

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE STORIES:
A GREATEST GOOD THEODICY

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Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz famously declared that this is the best of all possible worlds, for God is perfect and a perfect being always does what is best.¹ God's wisdom, goodness, and power ensure that he would create the best world.² Christians are likely to have the intuition that Leibniz is correct. Or they might conclude that if this is not the best possible world, it must be a very good world. Why else would God make this world and not another?

Voltaire thought that such a notion is absurd, particularly in light of the very real, horrific, and seemingly gratuitous evils we observe in the world. After the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755, Voltaire lamented, "If this world, just as it is, is the best of all possible worlds, we have no room to hope for a happier state."³ He then satirized Leibniz's views in his short novel, *Candide*.⁴ The characters of this story suffer terribly, and whatever good that results from such suffering is so trivial that it cannot balance or defeat the evils previously experienced.⁵

¹ Gottfried Leibniz, "Discourse on Metaphysics," §1 in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 35; "Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason," §10, in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 210. When citing Leibniz, I include the paragraph or section number, indicated by the § symbol, as well as the page number of the edition cited.

² Gottfried Leibniz, "The Principles of Philosophy, or, the Monadology," §55, in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 220. See also Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §116, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IN: Open Court, 1985), 187.

³ Voltaire, "Voltaire's Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," in *Candide, or, Optimism*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: Penguin, 2005), 98.

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, ed. and trans. Roger Pearson, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Roderick B. Chisholm distinguishes between balancing off evil and defeating evil in "The Defeat of Good and Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53–68.

Surprisingly, Voltaire was not an atheist, but a deist.⁶ However, Voltaire reasoned that “since there is enormous natural evil, pain, and suffering in the world, God is not a perfect architect of the universe.”⁷ Atheists go further: they believe that the world’s numerous, horrific, and seemingly pointless evils make it probable that God does not exist.⁸ Voltaire and atheists wonder why, if God exists, he would create a world in which there are such things as earthquakes, torture, rape, murder, and genocide.

Here we have two competing conceptions of God’s relationship to the world. It may be that those who deny that there is a God (or that God is perfect, or that this is the best of all possible worlds) conceive of worlds as machines that produce products. The best possible world would be like the most efficient machine that produces the maximal amount of goods, with each good being as good as it can be. Christians, as people of the Book, are more likely to see God’s relationship to the world as analogous to that of an author to a story.⁹ They know that however the story may appear presently, there is a very good ending in the future. Part of what makes this story so good is that evil will be conquered by the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

What follows is a brief sketch of a theodicy in which I contend that God has indeed created a story—a true story in which he maximally displays his glory. The world-as-story that best depicts God’s glory must be epic, containing certain elements: evil, conflict, suspense, and

⁶ Dale Jacquette, “Voltaire and the Philosophes,” in *The History of Evil in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Douglas Hedley, Chad Meister, and Charles Taliaferro, vol. 4 of *The History of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Charles Taliaferro (London: Routledge, 2018), 22–9.

⁷ Jacquette, “Voltaire and the Philosophes,” 23.

⁸ See, for example, William L. Rowe, “Evil and Theodicy,” *Philosophical Topics* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 119–32.

⁹ Many Christian theologians and philosophers have likened God to an author. For a small sample, see J. A. Crabtree, *The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism* (Eugene, OR: Gutenberg College Press, 2004), 110–1; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 156–8; Hugh McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 107–8; Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 89–115; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 297–337.

danger. Without those elements, there can be no plot, no climactic victory, and no satisfying, triumphant resolution. God's plan has always been to create a world in which evil would arise and be defeated by the works of Jesus, which best display God's glory. Evil is not evidence against God, nor is it proof that this world is not the best. Rather, evil makes the saving work of Jesus possible. According to Alvin Plantinga, the story of redemption in which Jesus is the protagonist "is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that *could* be told. No other great-making property of a world can match this one."¹⁰

