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Theism, natural evil, and superior possible worlds *

CHARLES T. HUGHES
Department of Philosophy, California State University, Long Beach, CA 90840–2408

1. Introduction

The cluster of problems created by evil and suffering are widely regarded as comprising the most intractable set of objections there are to the consistency and the truth of theism. Over the past thirty years, a great deal of attention has been devoted, in philosophical literature, to the issue of whether or not the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God could be shown to be compatible with the existence of *any* moral or natural evil at all or with various amounts, kinds, and distributions of moral or natural evil.[1] *Moral evil* or "sin" refers to the intentional wrong actions of free creatures and the foreseen consequences of those acts. For example, cruelty, lies, theft, and murder are all instances of moral evil. *Natural evil* or "pain" includes every other event which issues in diminished lives, suffering, and death. Disease, famine, earthquakes, genetic malfunctions and their bad consequences are all instances of natural evil. More recently, however, a general consensus has emerged among philosophers of religion that the objection against the compatibility of God and evil is at best inconclusive and at worst has been refuted.[2] But such an admission on the part of sceptics has not dampened their enthusiasm for problems raised by evil and suffering which are thought to count significantly against the truth value of theistic beliefs.

This world's quantities, types and distributions of moral and natural evils have been used to formulate inductive and cumulative case objections to the theoretical credibility of theism.[3] In addition to that, the practical problem of how to cope with the bad consequences of evil and suffering has called into question the existential adequacy of theistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity.[4] So, the problems raised by

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evil can take many forms but they are all thought to count in one way or another against the theoretical or practical credibility of theistic beliefs. Hence, any theistic attempt to justify the goodness, power and wisdom of God in the face of such objections will take different forms, depending upon the kind of problem of evil which is raised and the way in which it is thought to count against theism's truth value.

In this paper, I analyze one particular form of inductive argument against theism based on this world's quantity of natural evils, in relation to human life, as compared to alternative and allegedly superior worlds which God could and should have created in moral preference to this world. I spell out the conditions this kind of objection to theism must meet in order to reduce the plausibility or probability of theism's truth value. The case I develop proceeds on the basis of several assumptions concerning God's omniscience, obligations and purposes, the existence of natural laws, and human epistemological limitations.[5]

Because of its importance to my argument, the assumption I make concerning *divine purposes* will be outlined here. In order for God to create a superior world to this world, the alternative world in question must contain not only a significantly better balance of good over evil than does this world, but God's purposes for the creative process in general and for creatures in particular must be retained. On that account, a world in which there were few or no evils would not necessarily be a better world than the present world because such a world may presuppose radically different divine purposes for creation than the ones which theists recognize. So, the integrity of the divine purposes for creation, as theists understand them, must be as important a factor as the overall balance of good over evil in determining which worlds, if any, are superior to this world.

My argument is not necessarily relevant to other formulations of the problem of evil. Other problems of evil may require a different kind of analysis or answer than the one I offer in this paper. So, I am not seeking to eliminate the possibility of objections to theism based on evil and suffering. Instead, I am calling into question the legitimacy of problems of evil of a particular form which must meet certain conditions in order to be successful. But exactly what kind of objection from the quantity of natural evils do I have in mind?

2. The quantity of natural evils and superior possible worlds

Edward Madden and Peter Hare have developed arguments based upon evil and suffering which they believe help to reduce the plausibility of

theism's truth claim. They point out that: "God could have created a world with somewhat different [natural] laws than the present ones which would have produced much the same good results and avoided much of the gratuitous evil."[6] Madden's and Hare's point is this: If there is a God then he is committed to creating a world wherein there is the best attainable balance of good over evil. Since we think we can imagine alternative worlds with somewhat different natural laws which would retain or surpass the goods of this world while reducing the quantity, and types, of natural [and moral] evils which take place, it appears that this world is not the kind of world which a God would have created. Hence, this present world, with its quantity, and types, of natural [and moral] evils, is evidence against the truth of the theistic hypothesis.

