

## **Natural Evil and the Simulation Hypothesis**

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Abstract: Some theists maintain that they need not answer the threat posed to theistic belief by natural evil; they have reason enough to believe that God exists and it renders impotent any threat that natural evil poses to theism. Explicating how God and natural evil co-exist is not necessary since they already know both exist. I will argue that, even granting theists the knowledge they claim, this does not leave them in an agreeable position. It commits the theist to a very unpalatable position: our universe was not designed by God and is instead, most likely, a computer simulation.

Natural evil poses a serious threat to theistic belief. Some theists maintain, however, that they need not answer this threat. They claim to have reason enough to believe that God exists—reason that renders impotent any threat that natural evil poses to theism. They need not show how natural evil and God’s existence are compatible; since they already know God exists (and that natural evil exists), they know God’s existence is compatible with natural evil. Explicating how is not necessary.

I will argue that, even granting the theist the knowledge they claim to have of God’s existence, this does not leave them in an agreeable position. Although it would successfully defend theistic belief, it would commit the theist to a very unpalatable position: that our universe was not designed by God and is instead, most likely, a computer simulation.

### **1. Rescuing Theism from Natural Evil**

The fact that the inevitability of natural disasters is woven into the very fabric of our universe poses a serious threat to theistic belief. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and disease have caused an incalculable amount of evil in the world by causing horrendous amounts of suffering and death without bias and at random. They have caused so much evil, in fact, that it was once thought that such things were the work of demons.<sup>1</sup> Once we discovered, however, that they were a consequence of the laws that govern our universe—once certain common physical conditions have been met, the laws of nature dictate that such atrocities occur<sup>2</sup>—very serious questions began to be asked. God supposedly designed our universe, including the laws that govern it; but if the laws are responsible for such things, then whoever dictated those laws is ultimately the author of them. How could an omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent being (what we will call a “tri-omni” being) be the ultimate author of such atrocities? After all, he could have designed our universe in such a way that no physical conditions could ever give rise to such atrocities, leaving the amount of evil and suffering we endure solely up to us.<sup>3</sup> Instead, no matter who you are or what you have done, our universe is designed such that it could randomly, without warning, reach out and kill or injure you and your loved ones at almost any time. If I had embedded dog killing machines—that randomly activate and kill any dog within reach—into the design of my house, I could hardly be said to be a loving master of my dogs, Zorro and Alex. Yet this is the kind of thing that is embedded into the design of our universe. It seems that if some being designed our universe, that being is not wholly loving but is, instead, out to get us.

Most agree that it *seems* that natural disasters are evil and that no justifying good comes of them. However, if God exists, as a tri-omni being, he must have a good justifying reason for authoring them.<sup>4</sup> If God exists, there must be a theodicy. Yet no theistic hypothesis for what that reason is enjoys any kind of favored status.<sup>5</sup> Skeptical theists argue that, even setting reasons for belief in God aside, we need not provide such a theodicy; the fact that if God exists, his reason for doing so might be beyond our ken, means that perceived evil can’t even reduce the probability of God’s existence at all.<sup>6</sup> Not everyone is happy with this solution, however. Even many theists doubt the suggestion that evil doesn’t reduce the probability of God’s existence at all. They also worry that skeptical theism renders belief in God irrational by making it unfalsifiable, and that it threatens our ability to make any kind of objective moral assessment.<sup>7</sup>

Others argue, however, that the reasons they have for their belief in the existence of God can solve this problem, even removing any reason to provide a theodicy in the first place. Most famously this argument is made by Alvin Plantinga, who suggests that “being appeared to Godly,”<sup>8</sup> the *sensus divinitatis* or the Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS)<sup>9</sup> warrants belief

in God's existence, including the fact that God is tri-omni. Given that his theistic belief is already justified by such things, he believes an evidential challenge could not even weaken the rationality of theistic belief, much less show it to be irrational.

The example Plantinga uses in *Warranted Christian Belief* is one in which the memory of his sense data tells him that Maynard is a cat. Even if Plantinga finds out that Maynard loves cooked green beans and realizes that the hypothesis that Maynard is a Frisian better accounts for that fact (presumably, a greater percentage of Frisians like cooked green beans, compared to cats), Plantinga claims that his belief that Maynard is a cat will, and rationally can, continue unwavering. And this would be true even if he has only heard of Maynard and his green bean eating habits from a friend who, unbeknownst to Plantinga, made all of it up. Plantinga concludes, by way of analogy, that if theism is warranted (by the IHS or some other similar means), an evidential challenge could neither count as a defeater for theism nor weaken such belief in the slightest; in fact, even if theism were false and thus not warranted (as Plantinga defines it), as long as one thinks his beliefs are warranted (by, for example, the IHS), no evidential challenge could render them irrational. So, when presented with the challenge of natural evil, Plantinga would suggest that he need not respond to this challenge at all because (and simply because) he is of the opinion that his belief in theism (and specifically God's goodness) is warranted by (something like) the IHS.<sup>10</sup>

