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The Problem of Selective Miracles

Abstract

The problem of evil designates an umbrella of similarly related arguments linked together by family characteristics. Within this larger genus, the problem of selective miracles stands apart as a particularly underdeveloped species of argument that analytical and philosophical theologians have failed to adequately reckon with. By contextualizing this peculiar argument within an adequate metaethical framework, this article synthesizes a deontological framework with the elucidating work of John Peckham and his cosmic warfare theodicy. It further repudiates alternative approaches to the problem of selective miracles proffered by consequentialists and process theologians. In sum, the article contends that Peckham's cosmic warfare theodicy paired with a deontological foundation offers the most promising avenue in addressing the mystifying problem of selective miracles.

Keywords

miracles, Satan, Peckham, kenosis

Cover Page Footnote

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The Problem of Selective Miracles

Qoholeth, the mysterious author of Ecclesiastes, once reminisced that “there is nothing new under the sun.” His ruminations proved premature, for he had never heard of popular, crowd-funded television shows. The meteoric success of *The Chosen* enabled the beloved show to screen the premiere of season three across North American theaters. No doubt, avid viewers departed touched in varied ways, but one scene in particular stood out as particularly interesting. Towards the end of the screening, James the Lesser confronted Jesus concerning His refusal to heal James’ malady. In a moving, yet problematic, response, Jesus confides in James that:

so many people need healing in order to believe in me, or they need healing because their hearts are so sick [but] that does not apply to you. And many are healed or not healed because the Father in Heaven has a plan for them which may be a mystery...so hold on a little longer. And when you discover yourself finding true strength because of your weakness and when you do great things in my name in spite of this, the impact will last for generations.¹

Jesus’ overall rejoinder to James’ query smacks of consequentialism and the notion that wrongs can be righted by mere compensation. While stirring the hearts of moviegoers, such an approach to theodicy can only churn the blood of an analytical theologian. James’ imploration is but one moving expostulation of the subcategory of the larger family problems of evil, namely the problem of selective miracles; why does an omni-God *discriminatingly* perform miraculous deeds?² Though philosophers of religion have proffered several potentially promising ripostes to this puzzling issue, perhaps the most opportune defense can be framed in terms of a deontological cosmic warfare theodicy. The deontological cosmic warfare defense stipulates that the omni-God voluntarily discriminates in His miraculous activity in part due to prior deontological constraints, courtesy of His dealings with the demonic hordes.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

To better situate the deontological cosmic warfare defense within the confines of the problem of selective miracles, it is imperative to first appreciate prior, substantive developments in contemporary history of theodicy as a whole.

¹ The Chosen, “Why Haven’t You Healed Me?” *YouTube*, March 19, 2023, audio, 4:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZDvcEkjthA>

² Thomas Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God* (Grasmere, Idaho: SacraSage Press, 2019), 192.

Decades ago, J.L. Mackie famously converted Hume's Epicurean approach to the problem of evil (POE) into an analytical argument against theism. Mackie posited that the existence of evil was logically incompatible with theism given that an omnibenevolent, omnipotent God would both desire and know how to eliminate all evil states of affairs.³ Alvin Plantinga, however, set forth an additional premise to demonstrate the logical compatibility of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent God with the existence of evil: God created significantly free agents.⁴ The Free Will Defense (FWD) asserts that, all things being equal, a world containing significantly free agents is more valuable than a world absent of such creatures. As Frederick Choo and Esther Goh summate, "[A]n agent has SF [Significant Freedom] with respect to a given action iff [if and only if] the agent has LF [libertarian freedom] for that action and the action is a morally significant act."⁵ This entails that were God to create such creatures, He could not *make* them perform a morally significant act, an act whereby "it would be wrong for [the agent] to perform the action but right to refrain or vice versa."⁶ Many analytical theologians, theist and atheist alike, acknowledged (for the most part) that Plantinga's FWD relatively solved Mackie's specific logical problem of evil, but as with the Hydra monster, what appears to be a fatal blow in analytical theology often leads to the multiplication of clever possible defeaters.⁷ In his highly influential article "Varieties of Atheism," William Rowe popularized the evidential problem of evil, which is an inductive argument for the probabilistic non-existence of God given the kinds and quantity of evil present in the world. Rowe's argument runs as follows:

³ See J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in *Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams (New York, NY: Oxford, 2016), 25–37.

