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ARTICLE

An Evidential Challenge to Efficacious Grace

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Abstract

This paper develops a new evidential challenge to a contemporary universalist account grounded in the doctrine of efficacious grace. Drawing primarily on the work of John Kronen and Eric Reitan, I argue that if God possesses a morally legitimate and effective means of transforming even the gravest sinners without violating rational freedom, then the continued existence of apparently gratuitous moral evils becomes especially difficult to explain. The challenge does not consist in the traditional claim that evil is incompatible with divine goodness, nor does it attempt to refute universalism as such. Rather, it asks why transformative grace capable of healing distorted agency is reserved for the eschaton if its earlier application could plausibly prevent at least some of history's worst atrocities. After reconstructing the evidential problem of evil in Rowe and Russell, I examine the universalist account of efficacious grace and develop what I call the Evidential Challenge to Efficacious Grace. I then consider several possible universalist responses, including skeptical theism, appeals to the Fall, and arguments from divine sovereignty. I conclude that efficacious grace intensifies the explanatory burden generated by apparently gratuitous evil and therefore introduces a distinctive internal challenge for one influential form of contemporary universalism.

Keywords: efficacious grace; eschatology; evidential problem of evil; rational freedom; universalism

1. Introduction

The problem of hell has long been recognized as a particularly pressing variant of the problem of evil for Christians. Since Marilyn McCord Adams's influential paper on the subject,[1] philosophers have debated whether the existence of a place of eternal torment is reconcilable with a God of perfect love. They argue that the two generate a tension internal to Christian theology that neither an appeal to divine justice nor the free will defense can satisfactorily dissolve. Defenders of universalism have presented their position as the natural solution: if God ultimately saves all rational

[1]Marilyn McCord Adams, 'The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians', in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann,* eds. by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 301–327.

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creatures, then the deepest difficulty evaporates, since no finite creature ever remains irremediably alienated from infinite goodness.

This paper aims to challenge this comfortable narrative. My argument is that universalism faces a *sui generis* version of the evidential problem of evil – a problem made renowned in analytic philosophy of religion by the arguments of William Rowe and Bruce Russell, but not yet systematically applied to universalism.

The argument, in brief, is as follows: universalism is committed to the claim that God will save – at least – all rational creatures. A powerful defense of this claim comes from the refinement of the notion of efficacious grace. This concept, however, seems to sit uneasily with the existence of evils that a prompt and prior infusion of efficacious grace could avoid. Employing this concept could leave the universalist with less compelling explanations for why God did not simply create beings incapable of moral evil, or why the atrocities that scar human history were permitted at all.

As a scope note, I should add that my aim is not to demonstrate that universalism is false, or that it is not possible in principle for universalists to answer this challenge. More modestly, I argue that one of universalism's commitments – namely efficacious grace – seems ill-suited to tackle the evidential version of the problem of evil, and instead increases its explanatory burden. Since evidential arguments from evil are usually understood as probabilistic, my argument also is not intended to show universalism as necessarily false, but simply to present a reason to doubt a version of it. Moreover, I will not argue against the positive case for universalism proposed by its authors. That would require a dedicated effort beyond my purpose here, and would probably necessitate a thorough exegetical, patristic, and theological analysis that I will not undertake.

Methodologically speaking, this paper is an exercise in philosophical theology; thus, theological claims are provisionally assumed rather than demonstrated. The discussion proceeds within a broadly classical theistic framework, drawing in particular on Thomistic anthropological and moral concepts relevant to the universalist accounts under examination. While the arguments developed by the authors examined are not reducible to Thomism itself, they appear sufficiently compatible with this broader theological framework to justify limiting the present inquiry to it. I contend that, within this context, the challenge developed in this paper emerges with particular force.

The article will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I briefly recall the evidential problem of evil as formulated by Rowe and Russell. Section 3 outlines the notion of efficacious grace and its defense in the work of John Kronen and Eric Reitan. Section 4, the argumentative core, develops the issue with regard to efficacious grace and defends the claim that this particular universalism generates its own evidential problem. In Section 5, I analyze some possible counterarguments to my challenge and show how and why they do not answer it satisfactorily or ultimately undermine it. Section 6 concludes the paper with some final remarks.

