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Introduction

Is suffering desirable? According to large swaths of the Christian tradition, the answer to this seemingly strange question is a qualified yes. In itself, suffering is wholly undesirable, but love can exploit it as a means of expression and give it an immense value. "By suffering out of love and obedience," says St. Thomas Aquinas, "Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race." The savior's passion had atoning power, according to Aquinas, "because of the exceeding charity from which he suffered."[1]

The value of love-suffused suffering is not limited to Christ's passion, however, but is realized through the suffering of his disciples and followers as well, according to many Christian thinkers. "To love sufferings and afflictions for the love of God is the supreme point of most holy charity," says St. Francis de Sales.[2] For St. Teresa of Avila, "trials, sufferings, insults and persecutions" are "God's gifts in this world." God gives those gifts, moreover,

> in proportion to the love which He bears us. He gives more to those whom He loves most, and less to those He loves least; and He gives in accordance with the courage

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012), *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2 co. Aquinas also makes clear that "God willed Christ's death," insofar as it was accepted by Christ through charity (*Summa contra gentiles* [hereafter *SCG*] trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition (Green Bay, WI: The Aquinas Institute, 2018), *SCG* IV, cap. 55, ad 16).

[2] St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. O. S. B. Rev. Henry Benedict Mackey (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1997), 358 (Book IX, Chapter II).

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which He sees that each of us has and the love we bear to His Majesty. When He sees a soul who loves Him greatly, He knows that soul can suffer much for Him, whereas one who loves Him little will suffer little. For my own part, I believe that love is the measure of our ability to bear crosses, whether great or small.[3]

Although the sensibility displayed by Teresa and Francis may have flourished especially in the Counter Reformation period, it is clearly important throughout Christian history. Here are a handful of samples from other historical epochs, starting with our own time.

According to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, "love demands sacrifice. But if we love until it hurts, God will give us His peace and joy . . . Suffering in itself is nothing; but suffering shared with Christ's Passion is a wonderful gift."[4] She also proposes what she takes to be "the most beautiful definition of suffering": "Sorrow, suffering . . . is but a kiss of Jesus – a sign that you have come so close to Jesus that he can kiss you."[5] St. Pope John Paul II, who canonized Mother Teresa, seems to share her point of view. In his encyclical on the Christian meaning of suffering, he argues that "suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a 'civilization of love.'"[6]

Unsurprisingly, the late Middle Ages are rife with testimonies about the intimate relationship between suffering and love. St. Catherine of Siena reports having received the following message from God:

Very pleasing to Me, dearest daughter, is the willing desire to bear every pain and fatigue, even unto death, for the salvation of souls, for the more the soul endures, the more she shows that she loves Me [. . .] Consider that the love of divine charity is so closely joined in the soul with perfect patience, that neither can leave the soul without the other. For this reason (if the soul elect to love Me) she should elect to endure pains for Me in whatever mode or circumstance I may send them to her. Patience cannot be proved in any other way than by suffering, and patience is united with love.[7]

[3] Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1964), Chapter 32.7.

[4] Letter to Eileen Egan, December 14, 1976 (quoted in Mother Teresa and Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007), 146.

[5] Mother Teresa and Kolodiejchuk, *Come Be My Light*, 281.

[6] John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris* [Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering], www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html (accessed February 23, 2026), §30.

[7] Catherine of Siena, *Dialog*, trans. Algar Thorold (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1907/1994), "A Treatise of Divine Providence," 24.

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Julian of Norwich provides another interesting example from the same time. When she was around thirty years old, she asked God to give her a vivid experience of Christ's passion – "for I would that His pains were my pains . . . I desired to suffer with Him" – as well as an experience of being mortally sick.[8] "In this sickness, I desired to have all manner of pains bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should die (with all the dreads and tempests of the fiends) except the outpassing of the soul."[9]

God grants Julians requests, and when she falls ill, she receives a detailed vision of Christ's passion. Christ then asks her if she is pleased that he suffered in this way for her, and when she answers yes, Christ responds: "If thou art pleased, I am pleased: it is a joy, a bliss, and endless satisfying to me that ever suffered I Passion for thee; and if I might suffer more, I would suffer more."[10] As Julian meditates on these words, she realizes that

> as often as [Christ] *might* die, so often He *would*, and love should never let Him have rest till He had done it. And I beheld with great diligence for to learn how often He would die if He might. And verily the number passed mine understanding and my wits so far that my reason might not, nor could, comprehend it.[11]

In other words, Julian realizes that Christ's love is so great that he – if he could – would choose to die an unfathomable number of times. Moreover, he would do so even if it were not necessary, according to Julian. She points out that Christ "said . . . these words: *If I might suffer more, I would suffer more*. He said not, *If it were needful to suffer more*: for though it were not needful, if He might suffer more, He would."[12] This seems to imply that suffering, for Julian, is something positively desirable as love's most powerful means of expression.

In the early church, a mentality not far removed from Julian's can be found in a figure like St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose love for Christ expresses itself as a desire for martyrdom. "Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of

[8] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Grace Warrack (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1901), 7 (Chapter III).
[9] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 4 (Chapter II).
[10] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 46 (Revelation IX, Chapter XXII).
[11] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 46 (Revelation IX, Chapter XXII).
[12] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 47 (Revelation IX, Chapter XXII) (emphases in the original).

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the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ."[13] The Epistle of Barnabas makes explicit the rationale behind this kind of desire: "Those who wish to behold Me [Christ], and lay hold of My kingdom, must through tribulation and suffering obtain Me."[14]

The idea that suffering is desirable when endured for the love of God ultimately goes back to the New Testament.[15] For St. Paul, suffering is a necessary consequence of the believer's union with Christ through baptism.[16] Believers are "baptized into his death" (Rom 6:3) in order to rise with him, and this means that they must share in Christ's suffering as an integral part of their baptismal dying (Phil 3:10; 2 Cor 1:5).[17] We are "joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). This is why Paul can describe suffering as something to "boast" about (Rom 5:3), and a "privilege": "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (Phil 1:29).

The Letter to the Colossians portrays the sharing in Christ's suffering as a reason for joy and a way of participating in Christ's salvific mission: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24).[18] The First Letter of Peter strikes a similar

[13] Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistola ad Romanos*, cap. IV (translation from *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885)).

[14] Barnabas, *Epistola*, VII (translation from *The Epistle of Barnabas*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885)). Cf. Acts 14:22.

[15] There are of course also Old Testament precursors to this idea, for example, the thought that Israel's sufferings can count as a kind of sacrifice (see Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 45). The servant songs of Isaiah (Isa 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12) and several psalms point in this direction (e.g., Ps 22, 51), as well as the martyr theology of 2 Macc 7:36. (All biblical quotations in the present book are from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVUE)).

[16] See Barnabas Mary Ahern, "The Fellowship of His Sufferings (Phil 3, 10): A Study of St. Paul's Doctrine on Christian Suffering," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1960): 14–15.

[17] Paul's association of baptism with death is, according to Dunn, "distinctively Christian," and Paul here seems to combine two strands of his previous teaching, namely, baptism into Christ (Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 12:13) and dying with Christ (Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 10–11) (James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38a (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1988), 312).

[18] Several interpretations of this enigmatic passage have been suggested throughout history (see Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, ed. David A. Hubbard et al., Word Biblical

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note, as its author encourages believers to "rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13).[19] These attitudes to suffering and death must be understood against the background of a soteriological formula that is present in the earliest strata of the New Testament: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3); "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us" (1 Thess 5:10). As Christian Eberhart points out, "these 'dying formulas' ... convey that Christ's death is an 'effective' death by way of attributing positive meaning to it."[20] In the Gospel of John, Jesus relates this positive meaning to what seems to be a general principle about the nature of discipleship and self-giving love: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24);[21] "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).[22]

Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 77–78). Many contemporary interpreters understand its meaning against the background of the apocalyptic idea of the "woes of the Messiah" – the messianic afflictions of the end time – which according to Jewish belief had a pre-determined limit or measure that needed to be filled ("completed") (see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 115–116; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 78–79). According to Dunn, the passage develops the characteristic Pauline theme of sharing in Christ's sufferings as a "means of transition from old age to new" (115).

[19] The author's idea of joy in suffering is probably based on the Jesus-tradition behind Matt 5:11–12 ("Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you ... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven"), although the same idea is also frequently found in Jewish apocalyptic literature (J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, ed. David A. Hubbard et al., Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 262).

[20] Christian Eberhart, "Sacrifice and the New Testament," in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al. (2023), www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/SacrificeandtheNewTestament (accessed January 20, 2025), section 12. A closely related soteriological formula is the "surrender formula," exemplified in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (other examples are Rom 8:32; Gal. 1:4; Mark 10:45). As Eberhart points out, this formula can sometimes refer to "the entirety of somebody's mission," rather than merely to Jesus's death.

[21] Bultmann takes this saying to refer merely to the glorification of Christ (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 424). Other commentators, however, think that the image may have a wider application, so that the "grain of wheat" represents anyone who would be Christ's disciple (J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 689).

[22] The author of 1 John extends this saying to Jesus's disciples: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16) (see Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 812).

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There are of course other layers of meaning to – and alternative interpretations of – the biblical passages I have referred to, and many other texts would have been equally relevant to cite. Quotes from saints and mystics, moreover, could be multiplied indefinitely to make my case. The snippets I have given will suffice, however, for showing that a "qualified yes" to the question I initially asked – whether suffering is desirable – is a mainstream position in historic Christianity.[23] It is another question what to make of this position and how to evaluate it. Is there a metaphysical logic behind the tradition's valorization of suffering, or is it ultimately based on nothing but the brute fact that Christianity's founder suffered horrendously, together with the New Testament's interpretation of his suffering as being, in some sense, salvific?[24]

In mainstream contemporary theology, it is more or less an axiom that suffering should never be "glorified."[25] Modern thought in general is prone to look at testimonies such as those cited through a Nietzschean or Freudian lens and discover signs of some pathology – a masochistic preoccupation with pain, self-contempt, repression, *ressentiment*, or the like. Since it is hard to deny that excessive and distorted attitudes to suffering can be found in the Christian tradition, it is of course wholly legitimate to apply a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to Christian ideas and expressions of the sort I have cited.[26] It is also legitimate and potentially

[23] According to Simone Weil, "the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it" (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1963), 73).

[24] The claim that the New Testament ascribes salvific value specifically to Christ's suffering and death is controversial in contemporary theology but seems to be warranted by some of the things Jesus says in the Gospels, for example, in Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." Moreover, the New Testament's application to Jesus of quotes from Isaiah about the "suffering servant" indicates that his suffering is salvific. The First Letter of Peter, for example, says that "by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 24; Isa 53:5). Jesus's words about the grain of wheat in John 20:24 are also relevant in this context.

[25] For a sample of views (including some very nuanced and interesting reflections), see Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies, *Suffering and the Christian Life* (London: T&T Clark, 2019). A somewhat ironic fact is that Jesus uses the word *doxazein* (glorify) with reference to his own suffering, for example, in John 12:23.

[26] This is a common element in feminist critiques of the idea of redemptive suffering, see, for example, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carol R. Bohn (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), Chapter 7; Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon

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fruitful, however, to temporarily bracket the hermeneutics of suspicion and approach the testimonies of saints and mystics with the purpose of mining them for genuine insights about the relationship between suffering and love.