⁴ See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967) and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

⁵ Frederick Choo and Esther Goh, "The Free Will Defense Revisited," *International Journal of Theology, Philosophy and Science* 4:32-45 (2019): 33.

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defense," in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary*, ed. Linda Zagzebski and Timothy D. Miller (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 359.

⁷ On the one hand, Robert Adams asserted, "it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem. That is, he has argued convincingly for the consistency of [the set of propositions endorsed by the theist]" (Robert Merrihew Adams, "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," in Alvin Plantinga, ed. Peter van Inwagen and James E. Tomberlin [Dordrecht, NL: Reidel Pub. Co., 1985]: 226). Yet, despite repeated claims to the contrary, rhetoric concerning Plantinga's success is often overblown. At the most, Plantinga only solved the logical POE in its Mackian variety, but there are numerous other formulations of the POE enumerated by Paul Draper, John Bishop, James Sterba, Graham Oppy, etc. Furthermore, as Marilyn McCord Adams indicates, Plantinga engaged merely with the POE in the abstract, tactfully avoiding the concrete. (See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.])

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.⁸

By taking (2) for granted, almost as an explicit deduction of what it means to be good, and providing non-conclusive arguments for (1), Rowe offers at best a probabilistic argument for God's non-existence. However, Rowe's fatal flaw was in assuming that (2) should remain uncontested, for its underlying moral logic is thoroughly consequentialist. He assumes that God ought to intervene if an evil upsets the overall balance of good and evil in the world and otherwise refrain. Such thinking "... presupposes that the moral status of evil-eliminating acts is determined by the overall balance of good over evil that such an act produces."⁹ A deontologist, however, believes that certain actions are morally impermissible regardless of the consequences they produce. Thus, for deontologists, while moral evaluations consider the consequences of relevant actions, they are not *determined* by those consequences.

God may simply be in a position where He cannot intervene to prevent gratuitous evil (evil whose existence does not lead to a greater good and whose absence would not lead to an equal or greater evil) because the only avenues open to do so are morally impermissible. This background knowledge is essential for identifying flaws in an argument from evil concerning the selectivity of miracles.

Cosmic Warfare

Returning briefly to the free will defense, Plantinga and others have long acknowledged that the Christian tradition speaks to the existence of moral agents beyond the earthly sphere, namely that of angels and demons.¹⁰ In one of Jesus' parables, a certain landowner, upon seeing the presence of tares amongst his wheat decries, "An enemy has done this!" (Matt. 13:28) This assessment followed the

⁸ William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 336.

⁹ Eric Reitan, "Does the Argument from Evil Assume a Consequentialist Morality?" *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2000): 310.

¹⁰ Such designations are, no doubt, problematic at the scholarly level, but they will serve as appropriate designations for the sake of brevity.