2. The evidential problem of evil

Before assessing whether and how universalism faces a problem of evil, it is necessary to reconstruct the relevant form of that problem. The logical problem of evil, which attempts to demonstrate that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, has been largely set aside in contemporary philosophy of religion following Alvin Plantinga's free will defense, which succeeded in showing that there is

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no obvious contradiction between omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and the occurrence of moral evil.[2] The evidential problem of evil, by contrast, does not claim that God's existence is logically impossible given evil, but that the existence of certain evils, especially those that appear gratuitous or pointless, constitutes a strong abductive argument against God's existence – one that cannot be neutralized merely by showing that it is possible that such evils serve a greater good.

William Rowe's canonical formulation runs as follows. Consider a case of apparently pointless suffering: a fawn dying in agony in a forest fire that no human being witnesses. Such natural evil is not justified by the realization of a greater good, namely freedom, or the purpose of soul-building; thus, such an evil is gratuitous and constitutes evidence that hints toward, although it does not strictly necessitate, the nonexistence of a good, loving, omnipotent God.[3]

Russell's more forensically detailed version instead included a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who in the early hours of New Year's Day 1986 was raped, severely beaten, and strangled to death by her mother's boyfriend.[4] Russell's argument is built around the premise that any human moral agent who knew about such a crime and could have prevented it without serious risk to themselves would have been morally required to intervene. From this, Russell argues: if there was no outweighing good that morally justified permitting the murder, then God, who knew about it and could have prevented it without any risk, should have prevented it. Since the murder occurred, and since there appears to be no outweighing good that justifies it, we have strong evidence that God does not exist.[5]

The strength of the argument depends on the plausibility of the claim that the suffering was genuinely pointless – that no outweighing good was served by permitting it. Russell examines the theodical responses of Richard Swinburne and John Hick with care. Swinburne holds that the freedom of the agent and the 'deep responsibility' it enables are goods valuable enough to justify God's not intervening; Hick holds that the possibility of moral evil is a necessary condition for the soul-making that constitutes our highest spiritual development. Russell argues that, while these goods are genuine, they are not of sufficient weight to justify the specific suffering of a five-year-old child:

[2]Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), pp. 29–34; pp. 45–49; pp. 54–65. A notable supporter of the logical problem of evil is James Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). His arguments have been critically assessed in a special issue of *Religions* (January 2024), presenting forty papers. A recent argument against the very possibility of logical arguments from evil can be found in Daniel Vecchio and Patrick Flynn, 'There Can Be No Successful Logical Argument from Evil', *New Blackfriars,* 106(4) (2025), 346–60.

[3]William L. Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 16(4) (1979), 337. He defines a gratuitous evil as an 'instance of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse'.

[4]Bruce Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil', *Faith and Philosophy,* 6(2) (1989), 123.

[5]Russell's formal argument runs: (11) If there was no outweighing good that morally justified letting the little girl in Flint be brutally murdered, then God should have prevented that murder from happening; (12) There was no outweighing good that morally justified letting the little girl in Flint be brutally murdered; (13) Therefore, God should have prevented that murder from happening; (14) If God exists, then nothing happens which he should have prevented from happening; (15) Therefore, God does not exist. See Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil', p. 125.

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we would not, after all, permit a young child to die in order to provide another person with the opportunity for moral growth or the exercise of their freedom. The analogy is illuminating: it is good that someone receives a vital organ, but it would be wrong to allow a child to die in order to procure it.

Crucially, Russell also addresses the skeptical theist response – the contention that, for all we know, there are goods beyond our ken that would justify God's permission of such suffering. He offers the analogy of a skilled doctor proposing surgery to a Stone Age tribesman whose son has appendicitis: the father, knowing nothing of medicine, is rational in doubting the doctor's intentions, even though the doctor in fact means well and the surgery would save his son. The apparent pointlessness of the proposed intervention counts against the doctor's being both benevolent and competent, even though the father cannot presume to know everything the doctor knows. Similarly, the apparent pointlessness of evil counts against the existence of a perfect God, even though we cannot presume to know all that God knows; merely pointing to the possibility that the suffering has a hidden point is not sufficient to neutralize this evidence.[6]

3. God's efficacious grace

The second issue pertinent to this inquiry – one that requires thorough analysis to develop my argument – is that of efficacious grace. As defined by John Kronen and Eric Reitan, efficacious grace 'refers traditionally to that species of grace sufficient by itself to fully convert creatures, such that all who receive it are saved'.[7] If efficacious grace is true – as Kronen and Reitan argue – universalism has a robust reason to be deduced from the same loving nature of God, as well as what is known as his 'antecedent will' for universal salvation.[8]

Their contribution stems from the fruitful debate between Thomas Talbott and Jerry Walls, which constitutes one of the most rigorous philosophical exchanges on the relationship between grace and human freedom.[9] In their book on the subject, *God's Final Victory*, Kronen and Reitan developed two main arguments to defend their universalistic stance: (1) the Argument from Efficacious Grace (hereafter: AEG), and (2) the Argument from Infinite Opportunity. The authors favor the former since it is a deductively valid argument that would force one to accept it, provided that one accepts its assumptions. While the latter is a strong argument, as it supplies the universalists a libertarian tool to argue for their eschatological position, the former is the one relevant to this inquiry; thus, I will devote the next two subsections to it.

