

The Omission Theodicy

1. Introduction

Subsumption theodicies aim to subsume apparent cases of natural evil under the category of moral evil, claiming that apparently natural evils result from the actions or omissions of free creatures.¹ Subsumption theodicies include Fall theodicies, according to which nature was corrupted by the sins of the first humans (Aquinas 1993, Dembski 2009), demonic-action theodicies, according to which apparently natural evils are caused by the actions of fallen angels (Lewis 1944, Plantinga 1974, Johnston 2023), and simulation theodicies, according to which our universe is a computer simulation, with its apparent natural evils caused by the free actions of simulators in the next universe up (Dainton 2020, Crummett 2021).

The main motivation for pursuing a subsumption theodicy is that there are promising free will theodicies for moral evil (Plantinga 1974, Swinburne 1998, van Inwagen 2008), so if apparently natural evils can be construed as moral evils in disguise, a comprehensive theodicy may be within reach. Unfortunately, existing subsumption theodicies are unattractive. Fall theodicies seem to require young-earth creationism, or else have difficulty accounting for pre-human animal suffering without invoking dubious metaphysical devices like backwards causation, hypertime, or pre-existent souls.² Demonic-action theodicies tend to posit causes for natural phenomena that compete with well-supported scientific explanations. This is most obvious for flat-footed versions, according to which fallen angels directly cause earthquakes, forest fires, and the like. But the same holds for more sophisticated versions, such as Plantinga's (2011: 59) suggestion that Satan and his minions actively meddled in the evolutionary process,

¹ We borrow the term "subsumption theodicy" from Crummett (2021).

² See Dembski for a backward-causation Fall theodicy for pre-human animal suffering. See Crummett (2021) for a critical discussion of an alternative Fall theodicy applying Hudson's (2014) metaphysics of hypertime. See Murray (2008: ch. 3) for discussion of transtemporal models of the Fall.

“steering it in the direction of predation, waste, and pain” (cf. Lewis 1944: ch. 9). After all, we have wholly satisfactory naturalistic explanations for why a Darwinian evolutionary process would often result in Malthusian conditions of misery and scarcity, or why it would sometimes produce creatures that exploit the calories in the bodies of other animals for their own survival. Finally, simulation theodicies are metaphysically revisionary, threaten skepticism about the external world and the past, and seem to severely water down the doctrine that God is the creator of our universe.

We propose a new subsumption theodicy, the *omission theodicy*, which avoids the main problems with existing subsumption theodicies. According to the omission theodicy, apparently natural evil, including pre-human animal suffering, results from the omissions of free creatures who had the ability to prevent it, but culpably failed to do so. According to one version of the omission theodicy, God gave some angels the task of benevolently governing the earth, a task that was supposed to involve shielding animals from pointless suffering and steering evolution away from its default tendency toward predation, pain, parasitism, and Malthusian scarcity, but they freely abdicated their divinely assigned role. Other versions trace apparently natural evils to the omissions of aliens who had the power and opportunity to play a similar role in steering earthly evolution, but culpably failed to do so. On the omission theodicy, apparently natural evils are likened to harms that befall children due to parental negligence, or harms that befall citizens due to the culpable failure of government officials to adopt policies or develop technologies that would have prevented them.

This paper has two main goals. The first is to develop the omission theodicy and argue that it deserves a respectable place among leading hypotheses about why God might allow the apparent natural evils we find in our world. For the purposes of this paper, we assume that some

or other free will theodicy constitutes a satisfactory response to the problem of *moral* evil. Readers who aren't sold on this assumption can take what follows in a conditional spirit: *if* a free will theodicy can account for moral evil, then the omission theodicy provides a promising explanation for why God might have allowed the apparent natural evils we find in our world. The second goal is to argue that the omission theodicy avoids the main problems with alternative subsumption theodicies.

As we see it, many of the problems of rival subsumption theodicies arise from the superficially plausible assumption that, in order to give a free will theodicy for apparently natural evil, one must say that apparently natural evil is *caused* by free creatures. This assumption leads many subsumption theodicies to posit causes for natural phenomena that compete with scientific explanations, and leads others into extravagant metaphysical speculations involving simulations, backwards causation, and pre-existent human souls. But this assumption is false. To give a free will theodicy for apparently natural evil, it is enough to say that apparently natural evil is, or was, *preventable* by free creatures. The omission theodicy asserts preventability without further positive causal claims that would challenge scientific orthodoxy about the age of the earth, the causes of earthquakes, or the default tendency of evolution by natural selection to produce predation, pain, parasitism, and scarcity, and without radically metaphysically revisionary proposals like the simulation hypothesis. Unlike other subsumption theodicies, the omission theodicy is therefore scientifically and metaphysically conservative. Granted, some versions of the omission theodicy, such as those that appeal to the omissions of fallen angels, involve a controversial metaphysical commitment to created supernatural agents. But unlike (say) the simulation hypothesis, this commitment is baked into all major theistic traditions and is arguably plausible on theism.

As we will argue, an important virtue of the omission theodicy is that it predicts and explains what we regard as the main piece of evidence in support of naturalism: the apparently *indifferent* distribution of goods and evils, a distribution much like what one would expect if it were not the result of actions of either benevolent or malevolent agents (Draper 1989). Some rival subsumption theodicies, such as demonic-action theodicies, are in *prima facie* tension with this appearance of indifference. The same is true of many non-subsumption theodicies for natural evil, such as those that appeal primarily to desert, opportunities for virtuous action,³ the provision of motivation to turn to God,⁴ or the value of soul-building.⁵ Happiness and misery do not seem to be distributed according to desert, or to agents' needs to grow in virtue, or to their needs for moral/religious motivation, or to their developmental capacity to handle and grow from new challenges. The world is not like a well-designed video game, with new challenges systematically suited to one's needs and current levels of development.