In a similar vein, H. J. McCloskey outlines an objection against the probable truth value of theism based upon the quantity of natural evils in the world. McCloskey asserts that,

> He [God] could foresee man's emergence and could therefore have planned a world with better equipped sentient beings emerging. Of all the combinations of law-governed universes with emergent "men" that are possible for God, it seems very improbable... that an all-perfect being could not create a better world, and one with less evil in it, than this world. ...God could modify or change the laws when evil could thereby be prevented.[7]

What Madden, Hare and McCloskey have in common is the general form which some of their arguments from evil take. They compare the present world and its phenomena to some imagined alternative, superior world-order which a God both could and would have created in moral preference to this world-order. Hence, the existence of this present world-order is evidence against the hypothesis that God exists since, if God did exist, he both could and would have created a better world than this present world.

I concentrate on McCloskey's argument in this paper, though I develop it further than he does himself in order to put it, if possible, in its best light. As I do that, I evaluate McCloskey's argument from the standpoint of a traditional theistic understanding of the limits of human knowledge coupled with a Swinburnian-type of natural law theodicy. I conclude my case by rejecting McCloskey's argument against theism's truth claim as inconclusive, as lacking in the kind of forcefulness he thinks it possesses. If I am successful in this endeavor, my case against McCloskey's objection could also be useful in addressing other versions of the "superior possible worlds" objection from evil, like the one suggested by Madden and Hare.

3. An analysis of McCloskey's objection from natural evil

Any theistic attempt (Christian or otherwise) to discern and justify God's purposes in creating a world like this one populated with beings like humans is a highly speculative affair. What is not ordinarily recognized, though, is that the sceptic's endeavor to conceive of worlds allegedly superior to the present one may be even greater speculative undertaking. Theists have typically believed that among God's purposes in creation is the making of free, rational, moral and religious beings at an epistemic distance from their creator who possess a significant choice of destiny. Such a consideration, properly interpreted, rules out the idea that it was open to God to achieve his purposes with respect to mankind by creating the kingdom of God directly. As we have seen, however, a sceptic may grant the previous point but claim that he can, nevertheless, conceive of worlds which it was open to God to create and which would have allowed him to achieve all of his purposes for human life, apart from so much moral and natural evil as there is in this world.

In order to make his claim plausible, however, McCloskey is obligated to provide some adequate conception of the alternative world he has in mind so that philosophers can appreciate that such a world would facilitate divine purposes for human development and contain a significantly better balance of good over evil than there is in the present world. Undaunted by this task, McCloskey has asserted that: "We can describe a better world, with far fewer evils – for instance, a world in which beings were much more capable of experiencing pleasure of intellectual satisfaction or one in which there were no diseases."[8] So, McCloskey's objection from natural evil might be summarized in this way:

(A) It is both possible and morally preferable for God to create a physical, law-governed universe, populated with creatures like humans, which contains as much or more good than this world and significantly less natural evil. Hence, the existence of this world, with its quantity of natural evils, is strong evidence against God's existence.

Objection (A), however, can be interpreted in at least two different ways. It can be understood as:

(A1) It was open to God to eliminate the potential for so much natural evil in the world, while retaining the potential for as much or more good than there now is, by creating a world with entirely *different* natural laws and objects than the present world possesses.

Or, (A) can be taken as:

(A2) It was open to God to eliminate the potential for so much natural evil in the world, while retaining as much or more good than there now is, by creating a world like this one but with a few *modifications* of the existing natural laws and objects.

Let us examine each of these alternatives.

Can (A1) be shown to be a powerful objection to the plausibility of theism? No. Despite McCloskey's optimism about the range and accuracy of the sceptic's imagination, many theists believe it is beyond the limits of human knowledge to conceive of radically different worlds than this one where God's purposes for mankind are preserved, all the goods of this world are retained or surpassed, and there is significantly less natural evil. Why is that the case?