[6]Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil', pp. 134–135. On the CORNEA objection and Russell's response, see pp. 132–134.

[7]John Kronen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory—A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 128.

[8]Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), p. 99.

[9]Thomas Talbott, 'The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment', *Faith and Philosophy,* 7(1) (1990), 19–42. Jerry L. Walls, *Hell—The Logic of Damnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Jerry L. Walls, 'A Hell of a Choice: Reply to Talbott', *Religious Studies,* 40(2) (2004), 203–216. Thomas Talbott, 'Misery and Freedom: Reply to Walls', Religious Studies, 40(2) (2004), 217–224.

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3.1. Kronen and Reitan's argument

Kronen and Reitan develop their case for efficacious grace by first considering the most significant challenge to it: the claim that God cannot save the unregenerate without overriding their freedom. They begin by articulating this challenge as follows:

1. God can guarantee the salvation of all only by bringing about the salvation of the unregenerate through some means that overrides their freedom.
2. Either such a means is not available to God (it is not possible for God to save the unregenerate by overriding their freedom), or, if it is available, it is morally impermissible for God to make use of it.
3. God will not do what is morally impermissible.
4. Therefore, God either cannot or will not guarantee the salvation of all.[10]

Kronen and Reitan direct their criticism at both (1) and (2), for multiple reasons. First, they clarify what it could mean to 'override' the freedom of the individual. There could be various cases in which freedom is overridden in a licit manner, by virtue of the superior authority of the one who imposes the veto. The authors give multiple examples to support it, such as results of elections or expropriation of property. Overriding freedom could be considered wrong only if it was not coherent with the use of freedom from that point onward, as – to expand one of their analogies – in the case of election fraud.

They also specify what they mean by the term 'autonomy'. They recognize that 'one has autonomy to the extent that one's free choices play the role that one has a legitimate claim on them playing in the determination of outcomes'.[11] This definition could allow one to bypass or truncate individual freedom without violating it, since one could not have a legitimate claim to have a say in determining the outcomes of something with her choices. Autonomy would be violated only in the cases in which it would be impeded in its legitimate role, not in every case in which freedom is overridden.

Having clarified the terms, Kronen and Reitan continue presenting their positive argument for God's intervention in the salvation of the unregenerate – namely AEG.

AEG can be summarized as follows:

1. It is always possible for God to extend to the unregenerate efficacious grace; that is, a form of grace sufficient by itself to guarantee their salvation (i.e. sufficient to bring about all that is necessary for salvation, including relevant subjective acts such as sincere repentance and conversion).
2. Making use of efficacious grace to save the unregenerate is morally permissible for God, at least when the recipient would not otherwise have been saved.
3. It is therefore possible and permissible for God to save all through the exercise of efficacious grace (1, 2).
4. If God has a morally permissible means of saving all, then God will save all.
5. Therefore, God will save all (3, 4).[12]

[10]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, p. 127.
[11]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, p. 130.
[12]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 131–132.

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To ground their argument, they employ a notion of freedom they call 'rational freedom',[13] a concept they recognize as common with Aquinas and Talbott. Four key presuppositions underlie rational freedom:

I. values are objective, such that there are objectively good or best choices and objectively bad ones;
II. the rational faculty makes judgments in accord with its finite grasp of this objective order of values;
III. the will can be controlled by non-rational forces (such as addictions or entrenched habits);
IV. the will is naturally ordered to choose in accord with rational judgments such that it inevitably does so in the absence of any non-rational controlling factors.[14]

For Kronen and Reitan, God could infuse his efficacious grace without violating rational freedom, since such infusion would not introduce false beliefs or affective states contrary to reason, which would influence its faculties illegitimately. But since within the Thomistic anthropological and moral framework each creature is ordered toward the good, and God is the supreme good, if one experiences this good clearly, it could not be mischaracterized, and it will always present itself clearly as something worthy of love.[15]

A second reason they adduce for the availability of efficacious grace, borrowed from Aquinas,[16] is that God could concede to someone through a particular grace an infallible knowledge of the good and of the means to attain it. God could neutralize disordered passions by instilling virtue and inspiring the mind to resist sin. In summary, since efficacious grace presents the creature with a full understanding of what union with God entails while removing affective impediments to acting on this understanding, it does not bypass the creature's rational agency but rather perfects it.

