

Chapter 4

The Problem of Evil

I. A difficult synthesis

I have, in the past two chapters, developed two different perspectives on God as the “first cause,” or foundation, of two different aspects of reality: the creative power of the world, and the reflective faculty of the human mind. The phenomena that arise from these twofold realities are certainly not completely independent; at a minimum, the mind has to work around the relative autonomy of the material universe, and so the latter certainly conditions in part the workings of the former. But neither one is wholly reducible to the other; and in any realistic understanding of the world, this mutual relative autonomy needs to be acknowledged.

As I have argued above, this position is incompatible with philosophical materialism, which postulates that all mental functions are reducible to material causes¹; but it is also, at least tentatively, against philosophical idealism, which “maintains that the ultimate nature of reality is ideal, or based upon ideas, values and essences.” Nor am I, really, happy with the position called “substance dualism,” either, according to which mind and body would be two separate substances. Personally, I think that the evidence is that there is only one ultimate reality, but that it manifests itself in different ways to our powers of perception and analysis². Whether you call that ultimate reality material or spiritual may not matter much, because in the end we do not even know what those words mean; as I tried to point out back in Chapter 1, our best current description of the “material” universe makes use of “things,” called quantum fields, that are *not*, strictly speaking, creatures of either matter or energy.

I certainly will not attempt to develop here a complete philosophical system in order to postulate the precise (but utterly hypothetical) way in which these two aspects of reality ultimately “fit together.” I doubt if beings like us could truly comprehend this, anyway; and, moreover, I do not really believe that we need to. I will only point out two facts that suggest that there is, indeed, a “fitting together”—a synthesis of the “material” and the spiritual”—somewhere, perhaps just beyond the horizon of our mind’s comprehension.

The first fact is that our deepest theory of physical reality has come to make use of an object, the wavefunction or state vector, which itself appears to have an irreducible dual nature: on the one hand, it refers to the state of an objective physical system, but on the other hand it fundamentally expresses *our knowledge* of that state, so it also refers to *the state of our mind*. It does not seem possible to “do” quantum mechanics without using these objects that inseparably bind within

¹ As also argued above, today many scientists believe themselves to be materialists, but they are not, because they actually believe in the causative power of ideas such as mathematical truths (and the approximate truths of other sciences).

² This is, essentially, the position called “dual-aspect monism,” advocated by John Polkinghorne and often discussed in his writings; see, for instance, Chapter 1 of *The Faith of a Physicist*.

themselves the objective and the subjective worlds.

The second fact is precisely that we are able to go that far at all—to understand the “material” world in terms of our mental categories. As Einstein put it, “the most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.” This indicates that a strong “resonance,” a match, exists between our mind’s capability to apprehend mathematical and scientific truth, and the workings of the “material” world, and is suggestive of their common origin in one single, unifying principle.

It needs to be said also, however, that there are limits to what we can understand. Reductionisms of various signs tend to ignore this fact, by substituting a hypothetical explanatory mechanism for true understanding; but, in point of fact, there is *no* understanding. No many-worlds or hidden variable theory will really be able to tell you why this particular atom decayed at this particular time; no neurological theory of the mind will be able to explain to you how you know that the pythagorean theorem is true. But, most importantly, these are not arbitrary limitations of our understanding; rather, they are *necessary*, given that we exist and are capable of understanding at all.

This is an important point, and it needs to be made as clearly as possible. For our understanding of the world, limited as it is, to be possible at all, our mind *needs* to have the relative autonomy that I discussed in the previous chapter; but this would not be possible if the world was ruled by the absolute determinism of Laplace (because then we would be mere automatons), or even by an algorithmic combination of chance and necessity, as argued in the previous chapter. In order for us to have a mind that can “understand” much of the material universe—as scientists understand, that is, by developing theories and models of causation along the lines of classical physics—there *have* to be aspects of the universe that escape *precisely that kind of understanding*. There has to be a fundamental lack of determinism at some level (and processes whereby this lack of determinism is amplified to our level of action, if it resides originally at a different level); and there has to be something non-algorithmic about the workings of the mind itself. *There have to be such “incomprehensible” things in the world, in order for us to be able to comprehend pretty much everything else.*

This sort of “anthropic argument”—that in order for us to be the way we are, the world needs to be a certain way—will play an important role in the exploration to be undertaken in this chapter, which concerns the truly greatest difficulty that theism has to contend with. Reductionism is only a distraction; it is, unfortunately, so prevalent that it needs to be dealt with, but in the end it is just bad science and even worse philosophy. The real problem for theism is the problem of evil.

In fact, the problem of evil can also be viewed as a difficulty that arises when we try to combine the two aspects of God that we have introduced so far: the Creator of the universe, and the source of our ability to reflect, and, as a result of this reflection, to conceive of not only true and false but also right and wrong, and hence to develop a moral code for ourselves.

The reason the above sentence is so long is because, as detailed in the previous chapter, I wish to avoid placing God *directly* at the origin of “the moral law,” whatever that happens to be. Without such scruples on my part, I could summarize the problem of evil very shortly, in any of several pithy formulations, such as Abraham’s rhetorical question from Genesis 18:25:

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

Or: if God is responsible for both the material world *and* our sense of justice, why do we not see more justice in the workings of the world?

The fact is, however, that, as I tried to point out in the previous chapter, our “sense of justice” is, much of the time, so inextricably bound with our time, and place, and circumstances, that it often is doing God a serious disservice to attribute it *directly* to him. It is a fine thing, for example, for the psalmist to complain about “the prosperity of the wicked” (as in Ps. 73:3), but then, just a few pages later (Ps. 137:9), one runs into a tirade against Babylon that ends with the words

Happy shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!

Much as some people might like to believe that every word in the Bible is the literal word of God, the above statement, I think, should give them pause.

Nevertheless, there *is* a problem of evil, because we *are* moral beings, because we experience a deep desire to do what is right (even though we may be, like the psalmist, hopelessly confused about *what* is right), and yet we are confronted with the difficulty that, for future reference, I would like to summarize as follows:

The world is not set up so as to unfailingly and materially reward the obedience to *any* moral code (nor to unfailingly punish the disobedience to any code).

This is the real problem: that it does not, in fact, matter *what* moral law we may have chosen to abide by, or whether we have in fact abided by it or not: if we just happen to be living in the path of, say, the 2004 Asian Tsunami, we will be either killed, along with 225,000 other people, or deprived of everything we held dear, including our loved ones, *indiscriminately*.

I have said that evil is a problem for theism, which, of course, is true; and yet the above formulation makes it clear that it really is a problem for everybody, for theists, deists, and atheists; for anybody struggling to live a meaningful existence. How is such an existence possible in the face of suffering; undeserved suffering, suffering of an almost inconceivable magnitude, such as the Asian Tsunami, the Cambodian killing fields, the Nazi holocaust?

For the believer in a personal God, the question usually takes one of the forms “why would a

benevolent world create a world in which bad things happen to good people,” or “why would he not interfere to prevent evil people from hurting others.” These questions do not arise, as such, at this point in the path that I have followed here to develop the concept of God; yet we still may feel a difficulty, something like an inconsistency: if the universe does not “endorse” or validate our efforts to discern right from wrong, then it is hard to believe, as I have postulated here, that our discernment faculty itself is something “flowing” directly from the Source of Being; rather, it, and our deep desire for meaning, would appear to be irrelevant, unconnected with reality, a sort of freak accident of evolution.