Many objections are possible here. Most telling, I think, is that Plantinga neglects the fact that evidence can call into question the reliability of the source of a belief. If I remember having seen Maynard with my own eyes, and he looked like a cat, then my discovery that Maynard likes green beans and the fact that a higher percentage of Frisians than cats like cooked green beans is not going to affect (very much) my belief that Maynard is a cat. However, if I found out that dogs loved cooked green beans, that Maynard barked, loved bones, refused to use a litter box, loved to go for walks, was loving and faithful, and was called a "dog" by everyone else, my belief that Maynard is a cat becomes irrational. I must conclude that the source of my belief, my memory, is mistaken (even if it is usually reliable). Likewise, natural evil may call into question the reliability of whatever means I have acquired my belief in God. Even if it is reliable, unless one is certain that it is, it seems that there will always be some amount of evidence that can call into question its reliability and thus render one's theistic belief unjustified.

But my goal here is not to object to Plantinga's argument or criticize him directly. I wish only to establish that some theists claim that their reasons for belief in God's existence make providing a theodicy unnecessary. And I think this is fairly uncontroversial. Whether it be via the IHS, the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, or a religious experience, many theists claim to have so much reason to believe God exists that their inability to provide a satisfactory theodicy does not affect the rationality of their theistic belief. So let us grant, for the sake of argument, such theists what they claim. For simplicity let us say that we will grant the theist the "evidence" they claim for God's existence and the fact that it produces the knowledge of God's existence that they claim to have. Thus, the theist knows that God exists, and they know that they know—whatever method by which they gained their knowledge of such belief, we will say they know it justifies their belief that God exists. Let us say that, for example, Plantinga knows that he received his belief in a tri-omni God from the IHS and that the IHS justifies knowledge of a tri-omni God's existence.

If we do grant all this, it seems theists can defend theistic belief against the threat of natural evil. To see why, consider a thought experiment. My neighbor Caleb has been accused of the cold blooded murder of an infant, and the evidence against him is completely convincing.

However, through a psychic connection that I know guarantees knowledge in this case, I have looked into Caleb's mind and seen that he is perfectly sane and that he is literally incapable of committing a morally heinous action. Consequently, I need not explain away the evidence against him to justify my belief that he is innocent; since I already know he can't commit a morally heinous action, I know there must be an explanation for why it seems that he did despite the fact that he did not. Likewise, if I already have enough evidence to *know* that God exists, I need not provide an explanation for the evidence against his existence to justify my belief that he does; I know there is an explanation, even if I can't come up with one. Thus, if theists truly do have the evidence and knowledge they profess to have regarding God's existence, theistic belief can still be rational even though theists have not provided a satisfactory theodicy for natural evil.

## 2. Denying Divine Design

The problem is, even granting theists the evidence for and knowledge of God's existence they claim, natural evil still puts the theist in an undesirable position. To see why, let us return to our example. I know that Caleb cannot commit a morally heinous action, despite the fact that the evidence seems to suggest that he did. But there are two kinds of evidence that suggest that he committed a morally heinous act. One is the evidence that the cold blooded murder of the infant was carried out by Caleb; the other is the evidence that suggests that the cold blooded murder of an infant is morally heinous. Given that I know that it is impossible for Caleb to commit a morally heinous action, I must maintain that one of these pieces of evidence is faulty. Either someone else committed the crime, or the cold blooded murder of an infant is not actually a morally heinous action (i.e., it is not the kind of action that it is impossible for Caleb to commit). In deciding which piece of evidence to reject, I should clearly reject the one that is least intuitive. Thus, what we should conclude—in fact, what I am sure you had already concluded—is that someone else committed the crime. No matter how good the evidence is that Caleb committed the crime, it could never trump the reasons I have for thinking that the cold blooded killing of an infant is morally heinous.

But the theist who has been granted their claimed evidence and knowledge is in a similar situation in regard to natural evil and God's existence. The theist knows that God exists, and is tri-omni; thus the theist knows that God is not capable of performing a morally heinous act. Yet, as the problem of natural evil shows, the evidence suggests that he did. Natural disasters are evil, yet they seem to have been woven into the very fabric of our universe by God's design. However, there are two kinds of evidence here: the evidence that natural disasters are evil (and thus whoever wove them into the very fabric of our universe is not wholly good<sup>11</sup>) and the evidence that God is the designer of our universe.<sup>12</sup> Which piece of evidence do we have less reason to think it is accurate; which notion should we reject? The answer seems clear: we should reject the notion that God is the designer of our universe. Just like with Caleb, we shouldn't conclude that the crime in question wasn't really evil. We should conclude that someone else did it.