The more human beings learn about the structure and interrelatedness of the physical universe, the more difficult it is to believe it credible that someone can conceive of alternative universes which would accomplish God's purposes for human life and preserve all the good features of this world but lack the potential for many or all of the bad features. The limits of reliability concerning the human imagination in this regard are suggested when we consider three summary conditions which make clear human epistemological limitations about God and his governance of the world. To substantiate the plausibility of (A1), as a damaging objection to theistic belief, the sceptic must fulfil satisfactorily the following three conditions:

1. He must know, at least approximately, the quantity of natural evils the present world contains as well as the ultimate good (or entire class of individual goods) which God and man will achieve in and through the whole of the creative process. This would require a sufficient grasp of the necessary connections between most of the various goods and evils and/or where such connections do not obtain.
2. He must provide a fairly complete sketch of an alternative world which operates with entirely different natural laws. He would then have to describe what that system of laws implies for the new interrelatedness between physical objects in the world. On the basis of that he would have to work out the necessary connections between most of the various goods and evils and/or where such connections do not obtain.
3. After the first two conditions have been met, the sceptic would have to show that, probably, the alternative world's natural laws contribute to a significantly better balance of good over evil, while promoting God's purposes for human life, than the laws which govern the present world.[9]

I have stated these conditions briefly and without supportive arguments, though I believe that such arguments can be provided. But I think it can be assumed that in order to meet any of those three conditions, a sceptic would require an omniscient, God's-eye view of the world with respect to at least most of its good and evil in the past and present as well as the good of the future to be found in the consummated goal of the creative process in the kingdom of God. Therefore, any claim on the sceptic's part to be able to fulfil the three previously stated conditions begs the question against a theist's commitment to human epistemological limitations. Hence, if the sceptic wishes to convince theists that his objection from evil, understood as (A1), works, he must first show that the theist's understanding of the limits of human knowledge are drawn too soon with respect to knowledge of God's nature and governance of the world and the capacity to conceive of worlds radically different to this one which meet the previously specified conditions. But sceptics have not even begun to argue that epistemological case.

So, to make good his objection that better alternative worlds are conceivable and that a God would have created one of them in moral preference to this world, the sceptic must creatively develop the alternative world system with respect to its various laws and then show that the different system would result in a significantly better balance of good over evil and does the present world system. But it is difficult (to say the least) to calculate what the consequences for the balance of good over evil in *this* world would be if the conditions which gave rise to particular natural evils were to be eliminated. That is so because when the vast quantity of physical objects and energy systems and what their complex interrelatedness implies are made a part of the epistemological equation, the speculative task becomes hopeless. If that is the case, even greater epistemological difficulties must attach to speculations about how entirely *different* laws and objects would affect the balance of good over evil in an alternative world system. In short, it is one thing to claim that a God could and should have created a world vastly superior to the present one, using different laws, and quite another matter to make that claim credible. To paraphrase and redirect one of David Hume's famous dictums: "We have no experience of other world systems." Hence, human epistemological limitations make it virtually impossible to construct a case for the plausibility of (A1).

But the theist is not limited to undermining the sceptic's case for the plausibility of objection (A1). The defensive strategy I am deploying here should ultimately be complemented by a theodicy, an attempt to justify the goodness, power and wisdom of God in the face of evil and suffering. In that way, the theist could argue that the present world, with its law-

governed regularity, which makes possible both good and bad consequences through its normal functions, is a kind of world God is justified in creating to bring about the growth and development of free, rational, moral and religious creatures such as human beings who possess a significant choice of destiny. In that regard, I think there is much of value to be gained from paying careful attention to the theodicy-relevant pictures of the world painted by such philosophers of religion as John Hick[10] and Richard Swinburne.[11]

Swinburne's theodicy can, I think, be summarized as:

(B) The significant exercise of creaturely free will, responsibility and a choice of destiny, with the opportunity to grow in knowledge to bring about or prevent moral goods or evil, is a good of such value that it outweighs the moral evil it brings about and the natural evil which results from the operation of the law-governed, physical order which is a major means through which knowledge of how to produce good or evil is acquired.[12]

If there is any truth to such a theodicy statement, then it would appear to be logically impossible for God to bring about mature creatures, whose maturity is a result of their own past free choices and actions, apart from the kind of character-building process which theodicists such as Swinburne (and Hick) depict. If that is correct, then the present world order could be viewed as providing the kind of law-governed, physical medium which is required at this stage of human existence for there to be free, rational, moral and religious growth and development with a choice of destiny at an epistemic distance from God. But even if such a response could work in concert with the defensive strategy of this paper to further undermine the plausibility of (A1), there is still the objection raised by (A2) left to consider.

