁵ What matters is that person P be someone who can serve as the focus of the critic's focus and concern. The opponent of divine determinism can possibly tolerate harm to a person hidden within the mass of humanity, a person with whom he has no personal connection. He can concede that harm to such an anonymous person might serve as an essential element to the good of an organic whole. But once the detractor can give person P a face and take any personal interest in him, any net harm to person P becomes evidence of inexcusable evil.

does not make created reality evil. Taken as an organic whole, created reality could be utterly and completely good (morally worthy) even while a particular creature within it meets with an irredeemably harmful end. The detractor of divine determinism adopts a completely different perspective. He evaluates created reality from the standpoint of a particular creature. If, on the whole, created reality benefits that particular creature, then God's story is a morally worthy one. If, on the whole, it brings harm to that particular creature, then it is evil (not morally worthy).

Which standpoint is the right one? If theistic belief is true at all—and especially if biblical divine determinism is true—it is difficult to see how one could justify the particular-creature standpoint of the opponent. His assumption, and the standpoint behind it, makes sense only if God created reality for the purpose of bringing benefit to person P. If that were true, then to fail to achieve this purpose would clearly be bad. Creation would be bad (evil) to the extent that it failed to bring benefit—or to the extent that it brought harm—to person P.

But, from a biblical theistic perspective, how could one ever justify such a view? Within a biblical worldview, it is clearly unjustified to claim that the purpose of God's creation is to bring benefit to person P.¹⁶ And, in any case, biblical divine determinism explicitly denies the legitimacy of such a standpoint. In biblical divine determinism, all of created reality was created for God, for the benefit of God, with his interests in view, to serve his purposes, and to serve as a reflection of his character and being. For biblical divine determinism, this can only be said of the creator, never of any creature.¹⁷

So, while from a particular-creature perspective one could plausibly judge God's creation evil on the grounds that it is detrimental to a particular creature, there is nothing demonstrably true and unobjectionable about such a perspective.¹⁸ To refute biblical

¹⁶ Foundational to biblical divine determinism is a belief that the story of each human life is not told for the benefit of that particular person. Rather, it is told for the benefit of the divine author. Created reality is made for God, not for us. Somewhat offhandedly, in Hebrews 2:10, Paul describes God as the one "*on account of whom are all things and for the sake of whom are all things....*" In Romans 11:36, Paul, in praise of God for his mercy, remarks about God, "*For from Him and for the sake of Him and directed toward Him are all things. To him be the glory forever.*" These statements reflect this distinctive perspective: created reality was brought into existence by God, for God, with a view to highlighting his glory, to benefit him, and to serve his purposes. According to the Bible, created reality is theocentric, not anthropocentric. Creation was NOT brought into being for man, to benefit man, and to please man. It was brought into existence for God, to benefit God, and to please God. Its objective meaning is what meaning it has FOR GOD. So, with regard to what it says about God's moral character, the issue is whether the story he is telling is morally good from the standpoint of what it means and what it says about God's purposes and values. The issue is NOT whether the story he is telling is good and beneficial for all the actors.

¹⁷ With the one qualified exception of Jesus. To think that the purpose of created reality is (or should be) for the purpose of benefiting me is an understandable mistake—especially for constitutionally self-centered sinners. But it is a mistake nonetheless.

¹⁸ If I am a sinful rebel destined for destruction, the meaning and purpose of my existence is clearly detrimental to me. It may be objectively good nonetheless. In such a case, the meaning of my existence includes, among other things, the morally good message that God rejects and condemns evil. That is a morally good message, not evil. Similarly, the existence of Satan (as he is traditionally understood) does not, in the end, benefit him. But, arguably, his tragic end contributes to the moral goodness of the narrative of created reality. According to biblical divine determinism, the moral worth of Satan's destruction must be

divine determinism on its own terms, one must accept its assumption that God is the center of reality. One cannot insist on making a particular creature the center of reality and then make the outcome for that creature the measure of creation's (and of God's) goodness.¹⁹

(ii) There is a second reason that this assumption is false. It is likely, I think, that its plausibility relies, in part, on the equivocal nature of the adjective "good." Good can describe something as being morally good (morally worthy). But it can also describe something as being beneficial. If I refer to a person who loves his enemies as "good," I am probably suggesting that he is morally worthy. But if I refer to the fact that person P won the lottery as "good," I am probably suggesting that his winning the lottery will be a benefit to him. Loving one's enemies is good (morally worthy). Winning the lottery is good (beneficial). These are significantly different meanings of the term "good."

For the sake of argument, let us concede for a moment the particular-creature perspective we just criticized above.²⁰ In that case, God's creation is not good if it involves a detrimental outcome for person P. But given the two different meanings of "good" just noted, this assertion could mean one of two things. It could mean:

(a) God's creation is not beneficial for person P [=good] if it involves a detrimental outcome for person P.

Or, it could mean:

(b) God's creation is not morally worthy [=good] if it involves a detrimental outcome for person P.

Claim (a) is obviously, and trivially, true. But it is completely irrelevant to the issue of the moral worth of God's creation. Claim (b) speaks directly to the moral worth of God's creation, but it is not at all clear that it is true. But what if one were to conflate these two meanings and confusedly understand the claim "God's creation is not good if it involves a detrimental outcome for person P" in both senses at once? In that case, one might suppose that he has said something that is both obviously true [claim (a)] and of direct relevance to the moral worth of God's creation [claim (b)]. I think such confusion does, in fact, contribute to the acceptance of this assumption.

judged in relation to God's purposes for the narrative of created reality, not in relation to Satan's well-being.

¹⁹ The particular creature that the critic quite probably has in mind is himself. He may conceal his egocentric perspective by choosing to speak of the suffering of some other person P. But, more often than not, person P is a placeholder for himself. In effect, then, the perspective of the opponent is this: if created reality does not benefit *me*, it is evil. Such bald self-centeredness should make this perspective suspect. Can one, with philosophical seriousness, judge the moral worth of created reality in terms of whether it benefits himself? Especially since there are innumerable such "selves" that could serve as the basis for such a judgment. Even if I could justify it philosophically, I certainly could not reconcile it with a biblical worldview. See note 16 above.

²⁰ If we *do* accept an anthropocentric perspective on reality (*contra* biblical divine determinism), the argument from evil against biblical divine determinism must clearly prevail. According to the Bible's own teaching, not every human being attains, on balance, a beneficial outcome to his existence. Accordingly, if the failure to deliver a beneficial outcome to every human being is enough to conclude that God is evil, then God must necessarily be evil and biblical divine determinism must unquestionably be false.

If, in view of the two objections just discussed, one rejects the notion that God's creation is not good if it involves a detrimental outcome for person P, then the tragic outcomes within created reality are unavailable as a basis for rejecting biblical divine determinism. If one assumes that the purpose of created reality is to reflect who God is, then, it is good and morally worthy to the extent that its objective *message* (its *meaning*) is compatible with moral goodness, and not to the extent that it brings benefit to particular human beings. One could judge this creation (and God) evil only if the ultimate, overall meaning of created reality is itself an evil message.

3.1.7. Conclusion

We have considered six different factors that can contribute to the perception that there exists inexcusable evil in created reality. As our critique of those six factors shows, it is not, in fact, obvious that inexcusable evil exists. No human being—on the basis of his own direct perception of particular occasions of evil— could possibly claim to know that he has seen inexcusable evil. On the basis of a direct assessment of the moral worthiness of each particular event, a person would have to remain agnostic. He cannot know whether any evil in the world is inexcusable. Unless he knew the final resolution of the whole story of reality, he would have no basis from which to know whether the evil he sees makes a necessary contribution to a morally worthy story. We have not proved that the evil we see is meaningful and necessary. But neither can it be proved to be absurd and inexcusable. That is what we have shown. And since it cannot be proved to be inexcusable, neither can the evil in the world be known to be incompatible with biblical divine determinism.

3.2. Does There Exist Any Meaningless Suffering in Created Reality?

Above we focused on evil *per se*. Now we turn to a consideration of suffering.²¹ The question before us is whether there exists any inexcusable suffering in the world. Inexcusable suffering would amount to inexcusable evil. Hence, to show that inexcusable suffering exists is to show that inexcusable evil exists. For many opponents of divine determinism, it just seems *obvious* that the world is full of inexcusable suffering. That is what we will consider in this section.

3.2.1. Preliminary Consideration: When Is Suffering Evil?

Quite frequently, discussions of the problem of evil construe all suffering to be evil. This is clearly fallacious. Some suffering can be the means to a real good. (Or, at least, it can be a necessary accompaniment to what is the means to a real good.) Arguably, any suffering inflicted to bring about some real good is a morally worthy act. A dentist or a surgeon intentionally and knowingly inflicts pain. But his doing so is not evil. A friend who tells me a painful truth about myself knowingly inflicts pain. But it is not evil for him to do so. A parent who intentionally inflicts pain in the course of training his child is not doing evil to do so.