We use the term "theodicy," but not in the sense popularized by Plantinga (1974): a story advanced as known truth. But neither is our proposal a Plantingian "defense": a story aimed at establishing the mere logical compossibility of theism and evil. Our topic is instead theodicy in the sense characterized by David Lewis (1993: 152): "tentative theodicy, even speculative theodicy," the attempt to "advance from a predicament of not having a clue [why God permits evil] to a predicament of indecision between several not-too-unbelievable hypotheses [...] The job is to devise hypotheses that are at least somewhat plausible, at least to the Christian [or theist]." We propose the omission theodicy as a serious epistemic possibility, one that deserves a respectable place among leading not-too-unbelievable hypotheses about why God might have allowed the apparently natural evils we find in our world. It is admittedly speculative; it goes

³ See Swinburne (1998).

⁴ See van Inwagen (2008), Lewis (1944).

⁵ See Hick (1966).

beyond the entailments of bare theism or the doctrinal commitments of any theistic religion. But every major theistic tradition has held that earth is caught up in a larger drama that includes highly powerful and intelligent non-human creatures, including some who are morally flawed and some who have power and responsibility over terrestrial affairs. To this consensus the omission theodicy merely adds the modest conjecture that some such beings specifically had the power and responsibility to prevent the apparent natural evils we find in our world.

In §2, we develop the omission theodicy and explore several variants. In §3, we consider and respond to objections to the omission theodicy. In §4, we survey alternative subsumption theodicies and show how the omission theodicy avoids the main problems with each. In §5, we argue that the omission theodicy has the important virtue of predicting what we believe to be the most important piece of evidence for naturalism: the seemingly indifferent distribution of goods and evils.

2. The Omission Theodicy: Clarifications and Variants

In developing the omission theodicy, we face some choice points. First, how comprehensive do we want it to be? Should it cover the full range of apparently natural evils or a restricted subclass? For a comparatively modest version, we might restrict the omission theodicy to the human domain. For example, one might suggest that most apparently natural evils that afflict humans can be traced to culpable omissions of earlier humans. It's very plausible that, if all past humans had made an earnest effort to develop and use their natural gifts for the common good, we would now have the technological capacity to prevent much of the suffering that results from natural causes. But an explanation in terms of human omissions can only go so far. It wouldn't touch pre-human animal suffering or much of the suffering among the first several generations of humans. (Even if all humans had their act together, it would surely take many

generations to work out a cure for cancer, for example.) The more interesting and ambitious versions of the omission theodicy, which will be our focus here, seek to explain more-or-less the full range of apparently natural evil, including pre-human and early-human suffering, in terms of creaturely omissions. (“More-or-less” because we don’t want to rule out cases where an apparently natural evil was actively caused by free creatures, e.g., a forest fire that seems to have natural causes but was actually caused by human malice. We also don’t want to rule out the possibility that some mild forms of natural evil are exclusively explained in terms of other theodicies (e.g., those that appeal to the value of nomological regularity (van Inwagen 2008: ch. 7) or giving animals or humans opportunities for virtuous action (Swinburne 1998)), though we will not rely on these alternative theodicies to do any heavy lifting.)

A second choice point: who are the free creatures who could have, but culpably failed to, prevent the apparent natural evils we find in our world? Here an important division is between supernatural agents (e.g., angels/demons) and natural agents (e.g., aliens or, for apparently natural evil after the beginning of humanity, humans). We’ll start with a story that spells out a version of the supernatural option.

Archon Abandonment: In the beginning, God entrusted a group of “archons”⁶ or angels with the task of governing the earth. Like a gardener who steers her plot away from its default tendencies toward overgrowth and infestation, the angels’ job was to steer evolution away from its uglier default tendencies—to produce predation, pain, parasitism, and scarcity—and toward its lovelier potentials for symbiosis, harmony, beauty, and balance. Their task would include suppressing mutations that lead to Malthusian scarcity and promoting genetic tendencies toward restrained reproductive habits that would lose

⁶ We borrow the term from Johnston (2023: 13), who takes it from St. Paul (Ephesians 6:12). For Johnston, archons are “the most ancient of created wills,” understood to be created immaterial beings with immense power and intelligence. Thanks to Matthew Adelstein for suggesting the name “Archon Abandonment.”

in a fair Darwinian fight. Through similar methods, they were meant to prevent the nastiest forms of predation, parasitism, and disease.

They might have permitted mild and controlled forms of predation. For example, they might have arranged for genetic mechanisms to anesthetize prey (cf. Dawkins 1995: 131). Or they might have ensured that predators only target animals without phenomenal consciousness or with a minimal, morally insignificant degree of consciousness. They might also have permitted modest amounts of pain for the sake of learning, adaptation, self-protection, and opportunities for animals to exhibit excellences like courage, resilience, and compassion—but within reasonable bounds. Alternatively, they might have arranged for animals to lack all capacity for pain, instead producing self-protective behaviors through unconscious mechanisms or through intrinsically motivating phenomenal states without negative valence.⁷

Like a wise regulator who nudges an economy away from market failures that arise in laissez-faire conditions without undermining the market's productive capacity, the angels' role was to nudge evolution away from the evils that naturally arise in laissez-faire Darwinian evolution without undermining its capacity to produce wonders. Under competent stewardship, the earth would have included counterparts of all that is lovely in nature as we find it—the deer's grace, the elephant's dignity, the redwood's grandeur, the sparrow's melody—while avoiding its horrors. No parasitic wasps that hijack their hosts' nervous systems, leaving their larvae to devour living prey from within. No predator cats that eat their own cubs. No slow, agonizing deaths inflicted by Komodo dragons' venomous bites. None of the countless other gruesome examples that might be