query of one of his servants, “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?” (v.27) Such a statement traces the general sentiment of many today: why is there any evil in God’s world if God is good? The servant further inquired, “Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?” (v.28) Again, one can hear in the question of the servant the cry of the oppressed: why doesn’t God rid His world of evil *now*? “No,” the master answered, “for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest” (vv. 29-30). Shortly thereafter, Jesus explained to His disciples that He is “the one who sows the good seed” (v. 37), “the field is the world,” “the good seed” are “the sons of the kingdom,” “the tares are the sons of the evil one,” and “the enemy who sowed them is the devil” (vv. 38–39). John Peckham succinctly summarizes, “Here Christ explicitly depicts a conflict between himself and the devil, who sows evil and sets God up to be blamed for it. Such devil-sown evil is temporarily allowed because to prematurely uproot evil (tares) would result in irreversible collateral damage to the good (wheat).”¹¹ This passage thereby serves as the quintessential example of the “cosmic warfare theodicy,” prevalent throughout both testaments of sacred writ. While Satan and his machinations are an evil in God’s good world, God permits Satan’s doings for the sake of the wheat, even though He will eventually decisively uproot Satan and his tares. As Dale Allison and W. D. Davies note, “the parable of the tares addresses the question of theodicy by putting evil in eschatological perspective, by reminding one that the bad endures only for a season” but that “it shall not always be so.”¹² Davies and Allison also acknowledge that this parable illustrates, “a wider problem, namely, the cosmic struggle between God and Satan.”¹³ This cosmic struggle between God and Satan is evident in Satan’s temptation of Christ in the wilderness (Matt. 4, Lk. 4) where “we discover that the world of humanity is actually ruled by the devil.”¹⁴ Peckham also observes the specific parameters established in the temptation narrative whereby the angels do not minister to Christ until the temptations have ceased (Matt. 4:11), and how after “the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). Peckham explains, “In this striking conflict, Satan is allowed to antagonize Christ at a set time and place and within established parameters.”¹⁵

Similarly to Christ, Job is only afflicted by Satan in accords with God’s explicit parameters. The book opens by recounting how “The sons of God came to

¹¹ John Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 56.

¹² W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18: International Critical Commentary* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 1991), 431.

¹³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, 431.

¹⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 194.

¹⁵ Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*, 58.

present themselves before the LORD, and [the satan] also came among them” (1:6; cf. 38:7). Even though many scholars agree that “the sons of God” refers to celestial beings, there is notable division over the identity of “the satan.”¹⁶ The incessant suggestion that *hasśātān* is a mere court official numbered amongst the other good officials is equally presumptuous, however, as the traditional view that he is the chief of the demons. Job 1:6 relates how “there was a day when the sons of God [*bānê ʔlōhīm*] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan [*hasśātān*] also came among [*bəṯōwḱām*] them.” Being simply “among” a group does not necessarily imply belonging to that group. In Exodus 7:5, God instructs the Israelites to come “from among [*mittōwḱām*] them,” the Egyptians, and the Israelites can hardly be identified with their cruel captors. Moreover, Satan’s point of origin seems to differ from the sons of God, given the implications of God’s line of questions.¹⁷ “Minimally, whether poetic or symbolic or literal or whatever, the Book of Job likely indicates that *hasśātān* is a supernatural being who is a key adversarial player in the famous drama that unfolds [sic].”¹⁸ In any case, God questions the satan, “From where do you come?” The satan answers, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it” (Job 1:7). Given the near identical nature of the questions in Job 2, Peckham identifies them as merely procedural. The discussion soon turns to that of God’s righteous servant Job, whom the satan believes only fears God due to the “hedge of protection” God has established over Job and his family. This character assassination is directed not only at Job but also implicitly at God, who previously described Job as “blameless” and “upright,” both “fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8). Lindsay Wilson understands this rhetorical attack as “a questioning not just of Job’s motives but also of God’s rule. The accuser is saying to God that Job does not deserve all his blessings, and thus God is not ruling the world with justice.”¹⁹ God responds by permitting the satan to test his case by granting the satan power over “all that [Job] has”, but Job’s person was not to be harmed (Job 1:12). However, in the second court meeting, God allowed the satan to bodily afflict Job, save sparing Job’s life. Undoubtedly, many hold God responsible for Job’s suffering, but Anderson

¹⁶ See Henry A. Kelly, *Satan in the Bible, God's Minister of Justice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), Ryan E. Stokes, *The Satan: How God's Executioner Became the Enemy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), and Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* [Lexham Press, Bellingham, WA, 2015).

¹⁷ Shandon Guthrie, *Gods of this World: A Philosophical Discussion and Defense of Christian Demonology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 23.

¹⁸ Guthrie, *Gods of this World*, 23.