²¹ For the purposes of this paper, by "suffering" I intend to denote the full spectrum of suffering—from physical pain, on the one hand, to any and every kind of unpleasant and undesirable psycho-emotional state, on the other.

However, suffering can lead to a good outcome without being morally worthy. If God inflicts suffering that leads to a good result, an important question still remains: could God have produced the same good result without inflicting the suffering? To inflict *unnecessary* suffering would arguably be evil. If he could produce exactly the same outcome without employing suffering, how can it be good for him to have caused the suffering?

Therefore, to inflict suffering in order to produce a good outcome is not, necessarily, a morally good act.²² For the act of inflicting (or creating) suffering to be a morally good act, the suffering must be inherently and intrinsically good in and of itself. And in order for suffering to be inherently and intrinsically good in and of itself, it must make an essential contribution to the *meaning* of a morally worthy story that contains it. If it were an element within a morally *evil* story, suffering that brought about a good outcome would nevertheless be evil. Also, any instance of *unnecessary* suffering²³ is evil, no matter what its outcome and no matter how morally worthy the story of which it is a part. Having a good outcome can very well *contribute* to how an instance of suffering is meaningful in the context of a story. But what makes such suffering intrinsically good is not its good outcome *per se*; it is the goodness of the meaning to which it contributes.

Furthermore, suffering is fully able to be meaningful without its resulting in a good outcome for the sufferer.²⁴ It is good by being essential to a morally worthy story, irrespective of its outcome. Suffering can have a bad outcome, so long as it makes an essential contribution to the goodness of the organically whole narrative that God is creating.

One further point: suffering need not be desirable in order to be meaningful and morally good. All suffering, by definition, is undesirable. But if it makes a meaningful contribution to the moral goodness of a story, then it is good, even while being undesirable. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus chose suffering. He clearly did not want or desire it. So, why did he choose it? Presumably, because it was a necessary element to the meaning of a morally good story in which he was an actor.

²² To create a world where good results come from suffering is not necessarily a good world. As a matter of fact, much good *does* come from suffering. But why didn't God create a world where we get the good without anyone having to suffer to get it? Isn't this world evil if the benefits it offers can only be achieved through suffering? Christians typically conceive of eternal Life as a reality where pain and suffering no longer exist. Does that not tell us something about our conception of what a good existence would look like? Do we not conceive of a good existence as an existence void of pain and suffering? Hence good outcomes without pain and suffering are clearly superior to those same outcomes through pain and suffering. Hence, suffering is not justified merely because it leads to a good outcome. The suffering can only be justified if it is itself an essential component within the goodness of reality. Good being created at the price of suffering is not truly good unless the suffering itself somehow contributes to the goodness of that created reality.

²³ By "unnecessary suffering" I mean specifically an instance of suffering that does not make a necessary or essential contribution to the meaning of the narrative of which it is a part.

²⁴ Retributive punishment for moral evil is a good example. The punishment of moral evil is not good because it has a beneficial result for the sufferer. To inflict suffering upon the perpetrator of moral evil is good because such punishment makes a meaningful contribution to a story being told—a story whose meaning accords with what is right and good. It is morally good to punish evil. But it is most definitely not because the sufferer is "benefited" by the punishment.

From the above discussion, we can infer the following important fact: any unnecessary suffering—that is, any suffering that does not make an essential contribution to the goodness of created reality—would be inexcusable and evil. If God causes any such unnecessary suffering in the lives of his creatures, he is evil. Accordingly, created reality is good only if ALL the suffering that occurs within it is necessary—that is, only if all the suffering that occurs contributes to the meaning and significance of a morally good story that God is creating. Therefore, God is good if and only if ALL the suffering that exists is necessary in this sense (assuming the story of created reality is itself a morally worthy story).

With regard to suffering, then, the question of whether there is inexcusable evil in the world reduces to these two important questions:

(A) Is there any suffering that does not make a necessary contribution to the goodness (that is, to the morally worthy meaning and significance) of the narrative being created in and through created reality? That is, is there any *meaningless* and, hence, inexcusable suffering in the world?

(B) Is the narrative of created reality of such a nature that the nature and extent of the suffering it contains cancels out any moral worth of the story? That is, is the suffering in the world *excessive* and, therefore, inexcusable?

3.2.2. Why Do We Think It Obvious that Meaningless Suffering Exists in Created Reality?

Many critics of biblical divine determinism assume it to be obvious that meaningless and excessive suffering exists. Let us examine the validity of their perception.

A number of different factors contribute to this perception that there is meaningless, absurd suffering in the world:

(a) The first factor is the mistaken assumption that *any and all* suffering is meaningless, absurd, and necessarily evil. *Any* occurrence of suffering is incompatible with a good God. A good God would never cause any suffering, for suffering is inherently evil. We have already seen that this is fallacious. Some suffering is a necessary accompaniment to events that have a beneficial outcome; and, irrespective of outcome, suffering can be intrinsically meaningful in and of itself.

Nonetheless, many people would seem to endorse this assumption. Why? In all likelihood it stems from a tacit agreement with the following reasoning: To cause suffering in another is, by definition, to cause something that that other person does not want. According to the “golden rule,” to cause something that another person does not want is to fail to love him. To fail to love is evil. Therefore, to cause suffering is necessarily evil. Since, according to divine determinism, God causes *all* suffering, it follows that God is evil.

As we have already seen, this reasoning is fallacious. To inflict suffering is not necessarily to do something that the sufferer does not want. The dental patient *does* want his teeth cared for, pain or no pain. I *do* want to know the truth about myself, painful or not.

Furthermore, this specious argument fails to take into consideration another important fact: suffering is not evil because it is undesirable; it is only evil if it is meaningless, and suffering is not meaningless just because it has an undesirable outcome

for the sufferer. The “meaningfulness” of suffering—if biblical divine determinism is true—lies in the necessary contribution that it makes to the meaning of the organic whole of which it is a part. And the organic whole in view is the entire story that God is bringing into being in and through created reality. Therefore, if the suffering of person P makes a necessary contribution to the moral worth of the story as a whole, then it is meaningful (and not evil), even in the face of these two facts: (i) it is not desirable to person P, and (ii) it fails to lead to a beneficial outcome for person P.

To make the same point another way, it is a misapplication of the “golden rule” to argue that God is unloving (and therefore evil) if he causes suffering that P does not want. It fails to account for who God is and what role he plays *vis à vis* human existence.²⁵ Granted, as a human being I am to “do unto others as I would have them do unto me.” But this maxim does not apply to God. Given that God is the author of all reality, it makes no sense to apply the maxim to him.

(b) The second factor is the following specious reasoning: since suffering is so ubiquitous and is such an ineradicable part of human experience, *at least some of it* must be meaningless. This is a sort of vague probabilistic argument. The sheer volume of suffering in the world is so great that it is highly probable that some of it is meaningless. This is unconvincing. However immense the volume of human suffering in the world, it is certainly possible that *all* of it makes a necessary contribution to the goodness of the story being told in and through created reality.

(c) A third factor, closely related to the first one above, is the mistaken belief that, unless suffering has a good outcome for the sufferer, it is necessarily meaningless and evil. We have already seen that this is fallacious—at least on assumptions acceptable to biblical divine determinism. The suffering of a sufferer is meaningful or meaningless independently of the ultimate outcome to that sufferer. If Satan is ultimately punished and destroyed, the fact that it involves a non-beneficial outcome for him does not make his suffering meaningless. The Bible clearly means to suggest that the infliction of suffering on Satan would be retributive punishment that is essential to the morally good meaning of the organically whole narrative of created reality.

(d) A fourth factor is this: many critics of divine determinism believe that they have *direct empirical evidence* of the existence of absurd suffering. They look out at the world (or, they hear testimony from real human beings), and it seems to them that they just “see” (or hear of) clear, indisputable cases of utterly meaningless, unnecessary suffering in the world. They don’t need to hear any arguments about it. They have seen the existence of absurd, meaningless suffering with their own eyes.

How are we to evaluate such alleged claims of direct, immediate perception? I would submit that these are, in truth, misperceptions. They arise from certain realities of human experience that tend to distort our assessment of human suffering. In the following section, I discuss four psycho-emotional realities that, I believe, lead us to falsely conclude that there are numerous instances of meaningless suffering in the world. Given the forceful effect these realities have on us, it is understandable that we reach this conclusion. But it is invalid. These factors cause us to misperceive reality. We do not

²⁵ See the discussion under point (iii) under §1.1 above, page 4–5.

actually *see* cases of absurd, meaningless suffering. We misconstrue as meaningless suffering that, in truth, could quite possibly be meaningful.

3.2.3. Psycho-emotional Realities that Contribute to Our Belief that the Suffering We See is Meaningless

There are (at least) four psycho-emotional realities that affect the way we assess human existence: empathy, instinct, horror, and imagination. These contribute significantly to how we understand the suffering we see. They distort our perception and mislead our judgment, leading us to draw an unwarranted conclusion.