In the present book, I have chosen to explore the latter route, with the aim of accomplishing two things. First, I will try to uncover the metaphysical principles behind the Christian tradition's valorization of suffering (in the sense illustrated and explained above). Drawing mainly on the thought of St. John of the Cross and Thomas Aquinas, I will formulate my findings as a general hypothesis about the relation between human love and suffering.[27] My claim is that this hypothesis can make the radical statements about suffering quoted earlier intelligible and clarify the assumptions on which they rest.

Next, I will put my hypothesis to work by using it as the foundation for a theodicy. Constructing a theodicy is one way of dealing with the so-called problem of evil, which can be understood both as an intra-theological *aporia* and as a philosophical argument against God's existence.[28] The theodicy I will suggest aims to be relevant for the problem in both these guises, and one of my goals is to show that the existence of suffering in the amount we find in our world does not constitute strong evidence against the truth of Christianity.[29] I take this to be equivalent to showing that suffering and evil do not threaten the internal coherence of

Press, 2001); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011).

[27] Since my topic is human rather than divine love, I will not extensively engage with literature that primarily treats love as it exists in God himself, such as Brian Gaybba, "God as Love," in *God and Temporality*, ed. Bowman L. Clarke and Eugene T. Long (New York, NY: Paragon House Publishers, 1984); Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001); George M. Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008); John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015); Jordan Wessling, *Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God's Love for Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Kelly James Clark, *God and the Problems of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[28] For this distinction, see David Luy and Matthew Levering, "Introduction," in *Evil and Creation: Historical and Constructive Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. David Luy, Matthew Levering, and George Kalantzis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

[29] Today, it is customary to distinguish between "theodicy" and "defense." As I explain in Chapter 7, however, I do not find this distinction very helpful. I will therefore use the term "theodicy" in a way that includes what Alvin Plantinga and others refer to as "defenses."

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the Christian system of beliefs.[30] Unfortunately, the very notion of theodicy has been the object of massive critique in the contemporary academy, not least in theological circles. Some ground-clearing will therefore be necessary. Before I take up this task, however, I must briefly say something about the general character of this book's analysis of love.

What I will argue is that a correct understanding of the relationship between love and suffering must chart a path between two opposed pitfalls.[31] The first pitfall is the seemingly attractive idea that suffering only has a superficial or accidental relationship to human love. According to proponents of this view, there is nothing about the nature of suffering, or about human nature, that makes sacrificial suffering an especially powerful or great expression of love. True, in a sinful world, love must sometimes manifest itself through sacrificial acts, but this does not tell us anything essential about the nature of human love.[32] This view is a pitfall, I will argue, because it is false – it misrepresents the nature of human love – and because it makes God's choice to manifest his love by suffering in Christ's humanity unintelligible. In addition, the view makes the problem of evil intractable by separating the most important perfection that human nature can attain (love) from the phenomenon that provides arguments from evil with their most potent ammunition (suffering). Although partial explanations of God's permission of evil can be had without positing a logical-metaphysical link between human love and

[30] As I use the term, coherence requires probabilistic consistency and explanatory coherence in addition to logical consistency. This makes my theodicy relevant as a response to evidential arguments from evil as well as to the logical problem of evil (see Chapter 7). It could be argued, however, that displaying the internal coherence of the Christian system of beliefs in the face of evil is not sufficient for showing that evil does not constitute good evidence against Christian beliefs, since there could be evidence against Christianity that is not included in the Christian system of beliefs. However, on my view, any well-established evidence from natural reason (science, philosophy, etc.) that is relevant for assessing the rational status of Christianity is internal to the Christian system of beliefs in virtue of Christianity's respect for universal reason. This means that any proper counterevidence will produce incoherencies that Christians need to attend to.

[31] My analysis here and in what follows is indebted to Kilby. She discerns two "strands" within the Christian tradition that portray the relationship between suffering and love in different ways (Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 121). The two "pitfalls" I canvas here roughly correspond to Kilby's two "strands," although Kilby's evaluation of them differs from mine.

[32] By "human love" I here and in the rest of the book mean "love as it exists in human beings." Accordingly, even though charity ontologically speaking is *divine* love (ultimately identical to God himself), as far as it is participated by human beings, it counts as "human love." The same is true of the love of the God-Man, which involves his human nature.

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suffering, the present book proceeds from the conviction that only a deep dive into the profound *perichoresis* of love and suffering as manifested in the cross of Christ can provide materials for a solution that approaches completeness.[33] Exactly what this means will become clear as the book's argument unfolds.

The second, opposed pitfall is the idea that the relationship between suffering and love is so deep and necessary that its roots stretch all the way back to the immanent Trinity. According to this view, not even God can love without being able to suffer, and since God is love, there must be suffering – or at least something analogous to suffering – in the divine nature itself. This view is a pitfall because it gives suffering a bedrock ontological status that it cannot have, according to a Christian metaphysics. Suffering is not something that arises in God but, as I will contend, in the "interval" between God and creation.

I will argue that the correct position is to be found in the space between these opposing pitfalls. It is a truism (but an often forgotten one) that the nature and essential characteristics of human love flow from and are determined by the nature of human beings. Since we are essentially material creatures and therefore naturally vulnerable, our love necessarily includes – if it is perfect – a readiness to sacrifice our own bodily convenience and well-being for others in case this is needed. Absent such a disposition, human love is imperfect, and this is due to the kind of creatures we are. God could shield humans from all suffering, but not even he could create rational, material creatures who can love perfectly without being disposed to accept suffering out of love *under certain metaphysically possible conditions*.

What is true of human love, however, is not necessarily true of divine love, in the sense of love as it exists in God himself from eternity.[34] If God is invulnerable, and if the properties of the divine nature determine the essential characteristics of divine love, it follows that God's love has no

[33] As Francis de Sales says, "Love and death are so mingled in the Passion of Our Saviour that we cannot have the one in our heart without the other" (Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Chapter XIII).

[34] See Clark, *God and the Problems of Love*, Chapter 4. For the view that human love is similar to and therefore a reliable guide to the character of divine love, see Wessling, *Love Divine*, Chapter 1. In Chapter 4 of the same book, Wessling argues that we have no reason to differentiate divine from human love with respect to the value of compassionate suffering "unless one is independently committed to a conception of the divine nature that precludes God from suffering" (Chapter 4.III). As a classical theist, however, I take myself to have independent reasons to deny divine suffering.

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intrinsic reference to sacrifice and suffering.[35] In this book, I am going to proceed on the basis of this classically theistic understanding of God, which – I contend – is fully compatible with the Christian claim that God expresses his own love by suffering in an assumed human nature.[36] What I will argue, accordingly, is that human love, and human love alone, has an essential or intrinsic relationship to suffering. The nature of this relationship is complex, however, and needs to be spelled out through a modal analysis of love as a *habitus* or virtue. This is a main task of the present book, and the analysis I will suggest will leave untouched the possibility of perfect love in heaven (where there is no suffering), as well as the possibility of a primordial state without human suffering.[37] As a result of certain metaphysical constraints on the realization of perfect human love, however, a world in which God permits innocent suffering for a limited time can be better, I will argue, than a world in which God does not permit any suffering at all. This claim, if true, provides the starting point for a theodicy.

1.1 THEODICY: CLEARING THE GROUND

That God's permission of evil is explicable in terms of a greater good is widely acknowledged among classical theologians,[38] as well as among

[35] For a different view, see Wessling, *Love Divine*, Chapter 4. Mullins has argued that God's immutability and self-sufficieny do not necessarily exclude divine suffering, see R. T. Mullins, "Why Can't the Impassible God Suffer? Analytic Reflections on Divine Blessedness," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2, no. 1 (2018): 3–22

[36] For criticisms of classically theistic construals of God's love, see Vanhoozer, *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*; Wessling, *Love Divine* (especially Chapter 4); John Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001). For criticisms of classical theism in general, see, for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 217–230; Daniel J. Hill, *Divinity and Maximal Greatness* (London: Routledge, 2004). For defenses of classical theism, see, for example, the volume *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023).

[37] The possibility of such a state is not excluded by the fact that humans have evolved from other animals. For a way of harmonizing a traditional conception of the suffering-free existence enjoyed by Adam and Eve with evolutionary theory, see Nicanor Austriaco, "A Theologial Fittingness Argument for the Historicity of the Fall of *Homo Sapiens*," *Nova et Vetera, English Edition* 13, no. 3 (2015): 651–667. My own argument in this book, however, is uncommitted with respect to the existence of a primordial "Edenic" state (see Section 1.4).

[38] See, for example, St. Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1996), Chapter XI, 11; Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1; *ST* III, q. 1, a. 3,

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analytic philosophers of religion of a theistic stripe. In contemporary theology, however, the situation is different. Surprising as it might seem to outsiders, many theologians reject the idea that God permits evil in view of a greater good. As I will show here, what they reject is not merely the idea that we can *know* what the greater good that figures in God's reason for permitting evil is. They make the much stronger claim that there simply *is* no greater good that justifies God's permission of evil. As a consequence, they hold that the project of theodicy is misconceived by its very nature, if not outrightly immoral.[39] This stance is common even among theologians who can be described as "classical" (or at least "neo-classical"[40]) theists, and who therefore are committed to a strong notion of divine omnipotence.

Ian McFarland is an example of such a theologian. He writes:

> Proposed "solutions" to the problem of evil invariably run afoul of the basic logic of creation from nothing by assigning evil a place in creation as an experience that is either inevitable or justifiable. But if evil is that which God does not will, and nothing is created except that which is willed by God, then evil can have no place in creation, and any attempt to argue otherwise is false either to the essential character of evil or to the sovereignty of God. In this respect, Christians do well to avoid every attempt to explain evil.[41]

ad 3. Note that the claim that God's permission of evil is "explicable in terms of a greater good" does not entail that *we* are in a position to *know* what this greater good is.

[39] The claim that there is no greater good that justifies God's permission of evil is incompatible with "skeptical theism" as well as with theodicy. Skeptical theists assume that God – if he exists – has a good reason for permitting evil. What they deny is merely that we are in a position to know what this reason is or might be. In the present book, I leave the question of whether skeptical theism is a viable response to the problem of evil open. I hence do not presume that theodicy is the only way of responding to the problem of evil from a Christian standpoint. For brief oversights of skeptical theism, see Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," in *Oxford Handbook to Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Justin P. McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 7 (2010): 611–623. For criticism, see Laura W. Ekstrom, *Evil and Theodicy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Arguably, there is some tension between skeptical theism and theodicy, see Francis Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

[40] For the distinction between classical and neoclassical theism, see Edward Feser, "The Neo-Classical Challenge to Classical Theism," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 8 (2022): 1–9.

[41] Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 131. James K. A. Smith expresses a very similar view when he explains what he takes to be Augustine's stance on evil: "Augustine is not trying to make sense of evil. To make sense of it, to have an explanation for it, to be able to identify its cause, would mean that it has a place in the world. Evil is what ought not to be, the

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In this passage, McFarland does not merely make an epistemological claim about the futility of trying to *find out* the correct explanation of evil – why God permits it. He implies that there simply is no such explanation to be found. If God had a good reason for permitting evil, its existence would be justifiable by reference to this reason.[42] According to McFarland, however, "evil can have no place in creation . . . as an experience that is either inevitable or justifiable." It follows that evil either exists without divine permission (which means that God is unable to prevent it), or that God permits evil *for no good reason*, which seems to be an evil thing to do.