¹⁹ Lindsay Wilson, *Job: Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 34.

upholds God's "good reasons" for permitting Job to suffer, "namely to disprove the Satan's slander..."²⁰

One final Scriptural passage worthy of investigation on this particular topic comes from the Book of Daniel. Though demonic entities can be found at work in other passages in the Hebrew Bible, their activity is particularly explicit in this apocalyptic text. In Daniel 10, Daniel had just completed three weeks of fasting per his desire for understanding of a previous vision when he was visited by one of God's celestial emissaries. The ambassador confessed, "from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard..." (Daniel 10:12) If God heard Daniel's cry from the very moment it was uttered, why did His response tarry? The angel explained, "The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days." (Daniel 10:13-14) Tremper Longman III concludes from this passage "we have a clear case of spiritual conflict. On the one side stands God's powerful angelic army and on the other 'the prince of the Persian kingdom.'"²¹ For some reason, the "powers of evil apparently have the capacity to bring about hindrances and delays, even of the delivery of the answers to believers whose requests God is minded to answer."²² In order to better understand God's possible reasons for delegating such power to the forces of evil, Peckham introduces cosmic rules of engagement.

Rules of Engagement

The conflict between God and Satan cannot be one of mere power, for, as Scripture records, Satan must *ask* to sift Peter like wheat (Lk. 22:31) and afflict Job's person. God, the creator of all things visible and invisible (Col. 1:16), is not in competition with other created entities insofar as sheer power is concerned. However, there are some matters that cannot be settled by power alone. Seventh-day Adventism's "Great Controversy", for example, postulates that due to a self-inflated view of himself, and a suspicion of God's moral character, Satan accused God of being concerned solely (or primarily) with God's own self-exaltation, exercised by means of God's tyrannical, selfish, and oppressive governance. This epistemic conflict can perhaps be located in Genesis 3 where the serpent, "more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made" (v.1), calls into question God's prohibition. He asserts that God is a liar, withholding a certain good

²⁰ Frances I. Andersen, *Job* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1976), 95.

²¹ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 250.

²² Gleason L. Archer, "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel and the Minor Prophets (Volume 7)*, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 124.

from Eve to maintain her subservient state. This “direct frontal attack” on God’s character contains a “mixture here of misquotation, denial, and slander fed to the woman by the snake.”²³ Just as in Christ’s temptation, the serpent’s tempting of Eve contains accusations against God’s character and a desire to supplant worship to God as king.²⁴ Undoubtedly, God could have directed an elephant to squash the serpent, thereby terminating the dispute. Nevertheless, in doing so, God would have failed to answer the epistemic moral challenge; He would only have silenced it. Yet, “After the Fall, the serpent and his agents do on a worldwide scale what he began in the garden” by repeatedly slandering God’s character.²⁵

At this juncture, one might query as to why God does not choose to simply annihilate or incarcerate the Devil. “Before God executes judgment (either positively or negatively) toward an individual or a people, He first conducts legal proceedings, not for Him to know the facts, but to reveal in open court, as it were, that He is just and fair in all of His dealings.”²⁶ If God had simply suppressed Satan rather than meet his challenge, God might have instead planted seeds of doubts in others’ minds concerning His motives. Maybe the Devil had a point after all. Should God want “to win the hearts and minds of his finite creatures then he must act according to creaturely limitations. Created beings face *epistemological limitations* that God must work within [sic].”²⁷ God’s ultimate goal is to provide sufficient evidence, in due time, to squash the Devil’s accusations, but, in order to achieve this end, He temporarily agrees to rules of engagement with the forces of darkness. These rules emerge from mutual dialogue and are binding stipulations on both parties. Satan and his allies cannot infringe upon them due to power dynamics, and God cannot infringe upon them due to moral considerations (Heb. 6:18). God cannot, therefore, bring history to an abrupt end if history is to be the theatre for the Great Controversy to unravel. Rather, “The development of ideas, the minds or cultures that process them, the resulting historical impact, and the persons or societies which perform them, take time [sic].”²⁸ Only at the end of history will it finally be acknowledged by all that “Christ was wrongfully accused and executed by Satan’s earthly pawns. But his resurrection vindicated him in the law court of heaven and enabled him to take away the devil’s right and power as heavenly

²³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis (New International Commentary on the Old Testament): Chapters 1–17*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 189.

