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ARTICLE

A New Response to the Problem of Natural Evil

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Abstract

This paper will offer a new defense in response to the problem of natural evil, called the Perfect Will defense. The defense argues that in sustaining the universe, God conforms the system of physical laws to his intellect and will. Yet, God could not fully conform the system of laws (for our universe) to his intellect and will without simultaneously forcing people into a loving relation with God. Yet, since God would not force people to love him, God must thereby initially create people in a universe that has a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. However, while a universe with a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will allows for people to exercise their freedom over their relation with God, it also results in the occurrence of natural evils. The paper will argue that once this defense is fully developed, it is able to account for why God allows for natural evils to occur within the universe. The paper will outline the defense, as well as respond to the defense's major objections.

Keywords: defense; free will; natural evil; problem of evil; theodicy

1. Introduction

The problem of natural evil concerns why God (understood here as: a maximally intelligent, morally perfect, sustainer of the universe) would allow for there to be natural events that produce suffering for creatures. These events can include storms, earthquakes, diseases, parasites, etc. The events do not need to be considered 'evil' for there to still be a problem. The fact that the events produce suffering seems to create tension for the theist, since presumably a maximally intelligent being who sustains the universe would be able to prevent suffering from occurring. Furthermore, if God is morally perfect, he would be interested in preventing the suffering from occurring. Since that does not happen (in at least many cases), it may then seem to suggest that God does not exist.

A rejoinder to this problem is of course to offer a defense or a theodicy. The difference between the two being that a theodicy proposes to offer a plausible explanation as to why God would allow natural evils to occur, while a defense proposes a merely possible explanation (which may or may not be plausible) as to why God would allow

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for natural evils to occur.[1] Of course, many such theodicies and defenses have been offered in response to the problem of natural evil. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine those attempts. Rather, this paper will present a new attempt at offering a possible reason as to why God allows for natural evils to occur, which the paper will hereafter call the Perfect Will defense (PWD). Since the existence of natural evil is potentially more difficult to address than the problem of moral evil,[2] the topic of this paper is highly relevant to the discussion regarding the existence of God. The PWD has several steps and so the paper will divide the defense into stage one and stage two. The paper will then respond to the defense's most pressing objections.

2. Stage one

In understanding how the PWD works, it must be understood that the defense assumes a claim about the laws of physics for a given universe. The claim is that for any given universe to operate according to physical laws, the laws must operate as an interconnected system. This interconnected system then causally brings about natural processes, such as: planetary formation, biological evolution, etc. (To be clear, the term 'laws' is being used broadly to refer to any causal regularity within the universe.) So, the laws that bring about the formation of planets also ultimately bring about biological evolution, etc. Causally, everything is thereby interconnected through the same set of laws.

Now, consider that God sustains the system of laws by grounding the set of laws with his intellect and will. A way that can help to conceptualize this scheme is to imagine that the system of laws is like a causal 'web' or 'program' that is grounded within God's mental powers. So, this 'web' or 'program' operates to bring about the effects that God's mind desires and intends. So, if God desires for the universe to be a paradise, the laws will bring about a universe that is a paradise.

However, in order to bring about the results that God desires, God must fully conform the system of laws to his intellect and will. So, if God desires for the system of laws to bring about a universe that has planets, sentient life, no suffering, etc., then the system of laws will bring about those given features (assuming the features are actually possible to bring about). So, a system of laws that is fully conformed to God's intellect and will fully brings about God's intentions and desires.

On the other hand, a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will only partially brings about God's intentions and desires. So, if the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, then the system will bring about planets, sentient life, etc. but also bring those things about with some features that God does not fully intend. Again, the system of laws is like an interconnected program. So, if the program is fully conformed to God's mind, then the program will operate to bring about a system that God entirely prefers. But, if the program is only partially conformed to God's mind, then the program will operate to only partially bring about what God prefers. In other words, if the program is only partially

[1]c.f. Nick Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief: In Defense of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), p. 276.

[2]c.f. Nick Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief: In Defense of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 295–96.

