

The Failure of Plantinga's Solution to the Logical Problem of Natural Evil

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Abstract: Although the problem of evil receives a large amount of attention in the literature, focus is mainly reserved for the threat of moral evil; the threat that natural evil poses to theism is often ignored, receiving only a small fraction of the attention the moral argument receives. This is especially true of the logical problem of natural evil, which suggests that the existence of natural evil is logically incompatible with God's existence. This is mostly because Alvin Plantinga's response to the logical problem of natural evil is considered by most to be definitive. I will argue that it is not; in fact, Plantinga misunderstands what the problem of natural evil is and, as a result, fails utterly in responding to it. Consequently, since the assumed success of Plantinga's argument has caused theists to ignore it, more attention needs to be paid by theists to the logical problem of natural evil. To establish this, I will lay out Plantinga's solution, show how it misunderstands the logical problem of natural evil and in turn clearly articulate how the problem presents itself to the modern academic theist. I will conclude by observing that no one else has responded to the logical problem of natural evil directly, and then briefly outlining how adapting popular solutions to other versions of the problem of evil fall short in solving the problem I have presented.

In a previous volume of *Philo*, I argued that theists' inability to answer the logical problem of natural evil, even if you grant theists knowledge of God's existence, lands theists in a very precarious situation; it commits them to accepting that God is not the creator/designer of our universe and that our universe is, instead, most likely a computer simulation. Ironically, I expect this conclusion to not bother theists—not because they are comfortable with believing we live in a computer simulation, or because they think my argument is faulty, but simply because they think that the logical problem of natural evil has already been solved.¹

If one examines the literature on the problem of evil, one will see that attention has primarily been reserved for the evidential threat of moral evil; the threat that natural evil poses to theism is often ignored. The most recent theistic work on the problem of natural evil has even admitted this.² In fact, I have not seen any work done specifically on the logical problem of natural evil since Alvin Plantinga's 1974 work *God, Freedom and Evil*³ where he first articulated his response to the logical problem of natural evil. This is because, I believe, Plantinga's solution to the logical problem of natural evil is considered by most theists to be definitive (in the same way his solution to the logical problem of moral evil is considered to be definitive). No one bothers to deal with the logical problem of natural evil because it is assumed that Plantinga already solved it.

In this paper, I will argue that he did not; in fact, I will show that Plantinga misunderstands what the problem of natural evil is and, as a result, fails utterly in responding to it. Consequently, since the assumed success of Plantinga's argument has caused theists to ignore it, more attention needs to be paid by theists to the logical problem of natural evil and the threats it raises. To establish this, I will lay out Plantinga's solution, show how it misunderstands the logical problem of natural evil and in turn clearly articulate how the problem presents itself to the modern academic theist. I will conclude by observing that no one else has responded to the logical problem of natural evil directly and by showing that adapting popular solutions to other versions of the problem of evil will likely not be a productive strategy to pursue in response to the problem I have presented.

1. The Failure of Plantinga's Solution

Plantinga's free will defense against the logical problem of *moral evil* is considered by many to be definitive; I will not object here, and grant that the existence of free-willed creatures that do evil and God's existence are logically compatible. Plantinga believes that he can use his free will defense to solve the logical problem of natural evil as well. According to Plantinga, the logical problem of natural evil is an apparent logical incompatibility between these two premises:

- (1) God is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good.
- (2) Natural evil exists.

Plantinga rightly points out that to show (1) and (2) are logically compatible, one need only propose a third proposition which can be true together with both (1) and (2). Plantinga proposes the following:

- (3) Natural evil is a result of the free actions of nonhuman persons.