3.2. *Defending the morality of efficacious grace*

Kronen and Reitan anticipate several objections to their account of efficacious grace.[17] First, some critics argue that the vicious, morally corrupted as they are, cannot see God. Kronen and Reitan respond that God could reform the sinner's character and remove the vicious traits that impede the beatific vision. If the flaw is cognitive, God can heal it; if affective, God can free the sinner from it. Second, some object that the finite cannot see the infinite. To this they reply by invoking the Western distinction between sight and comprehension: while the person can see God, this does not entail comprehending Him. There is thus no metaphysical impediment to bestowing efficacious grace. Third, Fairbairn[18] objects that radically transforming the motives of a sinner would substitute her with another person. Kronen and Reitan counter that

[13]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 134.
[14]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 135.
[15]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 136.
[16]Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 9.
[17]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 137–140.
[18]Andrew Martin Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1907), pp. 467–468.

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this confuses person (the rational substance) with personality (the set of beliefs and affective states). Changing personality does not alter numerical identity.

Having addressed these objections, they offer additional arguments to show that efficacious grace does not violate autonomy.[19] Their central claim is that autonomy consists in one's free choices playing the role they have a 'legitimate claim' to play in determining outcomes. Since creatures have no legitimate claim to determine their own eternal damnation, God's transformative intervention does not violate autonomy. They support this with two analogies: an employer may override an employee's choice without violating her autonomy, since the employer has ultimate authority; a parent may restrain a child from danger without violating her autonomy, since the child is incompetent regarding such grave decisions. By extension, in matters of eternal significance, we are as infants before God, who has legitimate authority to override choices that would lead to our destruction.

Their conclusion is that, given their conception of rational freedom and the legitimate override of autonomy in certain contexts, God can save even the unrepentant through efficacious grace without violating their creaturely agency.

4. The evidentialist challenge to universalism

Russell's argument began with a brutal criminal case, but history offers many examples of evils so morally repugnant that they awaken our collective conscience. Humanly speaking, I think that in those cases asking ourselves 'why God allowed such a tragedy?' is a sign that our moral compass is still functioning, more than the start of a journey toward atheism. I would argue, however, that the moral intuition that raises such questions is particularly acute if we take into account Kronen and Reitan's notion of efficacious grace. I will call this the Evidential Challenge to Efficacious Grace (hereafter: ECEG).

The ECEG does not claim that universalists alone face an evidential argument from evil – that would be patently false. Evidential arguments are a recognized difficulty for theism in general. Nor does the ECEG purport to demonstrate that efficacious grace or universalism is false. Those are stronger claims than the ECEG could sustain, since it does not identify a logical gap in universalism, but only requests additional argumentation from its proponents.

What I do claim, however, is that this kind of universalism raises a particular version of the evidential argument, since the most awful evil acts in our history have been allowed by a God who is not merely willing or capable, but actually involved in the infusion of efficacious grace to convert even the most unrepentant sinners. Every historical occurrence of despicable evils, such as the murders of Peter Kürten – the so-called Monster of Düsseldorf – raises the same question: given the moral possibility of efficacious grace, were these atrocities not a reason sufficiently compelling to God to intervene and infuse the perpetrator with his grace? If they were, why did God not prevent their evil acts?

Granting Kronen and Reitan's account of efficacious grace, and the fact that God could have reasons to directly bestow his grace before the unspeakable happens, generates the ECEG in light of the existence of those evils. This peculiar problem arises if

[19]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, pp. 146–151.

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we accept two premises: (1) we witness every day an enormous amount of evils that qualify for the definition of 'gratuitous', and (2) the same God who would employ efficacious grace to save eventually even the most unrepentant is seemingly inactive – or at least less proactive – toward those same persons when they commit their atrocities in their earthly lives.