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conformed to God's intellect and will, then there could be aspects of the program that bring about regularities that God does not entirely prefer.

Now, it should be clear where this is going. If there is a morally sufficient reason for God to only partially conform the system of laws to his intellect and will, then this opens the door for the system of laws to bring about regularities within the universe that God does not entirely prefer, which includes things such as: storms, earthquakes, diseases, parasites, etc. In other words, natural evils thereby result from the system of laws not being fully conformed to God's intellect and will. The question then is whether there could be a morally sufficient reason that God could have for not fully conforming the system of laws of our given universe to his intellect and will. This paper will now attempt to provide such a reason.

3. Stage two

Plausibly, the type of universe that a morally perfect being would desire to bring about (if the system of laws was fully conformed to their intellect and will) would be a universe that not only lacks suffering, but also one where people have an overwhelming desire to fully love God (and one another) and not desire to commit any moral evil. That we find these features lacking in the universe is what prompts the problem of evil in the first place.

So, if the system of laws was fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then the system of laws would necessarily bring about a lack of suffering, but also bring about an overwhelming desire within creatures to love God (and others) and a desire to not commit any moral evil.

However, consider that it is unjust to intentionally force another person (defined here as: a being that has the capacity for rationality and free will) into a loving relation. This is because if a person is going to be in a relation with another, then it seems morally plausible that the person first has a chance to choose whether they want to be in that loving relation or not. To force another into a relationship would take away a fundamental right that person should have over their relationships. So, a morally perfect being would not force others to love them (or to love anyone else). As Eleonore Stump similarly argues:

> If God simply altered Paula's will without Paula's desire that God do so, then the resulting will would be God's and not Paula's. God's acting on Paula's will in that way would replace her will with God's. On Aquinas's view, that is something which God, who does not undermine the nature of his creatures, would not do.[3]

So, if God created the universe from the beginning to have a system of laws that fully conforms to his intellect and will and thereby brings it about that all beings necessarily love God (and one another), then this would leave no opportunity for people to be able to opt out of being in a loving relation with God (and others), which would thereby force people into a loving relation with God (and others) for all eternity. Yet, given that God is understood to be a morally perfect being, God cannot ever intend for anyone

[3]Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p. 160.

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to be wronged. Thereby, God cannot intend for any person to be forced into a loving relationship.

So, God would then create people in a universe where the system of laws is not fully conformed to God's intellect and will. Rather, God would start people out in a universe where the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will so the person can then have the opportunity to decide if they do want to freely enter into a loving relation with God. If a person determines that they do want to live in a loving relation with God for all eternity, God can bring this about by either eventually conforming the system of laws (for our given universe) to his intellect and will, which will thereby bring about a universe where there is no suffering for the people who freely desire to live in that universe. Or God could transport the mind (or soul) of a person at the end of their life to a universe that already has a system of laws that is fully conformed to God's intellect and will. (A reader may have theological reasons for preferring one of these theories over the other, but this paper is only here outlining conceptual possibilities.)

So to reiterate, the moral justification for why God does not fully conform the system of laws of the given universe to his intellect and will is to enable for people to decide if they actually want to enter into a loving relation with God (and one another) as opposed to being forced into that relation. With this now taken into account, a moral explanation has been offered as to why God would not initially conform the system of laws (for our given universe) to his intellect and will.

4. Summary of the defense

So to summarize how the PWD works, the universe necessarily is causally connected through a system of physical laws. The system of laws is grounded by God's intellect and will. If the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then the system brings about a world of love and no suffering. However, it is wrong for God to force people into a universe where they will necessarily love God. So, God starts people out in a universe with a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, so that people can choose if they want to develop a loving relation with God. But, a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will also brings about processes that God does not fully desire. So, this then allows for agents within the universe to have freedom over their relations, but it also brings about natural evils, such as: storms, earthquakes, diseases, parasites, etc.