The only examples Plantinga mentions as candidates for nonhuman persons are Satan and his demons. But one need not even subscribe to the truth of (3), much less identify nonhuman persons as fallen angels, or think they cause natural disasters and their subsequent evil, for the defense to solve the problem Plantinga proposes. The mere fact that, *if (3) were true, then natural evil would be the result of the free will actions of moral agents and thus Plantinga's already successful free will defense would allow (1) and (2) to be true as well*, shows that (1), (2) and (3) are logically compatible. And, of course, if (1), (2) and (3) are logically compatible then (1) and (2) are logically compatible.⁴

The central problem with Plantinga's defense is that it does not actually reconcile God's existence with *natural* evil. Natural evil, as the name implies, is evil brought about by natural processes—evil that is a product of nature. To suggest that nonhuman persons by actions of their free will bring about the calamities (*e.g.*, hurricanes) and adversities (*e.g.*, diseases) we call “natural disasters,” and thus that these nonhuman persons are the ultimate cause of the evils such things bring about, is to suggest that the evils in question are not natural evils but instead are moral evils. Plantinga himself admits this; this is why he thinks his solution to the moral problem can be applied to the natural one. This entails, however, that Plantinga's solution does not actually address the problem he raised: the supposed incompatibility between (1) and (2); instead, Plantinga's solution proposes a story in which (2) is false (there is no *natural* evil) and (1) is compatible with:

- (4) There is evil brought about by suffering that is caused by calamities such as hurricanes and adversities such as diseases.

Thus, Plantinga's solution does not solve the logical problem of natural evil, even as he himself articulates it.

The theist may object by arguing that my point is merely semantic:

Granted, by your definition of 'natural evil,' Plantinga's argument entails that (2) is false, but by another definition, it entails that it is true. You can call the evils brought about by hurricanes, diseases and the like what you wish. But to reply to the logical problem of natural evil, one must merely reconcile God's existence with the evil that results from the calamities and adversities we call 'natural disasters.' And Plantinga has done this. Whether such evils are properly called 'natural' is irrelevant.

However, any theist who makes such an argument is mistaken. Merely reconciling God's existence with the existence of the evils brought about by the calamities and adversities in question is not the problem; in fact, the mere existence of such evils has never really posed a serious threat to belief in God's existence.

It certainly did not for the ancient Israelites who attributed calamities and adversities to the activity of imperfect deities (like Yahweh).⁵ The same was true for the first century Christians who thought such things were the work of demonic spirits.⁶ It wasn't until Plato's influence worked its way through Christianity, making orthodox the doctrine of God's perfection, that such calamities and adversities raised questions about God's existence.⁸ But since such disasters were not well understood at that time, those questions could be easily answered by blaming such disasters on the moral failings of imperfect creatures. Augustine suggested many such theories: calamities and adversities were the work of Satan, God's

punishment for sin, or even the result of human sin (such as Adam and Eve's) blemishing God's creation.⁸ If Plantinga is merely trying to logically reconcile the existence of evil brought about by such calamities and adversities, he is a bit late to the game. All of the above are logically possible stories in which God and the evil brought on by (for example) hurricanes and earthquakes co-exist.

But this is not the problem that the modern thinker is or should be worried about. When such calamities and adversities became properly understood, this understanding presented a new problem that had not been considered before. This problem seriously threatens belief in God's existence—although few (if any) have articulated this modern problem of natural evil clearly. A proper understanding of such calamities and adversities began with the scientific revolution, so let me start my explication of the modern problem of natural evil there.

The scientific revolution was brought about by theists who thought that regularities of the universe—"the laws of nature"—could be found because if God created the universe, it should be orderly. The laws they were looking for were found but we also discovered that calamities and adversities were the consequence of the workings of those laws. It took a while for these explanations to mature, and some have only done so recently, but it was eventually discovered that tornados are the result of a complex interplay between cool, dry air and warm, moist air in thunderstorms, that earthquakes are the result of tectonic plates slipping and releasing vast amounts of energy that build up as they press together, that hurricanes are the result of (roughly put) water vapor hovering over low pressure areas in the ocean, and that diseases and mental disorders are the works of viruses, germs, genetic anomalies, chemical imbalances and brain injuries. Thus, these calamities and adversities began to be viewed, truly, as "natural disasters"—disasters that were the result of the workings of the newly discovered natural laws that govern the way the matter of our universe behaves. In fact, such disasters were not even thought of as, or called, "natural" until science had revealed their origin in this way.