3.2.3.1. Empathy

Empathy is a wonderful gift. It can be quite effective in motivating us to show concrete, tangible love for others. We can know the loving thing to do, and yet not be moved to do it. Empathy moves us. It gets us going. It causes us to “feel” the rightness of acting in love—to “feel” the goodness of showing tangible, concrete kindness to others. Through empathy, we can be moved from knowing the good we should do to actually doing the good we should do.

But when empathy becomes the basis for moral judgment, it leads us badly astray. It is not a reliable guide to moral judgment. Its rightful role is to move us to action. It is an effective and legitimate influence on our volitional choice; but it is not a valid basis for our moral intuition. When, contrary to its rightful role, we make it the basis for our moral intuition, it distorts our perception of reality.

Consider any of thousands of scenarios—a child being abused, a person being unjustly condemned, a person with crippling and oppressively restrictive physical disabilities or sickness. The list is long. We have all seen people in circumstances to which we spontaneously respond, “How can they stand it? They must be miserable. It must be awful to be them!” Our empathy reacts with deep feeling and passion: “How horrible! It is a terrible tragedy to experience what he is experiencing. Why does it have to be that way? What possible good can come of it?”

But my assessment of their circumstances is not based on any intimate knowledge of their existence. It is based on a feeling of empathy. If I pronounce their circumstances absurd, it is not my knowledge, understanding, and moral judgment speaking, it is my empathy speaking. I am “feeling” the tragedy of their suffering (as any humane person should do). But I am not *knowing* that their suffering is absurd and meaningless.

With regard to the problem of evil, a question arises with respect to each and every instance of suffering: does this episode of suffering have any purpose or meaning? It makes a huge difference from what standpoint I answer this question. If I answer from the standpoint of my God-given empathy, I will passionately respond, “No! It cannot possibly have any purpose.” I respond in this way because, it *feels* pointless. It *feels* meaningless. It *feels* completely absurd. From my empathy, I would never want anyone to ever suffer anything at all for any reason whatsoever.²⁶

In fact, from my empathy, I recoil even at the suffering of an utterly evil person who is suffering a just punishment for the evil he has done. In other words, our empathy

²⁶ Except when my empathy is overwhelmed by an even greater passion for revenge. Revenge is yet another powerful human passion.

recoils at *all* suffering, no matter what its meaning, and no matter what its purpose. All suffering is to be avoided. All suffering is to be opposed. No suffering is to be accepted. Therefore (and here is where empathy distorts our judgment if it is allowed to serve as the basis of moral judgment), any event of suffering is pointless, meaningless, and evil. Since we are hardwired to respond to suffering in this way, it is easy to see how we might conclude that much (or all) of the suffering we confront is clearly and unmistakably meaningless. Because it so strongly and distinctly “feels” so, we conclude that it is so.

But is this suffering I confront meaningless? Does my empathy reflect a true judgment? Do I know that it is meaningless—that it makes no essential contribution to the overall meaning of created reality? If I can get past my powerful feelings of empathy, it should be evident that I cannot possibly know. I have no frame of reference from which to draw such a conclusion. It may be absurd. But it may not be. How can I know? I lack an adequate perspective from which to pass judgment, one way or the other. As we saw above in our discussion of evil, to have a standpoint from which I could confidently conclude that an instance of suffering is meaningless and unnecessary, I would have to know the whole story of reality from beginning to end. I do not have such knowledge. All I have is my compelling empathy response. But that is not a reliable guide to objective truth.

3.2.3.2. *Human Instinct*

Protective instinct is another fundamental element of human experience. Parental instinct is the paradigmatic protective instinct, and, arguably, the most powerful one. Hardwired into every parent is the intense need to protect his children and to promote their happiness and well-being. Parental instinct is notorious for its tendency to undermine a parent’s ability to truly love his children. Children get “spoiled” because a parent allows his instinctual need to make them happy overrule his moral judgment with regard to what would actually be good for them. The parental instinct is satisfied when the child is pleased—even when the actions that please the child ultimately destroy his character. To destroy a child’s character is not an act of love. Hence, being guided by parental instinct can be contrary to love.

What does this have to do with the problem of evil? Consider the famous case of Abraham offering up his son Isaac in an act of human sacrifice. Leaving aside the moral issues involved, consider the issue that this command surely raised for Abraham: “What kind of God would require me to sacrifice my son? How can such a God be good?” With regard to the question of God’s goodness, parental instinct cannot help but distort a person’s judgment. When every cell of my being is screaming to protect and promote the well-being of my child, anyone (including God) who thwarts me in such a purpose will seem to me to be evil. From the standpoint of parental instinct, what is good is to protect my child. What is evil is anything that threatens my child.

But is that my settled moral judgment? Or, is that my instinct speaking? Is it possible that what I am biologically hardwired to want, need, and work toward is actually contrary to what is objectively morally good? Certainly that is a possibility. As a matter of fact, a good parent must discipline himself to act toward his child in a way that is truly, objectively good (loving), rather than in a way that satisfies his parental instincts. A good parent is one who does not always give his child what he desperately wants to give him.

If all this is true with regard to how a parent treats his child, it must certainly be true of how a parent perceives what happens to his child. What if God causes some harm to my child? I will tend to conclude that God has acted evilly toward my child. But is that true? The harm God has caused runs contrary to what every fiber of my being desires for my child. But biological instincts are a terrible guide to moral truth. They do not always want what is right and good. They want what they want: the happiness of my child. When, against all my instincts, God causes my child to suffer, I can understandably conclude that God has caused a great evil. But this would be a hasty and unwarranted conclusion.

What is true of parental instincts will, to one degree or another, also be true of other human instincts. Consequently, one must take great care to distinguish the conclusions of true, objective moral judgment from the dictates of natural instinct. Instincts are fine and good, but they do not give us moral truth.

If we assess the occasions of suffering carefully, dispassionately, and reasonably—discounting the strong passions of our protective instincts—we have to conclude that we do not know whether they are meaningless. We lack an adequate frame of reference from which to make that judgment.

3.2.3.3. *Horror / Revulsion*

Another common human experience when faced with suffering is horror. Suffering typically repulses us. We feel horrified by it. Through the phenomenon of revulsion, the suffering of another becomes my own suffering. The suffering of another causes an intensely unpleasant feeling of revulsion in me.

Accordingly, revulsion is another way that my moral judgment with regard to suffering can be misled. Experiencing a feeling of intense revulsion toward suffering, one can easily embrace the following facile reasoning: what is evil ought not to be; I feel intensely that X ought not to be; therefore, X must be evil. Such reasoning is logically fallacious, of course. But it is a natural and understandable mistake. From the natural feeling of intense revulsion—that is, from the intense feeling that a certain instance of suffering *ought not to be*—it seems readily to follow (by just such fallacious reasoning) that this horrible suffering is evil.

Consider the following scenario: a cruel and malicious serial killer—one who has committed multiple gruesome acts of torture and murder—is captured by the authorities (ones that are not particularly concerned with the humane treatment of prisoners). These authorities execute him in a particularly violent and gruesome way. Imagine the intense revulsion you would feel if you were a witness to the gruesome and violent execution of this serial killer. You can imagine being absolutely horrified by it. You can imagine being inclined to conclude, therefore, that the execution itself was an evil act. Yet, on what grounds? It is on the grounds that the execution was so horrible and repulsive. But can that be right? Is it morally wrong to exact judgment on a serial killer? Maybe. Perhaps his execution is evil. But to hastily decide such a thing simply because I find it horrifying and repulsive is terribly misleading. Something cannot be evil simply because I find it horrible.

The effects of an automobile accident can be just as gruesome, horrifying, and repulsive as any execution I might imagine. Does that make those effects morally evil? They are tragic, certainly. But are they morally evil? Isn't our response to the

gruesomeness of the serial killer's execution identical to our response to the gruesomeness of the auto accident? We are hardwired to have a visceral response to suffering and harm inflicted on the human organism. We are intensely repelled by it. But this built-in, self-protective response cannot rightly serve as the basis for moral judgment. Just because I am repelled by an instance of suffering does not make it evil. Neither does it make it meaningless. I can be repulsed by a surgery that I witness. But the surgery is not evil or meaningless because of that. Watching the surgery makes me agitated and uncomfortable. But that does not make it wrong. I could draw such a conclusion only if I falsely believed that anything that makes me uncomfortable is evil. And surely my state of comfort is not the touchstone of all moral judgment.

An instructive example

The infliction of suffering in the punishment of evil can serve as an instructive example here. Consider the punishment of Satan (whom I will assume to be utterly and irredeemably evil). Presumably, to witness the punishment of Satan would be undesirable. An instinctual response of horror and revulsion at the violence directed toward him would make it repulsive to witness it. But would the violent punishment and destruction of Satan be an evil act? My instincts might incline me to say so. I am utterly horrified by anyone (including Satan) being subjected to the violence of retributive punishment. (The more gruesome and repulsive I imagine the punishment to be, the more my instincts are inclined to call it evil.)

