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Holcomb, Kansas

The Problem of Evil

THEO: Well, here we are: Holcomb, Kansas. Not much to it, is there?

EVA: I don't think Disneyland has much to worry about.

GENE: I never promised Disneyland.

EVA: Yeah, but Gene! There's really nothing here!

GENE: It's smaller than I expected. And I guess I expected a sign or something. Did either of you see a sign?

THEO: The sign back there said Holcomb. It wasn't worth the trip, in my opinion.

GENE: No, I mean a sign about the Clutter murders or *In Cold Blood*.

THEO: It's a little creepy that you had us make this detour, Gene. I don't know how you convinced me.

EVA: Gene, did it ever occur to you that the people here probably don't want their town to be known for the murder of an innocent family? Did you think the city council promotes massacre tourism?

GENE: It's not massacre tourism: it's literary tourism! *In Cold Blood* is one of the best books in American letters, and this is where it's set. I don't have some macabre fascination with murder.

EVA: Okay, creep.

GENE: Oh, turn here, turn here! I think it's right down this lane that the Clutter family got it!

THEO: Man, you *are* creepy. It says no trespassing. I don't think we should...

GENE: Turn!

EVA: Better do what he says, Theo, or Holcomb might be the scene of another grisly crime.

THEO: Turning, turning...

GENE: That's it! That's the old Clutter Farm!

THEO: It's just a house.

GENE: Do you think they give tours?

THEO: No, I don't. Look, it's just a house. People are living there.

EVA: I don't know how you could live there after all that happened.

THEO: I thought you didn't believe in ghosts, Eva.

EVA: I don't. But that doesn't mean I don't get spooked in the middle of the night. And living in a house where a family was slaughtered...

THEO: I wouldn't want to live out here in the middle of nowhere, with no close neighbors or anything. If you screamed, no one would hear.

EVA: Okay, let's get out of here. Theo, let's go.

GENE: Wait just a second! Let me get a better picture. None of these...

EVA: Now!

THEO: Okay, okay. Sorry, Gene. It's spooky.

EVA: No kidding. The sooner we get back to civilization, the better.

GENE: I'm surprised at you, Eva. This isn't your normal, rational self. You know, you're almost certainly safer here than on the interstate.

THEO: Or in the middle of New York City, where you keep saying you're going to live.

EVA: I don't know. New York has so many people, even in the middle of the night you're near someone. You feel that if something happened, you could scream and hundreds of people would hear you. Out here...

THEO: You're assuming someone would help you if you screamed.

EVA: Now *you're* creeping me out, Theo.

GENE: No, Theo's right. Even in a crowded city bad things happen all the time and no one helps. Think of Kitty Genovese.

EVA: Kitty who?

GENE: Kitty Genovese. She was murdered near her apartment house in Queens, back in the 60's. People heard her screaming that she was being stabbed, but they didn't do anything about it. One guy yelled out of his window, and the attacker left for a bit, but he came back a little while later and finished the job.

EVA: Ech. Gene, where do you hear about this stuff?

GENE: The world is full of it. Ever watch the news?

EVA: Not for stuff like that. Besides, that happened way before you were born.

THEO: To be fair to Gene, I've heard of it too. It's pretty famous, actually. I heard about it in my psychology class. It's associated with what's called the bystander effect. People don't want to get involved.

GENE: That's exactly what one witness was quoted as saying. "I didn't want to get involved." At the time, some newspapers reported that one neighbor turned up his radio to drown out her screams.

EVA: That's disgusting. What sort of people are these?

THEO: Not good ones.

GENE: It's easy to say that, but would you have acted differently? Are you sure you'd have gotten involved?

THEO: I'd have at least called the police, and if I knew I wouldn't get seriously hurt I'd have directly intervened.

EVA: Did her neighbors even call the police?

GENE: Most of them didn't. Like I said, one of them is said to have turned up his radio...

EVA: That's just indecent.

THEO: Unforgivable.

GENE: You guys are pretty quick to condemn.

THEO: It's not exactly a hard call. These people could have prevented a murder without putting themselves in harm's way. That sort of indifference is immoral.

EVA: I agree.

GENE: I'd be careful about being so judgmental, Theo. According to you, there was another observer who didn't intervene on Kitty's behalf.

THEO: Oh, you've got to be kidding.

EVA: Gene's right! God was watching, and He certainly could have prevented the murder without harming himself or anyone else.

THEO: It's not God's job to jump in and prevent people from murdering.

EVA: Why? He doesn't want to get involved?

GENE: Sounds familiar.

THEO: It's not like that.

EVA: So what is it like?