This certainly did not disprove the existence of the "supernatural," but these discoveries rendered the old supernatural explanations for such calamities and adversities worthless—at least for the academic who wished to remain in step with scientific progress. Illness could no longer be understood as something that was caused by demons or evil spirits, and neither could meteorological disturbances. They could also not be the direct result of human sin, whether original or individual. There is neither a sound explanation for how lying, stealing or sexual immorality can make cold and warm air meet in a thunderstorm, nor one for how Adam and Eve's eating fruit could alter the laws of physics. (The view that the Adam and Eve's sin could somehow corrupt the natural order was also rendered problematic, since Adam and Eve were no longer considered by academics to be historical figures.) The view that calamities and adversities were the result of God's wrath against human sin also fell out of favor. Their general occurrence was obviously not the result of the willful action of a divine agent, but was rather due to the meeting of certain physical criteria; this is why tornados most often form in the American Midwest, earthquakes happen over fault lines, hurricanes always form over oceans, diseases happen after exposure to a virus or bacteria, and mental disorders appear after brain injuries. In addition, the idea that God directs natural disasters, once formed, to punish the sinful also became unpalatable. It is tempting to think, when someone you don't like has their house flattened by a tornado, that God is punishing them, but, we all know that natural disasters lay waste to their victims without bias—falling on the just and the unjust alike.

This is not to say that there were not, and are not, stragglers; some were, and still are, reluctant to acknowledge the true natural origins of such calamities and adversities. Benjamin

Franklin's discovery of electricity and invention of the lightning rod, according to one of Franklin's contemporaries Dr. Price, helped criminals escape the divine wrath due them.⁹ More recently, Rev. Jerry Falwell believed that AIDS was God's punishment for homosexuality.¹⁰ Rev. Peter Marshal thinks that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishing America for sexual immorality¹¹ and Rev. John Piper thinks God warned the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) against homosexuality using a tornado to knock down the steeple of the church in which they were meeting.¹² Even more recently, Pat Robertson suggested that the 2010 Haiti earthquake was a result of the Haitians making a "pact to the devil."¹³ But in respectable academia—fueled by its desire to remain coherent with modern scientific findings—the old explanations have all but disappeared, replaced by explanations rooted in the laws of nature.

This new knowledge, however, presented the academic theist with a new problem. Theistic scientists, who assumed that God had laid down the laws of nature, had to explain how it is that those very same laws are what give rise to natural disasters. The theistic scientist also assumed God to be a wholly good being; but how could a wholly good being embed laws into the very fabric of the universe that give rise to the calamities and adversities we despise? After all, such calamities and adversities are, and always have been, universally considered to give rise to events that are unquestionably evil. No one has ever thought that earthquakes, tornados, and tsunamis are good things—so to change our minds now, and call them good to save belief in God, would clearly be a mere ad hoc excuse. Yet, if God laid down the laws that give rise to the calamities and adversities we despise, then ultimately he is responsible for them. How could modern theistic academics make sense of this? They couldn't maintain that God didn't know how, or was unable, to create a world with laws that don't give rise to such calamities and adversities—they believed God to be omniscient and omnipotent too.¹⁴ God would be fully able to create just such a world, and given his whole goodness he would want to; yet, he clearly did not. *This* is the modern logical problem of natural evil.

It is important to clarify that it is not a question of why such a deity would *allow* such things,¹⁵ or why he would bring any specific natural disaster upon a specific location at a specific time. No one up to date with science, theist or not, thinks specific natural disasters are caused directly by God's will; they are brought about because the natural laws entails that when certain physical conditions are met, natural disasters happen—so they are caused directly by the meeting of those physical conditions. The problem is a question of how such a deity could *ultimately* be the author of them. That is, how could a wholly good creator/designer willfully have created a universe and endowed it with natural laws that bring about calamities and adversities which, for millions of years, killed and afflicted so many, with little warning¹⁶ if any at all,¹⁷ and assaulted both the just and unjust alike? God, given his omni-benevolence, should have chosen natural laws that entail that no physical conditions could result in a natural disaster, since—given that he is omniscient and omnipotent—he could have, and knew how to, do so. A designer who stitches natural disasters into the very fabric of the universe not only fails at being wholly good,¹⁸ but also seems, at best, indifferent to us and, at worst, out to get us.