Some theists might object at this stage by pointing to a dis-analogy in the two cases. Caleb is human, God is not. It's more likely that I could comprehend a reason that Caleb had for murdering an infant than I could comprehend a reason God had for authoring natural evil. So I am more justified in believing that the crime Caleb is accused of is morally heinous than I am in believing that natural disasters are. Perhaps this is true,<sup>13</sup> but it is irrelevant. I am not saying we should conclude that God didn't design our universe because we concluded that Caleb is innocent. The point of the Caleb story is merely this: when someone who we know is morally

upstanding seems to have done something wrong, we have a choice between rejecting either the belief that (a) the action was evil or (b) they did it. Clearly, when we have that choice, we should reject the option we have the least reason to accept (or the most reason to reject). In the Caleb case, we clearly have more reason to reject “Caleb did it.” In the God case, the choice is between rejecting “a tri-omni God designed our universe” and “natural disasters are evil.” What I am suggesting is that we have more reason to reject the notion that “a tri-omni God designed our universe” than we do to reject that “natural disasters are evil.” And whether this is true has nothing to do with how much less reason we have to reject the moral heinousness of infant murder or what we concluded specifically in the Caleb case.

Why do we have more reason to reject the notion that a tri-omni God designed our universe than we do to reject that the notion that natural disasters are evil?

First of all, we actually have no good reason to suppose that God designed our universe. We have granted the theist knowledge of God’s existence and tri-omni properties, but nothing further has been granted, and such knowledge in no way entails that God is the designer of *our* universe. Evidence that theists claim for the existence of a tri-omni God might establish that God is the explanation for why there is something rather than nothing, or that he is the ground of all being (i.e., that nothing can exist unless he continually wills it into existence), but this is not the same as establishing that God *designed* our universe. Even if it’s true that he had to create *a* universe, it does not even follow from this that he is the creator of *our* universe, much less its designer. Given what we know, our universe could have been created and designed by a less than perfect being within the universe that God created. (In fact, if it has a designer at all, the amount of evil in our universe seems to indicate that this is in fact true.) Even granting the theist the teleological argument, which concludes that our universe has a designer, would not establish that God designed our universe since the teleological argument does not establish that the designer is tri-omni. (The creation of our universe, for example, does not require ultimate power.)<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, we have no good reason to reject the notion that natural disasters are evil. In fact, that natural disasters are evil is nearly universally agreed upon. Humanity has thought for centuries that such things are unquestionably evil; that is why we used to think they were the work of demons. This is why some early (non-orthodox) Christians thought that the God of the New Testament was not the creator of our universe, but instead that our universe was the work of the evil God of the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> This is why we work tirelessly to prevent the suffering that natural disasters cause—tornado warnings, levee systems, reinforced buildings, tsunami detection, etc. Anyone who suggested, publicly, that the Haiti earthquake of 2010, or Indian tsunami of 2004, somehow made the world a better place would be publicly ostracized and ridiculed. (Indeed, simply making jokes about the Japanese earthquake of 2011 “too soon” cost Gilbert Gottfried his job as the voice of the Aflac Insurance duck.) If we discovered that natural disasters were actually the result of a Bond-type super-villain with a natural-disaster-causing-machine, we would never stop and think, “I wonder whether he is doing us a favor.” Although they do provide opportunities for compassion and generosity, no one thinks natural disasters are worth the evil they create.<sup>16</sup> All persons working for disaster relief would rather that the disaster never happened in the first place; certainly no such person thinks their compassion or generosity in any way justifies the suffering the disaster caused. If the super-villain thought that he was actually a hero, because he was providing opportunities for compassion and generosity by creating natural disasters, we would classify him as criminally insane.<sup>17</sup> Even if the theist knows that God exists, we are all even more certain that natural disasters bring evil upon the world.

Third, not only do we have no good reason for thinking that God designed our universe, but there are serious doubts as to whether this is true. Every philosopher knows that it can't be proven false that our universe is not some kind of "simulation"—perhaps an illusion created by some Cartesian evil-demon, or the dream of some great being (or perhaps our own dream). It could be that we are in The Matrix, or a brain in a vat. Each such hypothesis would entail that God did not design or create the universe we live in. Although there is no evidence that such things are true, there is also no definitive evidence that they are false (hence the skeptical problem). And that makes all of them more plausible than the suggestion that "natural disasters are not evil," since we do have evidence that is false.<sup>18</sup>

So, given the knowledge I have granted, we have a choice between rejecting the notion that God designed our universe and the notion that natural disasters are evil. We have every reason to think that natural disasters are evil, but we have no good reason to accept the idea that God designed our universe, and no more reason to doubt than to accept that our universe is instead some kind of simulation. Clearly the notion that we have more reason to reject is the notion that God designed our universe. Like we did with Caleb, we should conclude that someone else did it.