In case it is still not clear, the PWD is not arguing that a person's free will is what brings about natural evils within the universe. Rather, the PWD is arguing that in order for people to have freedom in regard to their relationship with God, the system of laws of the universe cannot be fully conformed to God's intellect and will. For if the system of laws was fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then people within the universe would necessarily love God (since the system of laws would bring about an overwhelming desire of love of God). So, if a person was created in a universe with a system of laws fully conformed to God's intellect and will, this would then take away that person's opportunity to freely develop a relation with God since that person would necessarily love God. So, since God wants to respect people's freedom, God creates people in a universe that has a system of laws that is not fully conformed to God's intellect and will. Yet, a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and

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will is also a system of laws that brings about natural evils. Thereby, in order to respect people's freedom over their final relation with God, God creates people in a temporary universe that inescapably has natural evils.

5. Virtues of defense

Before turning to objections to the PWD, I think it is important to briefly explain why the PWD is a unique and perhaps a better explanation than some of the commonly offered defenses in regard to natural evils. The reason it is important to do this is because some may think that the PWD is too similar to other defenses that have been offered in response to the problem of natural evil. I want to briefly explain why this is not the case.

While the PWD is similar to a free will defense,[4] it is perhaps better equipped to explain natural evils than a typical free will defense is. To see why, consider that a free will defense could account for why God allows for moral evil given that evil is the result of human free action.[5] However, free will on its own cannot easily explain why God allows for there to be natural evils since human free will is not directly responsible for all natural evils. There of course have been attempts to expand upon free will defenses to be able to also account for natural evils, such as appealing to the free actions of fallen angels.[6] However, appealing to the free will of fallen angels may be seen as too problematic to consider as a serious defense. The PWD, though, does not appeal to fallen angels. Rather, it appeals to the regularity of natural laws not being fully conformed to God's intellect and will. So, the PWD offers a unique perspective that is lacking from other free will-based defenses.

Another popular response to the problem of natural evils is a soul building defense. A soul building defense argues that God allows suffering to occur in order for people to grow in virtue.[7] A soul building defense is thereby likely to argue that natural evils

[4]For examples, see: Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Press, 1977); Eric Reitan, 'Does the Argument From Evil Assume a Consequentialist Morality?', *Faith and Philosophy*, 17 (2000), 306–19; Greg Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001); Bruce Little, *A Creation-Order Theodicy* (Lanham MD: University Press, Inc., 2005); Bruce Little, *God, Why This Evil?* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010); Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stewart Goetz, 'The Argument from Evil', in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), pp. 449–97; Josh Rasmussen 'On the Value of Freedom to Do Evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, 30 (2013), 418–28.

[5]Though this could be challenged for example, see: James P. Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[6]For examples, see: Dom Bruno Webb, *Why Does God Permit Evil?* (Manchester New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2004), pp. 34–42, 48–58; Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Press, 1977), pp. 57–62; Terrence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 246–47; Greg Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001); David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Publishing, 2005); Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth & Claw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 96–106; *Finding Ourselves After Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, ed. by Michael Lloyd, in Stanley P. Rosenberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2018), pp. 262–79 (kindle version).

[7]For some examples, see: John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper Rowe Publications, 1966); Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Richard Swinburne,

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can help contribute to people's growth in virtues like: charity, justice, patience, etc. It should be noted that the PWD is compatible with a soul building defense as it seems feasible for one to embrace the logic of both the PWD and a soul building defense. Yet, while one may find a soul building defense plausible, they may find that it is unable to account for all kinds of suffering.[8] For example, one may think that suffering enables people to grow in virtue, but doubt that all cases of natural evil enable a person to grow in virtue.[9] The PWD could then help account for those cases since the PWD does not argue that suffering is needed in order for people to grow in virtue, only that suffering is a bi-product of the system of laws not being fully conformed to God's intellect and will. So, if one is attracted to a soul building defense, the PWD can complement that defense. However, the PWD does not require the soul building defense to be true. So, if one has reservations regarding the strength of a soul building defense, they can still accept the PWD.