McCloskey could respond to my case at it stands so far by claiming that he does not mean such a radical alteration of the universe as (A1) implies, but simply a few modifications of the present world order. These "modifications," it is claimed, would result in a significant quantitative reduction of the world's natural evils while maintaining or even surpassing the current goods. McCloskey may even be inclined to admit that an independent, law-governed order with discernible regularity is necessary for agents to grow and develop in the ways theists suggest. He might agree, for example, that in order to perform an act of kindness or wickedness, I must learn, through inductive inferences, how to ensure that my practical and moral actions will produce particular effects in the world. However, McCloskey might go on to claim that God could actualize the world depicted in (A2) either by maintaining the present natural laws but

eliminating any of their bad consequences through constant divine interventions, or else by maintaining a world like this one but with some specified modifications of the present natural laws and objects themselves. Let us consider, then, those two ways in which (A2) can be interpreted in order to discover how strong an objection from evil they pose to theism.

3.1. Natural laws, objects and frequent divine interventions

With respect to the first option, human beings could be spared from much natural evil by God's frequent miraculous interventions to stop any bad consequences of the normal operation of natural laws. Present natural laws and physical objects, the sceptic maintains, would operate with regularity and maintain their essential properties. But whenever the natural outworking of those laws or the properties of objects placed them on a course where the consequences could be particularly damaging, God would intervene by stopping the natural consequences of the laws going through. Thus, it is claimed, the world would maintain enough regularity for the free, rational, moral and religious growth and development of human beings but would lose the potential for many significant natural disasters. The loss in uniform regularity within the natural order would be compensated for by fewer natural evils. Or, looked at another way, God could avert many natural evils through allowing the natural laws to operate but then miraculously eliminate their potential for bad consequences by temporarily altering the properties of the objects to which harm was imminent. For example, if a mountain-climber slips and falls from the face of a cliff, God could, instead of suspending gravity, simply suspend weight from the climber's body so that he becomes lighter than air and floats to the ground unharmed and in accordance with gravity. But would numerous miraculous interventions to prevent many natural evils from occurring make for a world better suited to God's purposes for mankind than the present one? I do not think so.

An appeal to divine miraculous intervention to remove most natural evils does not fare well when we take into account other considerations. There is a *prima facie* overriding reason for God not to interfere (at least very much) with the natural outworkings of the law-governed, physical order. For if God eliminated the potential for natural evils there would be a corresponding loss of the creature's potential for significant free, rational, and moral growth at an epistemic distance from the creator. That is, agents would soon learn that they could neither be severely harmed by the "regularities" of Nature nor, utilizing natural processes, could they harm others significantly or be harmed by them significantly. Why?

With respect to intentional free actions, an agent would soon discover that he could not apply, in many circumstances, what he learned through observing and interacting with the standard operations of the natural order. In such a world, an agent would discover that his free actions were efficacious when he did the good, but were not efficacious when he attempted to bring about any significant evil or did something accidentally which would result in disaster for himself or others. With regard to natural evils, an agent would discover that the cause and effect, or probability sequences, of the natural order operated efficaciously only when no harm would result to human beings (and perhaps to animals). He would learn that the consequences of natural laws are suspended whenever they would end in significant disasters or accidents. Stone-throwers, for example, would find that the boulder they used as a target became chipped and etched as their small missiles landed true. But if ever a stone missed its mark and flew toward a human being, God would frustrate the law-governed sequence and save the potential accident-victim from harm. It would, of course, also be open to God to alter the stone's properties and make it as soft as sponge, the impact of which upon the victim would cause no harm. The same divine frustration of the cause and effect sequence would occur if the stone-thrower hurled a stone at another agent with the intent to harm that agent. Hence, what the stone-thrower would learn is that, whenever he threw stones at non-human objects, which he could not harm, his stones would follow the course he laid out for them. However, he would discover something entirely different if ever he wished to bring about harm to personal agents with his stones or was in a position to do so accidentally.