This is not a palatable position for most theists as it stands. But, I believe, recent arguments entail that the theist is logically committed to a thesis that they will find even more unpalatable.

### **3. The Computer Simulation Hypothesis**

If someone else designed our universe, who did? I doubt we could ever know for sure. But one thing certainly follows from what we have so far discovered. Since the inevitability of natural disasters is woven in the very fabric of our universe, and such disasters are unquestionably evil, it seems that whoever designed our universe is not wholly good.<sup>19</sup> But, given recent developments and arguments that we shall now consider, we may be able to know something else about the designer of our universe: they own a computer. The theist's defense to the problem of natural evil under consideration may commit them to believing that we live in a computer simulation.

Above we discussed the possibility that we live in a simulation—a dream, a world created by an evil demon, a computer simulation, etc. Usually, philosophers merely point that such possibilities cannot be proven false (when raising the skeptical problem). However, recently, arguments have been put forth to suggest that one of these possibilities may actually be true: that our universe is a computer simulation; that we are virtual beings living in a virtual universe, all created and run on a supercomputer in another universe.

Why do some philosophers think this might be true? First of all, simulated universes are possible and could be created in our own universe. The more we learn about the brain, the more it is evident that our mental life, as well as our actions, result from the neural activity of our brains. We also have discovered that such neural activity can be reproduced using computer chips; such silicon-based chips are nearly identical to the carbon-based neurons that make up our brains.<sup>20</sup> Not only does this technology make androids—minded physical beings with silicon based brains—possible, but minded beings whose neural configuration is found solely on a computer hard drive are also possible.<sup>21</sup> Such beings could be introduced to a computer-simulated universe, even en masse, and would interact with it in the same way we interact with our universe—even believing it to be a physical reality. The rate of progression in technological development makes the possibility of such computer simulation universes likely. Primitive

versions can already be found in *The Sims* games.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, motivations for the creation of such universes are almost endless. Future academics could potentially use them to study history, politics, economics and human behavior. One could end debates on the consequences of proposed legislation by observing how such legislation affects a computer simulation of our universe. One could even figure out how the world would be different if Hitler had won WWII by programming a computer simulation that replicates the conditions of a 1940s earth and gives Hitler knowledge of the D-Day invasion.

Why does the possibility and likelihood of computer simulated universes give us reason to think that our universe is a computer simulation? Nick Bostrom (2003) tells us why.<sup>23</sup> If technology and society reach a point such that simulations are possible, we can't think our universe isn't a simulation because such things are impossible. In addition, if we do develop simulated universes, such simulations will be plentiful (just like modern computer games). In fact, the inhabitants of the simulated universes we create would likely (eventually) create their own simulated universes. So the fact that we created a simulated universe is no reason to think that our universe is non-simulated; we might have created a simulation in our own simulation. And since, by doing so, we would have shown that the creation of simulated universes is possible, we would have shown that they were created and are plentiful in the physical (non-simulated) universe (either by being created in our universe, or in the physical universe in which our universe is running as a simulation). And in a multiverse where there are a million simulated universes but only one real one, given the fact that the inhabitants of a simulated universe can't tell that it is simulated, one should conclude that one's own universe is simulated. In short, by creating a simulated universe, we will have established that there are likely millions of simulated universes, and only one real one. Given that we can't tell if our universe is simulated, we will be forced to conclude that it most likely is. It would be a million to one chance that it is not. By creating a simulated universe, we will have proven that it is most likely that we inhabit one. Of course, all societies may destroy themselves before becoming that advanced, or they may be opposed to such simulations for moral reasons, but they are equally likely to develop them. Thus, Bostrom concludes, given what we know, the hypothesis that our universe is a computer simulation is about 20% likely. There are about five basic ways our society could develop, each is equally likely given what we know, and one of them leads to us creating simulated universes and thus realizing that we are nearly guaranteed to be in one.<sup>24</sup>

Why does this commit the theist to believing that our universe is a computer simulation? We have seen that granting the theist knowledge that God exists, coupled with the evidence of natural evil, forces one to the conclusion that our universe was not designed by God. If the computer simulation hypothesis is the most likely scenario in which this is true, then it is the scenario we are forced to accept. Other scenarios—the evil demon hypothesis, the dream hypothesis—simply can't be disproven. It seems, however, that there is at least a 20% chance that the computer simulation hypothesis is true. This gives it an edge on the other non-divine design scenarios, and thus it seems that it is the most likely scenario in which God exists but did not design our universe.