Let me further explicate the problem by analogy. I own two small house dogs. Let us suppose that I am going to build a house for them to live in and in the design of this house I included dog killing machines—machines that randomly but often activate and kill any dog within reach—in every room. Of course, there is no guarantee that either of my dogs will ever be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it's likely that at some point they will be; if they ever figure out what is going on, they will live in constant fear. Regardless, if I did such a thing, I could hardly be said to be a loving master of my dogs—I certainly could not claim to be morally

perfect. Yet human killing machines—tornados, earthquakes, tsunamis, diseases, etc.—are woven into the very design of our universe. Thus, in the same way, it seems difficult to maintain that the designer of our universe is morally perfect.

What threatens God's existence then (what is incompatible with it), for the modern academic theist, is not simply the mere existence of evil brought about by calamities and adversities. Instead, it is the existence of such evil coupled with the knowledge that the calamities and adversities that bring about that evil are a consequence of the laws of nature, and the assumption that God dictated the laws by which the universe is governed. Formally, we could express how the logical problem of natural evil presents itself to the modern academic theists as a logical incompatibility between these three propositions:

- (1) God is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good.
- (5) God is the creator and designer of the universe, including the natural laws that govern it.
- (6) Calamities and adversities such as hurricanes, earthquakes, diseases and the like, and the evils they bring about, are the product of the laws that govern our universe.

The incompatibility of (1) (5) and (6) is, I think, fairly apparent and doesn't need much defense. Nevertheless, I will offer up one. God, if he is perfect (e.g., wholly good), cannot be the ultimate author of any evil; but that is exactly what he is if he imbedded in the universe natural laws that cause evil. How could a designer set up the world with natural laws that give rise to evil—that create calamities and disasters that kill large portions of us without bias—and still be considered wholly good? It can't be that he didn't know how or was unable to create a universe with laws that don't do such things, for God is also omnipotent and omniscient. The academic theist's assumption that (5) is true, along with the discovered fact that (6) is true, seems to be logically incompatible with believing (1).¹⁹ Together they entail that god is both perfect and imperfect—both wholly good and not wholly good—a direct logical contradiction.

To drive the point home, consider yet another analogy. Suppose that we discovered the calamities and adversities that plague our world are authored by a long-lived Bond-type super genius. He has a giant machine in his secret fortress that alters the laws of physics such that hurricanes, tornadoes, and diseases inevitably arise when certain physical conditions are met; if you shut the machine off, such things would never happen. Would we not conclude that this person was evil—that he was responsible for billions of unnecessary deaths? Would we not try to defeat him and shut the machine off? Of course. Yet this is analogous to what God has done; God has embedded the universe with laws that give rise to natural disasters, when all he has to do is “flip the switch off”—a switch that he himself turned on—to make such disasters impossible. The ultimate author of natural disasters can't be wholly good, yet God must be their ultimate author given the theist's own assumptions.

The truth of my thesis is probably clear at this point. Plantinga's response to the logical problem of natural evil does not solve it; in fact, his response does not even address the problem as it presents itself to the modern academic theist. But it is worth taking the time to spell out why this is the case. It is still true, as Plantinga suggests, that it's logically possible that free actions of nonhuman persons are what cause natural disasters; but this fact in no way does anything to address the problem I have raised—to show that (1), (5) and (6) are logically compatible. To address this, demons causing natural disasters would have to be a condition in which (1), (5) and (6) are all true. Instead, however, such a suggestion would deny the truth of (6)—by suggesting

that calamities and adversities are not a result of the laws that govern our universe—and thus do nothing to suggest that (1), (5) and (6) can all be true together. Thus, the fact that it is logically possible that demons cause natural disasters does nothing to solve the problem—nothing to resolve the logical incompatibility of (1), (5) and (6).²⁰