Another popular approach is to argue that God simply could not have created the universe without natural laws that lead to natural evils. This approach comes in different forms.[10] However, a difficulty for these approaches is that they may seem to limit God's power too much. For if God could not have created the universe without laws that lead to natural evils, then it seems difficult to grasp how God could ever end natural evils. If God cannot end natural evils, then this will not be seen as a promising perspective for many theists who place hope in God one day ending all suffering. On the other hand, if God can end natural evils, then it becomes mysterious why God created laws that lead to natural evils in the first place. The PWD is able to offer an explanation as to why God temporarily allows for laws that lead to natural evils, but will eventually be able to end natural evils. The PWD is able to do this because it appeals to the full conformity vs. partial conformity distinction. Again, the way this distinction accounts for natural evils is by arguing that a system of laws that is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, necessarily, is a system of laws that results in natural evils. Yet, that God will one day fully conform the system of laws to his intellect and will, which will bring about a system of laws that does not have natural evils.

The final popular approach that the PWD will be contrasted with is the epistemic distance defense. This defense may seem to be the most similar to the PWD. The epistemic distance defense argues that the existence of God must be not entirely clear

Providence and the Problem of Evil (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013).

[8]c.f. Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p. 476.

[9]c.f. Greg Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), pp. 259–62; Bryan Frances, *Gratuitous Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 125–27.

[10]For some examples, see: Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015). Thomas Jay Oord, 'An Essential Kenosis View', in *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. by Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), pp. 77–97; Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can't* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2019). William Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008); William Hasker, 'An Open Theist View', in *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. by Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), pp. 57–76; Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 113–34; Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Michael J. Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth & Claw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 130–99.

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(or epistemically distant) for people during their earthly existence in order to enable people to have free will.[11] This epistemic distance then results in there being natural evils within the universe. This may sound similar to what the PWD argues since both views appeal to free will indirectly entailing the existence of natural evils. However, the two views are quite different in that epistemic distance alone does not clearly explain why God created the universe with natural evils. For it seems conceivable that God's existence could be less than obvious for people without requiring the existence of natural evils.[12] So, the defender of epistemic distance needs to provide an explanation as to why God being epistemically distant for people also entails the existence of natural evils. The PWD offers a unique explanation for why humans having free will entails the existence of natural evils by appealing to the full conformity vs. partial conformity of the system of laws to God's intellect and will. So, the epistemic distance defense may be compatible with the PWD, but they are still distinct defenses.

To be clear, this paper has not done full justice to the above defenses. It has only briefly outlined them in order to show how the PWD contrastively offers a unique perspective. This is not to say that one could not defend one of the above defenses, only that the PWD is offering a different solution to the problem of natural evil than the other defenses do. There are also other responses to the problem of natural evil that this paper has not mentioned. Hopefully, this brief overview helps clarify how the PWD offers a unique response to the problem of natural evils. The paper will now respond to some of the major objections to the PWD.

6. Objections

Before examining the most pressing objections to the PWD, it is important to point out that some objections are not relevant to undermining the success of the defense. For example, one may object that the PWD assumes theological doctrines that one may not find plausible. For example, one may object to the idea of people having libertarian free will or God granting people an afterlife. However, given that the PWD is only a defense, it only needs to be consistent with the beliefs that a theist may hold.[13] Components of a defense do not need to be proven or demonstrated as likely to be true. The components only need to be possibly true and consistently held. If the components of the defense are not found acceptable to everyone, then it may not work as a defense for that person. However, it could still serve as a defense for one who does find its components acceptable.

Furthermore, the defense is only attempting to reconcile the existence of natural evils with the view that there is a maximally intelligent, morally perfect, sustainer of the universe. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an entire examination

[11]For some examples, see: John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper Rowe Publications, 1966), pp. 281–82, 315, 373; Kirk Macgregor, 'The Existence and Irrelevance of Gratuitous Evil', Presented at *2008 International Society of Christian Apologetics Annual Meeting*, p. 6. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319128248_The_Existence_and_Irrelevance_of_Gratuitous_Evil>.

[12]Nick Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief: In Defense of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), p. 279.

[13]This type of point is commonly argued in the literature; for example see: Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p. 415.