Or again, an avalanche could take place when there were no persons who would suffer or die because of it. On the other hand, an avalanche would either be restrained altogether by God if humans were in its path, or else God would cause it to miss them or stop short of them, or change the rocks to confetti, etc. In some instances then, one effect would be seen to follow from a known set of conditions where persons would be affected and, at another time, a different effect would follow from the same set of conditions where persons would not be affected. This would communicate to the observing and discerning agent that the regularity of sequence and natural production of effects takes place only when there would result little or no harm to human agents. It would be a small step from reflection on such evidence to belief in a "Divine Protector." However, the overall effect of this would be a vast reduction in potential for the free, moral, rational and religious development of agents with a choice of destiny at a distance from their creator. How so?

Agents in such a world would not learn from the natural processes how

to bring about or prevent effects which are harmful, for there would be very little in the way of significant harmful effects permitted by God. Hence, the frustrated cause and effect sequences in the natural order would be mirrored in the personal and interpersonal order. Agents would be unable to determine which actions to take in order to achieve morally wrong goals since God would not permit the occurrence of significant ones. In addition to that, agents would invariably come to see the hand of the "Divine Protector" preventing natural evils and frustrating any of their intentional or unintentional actions which would result in moral or natural evil. Such a world would thereby prevent agents from formulating or bringing about a wide range of their free, rational and moral intentions or choices and so diminish their development and significant choice of destiny. But if God wished to make possible the values which only efficaciously free moral beings like humans can realize, he had to create a world which operated by the regularities frequently called natural laws, the integrity of which he seldom violated. For only if the world is calculable can free creatures be in a position to grow and develop with a significant choice of destiny. Hence, it appears that some such world as this one is more compatible with divine purposes for mankind than a world where natural evils are prevented by frequent miraculous intervention.

The previous arguments may well identify a gap between God's purposes for human beings and a world run by frequent miraculous intervention, but that does not put an end to (A2). McCloskey could take another, stronger line of argument with respect to (A2).

3.2. Modified natural laws and objects

McCloskey might contend that certain piecemeal alterations in the regular workings of the present law-governed, physical order could be enacted by God such that the advantages of this world system are maintained while many classes or events of natural evil would be eliminated. On this account, God would permit the natural consequences of the laws of nature to go through. For example, imagine a world, in every respect like this one, except that it has no injuries or deaths from adverse contact with fire or water. (A2), understood in that way, presents an initially stronger objection from evil than when it is interpreted as constant divine intervention. But we first need to understand what these "few" modifications of existing laws and objects would be in order to grasp how they would reduce natural evils such that God would have created that world in moral preference to the present one. What then is implied by (A2) so interpreted?

To alter some of the existing natural laws such that the possibility of particular events or classes of natural evil are eliminated also entails a change in at least some of the properties of the world's objects. What would it take, for example, to eliminate much of the potential for harm and destruction to human beings from fire and water? To achieve that, either the properties of fire or water would have to be altered so that particular kinds of contact with them no longer resulted in burns or drowning or else vulnerable agents themselves would have to be physiologically altered so that they were somehow immune to the bad effects of adverse contact with flames or liquids. However, such alterations, even in so far as they can be thought through, often bring with them results which may not all be good. F. R. Tennant has given a classic illustration of the consequences of the kind of law and object alteration to which I am referring with respect to water. He says that,

> if water is to have the various properties in virtue of which it plays its beneficial part in the economy of the physical world and the life of mankind, it cannot at the same time lack its obnoxious capacity to drown us. The specific gravity of water is as much a necessary outcome of its ultimate constitutions as its freezing-point, or its thirst-quenching and cleansing functions. There cannot be assigned to any substance an arbitrarily selected group of qualities, from which all that may prove unfortunate to any sentient organism can be eliminated, especially if ... the world ... is to be a calculable cosmos.[13]

To make his case then, the sceptic is obliged to offer some imaginative reconstruction of the world's laws and what they imply for the nature of physical objects if natural evils are to be significantly reduced in a way compatible with the divine purposes for mankind. Hence, the implications of such alterations would have to be understood sufficiently well to be able to show that a world with them provided at least as good a theatre of growth and development in rational, moral and religious values as the present world does but with less natural evil. This raises again the question of whether the sceptic has come to the limits of human knowledge in his quest for a strong objection from evil which appeals to alternative world systems which God could and should have created in moral preference to this world. If those epistemological limits have been reached, then, as Tennant rightly reminds us:

> That painful events occur in the causal chain is a fact; but, that there could be a determinate evolutionary world of unalloyed comfort, yet adapted by its law-abidingness to the development of rationality and morality, is a proposition the burden of proving which must be allotted to the opponent of theism.[14]

But does the epistemological consideration alone undermine the sceptic's chances of mounting a plausible version of (A2)? It may not.