God as Artist and Author

Since God is *a se*, there is nothing outside of God that compels him to create. Yet God, the ultimate artist, delights in creating a world that is a work of art.¹¹ God's purpose in creating is to fulfill a certain end. Since God is the greatest being, it stands to reason that he would desire to create an artwork that reflects and magnifies what is best: himself.¹²

What kind of artwork would best display God's glorious attributes? God already has intra-Trinitarian glory: the three persons of God glorify each other. What God desires is for others to experience and enjoy his glory, so there must be others who exist. Since these others must actually exist, the artwork must be more than an idea in God's mind. There must be creatures, a people who behold God's glory, recipients of God's benevolence. God desires to

¹⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59.

¹¹ Herman Bavinck claims that "God is the supreme artist. ... The world is God's work of art." *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 2:206. Alexander Pruss explains how viewing the world as a work of art has advantages in addressing the problem of evil in "The Cosmos as a Work of Art: A Skeptical Theist Approach That Isn't Too Skeptical," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 94 (2020): 205–13.

¹² Jonathan Edwards makes a compelling case for this in "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John E. Smith, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 403–526. See also Walter Schutz, "Jonathan Edwards's *End of Creation*: An Exposition and Defense," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (June 2006): 247–71. For a briefer defense of the idea that God has created all things for his glory, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:433–4.

create an audience of creatures. God therefore creates this audience, a people he loves, as part of his artwork.¹³ Furthermore, it would seem that God wants to create an audience of creatures who are not merely observers, but who also participate in the art-making. So, it seems that God would create something like a drama, an enacted story.

Thinking of the world as a story has its advantages. God could have created the world to be like a giant art museum. His creatures could walk through it eternally, beholding his glory in unchanging works of art, such as paintings and statues. However, in this analogy, there are two deficiencies: one, those museum goers would not be part of the work of art; they would be merely an audience; and, two, while canvases and plastic arts might tell a thousand words, stories can tell hundreds of thousands. Stories not only provide more information, but they also have greater rhetorical and affective power than either a picture or even a proposition-laded lecture.¹⁴ Just as my actions, and not just my words, demonstrate my love for my wife, God's creating an enacted drama, a narrative that takes place in space and time, is better than a mere declaration of his attributes. In this cosmic drama he does more than tell; he also shows. This drama is therefore maximally revelatory.

Now, what kind of story would God create to display his glory? Let us imagine a story of a world populated by creatures who never sin. Such a world might be very beautiful, and some of God's attributes would be displayed. Annals of that world could be written. Events could be chronicled.¹⁵ But there wouldn't be a *story* worth telling. Quite frankly, such a world would seem boring. For God to create an epic, revelatory story, he needs an essential ingredient: conflict.

¹³ Human beings, God's image bearers, are not the only audience members, for angels also behold the works of God (Eph 3:10; 1 Pet 1:12). One could make the case that part of the way God is glorified is through the angels' earnest desire to "look into" the saving work of Christ.

¹⁴ According to Scott Christensen, "Showing communicates more evocatively than telling," Christensen, *What about Evil? A Defense of God's Sovereign Glory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 253.

¹⁵ Annals detail what happened in a given year. Chronicles, while similar, have unified subjects. But neither is truly a narrative. For the distinction between these forms of literature, see Noël Carroll, "Narrative," in *The*

Conflict and Resolution

Stories commonly have a structure of exposition, conflict or rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement or resolution.¹⁶ Conflict is an essential element of that structure. Without conflict of some kind, there is no plot, just a flat series of events.¹⁷ According to Noah Lukeman, conflict performs several functions: “it creates a rift which paves the way for resolution and satisfaction, it aids in suspense, [and] it can lend a work a sense of direction.”¹⁸ Joshua Rasmussen believes that great stories generally have several elements, including “adventure, exploration, progress, heroism, comic relief, courage in the face of uncertainty, layers of discovery, sacrifice, cleverness, good and evil, danger, victory,” and also “layers of mystery to be uncovered and discovered.”¹⁹ Without conflict, there is no heroism, sacrifice, evil, danger, and victory.