If God has a means to overcome resistance to grace in the eschaton without violating autonomy, why does He not employ such grace now? Unless freedom or autonomy changes value in the afterlife, it seems strange that He highly regards our freedom here – to the point of allowing terrible evils – but overrides it, albeit legitimately, after death. One might reply that freedom has a different significance between the *status viatoris* and the eschaton. However, Kronen and Reitan themselves cite a passage from *De Veritate* that explicitly concerns the infusion of grace in 'this life',[20] and use it in support of efficacious grace in the eschaton. At least on their account, then, there appears to be no decisive difference between the two states with respect to this issue.

Hence, especially if one believes that God has all the right reasons to supersede our autonomy in pursuit of our own good, the ECEG acquires particular force. To paraphrase a famous Latin maxim, *si gratia efficax est, unde malum?* If God can legitimately and effectively bring about the repentance of even the gravest sinners through efficacious grace in the eschaton, why was no analogous transformative action employed prior to at least some of history's worst atrocities?

Kronen and Reitan anticipate that the universalist might respond by appealing to the problem of evil itself: if all evils are ultimately redeemed, the problem is lessened, not intensified.[21] But this response addresses a different question – whether evil is irremediable – whereas the ECEG asks whether evil is avoidable given the resources God already possesses.

The ECEG, in fact, does not rely on the claim that evil is irremediable. Rather, it relies on the thought that at least some apparently gratuitous evils seem avoidable given the availability of efficacious grace. The issue, then, is not whether those evils are ultimately redeemed, but why they were permitted in the first place if the same salvific end was guaranteed independently of them. A universalist may certainly argue that such evils remain providentially integrated within God's plan. Yet this response appears to intensify the explanatory burden efficacious grace requires, since the doctrine already presupposes that God possesses an effective and morally legitimate means of securing the final repentance and transformation of sinners.

One might argue that efficacious grace functions only as a last resort employed by God to assure the salvation of the most recalcitrant sinners. If so, since efficacious grace would not constitute God's ordinary mode of salvific action, the ECEG might appear misplaced. However, the ECEG does not require efficacious grace to operate universally or continuously throughout moral history. The challenge arises only in relation to at least some apparently gratuitous and catastrophic evils whose prevention seems compatible with the kind of transformative grace Kronen and Reitan themselves describe. God could, in principle, employ efficacious grace only in such exceptional cases while still preserving it as an extraordinary salvific measure. If such cases plausibly exist, the explanatory pressure generated by the ECEG remains.

[20]Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 24, a. 9.
[21]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, p. 188.

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For similar reasons, the ECEG does not claim that God should intervene to prevent every possible evil or instance of suffering. It concerns especially those evils sufficiently apparently gratuitous to make us question divine inaction – or to doubt the paternal care that efficacious grace itself seems to presuppose in the eschaton. Minor or pedagogically intelligible evils – a failing grade, a broken leg, relationship problems – are difficulties ranging from the trivial to the serious that can be accounted for by a soul-making theodicy such as Hick's. Kronen and Reitan invoke Hick's theodicy precisely to defend universalism against the problem of evil.[22] Yet even if soul-making explains many ordinary evils, it does not explain why God permits catastrophic evils whose prevention appears compatible with soul-making – especially when efficacious grace is already available.

The ECEG, instead, concerns evils whose prevention appears fully compatible with soul-making. As Russell noted for the Michigan case, some evils seemingly play little to no role in soul-making – or, I add, are difficult to justify on soul-making grounds if we believe in a strong version of efficacious grace, potent enough to heal the corruption even of the most morally depraved person. The question the ECEG poses then is not 'if all are eventually saved, then why do we not all just *start out that way?*'[23] but 'why, granted our fallen state, does not God infuse efficacious grace to mitigate the most evil inclinations that could culminate in atrocity?'

As a last point, the ECEG is not merely the traditional evidential problem of evil transposed onto universalism. Its distinctive force derives from the universalist commitment to efficacious grace itself. The issue is not that God allows apparently gratuitous evils generically, but that within this universalist viewpoint God is already understood as possessing, and eventually employing, a morally legitimate and effective means of transforming even the gravest sinners. Therefore, raising the question: why does God not infuse grace preemptively?

5. Anticipating objections

This section will provide some insights on how to answer the most pressing objections to my argument. Their nature ranges from our epistemic position in regard to God's plan, to the parallel between current evils and original sin, the meaning of divine sovereignty, and the distinctive nature of gratuitous evils.