With respect to the previous illustrations about fire and water, the sceptic may simply reply that human beings could be made of asbestos to resist fire damage and given a set of gills in case water comes in. In that case, it could be that McCloskey's argument works. For the proposed alterations are relatively minor and they would eliminate much of the potential for harm to agents from either fire or water. These are small changes which *prima facie* do not seem to reduce the capacity of this world to bring about God's purposes for mankind. If that is true, then (A2) might become a powerful objection to theism. But is the sceptic's case as strong as it seems? Is there no price to pay for the elimination of particular classes or events of natural evil in the world through altering natural laws or the present properties of bodies?

One response to this is that the sceptic, in proposing such apparently minor changes to the world, is asking for much more than he thinks he is. The sceptic believes that the imagined world, where human beings are made of asbestos and have gills, lacks potential for a whole range of natural evils (and moral evils) associated with fire and water and yet maintains the level of the present world's goods as well. But there are consequences entailed by such changes which must be added to the equation in order to judge whether or not a world with the aforementioned modifications is genuinely superior to the present kind of world. Theists could maintain that in the imagined alternative, superior world there would be a reduction in lessons for growth in free, rational and moral activity which would correspond to the elimination of the potential for much help or harm from water or fire. There would, for example, be no capacity for creaturely harm from forest fires or arson, there could be no accidental or intentional drownings, and there would be no opportunities to avoid or prevent the occurrence of such actions and events either.

In the long run, however, the reduction of the range of evils possible through our current relations with fire and water may make no substantial difference to the quantity of natural evil in such a world and could result in the loss of certain goods. If, for example, God evolved creatures who were composed of an inflammable substance like asbestos and who possessed gills, there could come with those features the unavoidable potential for other natural evils which would replace or even surpass all of those evils eliminated. For example, with the introduction of gills into the human physical makeup, drownings would be eliminated, but there might also be more potential for evils related with lives lived in more intimate relation to the earth's bodies of water. Attacks from sea predators would be more frequent, especially as they acquired a taste for human beings. Wars would

take on a far greater aquatic dimension than is possible for them at present. Greater pollution to the earth's bodies of fresh and sea water might also result from mankind's increased intimate relations with them, not to speak of the potential to develop diseases and ailments confined, at present, primarily to aquatic life. Furthermore, asbestos (or inflammable) bodies might deny human beings the quantity and quality of pleasureable sensations made possibly by bodies covered with flesh. Asbestos bodies might also be much more prone than flesh bodies to damage from movement due to diminished flexibility. So, inflammable bodies would not burn, but they might not do many other things as well as our present bodies do. Hence, while the kinds of changes mentioned could reduce or eliminate some evils, they might create the potential for other evils as well as the loss of certain goods.

My point in the preceding few paragraphs is not that theists need to find ways to scuttle all suggestions for improving the human situation. That would be midirected. Instead, my point is that if God had altered the world's evolutionary conditions and materials such that inflammable bodies with gills, etc., were the result, then it is very likely that those changes would bring with them some potential for natural evils and the loss of certain goods which human beings are in a poor position fully to grasp. My arguments so far have been intended to illustrate the point that just as the sceptic can imagine some good consequences in altering the conditions which make possible certain natural evils, so theists can imagine some bad consequences which could result from the proposed alterations. The sceptic's case depends crucially on eliminating a class or classes of evils from the present world without creating, in the process, the possibility of any other evils or the loss of various goods. Unless the sceptic can succeed in that endeavor, he may not be able to come up with an alternative world which promotes God's purposes and has a better balance of good over evil than the present world. With respect to human epistemological limitations, though, the sceptic and the theist both occupy the same poor position concerning the structure of alternative world systems and their consequences for the human situation. On this account, it does not appear that either the sceptic or the theist can fully appreciate what modified laws and objects imply for the balance of past, present and future goods in some proposed alternative world system.