Conflict arises from some level of evil, for if there were no evil, there would simply be peace and harmony. If there were no sin in the world, we would readily cooperate, for we would not be proud or selfish. We also wouldn’t feel internal conflict, an experience that is among the many consequences of living in a fallen world. Truly great stories must include evil, which is why J. R. R. Tolkien asserts, “There cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall—all stories are ultimately about the fall.”²⁰

Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (London: Routledge, 2016), 282–3.

¹⁶ The language of “rising action” and “falling action” comes from Gustav Freytag. See *A Handbook to Literature*, ed. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), s.v. “Freytag’s Pyramid,” 242–3.

¹⁷ “Conflict is the raw material out of which plot is constructed.” *A Handbook to Literature*, ed. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), s.v. “Conflict,” 123.

¹⁸ Noah Lukeman, *The Plot Thickens: Eight Ways to Bring Fiction to Life* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2002), 146.

¹⁹ Joshua Rasmussen, “The Great Story Theodicy,” in Joshua Rasmussen and Felipe Leon, *Is God the Best Explanation of Things? A Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 227.

²⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, “From a Letter by J. R. R. Tolkien to Milton Waldman, 1951,” in Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, 2nd ed. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2001), xv. Karen Swallow Prior agrees: “All literature—stories most obviously—centers on some conflict, rupture, or lack. Literature is birthed from our

To see why great stories require evil and conflict, one need only imagine a series of events in which there is no evil and conflict. It's hard to imagine a novel, a play, a television show, or a movie that lacked such elements. There are no such stories—or no such stories worth telling—about people who always get along and who have no struggles. There would be nothing dramatic in such an account: no conflict, no suspense, no sacrifices, no battles, and no victories. Even works of historical non-fiction such as biographies feature conflicts. Technical manuals, recipe books, and textbooks don't feature conflict and resolution, but they're not regarded as great works of literature.²¹ Many people enjoy reading non-fiction, but very few enjoy reading non-fiction.²²

Great stories must not only have conflict; they must have significant conflicts that are not resolved too quickly or easily. Consider the case of Superman. Though comics featuring the Man of Steel quickly became popular after his 1938 debut, those stories had a problem: Superman easily beat his enemies. According to Paul Fairchild,

Those common, everyday criminals had no chance. Their opponent was stronger, faster and invulnerable. Superman was unbeatable. It wasn't just a problem for criminals. It was a problem for the writers of *Action Comics*. Invincible characters are boring. Superman's creators kept fans interested by piling on gimmicks, but after riding the wave of novelty, writers had to find a way to knock The Man of Steel off his lofty perch. To make him interesting they had to make him vulnerable.²³

This problem was solved in 1949 when Superman's Achilles' heel, kryptonite, was introduced. Rendering the hero vulnerable made the comics more interesting.

fallenness: without the fall, there would be no story." Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 26.

²¹ "Such writing is usually excluded from the domain of literature, in the belles-lettristic sense." Sholom J. Kahn, "The Problem of Evil in Literature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 12, no. 1 (Sept. 1953): 109.

²² Brian James Watson, "The Tension of Evil: A Problem to Be Resolved," in *Apologetical Aesthetics*, ed. Mark Coppenger, William E. Elkins Jr., and Richard H. Stark III (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 146.

²³ Paul Fairchild, "Kryptonite is Crap: The Weird, Dumb History of Superman's Ill-Conceived Vulnerability," *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/06/kryptonite-is-crap/276984>.