Another theologian with similar views is John Milbank:

> Thus evil for the Christian tradition was radically without cause – indeed it was not even self-caused, but was rather the (impossible) refusal of cause. In this way privation theory offers not an "explanation" of evil, but instead rigorously remains with its inexplicability, for "explanation" can pertain only to existence, and here evil is not seen as something in existence. Indeed it is regarded for this reason as not even explicable *in principle*, not even explicable for God. Since evil is in this way *so* problematic that it falls outside the range of *problema*, there has never been for theologians any "problem of evil."[43]

There are several problems in this passage. First, it is clearly untrue that "explanation can pertain only to existence." A privation needs an explanation as much as something that positively exists. "Why does this hen lack a leg?" is a perfectly reasonable question, for example. Second, if it is true that evil is "not even explicable for God," then we must ask how God can guarantee that heaven will be free from evil. What prevents privations from inexplicably rearing their ugly heads there?[44]

disorder of creation, the violation we protest. Evil has no place, no room to fit, no home here in a good creation [. . .] The price to pay for explaining evil is to give up naming and opposing it. As soon as we 'explain' evil, it vanishes" (James K. A. Smith, "How Augustine Responded to the Problem of Evil without Solving It," *The Christian Century* October 23, 2019, www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/how-augustine-responded-problem-evil-without-solving-it (accessed February 20, 2026)).

[42] This is true even if the reason in question would permanently elude *us*.

[43] John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17–18.

[44] The claim that privations might have no explanation is also difficult to reconcile with plausible versions of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, such as the version defended by Alexander R. Pruss in *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70. As Pruss argues, abandonment of this principle has serious skeptical implications. See also R. Koons and A. Pruss, "Skepticism and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 1 (2021): 1079–1099.

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The biggest problem, however, is this. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that evil is "radically without cause," as Milbank claims. The question remains why God does not eliminate all evils as soon as they randomly pop up and start to corrupt beings. If Milbank is right, God cannot have a good reason for permitting uncaused evils to *persist*, because the persistence of those evils would then be explicable in terms of this reason. Milbank's claim that evil is "not even explicable *in principle*, not even explicable for God" hence entails that God either does not really *permit* evils to persist once they have come into existence (which means that he lacks the power to eliminate them), or that he permits evils to persist without a reason (or at least without knowing his own reason).[45]

Since it is absurd to hold that God permits evil without a reason, or without knowing his own reason, Milbank as well as McFarland are committed to the claim that God does not really permit evil at all. Evil simply occurs, and God is powerless to prevent it. This view, however, is in conflict with Christian theism. To be precise, it is incompatible with all forms of theism that claim that God could freely have abstained from creating anything at all. Given the latter claim, which is accepted by the vast majority of Christian thinkers,[46] it follows by strict logic that God

[45] Many other theologians besides those I have quoted hold similar views, although they often state them less conspicuously. Karen Kilby, for example, seems to hold that God can and will overcome evil, but that there simply is no explanation of why he allowed evil in the first place. Kilby writes: "Christians believe God is working salvation, and trust that ultimately God will bring good out of all conceivable evils, but this does not make these evils goods, nor render their presence explicable . . . When we see good coming from evil, we can see this as the beginning of the hoped-for work of God, but not the beginning of any kind of explanation" (Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 81). Although I disagree with Kilby, her book is commendable for clearly explaining why the problem of evil cannot be dismissed as an "enlightenment invention" that is irrelevant for those who believe in the God of the Bible (for this kind of argument, see, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), Chapter II; Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1–37; Terrence W. Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 221–229). As Kilby points out, "even if the canonically formulated 'problem of evil' does not come up within Christian theology, something rather like it seems often to be lurking in the wings" (Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 80).

[46] Stanley Hauerwas represents a mainstream position in contemporary theology when he writes: "Creation did not have to be; it is God's free self-giving . . . While it is certainly true that, having created, God would not be other than the God who creates, this does not provide us with an account of the God who would metaphysically require God to so create" (Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering*, 79).

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has the power to prevent all evils.[47] He could have done so simply by abstaining from creating, thereby making sure that there would be no wars, no murders, no rapes, no torture, and no genocides. Since he nevertheless chose to create, it must be the case that he prioritizes the existence of the world (or some part or aspect of it) over the nonexistence of all these evils. This means that he permits evil in view of the greater good of the existence of the world (or some part or aspect of it).[48]

[47] For a different understanding of God's power, see David H. Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God's Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[48] The only way for Christians to escape this conclusion is to deny the premise – that God could have abstained from creating. Inspired by Sergius Bulgakov (see, e.g., *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 46–49), David Bentley Hart makes this move, as he claims that "there is no meaningful distinction between freedom and necessity" with respect to God's activity (David Bentley Hart, *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Pess, 2022), 105; see also John Milbank, "Orthodoxy, Knowledge, and Freedom," in *Exorcising Philosophical Modernity: Cyril O'Regan and Christian Discourse After Modernity*, ed. Philip John Paul Gonzales (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020), 235). Unfortunately, if this is true, it follows that there is no meaningful distinction between contingency and necessity within the realm of creation either. If God's act of producing creatures is not contingent (as Hart's statement entails), then the products of this act (creatures) cannot be contingent either, which means that we are facing a "modal collapse." Hart is therefore inconsistent when he says that "the temporal is, from the perspective of the finite, contingent" (Hart, *You Are Gods*, 104. For a similar critique of Hart's view, see James Dominic Rooney, "The Ends of the Divine: David Bentley Hart and Jordan Daniel Wood on Grace," *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 3 (2024): 811–840). For a traditional Thomistic solution to the problem of how God's act of creating can be free and contingent, despite the fact that God in virtue of the doctrine of divine simplicity is identical to all his acts, see Henri Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy – Volume II: Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. E. O'Hanley (Charlottetown, Canada: St. Dunstan's University, 1948), 328. Grenier argues that "God's free act is his necessary act as connoting a non-necessary transcendental relation to creatures, i.e., a non-necessary termination in creatures" (328). See also Christopher Tomaszewski, "How the Absolutely Simple Creator Escapes a Modal Collapse," in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023). A mediating position between Hart's and the traditional one is represented by Norman Kretzmann, who argues that "God's will is necessitated as regards *whether* to create, but fully free as regards *what* to create" (Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 254 (and Chapter 7). This view avoids (unlike Hart's) modal collapse, but it cannot be used to undermine the claim that God permits evil for the sake of a greater good. If God is "fully free as regards *what* to create," it follows that he could have abstained from creating humans and settled for merely creating (say) a number of hydrogen molecules. If he had done so, there would have been no evil. For the view that God creates necessarily because he is essentially kenotic love, see Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Thomas Jay Oord, *Defining*

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In the present context, it is important not to confuse the latter claim with the proposition that God uses evil as a *means* to a greater good. An agent can permit evil in view of a greater good without using the evil in question as a means. We can see this by the following example. Any contemporary national state could prevent a lot of horrendous traffic accidents by lowering the speed limits on all public roads to 30 km per hour. The reason why most states do not do this is that it would make the transportation system less efficient, which in turn would be bad for the economy, complicate many people's lives, etc. This means that contemporary states typically permit horrendous evils for the sake of what they take to be a greater good, namely, an efficient transportation system and all the goods that flow from this.

Clearly, however, this does not count as a case of using evil as a *means* to a greater good. The means to the realization of an efficient transportation system in this scenario is the decision to allow high speeds on the roads. The horrendous traffic accidents that this results in are foreseen but nonintended by-products of this decision. As this illustrates, an agent can permit evil for the sake of a greater good without using the evil as a means. Saying that God permits evil for the sake of a greater good, therefore, does not necessarily commit one to holding that he uses evil as a means, something that seems incompatible with God's goodness.[49] A good deal of criticism directed at theodicy in general fails to make this crucial distinction,[50] which I will come back to in Chapter 7.

My reasoning so far seems to have proceeded on the assumption that if God exists, he is a moral agent whose actions must – like any agent's – be evaluated in relation to moral norms. The Thomist philosopher Brian Davies has argued, however, that this idea represents a kind of "category mistake." Moral properties cannot be ascribed to God in any meaningful sense – he is simply the wrong kind of reality for that.[51] As a result, the

Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), Chapter 6.

[49] An important difference between God and a political state, of course, is that God has unlimited causal powers. This means that God would only have to accept an evil by-product of his action if there is a broadly logical relationship between this evil (or God's permission of it) and the good that God wants to realize through his act. More about this, and the notion of broadly logical (or metaphysical) necessity in Chapter 7.

[50] An example is found in N. N. Trakakis, "'And Therefore I Hasten to Return My Ticket': Anti-Theodicy Radicalised," *Sophia* 60, no. 3 (2021): 703.

[51] Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006), Chapter 4; Brian Davies, "Does the 'Problem of Evil' Rest on a Mistake?," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 85, nos. 1–2 (2024): 8–22. See also Edward Feser,

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project of theodicy must be seen as misconceived, according to Davies. God's creation of a world that contains a good deal of evil is not an act that can or needs to be morally justified.

Although I believe that God can be regarded, in an analogical sense, as a moral agent, I do not think that the falsity of this claim would undermine the project of theodicy.[52] Contrary to what Davies assumes, doing theodicy does not commit one to believing that God is a moral agent, or that properties such as "moral goodness" are ascribable to God. Suppose that the statement "God is good" only means that he is the summit of metaphysical perfection and the source of all goodness in the world, as Davies claims. Would this entail that God's goodness is compatible with any kind of behavior on his part? Davies himself assumes that this is not the case. Following Aquinas, he argues that God is not in any sense the cause of sin and merely accidentally the cause of "natural" evil.[53] Davies writes: "I take it for granted . . . that God cannot be thought of as good if he deliberately causes evil as an end in itself."[54] Clearly, then, there are behaviors that are incompatible with God's metaphysical goodness. Now, one behavior that classical theologians like St. Augustine and Aquinas regard as incompatible with God's metaphysical goodness is *to permit evils for no good reason*. Quoting Augustine, Aquinas writes: "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and power were such as to bring good even out of evil."[55] This claim entails that God would not be the highest good if he permitted evils for no good reason.[56]

"The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 268.

[52] For critique Davies's view, see James P. Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), Chapter 6. For criticism of Davies's interpretation of Aquinas, see Brian J. Shanley, *The Thomist Tradition* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), Chapter 5.

[53] Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 176–190.

[54] Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 173.

[55] *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1. The claim that God's metaphysical goodness is incompatible with his permitting evil for no good reason is eminently reasonable in itself, independently of the authority of Aquinas and Augustine. In light of the intrinsic badness of evil, it would be irrational for any agent to permit evil for no good reason.