So, in summary, if we grant the theist the knowledge of God's existence that they claim, the problem of natural evil forces the theist to choose between rejecting "God designed our universe" and "natural disasters are evil." We have much more reason to reject the former than the latter and, if Bostrom is right, our being in a computer simulation is the best non-divine explanation for our universe's design. (Certainly, it is more likely that our universe is a computer simulation than it is that natural disasters do not cause evil.) All in all, I argue, granting the theist

the knowledge of God's existence they claim in the face of the problem of evil forces them to accept that our universe is a computer simulation.

Unfortunately for the theist, however, this is likely not something they will find palatable. Despite the fact that the computer simulation hypothesis is more plausible than suggesting that natural disasters are actually good, and that it has been rendered more plausible than it has been in the past by recent arguments, any position that commits you to believing that we live in a computer simulation is a bit embarrassing. So, even if we grant the theist knowledge of God's existence that they claim, there is still work to do to defend theistic belief from objections that stem from considering natural evil.

#### 4. Dealing with Objections

In response, Plantinga might declare that the IIHS reveals that God designed our universe, and thus claim that fact can't be doubted. For the sake of argument, I granted Plantinga knowledge of God's existence via IIHS, and even knowledge that the IIHS justifies that knowledge, so one might think that this is a perfectly legitimate response to my argument. It is not, however, for three reasons.

First, Plantinga's move would be entirely ad hoc—an un-testable excuse to save his theory from falsification. Allowing this kind of move would make theism un-falsifiable and thus irrational. It is not credible to dismiss every objection to theism by claiming that you don't have to answer the objection because God has revealed to you that you are right. Now, some might say this move is not ad hoc because it has been claimed by theists before that the IIHS reveals that God designed our universe. This leads me to my second reason for rejecting this response.

I have never seen theists claim "God designed *our universe*" as divinely revealed knowledge. Genesis 1 and 2 certainly do not reveal this. Genesis might reveal that God created our universe, but as we have seen creation does not imply design. Certainly, Genesis does not reveal that God designed our universe in the modern sense of the word—that he dictated the regularities by which our universe is governed—since the idea that our universe is governed by regularities is only as old as the scientific revolution. Genesis does not even necessarily reveal that God did anything to *our* universe—only that he took part in creative acts "in the beginning." In fact, taken as divinely inspired, the Genesis story might be additional evidence that we live in a computer simulation. For most of history, the Genesis story has been interpreted literally by most Jews and Christians<sup>25</sup> a notion that was only rejected recently (relatively speaking) when it became clear that the story did not match up to what actually happened to our universe. However, if it is the divinely inspired (and thus literally true) story of creation but doesn't match up to how our universe was created, then wouldn't it be the creation story of another universe—perhaps the physical universe in which our world is being run as a computer simulation?

Setting this aside, a sense of wonder while looking at our universe might lead some to conclude that our universe has a designer. When combined with the (granted) knowledge that God exists one might conclude that God is the designer. (Plantinga tells such stories about his own belief.) But this follows only if "if God exists then he must be the designer of *our* universe" is true, and I have certainly never seen that claimed as divinely revealed knowledge. It is just assumed, not revealed.

Third and finally, the fact that I granted Plantinga knowledge that the IIHS justifies belief in God's existence does not entail that I must grant Plantinga everything he claims is revealed by the IIHS. I did so to get my argument off the ground, but that does open up the flood gates and allow the theist to claim knowledge of any and every thing they are apt to think is revealed by

the IIHS. If I grant you knowledge of something that you claim you saw with your own eyes by granting that your perception justified your knowledge in a particular case, it does not follow that I must grant you knowledge of everything you claim to have seen with your own eyes. This is especially true if the second thing that you saw is incompatible with the first, and this harkens back to the criticism I leveled against Plantinga in the first section. Recall, Plantinga fails to recognize that evidence can call into question the reliability of the source of a belief. Given that we know that the laws of nature necessitate natural disasters, and that natural disasters are evil, if (in addition to revealing that a tri-omni God exists) the IIHS also tells you that God dictated those laws, then the IIHS cannot be seen as a reliable source of information—no more than your memory is reliable if it tells you that Maynard is a cat, but it also tells you that Maynard barks and goes for walks. Thus, not only is the belief that God designed our universe not justified by the IIHS but, by undermining the reliability of the IIHS itself, claiming that it is might undermine the justification one was granted for the belief in God's existence in the first place. Besides, if knowledge that the IIHS is reliable on all matters were granted to Plantinga, this would end all debate (on anything) before it starts; no matter the issue, Plantinga could simply claim that the fact that he is right has been revealed to him by the IIHS.