Such a conclusion, however, would be premature, for several reasons. To begin with, evolutionarily speaking, a fundamental behavioral trait of an established species can no longer be considered an accident, no matter how it actually arose: our efforts to act in a morally meaningful way *must* have some survival value, which means that they must correlate in a positive way with the objective reality of the world. Moreover—and possibly also very significantly—the world has already met our expectations in one other, very important way: by being amenable to scientific, rational understanding. There is something objectively “out there” that is a pretty good match for our reasoning abilities, in particular those that make use of the language and concepts of mathematics¹. Why, then, shouldn’t there be something “out there” that also meets our moral and ethical expectations, that validates our capability for moral discernment, like the physical workings of the world validate our capability for mathematical discernment?

In the remainder of this chapter I will present arguments for the fact that, indeed, ethical behavior of a certain type does have a strong survival value, so much so that a fairly universal moral code has been “discovered” again and again throughout history. And yet, and most importantly, I will also argue that, much as our ability to comprehend the universe requires that some aspects of it remain incomprehensible, *our own capability for moral action requires that the material world must retain a core of “amorality” or “injustice.”* This means, in particular, that a hypothetical “designer” could not really have arranged for us a world without “evil,” except by the same expedient of making it a clockwork mechanism, whose gears would be just as incapable of experiencing sorrow as of experiencing joy. This remains true, as I shall also show below, even if one allows the hypothetical designer unlimited “magical” powers to alter the natural workings of the universe at any time to prevent harm to its creatures.

Since I am not, at any point in this work, trying to push any anthropomorphic idea of God as a “designer,” the above observations may appear irrelevant, but I believe they are important in that at least they should be allowed to temper and guide our expectations regarding the second, and crucial, point I made earlier, namely, the possibility that “the world,” or “life,” or the Ultimate Reality behind both might, in some way, validate our capability for moral discernment, and our efforts to live ethical lives. The point is that *we cannot really expect such a vindication to take place entirely in the material plane, or in purely material terms.* Hence the problem of evil, as

¹ In his work *Il Saggiatore*, Galileo famously compared the universe to a book “written in the language of mathematics.”

stated above—which was explicitly in terms of material rewards or punishments—truly does not not have a *solution*: it is simply a fact, and cannot be made to “dissolve” away. Nonetheless, it does, in my opinion, have an *answer*, in the sense in which we “answer” when questioned or challenged; and it is one in which, as I hope to show in the next and final chapter, a proper understanding of God does play an essential role.

II. The justice of the world, and its limitations

We are fundamentally moral creatures, I believe, in large part because we are fundamentally social creatures. We may not be born with many more instincts than just these—to learn and to socialize. We spend most of our lives trying to belong to communities, and dealing with the obligations that arise from that belonging, whether it is to families, teams, work groups, professional or political organizations. It is so much a part of us that even spiritual teachers like Jesus and the Buddha, whose concern was primarily with individual salvation, advised their followers to form communities. It is just much harder to achieve happiness as a member of a broken family, or a failed state.

Since any community needs rules in order to work, it is natural that “codes of behavior” should have developed in the course of human cultural evolution. All of these codes contain provisions that are very specific to the circumstances of the particular community, but all of them include what might be called a core of basic precepts and rules that are remarkably universal; enough so to make it reasonable to assume that they reflect something deep about our own nature. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Abolition of Man*, has collected a fairly substantive sample of these core precepts, from many different cultures and times, that makes the point rather effectively. I will only mention here, as a working example, the bottom half of the Judeo-Christian Decalogue: honor your father and mother; do not steal; do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not bear false witness (that is, do not tell lies that are harmful to somebody else); do not covet someone else’s goods (including, ahem, “his” wife). This may be set side by side with the “five precepts” of Buddhism (intended primarily for lay followers): to not kill, not steal, abstain from sexual misconduct, abstain from false speech, and abstain from drink and intoxicating drugs. The overlaps are evident, and much more significant than the differences (most of which, in any case, tend to disappear when additional texts of the two traditions are compared¹).

The usefulness of observing these precepts for living in any human community is obvious, and on those grounds alone it is not surprising that they should have been “discovered”, probably independently, over and over again in the course of human cultural story. As such, they may be expected to have a high “survival value,” and maybe even to represent a near-optimal adaptation to our “typical” environment; a sort of “instruction manual” for (human) life. But, moreover, since we are *biologically* social creatures, it would be reasonable to expect that there is also

¹ For instance, an alternative set of Buddhist precepts listed in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN 10.176) does not mention intoxicants but includes an admonition against covetousness.

something within us, even at the instinctive level, that “resonates” with these rules, whether it be a tendency to cooperate, a reluctance to hurt others, a tendency towards altruism, or a basic desire for fairness.

In any case, the importance of these precepts has been so universally recognized that they have almost always been elevated, from simple social rules of good behavior, to a full-fledged moral code; that is, most of the time, one finds them associated with an absolute sense of good, even as their opposites are associated with evil. Children are raised by their parents to abide by these rules, and to derive a great deal of their sense of self-worth from following them, from being what one would call “a good person.”

Finally, in all theistic systems, the basic moral code (usually augmented by a localized series of additional precepts) typically ends up being endowed with the supreme moral authority of something handed down by God (or the gods) himself. Nor is this confined to the world of theism; in both Buddhism and Hinduism, one finds the moral code reinforced by a belief in a cosmic order, the law of karma, that is expected to unfailingly reward good behavior and punish good behavior. This suggests that the appeal to divine authority that one finds in the Abrahamic world also must have resulted from the sincere conviction, on the part of the various prophets and lawgivers, that the code reflected a basic principle of the order of the universe: that the behavior encouraged was objectively good, and the behavior forbidden was objectively bad, in the eyes of the very powers that ruled the world.

I have already mentioned two plausible “natural” sources for this belief: the fact that communities that lived by this moral code may well have been more successful than those that did not, and the way the code may have resonated with some of our most basic instincts. As regards the first of these, a look at the Hebrew Bible, for instance, suggests that a way in which the ancient Jews felt themselves especially protected by God was in the series of battles that eventually gave them control over the “promised land”; but there is nothing supernatural or irrational in the notion that a tightly united people, relatively free from internal strife, may have had a military edge over communities that were more settled, sprawling, and possibly culturally heterogeneous, or even divided along clannish lines. Something similar may have been the case with the rapid early spread of Islam; and, in both cases, these military successes would naturally be seen as an indication of divine approval of the rules and practices of the tribe.

One can also argue that, even in peacetime, a harmonious community (such as would result when a majority of the people abided by the basic moral code most of the time) would have an advantage when, for instance, a natural disaster struck and a large degree of cooperation and mutual support was necessary. Again, over time, such a community would be likely to thrive and again, quite naturally, it might come to believe itself protected or favored by the gods, and to attribute this to their virtuous behavior. One can see here a likely self-reinforcing mechanism for the “divine sanction” belief—or, for that matter, for the belief in the karmic law as well.