5.1. The skeptical theistic objection

The ECEG, as developed in Section 4, is a criticism specifically of universalism that employs the doctrine of efficacious grace. The question it poses is this: if God possesses a morally legitimate and non-coercive means of transforming even the gravest sinners – a means that universalists believe God will eventually employ in the eschaton – why does God not employ it preemptively to prevent at least some of history's worst atrocities? This kind of universalism is committed to the claim that God will use efficacious grace to save all; but if this is so, what principled reasons could God reasonably have to postpone the infusion of efficacious grace to the eschaton, when it could be administered here, preventing those evils from being enacted?

[22]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, p. 188.
[23]Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, p. 187.

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As a response to the ECEG, the universalist could appeal to a form of skeptical theism and argue that our inability to discern a morally sufficient reason for present evils does not entail that no such reason exists.[24] This strategy remains available in the present context, and nothing in the ECEG demonstrates that skeptical theism fails in principle.

The difficulty, however, is that efficacious grace alters the dialectical structure of the evidential problem. The universalist account of efficacious grace appears committed to the claim that God can ultimately bring about the repentance and transformation even of the gravest sinners through divine salvific action that does not illegitimately violate creaturely agency.

If so, the central question becomes not merely why God permits evil in general, as aforementioned, but why God delays the very transformative intervention that universalism itself regards as both legitimate and effective. Why should efficacious grace be reserved for the eschaton if its earlier application could have prevented at least some of the most horrifying atrocities of human history? The point, then, is not that skeptical theism becomes unavailable to the universalist, or that it becomes implausible regarding this matter, but that the doctrine of efficacious grace appears to intensify the explanatory burden posed by apparently gratuitous evils.

While a theist not committed to efficacious grace could invoke the CORNEA to understand divine inaction toward gratuitous evils, the universalist who employs efficacious grace faces then a particular challenge. The CORNEA now has to account not only for why the gratuitous evils exist, but also why they exist despite God's possession and eventual employment of the means to heal the evildoer's will to its natural orientation toward him. The appeal to skeptical theism, however plausible in general, does not directly address this specific question of delay, which is distinctive to this specific universalist perspective.

5.2. The role of the Fall

The second objection I address is that a universalist might argue that my challenge applies equally to the fall of our progenitors.[25] The doctrine of the *felix culpa* presupposes that God can have sufficient reason to permit an evil as fundamental as original sin in view of a greater good. If this is so, why cannot the same logic apply to the gravest moral evils of history? God could permit them, the universalist might say, precisely because he can bring forth from them the ultimate salvation of all.

While this objection has real force, it presents a structural and teleological asymmetry that the universalist must address. The logic of the *felix culpa* is strictly tied to a unique, overarching *telos*: the Incarnation and the Atonement. The evil of the Fall is teleologically ordered to the supreme and unrepeatable good of Christ's redemptive work. The permission of that specific evil is thus traditionally justified as the logical antecedent necessary for the greatest possible good – namely the Incarnation.

However, applying this exact same logic to justify other historical atrocities becomes highly problematic once the universalist introduces the concept of

[24]Such an argument can be found in Stephen John Wykstra, 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil,* ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 126–150.

[25]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this objection to my attention.

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efficacious grace. The universalist in question is committed to the claim that God possesses a morally legitimate, non-coercive, and perfectly effective means of transforming the human will. If God has such a direct mechanism to achieve the specific good of an individual's conversion and salvation, the instrumental necessity of permitting atrocious evils to achieve that same good loses strength.

The asymmetry can be stated as follows: the Fall is permitted because it is uniquely ordered to the Incarnation; but the catastrophic moral failures of a murderer are not logically necessary for his ultimate salvation, precisely because efficacious grace provides an effective alternative route to heal his will. Why permit an atrocious evil to obtain a future good, if that same good (the agent's conversion) could be achieved non-coercively through the direct infusion of efficacious grace before the distorted will culminates in atrocity? For the salvation of individual agents, the postulation of efficacious grace renders the permission of gratuitous atrocities instrumentally redundant.

The question then remains: why does God tolerate the catastrophic corruption of rational freedom resulting in atrocities, when he could simply deploy the transformative mechanism of efficacious grace – which the universalist believes he will infallibly use in the eschaton – to heal the agent's distorted agency beforehand?

To this, the universalist might respond that God's reasons for permitting post-Atonement evils remain mysterious – an appeal akin to skeptical theism. But as I argued in the previous subsection, skeptical theism is available to all theists and does not address specifically the distinctive problem raised by efficacious grace, which increases the explanatory burden. Universalists who rely on this response have not lowered the pressure put by the ECEG; rather, they merely acknowledge the increased explanatory burden of postulating a perfect salvific tool whose application is mysteriously delayed.