But notice the moral incoherence that would result if I made these instincts the grounds of my moral judgment: God is evil to punish Satan, for his punishment would be horrifying; and God is evil not to punish Satan, for only an evil judge would allow evil to go unpunished. If my instincts speak the truth—"a good God would never cause suffering"—then a good God could *never* punish evil. And yet, surely a good God could never leave evil unpunished!²⁷ And this means that a morally good God *must* inflict suffering on the evil doer.²⁸

²⁷ From the perspective of biblical divine determinism, it is right and good that moral evil be punished. Paul clearly believes that God's punishment of evil men is compatible with (and, indeed, essential to) God's moral goodness. In *Romans* 3:5–6, Paul asks rhetorically, "God, when he deals out wrath, is not unjust, is he? (I mean, when he deals out wrath in response to the individual.) Of course not! Because, otherwise, how could God judge the world?" How can Paul approve of God "dealing out" any wrath at all? How could force and violence directed toward evil men be good? The only possible answer is that the punishment of (the use of force and violence against) evil men is a morally coherent, morally meaningful, and morally significant act. It is one that ought to exist in a morally good universe. The notable exception (also clearly taught in the Bible) is mercy. Mercy is the decision of a righteous God not to punish evil with the punishment it deserves. But mercy is not incompatible with goodness. Moral laxity would be incompatible with goodness, but mercy is not moral laxity. To allow evil to go unaddressed would be evil. But mercy, rightly understood, is not a matter of evil going unaddressed. An act of mercy fully recognizes and judges evil to be evil; it fully affirms that punishment should be the just response to evil. Mercy trumps punishment. It chooses to forego punishment. But it does not fail to acknowledge and affirm the propriety of punishment.

²⁸ What if God, the author of all reality, were to create a world where he rewarded evil with the same reward he rewarded good? (This is precisely the world that must necessarily be envisioned by a person who—out of tender-heartedness— insists that any suffering whatsoever is evil.) Such a world would be a morally incoherent world, at best. At worst, it would be an evil world. God is in a lose-lose situation with

Here we confront an important paradox that leads us to an important insight: our moral judgment with regard to suffering must be understood to be distinct from our visceral reaction to suffering.

Every human being whose humanity is whole and intact—who is not some sort of sociopath—has a psycho-emotional (sometimes even physical) reaction to the pain, suffering, sorrow, and misery experienced by others. What human being does not experience a kind of revulsion at the prospect of pain and suffering? This psycho-emotional revulsion is independent of the identity of the sufferer. I recoil at the prospect of Hitler being tortured just as surely as I do at the prospect of Hitler's victims being systematically and unceremoniously exterminated. But such a psycho-emotional reaction is an instinctive reaction, not a moral judgment. I cannot rightly permit it to become the basis for any moral conclusion. It is what it is—an automatic sympathy response to suffering and pain. It is psycho-emotional revulsion, not moral judgment. As such, it cannot rightly be allowed to replace moral judgment. Punishment inflicted on an utterly evil person may cause me to recoil, as I respond instinctively to the suffering that is inflicted on them. But this visceral response cannot legitimately cause me to conclude that such punishment is evil. My moral judgment must be based on the objective rightness or wrongness of the act of punishment, not on my instinctive reaction to the unpleasantness of the act. My moral judgment must be based on the moral meaning and significance of the act, not on whether I find it psycho-emotionally agreeable.

In summary, then, our conflicted response to the retributive punishment of evil highlights two very important facts:

- (a) Our moral judgment with regard to suffering must be understood to be distinct from our psycho-emotional aversion to suffering. Any normal (humane) human being will have a visceral reaction wherein he is repulsed by any force and violence against (that is, by the punishment of) evil men. But the punishment of (the use of force and violence against) evil men is a morally coherent and morally meaningful act that will make a significant contribution to the story of a morally good reality. Therefore, the dictates of our instinctive reactions to suffering is decidedly different from, and incompatible with, the dictates of moral judgment itself. There is an important difference between moral judgment and psycho-emotional aversion. It would be a mistake to take the latter for the former. It would result in a wrong judgment about the nature of reality.
- (b) There is an important difference between the objective moral goodness of a story and a beneficial outcome for a particular being within the story. Causing harm to an evil person as an act of punishment may very well be morally good without being psycho-emotionally appealing or attractive. But, further, causing harm to an evil person as an act of punishment may be an objectively good thing to do, without its resulting in any "good"—any benefit—for that particular person. Objective moral goodness has to do with the moral meaning and significance of an act, not

the tender-hearted objector to all suffering. If he creates a world where good is rewarded and evil is punished, then the objector calls God evil for exacting punishment on someone. If he creates a world where everyone is abundantly blessed (no matter what amount of good or evil he did), then God must certainly be called evil for his failure to create a morally coherent and morally good reality.

with the nature of the outcome for everyone involved. Something can be morally good without involving benefit for everyone related to the act. Therefore, the story of created reality, taken as a whole, may be morally good and worthy without every “character” within that story having a beneficial end.

3.2.3.4. *Imagination*

Another distorting lens through which we see the suffering in the world is imagination. Like empathy, imagination is a wonderful thing. It can benefit us greatly. It can also be a terrible curse.²⁹ And if we allow it to serve as the basis for our judgments, it can certainly mislead us. When we imagine something, it is easy to think that we *see* it. We think we *perceive* when, in reality, we only imagine. When we make imagined realities the ground of our knowledge claims, we are misled.

This is highly relevant to our perception of suffering in the world. Given the power of our imagination, we can easily imagine (and, therefore, believe) that we see unbearable, insufferable misery in another’s life when, in truth, it is no such thing. We *imagine* that it is unbearable; we do not *see* that it is. Our imagined “perception” does not deliver truth to us; it gives us our fantasy about reality. We fantasize misery when, in truth, it is not there.

This was brought sharply home to me in a third world country several decades ago. Some friends and I had walked down to visit an archaeological site. We encountered a group of young boys—poor, impoverished street urchins—playing in the dusty street near our destination. I stopped and watched. What surprised me—startled me, really—was how very *not* miserable they seemed to be. Did they not know how poor they were? Did they not know how much suffering their lives involved? Did they not know that they weren’t supposed to be happy? Given the economic circumstances of their lives, how could they be having so much fun with one another? The point was forever impressed upon me: misery is more a state of mind than it is the objective circumstances we find ourselves in. In my imagination, I had painted their lives as miserable, unbearable poverty. What is true of misery is equally true of meaningfulness. I can easily imagine that the suffering I see in another is meaningless and absurd, when, in truth, it is not.

We quite typically imagine that we know and understand the inner life of those we see suffering. We do not know it directly, for we are not they. We are not inside their minds, consciousness, and experience. We are observers from the outside. But, lacking direct access to their inner lives does not prevent us from imagining that we know them. And, typically, when we imagine the inner experience of a sufferer, we imagine it to be some flavor of misery, not some flavor of contentment. That creates a huge problem when it comes to judging the goodness of God. We can *imagine* another’s suffering to be pointless, absurd, and meaningless. And, having imagined it so, we falsely think that we have *seen* it to be so. That, then, can serve as direct evidence that God has created inexcusable suffering.

But do we understand this person’s suffering from the inside? Do we know what inner dialogue is happening between him and his creator? Do we know what kind of inner longings, yearnings, passions, and hopes are being spawned by the sufferer’s

²⁹ It is outside the scope of this paper to explore this fruitful topic.

suffering? Do we know that he has not learned to be content in his circumstances? Do we know that he is not learning true wisdom through his sufferings? Do we know that, in the midst of his sufferings, he is not finding profound comfort in a meaningful relationship with his creator? Of course not. We cannot know any of these things. Yet we *imagine* that we can, imagining that his suffering lacks any meaning or substance. It is one small step further to conclude that we *know* that his suffering is without meaning or substance. The underlying argument is, of course, fallacious: I imagine X to be meaningless; therefore X is meaningless. Some of us tacitly employ this unsound reasoning nonetheless, presuming that we see what we only imagine—a reality filled with totally meaningless suffering.

Mostly, I make this mistake when I contemplate the suffering of others. I am much less likely to misperceive my own suffering. The meaning of my own suffering can be quite apparent to me. Some of the most excruciatingly painful episodes of my life were the most meaningful ones. They were the experiences that transformed me. It is my suffering that has shaped my life, values, and perspectives, and made me the person that I am. Whatever semblance of wisdom I possess was gained through suffering.³⁰ The most painful experiences of my life have been the most meaningful and substantive experiences of my life. I hated every second; but I wouldn't trade them for anything. They changed me, formed me, and were essential to making my story the story that it is. I can understand, in part, why God caused me to undergo those painful experiences. They were a necessary part of my existence. I will never fully grasp *what* those moments of suffering meant, but that they *did have meaning* is clearly beyond doubt.

Therefore, for most of us, if we conclude that there are innumerable examples of meaningless suffering in the world, it is the suffering of others we have in mind. We do not typically have our own suffering in mind. But it is precisely with respect to the suffering of others that we are in no position to know whether it is meaningful or not. How could we know? It is part of *their* story, *their* narrative. If it has meaning, it has meaning in the context of *their* narrative; and that is something of which I have no direct understanding. I do not have a vantage point from which I ever could understand it.