This is all well and good for the community, but what about the individual? Here two further

observations may be made. First, the very individual-centered, modern Western society is a relatively recent historical development, and, in the broader history of the world, something of an anomaly. Throughout most of history, the prevalent state of affairs appears to have been that the needs and welfare of the community—be it the tribe, the clan, or even the city-state—always took precedence over those of any of its members¹. Hence, as long as the community thrived, an individual may well have felt that his own misfortunes were relatively unimportant. (And in fact, as long as the community did well, even its own relatively disadvantaged members would be comparatively better off than otherwise.) Moreover, since an absolutely virtuous life is largely an impossibility, one could almost always rationalize that a particular affliction was in fact deserved, because of some violation of a minor or major precept at some time or another. Even so, it seems that, sooner or later, somebody must have noticed the occasional, and wholly undeserved, suffering of children, and be disturbed by it, but this simply does not appear to have been an issue in the ancient world, probably because most ancient societies tended to regard children more as a possession of their parents than as free, individual human beings themselves². It is something of a supreme irony that in the book of Job—that very early testament to the reality of undeserved suffering, and to the deep theological questions it rises—nobody seems to feel particularly sorry for Job’s ten children (Job 1:10), killed at the beginning of the story (Job 1:18-19); destroyed, one might say, along with Job’s all other possessions. Instead, everything seems to be all right again when at the end (Job 42:13) Job is given, as it were, ten “replacement” children—even better, presumably, than the previous ones.

The other thing that needs to be pointed out is that the precepts in the basic moral code are mostly about relationships, and that following them will in general lead to happier relationships than the alternative, and hence, in general, to a happier life at the level of the individual as well. One can see this, for instance, in the commandments against covetousness and sexual misconduct. But this may also be taken as the starting point for a historical shift in emphasis, in early religious thought, from a happiness understood in strictly material terms, to one concerned more with the needs and aspirations of the human spirit. It is along this latter line that a clearer and more reliable correlation can be found between happiness and moral behavior, and this is clearly also the drift behind what might be called the “internalization of the code” advocated, for instance, by Jesus, which emphasized the cultivation of right internal states of the soul over the practice of external rituals. Buddhism had apparently emphasized this from the beginning, identifying a number of “unwholesome” (what today’s psychologists might call “destructive”) inclinations of the mind. Here, for example, is a list from the *Majjhima Nikaya*, 7:3: covetousness and unrighteous greed, ill will, anger, resentment, contempt, insolence, envy, avarice, deceit, fraud, obstinacy, rivalry, conceit, arrogance, vanity, negligence. Compare to the Catholic Church list of the “seven deadly sins”: pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth. Any of these mental attitudes has the potential to, quite literally, ruin one’s life—and

¹ The practice of ritual human sacrifice in a number of early societies is an extreme example of this idea.

² Which is also why, for instance, the ancient Hebrews do not appear to have thought it unjust that God would punish the iniquity of fathers “on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations” (Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:8, Deuteronomy 5:9).

hence, obviously, avoiding them can only, on average, lead to an existence happier than the alternative, even on “worldly” terms.

And yet, the problem is that as long as one is only considering happiness on “worldly” terms—whether these involve wealth, health, or relationships—the correlation between moral behavior and happiness simply cannot be perfect, in a natural course of things; in a world in which diseases or draughts or earthquakes, or human depredation, may strike at any time, out of the blue, and indiscriminately. Somebody who has grown up with the simple expectation, born of a naïve anthropomorphic concept of God as an all-powerful, just overseer of the universe, that good deeds will invariably be rewarded and evil deeds will invariably be punished, can only hold off this realization for a while, through any number of more or less contrived rationalizations; but in the end, he or she may be forced to accept the devastating truth that this is simply not the way the universe works.

Presumably, if we were all raised on a different concept of God, and a different concept of happiness, the contrived rationalizations would never be necessary, and there would also be no devastating moment of recognition at the end. This is something, I feel, to be seriously considered, although I am not sure I can offer any specific suggestions for how to do it at this point. We consistently use material rewards and punishments to develop our children’s moral sense, and even the greatest moral teachers the world has ever known could not avoid using the promise of material rewards and punishments when they were trying to develop the moral sense of their disciples¹. And they were, of course, quite right to point out the *likely* worldly outcomes of good and bad actions, as I have tried to describe them above: the problem is that we tend to understand their words as implying a perfect correlation, a *promise* that, if only we do what is right consistently, bad things will simply not happen to us. And nobody can promise that.

And yet—perhaps because there really is, much of the time, an imperfect correlation, or a correlation on the average, between a virtuous life and a (relative) degree of worldly success; or perhaps for any number of other, less rational reasons—this is an idea that many people, including religious leaders, are very reluctant to abandon. As late as the seventeenth century, it was an important belief of certain Christian groups that a person’s material prosperity was a direct reflection of his or her “rightness” with God. A modern version of this belief is provided by ministers who shamelessly try to sell—literally—the notion that “God wants you to be rich,” while its secular echo is all too often heard from contemporary politicians and commentators when they blame the poor for their poverty.

¹ For instance, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, 129, the Buddha explains how a wise man (“one who thinks good thoughts, speaks good words, and does good deeds”) “feels pleasure and joy here and now” in three ways, one of which is that he does not need to worry about being seized by the authorities and tortured as a common criminal. Of course, this may be true most of the time; but we know only too well that it is not true all the time or in every society. Similarly, Jesus appears to make a promise of material rewards in this life for his followers in Mark 10:30, although, in a strange sentence, the text goes on immediately to say “and persecutions besides.” In any case, these texts are exceedingly rare; both Jesus and the Buddha consistently taught that the rewards of the spiritual life are primarily spiritual, which, however—and this is important—does *not* necessarily mean “confined to the afterlife.” (More on this in the next chapter.)

When looking to the Eastern religious traditions, one finds that the law of karma acknowledges, implicitly, the imperfect nature of the punishment and reward system in this life, by postulating that some of it is actually due to something the individual did in a *previous* life. This is, of course, a wholly unverifiable belief, but, even as a concept, I personally see no justice in a reincarnation system in which somebody is held responsible for the sins of a previous incarnation who is, in fact, for all intents and purposes, a different individual altogether. Metaphorically speaking, of course, I do see the value of this idea as a reminder of some basic truths: such as that much, if not most, of the suffering in the world is caused by our moral failures, and that we are all born into a world that has already been spiritually and materially poisoned by the sins of the previous generation¹. Still, as a reductionist hypothesis—a purported explanation for *all* the ills of the world—it simply goes too far.

A number of Christian thinkers who are apparently stuck with the anthropomorphic idea of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing “master planner,” seem to take refuge in the idea that we can never understand the full consequences of anything that happens in the world, and hence we cannot discard the possibility that all that appears to us right now as random, undeserved suffering, may actually be necessary and, somehow, in the service of a greater good. I see a potential seed of truth in this idea, but only a seed: namely, if I understand it as implying that the “greater good” ought to be, ultimately, our eventual recognition that our true identity is not bound with any of our material possessions, but it is to be sought in the spiritual dimension instead. Or, in other words, that it is possible, with God’s help, to turn everything bad that happens to us into an opportunity for spiritual growth, as I will try to argue in the next chapter. But I would much prefer that people said this from the beginning, and framed our relationship with God in those terms, by presenting him as a source of insight and love through which the world’s random suffering can be overcome; rather than as a source of befuddlement and mystification, a cryptic character up in the sky that sends random suffering our way for incomprehensible reasons².