THEO: You're telling me that you don't believe in God because Kitty Genovese got stabbed?

EVA: It's a pretty old argument, actually. People usually discuss the example of the Holocaust, not Kitty Genovese, but the point's the same.

THEO: You're referring to The Problem of Evil, right?

EVA: Right.

THEO: I knew this time would come. I'm surprised it took you so long. Let's hear it.

EVA: The argument can be stated concisely, if we let "evil" stand for things having negative moral value.

GENE: What does that mean?

EVA: The clearest examples are pain and suffering. Those things are morally bad. I mean: it's better if there's less of them, other things being equal.

GENE: So evil is pain or suffering?

EVA: Again, those are clear examples. But there might be other evils, such as the sort of loss that death can imply.

THEO: Hold on, Eva. "Evil" doesn't mean "pain, suffering, or death." Paper cuts cause pain but rarely involve evil.

EVA: Right, I know. I just need a term for negative moral value.

GENE: Hey, I just thought of one that's less misleading than "evil."

EVA: Do tell.

GENE: How about, "negative moral value"?

EVA: Cute. Look, I'll just use "evil." Sue me later if you want.

GENE: Won't be worth it. Philosophers aren't rich.

THEO: Okay, okay, enough. Eva, all you've done is redefined a word. Where's the argument you promised?

EVA: Here you go:

1. If God exists, there is no unnecessary evil.
2. There is unnecessary evil.
3. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

THEO: It's concise, I'll give you that much.

GENE: Yeah, but I suspect those short premises build in a lot of assumptions.

EVA: Not really. The main assumption is one we've agreed on: we're talking about God as He's traditionally conceived—all knowing, all powerful, and all good.

GENE: That fits Samuel Beckett's name for him, *omniomniomni*: omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. But as we said before, not everyone thinks God is like that.

THEO: That conception is pretty central to the Judeo-Christian tradition, though. I wouldn't want to give it up.

GENE: Why not?

THEO: Well, first and foremost God must be worthy of worship. If He were a morally tainted character, He wouldn't be.

GENE: That's not so clear. The Greeks and Romans worshipped some shady characters. Zeus was an out-and-out philanderer among other things!

THEO: Yeah, and that's one of the reasons that the pagan religions are unappealing. Why would you worship a God like that?

EVA: Maybe because you thought that if you didn't you might get a lightning bolt through your forehead.

THEO: True, you might do it out of fear, but is that really worship? It sounds more like paying lip service to a tyrant.

EVA: What, fear can't inspire worship? C'mon! Fear and worship go together like peanut butter and jelly. Just ask a Catholic or a Jew.

THEO: That's not how I conceive of my relationship to God. I can hardly imagine choosing to make God a central part of my life, if I thought of things that way.

GENE: Okay, Theo, I see why you want God to be all good. But why all powerful?

THEO: He's supposed to have created everything! That takes a mighty powerful supreme being.

EVA: No kidding. I don't see why a universe creator would have to have zero limits on His power, but I see where you're coming from. But why think God has to know everything?

THEO: That's a little trickier, but part of the reason concerns His compassion. To be fully compassionate, He's got to truly understand everyone and everything; He can't be ignorant in any substantial way.

GENE: Okay, so much for motivating the omnioniomni conception. Let's get back to the problem of evil. Theo, how do you get around that argument? I'm guessing you agree with the second premise, that the world contains unnecessary evil.

THEO: Well... I'm not sure.

EVA: Oh, come on! Think of all of the Jews killed in the Holocaust, all of the children murdered and women raped in war and...well, like Gene said, just look at the news!

GENE: Now I see why people use the Holocaust example. But isn't the Kitty Genovese case enough to establish premise 2?

THEO: I don't think so. It's complicated. But I don't think I need to defeat premise 2 anyway. Premise 1 is false: God can coexist with unnecessary evil.

GENE: How's that? If God is all good, all knowing, and all powerful, then why would He allow the world to contain the suffering that it does?

THEO: Just look at your examples: the Holocaust, the Clutter murders, war crimes, Kitty Genovese. God didn't do those things. Those were human acts, human evils.

GENE: You're missing the point. The argument doesn't depend on God's performing any evil acts. The residents of Kew Gardens who heard Kitty Genovese screaming didn't stick the knife in her back. Their crime was failing to do anything to help her, despite hearing her cries for help. You thought that made them pretty bad. Why don't you hold God to the same standard?

THEO: You're forgetting about free will.

GENE: Go on.

THEO: God made us free. We can choose what we do. And by giving us free will, God gave us the ability to act morally and immorally. We don't always make the best choices. But without freedom, we'd be little more than automatons.