²⁴ Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*, 91.

²⁵ G. K. Beale, *Revelation: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 656.

²⁶ Richard M. Davidson, “Divine Covenant Lawsuit Motif,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 21, nos. 1–2 (2010): 83.

²⁷ Anthony James MacPherson, *The Redeemed-Good Defense: The Great Controversy as a Theodicy Response to the Evidential Problem of Evil* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

prosecutor (cf. 1:18).”²⁹ Until such a time, God must permit the tares to grow in tandem amongst the wheat.

Satan and the Selectivity of Miracles

It takes little effort, at this point, to extrapolate Peckham’s cosmic warfare theodicy and project it onto the problem of the selectivity of miracles. Per the rules of engagement God negotiated with Satan and his allies, God is unable to unilaterally bring about preventive acts of divine intervention and healing either without human action or full stop. When Jesus’ disciples are incapable of exorcising a demoniac, He explains to them after that “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer” (Mark 9:29). Such are the rules of engagement. Contrast this to Mark 6 where Jesus could perform “no miracle [in Nazareth] except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them” (Mark 6:5). What prevented Him from healing more individuals? Their “unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6). Peckham posits that though this passage, and others like it, does not explicitly lay out the relations between miracles and faith, “the textual data depict an explicit correlation, indicating impediments on what God can (morally) do that are yet dynamic, seemingly tethered to prayer and faith and perhaps other factors.”³⁰ Therefore, just as Christ could not accomplish additional healings due to a morally relevant impediment, so God cannot execute miraculous acts due to morally relevant impediments (i.e., the rules of engagement).

At this point, one may be wondering why God would agree to such rules of engagement in the first place. The answer is simple. Given the type of creatures God desired to relate to, those that are significantly free, God cannot enjoy union with those creatures without squashing the enemy’s allegations by allowing a demonstration of the goodness of God’s character to play out. Apart from such a demonstration, it is uncertain whether God’s creatures could achieve the maximal flourishing God desires for them as the type of creature they are. Should God not provide latitude for Satan to make his case, there would remain the question of God’s character. Thus, God grants Satan jurisdiction only to the degree necessary to make his case, a jurisdiction which is increasingly expanded, in part, due to the choices of other significantly free creatures. If one resists the devil, he will flee from them (James 4:7), but those who “give [him] an opportunity” (Eph 4:27) increase the scope of his reign (the Fall serving as the prime example of this schema). Peckham concludes,

Insofar as this covenantal arrangement is itself morally justified as the best (or only) available avenue to settle the cosmic dispute, the great good of ensuring that love flourishes throughout the universe for eternity serves as the morally

²⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 664.

³⁰ Peckham, *Theodicy of Love*, 108.

sufficient reason for God's allowance of evil, without affirming that any such evil itself is justifiable or necessary for such flourishing.³¹

Those who pray for acts of healing or divine intervention can thereby know that God always works to bring about the best possible state of affairs within the realm of the negotiated rules of engagement. Someone's lack of healing need not be construed as necessarily owing to a lack of faith but to moral constraints impressed upon God in the present time.

Kenotic Theology

More recently, Thomas Jay Oord has popularized process theism (a.k.a. finite theism) to a lay audience through his voluminous publications. He propounds his case by calling attention to the extensive list of things God cannot do. God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), be tempted (Jam. 1:12), cease to exist, create another God, etc.³² Yet, as Jacob Arminius stated, "When we make such assertions as these, we do not inflict an injury on the capability of God." Rather, theologians must ensure "that things unworthy of Him not be attributed to his essence, his understanding, and his will."³³ Opposing voluntary divine self-limitation, Oord locates "essential kenosis" as the consequence of God's loving nature. The self-giving, uncontrolling love of God is never coercive, only persuasive. God's gift of free will is irrevocable (so that God cannot heal others unilaterally), and as a panpsychist, Oord believes that "Our cells, organs, molecules, tissues, bones, and other bodily aspects have capacities of their own."³⁴ Given the confines of this paper, only a few brief comments must suffice.