Yet, even if we allow for the notion that what might be called “natural evil” does not come directly from God, but rather from the natural “freedom of the world” (for which I argued at length in Chapter 2), much as the possibility of “human evil” arises as an inevitable consequence of

¹ This is also a possible interpretation of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin.

² In any case, if both the material world and human beings are truly free, as I have argued here, it is clear that most of the things that happen to us—whether good or bad—cannot have been *specifically* planned by God. This is true even in the “block universe” picture (see Chapter 2) in which God is supposed to know the future because he can “see” it, from outside of time, as having already happened: if I go to the future to see what a free agent is going to do, what I see there is still the realization of *that agent’s* plan, not mine.

More generally, I would argue that “planning”—at least, as the term is usually understood—is something that only contingent, complex beings would do; it does not seem to fit well with the notion of God as “absolutely simple,” and free from any contingent “parts,” that I proposed in Chapter 1. Instead of “God’s plan” I think I would prefer to speak about God’s *goal*: a goal of eternal joy for all his creatures, that we can freely choose to work towards and help bring about, with God’s help, regardless of the random complications the world may choose to put in our way. (For more on the matter of “God’s will,” see Chapter 5.)

human freedom, we might still wonder whether God could not have created a better world to begin with, or whether he could not intervene directly to prevent the suffering that arises through either of these sources of evil. There are at least two problems with these questions: the first one is that they still depend on a notion of God that is much too anthropomorphic, and the second is that they implicitly rely too much on the material world for a definition of good and bad, as little more than pleasure and pain, respectively. Still, they need to be addressed, and they will (in reverse order) in the next two sections, because it is important to be as clear-eyed as possible about what *cannot* be expected from the world—and, indirectly, from God as well—before we can start working constructively on what I believe is the proper response.

III. Moral Evil, and What To Do About It (Or Not)

Even if we cannot literally believe that every good action will be rewarded and every bad action punished, there are, I would argue, good reasons to believe that consistently following the “universal moral code” would be better, in the long run, than any alternative. If undeserved bad things and undeserved good things are truly random, then over a sufficiently long period of time it is not unreasonable to expect that they may cancel each other out, leaving only the average bias present in “the system”; and this bias is almost certainly favorable for behavior according to the code. This is suggested, among other things, by its continuous rediscovery in the course of human cultural evolution, which singles it out as possibly a near-optimal adaptation to deal with what might be called a “normal” or “average” human environment. Moreover, the very sensible nature of the rules is readily apparent, as is also, and most importantly, the fact that behavior contrary to the code (lying, stealing, and so forth) cannot fail to be self-destructive in the long run.

This suggests that an argument, based on “enlightened self-interest,” could be made for abiding by the universal moral code *all the time*, even if it occasionally fails to return an instantaneous reward: in the long run, it seems that one would be better off that way than with any other strategy. Why, then, do we not follow it?

One, probably very important, reason has to be the psychological impact of the relatively frequent and occasionally very outrageous exceptions—at least as far as we can discern them—to what might be called “the karmic law.” When George Bailey in the movie *It’s a wonderful life* was dealt a terrible blow, after a lifetime of sacrificing himself for others, he was, at least temporarily, unable to see any meaning in all the good he had tried (and often succeeded) to do. When we see people around us who succeed by various forms of cheating and “bending the rules,” and who are apparently happy, we may also wonder if what matters is really to follow the code, or simply to not get caught. As long as we do not really believe in an omniscient overseer who will unfailingly punish or reward us, only in several blind enforcing “mechanisms” of a social, or even a psychological, nature, the temptation will be strong to try to see how much we can get away with (especially since it seems that many other people *are* getting away with something). The result tends to be that, even though most of us realize the danger of breaking

the rules *all* the time, and stay away from that particular path, we also do not try very hard to follow them all the time. Typically, we tend to strike a “compromise” where we will simply keep the easier precepts (“do not kill”), fudge the somewhat more demanding ones (how many of us still believe that Internet piracy is “stealing,” for instance?), and largely ignore the really hard ones, such as those having to do with responsible sexual behavior or the use of intoxicants¹.

Moreover, even if we were *sure* that—through whatever mechanism—life is truly biased so as to reward “good behavior,” and punish bad behavior, in the long run, and we realized (wisely, in my opinion) that we are probably not smart enough to spot and work around all the various mechanisms through which the “karmic law” may eventually be enforced, sometimes we may truly find ourselves in extreme circumstances, where any attempts to base ethical behavior on material rewards—whether instant or delayed—simply and utterly break down. The clearest way to see this is provided by what one might call “the Victor Laszlo dilemma”: you have been captured by the Nazis, and they are going to kill you unless you reveal the names of the other members of the Resistance. What do you do? Enlightened self-interest—the recognition that “doing the right thing” typically pays off in the long term—does not work, because in this extreme case the basic proposition fails: if you do the right thing, there will simply be no “long term” for you.

To “do the right thing” in the Victor Laszlo dilemma requires a kind of conviction that may be called religious in the broadest sense of the word: *a sense of obligation to something other than yourself*. It is this, I believe, that provides the ultimate base for morality, but, as should already be obvious, it is extremely important that whatever we put in the place of our “self” be the right thing. In the next chapter I intend to address at length what I believe is the right choice; but this is not a bad place to follow up a bit on this example in order to discuss, instead, a once-popular *wrong* choice—what one might call a wrong “secular religion”—and its world-reaching consequences.

To begin with, one should note that the consequence of all of the foregoing can be summed up in the corollary that “a world that only rewards ethical behavior most of the time will produce people who, at best, only behave ethically most of the time.” And this is extremely unfortunate, because the fact is that the overwhelmingly greatest part of the suffering in the world is actually due to moral failures: it is the result of what we would call “human evil,” or what we used to call sin. This does not require any further proof than a look at the day’s headlines: everywhere we see the suffering caused by wars that are the direct result of greed, violent anger, and the contempt for human life. We are currently in the midst of an economic crisis forced upon us again by greed and, in some cases, by deceit. The consumption of drugs continues to fuel crime and political instability around the world. Sexually irresponsible behavior has caused an AIDS crisis that today threatens the survival of an entire continent, while in countries like the U.S. it

¹ Occasionally, the world gets treated to the spectacle of a celebrity being arrested for drinking and driving (a violation of a “minor” precept that could easily, however, have resulted in an accidental killing), whimpering to the cameras “I am not a bad person”—which presumably, these days, only means “I have never cold-bloodedly murdered anybody.”

continues to keep broken families stuck in a dead end of poverty and crime. Terrible as natural disasters often can be, no earthquake or flood or epidemic¹ of the twentieth century even began to approach the cost in human suffering caused by the two world wars, and the murderous policies of the totalitarian regimes that emerged from them.

All this is true on a grand scale; but the destructive effects of sin are experienced every day, in every individual human life. Even those among us who most ardently protest that they are “good persons,” if they had any kind of self-knowledge, would have to realize how much misery their irresponsible, selfish actions have brought upon themselves and others². Small lies and betrayals that slowly erode our ability to trust; envy and jealousy that end up dividing friends and families; words spoken in anger, and pride that does not let us take them back. The average human being may be, as Hamlet put it, “indifferent honest”; we could also call him or her an “average sinner,” and, directly as a result of that, also “average miserable”—even as we may fail, sometimes, to realize the connection, *or* the true extent of our sin-induced misery, since our own condition may not appear to be a whole lot more wretched than that of most everybody else³.