EVA: So you're saying we're to blame, not God? It's from our misuse of our God-given freedom that we get murders, the Holocaust, and other atrocities?

THEO: Right.

EVA: I'm not sure that gets God off the hook. It's not enough to say God gave us free will. You also have to say that it was worth it. Maybe it would have been better if we didn't have free will and there weren't so many evils.

THEO: Of course it was worth it! Granted, people commit unbelievably evil acts. The Holocaust was, well, a holocaust. Even so, the alternative is worse. Without free will, we'd just be a bunch of robots.

EVA: Maybe that'd be true if we had no free will at all, but that's not what I'm suggesting. Here's an analogy. Many nations, including ours, place a high premium on personal liberty. Perhaps they think that life without liberty is no better than death.

THEO: Sounds right to me.

EVA: Me too, I guess, but even nations who think this don't let their citizens do just anything. Citizens aren't allowed to murder each other. But they're still free for the most part. Giving up a little freedom is worth it to avoid the disasters of anarchy.

GENE: Right, so why wouldn't God give us free will and then just curb it occasionally?

THEO: How would that work?

GENE: Why not have Hitler die while cleaning his gun, before his murderous reign begins? God could just put a glitch in his memory, so he forgets the gun is loaded or something. Or maybe just change around his brain chemistry, so that he loses all his racism and hatred. Sure, that'd be an intervention, and it would compromise Hitler's free will. And maybe it'd take an option off the table for some misguided Germans. But would that have been so bad? Surely it would have been worth it. It's not as though intervening in that way would have made us unfree robots.

THEO: Maybe not, but where would it end? After stopping Hitler, He'd have to stop Stalin. And after Stalin, Mao. And Pol Pot. And so on and so on, until He'd have to stop the killing of Kitty Genovese. Then we're back to a world without free will.

EVA: That seems a little quick.

THEO: The point is, there's nowhere to draw the line. Or maybe He's already drawn it.

GENE: I doubt it. I agree that it's hard to know when to curtail liberties. That's a problem for governments as well. But you have to draw the line somewhere. If the line you draw allows the Holocaust, there's something wrong.

EVA: Besides, there seem to be ways that God could prevent human evils from occurring without restricting liberties or violating our free will. He could make it so that when Oswald aimed and shot at Kennedy, a wind blew the bullet off course. Oswald would still have freely pulled the trigger. He'd still have made an immoral choice for which he could be judged. It's just that his act wouldn't have had the same bad effect.

THEO: That's easy enough to imagine in isolation. But think about what it'd be like if God did that sort of thing all the time. You'd have bending knives and swerving bullets galore—a miracle for every bad decision. I don't think we'd be free in such a world.

EVA: Sure we would! Being free just means being able to *try* to do things. It doesn't mean always succeeding. Your actions needn't accomplish all you hope they would.

GENE: I think freedom might require more than that. In fact, I'm not even sure that genuine free will exists.

THEO: You don't believe in free will?

GENE: I'm pretty skeptical. But that's a topic for another occasion.

THEO: I don't see why you wouldn't believe in free will.

EVA: I think I know where he's coming from. But without getting into a completely different debate, maybe I can push the objection this way: Why couldn't God make us so that we just freely chose to do the right things?

THEO: So we're free and yet we always choose correctly? That doesn't add up. If God predetermines that we choose correctly, that we choose to do good things, then we can't do otherwise. We're not free.

EVA: Why doesn't God make it so that we *could* choose bad things but we just, in the end, don't? We always choose good things instead.

THEO: Because that's incoherent. Remember, earlier we agreed that God's being all-powerful doesn't mean He can do the impossible. He can't make round squares. Making us so that we're guaranteed to freely choose the good every time is impossible, like making a round square.

GENE: But if God's omniscient, He knows everything, right? That means He knows what decisions we'll make before we make them. Why doesn't that imply that we don't have free will?

THEO: That does seem odd, but I think He can know what we'll choose even if we do so freely. Someone's knowing what will happen doesn't have any direct implications about what determines what will happen. In particular, it doesn't imply that we won't cause ourselves to do what we will do.

GENE: Okay, I guess that's right. But if there's no impossibility there—if God can know that we'll do something even though we could have done otherwise—then why is it impossible to make us so that we always freely choose to act well?

THEO: Because if God sets things up so that we always act well, then we're not free to do otherwise—and so we're not truly free. Hey, do you guys know if we're going the right way? Is that the road to Denver?

EVA: I think so. Gene, if we get lost because of this detour...

GENE: Don't worry. We're destined to freely get to San Francisco. It's already written.