Of course, one could avoid worrying about the incompatibility of (1), (5) and (6) by embracing the idea that demons do indeed cause natural disasters and thus denying (6). In the same way, one could avoid worrying about the incompatibility of (1), (5) and (6) by denying that God is the creator and designer of the universe (thus denying (5)), or denying God exists (thus denying (1)). This would be a legitimate move; who is bothered by the fact that a set of propositions can't be true together when you don't think they are all true to begin with? But no theist will want to deny that God exists, or deny that God created or designed the universe. And no academic theist wishing to keep in step with modern scientific findings will be willing to reject the idea that the physical laws are what cause natural disasters, and instead suggest that demons do. So such a solution is untenable to the modern academic theist.²¹

In short, we might say, Plantinga underestimates the depth of the logical problem of natural evil. He thinks it is merely a matter of resolving the assumption that God exists with the fact that the calamities and adversities we call natural disasters occur. But the problem is much more grandiose. We know that such calamities are a result of the laws that govern the universe, yet the theist assumes that if God exists then God is the one that dictated those laws. This seems to be logically incompatible with the assumption that God exists and is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent; and observing that demons could instead be responsible for such calamities in no way denies that logical incompatibility. Thus Plantinga misunderstands the problem and, as a result, his solution is glaringly inadequate.

2. The Significance of Plantinga's Failure

I have argued that Plantinga's solution to the logical problem of natural evil fails. It misunderstands what the problem actually is, and as a result does not even address the problem faced by modern academic theists. The importance of this conclusion deserves reiteration.

Although the problem of evil in general enjoys a lot of attention in the literature, the logical problem of natural evil, specifically, does not. This is because Plantinga's solution to the logical problem of natural evil has been considered definitive by most since he wrote it. As a result, work on that particular problem was abandoned, and attention shifted to other problems—like, for example, the evidential problem of moral evil. It's hard to find an article that addresses the logical problem of natural evil specifically. Certainly, no article addresses the logical problem of natural evil as it presents itself to modern academic theists that I have identified in this paper. But, if Plantinga's solution to this problem fails, yet no one has been working on it, then the logical problem of natural evil has yet to be solved. This is a big problem, given that it presents such a serious threat to theistic belief.

Some might grant me my thesis—that Plantinga's solution fails—but deny its significance. The failure of Plantinga's solution isn't a problem if some already existing response to another similar argument can be adapted to solve the logical problem of natural evil. True, but no such adaptation seems to fit the bill. A full treatment of every possible response would take an entire book, but let me close by quickly showing why I think some of the best candidates fall short, and thus why my thesis is significant and the problem I have presented here needs more attention.

Some, adapting solutions to similar problems, may argue that natural evil is no threat to theistic belief because a perfect world, with no evil, is not desirable and would not be better than a world with evil. For example, evil may be needed as a counterpart to good, so that good can be appreciated and recognized. Or perhaps, evil is necessary for Hick-type “soul making” or second order goods, such as compassion, generosity and courage. I’m dubious of such claims, but regardless they are irrelevant. God not authoring natural evil does not imply the non-existence of evil entirely. In fact, given Plantinga’s free will solution to the moral problem, moral evil seems inevitable. If evil is somehow necessary, surely our own actions would provide us with all the evil we need—all we need to appreciate and recognize the good, to provide enough opportunities for soul making, compassion, generosity and courage, etc. We don’t need natural disasters embedded into the very fabric of the universe too.²² The problem I have presented does not suggest that God would create a perfect world; it simply suggests that God would not author natural disasters.

Others have argued, in reply to a related problem, that God is unable to create a universe with laws that don’t give rise to natural disasters, despite the fact that he is omnipotent and omniscient. God’s power only encompasses what is logically possible, and creating such a universe is, some argue, logically impossible.²³ If so, (1) (5) and (6) are not logically incompatible; there is nothing incoherent about suggesting that God embedded natural laws into our universe that cause natural disasters if it is logically impossible for him to do otherwise. If there is no “better” set of laws that it logically possible for God to choose, such that a universe with such laws would be (all things considered) better than ours, then God cannot be morally blameworthy (and thus imperfect) for not choosing such a set of laws for our universe. The theist might claim that the suggestion that there is a better set of laws—one that leads to less or no natural evil—is groundless.