[56] At one point, Davies claims that God does not act for reasons (Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 215–219). This is a strange thing for a Thomist to say, since it is hard to see what sense could be made of Aquinas's discussion of the "motives of the Incarnation" (*ST* III, q. 1) if God did not become incarnate for some reason or other. The Nicene Creed, moreover, explicitly says that God became incarnate "for our salvation" (*propter nostram salutem*). However, what Davies in the final analysis seems to mean by denying that God acts for reasons is merely that God does not deliberate about what to do

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If this is true, there is no escaping the "problem of evil." Given Augustine's and Aquinas's view of what God's metaphysical goodness entails, atheists can argue that God probably does not exist, because there are evils that God seems to have no good reason to permit. In response to such arguments, theists can suggest possible reasons that God might have for permitting the relevant evils, without thereby implying that God is a moral agent. Augustine's and Aquinas's view (which Davies claims to share) hence implies that theodicy is a meaningful, or at least a legitimate, activity. This means that we need not discuss, in the present context, whether God is a moral agent or not. In this book, I will assume that he is, but it should be kept in mind that this assumption is not essential for my argument.

Finally, another global critique of the enterprise of theodicy alleges that it is immoral by its very nature, and that engaging in this discourse practice therefore "*creates* evils," as Terrence Tilley puts it.[57] Although this kind of critique comes in many guises,[58] much of it rests on something like the following claim: The very idea that God's permission of evils (and especially of horrendous evils) might be justifiable by reference to a greater good embodies or represents a denial of the seriousness of the evils in question.[59] If you hold, for example, that God's permission of the Holocaust could possibly be justified in this way, you are simply

and does not strive to satisfy some needs of his. Davies admits, however – with Aquinas – that God wills one thing on account of another (see *ST* I, q. 19, a. 5 co; *ST* I, q. 23, a. 5 co). This is all I mean by saying that God acts for reasons. If God wills one thing on account of another, it is clearly meaningful to ask: *Why* (on account of what) does God will to permit evil?

[57] Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 3.

[58] For overviews, see Toby Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 1 (2016): 56–65; Nick N. Trakakis, "Antitheodicy," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBryer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013). A closely related phenomenon is "Protest Theodicy," see John K. Roth, "A Theodicy of Protest," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2001).

[59] See Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 71–72; Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy," 59–60; Lauri Snellman, "'Anti-Theodicy' and Antitheodicies," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 1 (2019): 215. For a different view of the status of the mentioned claim in anti-theodicies, see Gabriel Echazú, "Does Moral Anti-Theodicy Beg the Question?," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 95, no. 2 (2024): 126–129. The fact that moral critiques of theodicy attack the very idea of a justification for God's permission of evils explains why anti-theodicists usually are unwilling to accept "skeptical theism" (see Trakakis, "And Therefore I Hasten to Return My Ticket," 700–701). The latter position does not deny the *existence* of a God-justifying greater good, but merely casts doubt on our ability to know what this good is.

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displaying an "irremissible moral blindness" by refusing to acknowledge the gravity of this horrendous evil.[60] Theodicies, in other words, "misdeclare" or "disguise" evils by implicitly portraying them as less evil than they really are.[61]

As I will shortly argue, there is a true moral intuition behind this kind of critique, and it needs to be taken seriously if the enterprise of theodicy is to be credible. In order correctly to identify this intuition, however, we must first discern where the critique goes wrong on a theoretical level. As it stands, it cannot be endorsed by anyone who believes that God exists and could have abstained from creating the world.[62] If the latter claim is true and God has *freely* created the world, it follows that he permitted the Holocaust and other horrendous evils for the sake of a greater good, since he could have prevented them by simply abstaining from creating. Now, if God has in fact permitted all evils in view of a greater good, then clearly it cannot be intrinsically immoral for us to *think* or *say* that he has done so.[63] Otherwise, God must be immensely more immoral than we are,

[60] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 84.

[61] In addition to this, moral anti-theodicists also allege that theodicy involves moral impropriety in three other ways: 1) theodicists do wrong to victims of evils by adopting an insensitive attitude to them, 2) theodicists must necessarily practice a morally vicious form of emotional detachment, 3) the communication of theodicies has harmful consequences, such as legitimizing structures of oppression and other evils. For good responses to all three arguments, see Robert Mark Simpson, "Moral Antitheodicy: Prospects and Problems," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (2009): 153–169. Simpson argues that the first two points of critique – the arguments from insensitivity and detachment – err by "implicitly discounting the possibility of there being a plausible explanation for God's permission of evil" (163). This confirms my view, stated above, that moral critiques of theodicy for the most part presuppose a rejection of the very idea that God could permit evil for the sake of a greater good. As to the third point of critique – harmful consequences – Simpson rightly points out that it is an empirical question what consequences theodicies have. Furthermore, "it seems reasonable to expect that a theodicy which 'gets things right' in its claims about God, evil, the afterlife, and so on, will also support an upright moral orientation towards the evils that exist in our world" (166). This means that the third form of critique, like the two previous ones, presupposes that there can be no such thing as a *true* theodicy.

[62] For philosophical rebuttals of the moral critique, independent of the truth of Christian theism, see Simpson, "Moral Antitheodicy"; Atle Ottesen Søvik, "Why Almost All Moral Critique of Theodicies Is Misplaced," *Religious Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008): 479–484; Robert Simpson, "Some Moral Critique of Theodicy Is Misplaced, But Not All," *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 339–346. For a critique of other aspects of antitheodicy (as they appear in Kenneth Surin's work), see David O'Connor, "In Defense of Theoretical Theodicy," *Modern Theology* 5, no. 1 (1988): 61–74.

[63] For the distinction between *believing in* and *communicating* a theodicy, see Atle Ottesen Søvik, "More on Moral Critique of Theodicies: Reply to Robert Simpson," *Religious Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 384.

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since he has actually done what we (as theodicists) merely think or speak about. Since an immoral God is no God at all, the anti-theodical critique strongly suggests that no God exists.

Note that the claim I here reject as unsustainable for Christian theists is merely the categorical one that theodicy *as such* is an immoral enterprise, in the sense that it is always and everywhere wrong to propose or endorse a theodicy. Rejecting this claim does not commit one to denying that there are certain contexts in which it would be morally wrong to bring up theodicy for discussion, or that particular theodicies might be morally problematic. However, if it is true that believers in a freely creating God cannot reject as immoral the *general* claim that God permits evils in view of a greater good, it follows that no theodicy can be rejected a priori on moral grounds by those who believe in such a God (or even in the possibility of such a God). Religious anti-theodicists, therefore, must descend into the trenches and explain why the specific features of particular theodicies are morally objectionable. Since this applies to the theodicy of the present book as well, I take it that the theoretical ground has been cleared for a fair assessment of its virtues and vices.

Theory is one thing, however, and the concrete reality of evil quite another. The correct intuition behind the moral critique of theodicy is that certain forms of suffering are simply intolerable. Given a clear-eyed apprehension of – and sufficient closeness to – evils such as torture, sadistic rape, or cancer in children, most people will find that their strongest desire is for those evils to stop. The fact that this is how we react to extreme suffering – both our own and in many cases that of others – is closely connected to the very nature of suffering. An aversion of the will towards some evil seems to be an intrinsic and constitutive element of suffering as such, and many theorists portray this as the essential element. According to John Hick, for example, suffering can be characterized as a "state of mind in which we wish violently or obsessively that our situation were otherwise."[64]

It is clear, however, that the will can be divided. It is not unusual to have a strong desire to avoid some evil, but an even stronger desire to obtain some good whose realization is incompatible with avoiding the evil. In such situations, we may voluntarily expose ourselves to the suffering that confronting the evil entails. This means that Hick's definition needs to be amended. In order for suffering to be correctly ascribable

[64] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1985), 318.

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to a person, she need not necessarily wish *simpliciter* – all things considered – that her "situation were otherwise." It is sufficient if the evil is something that she – at some level – "minds." Michael Brady accommodates this insight by defining suffering as "an unpleasant or negative affective experience that [the subject] minds, where to mind some state is to have an occurrent desire that it not be occurring."[65] This definition allows that we may simultaneously have other – and contradictory – desires besides the suffering-constitutive desire that things be otherwise.

Nevertheless, if the will's aversion to some situation is strong and violent enough, it is likely to prevail over all other desires. Situations involving extreme physical pain are paradigmatic examples. When we merely contemplate, from a distance, what it would be like to have one's leg amputated without anesthesia, it is possible to think that the resulting pain would be worthwhile if the procedure were the only way to save one's life (e.g., in the context of a pre-modern war). However, when the pain is imminently at hand – or a fortiori when we are in the midst of it – most people will be wholly overtaken by the desire to avoid the pain, at any cost. This is why amputations without anesthesia usually require that the patient is tied down.

It is natural for us to react to extreme evils in this way, and our disposition to do so has an evolutionary explanation. Moreover, since we are social and rational animals capable of empathy and moral thought, we are also disposed to be overtaken by strong and sometimes all-overriding feelings of aversion towards the suffering of others, especially those who are close to us. It is good that we are thus disposed. The world would be a much worse place if people could easily override their natural reactions to extreme evils affecting themselves or others.

However, while critics of theodicy are certainly right that many evils are simply intolerable – "mind-stopping," as Surin puts it[66] – they are wrong to equate this predicate with "unjustifiable." That this equation is wrong at least in some cases is shown by the example already given. The fact that an amputation patient finds the pain intolerable and wants to get away from it at any cost does not entail that her suffering cannot be justified in view of a greater good. When the pain has stopped and her life has been saved, the patient may agree that the procedure was justified. This example, of course, does not show that *all* cases of extreme suffering can possibly be justified – showing this is the end game of the project of

[65] Michael S. Brady, *Suffering and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27.
[66] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 84.

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theodicy. My point here is merely to note that mind-stopping suffering is not the same thing as unjustifiable suffering.

If this is right, it follows that theodicists who argue that God's permission of horrendous suffering is justifiable can, without inconsistency, agree with anti-theodicists that torture, rape, and cancer in children are simply intolerable and mind-stopping evils. As human beings, we (or at any rate many of us) are incapable of closely apprehending such evils without finding that we cannot desire anything more than that they stop. The issue that divides theodicists and anti-theodicists is whether this perspective "from the inside" of suffering (so to speak) is the *ultimate* moral vantage point, beyond which no truth about human suffering could be found or should be sought.

With respect to this issue, anti-theodicists can at first glance seem to occupy the moral high ground. They claim to be the ones who take the suffering of victims most seriously, since they refuse to accept a relativization of the experiences of sufferers in favor of some purportedly "higher" or more ultimate perspective. The most compassionate stance, according to this view, is the one that refuses to look at the world except through the eyes of those who suffer here and now.[67]

On the other hand, it can be argued that a denial of the possibility to relativize suffering in view of a higher vantage point deprives the victims of suffering of all hope. If there is no more ultimate perspective than the one occupied by people who here and now experience intolerable suffering, it follows that there is no redemption from suffering. Even if all suffering at some point would stop and be followed by eternal bliss, the suffering must still be considered weightier and more ultimate than the bliss, because otherwise the perspective of the victims *at the time when they suffered* has been relativized and transcended in favor of a

[67] The perspective "from within" suffering is obviously crucial, and contextual theologians have rightly emphasized its importance for theology. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, argues that the situation of those who suffer must profoundly shape the way we speak about God. "Job's words," he writes, "are a criticism of every theology that lacks human compassion and contact with reality; the one-directional movement from theological principles to life really goes nowhere" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 29). At the same time, a one-directional movement in the other direction – letting the perspective from "within" suffering wholly determine one's apprehension of God and the world – is equally distortive. The hope of redemption from suffering requires the ability to imagine a God who is beyond the sway of suffering and evil. According to Christianity, the two perspectives (from within suffering, and from beyond it) converge in the notion of an incarnate, suffering God who in his divine nature is impassible.