It is easy, when considering all of the above, to be tempted to conclude that we could remove a great deal of suffering from the world, and overall make people happier, if only we would *force* them to behave properly. This, on the grand scale, is the temptation of the socialist and communist utopians that left a trail of bloodshed, destruction, and lies across much of the twentieth century⁴.

It is not clear whether the Victor Laszlo of Casablanca is a communist (like so many were who resisted the Nazis) or not⁵, but it is clear that Communism would provide the morally right answer to his dilemma: it *is* right for an individual to sacrifice himself for the good of many. The trouble is that Communism would go ahead and *actually sacrifice* the individuals—ruthlessly, and in great numbers—for the good of the collective. Most of Communism is, in fact, like this, a

¹ With the notable exception of the 1918 flu pandemic, which may have killed between 20 and 100 million people worldwide, although some of this may have been exacerbated by the world war going on at the time.

² In *What Is Man* (p. 113), Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

Embarrassment not only precedes religious commitment; it is the touchstone of religious existence. [...] A religious man could never say: “I am a good person.” Far from being satisfied with his conduct, he prays three times daily: “Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned.”

³ Sigmund Freud is occasionally quoted as having said that “The goal of psychoanalysis is to convert neurotic misery into ordinary unhappiness.” There is more to the quote, of course—it is really a paraphrase—but even out of context like this, it is just too good to pass up. (The context appears to be the last paragraph of *Studies of Hysteria* (1893-1895), in the section of “Psychotherapy of Hysteria.”)

⁴ Of course, the temptation has also afflicted a number of religious leaders who wielded political power throughout history. I could just as easily have made my point, in the following, by referring to the evils of theocracies, instead of communism, but enough people have done that already, and—unlike them—I do not want to give the impression that the evils in question had anything to do with whether the rulers claimed to believe in God or not.

⁵ But he probably is at least a sympathizer, since he regards Rick Blaine, who “fought on the side of the loyalists” in the Spanish Civil War, as a kindred soul.

lot of ideas that start out good and immediately get out of hand. For instance, the observation, just made, that greed is responsible for a great deal of the suffering in the world, is followed immediately by the solution of eliminating greed by not letting anybody own anything.

It is not a coincidence that Communists societies were, on the whole, very “moral”—even prudish, at times, as they railed against “Western decadence.” This is a natural consequence of the realization that the universal moral code is typically good for the community, as pointed out in the previous section. The problem, however, is not just that this “goodness” was forced upon everybody, but that the enforcers—“the state”—reserved for themselves the right to break the code in every way they deemed necessary or even merely convenient: to kill anybody at any time, to take anything away from anybody, and, perhaps most remarkably, to lie, to lie to everybody, constantly, in every way. George Orwell famously documented in his book *1984* the curious perversion of language characteristic of totalitarian regimes; the persecution of entire branches of natural science and the general decline of critical thinking evidenced by the official and earnest pursuit of pseudoscience are also well-known facets of the Soviet Union’s inability to handle, or even to seek, most kinds of objective truth.

Communism is an attempt to bring about a Utopia—a paradise on Earth—but *the price is the loss of all that makes us human*. To enforce the rules and protect the collective, you do away with compassion and mercy in the name of “justice”; to avoid instability, you suppress critical thinking (once you have decided that your ideas are the only true ones, there is no need for anybody else to think—it can only lead to trouble), and with it, discovery and creativity; and, in the end, by depriving people of their freedom you even make it impossible for them to truly act morally, that is, to make their own choices.

All of this may be used as a cautionary tale to keep in mind when discussing the attempts to answer the question “Why does God permit evil?” from a theistic perspective. The implicit question, in the present context, is really “Why doesn’t God intervene to prevent evil people from hurting others?” But we might as well ask, “Why doesn’t God keep us from hurting ourselves?”

Since I have not yet developed the concept of God to the point where we can even envision him “intervening” in anything, we do not, strictly speaking, have to address this question yet—we could say that it is really asked coming from a different frame of reference—but it is important to consider it anyway because of its historical (and still current) significance to many believers and unbelievers, and especially, as I shall try to show, because it rests on implicit assumptions about God that need to be examined critically.

Let me start by saying that the traditional theistic defense—namely, that it would somehow not be right for God to interfere with human freedom, including the freedom to do evil—poses a potentially serious problem, because it suggests that freedom, as such, is *the greatest possible good*, worth any amount of human suffering and pain. This is clearly not the best ground on which to build a moral code.

One has, therefore, to qualify the traditional defense heavily, by pointing out that what is at stake is not *merely* freedom, but rather, as the case study of Communism shows, *everything that makes us human*. There is no way to absolutely prevent us—by force—from hurting each other without destroying our humanity itself.

At this point, it is important to examine the basic implicit (sometimes explicit) assumption from which the problem of evil for theism arises: namely, the idea that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful. This is a very old notion that most of us do not even stop to question, but, as I have said elsewhere, it is really a tricky concept because it is always tricky to play with infinities. If one does not watch out, one can get caught up in all kinds of paradoxes.

It is in part to avoid those paradoxes that most careful thinkers have always traditionally qualified the idea of God's omnipotence by pointing out that it does not really mean that God could do, literally, *anything*. He could not, for instance, do anything that is logically impossible, or involves a contradiction in terms: for instance, create a four-sided triangle.

Along these lines, then, the traditional theistic defense against the problem posed by human evil would be to argue that to eradicate human evil by force and still have some humanity left is just as impossible as to make a four-sided triangle. You would need to remove human freedom completely in order to make it completely impossible for any human being to hurt another; and, at that point, you would not have a world of human beings, but of automatons. Then, indeed, suffering would no longer be an issue, simply because nobody would be able to *feel* anything anymore, whether it be sorrow or joy.

I believe that this is fundamentally true, but there are still a couple of objections people might raise. One would go more or less as follows: “But couldn’t God have made us *better*? Less greedy, for instance, so we would have less of a tendency to hurt each other over that?”

To this I can only answer, having raised now two children of my own, that, no matter what the believers in the doctrine of “total depravity” might think, there is, as far as I can tell, *nothing* wrong with what one might call the “default factory settings” with which human beings come into the world¹. With their tremendous instinct to socialize and follow the group, human beings could easily be raised to be generous to a fault, if they only saw examples of generosity all around them. It is certainly much harder than that in practice, but only because we are embedded in a culture of disposable consumerism that literally needs greed to survive, and promotes it in

¹ There may be exceptions, of course, but these would fall under the heading of “natural evil,” to be discussed in the next Section.

every possible direct and indirect way all around us¹. We cannot blame God for our “innate” predisposition for evil because there is no such thing. We merely are what we (collectively, including all the past generations²) have chosen to make ourselves—and, considering that we are still here (in spite of all the chances we have had to destroy ourselves, or at least civilization, along the way), one might even say that we have not really turned out that bad, on the whole³. It is just that it is much easier to destroy than to create, and a relatively small amount of moral evil can indeed do an awful lot of damage.

The second objection is really the toughest one: Couldn’t God at least intervene *partially* (that is, some of the time), to directly prevent the most horrifying crimes or abuses?