There are a couple of problems with this reply.

One is that this objection seems to employ a double standard. Such objectors are unwilling to even consider my claim that “(1), (5) and (6)” is logically impossible, yet they readily embrace the claim that “a universe with better laws” is logically impossible. Why embrace one claim of logical impossibility and reject the other? Their choice seems especially odd given that I can think of no good reason to believe that a universe with better laws is logically impossible—a universe with laws that don’t lead to natural disasters is certainly conceivable and the statement doesn’t take the form “P&~P”—yet I have given many reasons to accept the logical impossibility of “(1), (5) and (6).” It entails that God is both all-good, and not all-good—a clearly logical impossibility.

The second problem is, I believe, more telling. Theists claim that a universe with better laws is logically impossible, yet the logical possibility of a universe with better laws is embedded in the doctrines of all monotheistic religions; both the Garden of Eden and Heaven are worlds governed by laws that do not give rise to natural disasters. The idea that there is a logically possible set of laws that would govern a world and not lead to natural disasters is not groundless; in fact, it is an idea grounded in the doctrines of the religions to which the theists themselves belong. Of course, many academic theists (and some religious sects) argue that such things do not exist—but none have argued they are logically impossible. And, unless they are logically impossible, they are within God’s power.

Another popular response to the problem of evil is skeptical theism. It suggests that no evil can count as evidence against God’s existence since, if God exists, his reasons for allowing (or authoring) evil might be beyond our ken. Skeptical theism was originally a response to the

evidential problem of evil, and I have argued against its effectiveness elsewhere.²⁴ Applied to the logical problem of natural evil, it certainly doesn't fare any better. The skeptical theist would suggest that the logical incompatibility of (1), (5) and (6) might only be apparent; there might be some proposition that could be true together with (1), (5) and (6) that we simply can't think of—perhaps a proposition that expresses some unfathomable justifying reason God could have for stitching natural disasters into the very fabric of our universe.

This suggestion is fraught with multiple problems, however. Ultimately, it suggests that “for all we know, natural disasters aren't really evil, but actually bring about good.” But consider just one such natural disaster, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake (which killed 300,000 and left a million homeless). If I don't know that such a natural disaster is evil, I can't be sure that anything is evil. Applying the skeptical theist's position to the logical problem of natural evil leads to complete moral agnosticism, for nothing is more clearly evil than natural disasters.²⁵ Certainly, anyone who suggested publicly that the world *even might* be better off because of such an event, would be socially outcast. To drive the point home: even if the Bond character with the natural disaster machine was an genius who was magnitudes smarter than any human that ever lived, we would never take seriously his suggestion that he was actually doing us a favor—even though it's possible that he has some justifying reason for authoring natural disasters that none of us could comprehend. Instead, we would most likely classify him as criminally insane.

In addition, a skeptical theistic reply would not actually solve the problem; it would not show that (1), (5) and (6) actually are compatible for it does not show that there actually is a proposition that is compatible with all three. At best, it would show that the fact that (1), (5) and (6) *seem* to be logically incompatible is no reason to think they actually are. However, if the skeptical theist is allowed to ignore this seeming logical incompatibility without actually solving it, there is nothing to stop anyone from doing the same with any other logical incompatibility. Allowing the skeptical theists such a move would render all logical debate impotent because logic relies on the assumption that contradictions can't be true, yet any proposed logical contradiction could be ignored on the grounds that it could be logically coherent for a reason we can't comprehend—we are limited creatures, after all, regardless of whether God exists. For example, every reductio-ad-absurdum objection could be answered with “perhaps it only seems absurd.” I doubt the theist wants to open such floodgates.

3. Conclusion

What I have argued in no way implies that the logical problem of natural evil I have presented cannot be solved. Perhaps there is a solution out there. Perhaps one of the solutions just mentioned could be modified further; it would just take some effort to show how. If one can, it's not obvious how, and someone needs to develop it. And that is my point; the problem needs more attention. It has been ignored because of the false assumption that Plantinga solved it.