When we discount all the meaningless misery of others that is conjured up by our imagination—of which we could never really claim to have *knowledge*—it becomes a seriously open question whether there exists any meaningless suffering at all. Perhaps there is. Perhaps there is not. But one thing is clear. We have no clear, undistorted empirical evidence that it does. We only have what our imagination delivers. In view of this, it is only from an unreflective dogmatism that one could claim to know firsthand of the pointless suffering that abounds in the world.

3.2.4. Conclusion: Do We See Meaningless Suffering?

It is easy to look at the various instances of human suffering in the world and believe that we are seeing instances of meaningless and inexcusably evil suffering. But what makes this so are various non-rational factors that are not reliable guides to truth. Human

³⁰ Often I was unable to articulate what an occasion of suffering taught me, but it was clear that it changed me—I think for the better. Even when I could not pinpoint the “wisdom” that an episode of suffering taught me, it was clear that it did, in truth, make me wiser. But it was a wisdom that was burned into my soul, not a wisdom that would flow glibly out of my mouth.

empathy, protective instincts, natural revulsion at violence, and creative imagination all ultimately distort our moral judgment. They lead us to the conclusion that suffering is evil and meaningless when we have no rational basis for thinking so. In truth, we lack any standpoint from which we possibly could know.

Just as we saw in our discussion of evil generally, I would have to know the final resolution of the entire story of reality before I could claim to “see” directly that an instance of suffering is unnecessary. Therefore, I would have to know the whole story before I could justly claim to “see” that it is absurd and meaningless. Without such knowledge, I have no basis from which to claim to know. I must remain agnostic. The suffering I observe might very well look absurd and meaningless—I readily imagine that it is—but I have no way of *knowing* that it is. Hence, any claim to knowledge is sheer dogmatism.

3.2.4.1. Underlying Biblical Assumption

The above argument clearly assumes a certain priority of reason and knowledge over passion and feeling. Some today—as at various times throughout history—believe that what we “feel” gives us a truer and more profound insight into reality than what our minds, reason, and understanding can know. Obviously, I don’t agree. An important aspect of the biblical worldview is that a human was intended by his creator to make his reason the final arbiter of what is true. If one insists on the alternative—if one insists that what we “feel” is a more reliable guide to truth than reason—then he must inevitably reject the goodness of God. For all the reasons discussed above, any normal human being will “feel” quite strongly the horror and senselessness of the evil and suffering in the world. And if God is the cause of it, he must be evil. But it is a mistake to give such priority to what I feel. Life experience shows us repeatedly, I believe, that the one who trusts what he “feels” is ultimately misled. His feelings guide him into all manner of folly, evil, harm, destruction, and error. These negative outcomes—if nothing else—ought to call into question the reliability of passion and feeling as a guide to truth. In any case, I believe our instinctual responses to suffering distort our perception and moral judgment with regard to the suffering in the world. While it might feel absurd to us, this is not the indubitable judgment of our reason. It is the spontaneous, visceral reaction of our instincts.

3.2.5. Is There Excessive Suffering in Created Reality?

There remains one last question about suffering. What if all the suffering in created reality is, in fact, meaningful? Is it not possible, nevertheless, that it is excessive? There are two ways that this could be the case:

(1) In any given case of suffering, its intensity and/or duration is excessive. While the suffering serves an important and meaningful role in the relevant narratives, it could be milder and shorter and still have the same meaning and still accomplish the same purpose.

(2) The sum total of all the suffering in the world is just too great. While every particular instance of suffering is meaningful, purposive, substantive, and *measured*, nevertheless, the total suffering in the world is so excessive that this world should never have been created. Whatever morally worthy story gets told through that suffering, it cannot possibly be good enough to counterbalance the evil of the sheer amount and

intensity of the suffering that it contains. There is just too much! A good God would never have created this much suffering, no matter to what good it might contribute.

I concede, in principle, that it makes sense to suppose that there is a threshold of total suffering beyond which reality would become evil. In other words, I concede that there could be a total amount of evil and suffering that would cancel out the goodness of any created reality that included it—no matter how meaningful and morally worthy that created reality—taken as an organically whole story—might be. But this objection to divine determinism must be evaluated just as we have evaluated all the other objections thus far. Namely, by recognizing the groundlessness of its assumption. To claim that the amount of suffering in this world is excessive is arbitrary. It is completely void of any rational foundation.

How could any human being possibly claim to know what would be the morally appropriate *amount* of meaningful suffering that could be included within a morally worthy created narrative? It is sheer *hubris* to presume that I possess such knowledge. Therefore, it is difficult to take this objection seriously. Perhaps the *amount* of meaningful suffering in created reality is excessive; perhaps it is not. I cannot presume to know. And I certainly cannot make such an unfounded judgment my basis for rejecting biblical divine determinism.

3.3. *The Outcome of the Argument: A Summary*

Let me summarize where our discussion has brought us. We established that no formal argument based on the nature and extent of evil in the world can decisively refute biblical divine determinism. Such an argument merely highlights the point that there are two competing premises. Either, Premise A is true or Premise B is true, but they cannot both be true. Specifically, either created reality *does* contain inexcusable evil (Premise A)—in which case biblical divine determinism cannot be true. Or, biblical divine determinism *is* true (Premise B)—in which case created reality cannot contain inexcusable evil. Whether one opposes or favors biblical divine determinism will ultimately hinge on which of these premises he accepts.³¹

On what basis does the opponent of biblical divine determinism embrace Premise A (the assertion that reality contains inexcusable evil)? The traditional argument from evil would have us believe that Premise A is, in some sense, self-evident and incontrovertible. All that is necessary is to parade before one's eyes all the horrible and tragic instances of meaningless, absurd suffering in the world. In the light of that parade, one would have to be a moral monster not to agree with Premise A. Reality clearly contains inexcusable evil. Granted, some of it might be meaningful and, therefore, not inexcusable. But the sheer volume of what seems to be meaningless evil and suffering makes it inescapable that at least some of it is inexcusable. Hence, Premise A is true. Reality contains inexcusable evil.

We have seen how misleading this approach is. The fact that my fertile imagination and keen empathy induces me to imagine all sorts of meaningless evil and purposeless

³¹ I was helped to see that any argument from evil ultimately reduces to something like this fundamental choice by William Roe's discussion of the problem of evil in Chapter 6 his book, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, especially in the section he titled "Response to the Evidential Problem."

suffering in the world does not make it so. My spontaneous psycho-emotional responses do not necessarily provide me with a valid insight into the nature of reality. I cannot evaluate Premise A from the standpoint of my imagination and empathy. It must be evaluated from the standpoint of sound reason and sober understanding. As we discussed above, imagination, empathy, and passion are great incentives to action, but they are unreliable bases for rational moral judgment.

Tellingly, the most compelling formulations of the argument from evil are constructed by novelists, poets, or artists of various stripes, not by philosophers. The reason is simple. The argument from evil is psycho-emotionally compelling, but it is intellectually inconclusive. I can have my passions incited to embrace the idea that reality contains inexcusable evil, but no one can demonstrate—by sound philosophical argument—that it is true. Therefore, as it turns out, the argument from evil is usually not an *argument* at all. It turns out to be an exercise in psycho-emotional manipulation. The consumer of the “argument” is made to feel the horror, the tragedy, the pain, and the outrage of pointless, meaningless suffering. Then he is told that no truly good God could ever be the author of such suffering. That is most certainly true! No truly good God *could* ever be the author of pointless, meaningless suffering. But that is beside the point. The fact that God has authored such pointless, meaningless suffering has never been proved. To make an *actual argument* against biblical divine determinism, this very fact would have to be proved. And that is what no argument from evil ever can actually prove. Believing that reality is inexcusably evil is a judgment I can *choose* to make, but it is not a conclusion that is *necessitated* by indisputable evidence.³²

At the same time that the argument from evil is intellectually inconclusive with respect to Premise A, it is also intellectually “safe.” No one can prove Premise A false. It is logically possible that inexcusable evil does exist in the world. No one—*from his own personal standpoint in experience*—has any basis for denying its existence. So, the opponent of biblical divine determinism is on safe grounds. No argument from evil can conclusively refute biblical divine determinism, but neither can any argument decisively prove that the evil and suffering in the world is compatible with biblical divine determinism. Whether it is true or not, the assumption that inexcusable evil exists is logically possible.

Therefore, an analysis of the argument from evil simply brings us to an impasse. Perhaps the opponent of biblical divine determinism is right in his embrace of Premise A; and perhaps the proponent of biblical divine determinism is right in his embrace of Premise B.³³ The *actual* reasons why the opponent of biblical divine determinism

³² As we have shown, no one has a standpoint from which he could justly conclude that the evil and suffering in the world is of such a nature and of such an extent that no good God could ever have purposed to include it in a created reality. To justly reach such a conclusion, one would have to know the whole story of reality, and he would have to have intimate knowledge of the inner experiences of every human creature. Obviously, no human being can have such knowledge. Therefore, no one can justly claim to know—on the basis of his direct knowledge of evil and suffering in the world—that inexcusable evil exists.