Others, in response to my main argument, might question the validity of Bostrom's arguments, suggesting that the computer simulation hypothesis is not any more likely than other non-divine design hypotheses. Others may argue that a particular non-divine design hypothesis is more likely than the computer simulation hypothesis. Still others might suggest that, even if God exists, it's more likely that our universe simply doesn't have a designer, than it is that it was designed by something that isn't God. Fair enough. I don't agree, but I am not that interested here in arguing that the theist is committed to the computer simulation hypothesis specifically. But the fact remains, the theist is not going to find any of these alternatives palatable. Whether they find themselves committed to the computer simulation hypothesis, another non-divine design hypothesis, or the non-design hypothesis, theists will not be happy. Usually, unless God did it, they are not satisfied. Yet that God did not do it is exactly what they are committed to believing. And that is my main point. Many theists respond to the problem of natural evil by suggesting that they need not reply because they already know that God exists; but the avenue this response leads the theist down can only dead-end at a place that the theist does not want to go.

My argument could allow the theist to solve the problem of natural evil, if the theist is willing to bite the bullet of admitting that our universe is not designed by God, but by some other non-divine being. And perhaps some theists are okay with accepting that consequence; perhaps protecting belief in God from the problem of natural evil is that important to them. Atheists, however, might raise further objections by suggesting that the theist still can't avoid the problem of natural evil. If God is tri-omni, why would God allow our universe to have natural evil in it? Even if he didn't create or design it, he could still stop such things from happening in it, right? Theists will, I believe, look for a response to this in an already existing reply to the problem of moral evil. Why doesn't God stop people from performing acts of evil in this universe? He doesn't, most theists maintain, because to do so would be to interfere with our free will, and granting his created beings free will is more important to God than eliminating or reducing evil.<sup>26</sup> But if our universe is created and designed by a being within the universe God created, then the act of weaving natural disasters into the fabric of our universe was the free will action of one of God's created beings—an action that God would not interfere with. So, if this response to the problem of moral evil works, then granting a non-divine design hypothesis does solve the

problem of natural evil—it does so by turning natural evil into moral evil, and then allowing the free will solution to do its work. And it does this without contradicting our modern scientific understanding of our universe (unlike the suggestion that natural evil could be the work of demonic powers within our universe).<sup>27</sup>

If, however, the free will solution to the problem of moral evil is not satisfactory (and I'm not convinced it is), then things are all the worse for the theist and my main point is doubly reinforced. The theist has already been forced into accepting a non-palatable hypothesis in order to solve the problem of natural evil and protect God's existence with this solution; but now it turns out this solution doesn't even protect belief in God's existence. Not only does it commit them to rejecting the notion that God designed our universe, but (if the free will solution fails) it raises yet another problem—a problem of moral evil—for which they have no solution. I suppose the theist could once again claim that their knowledge of God's existence entails that they need not offer such a solution, but it seems that this would not be a move they would want to employ twice in the same argument. All in all, the theistic response to the problem of natural evil, indeed, does lead them to places they do not want to go.

## 5. Conclusion

We have granted the theist the evidence and knowledge he claims to have of the existence of a tri-omni God. With such knowledge in hand, the theist would be convinced that there must be an explanation for how God's omnipotence, omniscience and whole goodness can be reconciled with his assumption that God designed our universe, its laws and the fact that the laws that govern our universe give rise to natural evil. But, without a theodicy, the theist still cannot deny that the latter fact provides very convincing evidence that our universe was not designed by a wholly good being. So, the theist knows that God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good, but also has convincing evidence that our universe was not designed by a being that is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good. If these two beliefs were logically incompatible, the theist would be forced to determine which evidence was more convincing. But they are not, for it is entirely possible that God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good and not the designer of our universe—for it is possible that our universe was designed by a non-perfect creature within the universe that God designed, most likely (I think) as a computer simulation. In fact, if the available evidence points both to God being omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good, and to our universe not being designed by a being that is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good, then this is the hypothesis that is the most rational for the theist to accept.

Of course, if you are a theist who finds a particular theodicy convincing, this problem will not bother you. You need only worry about the fact that most others don't find your theodicy convincing. If you are a skeptical theist, you need only worry about dealing with the plethora of objections (some of which I mentioned before) that plague your position. Theists who reject some of God's classic attributes, like omnipotence, can also avoid being forced to such a conclusion.<sup>28</sup> Others, who deny that God is the creator, will be more comfortable with non-divine design hypotheses. But many theists believe in the traditional tri-omni God who designed our universe, yet they reject skeptical theism and find no theodicy compelling. They are not bothered, for they think their knowledge of God's existence is enough to defend their theistic belief. But, I have argued, such theists have some work to do if they wish to avoid being committed to an unpalatable position like the computer simulation hypothesis.<sup>29</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to give credit to my dear friend Jay Kelley for helping inspire the original idea for this argument, and to thank Bill Irwin, Greg Bassham, Paul Draper and the anonymous reviewers who all gave meaningful feedback on previous versions of this paper.