For starters, William Hasker raises an obvious question against Oord's position: "what in fact is God able to do in [the] world, given the restrictions as set forth by Oord?"³⁵ Believing love to be proportionate to its subject, Hasker shudders, "If God's 'love' means that he values the existence of a virus—something that is not, by all accounts, alive at all—equally with the life of a human being, we certainly are going to wonder about the indiscriminate nature of such love!"³⁶ What are believers to make of medical oncologists, who work towards excising cancer

³¹ Ibid., 109.

³² Thomas Oord, "An Essential Kenosis View," in *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Drew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: 2017), 85.

³³ Jacob Arminius, *The Works of Jacob Arminius* (1828; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 1:135.

³⁴ Thomas Oord, *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils* (Grasmere, Idaho: SacraSage Press, 2019), 96.

³⁵ Hasker, "The Open Theist Response," in *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Drew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: 2017), 161.

³⁶ Hasker, "The Open Theist Response," 161.

from the body? Are they less loving than God?³⁷ Assuredly not, rather, many Christians will understandably envision physicians as instruments of the divine will and beneficence.

Oord's overall contention seemingly rests upon the bold declaration that love, which is by its nature uncontrolling, stands radically opposed to coercion, specifically metaphysical coercion. Oord depicts such acute coercion as owing to unilateral determination wherein "the one coerced loses all capacity for causation, self-organization, agency or free will."³⁸ An apparent inconsistency arises in Oord's previous delineation between several forms of coercion (psychological, violent, and bodily) and his citation of a parent confining a child to its crib, much to the infant's consternation. As David Basinger notes, in such an instance, the child retains its innate decision-making ability, despite the parent bringing about an outcome at odds with the child's wishes.³⁹ One wonders as to why the parent's action is not deemed metaphysically coercive but God's action would be classified as such if God were to actualize the exact same event. Were God to do so, it would not necessarily follow that the child's self-organization and agency thereby lacked all causal abilities. Given the deficiencies in Oord's construal of coercion, his entire program for miracles within his system is thrown into disarray.

Even so, Oord's notion of coercion is critical in his understanding of the nature of miracles, given his disdain for alternative models. Castigating language of supernatural interventionism, Oord defines miracles as "unusual and good events that involve God's causal action in relation to creation."⁴⁰ In order for miracles to occur, the situation, therefore, requires God's initiating and empowering activity, creaturely response, and conducive creation conditions.⁴¹ The primary causal onus lies with God and God's provision of new possibilities from moment to moment to God's creatures. Though God requires cooperation from God's animate creatures, God merely requires conducive conditions on the part of the inanimate aggregates involved. Unlike Green Lantern, God, according to Oord, cannot unilaterally arrange inanimate objects into God's desired alignment. Rather, God merely discerns possibilities given the current situation, acts in relation to those possibilities, and calls His creatures to do likewise.⁴²

³⁷ Randal Rauser, "What do you mean "God can't"? A response to the Peckham-Oord Debate," *The Tentative Apologist*, February 17, 2020: <https://randalrauser.com/2020/02/what-do-you-mean-god-cant-a-response-to-the-peckham-oord-debate/>

³⁸ Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 183.

³⁹ David Basinger, "Is An Amipotent God Preferable to the God of Freewill Theism?" in *Amipotence: Support and Criticism; Expansion and Application*, ed. by Chris S. Baker (Las Vegas, NV: SacraSage Press, 2025): 158-159.