Questions regarding how conflicts will resolve generate suspense, which keeps an audience engaged.²⁴ Perhaps the hero will fail; the story might very well be a tragedy, and not a comedy.²⁵ Tension drives stories forward, and tension is fueled by a sense of danger. As C. S. Lewis has written, “Dangers, of course, there must be: how else can you keep a story going?”²⁶ The path to resolution should not be straightforward or predictable. Before great stories reach their climaxes, there are plot twists, reversals, and moments of heightened danger.²⁷

At the conclusion of great (comedic, not tragic) stories, evil is defeated. In some cases, those who once were villains become heroes (Ebenezer Scrooge, the Grinch, Darth Vader, Kyo Ren). Frequently, evil is defeated by the heroic sacrifice of a protagonist (e.g., Tony Stark’s sacrifice in *Avengers: Endgame*). The conclusions of great stories are satisfying precisely because evil has been overcome and conflict has been resolved.

The Greatest Story Ever Told

Christians believe that the Bible tells the story of the world. Much of the world’s history is not depicted in the pages of Scripture, but the Bible does present the broad contours of the story of the world: the beginning, the middle, and the end. The common structure of literature mentioned above (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement) is paralleled in the Bible’s story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

²⁴ “Suspense is a major device for securing and maintaining interest.” *A Handbook to Literature*, ed. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), s.v. “Suspense,” 537.

²⁵ A comedy in this sense is not a story that is light-hearted and elicits laughter, but rather a dramatic story with a happy ending, as opposed to a tragedy.

²⁶ C. S. Lewis, “On Stories,” in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 3.

²⁷ Mystery writer Jane K. Cleland identifies these features of stories in *Mastering Suspense, Structure, and Plot: How to Write Gripping Stories That Keep Readers on the Edge of Their Seats* (New York: Writer’s Digest Books, 2016), 39.

The Bible begins with a brief exposition, establishing a fitting setting for God's grand story of redemption. James Hamilton likens creation to "a spectacular theater that serves as the cosmic matrix in which God's saving and judging glory can be revealed. God's glory is so grand that no less a stage than the universe ... is necessary for the unfolding of this all-encompassing drama."²⁸ Within this setting, the main characters are introduced, as are important themes (including creation, covenant, temple, and kingdom).²⁹

Before long, conflict arises: a mysterious serpent tempts God's image bearers. His lies lead those image bearers to doubt God's goodness and to reject his authority. A great rupture in the relationship between God and humans occurs, producing terrible consequences: the creation becomes subject to futility, humans are separated from God and removed from the garden, and they die. A narrative question arises: How can they get back to the garden?³⁰ How this question will be answered generates great suspense.

A partial answer is given soon enough: God promises one man that the world will be blessed through his offspring. Yet there is still suspense, for it is unclear how God's promises will be fulfilled, or even if they will be fulfilled. There are times when it looks like Abraham will not father that child of promise. There are multiple times when the very existence of his descendants is threatened. Then, when freed from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites appear to be a group of grumbling, faithless, idolatrous malcontents. How can God's promises be fulfilled?

In the fullness of time, God enters the story in an unexpected way. In a great plot twist, the eternal God who transcends heaven and earth becomes a human being, the great hero, for it

²⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 53.

²⁹ Many recent works of biblical theology explain and trace the development of these themes. Hamilton's *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* is an excellent example.

³⁰ According to Cleland, "The narrative question refers to the overarching thematic question posed at the beginning of the book that must be answered by the end." Cleland, *Mastering Suspense, Structure, and Plot*, 15.

takes nothing short of the incarnation of the Son of God to redeem his people. He alone lives a perfect life and thus is a fitting covenant partner of God. Yet in another twist, the only sinless human being who ever lived is treated like the worst of criminals and is crucified. He dies not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people. It is at the cross that God most clearly displays both his justice and grace, his righteousness and his love, not to mention his wisdom. This terrible event was predestined by God (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:28), which indicates that this story was authored by God and that God can—and will—bring good out of evil.³¹

Then, in a reversal, the God-man rises from the grave triumphantly, demonstrating God's power. Ironically, those who sought to destroy him were accomplishing God's plan. Jesus begins to transform people by the power of the Holy Spirit, turning them from villains to heroes, from enemies to friends. The story of the church has its own many twists and turns, reversals, rises and falls, but one day it will culminate in the triumphant return of the King, who will finally defeat all his enemies, including Satan and death.