1. See Earl Doherty. *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a mythical Christ?* (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Humanist Publishing, 1999), p. 236. This led to many of that time's apocalyptic teachings; people hoped for a time in which God would enter into history, end the demonic activity and put the world back in order.

2. For example, tornados are the result of a complex interplay between cool, dry air and warm, moist air in thunderstorms. Earthquakes are the result of tectonic plates slipping and releasing vast amounts of energy that build up as they press together. Hurricanes are the result of (roughly put) water vapor hovering over low pressure areas in the ocean. Diseases and mental disorders are the works of viruses, germs, genetic anomalies, chemical imbalances and brain injuries.

3. Given the fact that the Garden of Eden is a part of the lore of every monotheistic religion, it would be difficult for the theist to maintain that such a universe is not at least logically possible for God to create. Heaven would also provide a good example of a logically possible world with natural laws that don't lead to natural disasters.

4. It's perhaps worth noting that no academic should take the following explanation for natural evil seriously: "God created a perfect world, but we corrupted it with sin and that sin is what lead to natural disasters." This explanation is rooted in a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, which is not taken seriously in academic circles. It is also contrary to the finding of science, which show us that earthquakes, volcanoes, tornados and the like were around millions of years before human kind came around to sin and "mess things up." Natural disasters are an inevitable result of the laws that govern our universe, and they have governed our universe from the beginning. Besides, there is no palatable explanation for how human acts of sin—fornication, lying, cheating, and eating forbidden fruit—can cause (for example) tectonic plates to shift.

5. Swinburne has offered up such a theodicy, but I know of no one who finds it truly palatable. It certainly does not have the side acceptance that, say, Plantinga free will solution to the problem of moral evil enjoys. See, Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), chapters 9 and 10.

6. See Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), pp. 73–93.

7. Such objections were raised by the father of Skeptical Theism himself, Stephen Wykstra, in a response to a paper defending skeptical theism by Michael Bergman. See Michael Bergman, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," Presented at Alvin Plantinga's Retirement Celebration, University of Notre Dame, May 20, 2010.

8. See Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.) *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1983), chapter 2.

9. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

10. To allow the reader to verify the accuracy of my paraphrase, let me quote Plantinga directly:

"That I am in my study, that Maynard is a cat, that you are a human beings—these are all subject to an evidential challenge; of course that doesn't suggest for a moment that there is something irrational or problematic in these beliefs, or that they are improbable with respect to our epistemic situations. Why not? Because each of these propositions has a good deal of warrant for me, warrant that is independent of its probabilistic relationships to the beliefs involved in the evidential challenges. In cases like this, being evidentially challenged comes to very little. And it isn't even necessary that the belief in question have a high degree of warrant. ... Suppose Christian and theistic belief has a good deal of warrant for me by way of faith and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS); then the fact that theism is evidentially challenged doesn't give me a defeater and doesn't bring it about that my theistic belief is irrational. Compare the case of Maynard and my belief that he is a cat. You point out that this belief suffers from an evidential challenge: That he likes cooked green beans is much less likely on his being a cat than on his being a Frisian. I agree, but am undeterred, continuing in full rationality to believe that he is indeed a cat. This belief is rational for me in these circumstances because it has warrant for me quite independent of its relationship to the proposition that Maynard likes cooked green beans. There is of course no cognitive malfunction involved in my continuing to hold a belief with significant warrant from such sources as memory, perception, IIHS, and the like, even when I

learn that the belief is subject to an evidential challenge. Our cognitive design plan permits, indeed, requires maintaining such a belief in the face of such a “challenge.” And clearly the same goes for my theistic belief, if, in fact, it has warrant in the way proposed [by the Calvin/Aquinas Model]... But even if theism has little or no warrant, it could still be (and in the typical case would be) that an evidential challenge doesn’t provide a real challenge or a prima facie defeater... Perhaps I mistakenly but rationally believe that [my theistic belief] has warrant... I believe, mistakenly, in [the Calvin/Aquinas model], according to which theistic belief does indeed have warrant. Under those conditions, my theistic belief does not, in fact have warrant; nevertheless, my learning that it is subject to an evidential challenge does not compromise its rationality and does not give me a defeater for it.” (Ibid., pp. 477–480.)