³³ We have shown that, on the basis of our own personal assessment of our direct experience with evil and suffering in the world, we have no way of determining whether Premise A is true or false. Accordingly, we have no way of judging, on such a basis, whether the nature and extent of evil and suffering in the world is compatible or incompatible with biblical divine determinism. In other words we have no way of

embraces Premise A lie in the power of his imagination, the proclivity of his empathy, and the inconclusive nature of the data. As we have seen, none of these actual reasons are particularly sound or compelling reasons to embrace Premise A.³⁴ We turn now to an exploration of the reasons why the proponent of biblical divine determinism embraces Premise B instead.

4. **Assessing Premise B: Biblical Divine Determinism is True**

In the face of all the evil in the world, why might a proponent of biblical divine determinism find premise B (the truth of biblical divine determinism) compelling? To answer this, it is important to remember the nature of the argument to which this paper is a response. It runs like this:

In light of the inexcusable evil that exists in the world, if God is good, then he cannot be the determiner of all things.

We grant that God is good.

Therefore, in light of the inexcusable evil that exists, he cannot be the determiner of all things.

Biblical divine determinism involves two elements: a belief in divine determinism and a belief in divine goodness. The argument from evil against biblical divine determinism rejects its belief in divine determinism on the grounds that the existence of inexcusable evil in the world makes it impossible to embrace both divine determinism and divine goodness, and it refuses to reject divine goodness. Given the nature of this argument, here is the counter-argument that the proponent of biblical divine determinism must therefore defend:

In light of the fact that God is good, if God is the determiner of all things, then the evil that exists cannot be inexcusable.

We know that God must be the determiner of all things.

Therefore, in light of the fact that God is good, the evil that exists cannot be inexcusable.

To defeat the argument from evil against his position, the proponent of biblical divine determinism must defend both his belief in divine determinism and his belief in divine goodness. If both of these beliefs are true, it logically follows that the evil in the world cannot be inexcusable, and he has a logical basis for rejecting the salient premise of the argument of his opponents.

knowing, on such a basis, whether the argument from evil against biblical divine determinism succeeds or fails.

³⁴ The typical perspective of the opponent of biblical divine determinism is that *it is OBVIOUS that inexcusable evil exists* in created reality. We have shown that this is not at all *obvious*. There could be evil in the world that is incompatible with the purposes of a good God, but no human being has any basis upon which to claim to know such a thing. He may believe it, but he has no firm rational basis for doing so. Therefore, when the opponent of biblical divine determinism asserts that it is *obvious* that created reality contains inexcusable evil, he is simply being dogmatic. His claim is groundless.

Now it is outside the scope of this paper to explore how the proponent of biblical divine determinism would defend his belief in divine determinism.³⁵ But it is essential to the purpose of this paper that we explore how the biblical divine determinist would defend his belief in divine goodness.

The *opponent* of biblical divine determinism bases his belief in inexcusable evil on the actual occurrences of evil and suffering in the world. How can the biblical divine determinist observe those same occurrences of evil and suffering and embrace the claim that God is good? In other words, *in face of the evil and suffering that actually exists in the world*, why do proponents of divine determinism find it plausible to accept the goodness of God? That is what we must explore here.

The biblical divine determinist must certainly concede that there exist instances of evil and suffering that challenge his perspective. He cannot prove that every instance of evil is consistent with his belief that a good God purposed it. In the face of such problematic evil and suffering, therefore, how can he embrace biblical divine determinism? On the assumption that his belief in divine determinism has a sound basis to begin with, he can embrace *biblical* divine determinism only if—*independently of the problematic instances of evil*—he has a valid basis for believing in the goodness of God. If he has reason to believe that God is good, then he can reasonably embrace biblical divine determinism in spite of any problematic instances of evil. For, if God is good (and divine determinism is true), it logically follows that such problematic instances of evil are not ultimately *inexcusable*.

So here is the question that remains: in view of all the sin and evil that exists, on what basis does the biblical divine determinist believe in the goodness of God?

4.1. Reasons for Belief in the Goodness of God

There are at least four bases upon which the biblical divine determinist believes that God is morally good (and that the evil and suffering in the world are not inconsistent with his goodness): (i) what everyday, ordinary experience reflects with regard to the moral character of God, (ii) his own personal experience with suffering and evil, (iii) God's self-revelation in and through history, as that is recorded in the Scriptures, and (iv) the role and moral nature of Jesus, as that is understood from the Scriptures. I will discuss each of these in turn.

4.1.1. God's Ordinary, Everyday Beneficence

One of the most powerful and influential expressions of the argument from evil is Ivan's soliloquy in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ultimately, Ivan appeals to the overall fabric of human experience. He contends that, if one considers the world that God has created and the divine purposes that are reflected in that world, one must conclude that God is something of a moral monster. He is not worthy of our honor or respect.

³⁵ The narrower purpose of this paper is to show that the problem of evil does not constitute a decisive refutation of biblical divine determinism. For a defense of divine determinism itself, see my book *The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism*. The biblical divine determinist embraces divine determinism on the basis of biblical exegesis, biblical theology, and philosophical reflection.

Therefore, for moral reasons, he refuses to grant him any respect. (Ivan does not deny the existence of God. He only denies that he is worthy of any honor, respect, or worship.)

Herein lies a real irony. It is precisely on the basis of the overall fabric of human experience that the biblical divine determinist believes that God is a good and worthy benefactor—quite the opposite of a moral monster. Ivan can describe God as a moral monster because he selects out dramatic instances of horrible human suffering, he exaggerates them in his creative imagination,³⁶ and then he paints his portrait of God on the basis of such highly selective, imaginatively distorted evidences. The biblical divine determinist rejects Ivan's portrait as tendentious and ultimately false.

What is remarkable to the biblical divine determinist is this: an occurrence of evil or suffering strikes us as horrible and tragic. It strikes us that "it ought not to be!" Why is that so? Is it not because such a horrible and tragic event is a jarring departure from our expectations? And from whence did our expectations arise? Do they not arise out of our assessment of ordinary life experience? In other words, we are horrified at the occurrence of evil in the world precisely because it strikes us as a violation of the fundamental nature of reality. It is at odds with the overall fabric of human experience.

It stands to reason that our expectations of everyday, ordinary experience would arise out of our overall, tacit assessment of its ordinary character. In other words, what we expect from tomorrow is based on our assessment of what has happened in the past. And what exactly are our expectations for tomorrow? We expect to survive the day. We expect to be protected, fed, and cared for. We expect that tragedy will not strike. Why? Because mostly, and usually, that has always been our experience. Mostly, and usually, we do fine.

The simple fact is this: most of the time we are cared for and sufficiently provided for. God is a beneficent provider who is committed to preserving and caring for his creatures. It is precisely this assessment of ordinary reality that Jesus appeals to in Matthew 6:25–34. He reminds his disciples that most of God's creatures, most of the time, are wonderfully cared for. Any exception is part of God's providential purposes. God takes care of even the very least of his creatures unless he has some specific purpose to do otherwise. (See Matthew 10:29–31.)

The benevolence of God in our ordinary experience is so "normal" that it is virtually invisible to us. We rarely notice or think about it. We take it for granted. We readily notice and "count" the evil and suffering we encounter, because it stands out in sharp relief against the backdrop of normal beneficence. But, normally, we don't even see the goodness, for the blessings of ordinary life blend invisibly into the fabric of our everyday life and experience.

When one stops to consider it, tragedy and extreme suffering are truly exceptional. Consider a thought experiment. What if evil and tragedy were just as likely to occur as good and beneficence? Would the occurrence of evil and tragedy shock us under such circumstances? If there were a 50-50 chance of evil happening at any given instant, would we be surprised and jarred if and when it did? Is it not significant, therefore, that

³⁶ In this regard, note the discussion above on the distorting effects of human imagination. §3.2.3.4, pp. 27-29

we respond with surprise and horror to evil and suffering when it occurs? Does it not suggest that occurrences of evil and suffering are a surprising departure from what we expect from human experience? In other words, suffering and tragedy are not a part of the intrinsic fabric of ordinary experience; they are a blemish. All in all, we expect human experience to be beneficent; we do not expect it to be destructive and evil.

Or again, consider a simple, straightforward comparison of the sheer amount we experience of each. We are always shocked at the occurrence of a devastating natural disaster. But for every day of devastation brought about by a natural disaster, how many hundreds of thousands of days of normalcy—safety, ample provision, basic well-being, etc.—had preceded that day of tragedy? How many hundreds of days of normalcy had been lived by hundreds of thousands of people? In terms of the sheer number of person-days, care and benevolence is the rule, tragedy is the exception. In ordinary, everyday reality, benevolence and care prevails over suffering and tragedy. If we were to keep score and were to give God the points that are due him for every little gift and every little kindness, would the “score” even be close? God purposes that we experience beneficence more often than he purposes that we experience evil and harm.