EVA: Yeah, I'm pretty sure we're going the right way. But listen. Even if you're right, and God can't make us so that we freely always choose the right actions, surely you admit there are ways we can influence each other significantly. What we do is heavily influenced, even if not completely determined, by the way we were raised, by those who teach us, and by our natural dispositions.

GENE: Actually, I'm inclined to think everything we do is completely determined by those things.

EVA: Maybe you're right, though I can see why Theo might want to resist that claim. Still, Theo, you've got to admit that what we do is at least strongly influenced by factors outside of our control—our environment, our genetics, etc.

THEO: Yes, but we can always buck the odds. Even someone brought up in a perfect home can choose to murder, and a child abandoned in the slums can wind up a saint.

GENE: That doesn't prove anything.

EVA: Hold on, Gene. Theo, even if you're right, surely you recognize that what we do is to some degree conditioned by our genetic and environmental inheritance.

THEO: Fair enough. I probably wouldn't have been making this drive if I hadn't inherited a car, for example.

GENE: Or if you hadn't met us.

EVA: And you agree that some crimes and murders are committed not because the murderers thought it a good idea to commit a crime and freely did so, but because they were crazy?

THEO: Maybe. I'm not sure.

GENE: Oh, come on! David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, thought his dog was telling him to murder! Clearly that guy was nuts! Not only did he think his dog was talking to him; he actually did what he thought his dog told him to do!

EVA: You can't deny the existence of mental illness, Theo.

THEO: Of course not. Berkowitz and Manson were nuts. No question.

EVA: So would it have interfered with their free will to remove their mental illness? Wouldn't that actually have made them more free?

THEO: I don't know about that. But why focus on such lunatics?

EVA: Why not? All I need is one case. If God could have prevented the Son of Sam murders without interfering with anyone's free will—perhaps by making a world that didn't have mental illness—then He would have been wrong not to have done so. To put it another way, given that a perfect God would have done so, there must not be a perfect God.

GENE: Eva doesn't really need to point to cases like Son of Sam.

EVA: You're not about to trot out some other, more obscure mass murderer, are you?

GENE: No, I was just going to say that your point holds for normal people. You admit, don't you, Theo, that a parent, teacher, or leader can inspire people to act well without infringing on their free will?

THEO: Of course.

EVA: You'd better! On your view, Jesus' teachings made the world a better place, didn't they? Yet I don't think the Sermon on the Mount robbed anyone of their free will.

THEO: True.

EVA: So why not create better teachers?

GENE: Why not send down a Jesus every fifty years?

THEO: I can't believe what I'm hearing. God sends down His own son, the greatest teacher man has ever had, and you ask for more?

EVA: Sure, why not? I think if God existed He'd do something just like what Gene suggests. He wouldn't just send down His son and then let the world fight for two thousand years over whether or not he really was God's son! As great a teacher as Jesus was, it obviously wasn't enough. And if God existed, He'd have known that. That there aren't more teachers like Jesus despite the fact that the world obviously needs them is evidence that God doesn't exist.

THEO: What you're saying is absurd. It's not that Jesus wasn't enough or that his teachings weren't good enough. It's that people haven't listened. That's their choice.

GENE: But why haven't they listened?

THEO: I have no idea. Eva, why haven't you?

EVA: Ha ha. Very funny.

GENE: Seriously. God, knowing everything, knew we wouldn't listen. He also knew why: human psychology has limitations. We're often self-centered, we have limited memory capacity, and many of us aren't terribly compassionate.

THEO: Speak for yourself.

GENE: I am. I mean, I know that a child dies of hunger every five seconds, and that I can prevent some of those deaths if I give money to any one of many charities. Even though I know this, I buy books instead of checking them out of the library. I buy DVDs I don't need, and sometimes I only watch them once. And my collection of table tennis rackets is obscenely large.

THEO: So you're selfish. We knew that.

GENE: I don't think it's just me. Here we are, staying in hotels and ordering room service, while people are dying of hunger. People aren't

hard-wired to keep these things in view. If God existed, wouldn't He have made sure we kept each other in mind a little more than we do?

THEO: Why are you blaming God for your shortcomings? I can't believe I'm even listening to this.

EVA: No, Theo, Gene's making a good point. We have certain capacities that have a lot to do with our tendency to do good and evil—our capacity to listen, remember, feel, and so on. The fact that we're made the way we are, so as to allow atrocities such as the mass killings in Rwanda to occur or to allow others to die of hunger while we remain in the lap of luxury. That indicates that those capacities weren't designed by a perfect God.

THEO: In other words, you're saying that God is partly responsible for the evils that humans commit, even if they chose of their own free will to perpetrate those evils? Because He didn't give them faculties that would have led to better decisions?