⁷ See the alien isolationism story below for more possibilities along these lines.

found in the book Darwin (1901: 105) imagined could be written by “a devil’s chaplain [...] on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature.”⁸

Like a good parent who occasionally intervenes to avert disaster, the angelic guardians were intended to serve as active caretakers to prevent extreme pointless suffering from accidents or natural forces. For example, they would ensure that Rowe’s (1979) fawn does not die a slow, agonizing death in a forest fire, either by mercifully ending its life or giving it an urge to flee before the fire starts. Similar protections were intended to apply to humans (or the closest counterparts of humans—the first rational, spiritual animals—under this alternative course of evolution), until they reached a level of technological maturity at which they could protect themselves from nature’s whims.

The spirits entrusted with this very demanding task had, individually or collectively, the immense power and intelligence required to carry it out. But they also had free will. Many or all of them freely abdicated their divinely assigned role, perhaps as part of a broader rebellion against God. Earth’s garden was left largely untended. Evolution proceeded without the wise and benevolent stewardship intended by God, led instead (at least in large part) by blind chance and natural selection, with some horrific results.⁹

⁸ See Dillard (1999) and Dawkins (1995: ch. 4) for eloquent descriptions of many such cruel works of nature.

⁹ The story here takes some inspiration from C.S. Lewis’s novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*. In the novel, Mars is under the wise and benevolent governance of an angelic being, Oyarsa, with the planet’s three unfallen species of rational animals and many subrational species living in harmony under Oyarsa’s rule. The protagonist learns that the angel who was supposed to play a similar role on Earth turned evil. While the novel does not explicitly suggest anything like an omission theodicy, or discuss the problem of pre-human animal suffering, there is at least a suggestion in the story that terrestrial creatures would have lived in harmony if Earth’s appointed guardian hadn’t dropped the ball. (However, when Lewis addresses the problem of pre-human animal suffering in *The Problem of Pain*, he suggests that fallen angels might have actively steered evolution in bad directions, but doesn’t consider the simpler omission account.)

A second version of the omission theodicy traces apparent natural evil to the omissions of aliens.

Alien Isolationism: Long before conscious life emerged on Earth, an advanced civilization developed on an alien world. Living beings on the alien planet did not experience the horrendous sorts of natural evils experienced by denizens of Earth. They may have experienced some milder forms of natural evil, but only the sort that can be explained by alternative theodicies. How was natural evil avoided? Perhaps evolution charted a very different course when it came to providing conscious beings with motivation to avoid damage and danger. Instead of suffering, these aliens might have been motivated by varying levels of pleasure. Perhaps they feel delight at escaping a predator or avoiding an injury, and only a lack of pleasure when they are injured (cf. Hume 1998: part xi). Or perhaps there are brain states that play the role for these aliens that pain plays for earthly creatures, but these brain states do not have any qualia correlated with them, so their reactions to damage seem like automatic reflexes to them (cf. Murray 2008: ch. 4).¹⁰

These non-painful ways of reacting to damage may have come about by natural evolutionary processes, foreseen, no doubt, by God. Or perhaps God played the role for these aliens that we might have expected him to play on Earth. Perhaps he directly created them with a suffering-free psychology. Or perhaps he behaved like the angels in

¹⁰ There are further possible alternatives to pain-based motivation in conscious species. Perhaps (1) certain inputs produce affectively neutral sensations which reliably generate a conscious judgment/belief that something bad/harmful/threatening is going on in the relevant body part, and this belief motivates avoidance behavior, etc. Or perhaps, (2) they have phenomenal states that are intrinsically motivating (like itches), but (unlike itches?), don't lead to negative phenomenology when one fails to do the thing they motivate one to do. This might be a conscious feeling of urgency to exhibit relevant behaviors (avoidance, withdrawal, etc.), but where failure to do so doesn't lead to negatively valenced phenomenology (maybe it only leads to a judgment that something bad is going on).

our previous story were supposed to, guiding the evolutionary process to a better outcome.

Our aliens eventually discover that life could have developed under much worse circumstances. Perhaps they discover pain in the lab when experimenting with brain modification. They are quite confident that alien life will arise, if it hasn't already, elsewhere in the galaxy. Their scientists theorize that the development of conscious life elsewhere could easily go in a much worse direction. Some of these aliens come to appreciate the staggering moral implications of these discoveries. They realize that an unimaginable amount of suffering is likely to occur if their planet does not act to prevent it. They devise a plan to travel to potentially habitable planets and seed them with life that is likely to evolve as they did, thereby preempting the evolution of suffering-prone species. If they find primitive life already occurring, they intend to guide the process of evolution on that planet so that creatures like themselves, immune from excessive pain, will emerge. This will be an extremely sophisticated project. They will have to leave volunteers (or advanced AI) behind to regularly examine the genetic code (or equivalent) of the local lifeforms and, if necessary, intervene through genetic engineering or culling lifeforms with pain-promoting traits.

But the natural tendency of this species, like our own, is to care mostly about local concerns. The party in favor of galaxy-wide pain prevention is belittled for their "far-fetched" concerns. Many are driven by self-interest to find some objection to the (very expensive) proposal. Some complain that interfering in the evolution of life on other worlds is wrong on principle. Others argue that the plan is either unnecessary or likely to be ineffective. Ultimately, due to culpable choices by many, the aliens do not

attempt to prevent suffering on other habitable worlds. As it turns out, Earth is not too far from their planet. They would have had a very good chance of preventing human and animal suffering had the interventionist proposal won the day.