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of all divine attributes, such as: omnipotence, omniscience, etc. It is also beyond the scope of the paper to fully examine or reconcile a different conception of God with the existence of natural evils. So, while one may object that the PWD does not have a proper understanding of God's power or knowledge (or some other attribute), it is beyond the scope of this paper to address that concern. Again, the paper is only reconciling the existence of natural evils with the existence of a maximally intelligent, morally perfect, sustainer of the universe. Given those conditions, I will try to respond to the four most pressing objections.

6.1 The greater conformity objection

Objection #1: The greater conformity objection argues that it seems conceivable that God could have conformed the system of laws to his intellect and will just enough so that there are no natural evils within the universe, but still not conform the system of laws too much, in order to avoid forcing people to love God. So, it seems that God could have avoided there being natural evil altogether and yet still allow for people within the universe to have freedom over their relationships.

Response: It is essential to keep in mind that the PWD is arguing that it is metaphysically impossible for God to fully conform the system of physical laws to his intellect and will 'just enough' in order to prevent natural evils and yet simultaneously still allow for people to have freedom over the development of their relationships. For the stipulation of the PWD is that as long as the system of laws is not fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then the effects of the system of laws necessarily result in processes that God does not fully desire. So, it is only when the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will that the system of laws fully brings about God's intentions within the universe. This then allows for there to be natural evils.

The burden is then upon the objector to demonstrate that the system of laws could simultaneously be only partially conformed to God's intellect and will and yet there still be no natural evils brought about within the universe. Yet, it is unclear how the objector could demonstrate that this scenario actually is metaphysically possible. Merely being able to conceive of such a state of affairs is not enough, for one would have to know the actual results of the system of physical laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. However, no one can demonstrate such a thing, unless they were able to inspect the mind of God and its causal relation to the universe. The defense, though, does not have the burden to demonstrate that a system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will results in there being natural evils within the universe, since the defense is only arguing that this is possibly true. The objector would need to demonstrate that this could not possibly be true.

One could then object that this response may work against a 'logical problem of evil' which attempts to arrive at deductive certainty, but an objector could still raise an 'evidential problem of evil' that is not based on deductive certainty but rather is based on what is probable and/or plausible. So, while one may not be able to 'prove' that God could simultaneously partially conform the system of laws to his intellect and will without the system producing natural evils, a person could still argue that it seems likely that God could simultaneously partially conform the system of laws to his intellect and will without the system also producing natural evils.

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However, in response, the difficulty still seems to remain (to me) that it seems impossible to know what would be the likely result of the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. If the objector wants to argue that one should lean towards thinking that God likely could simultaneously conform the system of laws to his intellect and will without the system producing natural evils, the objector would need to demonstrate why this is likely the case. Yet, I do not see how the objector could demonstrate such a thing.

6.2 The compatibilist objection

Objection #2: The PWD seems to assume that libertarian free will is required for people to make a free choice about the nature of their relationship with God. However, an objector could argue that it is conceivable that God could create people with the desire to love God, without violating that person's free will. This would then be more of a compatibilist conception of one's freedom over their relationship with God. People would be created with a deterministic desire to love God, but would also freely do so. So, the objection would be that people do not necessarily need libertarian free will in regard to choosing to love God or choosing not to. Thereby, God could have created people in a universe with a system of laws fully conformed to God's intellect and will that has no natural evils and people still freely love God, without God doing any injustice to people.

Response: The PWD does seem to assume that libertarian free will is needed for agents to decide if they want to develop a loving relation with God or not. However, it is a plausible assumption that if agents lack libertarian free will over their relationships, they would not be in full control over their relationships, since their choices in how they develop their relationships would be determined by causal factors outside of their own will. Even if one does not find that reasoning plausible, this still does not undermine the PWD. For again, the PWD is only a defense. It is only arguing that it is possible that people need libertarian free will in regard to choosing if they want to develop a loving relation with God. As long as it is possible that agent's need libertarian free will in order to make free, uncoerced decisions regarding the development of their relationships, then the PWD is possible. The burden of proof is then on the objector to show why it could not be morally relevant for agents to possess libertarian free will to be able to choose to enter into a loving relation with God.