The first problem with this idea is that it *sounds* good, but there is no way of giving it a definite meaning. Just what are those most horrifying crimes, and where and by what authority does one draw the line? Suppose God somehow always intervened directly to prevent any instance of child rape. Wouldn’t a raped 18-year old be justified in finding it unfair that God did not protect her, just because she was no longer under age? (And just how is God supposed to intervene, anyway? Annihilate the criminal *before* he commits the crime?)

We may all feel that God should have stopped the Holocaust. But at what point should he have intervened? How many murdered Jews are an intolerably large number?

Nobody can answer these questions, and no fair answer is possible. Of course, that will not stop some people from trying to impose their own answers, which is why I can only point again at the devastation caused by the totalitarian regimes of the past century as an example of what happens when human beings decide to play God and rid the world of (what they consider) evil; which, in the supreme irony of all, is precisely what Hitler thought he was doing with his “final solution.”

“But surely,” somebody might still say, “that is just us, flawed, finite human beings; but God,

¹ The astute observer may suspect that with this statement I am, after all, endorsing the humanist utopias (Communism or Socialism, with their dream of creating a “new human being” through the proper “education”) that I was just dismissing a moment ago. I am not, but the point is subtle. First, I do believe that a loving community of generous human beings would raise loving, generous children *more often than not*, although probably not in *every* case—a caveat I feel I have to add not because of any “innate disposition towards evil,” but because of the irreducible fact of human freedom. Second, of course, is the fact that Communist societies were never loving nor generous.

² See footnote in previous Section about Original Sin.

³ With this I certainly do not want to sound complacent, suggest that we are, in any way, already “good enough,” or imply that being good is “easy.” It is easy sometimes—all the more, the more we “train” ourselves—and awfully hard some other times, and at times, as in the Victor Laszlo case, it requires nothing short of heroism. The consistent teaching of the Christian church is that it is impossible for us to save ourselves without God’s help, and I have no problem with this idea; in fact, I think that our not having turned out “that bad, on the whole,” is, as much as anything, evidence that God *does* help us constantly, as I shall try to explain later. But, even so, this still requires for us to be, at a minimum, predisposed enough for good to *want* to be good, and to seek God’s help, or accept it when it is offered.

being all-powerful as well as infinitely wise, surely could figure out a way to do it *right!*¹¹ But, at this point, we are merely invoking infinities again to disguise the fact that we really cannot tell what it is that we want. If we are forced to admit that God would have to draw a line somewhere, and that it would be impossible, no matter where he drew it, for everybody to like it, how do we know that that is not the precise situation we have now, anyway?

The assumption of God's omnipotence, in fact, introduces another difficulty, which is that, not only there is no "natural" place for him to stop, there is not even a *necessary* (meaning unavoidable) place for him to stop. We are limited, and when we try to help, sooner or later we run into some fundamental limitation, and have to stop and say truthfully, "I have done all I could." But an omnipotent God would not be subject to any such restriction. If he were to do *all* he could, there would be nothing he would *have to* stop at.

In this sense, our finiteness, even if it is a constant source of frustration, should perhaps be perceived as a "blessing in disguise." We do not have to figure out how to run the world, because we *cannot* run the whole world; and considering what happens when one of us forgets about that and actually tries to remake the world into his own concept of a just society, we should be, on the whole, thankful that we have not been given *more* power, on an individual basis. Our task, our sphere of influence, is narrowly defined for most of us; and our job is made all the easier for that. We can just do what we know is the right thing right now, without having to worry about all the possible consequences of our action, which we cannot possibly anticipate, nor about the fact that we can only do the right thing *here*, now—and not someplace or everyplace else. There is a certain humility that ought to go hand in hand with true goodness. Jesus advised his followers to, at the end of the day, say to themselves "we are worthless servants; we have only done our duty." I think there should be some relief, even some measure of peace, in this: that we were only asked to do *our* duty, not somebody or everybody else's. We are only asked to live our lives by the proper rule; we are to resist the temptation to rule anybody else's life.

All of the above may seem to suggest that God should simply not intervene at all, not do anything at all about moral evil, but that is not a foregone conclusion. There remains the possibility that God's mode of "intervention" be *naturally* restricted in some way that we have not considered yet. The simplest—one might say the minimal—such assumption is that God is restricted to act *through us*, by motivating us, helping us discern what is right, and giving us the courage and strength we need to do it. By thus assuming our own limitations, as I have just discussed, the difficulties created by God's alleged omnipotence disappear, and yet one might say that a form of, as it were, *conditioned omnipotence* remains: because *if* all of us decided, freely, to cooperate with God and with each other, the result would be nothing less than the eradication of *all* moral evil; by far the greatest source of suffering in the world. But the way this is to be

¹ The parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30), on the other hand, suggests that Jesus believed that not even God could remove all evil from the world without removing the good as well. The incident of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) suggests a possible reason, in addition perhaps to those presented so far. Since everybody is guilty of *some* sin, shouldn't everybody be removed?

done is, if this assumption is correct, one person at a time. It is as if God were saying “first eradicate *your* own moral evil; do not think you can eradicate your neighbor’s by force,” and showing us, by way of example, how he himself refrains from doing just that.

Remarkably, there is a suggestion that this may be the way God actually works in the foundational text of monotheism, the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. We are all familiar with the biblical story (or at least with the movie version), and yet nobody ever seems to wonder, Why did God go to such trouble to persuade the Pharaoh to let the Jews go? If he is truly the all-powerful “supreme magician” that, only too often, we imagine him to be, why didn’t he just snap his fingers and “teleport” all the Jews straight out of Egypt and into the promised land?

There is definitely this about the story. Sure, there are a bunch of miracles, as we would expect them to be in this kind of text, but they seem almost perfunctory: they can all be “mistaken” for natural phenomena, or for the “magic tricks” of the Egyptian priests themselves. God’s true effort, his true concern, appears to be elsewhere: first, with persuading Moses to accept his charge, then with persuading the people to leave, then with persuading the Pharaoh to let them go. It is definitely very much a “hearts and minds” God that the text presents to us, under the thin miracle veneer. And this continues throughout the Old Testament: God persuades, exhorts, encourages, strengthens, and comforts the people, but the task at hand is ultimately done *by the people*—whether they be prophets, or kings, or common folk—who choose to listen to him.

In his book *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of the Hasidim*, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber tells that the Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk once asked a couple of disciples “where does the Holy One dwell?” They answered “What a question! Isn’t it written that the heavens and the earth are full of his glory?” But the Rabbi answered, “No, the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells *there where Man lets him.*”

This story expresses the fundamental idea that I will develop in the next and last chapter, the essence of our personal relation with God: that it is up to us to let him in, to bring him into the world; that it is through us that he acts, through us that “his will is done.” But I want to present this properly, without skipping ahead; for there is no indication as yet, in the very basic concept of God I have so far developed, of what might be called “his will.”

And there is, in fact, a problem with presenting this hypothesis of “minimal interventionism” of God in the way in which I have done it here, using freely the language of “anthropomorphic” theism. The problem is that, as long as the audience still has in the back of their minds the traditional image of God as “a being among beings” (see Chapter 1), an all-powerful magician in the sky, all this simply makes it sound like God *could* help us further—could do anything, smite the evildoer, prevent the crime, bring the dead back to life—only he just *chooses* not to, out of some exasperating respect for some kind of Star-Trek-like “prime directive.” Small wonder, then, that the very same Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk ended up despairing of God, angry with God, locking himself up in his house for the last twenty years of his life as a protest against the God

that continued to allow his people to be oppressed in exile¹.