I am not arguing that mankind possesses no experience or understanding of what it would be like to make *this* world a better place through ridding it of certain evils. Indeed, that very knowledge itself depends crucially upon utilizing natural processes we understand in accordance with values which are rooted in and compatible with this system. Clearly, there are particular natural evils which have been stopped as a result of

human efforts, and the consequences have been nearly all good. One example is the virtual elimination of smallpox in Western nations by the vaccines arrived at through medical research. Here, though, the sceptic might insist that this world would have been better if smallpox never existed. Perhaps. But what if behind the growth of the smallpox virus there exists a regularity which made its growth possible and which is extremely beneficial in other respects?[15] Well, what if there is such a regularity? How does that help my case?

If the regularities which govern matter and its properties are what make possible a world like this one and yet also make smallpox possible, it is difficult to wish away the process which permits smallpox without wishing away all of the other beneficial things the process or regularity makes possible or brings about. In that case, an elimination of those features of the world which make possible the growth of the smallpox virus could be tantamount to altering some fundamental regularity or the properties of the material world. If that occurs, it becomes very difficult to know the good or bad consequences of the resultant alternative world which lacks smallpox but also lacks some other, possibly, very beneficial regularity or material property. In short, if the existence of the smallpox virus is a possibility given the essential properties of matter operating in concert with some otherwise beneficial regularity, then it would be hard to "wish them away, without also wishing the whole cosmos away."[16] To be sure, such a conviction is more a matter of faith than of proof, but it seems to be a more credible article of faith than the sceptic's belief that he can conceive of better alternative world systems than this one, given God's purposes for the creative process.

If my arguments so far have carried any weight, even such apparently small, piecemeal alterations of laws and objects as those I have considered could reverberate throughout the universe and result in a world with different evils but no better balance of good over evil than this world contains or even a worse world than this one. To chart the interrelations and consequences of laws and objects required to bring about human beings made of asbestos and possessing gills is a virtually impossible task at the outset. Furthermore, as I have indicated, it cannot be known with any certainty whether or not there are new problems raised for beings made of asbestos with gills or significant goods that would be lost if the suggested modifications were implemented in the world. However, even if my suggestions about potential problems in the sceptic's imagined world are not very convincing, they may well show that the sceptic's case about the proposed superiority of his imagined world is not very convincing either. Once it is granted that neither the theist or the sceptic is in a strong position to chart the potential advantages and liabilities of alternative

worlds, sceptical objections suffer the same fate as theistic responses. But that is what the theist expected, given his belief in epistemological limitations concerning the nature of God, his governance of the world, and alternative world systems.

So, when the attempt is made to try to think through the implications of proposals for possible and allegedly superior worlds to this one, constructed by eliminating some or all of the conditions which make possible pain, suffering and death, one or more of three problems tend to vitiate the sceptic's case:

1. It could be that the modifications offered within the framework of God's purposes are so slight, and the trade off of good and evil so insignificant or so well balanced, that the proposed alternative world does not differ significantly from this world with respect to its balance of good over evil.
2. We may find that the sceptic's seemingly innocent proposals could end up replacing this universe with a radically alternative one in which the creative potential for significant and ultimate goods disappears along with the potential for significant natural [and moral] evils. Here the sceptic may also inadvertently revise God's purposes for creation in his attempt to reduce significantly the quantity of the world's evil.
3. It appears that the sceptic's enterprise cannot succeed because, to do so, he must vastly exceed what the theist sees as human epistemological limitations. Unless the sceptic is able to overcome this difficulty, the credibility of his argument is thereby undermined. And the sceptic has not even begun to make that epistemological case.