The story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is similar to the dramatic structure of many great stories. In literature, and in life, there would be no triumphant, satisfying resolutions if there had been no conflicts, tension, and evil. Similarly, there would be no atonement or glorious resurrection without sin.³²

³¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer makes much of the God-as-author analogy, going so far as to say, "According to the Scriptures, that God is the author of this grand narrative is never in doubt." Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 316.

³² This, of course, is the *felix culpa* theme that has been voiced by many Christians over the centuries. Both Catholics and Protestants, and both proponents of libertarian and compatibilistic free will, have endorsed some version of the view that Adam's sin paradoxically yielded a benefit: the manifestation of the Son, particularly in his saving acts. That such a varied group of Christian thinkers has endorsed this view gives it a fair amount of plausibility.

Advantages of—and Objections to—Viewing the World as a Story

This view of the world as a story has considerable advantages. First, if the world has been authored by God, then the world has meaning. Everything that happens serves a purpose. We need not know all the reasons why certain events happen—how could we, given our finitude and our limited perspective from the middle of the story? Yet we trust that evils serve some greater good or goods. Evils contribute to the quality of the story, which magnifies God’s glory. Evils give us opportunities for moral growth, for acts of bravery and compassion, sacrifice and forgiveness. As stated above, evils are necessary for salvation and judgment, both of which reveal some of God’s attributes to an extent that they could not otherwise be revealed, demonstrating God’s greatness to an extent that it could not otherwise be demonstrated, and glorifying God to an extent that he could not otherwise be glorified. There may also be additional reasons for why evil exists. Perhaps other goods, which we cannot now conceive, can only be obtained through evil.

A second advantage is that if the world is a story, the presence of evil is certainly not evidence against God. Rather, it is evidence for God. If God intends to create an epic story, there must be evil. On this view, we would expect a significant amount of evil.

A third advantage is related to the second: that God has allowed or ordained evil to occur does not mean he has done anything wrong. We do not think that Shakespeare was wrong to create the character of Iago or to write a story in which an innocent person such as Desdemona is murdered. If evil contributes to the overall good of the story and if the evil acts themselves are not glorified, the author has done nothing wrong.³³ Why then should we think it is wrong that God has authored a grand story in which evil arises?

³³ Crabtree, *The Most Real Being*, 253.

The fact is that our lives are short segments of a grand story. One cannot judge a story by experiencing only a small portion of it. As Alexander Pruss reminds us, “Musical performances, literary works, plays and films have a structure in time. While still first viewing the work, the viewer has not seen how it completes. This temporally limited point of view can make it impossible to judge the significance and merit” of the artwork.³⁴ The value of stories—and worlds—cannot be determined by a synchronic snapshot of how the world is at any given time. We wouldn’t judge the value of a movie by one frame, or the value of a novel by one sentence, nor should we judge the value of this world by looking at one event, whether it’s an earthquake, the Holocaust, or the death of a lonely fawn in a forest fire. Stories must be regarded diachronically, and so must the world. The world’s story ends, Scripture tells us, with a restored, sinless, deathless world of beauty, in which God’s people dwell with him and praise him for his saving work. It is hard to imagine a better ending.

There is a fourth advantage to viewing God as an author and the world as his work of art. Some philosophers claim that there simply is no best possible world, for any possible world can be surpassed by a better one. They say that the value of any given world can always increase.³⁵ Such philosophers assume that the value of worlds can be expressed quantitatively. Yet artworks cannot be reduced to quantitative analysis. Novels are not necessarily better because they contain more words. The best paintings are not the ones on the biggest canvases. Pieces of music are not always better because they have more notes.³⁶ We cannot simply add up quantitative elements of

³⁴ Pruss, “The Cosmos as a Work of Art,” 208. Vanhoozer expresses a similar thought, pointing out that we cannot understand the meaning of our whole lives before they are completed. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 324–7.