The stories above raise the question: why would God give this job to created agents? Why not cut out the middleman and do it himself? For the purposes of this paper, we are assuming that the usual free will theodicies for moral evil are at least somewhat promising. These theodicies suggest some answers. This arrangement might allow creatures to have difference-making responsibility for good outcomes and the avoidance of bad outcomes, which is arguably something of great value. Relatedly, it might give creatures the valuable role of “mini-creators,” whereby they possess a dim likeness to God as “ultimate source[s] of the way things happen in the Universe” (Swinburne 1998: 84; cf. Anselm 1998, Bk 2, ch. X). It might also make it possible for creatures to enter into certain valuable kinds of relationships with God and other creatures, such as loving relationships, which arguably require the freedom of refusal.¹¹

There are other speculative possibilities for why God might give this role to created spirits. Consider the classical idea that it is fitting for the higher to rule the lower. If God creates “higher” incorporeal spirits and “lower” corporeal” creatures, it is arguably fitting for corporeal parts of creation to be governed by the spiritual parts.¹² Relatedly, perhaps it is fitting for the natural order to reflect the spiritual and moral order, an arrangement that is achieved in the first story above. This might realize a valuable “organic unity” across the parts of creation.¹³

¹¹ Van Inwagen (2008), Speak (2015), F. Howard-Snyder and D. Howard-Snyder (1993).

¹² Cf. Aquinas (ST I, Q. 110, a. 1), who explains that God has ordered creation so that “as the inferior angels [...] are ruled by the superior; so are all corporeal things ruled by the angels.”

¹³ See Nozick (1981: ch. 5) on the value of organic unities.

3. Objections and Replies

Objection 1: There is a problem with the omission theodicy that applies to many free will theodicies: the good achieved is *just not worth* the horrible cost paid. The potential for angels or aliens to enjoy the freedom-related goods mentioned above—difference-making responsibility, a role as “mini-creators,” loving relationships, and so forth—aren’t important enough to justify risking so much horrible suffering.

Response: The objection is correct in noting that this is a general issue for free will theodicies. In many cases, the goods of human freedom might not seem valuable enough to justify the risk of some horrible evil. The main goal of our paper is to show that, insofar as free will theodicies are promising to begin with, the omission theodicy provides a plausible extension of them to apparently natural evils. So it is not a major aim of our paper to solve this *just not worth it* problem. But we will briefly sketch a few possible responses, some of which suggest that the challenge has less force against our theodicy than against human-centered free will theodicies.

First, suppose the angels/aliens had done their duty and prevented earthly creatures from suffering various natural evils. In that case, the potential value of our relationships with them seems to be enhanced, since they have made a tremendously positive difference in our lives. If there is an afterlife in which we live in harmony with them forever, it seems plausible that our relationships with them will be at least slightly more valuable at each future time, because of this history of difference-making. Because the relationships last forever, a bit of extra value at each time may aggregate to an infinite increase in value in total, thus outweighing the risk of finite loss in the event the angels/aliens do not do their duty.¹⁴ Even if the increased value doesn’t

¹⁴ See [removed for review] for a defense of this solution to the *just not worth it* problem.

aggregate without limit, it might aggregate enough to outweigh the risk.¹⁵ This solution might apply to nonhuman animal suffering as well, though this would require that animals also have an afterlife—a more controversial assumption.

A second response, which focuses on potential benefits to earthly creatures in this life, is that it may simply be good for creatures to be freely cared for by great beings like angels, even if the creatures are unaware of the arrangement. Think of the pride one might feel in having a great philosopher—say, David Lewis—as one’s PhD advisor. It lends a kind of dignity to one’s career to have been the object of the Great Philosopher’s attentive care and concern, to have actualized one’s modest potential under his guidance. Similarly, it may lend dignity to one’s life if Great Beings freely choose to nurture one’s development and attend to one’s interests.

Third, we might appeal to the benefit the angels or aliens would have received from being positive difference makers in the lives of earthly creatures, or having loving relationships with them, even in the absence of a shared afterlife. Some philosophers hold that benefits to greater beings, or beings with higher moral status, matter more (Kagan 2019). If moral status is tied to mental capacities and the angels/aliens have mental capacities of a higher order than humans, they might have a correspondingly higher moral status, just as humans are commonly taken to have a higher moral status than non-human animals. In that case, the potential benefit to the angels/aliens might outweigh the risk to us.

Fourth, the value of playing the role of “mini-creators” might be greater than we are initially inclined to think, especially given a traditional theistic metaethics on which creaturely value is constituted by a kind of likeness to God.¹⁶ This value might be compounded for beings who are relevantly higher on the “chain of being,” as angels or aliens may be for the reasons just

¹⁵ For a defense of limited aggregation, see Lazar and Lee-Stronach (2019). For objections, see Hawthorne, Isaacs, and Littlejohn (2023).

¹⁶ See R.M. Adams (1999) and Murphy (2011) for contemporary versions of this view.

stated, since they can achieve a greater likeness to God in their capacity as mini-creators. This response and the last two illustrate that the *just not worth it* objection might have less force against our omission theodicy than against standard free will theodicies for moral evil in the human domain.