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purportedly more fundamental perspective.[68] If this kind of relativization is unacceptable, as anti-theodicists argue, it follows that nothing can *ever* be allowed to dethrone suffering from its position as the final determinant of human existence.

This conclusion is explicitly drawn by Brown and Parker:

> suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed . . . God's grief is as ultimate as God's love. Every tragedy eternally remains and is eternally mourned. Eternally the murdered scream, Betrayal. Eternally God sings kaddish for the world.[69]

Suffering is here taken so seriously that any suggestion about its redemption is seen as an insult to the victims. Is this a compassionate stance? I would argue that it is the opposite. What Brown and Parker do is lock victims into the prison of their own suffering for eternity, denying them all hope that something else will in the final analysis prove to be ultimate.

Many anti-theodicists would argue that Brown and Parker go too far. In order to take suffering seriously we need not deny the possibility of its *redemption*, we need only reject the possibility of its *justification*. This is an unstable position, however. It is only a God who has permitted suffering for a good reason – and hence justifiably – that can redeem us from it and redeem our suffering as such. A God who has not *permitted* suffering but was simply powerless to prevent it, is also powerless to redeem us. A God who has permitted suffering but without a good reason might equally well choose not to redeem us from suffering for no good reason. Only a God of whom some theodicy is possibly true can be relied upon to save.[70]

1.2 SUFFERING IN GOD?

Earlier I mentioned a second pitfall to be avoided when thinking about the relation between suffering and love in the context of theodicy. This is

[68] This, arguably, is the stance of Ivan in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

[69] Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?," 21.

[70] This theodicy might not be known or knowable by us, of course, and the "vantage point" from which suffering is fully justifiable might be occupied only by God. However, if such a vantage point *exists*, it might be possible for us theoretically to approach it, although always with conflicting feelings and desires. Theoretical engagement of this kind may be of direct practical relevance, moreover. It is well known that the way we intellectually frame our suffering affects how much we suffer (see Bethany N. Sollereder, "Compassionate Theodicy: A Suggested Truce Between Intellectual and Practical Theodicy," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (2021): 387–388). Engaging in theodicy might hence make people more resilient in the face of suffering, as Sollereder points out.

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the view that suffering can only be fitted into a Christian worldview if it is so tightly connected to love that suffering, or something analogous to it, must be present in the divine nature itself.[71] For many who do not believe that God permits evil on account of a greater good, appealing to divine suffering has become an attractive alternative to theodicy as a way of defending God's goodness in the face of widespread suffering in the world. Theologians of this stripe attempt to make human suffering intelligible by reference to divine suffering, which they in turn explain as a necessary aspect of a God who is love. As Jürgen Moltmann contends,

> if love is the acceptance of the other without regard to one's own well-being, then it contains within itself the possibility of sharing in suffering and freedom to suffer as a result of the otherness of the other. Incapability of suffering in this sense would contradict the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love.[72]

Moltmann's move can be taken to have relevance for the problem of evil in two ways. First, it can be argued that "a God of salvation would be justified in creating a world which contained so much pain and suffering only if he were prepared to share the burden of pain and suffering with his creatures."[73] Besides Moltmann, thinkers like Dorothee Sölle and

[71] For overviews of the contemporary debates about divine suffering, see James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, "Introduction: Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Theology," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Humn Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 103, no. 13 (1986): 385–389; Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (1984): 6.

[72] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 237. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), Chapter 2; Marcel Sarot, "Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God," *Modern Theology* 7, no. 2 (1991): 135–152. For a cogent response to the claim that God must be passible in order to love, see Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *Ars Disputandi: The Online Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1–13. Weinandy writes: "The absence of suffering in God actually liberates God from any self-love that would move him to act to relieve his own suffering. The absence of suffering allows God's love to be completely altruistic and beneficent." (10) See also his book-length treatment of the issue of divine suffering, Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2000). A different defense of divine impassibility is given in Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For defenses of divine passibility, see, for example, Charles Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas W. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988).

[73] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 67.

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Eberhard Jüngel are influential proponents of similar views,[74] which are usually linked to a moral critique of theodicy. As Karen Kilby points out, there is

> a very common answer to the question of what theology ought to do if not engage in theodicy, namely that it ought instead to proclaim the suffering of God. Almost as appealing as the free-will theodicy seems to be with students, so the notion of the suffering of God is to professional theologians.[75]

However, the idea that God's co-suffering with his creation has any bearing on the problem of evil is misconceived. The decision of a father to let his children play with matches and gasoline does not become morally justified by the fact that he suffers with them when they set themselves on fire. It does not become justified even if he lets his children set *him* on fire so that he suffers in exactly the same way as they do. In the absence of a good reason for letting them play with matches and gasoline, no suffering on the part of the father will have any tendency to justify his permission. Neither can the putative fact that God suffers with us replace a divine reason for letting us suffer.

Perhaps it could be argued that although God's fellow-suffering with us does not constitute a justification for his permission of our suffering, it is still the case that God would be morally defective if he failed to be emotionally affected by our suffering. So while divine suffering is not a sufficient condition for the justice of God's permission of our suffering, it is a necessary condition for God's moral goodness. In other words, what we need is *both* a divine reason for permitting suffering, *and* divine fellow-suffering.

However, the claim that God would be morally defective if he does not suffer with us is question-begging. It is true that a being who is constitutionally capable of having emotions and to suffer would be morally imperfect if he failed to suffer in sympathy when others suffer. However, it does not follow that a being who is *not* constitutionally capable of suffering would be morally reprehensible by not suffering in sympathy. What is moral or immoral to do or to feel depends on what kind of being one is. If God is very different from us, the absence of suffering in him might not be a defect, even though a corresponding absence would be a defect in us.[76]

[74] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Chapter 4.
[75] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 68.
[76] Sarot argues in a similar way, although he for other reasons defends divine passibility, see Sarot, "Auschwitz, Morality and the Suffering of God."

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The second way in which the purported suffering of God can be taken to be of relevance to the problem of evil is because this idea seems to provide some intelligibility to the omnipresence of suffering in the world. If not even God can love without suffering, suffering seems to be necessary in a deep sense, and we cannot expect human life to be suffering-free. Salvation, accordingly, cannot entail the total removal of suffering, but must instead mean that God becomes present in the midst of it, thereby defeating its power to alienate.[77] As Moltmann puts it:

> Therefore anyone who enters into love, and through love experiences inextricable suffering and the fatality of death, enters into the history of the human God, for his forsakenness is lifted away from him in the forsakenness of Christ, and in this way he can continue to love, need not look away from the negative and from death, but can sustain death.[78]

Although Moltmann's approach to suffering has been influential, it is arguably Hans Urs von Balthasar who has gotten the most explanatory mileage out of the idea that suffering has a basis in God. Unlike Moltmann, Balthasar does not claim that God suffers in his divinity, but only that something *analogous* to suffering goes on there, in the bosom of the Trinity. Balthasar hence speaks about "that unnamed divine perfection, that eternal prototype in him, which in us is pain."[79] As Jacob Friesenhahn describes his view: "Balthasar provides a mediating position between a divine nature that somehow includes evil and an indifferent deity, who remains aloof from the world's evil, while Christ suffers in his humanity alone."[80]

Balthasar arrives at this mediating position by describing the eternal relations between the divine persons of the Trinity in terms that vaguely suggest some degree of negativity, vulnerability, and loss. He talks, for instance, about the "infinite distance" between the Father and the Son and describes the Father's generation of the Son in terms of a divine

[77] This would seem to drastically reduce the value of salvation. See Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 351; Bruce D. Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

[78] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 263.

[79] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. V: The Last Act* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 147.

[80] Jacob H. Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy: The Trinitarian Theology of von Balthasar and the Problem of Evil* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 152.

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self-emptying or "Urkenosis," which entails as "super-death."[81] The Father's "surrendering" of himself to the Son, and the Son's corresponding self-surrender to the Father imply, for Balthasar, a note of loss or sacrifice.[82] He can even speak in this context about an intra divine "godlessness." The Father, writes Balthasar,

> lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) God-lessness (of love, of course). The latter must not be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it.[83]

In another context, Balthasar makes a similar point in terms of death: "Both life and death are images of God . . . if death is understood to mean the sacrifice of life, then the original image of that sacrifice is in God as the gift of life flowing between the Father and the Son."[84]

This portrayal of the eternal character of divine love provides the basis for an integrated vision of how the suffering of this world and God fit together.[85] Since the roots of suffering are inextricably intertwined with love in God's inner life, according to Balthasar, it can be argued that some light has been shed on the human condition. Moreover, through our own suffering and death, we can participate in the kenotic aspect of God's inner life and thus be conformed to the Trinity. On Balthasar's construal,

[81] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Vol. V*, 84. As Thomas Joseph White points out, this is inspired by Barth's idea that the divine Son eternally shows obedience to the Father, as well as by Sergius Bulgakov's view of intra-Trinitarian renunciation, separation and "supra-eternal kenosis" (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1 – The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 157–357; Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 49; White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 392–395). For a stringent critique of the idea of an intra-Trinitarian, eternal obedience on the part of the Son, see Bruce D. Marshall, "Personal Distinction in God and the Possibility of Kenosis," *Angelicum* 98, no. 1 (2021): 65–104. Marshall argues that ascribing an eternal attribute of "obedience" to the Son (and a corresponding attribute of "commanding" to the Father) violates the numerical identity of the divine nature and will (100–104).

[82] Balthasar writes: "No one doubts that, as the New Testament tells us, the Father's act of giving up the Son and the Spirit in the economy is pure love, as is the Son's and the Spirit's act of letting themselves be given up. But how could this fundamental claim about the economy of salvation have no foundation in any property of the essence of the Triune God" (Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Vol. II: Truth of God* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 136.

[83] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. IV: The Action* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 324. The idea that God somehow "contains" distance and loss has Hegelian roots, see Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 555.

[84] Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Vol. V*, 251.

[85] This analysis draws on Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 131.

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then, suffering has a deep meaning and allows us to look into the abyss of divine love.[86]

I sympathize with Balthasar's ambition to make suffering intelligible in a world created by God. There are problems with his account, however. First, it is unclear if his mediating position is stable. Does he really succeed in maintaining divine impassibility, as he wishes to do? This is a common criticism of Balthasar, and it can be developed in various ways.[87] Instead of recounting this critique, however, I will focus on what I take to be another problem with Balthasar's explanatory project.

This project proceeds from the intuition that there is an intrinsic connection between love and "negativity" in the sense of privation, suffering and death. As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, this intuition has a firm basis in the Christian tradition, and we see it expressed in well-known Gospel passages, one of which I have already quoted: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39). The so-called "law of the grain of wheat" is both Christian and universal, paradoxical and deeply intuitive, and Balthasar takes the insight it expresses as revelatory of the very essence of love as such. As Kilby describes his view:

> love itself ... turns out to be something darker and more painful than is usually supposed. The fundamental mystery is not the co-existence of love and suffering, but their mutual inherence, perhaps even their ultimate identity.[88]

If this is what love is like, and if God is love, then there must be something analogous to negativity, loss, and suffering in God himself. What Balthasar does not attempt to do, is to explain *why* the basic intuition that provides the foundation for his explanatory project holds true. Why is love, both human and divine, inextricably bound up with negativity?