Regardless, my main point is unaffected: Plantinga's “solution” to the logical problem of natural evil is not a solution to the problem as it presents itself to the modern academic theist. But given how the assumption that Plantinga's solution was definitive led many to ignore the problem, and to ignore the consequences of not being able to solve it, it seems that theists need to devote more effort to developing a reply.

Acknowledgements:

1. For my argument, see David Kyle Johnson, “Natural Evil and the Simulation Hypothesis,” *Philo* 14:2 (2011).
2. 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) p. xxix.

3. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), p. 58.

4. Although Plantinga first articulated this response in *God, Freedom and Evil*, one can also find it in James Sennett, (ed.), *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), p. 23.

5. Because the ancient Israelites did not consider deities (including Yahweh) to be perfect, such evils only raised doubts about their own personal loyalty to such deities—like it did for Job—not about their existence.

6. These demonic spirits were either outside of God's control, or allowed by God to do what they wished. Since the early Christians did not believe in God's perfection either, there was still no threat to belief in God's existence. "One of the great superstitions of the [first century]... was the pervasive belief in demons, the presence of evil spirits in the very air in which people moved. These demons were regarded as responsible for many types of illnesses, both physical and mental. They were held accountable as well for almost any unfortunate accident or natural disaster, even for developments within society which certain groups regarded as counter to God's wishes—and their own." 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.

7. For a readable history of humanity's conception of God, see Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993). See also, Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

8. See R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and Evidence for God*. (Temple University Press, 1995) p. 185.

9. Apparently, Price didn't think that God could make lightning hit a sinner despite a nearby tall metallic pole. This story can be found in Bertrand Russell's "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish." See Christopher Hitchens *The Portable Atheist*. (Philadelphia, PA: Ca Capo Press, 2007) p. 183.

10. See Daniel Kurtzman, "Jerry Falwell Quotes" (About.com)

<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/stupidquotes/a/falwellquotes.htm> (Accessed Sept 14, 2009).

11. See Stephanie Simon, "The Culture Wars' New Front: U.S. History Classes in Texas." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124753078523935615.html> (Accessed August 23, 2010).

12. See John Piper, "The Tornado, The Lutherans, and Homosexuality." www.desiringgod.org, Aug 20, 2009. http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1965_the_tornado_the_lutherans_and_homosexuality/ (Accessed August 23, 2010). For a response to Piper, and proof that not all theists think blaming God for tornados is sensible, see Greg Boyd "Did God Send a Tornado to Warn the ELCA?" <http://reknew.org>, Aug 21, 2009.

<http://reknew.org/2009/08/did-god-send-a-tornado-to-warn-the-elca> (Accessed October 23, 2012)

13. See Ryan Smith, "Pat Robertson: Haiti 'Cursed' After 'Pact to the Devil.'" CBS News, January 13, 2010. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-12017-504083.html#addcomm (Accessed May 25, 2010).

14. The objection that God is unable to do such a thing, despite the fact that he is omnipotent and omniscient, will be addressed below.

15. However, that is another question that deserves more attention.

16. Although we have good detection methods today, for most of our history tornados and hurricanes laid waste to people with hardly any warning.

17. Although we have some detection capabilities, for most of our history, volcanoes and diseases laid waste to people without any warning at all. We still have no real way to detect earthquakes, and only are able to warn about tsunamis if we happen to know about a deep sea earthquake. As the recent disaster in Japan showed us, our current warning mechanisms have limited efficacy.