11. Or perhaps that being is not powerful enough or smart enough to know how to design our universe with laws that don’t create massive amounts of suffering. In any event, that being is not tri-omni and thus not God.

12. One other option would be to deny that natural disasters are a result of the workings of the natural laws; we could go back to believing that they are caused by demons. Although some “popular” theists, such as Pat Robertson, might be comfortable doing so, I will assume for charity’s sake that the academic theist is not comfortable denying the findings of science in such a grandiose way.

13. However, no theist concerned with my argument would likely make this reply, for it employs the reasoning of skeptical theism. “God’s reasons for allowing natural evil may be beyond us.” Skeptical theism, if successful, would avoid the problem of natural evil to begin with. As I mentioned before, here I am only concerned with theists who are unsatisfied with skeptical theism (often because of the kinds of objections I raised above), and other theodicies, and think that their evidence that God exists relieves them of the obligation to provide an answer to the problem of natural evil.

14. Plantinga might claim that he knows that God designed our universe in the same way that he knows that God exists—via the IHS. I will deal with this objection in the last section.

15. Bart Ehrman points out, in *Misquoting Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2007, Chapter 6) that squelching such heresy was a prime motivation that many early scribes had for changing the wording of the documents of the New Testament in many places.

16. Not to mention the fact that we don’t need natural disasters for the possibility of such things; moral evil supplies all the opportunities we need. I have also neglected the fact that natural disasters eliminate many people’s abilities to show compassion, etc. by killing them—thus reducing the amount of good in the world.

17. Of course, it’s logically possible that there are some hidden facts that make natural disasters wonderful, but anyone who actually rejected the notion that natural disasters are evil would (and should) be stripped of all intellectual credibility. Besides this, once again, is the objection of a skeptical theists, and I am only concerned here with a reply that is given by theists who are not satisfied with skeptical theism.

18. Of course, the simulation hypotheses that entails that you are the only thing in existence—like Descartes Evil Demon hypothesis—might entail that natural disasters are not evil simply because they do not cause suffering in others (because no others exist). But this is different than denying that natural disasters that do cause suffering are evil—which is what one would have to do if one refused to accept any simulation hypothesis.

19. Or, again, it could also be that whoever designed our universe was not powerful enough or smart enough to know how to imbed it with laws that wouldn’t lead to natural evil. Regardless, that being is not tri-omni and thus not God.

20. See Floyd Bloom, *Best of the Brain from Scientific American: Mind, Matter and Tomorrow’s Brain* (New York: Dana Press, 2007), chapters 17 and 20.

21. If Strong AI could be established as false, then my suggestion that the computer simulation hypothesis is the most likely simulation hypothesis is discredited. If I know I am a conscious creature, I know I can’t be a computer simulated person if I know such persons would not be conscious. Strong AI, however, is far from being established as false and it being false would also not affect my overall point; natural evil would still commit theists who claim to know that God exists to rejecting the idea that God designed our universe.

22. For those unfamiliar with such things, see <http://www.thesims3.com>

23. “Are You Living In A Computer Simulation?,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (No. 211, 2003), pp. 243–255.

24. This argument has gained so much attention that it was the #1 topic on Keith Olberman’s *Countdown*, after John Tierney fleshed it out on in an article entitled “Our Lives, Controlled From Some Guy’s Couch” in the pages of the *New York Times* on August 14, 2007.

25. In the Judeo-Christian world, a literal understanding of Genesis 1 and 2 has been dominate. As a result of Hellenizing influences, you start to see non-literal interpretations in the 2nd century with Philo of Alexandria, but a literal interpretation continued to dominate until evolution and Darwin provided an alternate literal hypothesis. In fact, given the number of people who still profess creationism, despite the overwhelming evidence of evolution, you might say that the literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 still dominates (just not in academia).

26. The most successful version of the free will defense belongs to Alvin Plantinga. See *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977). That most philosophers accept this as a successful solution to the logical problem of moral evil is widely professed. See Chad Meister, *Introducing Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 134.

27. Plantinga does suggest this in his answer to the logical problem of natural evil. See James Sennett, ed. *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), p. 48–49.

28. See, for example, Harold Kushner, (1981) *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1981). For an even more reformed view, see F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005). Another reformed view, which is motivated by the problem of natural evil itself, belongs to Wesley Wildman (see Nancy Murphy, Robert John Russell and William R. Stoeger, eds., *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives of the Problem of Natural Evil* (Vatican Observatory Foundation, 2007) pp. 267–296.)

29. In fact, I'm even tempted to suggest that the problem will also haunt theists who don't claim to have evidence for God's existence, but merely believe so by faith—at least if they admit to having no theodicy for natural evil. The simulation hypothesis provides one. Without another, they must embrace it as the best solution.