[86] Similar ideas can be found in Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 161–162. See also Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.

[87] See, for example, Joshua R. Brotherton, "Trinitarian Suffering and Divine Receptivity After Balthasar," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2 (2018): 189–234; Joshua R. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered: Balthasar's Theology of Divine Suffering in Dialogue* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2020), Chapters 4 and 5; Kevin Duffy, "Change, Suffering, and Surprise in God: Von Balthasar's Use of Metaphor," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2011): 370–387; Bernhard Blankenhorn, "Balthasar's Method of Divine Naming," *Nova et Vetera* (English ed.) 1, no. 2 (2003): 254–267.

[88] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 132.

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Instead of looking for an answer, Balthasar takes the Christian intuition as something like a "basic belief" or a first principle in light of which the whole of reality is to be explained. If God is love, and if love – for unclear reasons – contains an intrinsic aspect of sacrifice and negativity, then the occurrence of evil and suffering in a world created by God can seem to become intelligible to some degree.

But is the feeling of explanatory progress warranted? If the relationship between love and negativity remains mysterious, does it really help to give this relationship the status of a first principle and locate its primary instance in God? The result could perhaps be described as an integrated vision of how sin, suffering and God fit together, but this integration is achieved by simply identifying the mystery of the relationship between love and negativity with the mystery of God.

A second, related criticism is this. The Christian intuition about the connection between love and suffering is based on Christian experience of the love and suffering of created and embodied beings (including, importantly, the embodied being Jesus of Nazareth). It is hence possible, for all we know, that the close relation between love and negativity is not a property of love as such but *only* of the love of created beings, as the Christian tradition has assumed. Love is a concept with analogical applications, and the love of humans might have essential properties that are unique to that kind of love, with no correlate in divine (or angelic) love. Compare: It is an essential property of human creativity that we can only make things from preexisting matter – we cannot create ex nihilo. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the same is true of divine creativity.

Balthasar's interpretation of the whole of reality – including God – in terms of the relationship between love and negativity is hence risky. Unless we first get some understanding of *why* love and negativity seem to be inextricably linked in the human domain, we cannot know whether this relationship also carries over to God. Since the classical Christian tradition does not portray intra-Trinitarian love as characterized by an aspect of negativity, the presumption should be that the connection between love and suffering only holds for created beings.

In this book, I will address the question that Balthasar does not sufficiently ponder – *why* love and sacrificial suffering seem so tightly linked from our perspective. If the explanation I suggest is correct, Balthasar has been too quick to conclude that love as such is inextricably related to negativity. As I have already hinted, my metaphysical analysis will show that a link to negativity is essential for *human* love. This link, however, is explained by the nature of created being in general, and embodied being in particular, rather than by the "generic" nature of love as such.

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1.3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Although the reflections above have focused on theodicy and the issue of explaining God's permission of suffering, the greater part of this book is devoted to an analysis of the Christian understanding of love and its relationship to what I have referred to as "negativity" (a concept that includes, besides suffering in a narrow sense, privations of various kinds as well as voluntary sacrifices). In order not to leave the reader in suspense about how these two elements of the book hang together – the analysis of love and the theodicy – I will, in what follows, give a bird's-eye view of the book's main argument and the topics of the different chapters. This will raise many questions and potential objections, which hopefully will receive satisfactory answers later in the book.

The point of departure for my argument is the claim that human love is a virtue, which means that love is partly constituted by dispositions to act in appropriate ways in different possible circumstances ("possible worlds"). Importantly, perfect love must dispose the lover to act self-sacrificially in circumstances where this is called for, and this means being prepared to accept suffering and loss of created goods for the sake of a beloved. Such a disposition is not external to love, but constitutive of it. This can be seen by reflecting on the following passage from the Book of Job, in which Satan challenges God to test Job's fidelity and love:

> Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face (Job 1:9–11).

One conceivable way in which God could have answered Satan is along the following lines: "What relevance does it have what my servant Job *would* do in the unlikely event that I were to stretch out my hand and deprive him of all his possessions? The only thing that matters is that Job loves and fears me now, in the actual world, where I shower him with every conceivable gift."

But God does not answer Satan in this way. Instead, he acknowledges the relevance of Satan's "thought experiment."[89] What Job *would* do in

[89] According to Ford, "Satan's question about Job in 1:9 indicates what is probably the main point of the book: the wisdom of fearing God for nothing" (David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99, emphasis removed). Moreover, "loving God in the Spirit of Abraham, Moses, Job and Azariah is the fulfilment of fear of God and the essence of wisdom" (233).

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the scenario suggested by Satan has a direct bearing on the perfection or quality of Job's love for God *here and now*, before the scenario in question is realized – in fact, independently of whether the scenario will ever be realized.[90] If Job were *disposed* to love God only in good times, his love would be intrinsically deficient. This turns out not to be the case, however, and after having put Job to the test, God praises him before Satan: "He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason" (Job 2:3).[91]

The point here is that human love cannot be exhaustively described without reference to metaphysically possible scenarios that involve loss, suffering, and death and that call for certain responses on the part of lovers who by nature are susceptible to these evils. Not even God can create a human being who is *naturally* insusceptible to suffering and death, and the criteria for love's perfection in humans are determined by the intrinsic properties and liabilities of human nature. The aim of the dispositional analysis of love that I will suggest is not to argue for a new and innovative understanding of Christian love, but rather to spell out what I take to be the logical preconditions and entailments of what Christians have always considered love to be.

This is why I start, in Chapter 2, with an analysis of the thought of John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, two Carmelites who thematize the relationship between love and negativity in a particularly profound way. John of the Cross views love of God as a coin with two sides: A self-emptying, sacrificial side, and a possession-oriented side that seeks happiness in union with the Beloved. These two sides are inseparable, since union with God can only be accomplished by the total gift of self to him, and John spells out the logic of this gift in terms of detachment from all things that are not God. In order to be wholly united with God, one cannot belong to anything created in the sense that one desires it equally much or more than doing God's will.

After having presented the central elements of John's thought, I analyze his concept of detachment (*desasimiento*) in dispositional terms. I conclude that the reason why love has an intrinsic reference to negativity is because it is always logically possible for a rational creature to choose

[90] Ford describes the dialog between God and Satan as "theology in the subjunctive," involving a "divine experiment" (Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 102).

[91] From a historical-critical perspective, Tryggve Mettinger describes the episode as a "test," the purpose of which is "to ascertain whether Job's piety is disinterested, unselfish piety or not" (Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 55).

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to love itself (or some other aspect of creation) before God. This is why a total gift of self to God cannot occur in the absence of a disposition or readiness, on the part of the rational creature, to put God first and sacrifice the satisfaction of any need or desire for a created good (or for the absence of some evil) if this is what doing God's will requires. This does not only hold true "after sin," but in all possible worlds. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to John's modern disciple, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose thought and experiences I draw on to deepen the picture and discuss the relationship between detachment from creatures, grace, and suffering.

Chapter 3 contextualizes the ideas that I have extracted from John and Thérèse by showing that they are deeply anchored in biblical and traditional conceptions of sacrifice. The general phenomenon of sacrifice points to the fact that human love for God cannot be understood in separation from the bodily acts and signs whereby this love is outwardly expressed. Consequently, in the Old and the New Testament, as well as in theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, and Matthias Joseph Scheeben, sacrifice is not primarily about expiation for sin. It is fundamentally about the gift of self to God with the aim of attaining communion with him, something that is expressed through physical acts that involve renunciation. There is no contradiction between the communion-oriented intention behind sacrifice and its "negative" aspect, since a radical detachment from creatures is a necessary component of a rightly ordered love for God. This is illustrated by the story about the binding of Isaac (the Akedah), which provides a key for understanding the sacrificial cult of ancient Israel. As Matthew Levering writes: "Abraham grasps that true interpersonal communion, true feasting, laughter, and hospitality, must flow from profound sacrifice of everything to God."[92] For Christians, the definitive sacrifice is Christ's self-gift on the cross, which – like the Akedah – constitutes an expression of love through the voluntary embrace of suffering and loss.

In contemporary theology, however, the notion of sacrifice has been the target of various kinds of critique. The most radical critics, such as the early René Girard and some feminist and womanist authors, argue that sacrifice is an irredeemable concept that has no place in Christian theology. More moderate critics, such as Robert Daly, accept the legitimacy of sacrificial language but attempt to dissociate it from any connection

[92] Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 40.

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with "negativity." Sacrifice, according to this understanding, is *merely* about communion and conviviality, and any negative aspect is wholly incidental. In the second half of Chapter 3, I address both kinds of critique, with a focus on the second kind. I show that the idea of self-gift – which is the core of sacrifice – becomes incoherent if it is disconnected from the notions of potential suffering and loss.

In Chapter 4, we turn from the expression of love through sacrifice to the nature of love itself and the debate about this in contemporary theology. Perhaps the most controversial question in this context has been the relation between love as self-regarding and as other-regarding, often framed in terms of Ander's Nygren's distinction between eros and agape.[93] This distinction roughly corresponds to the distinction I made above – in connection with John of the Cross – between the "self-emptying" and the "possession-oriented" sides of love. However, while Nygren pits these two sides against each other and denigrates the latter (eros), John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and the mainstream Catholic tradition – as well as many Protestants – see eros and agape as inseparable. This inseparability-thesis is closely related to the main argument of the present book. In fact, my argument about the intrinsic relationship between love and negativity can be seen as an explication of the claim that eros and agape are inseparable.

Although the intimate relation between these two tendencies of love is widely acknowledged today, it is often simply asserted rather than explained, and the basic logic behind it needs further elucidation. In the second half of Chapter 4, I argue that Thomas Aquinas's theory of love makes the co-existence of eros and agape within the one and unitary reality of love intelligible. The key to Aquinas's solution to "the problem of love" is his analogical conception of unity, which allows him to see the common denominator in self-love and love of others, and to explain why it is natural to love God more than self.

But can Aquinas's balanced theory of love integrate the radical embrace of suffering and self-sacrifice exemplified by John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux? In Chapter 5, I argue that it can, and that Aquinas's perspective in fact entails that perfect love is radically sacrificial in precisely the way envisaged by John and Thérèse. To love another human being means for Aquinas to regard her as an "other self" – to invest something of one's own identity in her. Aquinas, accordingly,

[93] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982).

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connects love with "ecstasy," literally "standing outside" of oneself. "In the love of friendship," he writes, "we draw ourselves to what is outside. For, to those whom we love in that love we are related as to ourselves, communicating ourselves to them in some way."[94] The result of such self-communication is that one wills the good of the other in the same way as one wills one's own good.