Now, an objector may follow up by arguing that it is unclear that the PWD is actually compatible with libertarian free will: since the PWD argues that if the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then people will necessarily love God (and others). This then seems to be a deterministic view after all. For if a system of physical laws can necessitate that people love God (and others), then that no longer appears to be describing libertarian free will.

However, to be clear, the PWD argues that if the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then the system of laws will produce a desire within people that will necessarily produce feelings that lead people to love God (and others) in an unwavering manner. One could argue that if people are necessitated to love God (and others) by a system of physical laws, then they no longer have libertarian free will. It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate that point. The PWD is only arguing that there has to be a period of time where the system of laws does not produce a desire

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within people that will necessarily produce feelings that lead people to loving God (and others) in an unwavering manner.

That period of time will be one where people genuinely can pursue a loving relation with God (and others) or choose not to pursue such a relation. If the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will (the PWD argues) then people would only be able to love God (and others) because of the intense feelings produced by the system of laws. Yet, it is morally important that people have a time frame where they could genuinely go in either direction in terms of developing a loving relation with God (and others) or not developing a loving relation with God (and others). One could argue that this scenario is even compatible with determinism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate that point. The point regarding free will that the PWD requires is (at most) that people have a time frame where they genuinely could develop a loving relation with God (and others) or choose not to develop a loving relation with God (and others) without being forced by God to love God (and others).

One may still object though that if God desires for people to have an opportunity to freely develop a loving relation with God (and others), then it seems that a system of laws that fully conforms to God's intellect and will would actually allow for people to have freedom to choose to love God (and others) or not, rather than to necessarily love God (and others). So, the PWD seems to be contradicting itself in suggesting that in one sense a reality where everyone loves God (and others) is God's desire, but then, in another sense, a reality where people have freedom to choose to love God (and others) is what God desires.

However, in response to this concern, the PWD is arguing that it is God's desire for people to necessarily love God (and others), yet that God recognizes that it would be wrong to force people to love God (and others). So, it is out of God's concern for justice that God only partially conforms the system of laws to his intellect and will, not because a universe where people have that freedom is itself more desirable overall, but because God will not do what is wrong (i.e., force people to love God and others).

6.3 The miracles objection

Objection #3: One could grant that the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will might be able to explain why natural evils occur within our given universe but object that surely God could miraculously change the system of laws in order to prevent and/or undo the harmful effects brought about by natural evils. So, even if one grants the logic of the PWD, it seems God could still prevent the system of laws from resulting in natural evils, without undermining people's free will. So, at most, the PWD could serve as an explanation as to why the universe has the initial conditions that it does, but the PWD does not explain why God does not prevent natural evils from occurring. For example, if the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will is going to result in there being cancer cells forming, God could still causally prevent the system from producing the cancer cells. If one does not think it is possible for God to causally prevent such an event with the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, then it seems that the theist will need to deny the possibility of miracles. However, many theists will not want to deny the possibility of miracles. So, this poses a problem for the PWD.

Response: This paper certainly wants the PWD to be compatible with the occurrence of miracles. So, in answer to that concern, it must be kept in mind that miracles

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are themselves a bi-product of the system of laws being conformed to God's intellect and will. So, if the system of laws is fully conformed to God's intellect and will, then God will causally bring about the full panoply of miracles that he desires. Yet, if the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, then only a partial amount of miracles that God desires will be brought about within the universe. Again, this is because according to the logic of the PWD, miracles are a bi-product of the system of laws. So, how conformed the system of laws is to God's intellect and will, thereby determines how many miracles are brought about. So, a more fully conformed system = more miracles, while a less conformed system = less miracles.

One may think that surely God either would bring about all miracles that he desires or would not be able to bring about any miracles. However, the PWD is arguing that it is possible that while God has the power to bring about any miracles, only a certain number of miracles will actually be brought about as long as the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. This is because as long as the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, the system only partially matches God's intentions and desires.