⁴⁰ Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't Q&A: Questions and Answers for God Can't* (Las Vegas, NV: SacraSage Press, 2020), 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

Case in point, Oord references the biblical nature miracles, particularly the parting of the Red Sea. Since God's essential kenotic nature rules out His suspending the lawlike regularities inherent in the world, Oord investigates other strategies for explicating this miracle. Perhaps God identifies advantageous random events and invites His creatures to respond appropriately in order to realize unexpected and good results.⁴³ Or maybe God extends the opportunity for "novel possibilities" to creatures, whose response could consequently affect insinimate objects and natural systems in a manner akin to events described by chaos theory.⁴⁴ The third strategy involves God's guidances of God's creatures to act in accordance with what God foreknows with high probability. In this case, in discerning the weather patterns, God foreknows, with high probability that a favorable strong east wind will prevail upon the Red Sea at a certain location and time. Hence, God calls on Moses and the Israelites to be present at this time and place to take advantage of this rare instance. Scriptural readers familiar with Jesus' miraculous activities may puzzle at these incredible hypotheses which invoke quantum mechanics and chaos theory all the while largely reducing God to a mere recipient of fortune and good luck. Since Oord denies a model of miraculous divine activity whereby God suspends the laws of nature, it also remains to be seen how God can persuade human embryonic cells to activate dormant capabilities culminating in the glorification and not mere resuscitation of Christ's corpse.⁴⁵ Despite Oord's clever, innovative proposal, the aforementioned limitations cast doubt on its plausible nature.

Finally, Oord's triumphalistic pronouncement of his solution to the problem of the selectivity of miracles relies on a grossly deficient misunderstanding of the qualities of perfect love. Oord writes, "When we understand that God cannot heal singlehandedly, we solve the problem of selective miracles."⁴⁶ Yet, "If God could heal single-handedly, God should fix our problems acting alone!"⁴⁷ Oord makes markedly similar statements to this one throughout his work without acknowledging his seemingly underlying consequentialist assumptions. It may simply be the case that there are no morally permissible means available for God to heal an individual at a particular time, despite God having the power to do so. A moral constraint of this kind on God's power serves equivalent purposes as the ontological divine constraints Oord himself elicits. Moreover, even if the means and conditions prove permissible for God to perform miraculous deeds, God may have morally justifiable reasons to refrain from doing so. Contra Oord, it is not true

⁴³ Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 209.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 209

⁴⁵ Manuel Schmid, "A Threefold Critique of Thomas Jay Oord's Model of Divine Amipotence," in *Amipotence: Support and Criticism; Expansion and Application*, ed. by Chris S. Baker (Las Vegas, NV: SacraSage Press, 2025): 227.

⁴⁶ Oord, *God Can't*, 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

that “love prevents preventable evil” and that a “loving person does not allow pointless pain if they can stop it.”⁴⁸ A “helicopter God” who swoops in to prevent preventable evil would prove deficient in love by failing to allow His creatures to confront genuine risks with real consequences that provide the opportunity for growth in virtue. Such a coddled creature would fail to discover her own limits, and, through spoiled dependence on God, would not develop healthy discipline, self-control, and courage in the face of potentially adverse obstacles.⁴⁹ Thus, unintentionally, Oord’s “amipotent” account of divine love is an imperfect one owing to Oord’s essential kenoticism and the restraint it imposes on God’s ability to promote the good of God’s intended object. In short, Oord’s proposal for handling the problem of the selectivity of miracles proves inadequate to the task and can be surrendered for more promising candidates.

Greater Good Defense

The cosmic warfare theodicy resurfaced in recent years as a viable position due in no small efforts to that of Greg Boyd. In contrast to “classical-philosophical” approaches to the problem of evil, Boyd rejects a “blueprint worldview” and its appeals to “God’s secret plan.”⁵⁰ While not all blueprint models are created equal, they all adhere, one way or another, to “greater good” theodicies. Melville Y. Stewart defines greater-good defenses (GGDs) in the following manner:

For every evil that God permits there is a good state of affairs which counterbalances and which logically requires the evil in question (or some other evil of at least equal negative value), and some evil is overbalanced by a good state of affairs (or good states of affairs) which logically require the evil in question (or some other evil of at least equal negative value).⁵¹

Many approaches to the problem of selective miracles employ the greater good defense in one variety or another. One of the issues with such a move on the part of theodicians is the entailment on GGD that “there is only one thing that is clearly evil intrinsically, and this is sin, or evil willing. But this *prima facie* evil is only apparently evil, for the universe is a better place with sin than it would have been without it.”⁵² Bruce Little also suggests that GGDs are strained to the breaking

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Alan Rhoda, “Exaggerated Rumors of Omnipotence’s Death,” in *Amipotence: Support and Criticism; Expansion and Application*, ed. by Chris S. Baker (Las Vegas, NV: SacraSage Press, 2025): 221.