A possible weakness of the third and fourth responses is that they would run afoul of certain sufferer-centered constraints on theodicy, which require that God's allowing evil must ultimately benefit the victims who suffer the evil. Perhaps it is not permissible for God to allow earthly creatures to suffer in order to make benefits available to angels or aliens, at least not without "defeating" or balancing off the suffering within the victim's own life.¹⁷ Satisfying these constraints may require an afterlife for even non-human animals, since it would appear that not all animal suffering is balanced off or defeated in this life. However, we do not think that the success of our theodicy requires the assumption of animal afterlives. First, it is far from clear that we should accept these sufferer-centered constraints on theodicy. Sometimes it is permissible for *us* to allow someone to suffer an all-things-considered harm if this is the only way to make available a vastly greater good. Why wouldn't it ever be permissible for God to do the same? Second, we can accommodate sufferer-centered constraints without animal afterlives by restricting the sufferer-centered requirements to persons (a compromise reminiscent of Nozick's (1974: 39) "utilitarianism for animals, Kantianism for people").

Objection 2: The omission theodicy is *ad hoc* or implausible because it involves substantial speculative commitments beyond theism.

Response: As noted above, many theists are already committed to the claim that (fallen and unfallen) angels exist, and indeed, have the ability to affect how things go on Earth. So the

¹⁷ M.M. Adams (1999) and Stump (2010) propose sufferer-centered constraints on theodicy. See Hasker (1992) and Crummett (2017) for discussion and objections.

additional commitments such a theist needs to take on might be fairly minimal. Furthermore, we want to emphasize that the omission theodicy is rather generic. The key claim is that *some* free creature(s) could have prevented a great deal of (seemingly natural) evil. We have presented two scenarios, but there are a variety of ways this could turn out to be true.

Objection 3: While many theists are committed to the existence of angels, the Archon Abandonment story fits poorly with traditional views of fallen angels. Within the Christian tradition, for example, fallen angels are often depicted as causing trouble through active meddling—tempting, deceiving, possessing people, causing diseases—not by mere omission.

Response: The Archon Abandonment story is entirely consistent with the traditional view that there are many particular instances of active meddling from fallen angels. The key idea is just that angelic omissions are responsible for the *broad-brush facts of natural evil*, such as the general fact that nature is “red in tooth and claw,” the fact that terrestrial creatures seem to be “the playthings of chance” (van Inwagen 2008: 89), the existence of widespread starvation and seemingly senseless suffering, and the overall appearance that nature is indifferent to the interests of sentient creatures. By analogy, suppose one explains the general fact that lots of people suffer from a certain naturally occurring disease by citing the government’s culpable failure to develop a vaccine. This would obviously be compatible with the claim that on several particular occasions malicious government agents have actively infected people with the disease.

The Archon Abandonment story, we think, coheres well with traditional Christian views about fallen angels. First, our story’s claim that these angels were appointed to govern the earth would explain why they have the power to actively meddle in earthly affairs at all. It also coheres with various New Testament descriptions of the devil and other evil spirits. The devil is said to be “the prince of this world” (John 14:30, John 12:31), “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians

4:4), and the “Prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:1-3).” The whole world lies under his power. (1 John 5:19) He is related to the world as an owner to his house (Mark 3:27). The kingdoms of the earth belong to him (Matt 4:8-9, Luke 4:6). The “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” are the “rulers of this world” (Ephesians 6:12).

Further, it fits with commonly accepted ideas within historical theology, such as the popular view that God initially left the cosmos to the care of angels.¹⁸ For example, Aquinas (in ST I, Q. 110, a. 1) maintains that “all corporeal things are ruled by angels” and quotes a host of earlier Christian authorities to the same effect, including some that make reference to the devil’s original responsibility over Earth. Here he approvingly quotes John Damascene, ‘The devil was one of the angelic powers who presided over the terrestrial order.’”

Our story also answers a puzzle for the traditional Christian view that the Fall placed the human race under the devil’s dominion. Why would losing our union with God, with all the gifts and protections that union entailed, put us under the devil’s dominion? Why wouldn’t it merely result in a state of separation from God? Our story suggests a potential answer: the devil was already the appointed ruler of the earth before humans came on the scene. Analogy: a child who runs away from home, in losing the protection of her parents, would by default find herself under the rule of whoever *already* controls the surrounding territory. (Our story might also suggest that the condition of being “under the devil’s dominion” can be understood less in terms of being actively controlled by a puppeteering devil, and more in terms of a vulnerability to the spiritual harms and disorder that naturally result from a lack of spiritual care from an appointed caretaker. Some might find this a more palatable way to construe the traditional Christian idea, taught explicitly at the Council of Florence, that the unbaptized remain under the dominion of the devil.) Our story also coheres with St. Paul’s claim that creation is in “bondage to decay”

¹⁸ Dumsday (2019) documents historical support for this view among Patristics and later Christian thinkers.

(Romans 8:21), as decay is what happens by default when something that is supposed to be managed and maintained isn't. Moreover, at least some of the apparent active meddling in scripture might be interpretable as culpable omission (though certainly not all of it). For example, when Jesus says of a crippled woman that Satan "has kept [her] bound for 18 long years" (Luke 13:16), this might simply mean that Satan has neglected to heal/prevent a naturally caused infirmity that was his duty to heal/prevent. One might similarly say of a parent who fails to provide their child with easily accessible medical treatment that they have kept the child bound by their infirmity.

4. How the Omission Theodicy avoids the Main Problems of Other Subsumption Theodicies

In this section we briefly show how the omission theodicy avoids what we take to be the main difficulties with other subsumption theodicies. Recall that our claim for the omission theodicy is just that it deserves a respectable place among leading not-too-implausible hypotheses as to why God might allow the evils we find in our world. Taken in this way, the omission theodicy need not be in competition with other theodicies, even those with which it is inconsistent. For the project of theodicy, the more reasonable hypotheses the better. Accordingly, our aim here is not to show that these alternative subsumption theodicies are untenable, but only to show that their main difficulties are easily avoided by the omission theodicy.