Therefore, so far as the biblical divine determinist is concerned, everyday human experience is a series of tragic storms moving across the surface of a vast ocean of divine benevolence. We are surprised by the storms; we take the ocean for granted. The argument from evil against biblical divine determinism ultimately depends for its persuasive power on painting God as a moral monster. While everyday experience cannot prove that God is perfect and unblemished in his goodness, it certainly refutes the moral monster picture of God. Whatever God is, he is not a moral monster. If God is even mostly good, then it follows that—if he is the determiner of all things—the evil that does occur is not meaningless, unnecessary, excessive, and inexcusable.³⁷ If God will not allow a sparrow to die without it serving his overall good purposes, then surely he will not allow a human being to suffer without its likewise serving some fundamentally good purpose.³⁸

³⁷ The meaning and purpose of much of the evil and suffering in the world is hidden from me. It remains mysterious. The hiddenness of its meaning creates the space within which to question the goodness of God. The evil within reality challenges my beliefs. I have no ready explanation for why so much suffering and evil exists in the world. For some, it is fashionable—not to mention, emotionally satisfying—to take the myriad of questions and mysteries as definitive evidence against the goodness of God and reality. But the truth remains: however fashionable it may be to think otherwise, there is no clear, definitive, unambiguous evidence that reality is excessively and absurdly evil. And when I consider carefully the nature of ordinary, everyday experience, I must concede that beneficence is the rule, tragedy is the exception.

³⁸ A likely objection here is that my belief in the benevolence of God and reality is the distorted perspective of a prosperous American. It is not the perspective of an impoverished, third-world sufferer. In response to this objection, I would make three points: (1) Granted, my own perception is certainly shaped by my privileged experience as a prosperous, 21st century American. But Jesus’ perception was not shaped by such a standpoint. And his teaching was not addressed to people who enjoyed my prosperity. Jesus was decidedly *not* prosperous by any standards of world history. And he was speaking into the experience of people who were intimately acquainted with hardship. They lived lives of hard labor and bitter grief. Yet, Jesus does not hesitate to teach what he does in Matthew 6: 25–34. He portrays God as benevolent and caring. (2) To the extent that my perspective is informed by my prosperity, surely such comfort distorts my

4.1.2. Personal Experience with Evil and Suffering

A second basis upon which the biblical divine determinist believes in divine goodness—even in the face of the evil and suffering in the world—lies in his own personal experience with suffering and evil. In his own experience, suffering and evil have always been constituent elements of something good. Through suffering and evil have come wisdom and understanding. Through suffering and evil, he has come to know and embrace what is valuable and important. Through his encounter with evil, he has come to understand the most important questions of his existence. It is in and through the crucible of suffering that he has been made and transformed.³⁹

The biblical divine determinist has not experienced suffering and evil as ultimately harmful, absurd, and meaningless; he has experienced it as ultimately good, meaningful, purposive, and productive. If his past experience teaches him that suffering and evil can be meaningful and purposive in this way, then two things follow:

(a) He has good grounds for believing that his future experience with evil and suffering will be similarly meaningful and purposive.

(b) He cannot know that the suffering of others in the world is not similarly meaningful and good for them. (How can he assume that the evil and suffering encountered by others is absurd and meaningless when, in his own case, he has never experienced it as such?)

The meaningfulness of his own suffering does not prove that all human suffering is meaningful. That is not his argument. But, in the light of his experience, it is certainly plausible to believe that all human suffering is meaningful. In the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, it is entirely rational for the biblical divine determinist to assume that the suffering within human existence is not in conflict with the basic beneficence of human existence. Accordingly, it is entirely rational for him to assume that it is not in conflict with the fundamental goodness of God. For, on the basis of his own experience, the biblical divine determinist has come to conclude that God is fundamentally good.

perspective in the opposite direction from what is envisioned by the objection. As a “spoiled” American, I have much less tolerance for discomfort and suffering than I would if my life were filled with hardship. If I were not a spoiled American, I would be much more inclined to receive everyday survival and provision with gratitude, and with an understanding that God had been good to me. As a comfortable, prosperous American, I am much more inclined to take physical provision for granted and to not see the benevolence of God at work in it. (3) While one can think of notable examples of misery and suffering that seriously challenge the perception that God is good, are such examples the exception or the rule? That is the critical question. Jesus did not teach his followers that the sparrow never falls to the ground. He taught them that it does not fall to the ground without the Father knowing it—that is, without the Father purposing it. Terrible things happen under the benevolent governance of a caring Father. But they are the exception, not the rule. And when they do occur, they are part of the purposes of a benevolent, caring Father. This is the perspective Jesus taught to his ancient “third-world” followers.

³⁹ Not all the wisdom that a person gains through suffering comes to him in the form of an understanding that he can articulate to himself or to others. True wisdom runs deeper than an understanding that one can articulate. True wisdom transforms and creates more than it informs.

4.1.3. God's Self-Revelation in and through Biblical History

There is a third basis upon which the biblical divine determinist believes that God is good: on the basis of his self-revelation. According to biblical divine determinism, the moral character of the transcendent author of all things is ambiguous and difficult to discern. He creates light, he creates darkness; he creates good, he creates evil. Who is he then? What is the character of this transcendent author of all things?

The moral character of God cannot be discerned from how he acts out of his transcendence. It can only be discerned from the various roles he plays within the story of history and reality. God has not remained invisibly above his creation. He has assumed very specific roles within human history and experience: Lawgiver, Judge, god of Israel, etc. Within each such role, God acts and behaves in ways that reveal who he is. Specifically, he acts in ways that demonstrate his commitment to good, and his opposition to evil. It is through these roles that God reveals his true moral character.

It is in the Scriptures that we find a record of this self-revelation by God. In the Scriptures, God is invariably depicted as a being who rewards good and condemns evil. He delights to reward good, and he considers it tragic that he must punish evil. In every role we see him in—whether as judge over all the earth, as lawgiver to his people, or as the divine protector of his people—we always see him conduct himself in accord with what is good. He never does evil.

In sum, the Bible explicitly declares that God is good; and then it inevitably depicts him as good in every role that he plays in the history of his dealings with mankind. In the record of God's self-disclosure, therefore, God reveals himself to be a morally good being. Without question, the teaching of the Bible is that God is good. For a biblical divine determinist, this biblical teaching provides an important basis upon which he believes in divine goodness.

4.1.4. God's Self-Revelation in and through Jesus

Finally, a fourth basis upon which the biblical divine determinist believes in divine goodness is on the basis of the moral nature of Jesus as that is depicted in the Bible. According to the teaching of the Bible, Jesus is the "image of the invisible God." He is the "stamp of his very person." He is the "translation" of God's being into the medium of human personhood.⁴⁰ If that is right, there is no better way to judge the moral character of God's person than to assess the moral character of Jesus' human person.

According to the eyewitness testimony regarding Jesus that is recorded in the Bible, Jesus was utterly good. He was an entirely righteous and upright man. And, further, the most dramatic action that Jesus took on behalf of mankind (to voluntarily go to his death in order that he might rescue mankind from their slavery to condemnation) was a most elegant and dramatic statement of the love (and, therefore, of the goodness) of God. In the light of who Jesus was (as that can be known from eyewitness testimony), God can be known to be utterly good. Translated into the form most readily knowable to us, God's character—as expressed in the form of Jesus' human life—was revealed to be good, and not evil.

⁴⁰ See Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, and John 1:18.

4.2. *The Goodness of God*

Taken all together, the four factors listed above—on assumptions acceptable to biblical divine determinism—make a compelling case that God, the author of all reality, can be known to be good, and not evil. Accordingly, they make a compelling case for rejecting the proposition that God's creation contains inexcusable evil. If God is as good as all this evidence suggests, then it follows that he would never purpose evil or suffering that is senseless, unnecessary, absurd, or excessive. In other words, God would never cause inexcusable evil.

5. **Conclusion**

To conclude, then, let me trace the argument that I have made in this paper:

The *proponent* of biblical divine determinism believes that biblical divine determinism is true on the basis of the data of biblical revelation in conjunction with the results of philosophical reflection on that data.

On the other hand, the *opponent* of biblical divine determinism believes that it can be refuted by an argument from evil. If the actual suffering and evil in the world is inexcusable (such that a good God could never have purposed it), then the reality of that inexcusable evil is incompatible with the tenets of biblical divine determinism. Specifically, it is incompatible with the claim that God is both good and the cause of all that is. The critic assumes that the evil in the world is, in fact, inexcusable. Therefore, he believes that it stands as an insurmountable refutation of biblical divine determinism.