⁵⁰ Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 13.

⁵¹ Melville Y. Stewart, *The Greater-Good Defence: An Essay on the Rationality of Faith* (New York: St Martin’s, 1993), 56.

⁵² David Ray Griffin, *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 76-77.

point when it comes to the empirical burden of proof they bear in the face of horrendous suffering. It is unavoidable, therefore, that GGDs rely on skeptical theism. Furthermore, if evil is necessary for God's purposes, then this calls into question God's goodness, given God's consequentialist leanings, and God's omnipotence, since His ends cannot be achieved apart from evil.⁵³ If the good God desires to actualize by means of the suffering of an individual excludes that same individual from experiencing the good, then God appropriates purposes as instrumental means to others' ends. If goods are proportionate to the evil that serves as an instrumental means, then slight evils would only produce slight goods, whereas severe evils would produce substantial goods. The intuitive conclusion would be that "it is better to be beaten and raped than only beaten since the good is greater (something no one actually believes.)"⁵⁴

For these reasons, and numerous others, theodicians ought to pivot to MacPherson's differentiation between partial and full greater good theodicies. A partial greater good theodicy holds that there is a certain antecedent good that makes possible an evil while not rendering it certain. A full greater good theodicy places the good consequent to the evil and views the evil as directly linked to the realization of the good in question. There is no gratuitous evil on a greater good theodicy, as there is on a partial greater good theodicy, but both theodicies acknowledge that God has reasons for allowing the evil in question to take place. The cosmic warfare theodicy capitulates to the presence of gratuitous evils in this world, such as the selectivity of miraculous healings, but sees these evils as unnecessary byproducts of an antecedent greater good, namely significant freedom. This is completely in alignment with the deontological principle of double effect, which states that "it is permissible to cause a harm as a side effect (or 'double effect') of bringing about a good result even though it would not be permissible to cause such a harm as a means to bringing about the same good end."⁵⁵ The most that could be charged against God, given the principle, is that God intended the *risk* of evil, but not the *fact* of it. Nevertheless, while God risks evil's factuality, God also intends that should evil arise, God will conduct a cosmic controversy to redeem creation. "Therefore, redemption is a 'greater good' that restores an earlier 'greater good' but it is not itself the 'greater good.' It is restorative of the antecedent good [a free creation]."⁵⁶

In the case of those who fail to experience their miraculous healing in the present, God works to actualize the best possible state of affairs in their lives, given

⁵³ MacPherson, *The Redeemed-Good Defense*, 33.

⁵⁴ Bruce A. Little, *A Creation-Order Theodicy: God and Gratuitous Evil* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 121.

⁵⁵ Alison McIntyre, "The Doctrine of Double Effect." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014.

⁵⁶ MacPherson, *The Redeemed-Good Defense*, 188.

the operative rules of engagement. There is also the solace in knowing that while accepting the risk of evil's existence in the world, and the suffering it would inflict on other agents, God intended from the acknowledgment of the risk to redeem the sorry state of affairs should evil arise.

Conclusion

In times past, theodicians often relied upon explanations of God's dealings in the world attached to morally questionable assumptions. For theologians sympathetic with a deontological ethical framework, the cosmic warfare defense offers a scripturally based, compelling narrative as to why God's miraculous acts of healing are selective in nature. God must allow the tares to grow up amongst the wheat, but, in due time, God will uproot the tares by demonstrating God's upright character from the lowest to the greatest. Moreover, despite the initial appeal of Oord's essential kenoticism and its approach to the problem of the selectivity of miracles, its heterodox quality, unruly exegesis of scripture, and immodest characterization of the nature of divine love disqualifies it from the realm of possible responses. The deontological cosmic warfare defense, in contrast, offers a robust rejoinder to the problem of selective miracles worthy of further explication.

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