4. Conclusion

I have considered and rejected several interpretations of an argument initially outlined by H. J. McCloskey. In that argument, McCloskey claimed that whole or piecemeal alterations of the world's natural laws and objects would result in a world which would accomplish God's purposes for mankind and contain a significantly better balance of good over evil than this world. I argued that what it appears possible to know about the proposed changes leads us to believe that such changes could bring with them their own potential for evils and/or perhaps result in the loss of various goods. Most of the sceptic's proposed improvements, I concluded, would require him to possess an omniscient perspective in order to substantiate his claims. Accordingly, much of that sceptical endeavor begs the question against theists who believe that human epistemological limitations rule out any adequate conception of alterna-

tive, superior worlds allegedly better suited to God's purposes for human beings than the present one. Because of the limits of human knowledge, I also believe it would be unreasonable for sceptics to require theists to show that it is impossible that God could have created a world much better suited for his purposes than this one and with less natural evil. For those reasons, I do not believe that McCloskey's objection from evil, in the forms of it I have considered, reduces the plausibility or probability of the claim that there is a God.

Notes

1. In support of the inconsistency of theistic beliefs given evil, see for example, J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–212.
2. William Rowe has spoken for most philosophers of religion when he admits that theists who are incompatibilists can construct a "compelling argument" for the logical consistency of God and evil. See, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16.4 (1979): 335.
3. See, for example, William Rowe, "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in Robert Audi and William Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 227–247.
4. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner has recognized the existential problem created by evil and writes candidly and wisely about the capacity of Judaism to provide comfort and support during suffering in, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (London: Pan Books, 1982). C. S. Lewis records his struggle concerning the practical adequacy of Christianity and the help his renewal of faith gave him during the aftermath of his wife's untimely death in, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964).
5. My assumptions are these: (1) In order for the "superior possible worlds" objection to be most forceful, God may have to possess omniscience which includes knowledge of future contingent actions and events. For, if God lacks knowledge of the future, he may not be able to create, at his first attempt, a world which achieves his purposes and which also contains a better balance of good over evil than does this world. That would be so because God would only be able to speculate about future balances of good over evil rather than know in advance what those balances would be. In any case, for purposes of argument, I will accept that God's omniscience includes knowledge of the future. (2) In order for objections from evil to hold against God, it must be thought that God has a number of important and intelligible moral obligations to his creatures. For, if God has no obligations toward his creatures, or if divine and human moral conceptions are radically different, then human beings will be unable, convincingly, to charge God with any breaches of moral obligations. However, I assume here that God has moral obligations to his creatures. These include obligations to keep his promises to creatures, to refrain from harming them unless justified in doing so, etc. (3) There are

"laws of nature" which govern the world beyond the human mind. However, it should be kept in mind, as Richard Swinburne has pointed out, that "laws of nature are not things which exist independently of material bodies. Talk about laws of nature is really only talk about the powers or liabilities of bodies," *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 43. For my purposes here, let us understand "natural laws" as descriptive statements about how objects act and react under certain specified conditions. This implies that a change in the world's natural laws entails a change in the powers or liabilities of the world's objects. However, even if there are no laws of nature, but only "regularities" which give the appearance of such law-governedness, my case is not necessarily undermined. So long as objects conform to the regularities within nature which humans observe and order their lives by, and the practical effect is the same as if there were laws of nature, my main point stays intact. (4) The traditional theistic commitment to human epistemological limitations regarding the nature of God and God's providential governance of the world is correct. That is, I believe it to be the case that all human thought about the divine nature and providence is subject to severe limitations and inadequacies. For more on this, see M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London: RKP, 1971); and F. J. Fitzpatrick, "The Onus of Proof in Arguments about the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 19–38.

6. *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), pp. 54–55.
7. *God and Evil* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 94, 95.
8. "The Problem of Evil," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 30 (1962): 191.
9. My inspiration for the development of these three conditions came from M. B. Ahern, *op. cit.*; and from F. J. Fitzpatrick, *op. cit.*
10. *Evil and the God of Love*, Second edition (London: Macmillan, 1977), Parts III and IV.
11. *The Existence of God*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), chapter 11; and, "Knowledge from Experience and the Problem of Evil," in William J. Abraham and Stephen W. Holtzer (eds.), *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 141–167.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Philosophical Theology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 2, p. 201.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Ninian Smart's example of the growth of cancer cells in, "F. R. Tennant and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1964), p. 155.
16. *Ibid.*