GENE: Precisely.

THEO: This sounds a bit like a rapist whining because his mother didn't cuddle him enough!

EVA: Lovely, Theo.

THEO: In any case, I don't see how you two can be so confident that humans are a flawed creation. If God made us so that our sentiments welled up so that we always did the right thing, we wouldn't have free will. He gave us room to make good or bad decisions. Bad decisions are bound to get made sometimes.

GENE: But evil acts aren't rare. They occur all the time.

THEO: What makes you so sure God hasn't struck just the right balance? Maybe we have enough free will to prove our moral worth and enough moral sense to know what to do if we chose to do it. Isn't the fact that there are a lot of saints as well as a lot of sinners an argument that He struck that balance?

GENE: I guess I can't rule that out. I don't know how to make the perfect man.

EVA: Or woman.

GENE: I have a clearer idea of that.

EVA: You're a pig. Fortunately, though, we don't have to resolve this free will business to show that God doesn't exist. Human beings don't cause

all the unnecessary evil in the world. There's plenty of evil to go around, even without our handiwork.

THEO: Namely?

EVA: Well, think about unnecessary animal pain. There was a lot of that before humans even existed.

THEO: I don't know. Did dinosaurs feel pain as we know it?

EVA: Probably. But forget animal pain. Stick to humans. There's still plenty of unnecessary pain, suffering, and death that we didn't cause.

THEO: Such as?

EVA: I'll give you a hint: we're on our way to California.

GENE: Earthquakes!

EVA: Earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, famines, floods, plagues ... the list goes on. Hundreds of thousands died in the 2010 Haiti earthquake alone. I've been using murder as an example because that's what we were talking about. But the argument from evil could be run in terms of evil caused by natural disasters:

1. If God exists, there is no unnecessary evil caused by natural disasters.
2. There is unnecessary evil caused by natural disasters.
3. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

GENE: That's pretty compelling. Rejecting that reasoning would be like believing your house was designed by the perfect architect even though the roof leaks and the ceiling sags.

THEO: You'd still believe there was an architect, wouldn't you? You wouldn't believe the house just leapt from the ground.

EVA: That's just the argument from design again, Theo. We flogged that dead horse enough.

THEO: Who said it was dead? Anyway, I'm not convinced by your architecture analogy. What if it turns out that your roof doesn't just leak—it leaks into a cistern that provides drinking water for the house?

GENE: That'd be pretty neat.

THEO: Maybe that's what's happening here.

EVA: You might wonder why the leak and the cistern have to be in the middle of the living room, though.

THEO: Huh?

EVA: I'm just anticipating. You're planning to say that seemingly pointless evil serves some unknown purpose, right?

THEO: Exactly.

EVA: Well, that's probably so in some cases, but in all? Also, even if natural disasters always did some good, that wouldn't be enough. The purpose has to be worth the cost.

THEO: True.

EVA: Yeah, it's not hard to find silver linings in dark clouds. But if the darkness is worse than the silver or if the silver could have been gotten without the clouds, then the plan could be better than it is. We still have evidence against God's existence.

THEO: I don't think it's like that.

GENE: I don't know, Theo. I mean, I once heard a guy say that God gave us famines to curb population growth.

THEO: Yeah, I don't buy that.

GENE: Right. If God wanted to curb population growth, He wouldn't use a famine, would He? There are so many other methods that don't involve so much suffering. For example, he could have made us so that we became less fertile when we live in places where population growth would cause problems.

EVA: Why would God even care about population growth? He could just have the planet expand and become more fruitful every time a child is born!

THEO: Okay, so pointing out some good effects of bad things doesn't completely answer the argument from evil. Still, I think a case can be made that evil plays an important role in an overarching design.

EVA: Go for it.

THEO: Well, Eva, do you remember reading Heraclitus in our philosophy class?

EVA: "Everything is fire"? That Heraclitus?

THEO: That's the one, but that's not the part I had in mind. He also said opposites depend on one another. Light depends on darkness, odd depends on even, and so on. The same thing could be said about good and evil. You can't have one without the other. So, the suffering that

exists is needed because without it the world wouldn't have goodness either.

EVA: I do remember that bit in Heraclitus.

THEO: So how about it?

EVA: If I remember correctly, the professor made a couple of distinctions when explaining what Heraclitus might have meant. Those might come into play here.

THEO: Okay.

EVA: You might mean good and evil couldn't exist without each other. Alternatively, your point might concern *knowledge* of good and evil. In that case you could allow that they could exist without each other. The point is rather that if we never encountered bad things we wouldn't understand good things. Moral knowledge requires contrast.