Hence, given the teleological asymmetry, I do not think the ECEG implies an unorthodox stance.

5.3. *Divine sovereignty*

Two arguments that may indirectly help circumvent the ECEG can be found in Eric Reitan's work on the problem of evil. In one paper, Reitan addresses and expands Swinburne's theodicy from efficacious freedom,[26] while in the other he responds to James Sterba's argument from evil.[27]

In the former, he argues that two deontological principles – the Principle of Efficacious Freedom (PEF), which forbids systematically depriving creatures of the freedom to carry out even horrific acts, and the Non-Arbitrariness Principle (NAP), which forbids treating comparable cases differently – jointly entail that God cannot intervene selectively to prevent horrors without violating one of these duties. Since God possesses unlimited power to redeem suffering, Reitan contends, God is never

[26]Eric Reitan, 'A Deontological Theodicy? Swinburne's Lapse and the Problem of Moral Evil', *Faith and Philosophy,* 31(2) (2014), 181–203. In p. 184, he defines efficacious freedom as 'the freedom to make choices with real consequences for good or ill'.

[27]Eric Reitan, 'Divine Omnipotence, Divine Sovereignty and Moral Constraints on the Prevention of Evil: A Reply to Sterba', *Religions,* 13(9) (2022), 397–413.

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in a situation where truncating freedom is the only way to meet a creature's crucial needs; as a result, the duty to respect efficacious freedom becomes absolute rather than merely *prima facie*.[28] God's hands are thus tied: he cannot intervene without moral compromise, and must instead 'suffer with us while it is going on and then make it better in the end'.[29]

In the latter, he tries to apply a similar approach to Sterba's argument. Sterba appeals to the so-called 'Pauline Principle'[30] to argue that permitting horrific evil is itself morally problematic whenever such evil could be prevented without causing greater evil. Reitan responds that, while human authorities may be justified in constraining freedom in order to prevent horrors – because their capacities are limited – the same reasoning does not straightforwardly apply to God.[31] Since God possesses unlimited power to redeem suffering and horror, divine non-intervention need not be morally equivalent to human non-intervention. Reitan writes that 'If God is all-powerful, then God arguably possesses an unlimited capacity to redeem evil and so is barred from all freedom-constraining actions, and so must permit horrors'.[32]

He further argues[33] that the more power one possesses to prevent misuses of freedom, the more likely it becomes that extensive intervention would amount to assuming the role of sovereign governing authority over humanity. Given divine omnipotence, even a minimal exercise of divine 'freedom-constraining' would vastly exceed the legitimate authority exercised by any human ruler, thereby threatening the integrity of creaturely freedom and moral development.

This two-fold response is philosophically significant, especially because it highlights the dangers of conceiving divine action as a form of constant authoritarian intervention into human history. Nevertheless, it appears difficult to reconcile fully with the account of efficacious grace developed by Kronen and Reitan in *God's Final Victory*.

The tension arises because efficacious grace is itself presented not as a coercive violation of rational freedom, but as its restoration and perfection. As discussed previously, Kronen and Reitan repeatedly argue that divine transformative action can heal distorted rational agency without illegitimately overriding creaturely autonomy. If this is correct, then the universalist account already appears committed to the possibility of non-coercive transformative intervention capable of preventing at least some catastrophic moral evils prior to their occurrence.

The deontological framework does not dissolve the challenge either: If God's hands are tied during the course of history, why are they free instead in the eschaton? If the duty to respect our freedom is absolute, as Reitan argues, then why is not God constrained by that duty after our death?

[28]Reitan, 'A Deontological Theodicy', p. 202.
[29]Reitan, 'A Deontological Theodicy', p. 199.
[30]Sterba defines it as 'we should never do evil that good may come of it', in *Is a Good God Logically Possible,* ed. James P. Sterba (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 49.
[31]Reitan, 'Divine Omnipotence', pp. 404–405.
[32]Reitan, 'Divine Omnipotence', p. 411.
[33]Reitan, 'Divine Omnipotence', p. 411–412. A point he reiterates from Reitan, 'A Deontological Theodicy', p. 202–3.

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Finally, the issue is not whether God should engage in authoritarian suppression of creaturely freedom. As I have pointed out earlier, the ECEG is not asking for total divine policing of all wrongdoing or all instances of suffering. Rather, the question is why transformative grace capable of healing radically distorted rational agency should be reserved for the eschaton if analogous divine action could prevent at least some of history's worst atrocities without violating rational freedom itself. In this respect, Reitan's emphasis on divine redemption appears not so much to dissolve the ECEG as to reinforce its central question: why is divine transformative victory delayed?