But this is *not* the way to think about it. God is not “a being among beings,” a contingent creature, someone who might as well help or not help, do something or do something else. God is What IS, the ultimate reality, the substrate from which all contingent beings derive their existence. By his very nature, to the extent that it expresses itself in his relationship to what he thus “brings into being,” God *defines* what is possible, and we might equally well say that this relationship also defines the ultimate good for each creature. The traditional questions of theodicy, such as “how can evil exist if God is both infinitely good and infinitely powerful,” pretty much miss the point: it is not for us to try to tell God (that is, Reality) what he is supposed to be like. Rather, our job is, to put it bluntly, to live with it; and the job of any theodicy (or of any theology, for that matter), must be, first, to help us see Things As They Truly Are, and then show us that there *is* a way to think of God, and to relate to him—to the source of our existence—that actually helps us overcome the reality of suffering.

Of course, an important part of seeing “things as they are” may be to understand why reality cannot always conform to our wishes, and how much of that may be because our perception of reality is wrong, and how much is an unavoidable part of the nature of things—a “nature of things” that very much includes us as living, sentient, moral beings. This is what I have tried to do in this chapter. But it should be clear already, from the example of the Rabbi of Kotzk, that none of these objective “solutions” to the problem of evil can fully satisfy anybody, because suffering, besides an objective reality, is above all a tremendously personal, subjective thing. This is why the ultimate answer—to be explored in that mythical next chapter, naturally—will have to be subjective as well.

IV. Material evil, or the residual injustice of the Universe

Before we can move on to that, however, there remains one last “reality check” we must perform, concerning the contribution to human suffering that comes directly from the “material” world, independent of any human agency. The underlying question, from the point of view of conventional theism, is always the same: “Couldn’t God have made the world differently: without disease, or death, or natural disasters?” What I am going to argue in this section is, to the contrary, that such things must always be present, as possibilities, in any world that allows for moral action.

To begin with, a world that allows for moral action cannot be fully deterministic: if whatever is going to happen will happen, regardless of what we do, then there is no moral weight whatsoever

¹ See the statement, attributed to this Rabbi, on the very first page of Chaim Potok’s novel *The Promise*, and while you’re at it, read the novel. It’s good.

attached to any of our actions¹. But this means that not only us, but the material world itself has to be “free” as well: its future has to be sufficiently “open” to make it possible for us to change it. This means that there has to be a core of irreducible unpredictability (what we might call randomness) to the world. Yet, at the same time, there has to be a sufficient degree of order, or predictability, for us to be able to anticipate fairly accurately what the result of our action is likely to be.

Any world that supports moral actions, therefore, needs to satisfy these conflicting requirements somehow. The way our world does it is not necessarily the only possible one, but I believe any other way would have to be not very dissimilar. Basically, as explained in Chapter 2, our world manages to be largely very predictable on a macroscopic scale, which is the scale on which we typically act, by averaging over a great many unpredictable, microscopic “degrees of freedom”—such as the positions, velocities, etc., of enormous numbers of atoms and molecules that make up the objects of our everyday environment.

Consider a simple action such as stopping a ball that somebody has thrown. The ball has a certain velocity and, associated with it, a macroscopic “kinetic energy” that we want to make “disappear”; that is how we intend to change the universe in this very simple case. How it actually happens is that the macroscopic energy gets spread out, in a random (disorganized) way, over all the microscopic parts that make up the ball. Each atom gets an extremely small amount of energy, and the particular initial condition that such energy represents gets quickly lost in the quantum uncertainty explained in Chapter 2, so that one can say that most of the information about the initial state of the ball is effectively “erased” from the world; there would be no way to tell, by examining it, precisely which direction it came from, for instance.

Erasure of information may be sometimes easier and sometimes harder, but it is always necessary in order for us to actually *change* the world: we need to be able to make things “forget” what or where they used to be, in order to have them be something else, someplace else. So any world that allows moral action must provide a mechanism for information to disappear from the “macroscopic” scale, the scale at which we typically act².

But now consider what this implies. Once that “channel” is open, it cannot plausibly be ever *completely* closed. To do so would be, in essence, to place the object off-limits, to make it impossible for anybody else to use it or modify it. Even if we could do this, by magical means, to a few objects, we could not do it to everything in a *shared* universe: it would immediately fragment into separate worlds that would not be capable of interacting with one another.

¹ Marx famously said that religion was the opiate of the masses, but I think it is clear that reductionism is an even better narcotic. If I am not truly free, of course I am not responsible for anything. I do not need to feel any guilt about any betrayal, any manner of deceit, any amount of suffering I may have ever caused to another human being. It was just my atoms that did it, or maybe my genes, or my neurons.

² Since a loss of information can be regarded, technically, as an increase in entropy, we can say that what we require is the existence of a sufficiently large entropy reservoir where we can “dump” the macroscopic information that we do not want anymore.

Hence, in a shared universe, any information that we may imprint on anything must be subject to the *possibility* of decay, by the very freedom of the universe that makes the writing of truly new information possible. Any shape that we form can, and will, eventually, disappear. So everything around us must be subject to decay, slower or faster, sooner or later; including, of course, our own bodies, to the extent that they are a part of the material universe. At some point, so much information is lost that a thing may cease to be what it was, and becomes something else. As this happens to a living organism, or its component parts, it must eventually stop functioning; hence death, too, appears to be (eventually) unavoidable.

Of course, as long as the actual carriers of the information do not disappear from the physical universe, the erasing of information really means that something else gets written in its place; we also saw this in Chapter 2, on the “creative power” of the world. Among living things, or mechanisms in general, the changed instructions will typically result in malfunctions, or diseases. So these, too, appear to be an unavoidable feature of the kinds of worlds we are considering.

The time scales for these processes can certainly be very long. In our own world, we have creatures that live hundreds of years, and creatures that live only a few hours. We ourselves have managed to lengthen our lifespan substantially over the past few hundred years, and one can envision science-fiction scenarios in which we replace many of our body parts as they “wear off.” One might even imagine artificially lengthening the survival of our “mind” by performing some kind of error-correction on our brain. The fact, however, discussed in Chapter 3, that there are fundamental aspects of our thinking that are essentially not reducible to algorithms, suggests that it would ultimately be impossible to completely restore a particular state of consciousness by mechanical means. In any case, even error correction applied relatively frequently cannot provide perfect protection against a large fluctuation occurring over an unusually short timescale, and such things would eventually occur, given enough time.¹

Error correction is an “active” way to protect information based on frequent observations, and especially well suited for systems whose state is constantly changing. The “passive” way to protect information, suitable for systems that one does not want to change often, is simply to store it in a very “durable” medium. This typically means something that cannot be altered substantially without a comparatively large expenditure of energy; of course, this kind of energy typically needs to be spent in order to record the information in the first place. If we rely for the things we build, with an intention to having them last, on “natural” objects, that is to say, things that have been produced as a result of the natural workings of the material world (such as wood or stones) we must deal with the fact that, first, the energy needed to make or destroy these things is obviously available in the material world, and, secondly, if these things have arisen

¹ Our brains, or whatever might be the material substrate for our minds, could not, of course, be “frozen,” and kept out of the world of change forever, since they need to be made available, for any needed “modifications,” to our future selves, that is to say, to one’s self at any future time; this means that they, too, in any conceivable world, need to be connected to the “entropy reservoir.”