Willing the good of the other is not a sufficient condition for a true gift of self, however. A person can will the good of another while simultaneously having a much stronger desire for his own private good, or even for superficial goods like pleasure. Clearly, such a person's gift of self is seriously deficient. In order to love another perfectly, one must not only will her good but also take a *comparative* view of her good in relation to one's own, in the sense that one must see the beloved's well-being as *equally* (or almost equally[95]) important to oneself as one's own.[96] This comparative or relational perspective has sacrificial implications. Any rational person is prepared to sacrifice an arm if this can save his own life. Hence, if a person truly regards his beloved's good as being of comparable importance to him as his own, he must be prepared to sacrifice an arm to save *her* life (provided that this is compatible with his other responsibilities). Unless the lover is willing or disposed to do this, his love is imperfect, and the gift of self is incomplete.

On the basis of these (often overlooked) implications of Aquinas's theory of love, I propose a metaphysical explanation of the commonsense intuition that a person's love is greater or more perfect to the extent that he is ready to sacrifice for his beloved.[97] The reason why this is so, I suggest, is that a person who is disposed to make great sacrifices when the circumstances require this will treat his beloved as an "other self" in *more possible worlds* than a person who lacks a self-sacrificial disposition, or who is only disposed to make smaller sacrifices. This follows from the fact that in some possible worlds, great sacrifices are needed in

[94] *Lectures on John*, Chapter 15, Lecture 4, Marietti #289 (quoted in Michael Waldstein, "John Paul II and St. Thomas on Love and the Trinity," *Anthropotes* 18 (2002): 129).

[95] Aquinas holds that we should love ourselves more than our neighbor, because "man's love for himself is the model of his love for another" (*ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 4). We should, however, love our neighbor's *soul* more than our own body (*ST* II–II, q. 26, a. 5), which means that the priority of self-love does not, for Aquinas, have the egotistical implications that we might initially think it has.

[96] A desire for union with the beloved is also a necessary component of love of friendship and gift of self, according to Aquinas. I have – for the sake of simplicity – omitted the latter element, which I will discuss extensively in Chapter 4.

[97] All else being equal (implied in the given formulation).

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order to protect other people from harm and death. In such worlds, persons who are less self-sacrificially disposed will fail to do what perfect love requires. Some will only treat their beloved as love dictates in the narrow range of worlds where this is easy and entails no suffering. This means that their love will lack what I call "modal depth," or "robustness across possible worlds," which I argue is a great-making property of love.

In Chapter 6, I consider more carefully what a self-sacrificial disposition is. Dispositions are, by their very nature, directed or oriented toward a certain characteristic act or manifestation, by which they are perfected. In the case of a disposition for self-sacrifice, its proper manifestation is the acceptance (on the part of the subject or person) of some kind of loss or suffering for the sake of protecting, benefitting, or honoring another. It is not necessary, however, that *actual* loss or suffering follow the person's sacrificial acceptance of these consequences, since unforeseen circumstances or factors may intervene and prevent them from materializing (Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac being a case in point). As long as the person reasonably *believes* – when he decides to make the sacrifice – that the projected negative consequences will ensue, a real sacrifice has been made, and the self-sacrificial disposition has issued in its proper act.

It would be impossible, however, for a self-sacrificial disposition to manifest itself perfectly in a world where God does not permit loss, suffering, and death. In such a world, nobody could reasonably believe that a beloved's well-being or life needs to be protected by self-sacrificial acts, or that exposing oneself to loss, suffering, or death for the sake of another is even possible. In the biblical Eden, for example, heroic self-sacrifices could only occur given an elaborate scheme of divine deception, which would be morally impossible for God to carry out. This means that an essential dimension of human love must remain in an embryonic state there. The self-sacrificial disposition inherent in love would by necessity fail to attain its full perfection in an Edenic world, in the same way as the infused virtue of faith in a newly baptized infant must necessarily remain in an imperfect state until the child can make actual acts of faith.

This argument entails that the biblical, prelapsarian Adam should not be seen as a paradigm of perfection, but rather (following Irenaeus) as immature and naïve in crucial respects. What accounts for Adam's inability to exemplify perfect love, however, is not any limitation in God's power to infuse charity in him, but rather the principle that "whatever is received into something is received according to the mode of the

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recipient."[98] Given this principle – and its corollary that "grace perfects nature according to the manner of the nature"[99] – we can argue that God's suppression of the potentials for suffering and death in prelapsarian Adam must necessarily prevent the charity Adam receives from engaging all essential aspects of his human nature. Put in other, more general and hypothetical terms: If God had permanently shielded humans from their natural vulnerability and mortality, God would thereby inevitably have prevented an important dimension of human nature from being co-opted by charity.

In Chapter 7, I propose a theodicy on the basis of this reasoning and the preceding analysis of love. Since the theodicy contains too many moving parts to be conveniently summarized here, I will only point out that it can be seen as a development and expansion of a traditional Thomistic explanation of God's permission of sin. This Thomistic explanation appeals to the fittingness of a providential order in which God governs things in accordance with their natures. Since humans by nature are such that they can fall away from moral rectitude, Thomists reason that it is fitting for God to permit that this sometimes happens.

The same reasoning can be applied to God's permission of suffering and death, given the relation between human love and "negativity" canvassed above. If God were to prevent certain forms or degrees of suffering that humans by nature are susceptible to, he would thereby also prevent human love from attaining its ultimate perfection. This includes supernatural love, which – although infused – is necessarily "received according to the mode of the recipient." Now, in light of the serious nature of the suffering that normally accompanies the manifestation of the greatest human love, it can be argued that God is morally obliged to prevent such suffering, even if this comes at the price of limiting the extent to which human love can be perfected. I argue, however, that it would be compatible with God's goodness to permit all the suffering we find in our world, given the satisfaction of the following three conditions:

1) That the perfection of love in human beings is or entails a good that, on the whole, outweighs the totality of human suffering (and that could not be obtained without God's permission of the suffering in question).
2) That every individual who suffers undeservedly gets the opportunity, at some point, to enjoy the mentioned good, unless he or she culpably forfeits it.

[98] *ST* I, q. 75, a. 5 co. [99] *ST* I, q. 62, a. 5 co.

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3) That every individual who enjoys the mentioned good will find his or her sufferings worthwhile and will retrospectively consent to having undergone them.

For all we know, these three conditions could be satisfied. With respect to the first, I argue that the perfection of love in human beings is both an intrinsic good of great value and a necessary condition for deep intimacy with God.[100] Since such intimacy is of incommensurate value, its realization (to an ultimate degree) can outweigh any amount of suffering. As Paul puts it: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18).

With respect to conditions 2 and 3, I argue that they would be satisfied if God offers to every person who undeservedly and involuntarily has endured some serious suffering during their life the opportunity to present – perhaps from a post-mortem state – their suffering to God as a sacrifice that perfects their love and deepens their relationship with him. This means that the "form" of sacrifice is retrospectively supplied to the "matter" of some previous, nonsacrificial suffering. In this way, any suffering can be redeemed and joined to Christ's through a retrospective intention.[101]

After having discussed a number of potential objections, I will in Chapter 8 deepen the theodicy by making explicit its Christological and soteriological sources of inspiration, drawn primarily from two Pauline themes. Paul refers to Christ as "the last Adam," a notion that makes explicit that Christ, in contrast to the first Adam, fully realizes the potentials of human nature, thereby perfecting humanity in his person. As Joseph Ratzinger puts it: "In him [Christ], 'hominization' has truly reached its goal."[102] Now, the central claim of the proposed theodicy is that God permits evil with the perfection of human love in view. This perfection is realized by Christ in his capacity as the "last Adam," in virtue of his willingness to lay down his life in obedience to the Father.

[100] My argument does not entail that *any* degree of intimacy with God depends on God's permission of sacrificial suffering, but only that the highest (or deepest) degrees of union do (see Chapter 7.5). The latter claim is congruent with Matthias Joseph Scheeben's view: "God permitted the insurrection of nature, but only for the purpose of subsequently making the union more intimate and glorious than ever" (Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Nature and Grace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 333).

[101] The distinction between the "form" and "matter" of sacrifice is a key element in my explanation of how love can be perfect in heaven, despite the fact that no sacrificial suffering is possible there (see Chapter 6.3).

[102] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 235.

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As the Letter to the Hebrews states: "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (Heb 2:10). Since God does not suppress the potential for suffering and death in Christ's assumed human nature, there is nothing that prevents Christ's charity from fully actualizing the sacrificial dimension that essentially belongs to human love as such. This is what happens on the Cross. In Christ, humanity loves God perfectly.

Moreover, in the same way as the "first Adam" in the Bible is not only an individual but also a "corporate personality," so the "whole Christ" includes his mystical body, the Church. This means that believers who are united to Christ through grace participate in his perfect manifestation of love as members of his Body. Augustine can therefore speak of the "total suffering of Christ, who has suffered in our head and suffers [now] in his members, that is in ourselves."[103] According to Matthias Joseph Scheeben, Christ "continues the immolation and glorification of His own body in His mystical body [the Church]."[104] Connecting this to the present theodicy, we might say that Christ's one and perfect sacrifice potentially includes all human acts of sacrificial love, and its power to mediate and enable deep intimacy with God justifies all nonpunitive suffering.

At the end of the book, I argue that the analysis of love and the theodicy I have proposed can shed light on some theological questions that are not directly related to the problem of evil, such as why Christ's atonement needed to involve suffering. I also argue that the explanatory power of the theodicy with respect to intra-theological matters of this kind makes it more effective in restoring and creating coherence in the Christian system of beliefs than standard theodicies typically are. Finally, I address the question of why God created physical beings in the first place, considering that the love of such vulnerable and dependent creatures is inherently sacrificial.

1.4 PRESUPPOSITIONS

Before we get started, some brief methodological remarks are in order. The arguments in this study will proceed on the basis of broadly

[103] St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 62 (quoted in Robin Anthony Steedman, *Colossians 1:24 and Vicarious Suffering in the Church* [Dissertation] (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2014), 84).

[104] Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (New York City, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 439.

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Thomistic metaphysical and theological assumptions, including a conception of God that corresponds to the Trinitarian theism of Thomas Aquinas, as presented in the First Part of the *Summa theologiae*. My aim is to argue in a way that respects this framework and does not violate general principles of Thomistic theology.[105] This does not mean that my argument depends for its cogency on the acceptance of those principles. Instead, the Thomistic framework can be said to play the dual (and perhaps paradoxical) role of being both a source of inspiration and a "straitjacket" that ensures that my proposal stays within the bounds of what most would recognize as a version of Christian orthodoxy. Hence, while the proposal in an important sense is Thomistic – and draws heavily on Aquinas's theory of love – it is not addressed only to those who stand within this tradition.[106] The theodicy is compatible with a wide variety of views on issues such as the nature of God and the relationship between his causality and human freedom.

Besides Aquinas, the main resource I will use is John of the Cross. John was thoroughly schooled in Thomistic philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca, and his thought often moves within the broad framework of Aquinas's ideas. There are commentators, however, who see potential tensions between John and Thomas at certain points.[107]

[105] There are a wide variety of Thomistic responses to the problem of evil in the contemporary literature. Although they may be based on similar metaphysical principles, these responses nevertheless tend to be very different from each other. Compare, for example, Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*; John F. X. Knasas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); Agustín Echavarría, "Thomas Aquinas and the Modern and Contemporary Debate on Evil," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1054 (2013): 733–754; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul A. Macdonald Jr, *God, Evil, and Redeeming Good: A Thomistic Theodicy* (London: Routledge, 2023). The Thomistic approach to the problem of evil taken in the present book differs significantly from all of these recent studies, while sharing many of their metaphysical presuppositions.