Fall Theodicies. According to Fall theodicies, apparently natural evils result from the corruption of nature wrought by the sins of the first humans. (In our taxonomy, Fall theodicies are concerned with the fall of *humanity*. Those that appeal to the fall of the devil or other spiritual beings would be classified as either demonic-action theodicies or an omission theodicy, depending on the details.) As noted earlier, Fall theodicies have a hard time with pre-human

animal suffering. One option is to deny the existence of pre-human animal suffering. But this would seem to require a scientifically objectionable young-earth creationism or an implausible denial of (morally significant) animal consciousness. The other option is to invoke some extravagant metaphysical hypothesis: that human sin produced pre-human animal suffering via backwards causation, or that the Fall was caused by transtemporal sins in disembodied human souls, or perhaps an appeal to Hudson's (2014) notion of hypertime. The omission theodicy avoids all of these unpalatable options.

Another challenge for Fall theodicies is what Murray (2008) calls the "fragility objection." Fall theodicies entail that God made the integrity of the natural order dependent on the choices of human beings. Why would God make nature so fragile? Murray suggests that, absent some further story, the fragility of nature would seem to be "a puzzling defect in creation" (83). In our view, the resources of standard free will theodicies (e.g., the value of difference-making responsibility and co-creatorship) can explain why God might make the integrity of the natural order dependent on free creatures. Still, we think the fragility objection points to an extremely awkward feature of standard Fall theodicies. It is as though God created a beautiful, perfected world, and then added the final touch: a "ruin everything" button that we were commanded not to press. This is not exactly the most artful way to secure the goods of creaturely responsibility and co-creatorship. The omission theodicy offers a more attractive picture. Instead of adding a "ruin everything" button to a perfected world, God creates raw materials with the potential to be cultivated into something lovely, but only with the willing cooperation of free creatures. In the first case, God acts like a father who builds a cool Lego creation himself and then gives his child a hammer, leaving it up to her whether to smash the creation to bits. In the second case, God acts like a father who gives his child a Lego set and

leaves it up to her whether to build a cool creation or leave the pieces scattered across the floor. Under both arrangements, the existence of a cool Lego creation is dependent on the child's choices, but the latter seems to involve a more valuable kind of responsibility and co-creatorship.

Another difficulty for Fall theodicies is that the value of responsibility for whether some good or bad outcome occurs is plausibly bounded by the agent's ability to comprehend the stakes involved. Imagine giving a 5-year-old control over the US nuclear arsenal. Even if all goes well and they manage not to cause disaster out of a vague sense that pushing the red button would be bad, this doesn't seem like a hugely valuable form of responsibility (in comparison with, say, responsibility for clearing their dishes). The child's understanding of what's at stake is too impoverished. Giving the first humans control over whether nature-as-a-whole is healthy or disordered is arguably a bit like this, at least if their cognitive limitations were anything like ours. The potential downsides are enormous, but the potential upsides are severely bounded due to human cognitive limitations. These problems wouldn't carry over to our omission theodicies, at least if the angels and aliens are assumed to be vastly intellectually superior to us.

Demonic-Action Theodicies. According to demonic-action theodicies, apparently natural evil results from the actions of fallen angels. We can divide these into three (mutually consistent) types, according to how far back in the causal chain we place the demonic influence. *Direct-action* accounts hold that fallen angels directly cause earthquakes, forest fires, disease, and so forth. *Evolution-steering* accounts claim that they actively steer the course of evolution toward bad outcomes like predation, pain, and scarcity. *Cosmic-deformation* accounts claim that angels were given a role in the creation of the physical universe, but they twisted some of its basic structural features, like Melkor adding dissonance to the Great Music in *The Silmarillion's*

creation myth. The result was a universe with a robust tendency toward the kinds of natural evils we find in our world.

We've noted that the first two seem to posit causes for natural phenomena that compete with well-supported scientific explanations. This is most obvious for direct-action accounts. We already have satisfactory naturalistic explanations of earthquakes, forest fires, and tsunamis.¹⁹ But it is also true for evolution-steering accounts. We have satisfactory naturalistic explanations of the general tendency of Darwinian evolution to produce many forms of animal suffering. Consider the suffering that arises from Malthusian scarcity. Dawkins (1995: 132) remarks, "During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, [...] thousands of all kinds [of animals] are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there is ever a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored." Here Dawkins succinctly summarizes a well-studied, well-understood explanation for why natural selection often tends toward a Malthusian equilibrium. This is what we would expect from an evolutionary process that isn't managed by a powerful centralized coordinating mechanism that enforces restrained reproductive behavior and prevents the spread of genes that lead to free-riding, defection, and so forth.

Lewis's demonic-action theodicy fails to appreciate this fact. He conjectures that the "excess of the sexual impulse" that leads to unrestrained animal reproduction was thought of by Satan "as a response to carnivorousness—a double scheme for securing the maximum amount of torture" (Lewis 1944: 123). In other words, Satan introduced carnivorous behavior, which led to lots of animal death, and then compensated by producing an excess in animals' sexual impulse to produce more beasts for slaughter. This explanation faces the same objection as the demonic-action explanation for earthquakes. We have much better naturalistic Darwinian

¹⁹ Cf. Dainton (2020: 211).

explanations for animals' "excessive" sexual impulses. The same holds for carnivorousness. Natural selection needs no demonic nudges to favor creatures that can exploit the calories in other animals' bodies.