GENE: This is getting a bit abstract. Give me examples.

EVA: Sure. You know how a valley depends on a mountain? If you have a valley between two mountains, and you take away the mountains...

THEO: You get Kansas.

EVA: Basically. No more valley. A valley only exists in relation to the mountains that surround it. You couldn't have a world with only valleys and no mountains.

GENE: Right.

EVA: So, one idea is that good and evil are like that. There can't be a purely good world: one with only goodness and no badness. Likewise, there can't be a purely bad world.

GENE: What's the other idea?

EVA: That good and evil are related like wealth and poverty. In principle, everyone could be poor; alternatively, everyone could be rich.

GENE: Does that even make sense?

EVA: I don't see why not. Just imagine that the world didn't have limited resources. Or imagine a plague wiped out everyone except those in the highest tax bracket. They wouldn't stop being rich just because no one was poor anymore.

GENE: It might give new meaning to the phrase, "You can't find good help these days."



EVA: Ha ha. Still, there might be a different sort of dependence. If you've never experienced poverty, you won't appreciate wealth in the same way you would otherwise. And if no one were poor, maybe no one would think of themselves as wealthy.

GENE: In that case, the terms "rich" and "poor" might never be used, or even invented.

EVA: Right. But there'd still be people who are financially well off. So the point is that sometimes one thing doesn't depend on its opposite, though comprehending that thing might depend on being familiar with its opposite.

GENE: Got it. So which do you want to say holds for good and evil, Theo?

THEO: It's a lot more like the wealth case than the valley case. I don't want to say there can't be a world without any evil. That view might entail that heaven is impossible, and it's not.

GENE: Right, and it's not as though people fighting against evil had better be careful not to fight it too well or they'd wipe it out and poof, goodness would suddenly disappear!

EVA: And it's not as though if things start to get too good we had better keep someone around to torture just to make sure that goodness continues to exist.

THEO: Yeah, the role of evil in the world is to add the contrast that allows us to appreciate the good in the world. Evil adds pepper to the soup.

EVA: I'm sure that'd make the people dying in famines and floods feel great. "Don't fret, my suffering brethren: you're the pepper in the soup of my life!"

THEO: I wouldn't put it that way.

GENE: No, but Eva has a point. If the purpose of evil is to help people appreciate the good, then evil is distributed unfairly. Entire populations have inordinate amounts of suffering—constant pain, hunger and death—while a relatively small number of people have gold-plated toilet bowls and beach-front balconies. If the evil that exists were there to serve the purpose you're talking about, would this be the way things are?

EVA: Right. Wouldn't it be better for every person to have a certain amount of strife, but no one person have so much that it's unbearable for her?

THEO: I don't know. Maybe for some reason we need examples of people who live terribly painful lives.

EVA: I don't see why. But even if some examples are needed, why so many? And why are they so concentrated in specific areas like Africa and Bangladesh? And Europe and Russia during World War II? Why do people have it so good in places like the United States today?

THEO: I don't think the residents of New Orleans would see things that way, since Katrina.

EVA: Okay, but you get the point, don't you? Even if some suffering is needed, why so much? And surely it could be distributed more justly. Again, why not give everyone a big headache for an hour a day? If the only worry is that in a perfect world we wouldn't have a conception of goodness, the daily headache would take care of it. No need for famines or earthquakes.

GENE: Or if you're so worried about people failing to appreciate the good life, why not just give them nightmares. Have you ever awakened from a terrible dream and been so relieved that it was only a dream?

THEO: Absolutely. I keep hoping that's what will happen any moment now.

EVA: So, God could give us dreams. And why stop there? He's all-powerful. He could just snap His heavenly fingers and we'd all have the concepts of good and evil. He could snap His fingers again and no one would take his or her life for granted.

THEO: Okay, okay, I get it. Still, you've got to admit that if the world were as you say—if no serious suffering happened except in nightmares or during daily headache hours—then life would lose its drama. There'd be no heroism, no genuine danger or cause for fear. It would be a pretty colorless world. Think of your favorite book or movie. Whatever it is, what would remain of it if there weren't any true risk of harm or adversity to be overcome?

GENE: Good point. *Casablanca* probably wouldn't be such a powerful film if the Nazis were just a bad nightmare.

EVA: Oh, come on. Surely you'd trade *Casablanca* to prevent the Holocaust!

GENE: But it's not just *Casablanca*. What about the tragedies of Shakespeare, the operas of Verdi, the films of Spielberg? Those would go down the toilet, too.

EVA: Nice list. Steven Spielberg: Shakespeare of the silver screen!