³⁵ Robert Merrihew Adams, “Must God Create the Best?” in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 91; Frances Howard-Snyder and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “The Real Problem of the Best World,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1996): 422–5; Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 124–7.

³⁶ Others maintain that there may not be a best possible world because the goods in different worlds are incommensurable. That is, the goods are so different that they cannot be measured by one standard. For this

artworks to determine their value. Arguably, the respective values of artworks are determined by evaluators. The evaluator of worlds, the one whose views matter most, is God.

Undoubtedly, there will be many objections to my theodicy. One is that conceiving of God as the author of the world is too deterministic. It is true that conceiving of God as author entails some model of meticulous providence. The God of open theism cannot be the author of the world in the sense that I have described. While I write from the perspective of a theological determinist, it seems to me that on Molinism, God can be the author of a world in a certain sense. The Molinist might say that God has decided to actualize the feasible world that best and most dramatically displays his glorious attributes.

One other objection is that while this story has an overall happy ending, it is not happy for everyone: while those who are redeemed rejoice in the Lamb's sacrifice, there are those who are condemned to eternal misery. In response, I argue that the fact that there are sinners who will be condemned makes the redeemed more thankful for salvation. This gratitude is fueled by their knowledge that were it not for the grace of God, they also would be condemned.³⁷ This gratitude is a great part of what glorifies God, and therefore it is part of the good that outweighs the evil that led to the condemnation of some sinners.³⁸ Additionally, it is within God's right to create people for his purposes (Rom 9:19–23).³⁹ God does not wrong us if we suffer, so long as we are

objection, see William E. Mann, "The Best of All Possible Worlds," in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 270; Heath White, *Fate and Free Will: A Defense of Theological Determinism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2020), 294. I am willing to argue that viewing the world as a work of art and God as an artist with a particular artistic vision can defeat this objection. However, I cannot pursue this argument here.

³⁷ I don't have space to pursue this argument further, but for an extended argument, see Matthew J. Hart, "Calvinism and the Problem of Hell," in *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*, ed. David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 248–72.

³⁸ Condemnation of sin is not evil, but one may wonder whether it is necessary for there to be evil for which there is no atonement.

³⁹ According to Richard Swinburne, "God's right to create, cause, and allow suffering arises from his being from moment to moment the source of our being." Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 243.

of use to others.⁴⁰ As Richard Swinburne says, “If there is a God, the greatest good of all in this respect must be being-of-use to God himself.”⁴¹

There are likely to be many other objections. I am confident that those objections can be answered, though surely not to everyone’s satisfaction. Still, the brief theodicy I have sketched above offers significant advantages, chief among which is that it coheres with the Bible, the book that attributes its own authorship to God.

Conclusion

If God’s intent was to create the world to be a perfect machine, then he seems to have failed. Those who assume that God would create such a world are likely to conclude that he doesn’t exist, he isn’t good, or he could have done better. However, if one views God as an author and this world as a drama, then one might embrace the idea that God has made a very good world, perhaps the best possible world. As Sean McDonough concludes, “If the world is viewed as a snapshot at any moment in its fallen state, it is evidently not the best imaginable one in any sense of the word. If, by contrast, the world is taken as an eschatologically oriented drama—a divine comedy—then it is indeed arguable that this *will prove to have been* a most excellent universe.”⁴²

⁴⁰ For a discussion of this principle, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 259–61.

⁴¹ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 261. He adds, “One who is of use to the perfectly good source of all being is indeed fortunate.” Swinburne would not endorse my theodicy, but he is correct to point out that God has certain rights over his creation, and that being of use to others is good for that person.

⁴² Sean M. McDonough, *Creation and New Creation: Understanding God’s Creation Project* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 64. He adds, “Those who hold that creation is in some sense for the sake of the redemption wrought in Christ argue in analogous fashion to Leibnitz [*sic*]: it is supremely good for God to have displayed his love in the sacrifice of his Son for sinful humanity.”

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