There are countless other examples where unguided Darwinian processes robustly tend toward morally suboptimal outcomes, many of which have been well studied by evolutionary game theorists. Dawkins (1995: ch. 4) discusses the case of sex ratios in many species that seem far from ideal. For example, elephant seals have a harem system, where a very small minority of males has a monopoly on the females. This seems both unfair to the male bachelor majority and extremely wasteful, since the sexually deprived 96% of the males consume half the population's food resources, while doing nothing but waiting for an opportunity to displace one of the harem masters. Dawkins writes, "Any utility function that paid even a little attention to the economic efficiency of the community would dispense with the bachelors" in favor of a system with "just enough males to fertilize the females." But as he goes on to explain, these seemingly unfair and wasteful sex ratios are the robust and predictable result of "the true Darwinian Utility Function: maximizing DNA survival" (*ibid*: 106).

The rough idea is that natural selection will tend to favor producing offspring of whichever sex is currently the minority of the population. Since each offspring has one male parent and one female parent, it follows that males, as a group, must produce exactly as many offspring as females, as a group. If one sex is in the minority, the average number of descendants produced by members of that sex will therefore be larger. It will thus be a better bet, from the standpoint of maximizing the number of one's descendants, to produce an offspring of the minority sex. This makes a 50:50 sex ratio evolutionarily stable. If ever the population drifted toward an intuitively more sensible sex ratio with fewer males, Darwinian forces would steer it

back toward the 50:50 equilibrium. This simplified explanation glosses over several complications that can drive the ratio away from perfect balance (e.g., differential costs of feeding male vs. female offspring, differential mortality rates), but none of these affect the central point: any explanation of morally suboptimal sex ratios and the resultant suffering and waste in terms of demonic interventions in the evolutionary process would be in competition with the more plausible naturalistic explanations of evolutionary game theory.

To some extent, naturalistic Darwinian explanations of widespread animal suffering raise difficulties for cosmic-deformation theodicies as well. These theodicies would seem to imply that, if the relevant angels had acted rightly when they helped to craft the deep structure of the physical universe, then physics would somehow have been different in such a way that life would have naturally evolved along a kumbaya path of balance and harmony, avoiding the darker elements of our actual evolutionary history. The trouble is that the standard explanations of why (for example) Darwinian evolutionary processes robustly tend toward Malthusian conditions of scarcity seem to be insensitive to the details of the physics on which the Darwinian process is implemented. It's not as though these explanations rely on specific assumptions about the strength of the weak nuclear force or the exact value of the cosmological constant. Malthusian tendencies are what we would expect from more-or-less any Darwinian process that *isn't intelligently and benevolently managed*, regardless of the underlying physics. Proponents of the cosmic deformation theodicy could propose that, in the relevant counterfactual scenario, the process *would* have been intelligently and benevolently managed, perhaps by the very angels who actually deformed the universe (for they would have been good and obedient stewards of creation in this alternative scenario). But now the cosmic-deformation part of the story looks otiose. The real explanation for apparently natural evil is just the angels' failure to appropriately

manage the course of evolution. This is just what the omission theodicy claims, but without any need for cosmic deformation.

Some versions of the cosmic-deformation account face another difficulty, which Crummett (2021) calls the “precision problem.” On one version, our world has the features it does because of a conflict between angels and demons. Natural evil results from the way that the basic features of our universe were twisted by these demons, while many of the good aspects of our universe result from basic features that the angels (or perhaps God himself) maintained control of.²⁰ But in order to get a universe like ours, many features of the world need to be set very precisely. For example, the values of various constants, such as the strength of gravity, need to be fine-tuned in order for a universe with our basic laws of nature to be life-permitting.²¹ If the basic conditions of our universe are the fallout of an indecisive conflict, it seems unlikely that the resultant universe would have the precise balance required for life, since “many variables are such that even slightly altering them without changing anything else would wreck the whole system” (*ibid.*: 623).

A cosmic-deformation account on which the entire universe is created by demons cooperating together, or by a single demon, would avoid this precision problem. Mark Johnston (2023) has offered an account along these lines. On Johnston’s account, God directly created some very powerful spirits (“archons”), one of whom became a Demiurge who sinfully chose to create our material universe. On this view there is no precision problem, since the Demiurge will have full control of the structure of the universe. We will raise a different worry for this view below.

²⁰ Cf. Webb (1941: 49-50), who is quoted approvingly in Plantinga (2004: 16): “[the natural causes of earthquakes or thunderstorms] are what they now are owing to the deep-set disorder in the heart of nature resulting from this action of fallen spirits, most subtly mingled with the action of good spirits, throughout the long ages of the world’s formation—’an enemy came and sowed tares also amid the wheat.’”

²¹ See Collins (2009).

Simulation Theodicies. According to simulation theodicies, we are all living in a simulated reality created by technologically advanced agents. This simulation hypothesis is often motivated by a statistical argument. Roughly: if even a few civilizations gained the ability to create complex simulations containing societies full of conscious beings, there is a decent chance that they would create a great many such simulations. As a result, it could be that the majority of conscious beings with experiences relevantly like ours live in simulations, in which case it's not so unlikely that we ourselves are living in a simulation.²² If we are living in a simulation, then the apparently natural evils we experience result from the actions of the simulators who create and maintain our simulated reality.

Simulation theodicies face multiple challenges. First, skeptical worries loom. One might worry that a simulated tree (for example) is not a genuine tree, so perhaps most of our perceptual beliefs are false if we live in a simulation. But even if we accept that a simulated X is really an X, and that the simulation hypothesis can avoid external-world skepticism (as Chalmers (2022) argues), there remains a skeptical worry about the past. It is not at all obvious that our world has the history we assume it has. There is no reason to think simulators would begin most simulations at the big bang, rather than just picking an interesting starting point. Perhaps our simulators were interested in the effects of gunpowder on warfare and thus began the simulation around the time gunpowder was invented.²³ In response to this sort of worry, Chalmers (2024) argues that the best way for simulations to include the detailed memories and records of the past is to actually simulate the events that give rise to memories and records.²⁴ We are not confident that he is correct about this, but perhaps we can sidestep the issue. Consider the possibility that

²² See Bostrom (2003) and Chalmers (2022: ch. 5).