THEO: Enough, children. Anyway, it's a mistake to focus just on art and entertainment, as if the main point of evil were to generate box office receipts. It's part of many religious views, certainly mine, that our time on Earth is just an instant compared to what lies thereafter. But our earthly existence isn't just for fun. It's then when we show our moral worth—when we earn our way into paradise. The world is a sort of moral obstacle course, full of opportunities for moral development. It has its share of pain and suffering, but what sort of obstacle course would it be if there weren't obstacles?

EVA: But why do we need obstacles? Why throw us in the middle of an obstacle course?

THEO: Because without it there'd be no moral development, no chance for the triumph of the human spirit, and no progress. The world would just be a boring, static place.

GENE: What you're saying sounds pretty compelling, Theo. As strange as it is to say, the world would be awfully bland without evil—natural or otherwise.

THEO: You mean you're actually conceding something? Pinch me!

GENE: Hold on, let's think about this more. Aren't we judging the blandness of the world we're imagining from the comfortable perspective of the well off? I mean, sure, from the mountaintop the ravages of war and the whole of human suffering can seem sweeping and grand. But what about the perspective of those who actually suffer and die? You'd probably have a hard time convincing the moaning child who can barely see out of his own filth that his suffering is worth it to add to the drama.

EVA: Right. It's one thing to lecture in loafers about the obstacle course facing you. It's quite another to be crushed by the obstacles, drowned by the floods, and murdered by bloodthirsty lunatics.

THEO: That's true. But the harms that befall those poor souls provide opportunities for others to show their worth.

EVA: That's so callous. News flash: the world isn't just a moral training camp for Theo. And if it were, that'd be totally unjust.

THEO: I'm not saying that. I don't know God's plan. I doubt any of us can even grasp it. But that doesn't mean I have to bow my head and say, "There must be no purpose to everything, so God doesn't exist." You say

God wouldn't have created a world with so much suffering. I just don't see how we could know that, especially since all we know is what we find in this life.

EVA: So you're saying the scales could all even out in the afterlife?

THEO: Sure, for all we know. Granted, those children who die of hunger or drown in tsunamis haven't had anything but suffering in this life. But I believe that this isn't the end for them. They might return to Earth as Rockefellers or they might occupy a particularly resplendent part of the afterlife.

EVA: So you're into reincarnation now? That doesn't seem very Christian.

THEO: I'm saying that we don't know God's plan. I don't believe in reincarnation, but I'd sooner change my mind about that than deny that God exists or say He puts innocent children through such misery without giving them anything in return.

GENE: So let me get clear on what you're saying. You're responding to the argument from evil by denying premise 2. On your view, there's no need-less suffering in the world.

THEO: That's right, though my response to that premise has two parts. First, a lot of evil results from our misusing our free will. God would certainly prefer that this suffering not occur, but it's unavoidable—it's the price of making us free.

GENE: But then there's the evil that isn't caused by humans...

THEO: Right, but that too is unavoidable. The alternatives would be worse overall. It doesn't always seem that way to us, what with natural disasters and such. But that just shows that we're finite creatures. There's much that figures into God's overall plan that we can't comprehend. That's part two.

EVA: Part two seems like a stretch.

THEO: True, but again, we aren't privy to the big picture. You can't rule out the possibility that all the floods and earthquakes are vital components in an overall package that's better than all the alternatives. God has a purpose for everything that happens in nature.

GENE: I'm inclined to agree with Theo here, Eva. I've seen plenty of movies that didn't make sense to me until the end. Sometimes strange things happen that don't make sense until much, much later. Have you ever seen *The Wire*?

EVA: What, the HBO show?

GENE: Yeah, that's the one. Early in each season stuff happens that you barely notice or that seems pointless. But by the end of the season, everything fits into place, and you realize the significance of all that seemingly pointless stuff. The real world is much more complicated than a movie or TV series and God, if He exists, would be much more sophisticated than even the greatest director. So, how can I be certain that in the end, from some point of view this won't all make sense?

THEO: You can't.

EVA: Okay, look.

GENE: Can you stop clenching your fists, Eva?

THEO: She's clenching her fists?

GENE: Her knuckles are white.

EVA: Okay, okay. I'll chill out.

GENE: Good.

EVA: But you guys are both making a huge mistake.

THEO: Oh my God! Is that a threat? Gene, does she have a gun?

GENE: No, she looks a little pale, but then she always does.

EVA: No, I mean you guys are making an intellectual mistake.

GENE: It wouldn't be the first time.

EVA: Your mistake is to think that this is about certainty.

THEO: You seem pretty certain.

EVA: My point is that atheism doesn't imply that you think there's no conceivable way there could be a god with some Rube Goldberg-like plan that explains how all the suffering in the world winds up doing some good.