5.4. Qualifying gratuitous evils

The final objection I will address concerns the notion of gratuitous evil itself. One may argue that the category is too controversial or insufficiently precise to ground the ECEG. This is arguably one of the strongest objections available, since if no evil can meaningfully be regarded as gratuitous, the challenge posed by the ECEG loses much of its force.

Throughout this paper I have largely relied upon Rowe's influential characterization of gratuitous evil, but while this definition captures the kind of evil relevant to the ECEG, it remains philosophically contested. Different cultures, traditions, and moral frameworks may disagree profoundly regarding what counts as sufficiently unjustified suffering.

Yet the ECEG does not require an absolutely uncontroversial catalogue of gratuitous evils. Rather, its force derives from the apparent preventability of at least some catastrophic moral evils given the availability of efficacious grace. The central issue is not merely the existence of suffering as such, but the occurrence of severe moral failures that efficacious grace itself appears capable of ultimately healing and transforming before those catastrophic evils occur.

At this point, a key concept in Kronen and Reitan's arguments becomes especially relevant: rational freedom. Their understanding of efficacious grace presupposes that salvation does not consist in the destruction of autonomy, but in its restoration and perfection. If this is correct, then certain moral evils acquire particular significance precisely because they represent profound distortions of rational freedom itself. Atrocities such as systematic torture, genocidal violence, or severe forms of dehumanization do not merely produce suffering; they also corrupt rational deliberation, interpersonal relationships, and the moral orientation of the agent.

This consideration does not replace Rowe's account of gratuitous evil, but intensifies the challenge posed by the ECEG. If efficacious grace can eventually heal even the gravest distortions of rational freedom without illegitimately violating creaturely agency, it becomes difficult to understand why analogous transformative action could not prevent at least some of those catastrophic corruptions prior to their occurrence. To further specify, the ECEG does not require a constant policing of human action by God. The ECEG only asks why God does not anticipate the interior healing of the will made possible by efficacious grace, before the corrupt will culminates in atrocity. The issue is not the prevention of the act, but the prevention of the disposition that leads to the act – a disposition that efficacious grace itself is supposed to heal.

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The issue, then, is not simply that such evils are painful or glaringly horrific but that if efficacious grace heals distortions of rational freedom without violating autonomy, then the permission of evils that constitute such distortions – rather than merely causing suffering – requires an additional and independent theodical justification.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has not been to refute universalism, or to demonstrate the incoherence of efficacious grace. The ECEG does not establish a logical contradiction within universalist eschatology, and nothing in the present argument shows that universalists cannot in principle respond to it. My more modest claim has been that the universalist commitment to efficacious grace generates a distinctive evidential pressure that has not received sufficient attention in the contemporary debate.

Unlike the traditional evidential argument from evil, the ECEG does not merely ask why God permits apparently gratuitous evils. Its distinctive force derives from the universalist claim that God already possesses – and will eventually employ – a morally legitimate and effective means of transforming even the gravest sinners without illegitimately violating creaturely agency. Once this commitment is granted, the question naturally arises: why should such transformative grace be reserved for the eschaton if its earlier application could have prevented at least some of history's worst atrocities?

This question does not entail that all suffering is gratuitous, or that every evil should be prevented by divine intervention. As argued above, many mundane or ordinary forms of suffering can plausibly be understood within soul-making frameworks or broader providential accounts of moral development. The ECEG concerns instead those catastrophic moral evils whose prevention appears fully compatible with the salvific process itself, and whose prevention could reasonably be expected given the concept of efficacious grace.

Several strategies remain available to the universalist. One may reject the notion of efficacious grace altogether, reinterpret its nature, adopt a more libertarian understanding of freedom, or argue that God possesses morally sufficient reasons for delaying transformative grace until the eschaton. The present paper has not attempted to demonstrate that such strategies necessarily fail. Rather, it has argued that the doctrine of efficacious grace intensifies the explanatory burden generated by apparently gratuitous evil, especially once divine transformative intervention is already understood as both legitimate and effective.

In this sense, the ECEG should be understood not as a refutation of universalism, but as a challenge internal to one influential contemporary account of universal salvation. If successful, a universalist response to the ECEG would not merely preserve the coherence of efficacious grace but would significantly strengthen the broader universalist case by clarifying why divine transformative action is delayed in the present world despite its eventual eschatological employment.

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