18. Of course, if a being is not wholly good, such a being cannot (by definition) be God.

19. As a point of clarification, it is worth mentioning my reply to objections from academic theists (from email correspondence) who have misunderstood the argument. "It makes sense that God would set up the universe to function according to certain laws; but why would he continually intervene when those laws bring suffering? Gravity makes both good and bad things possible; is God supposed to intervene every time someone slips while mountain climbing?" Such an objector fails to realize that I am not denying that God would set up the universe to obey certain laws, that any order could be used or abused by humanity to bring about evil, and that I am not asking why God doesn't intervene every time those laws are about to cause an evil. I'll grant that an orderly universe is better than a chaotic one, that order could always be abused, and that constant intervention could arguably, and undesirably, make the universe chaotic. (Although I am curious what a theist who agrees with the latter would say about intercessory prayer.) What I am suggesting is that an all-powerful, all-knowing being could order the universe in any way it likes; and if that being were wholly good, that being would not bestow upon the universe a set of laws that give rise, at random, to calamities and adversities, like hurricanes and diseases, that cause massive amounts of suffering, that we do nothing to bring about but can do nothing to avoid. Yet that is exactly what the laws that

govern our universe do. It follows that either the designer of our universe is not all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good or that our universe has no designer at all.

20. In fairness, one way that nonhuman persons such as demons could be the cause of calamities and adversities, without (6) being false, is by demons being the author of the universe's natural laws. But that would deny premise (5), and (for the same reason) not resolve in incompatibility of (1), (5) and (6). Besides, such a move would seem to be a dead end given that such a suggestion is not going to sit well with any theist I know, since they all maintain that it was God who designed the universe, including its laws. See Keith M. Parsons, *God: And the Burden of Proof*. (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989) p. 124.

21. And anyone who presents similar solutions has similarly misunderstood the problem. For just such a similar solution, see Stewart Kelly, "The Problem of evil and the Satan hypothesis." *Sophia* 36:2 (1997).

22. And if God were authoring natural disasters to create even more opportunities for second order evils, that would seem to be contrary to God's morally perfect nature as well. As Richard Swinburne, one of the most notable defenders of theism observes himself, "...it would be crazy for God to multiply pain in order to multiply compassion." Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) p. 161. Swinburne's entire argument might be developed as a response to the problem I have presented, but in my estimation his entire argument fails, and could not be successfully applied. A full articulation of why goes beyond the scope of this paper.

23. This seems to be the main argument of the aforementioned *Physics and Cosmology* (Murphy, et. al (2007)), especially William R. Stoeger's "Entropy, Emergence, and the Physical Roots of Natural Evil" (pp. 93-108) and Robert John Russell's "Physics, Cosmology, and the Challenge to Consequentialist Natural Theodicy" (pp. 109-130) and Nacny Murphy's "Science and the Problem of Evil: Suffering as a By-Product of a Finely Tuned Cosmos," (pp. 131-152). Although, it is worth noting that these authors profess to be addressing a slightly different problem than the one I have presented—"why does God seem to do so little to prevent and alleviate the suffering of innocent victims of natural disaster, disease, and so forth?" (p. xiii).

24. See David Kyle Johnson, "A Refutation of Skeptical Theism" *Sophia* 52 (3):425-445 (2013)

25. This issue was addressed by Michael Bergman and Stephen Wykstra in an exchange at Alvin Plantinga's Retirement Celebration, May 20, 2010. Bergman argued that although we must be agnostic about the objective (all things considered) moral status of events, we can still be allowed to make judgments about the subjective (available evidence considered) moral status of events. Thus we can still, subjectively, condemn certain acts and praise others. (See Michael Bergman, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism." Presented at Alvin Plantinga's Retirement Celebration, University of Notre Dame, May 20, 2010). Ironically, Wykstra (the father of skeptical theism) convincingly argued that such a response falls prey to many objections, and that indeed skeptical theism entails moral agnosticism. For one, the response betrays our confidence in the objective moral status of the holocaust—it was, after all, undeniably, objectively bad. Second, this response seems to make clear that the skeptical theist is relying on a highly consequentialist ethical theory, which seems contrary to his own religious commitments. Aren't some things, like genocide, wrong regardless of consequence—regardless of what else we consider? Lastly, the response contradicts intuition by making our subjective moral judgments irrelevant to our evaluation of an event's objective moral status. If everything I know points to the fact that something is bad, doesn't that give me at least some reason for thinking it is objectively bad? Not if the skeptical theist is correct.