“spontaneously” and unpredictably, there must be pathways up from the “ocean of entropy” towards possible large concentrations of similar amounts of energy that could, also spontaneously and unpredictably, destroy whatever it is that we have put together. In other words, a world that can create a tree or a mountain must also be able to destroy a tree or a mountain, and “natural disasters” must occasionally, and unpredictably, happen in such a world as well.

This, of course, suggests a way to reduce the impact of natural disasters: use artificial materials, such as steel or plastics, things that typically require an energy in order to be produced, or destroyed, that is greater than what the natural world can usually muster on a whim. This approach, carried to an extreme, suggests that a totally *artificial* world could be made free from natural disasters. That is, the theater for our actions could have been designed (by some outside demiurge) to consist only of things with a few pre-specified properties that can only be used in specific ways, and do not otherwise interact at all with ourselves or with each other. One could imagine a possible implementation of this idea as a “virtual world,” such as the ones we visit in computer games. But it is not hard to see the problem with this idea. One would still have to be able to keep the information that describes the “artificial world,” and update it or delete it, somewhere. In a real world, this would still require a sea of entropy contained within the things themselves, and hence would open them up to unavoidable decay; in a virtual world, this would require an *external* world where the records are kept, still subject to change and eventual decay. At most we could remove the possibility of natural disasters inside the virtual world, but if the external, real world itself arose spontaneously, it could also be destroyed spontaneously.

We conclude that no world that allows for moral action by free, reflective agents, can be entirely free from decay, death, disease, or natural disasters. In any such world, these things may strike at random and upset our moral balance, taking out the good with the bad, the just with the unjust. The possibility of a moral order *itself* precludes the possibility of a perfectly just material universe, by any standard of justice we might imagine.

On the other hand, as I argued at the beginning of the chapter, if we have evolved within this material universe, then we can reasonably expect to have also evolved a code of conduct that will be close to the best fit to the universe itself, one that will maximize our survival possibilities, even in the face of the world's residual randomness. Acting in this way will feel, in some way, “natural,” and will typically be rewarded; a better alternative, I think, than suddenly being dropped into a totally alien world with strange and arbitrary rules, that could *still* not be guaranteed to unfailingly reward our compliance. At least this world *feels* ours, as I pointed out at the end of Chapter 2: it *is* ours, it is *home*. If it contains much that can hurt us or break our hearts, it also contains sounds, shapes, scents, that resonate with the depths of our being and can bring us moments of rapturous happiness.

The above paragraph is an answer to the implicit question of “Why didn't God put us in a better world in the first place?” that is often asked from the “anthropomorphic God” perspective. Another answer is that, clearly, since *any* world would necessarily be afflicted by “natural evil,”

any world could be “improvable,” so it becomes again an arbitrary choice just how bad a world you’d want to be dropped into.

As I have already pointed out, we have already, as a species, made dramatic improvements to our quality of life on this planet, from a purely material perspective: increased life expectancy, greatly reduced child mortality, better nutrition, and even the total eradication of a major disease or two. It might seem unfair to not have been given all these advantages from the start, but, interestingly, there is no real evidence that our disease-ridden, short-lived ancestors were, as a whole, much more unhappy than we are today. If anything, the contrary could be argued: the regions of the modern world with a greater incidence of suicides tend to be precisely the ones where material life is the *most* comfortable.

Clearly, the old human psychological trick of “subtracting the average” is at work here, and its value as a survival trait is apparent. Whatever the average standard of living may be for a particular human community, their members will come to consider it normal, and will only consider good the fluctuations above the average, and bad the fluctuations below the average. Since there will always be some of the latter, people will always be motivated to improve their condition, but once the improvements have become sufficiently stable and widespread, they become the new standard, and the bar is reset again.

This high degree of subjectivity of what we consider, at any given time, or in any given culture, “a fair deal” is one reason why we must be careful not to project our own feelings into anybody else when arguing about “the suffering” or “the evil” in the world. It has, for instance, been claimed that using natural selection as a way for creation to take place would have been an extremely cruel thing for any “personal God” to do, because it so ruthlessly results in the death of the weakest. But, as far as the animal world is concerned, this is itself an instance of pointless, and unwarranted, anthropomorphism. I doubt if a weak antelope, killed by a young lion, feels it a burning injustice that he was not allowed to live out the average lifespan of his species. Even our allegedly sensitive cousins the chimpanzees are known to occasionally indulge in infanticide, and *they* do not seem to think there is anything unfair about it; at least I have not seen any reports of either the killer or the victim's relatives losing any sleep over it.

Natural evolution ensures that, when a species becomes established, it has a fair chance of surviving as a species; that is the initial deal, and the one that would be initially perceived as fair by any species reflective enough to worry about fairness. Of course such a species would resent the harder times, and try to improve its lot, and, accordingly, raise its standard of fairness with time¹, as I have described. But when attempting to quantify the degree of “natural evil”

¹ This again leads to the somewhat troublesome idea of a moral code that changes—at least in the details—with time. I do not see a way out of it: there is inevitably a subjective, or situational, element to all moral codes. I do believe, as pointed out in small print at the end of Chapter 3, that an absolute general principle can be established, but the specific precepts by which this is to be followed may well vary from time to time or place to place.

In general, the course followed by human ethical evolution appears to have been one of extending greater and greater rights to larger and larger groups of people: war enemies, slaves, women, children, and even criminals. It is hard to argue that there is anything fundamentally wrong with this.

experienced, say, by neolithic people, we need to wonder whether their sum of subjective suffering would, in the final analysis, be found to be substantially greater than ours, with our vaccines and our air-conditioned homes—and I believe the answer would be probably not.

This bring us to the end of what might be called the objective answer to the problem of evil, and to the necessary realization that, as already anticipated, the only final answer must have a strong subjective component, because, ultimately, I do not really know—and I am not authorized to presume—very much about someone else's suffering; I am not allowed to decide for them whether the world, or life, has been “fair” to them or not (even if I may have a very definite idea in many cases). I can only fully know my own situation, and ask myself if life has been “fair” to me; and if I am truly honest I must realize that the question is unanswerable¹. Ultimately, the only “suffering” I really know about is my own, such as it may be right now; and the only question that I can then try to ask and answer is “what can I do about my suffering?” Or, to bring God in, “what can God and I do about *my* suffering?”

This is not nearly as self-centered as it seems: it is only a starting point, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the answer necessarily must take me beyond myself, to once again confront the suffering of others; only this time as the instrument by which God responds to and addresses that suffering.

¹ In fact, if pressed, I personally would probably echo the words of the great nineteenth-century physicist, James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), as he lay close to death, at the age of 48, from abdominal cancer: “I have been thinking how very gently I have always been dealt with.” (See the online essay *James Clerk Maxwell and the Christian Proposition*, by Ian Hutchinson, at <http://silas.psfc.mit.edu/maxwell/>)