As long as this theory is possible, then the objection does not undermine the PWD. For again, the PWD is only a defense and so only needs to be possible. The objector would need to demonstrate why more miracles would be brought about with the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. It is doubtful that an objector could demonstrate that claim since (as was argued above in regard to the greater conformity objection) the objector would need to be able to inspect the mind of God and examine its causal relation to the universe along with what would result with the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. Since the objector cannot make such an inspection, the objection then does not undermine the PWD.

6.4 Child death objection

Objection #4: Not all people get the chance to exercise free will during their lifetime. For example, children who die young. This then poses a difficulty for the PWD. For the basis of the PWD was that God needed to start people out in a universe with a system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will so that people then have a chance to exercise their freedom over their relationship with God. If the PWD proposes that children who die young enter into a loving relation with God after their death, then it seems that it was not necessary for God to start them out in a universe with the system of laws being only partially conformed to God's intellect and will. On the other hand, if the PWD argues that children do not enter into a loving relation with God upon their death, then surely God is unjust. So, the death of young children poses a difficulty for the PWD.

Response: In response to this dilemma, this paper will offer a couple of speculative suggestions. First, it is possible that the souls of children who die are transported to another universe where they then get an opportunity to exercise a free choice over their relation with God.[14] As long as that is possible, then the PWD is not undermined

[14]For a similar argument see: Greg Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), pp. 380–86; also c.f. Stewart Goetz, 'The Argument from Evil', in *The Blackwell Companion to*

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by this objection, since the PWD only needs to be possible in order to succeed as a defense.

A second possibility is that in conforming the system of laws to his intellect and will, it would not be God's intention for children to die young. Rather, God's intention would be for all agents to be able to exercise freedom during their lifetime. Yet, since the system of laws is only partially conformed to God's intellect and will, the system of laws brings about effects that God does not fully desire or intend, including the death of the innocent. There would then be no physical or spiritual barrier preventing the child's soul from entering into relation with God, and, so, their soul would necessarily enter into relation with God. Yet, under this circumstance, God did not force the child's soul to enter into relation with God; so God did not commit an injustice against the child. The objection is only a problem for the PWD if God *intentionally* forced the child's soul into relation with God. As long as God does not intentionally force the child into a relation with God, then the PWD is still consistent.

Of course, both of these responses are speculative and fully examining them goes beyond the scope of this paper. Again though, as long as the responses offered here are at least possible, then the objection from child death does not undermine the defense. It would be the burden of proof of the objector to demonstrate why the responses are not even possible in order to undermine the PWD.

However, one could object that even granting all of that, it seems people do not really have freedom over whom they love anyways. For example, children do not choose to love their parents. So, the PWD rests upon an assumption regarding the nature of freedom that seems false, namely, that people actually control who they choose to love.

In response to this follow up concern, it does seem that people do not have full control over who they love. In a sense, one cannot help being attracted to another. Yet, it also seems that people do have some degree of control over how they develop relations with others in regard to their choices, responses, etc. Furthermore, if loving God also requires loving even those one is not fond of (as some religious traditions suggest; for example, think of Jesus' parables regarding helping the least of all), then it seems that one is not always attracted to those who they are supposed to love, which then requires serious effort of will. Yet, this effort of will is important. So, overall, even if some degree of how we love is outside of our control, it seems plausible that some degree is under our control, which is all that the PWD needs in order to succeed.

7. Conclusion

This paper has outlined how the PWD could account for why God (understood here to at least be a maximally intelligent, morally perfect, sustainer of the universe) may allow for the existence of natural evils to occur within the universe. The paper explained how the PWD is a unique response to the problem of natural evil as compared to some popular defenses in the literature. The paper then responded to the defense's major objections. I encourage theists and non-theists alike to consider the PWD as a defense

Natural Theology, ed. by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 483.

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and potentially as a theodicy, if they find it plausible enough. More work can also possibly be done in developing the defense, as well as applying it to further problems of suffering. A follow-up project could also be to show how prayer works within the framework of the PWD as a means by which God conforms the system of laws to his intellect and will to bring about miracles within the world.[15]

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