The only way the proponent of biblical divine determinism can possibly answer this alleged refutation of his position is to argue that there is no clear and irrefutable evidence of his opponent's claim. Specifically, there is no clear and irrefutable evidence that—in terms that are consonant with biblical divine determinism itself—the suffering and evil that exists in the world is, in fact, inexcusable. To defend biblical divine determinism along these lines, I did two things in this paper:

(a) I analyzed the tacit, underlying reasons why the typical opponent of biblical divine determinism so readily believes that the suffering and evil in the world is inexcusable. I demonstrated that those reasons are not decisive. To know directly, from immediate observation, that the evil and suffering one observes is inexcusable, one would have to have a standpoint that is unavailable to any human being. Hence, direct and immediate observation provides no clear, definitive, incontrovertible evidence that inexcusable evil exists in created reality.

(b) I examined the underlying reasons why the typical proponent of biblical divine determinism believes—in the face of the evil in the world—that God is good. I showed that—though he could never prove that every instance of evil in the world is compatible with divine goodness—he nevertheless has significant reasons for believing it to be so. Since he is convinced—by reasons compelling to him—that God is utterly good, it stands to reason that the instances of inexplicable evil and suffering in the world are likely compatible with the goodness of God. Hence, it is likely that none of the evil and suffering in the world is inexcusable.

Therefore, we have shown that the specific argument from evil that we outlined at the beginning of this paper does not decisively refute biblical divine determinism. The

critic of biblical divine determinism cannot successfully show that the nature and extent of evil and suffering in the world is definitively and incontrovertibly irreconcilable with the tenets of biblical divine determinism, including its belief in divine goodness. And, on the other hand, the proponent of biblical divine determinism can offer substantial reasons for believing that the nature and extent of evil and suffering in the world can be plausibly believed to be compatible with the goodness of God. Hence, the argument from evil as an argument against biblical divine determinism is not successful.

EPILOGUE

A Dialogue

Allosthelia: I understand all the points you made. But I'm not particularly satisfied. There remains a problem that you still have not answered to my satisfaction.

JAC: Oh, what is that?

Allosthelia: It just seems to me that some of the suffering that evil people inflict on others is so horrible and so extreme that it is difficult to believe that a good God could be responsible for it. Think about an evil man who rapes a two-year old, for example. It is utterly horrific to contemplate the terror and pain and damage that that evil man is inflicting on the child. You have not yet convinced me that a good God would actually want to cause such a horrific evil. What good could possibly come of it?

JAC: Okay, let's talk about your example and see if we can come to some clarity. What is it in your example that makes it particularly problematic in your eyes? Is it that the evil is more extreme than other examples of evil? Or is it that the horror you feel is more intense?

Allosthelia: Well, certainly it feels more horrible to me. But I think it is a more extreme evil. I think the evil itself is excessive.

JAC: Tell me then. Is it more evil than a husband treacherously betraying and deceiving his wife by having a decade-long affair while pretending that he is faithful to her?

Allosthelia: I think so. Certainly that would be evil, but it doesn't strike me the same way. I don't find it as unthinkable as horrifying. Probably because it doesn't involve a child.

JAC: But why should the age of the victim of my evil have anything to do with how evil I am?

Allosthelia: Well, because a child is so small, and helpless, and vulnerable. It is so terribly evil to take advantage of a child's helplessness and vulnerability.

JAC: But hasn't a trusting wife made herself vulnerable as well? Hasn't her trust in her husband rendered her vulnerable? He is taking advantage of her trust and is using it to deceive her. That is the treachery. That is a significant part of the evil of his betrayal. It is not clear to me that he is any less evil than the child rapist.

Allosthelia: But how can a man hurt a child like that? That is what strikes me as so grotesquely aberrant.

JAC: Certainly the child rapist is engaged in horribly aberrant behavior. And it is grotesquely aberrant precisely because it is so terribly unnatural. It violates every instinct that a human being has to nurture little ones. But I think you have put your finger on what it is you feel. You don't feel that the child rapist is more evil than the treacherously deceitful adulterer. Rather, you feel that he is more grotesquely broken and twisted with regard to his inclinations. You feel that his impulses are more extensively abnormal. They depart horribly from what should be normal human instincts to protect and nurture a child. I absolutely share your feelings in that regard. But, however more grotesque than other evil the rape of a child might be, I think it strikes us as extreme in the extremity of its grotesqueness, not in the extremity of its evil. So far as evil goes, I think it is just one more example of human evil. It is just one more example of rebellion against God, against goodness, against truth, and against nature—even to the point of totally disregarding normal human instinct. So, as far as evil goes, it is no more and no less problematic than any other evil. Either God can use it as a necessary element of a good and worthy story he is creating, or he cannot. Either it can be meaningful and purposive, or it cannot. I don't think the degree of horror that it induces in us is relevant to the issue of whether it can be meaningful and purposive.

Allosthelia: Perhaps you are right, but just imagine the terror and horror that the child herself would experience. How can a good God even imagine creating such a thing?

JAC: Again, we have to separate the evil of the act from the suffering inflicted by the act. He can imagine the evil by extrapolating to that which he is not, isn't that so? As for the suffering, now that is a different matter. Can you imagine any suffering being meaningful and good, or do you think that all suffering is unnecessary and meaningless? The Bible would seem to suggest that suffering is an essential element to making existence meaningful. If that is right, then it cannot be suffering *per se* that is the problem. God can and does use suffering to create meaning in existence. So, what is it about inflicting this particular suffering that makes it seem so unthinkable to you?

Allosthelia: Again, I think it is because it is a child. A child cannot understand. A child cannot see the meaning in her suffering. A child cannot grow and become deeper and become better because of suffering she has endured. It seems to me that such an event is just an absurd, meaningless nightmare to a child.

JAC: Yes, it is easy to see how it would seem so. But let's be careful to distinguish what we know is true from how things seem to us. If the ultimate goal is to determine what sort of perspective we are going to take toward the creator, don't you think it is necessary to make such a decision on the basis of what we actually know, not on the basis of what seems like it might be so.

Allosthelia: Yes, certainly that is true.

JAC: So, do we actually know that a horrible, terrifying event in the life of this child can never be an essential element of anything ultimately good? As I argued in my paper, certainly we can imagine that it cannot. We can imagine that nothing ultimately meaningful arises from it. But in real life events of such a nature, do we actually know, for a fact, that no good thing arises from them?

Allosthelias: No, you're right. It would be rather presumptuous to say that I know that no good can or does come from them. I just don't see what it could be.

JAC: Granted. And I am in total agreement with you there. I am just as perplexed as you are at what possible good could be involved in such an event such that a good God would cause it to happen. But are we in agreement that it cannot be a matter of you and me knowing whether any good could come of it? Rather, that it is a matter of whether we might reasonably believe that God could mean it for some ultimate good?

Allosthelias: Yes, in terms of the issue at hand, you are absolutely right.

JAC: So, for the sake of whether biblical divine determinism is true, it is not a matter of whether I am comfortable with the evil that is in the world; and it is not a matter of whether I like the nature and extent of the evil that is in the world. It is a matter of whether the nature and extent of evil in the world provides a compelling rational justification for my rejecting biblical divine determinism—that is, for rejecting either the goodness of God or divine determinism. The argument I offered was not intended to make anyone more eager to accept the evil that is in the world. I don't think it can do that. And it would be horrible if it *did* do that. We *shouldn't* ever be comfortable with the evil that is in the world. Frankly, the evil in the world is intolerable. That is God's own perspective toward it; and it should be ours as well. God finds the evil in the world intolerable. So should we. We should grieve over it, not be okay with it. Some of the evil in the world is outrageously horrible. It is a grotesque distortion of what human existence should be. So, it is right and good that I have an intense emotional aversion to it. There would be something wrong with me if I didn't. But my aversion to it must not be construed as proof that it is necessarily meaningless and without any moral worth in the ultimate scheme of things. I cannot know that. I don't know that.

Allosthelias: Yes, you are right. I must confess that what I wanted from you was an argument that would convince me to *like* the way God is scripting this reality. But, frankly, I don't like it. I don't think I am alone in wanting someone to offer me a perspective that would show me how I could like it. At least, something that would show me how I could find it tolerable. But your argument doesn't do that. But, then, as you are saying, you never claimed that it would.

JAC: Exactly right. And as I said, it would actually be wrong of us to "like" everything that God does and everything that he scripts. From the Bible's perspective, not even God "likes" everything that he scripts. Just because he "wills" it all doesn't mean he likes it all. There are some very grievous,

sorrowful, and tragic elements within the fabric of this world. By its very nature, tragedy is not "likeable." Tragedy can be significantly meaningful. But it is not likeable. To say it again, there would be something terribly wrong with us if we actually liked tragedy as tragic. It can be meaningful and significant. And we can "like" it for that. But we should never love the tragic for its evil character *per se*.

Allostelia: But I think what we all hope for is an argument that will show us how we can look at the horribly evil things in this world in such a way that we can directly see and know what good purpose they serve. Your argument has not shown me that.

JAC: That's right. And no argument ever could. We would have to be God himself to see directly and clearly how every evil contributes to the morally good whole that God is creating. We do not have any perspective from which we could see that. And, indeed, it is impossible that we ever could have such a perspective. We are not God; we are his creatures.