THEO: Rube Goldberg?

GENE: You know, a Rube Goldberg machine.

THEO: Oh thanks, that's really helpful. A Rube Goldberg *machine*. I though you meant a Rube Goldberg *hamster*.

EVA: Gene, explain what a Rube Goldberg machine is.

GENE: A Rube Goldberg machine is a ridiculously, unnecessarily complex contraption.

EVA: The point is that atheists needn't say we're 100% certain we're right. We say only that there's at least sufficient reason to conclude that God doesn't exist.

THEO: I deny that.

EVA: And I think you're still demanding too much of the atheist. On your view, she's got to say that God isn't even conceivable. That's too strong.

GENE: I'm surprised to hear you say that, Miss Conviction.

EVA: Let me give you an example. Suppose some people are on an ocean cruise.

THEO: Good, a cruise. As long as it's not a cross-country drive.

EVA: And suppose they've never seen the ship's captain.

GENE: They can't get to the bridge?

EVA: The bridge?

THEO: It's where the captain steers the ship.

EVA: I'll take your word for it. No, no one can get to the bridge, and no one can see in there either.

GENE: Okay.

EVA: Now let's suppose that the ship begins to turn towards an iceberg.

THEO: I think I've seen this movie. Have I seen this movie?

EVA: No. This ship turns toward an iceberg in the middle of the day.

THEO: Oh, okay.

EVA: It hits the iceberg, and all hell breaks loose. People fall overboard and drown, old men have heart attacks...

GENE: And the ship sinks.

EVA: No, curiously enough, the ship doesn't sink.

THEO: It was a glancing blow?

EVA: Right. The ship heads on into the ocean. Still no sign of the captain. And soon it becomes clear that the ship is going in very wide circles.

GENE: I haven't seen this movie, but I'd like to. Are there snakes in the bilge?

EVA: No, no snakes. But a debate starts on the ship. Some think there's no captain on board. Maybe the captain fell overboard or maybe she never boarded, but anyway there's no captain present, in their opinion.

Others think there's a perfectly able captain, who's doing all this ramming and turning for a reason. They don't know the reason, but they think one exists.

GENE: Isn't there another possibility? The captain might be drunk.

EVA: That's a possibility, but let's put that aside for the moment. So there are two groups: those who believe a captain is on board and those who believe there is no captain on board. Which group is the more reasonable?

GENE: The nonbelievers, obviously.

THEO: It depends on what other evidence there is.

EVA: Okay, let's suppose during the voyage the boat runs over a smaller boat, crushing the people inside; that it has another collision, this time with a rocky shore; and that its course is zigzaggy, sometimes turning, sometimes straight.

THEO: Okay, there's probably no captain.

EVA: But wait! The captain believers protest: how do we know that this isn't all part of the captain's plan? Maybe the ship turned into the iceberg because it was dodging a mine, and maybe the boat it ran over was an enemy ship, out to plant mines, and maybe the circles are to confuse the enemy...

THEO: Okay, I get it.

EVA: And maybe not only is there a captain, but this is one James Bond of a perfect captain, steering the ship deftly under dire circumstances!

THEO: I said I got it.

EVA: You can't rule that out!

GENE: Okay, Eva. Enough already.

EVA: The point is that you don't have to rule out, with absolute, indubitable certainty every other hypothesis to know which hypothesis is the most reasonable, or to accept a hypothesis as established.

GENE: It's a good point. But I still think there should have been some snakes in the bilge.

THEO: I don't buy your analogy, Eva.

EVA: No surprise there.

THEO: People go on cruises for certain reasons, with certain expectations, and captains have a specific job. In your case, these people know that job isn't being done correctly.

EVA: Are they certain? Granted, this is no normal cruise. But how do they know for sure that the captain hasn't been made aware of a complicated, evil plot—one he's doing his best to foil?

GENE: I don't know why you're ignoring the obvious possibility: the captain is drunk.

THEO: I'm not crazy about that possibility.

GENE: Why not? It seems the most likely.

THEO: Because the analogous position is that God is incompetent.

EVA: Right. And the drunk-captain theory is plausible only because the believers know that ships typically have captains. We don't have anything like that in the God case. So instead of thinking we have a drunk, incompetent God, we should just conclude that the world arose naturally and that God is a superstition.

THEO: Or we could just take God's plan on faith and humbly admit our ignorance. For example, neither of you probably noticed that we're not in Kansas anymore.

GENE: No, Dorothy? Where are we?

THEO: Colorado! In fact, Denver's not far.

EVA: And after Denver...

THEO: Vegas, Baby! Vegas!