[106] "Thomistic" is a wide label, and there are of many versions of Thomism. The kind of Thomism represented in the present book may perhaps be characterized as "analytical Thomism." Like John Haldane – who coined this term – I see many affinities between the analytic and the Thomistic philosophical traditions, as well as possibilities for complementarity. For Haldane's own characterization of analytical Thomism, see, for example, John Haldane, *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical* (London: Routledge, 2004), "Introduction."

[107] It has been argued, for example, that John violates the principle that "grace builds on nature" (*gratia supponit naturam*), see Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500–1650)* (New York, NY: Herder/The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2017), 307. See also Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2002), 48–50. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange,

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Although it would be worthwhile to address such tensions, for the present purposes, this is not necessary. What I am interested in with respect to John is the broad strokes of his spirituality – most importantly, his conception of detachment – and not the philosophical details of his way of understanding, for example, the ontology of mystical experiences or the nature–grace relationship. For this reason, the reader should presume that any perceived tension between John and Thomas is to be resolved (from my point of view) in favor of the Thomistic framework.[108]

"Free will" is often taken to be of great importance in the context of theodicy, and many theodicies depend on a conception of human freedom that is commonly referred to as "libertarian." In his famous "free will defense," for example, Alvin Plantinga assumes that a necessary condition for an action or a choice to be free is that "no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine that [the person] will perform the action, or that he will not."[109] Such a conception of freedom has usually been taken to

however, argues that "St. John of the Cross, like all Carmelite theologians, is in full accord with St. Thomas on the great questions of predestination and grace" (Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co, 1949), 3).

[108] The relationship between nature and grace (supernature) in Aquinas's thought has been the topic of extensive and longstanding debate. Following Henri de Lubac (*Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2008); *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998)), many recent interpreters have found a weaker distinction between nature and grace in Aquinas than baroque scholastic and neo-Thomist interpreters typically did, although a trend in the opposite direction is presently visible (see, e.g., Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2010); Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010). For the purpose of the present book, there is no need to take a stand in this debate, as long as some kind of real *distinction* (without a dichotomy) between nature and grace is acknowledged, and nature is granted a certain integrity. (For perspectives that deny the latter, see John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2002), especially Chapter 2; John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014); Hart, *You Are Gods*). My own view on the issue (which is not essential for the argument of the present book) is close to the position of Thomas Joseph White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man: Thomas Aquinas and the Paradigm of Nature-Grace Orthodoxy," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 78, no. 2 (2014): 247–289; Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), Chapter 5; Jacob W. Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

[109] Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 166.

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entail that God cannot causally determine – as an "antecedent condition" – human acts without depriving them of their freedom.[110] Free will, on this view, is a "no fly zone" for God.[111]

In classical theology, on the other hand, it is usually assumed that God's transcendence rules out any competition between divine causality and human freedom.[112] Divine and human agency operate on different ontological levels, and therefore do not relate to each other in the manner of a "zero-sum game." Aquinas, for example, claims that "God is the cause of action in every agent"[113] and seems to hold that human freedom is compatible with God's transcendental determination of human acts. "Just as by moving natural causes [God] does not prevent their acts being natural, so by moving voluntary causes He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary."[114]

[110] W. Matthews Grant, however, has argued that this commonly heard claim is misconceived, and that libertarian freedom is compatible with God's causing all human acts. Grant argues that this compatibility follows from the doctrine of divine simplicity, which forces us to construe God's willing (and hence causing) some external state of affairs as an extrinsic or relational property of God, which as such does not exist prior to the external state of affairs it refers to. This means that God's act of willing or causing a human act is not an antecedent, sufficient condition for the occurrence of the human act in question. According to Grant, this "extrinsic model" of divine causation allows us consistently to affirm both libertarian human freedom and divine universal causality. However, as Grant himself admits, his account nevertheless undermines the so-called "free will defense" (W. Matthews Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality: The Dual Sources Account* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), Chapter 7.1). On the extrinsic model, God is not forced to choose between granting his creatures freedom and ensuring that they always act rightly – instead, he can have the cake and eat it too (122–123). (For a succinct account of Grant's argument, see W. Matthews Grant, "Can a Libertarian Hold that our Free Acts are Caused by God?," *Faith and Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2010): 22–44).

[111] I have borrowed the expression "no fly zone" from Steven A. Long, "St. Thomas Aquinas, Divine Causality, and the Mystery of Predestination," in *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, ed. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, and Thomas Joseph White (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2016), 76).

[112] See Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 73–75.

[113] *ST* I, q. 105, a. 5.

[114] *ST* I, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3. There are different interpretations of Aquinas, however. For the interpretation I endorse here, see, for example, Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72–77; James F. Ross, "Creation II," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 128–134; Taylor Patrick O'Neill, *Grace, Predestination, and the Permission of Sin: A Thomistic Analysis* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 13–41; Simon Francis Gaine, *Will There Be Free Will in Heaven? Freedom, Impeccability and Beatitude* (London: T&T Clark, 2003). For a different interpretation, according to which Aquinas is a libertarian, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), chapters 9 and 13; Stump, *Wandering in*

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Although I lean towards Aquinas's side in this debate, all arguments in the present book are neutral with respect to these different views on how human freedom relates to God's causality.[115] In the present context, however, the most important thing to note is that the theodicy I propose does not, unlike many other contemporary theodicies or "defenses," depend on a libertarian construal of human freedom. The theodicy, if cogent, works also given a strictly compatibilist view, for example, the "classical Thomism" of Domingo Báñez or Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.[116] Nothing in my argumentation depends, in other words, on the idea that God must somehow refrain from "interfering" (as it is often misleadingly put) with human choices. This I take to be one of the major strengths of the theodicy.

Finally, it should be noted that the theodicy is also uncommitted on the question of a historical Fall. Traditionally, the Fall of Adam and Eve has been regarded by Christians as the ultimate source and explanation of suffering and death. This is the view presented, for example, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says that "the account of the Fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man*."[117] Due to this deed, "death makes its entrance into human history" and "the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered."[118]

There are different opinions about whether a traditional view of this kind is compatible with the standard evolutionary account of the origins

Darkness, 454, 457. W. Matthews Grant has also (in a very different way) defended libertarian freedom within a broadly Thomistic framework, see his *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*.

[115] For a theological critique of the compatibilism that has dominated classical, Latin theology, see David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapter 2.

[116] "Classical Thomism" is a school of thought that emerged from the *de auxiliis* controversies in the sixteenth century. A somewhat softer form of compatibilism is found in later Thomists like Jacques Maritain, Francisco Marin-Sola, and Bernard Lonergan, who – like classical Thomists – hold that God can infallibly cause human acts without depriving them of freedom. However, they also hold that God normally does not act in this way, and that humans can autonomously resist certain divine "movements" affecting their will. See, for example, Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

[117] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), §390.

[118] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §400. See also §403.

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of humankind and all the scientific evidence that backs it up.[119] In my view, the traditional and the evolutionary stories are compatible, provided that the principal consequence of the Fall is taken to be privative: the loss of sanctifying grace and the supernatural protection ("preternatural gifts") that God had bestowed on the first humans.[120] While it is clear that animal death existed before humans came onto the scene – a fact that theologians like Augustine and Aquinas also acknowledge[121] – there is no scientific evidence that rules out the possibility that God could have protected the first humans that emerged from evolution

[119] For the negative opinion, see, for example, John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 149; Jack Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 71; Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 143–144. For defenses of the compatibility between evolution and a historical, human Fall, see Austriaco, "A Theologial Fittingness Argument for the Historicity of the Fall of *Homo Sapiens*"; Andrew Pinsent, "Augustine, Original Sin, and the Naked Ape," in *Finding Ourselves After Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Stanley P. Rosenberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); James K. A. Smith, "What Stands on the Fall?: A Philosophical Exploration," in *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. William T. Cavanvaugh and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017); C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Karl Rahner, "The Sin of Adam," in *Theological Investigations, Vol. 11, Confrontations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974); Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), Chapter 6. For an overview of different ways to accommodate a historical fall within an evolutionary context, see John Bimson, "Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin," in *Theology After Darwin*, ed. Michael S. Northcott and R. J. Berry (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009).

[120] Following St. Anselm, Aquinas understands original sin as the privation of original justice (*ST* I–II, q. 82), a position also adopted by the Catholic Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §399, 405). For Aquinas's account of what the tradition has called the "preternatural gifts" of immortality, integrity, knowledge, and impassibility, see *ST* I, q. 97, a. 1 (immortality); *ST* I, q. 95, a. 2 (integrity); *ST* I, q. 94, a. 3 (knowledge); *ST* I, q. 97, a. 2 (impassibility). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* alludes to (the loss of) these gifts in §405. For an account of Aquinas's doctrine of original sin in relation to evolutionary theory, see Daniel W. Houck, *Aquinas, Original Sin, and the Challenge of Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[121] See Gavin Ortlund, "Augustine on Animal Death," in *Evil & Creation: Historical and Constructive Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. David J. Luy, Matthew Levering, and George Kalantzis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). Aquinas acknowledges animal death before the Fall in *ST* I, q. 96, a. 1 (see also Ortlund, "Augustine on Animal Death," 85, footnote 5).

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(whether a single couple or a larger group) from suffering and death until they fell.[122]

Although my sympathies lie with attempts to harmonize the doctrine of a historical Fall with our current knowledge of evolutionary history, nothing in the theodicy I will present requires the affirmation of a historical Fall. The theodicy is neutral on whether suffering and death entered *human* history through a Fall, or if those phenomena have always been with us. However, in what follows, I will sometimes use a traditional conception of "Eden" to exemplify a possibility that God could have actualized as a permanent state – a "possible world," as it were, free from human suffering and death. Given a traditional conception of divine omnipotence, it is hard to deny that God *could* have created such a world and preserved it indefinitely.[123] A theodicy, then, can be seen as an attempt to answer the question of why he did not do this.[124]

[122] A potential difficulty with the traditional story is the evidence that suggests that the theory of monogenism is false, and that humans do not derive from a single couple. Recently, however, there have been a number of interesting attempts to show that the evidence in fact does not rule out monogenism (William Lane Craig, *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2021); Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam and Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019); Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *The Origin of Humanity and Evolution: Science and Scripture in Conversation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)). It can also be argued – with Karl Rahner, Matthew Levering, and many others – that the doctrine of a historical Fall does not stand or fall (pun not intended) with monogenism (Rahner, "The Sin of Adam"; Karl Rahner, "Theological Reflections on Monogenism," in *Theological Investigations, Vol. 1, God, Christ, Mary and Grace* (London: Dartin, Longman & Todd, 1961); Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation*, Chapter 6).

[123] At least this must be admitted by those who believe in the Christian doctrine of a bodily afterlife in heaven without the possibility of sin.

[124] As this formulation indicates, I disagree with Stump's claim that "a successful theodicy or defense is one that can explain why God was (or could have been) justified in allowing human suffering *given the fallen nature of human beings*" (Eleonore Stump, *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), Chapter 1, my emphasis). I regard the question of why God permitted the Fall as part of the problem of evil, and therefore as something that a successful theodicy must address.

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