²³ For a defense of this sort of skeptical worry see Schwitzgebel (2024).

²⁴ However, Chalmers himself is inclined to grant that conditional on the simulation hypothesis there is at least a 10% chance that he is in a sort of sceptical scenario.

our simulation is run by a historian interested in the early 21st century, who intends to shut off the simulation once we reach 2030 or so. This still seems to be a skeptical hypothesis, since it implies the falsity of our ordinary beliefs about whether our galaxy will exist in 10 years. But we have no memories or records of the future which need be explained by an actually occurring future.

A second feature of simulation theodicies may be troubling to some theists. Theists have traditionally held that God created our universe. On the simulation hypothesis, God creates our universe only indirectly, perhaps by creating our simulator's universe. Moreover, there is no guarantee that we are only one level of simulation deep. Perhaps we are a simulation within a simulation, which is itself within a third simulation. After all, if non-simulated advanced societies run simulations, then why wouldn't simulated advanced societies also run simulations? It may turn out that we are many levels removed from a universe directly created by God. This seems to significantly water down the traditional doctrine that God created our world. (A similar worry applies to Johnston's (2023) cosmic-deformation account, which explicitly denies that God created the material universe.)

5. The Distribution of Evil

It is not so much the existence or quantity of suffering, but its distribution, that creates difficulties for theism. If suffering were distributed according to desert, it would not cast doubt on theism. If anything, this would be further evidence of cosmic design. The same would be true if trials were dealt out according to our developmental capacity to handle and grow from them, or if suffering only visited those who most urgently need to learn the futility of pursuing happiness apart from God. The main threat to theism is the seemingly *indifferent distribution* of

suffering—or evils and goods more generally—a distribution much like what we would expect if it were not the result of benevolent or malevolent agents.²⁵

A major virtue of the omission theodicy is that it predicts this seemingly indifferent distribution of evil. The harms that result from culpable failures to protect and provide typically have an indifferent character. To illustrate, consider three highly powerful idealized governments: the Good Government, which is just and benevolent, the Evil Government, which actively harms disloyal citizens, and the Negligent Government, whose agents are merely asleep at the wheel. There may be suffering under all three, but it will be distributed differently. Under the first, suffering may be experienced primarily by criminals as part of a just punishment for their misdeeds. Under the second, suffering and untimely death may fall disproportionately on those who show disloyalty to the state. Under the third, we would expect a fairly indifferent distribution. There would be all kinds of suffering due to culpable failures to build infrastructure to protect citizens from natural disasters, failures to develop vaccines to protect citizens from diseases, and so forth. But the pattern of suffering—who falls victim to the natural disasters, who is most affected by this or that disease—would be largely indifferent. Suffering wouldn't disproportionately fall on vocal opponents of the government or on wrongdoers. The pattern would be haphazard, determined largely by happenstance: where one happens to live when disaster strikes, whether one has the genetic mutation that makes one vulnerable to the disease, and countless other morally insignificant variables. According to the omission theodicy, the earth is subject to something akin to the Negligent Government.

Many other theodicies fail to predict, or even stand in tension with, the appearance of indifference. For example, demonic-action theodicies are in *prima facie* tension with the appearance of indifference, as this is simply the appearance that the distribution of goods and

²⁵ Draper (1989).

evils is not the result of the actions of benevolent *or malevolent* agents. Or consider the hypothesis that God allows evils for the purpose of soul-building (Hick 1966), or to “rouse a deaf world” (Lewis 1944: 81), or to motivate us to seek reunion with God (van Inwagen 2008), or to enable us to acquire morally significant knowledge of how to help and harm others (Swinburne 1998), or to give agents opportunities to exercise certain virtues (Mackie 1955, Swinburne 1998). None of these hypotheses clearly predicts an appearance of indifference. *Prima facie*, they would seem rather to predict a non-indifferent distribution that is more clearly optimized for the divine purpose in question.

6. Conclusion

We have argued that the omission theodicy avoids the main problems with existing subsumption theodicies and ought to be taken seriously as a candidate explanation for why God allows apparently natural evil. Unlike some Fall theodicies, it does not reject scientific consensus about the age of the earth or the existence of pre-human animal suffering. Nor does it require the extravagant assumptions of other Fall theodicies, such as that pre-human animal suffering is produced by backward causation or by the sins of pre-existent human souls. Unlike many demonic-action theodicies, it does not posit causes for apparently natural evil that compete with well-supported scientific explanations. Nor does it face the precision problem or deny that God created the physical universe. Unlike simulation theodicies, it does not threaten skepticism or water down the doctrine of creation.

Further, we have argued that the omission theodicy has an important virtue that distinguishes it from several other theodicies: it predicts the central piece of evidence for naturalism, the seemingly indifferent distribution of goods and evils. While some versions of the omission theodicy take on a controversial metaphysical commitment to created supernatural

agents, this commitment is not an ad hoc auxiliary to theism, nor is it implausible on theism. The major theistic traditions have always held that Earth is caught up in a larger drama involving intelligent non-terrestrial creatures, some of whom have immense power and intelligence, some of whom are morally flawed, some of whom have the power to interact with terrestrial creatures and have responsibilities over terrestrial affairs. From this standpoint, the hypothesis that some of them specifically had the power and responsibility to prevent earthly natural evils, while not entailed by theism or the commitments of any major theistic tradition, is at least a natural conjecture. We conclude that the omission theodicy deserves a respectable place among leading theodicies of natural evil.²⁶

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