

The Problem of Evil and Divine Incomprehensibility: **An Introduction to the Course, *Suffering and the Problem of Evil***

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This paper introduces the problem of evil as it is usually approached in philosophy and provides some elements of a response to it. However, the course as a whole, not this paper by itself, is meant to respond to the problem.

I. Kinds of Evil

Moral evil vs. physical (or natural) evil

Many philosophers divide evils into two broad kinds: moral and physical (or natural).

Moral evil primarily is in human free choices and the actions that carry them out. Insofar as a person's bad choices and actions adversely affect other people, everyone calls their evil "injustice"; insofar as bad choices are at odds with God's guidance, believers call them "sins." Secondly, moral evil includes the badness of certain lasting effects of morally evil choices and actions, such as bad institutions (unjust social structures) and the vices that constitute bad character.

Physical (or natural) evil is a defect in, damage to, or destruction of something in the natural world—for example, the injury, disease, or death of organisms, including human beings. Though not evil in themselves, natural occurrences that adversely affect human beings (sometimes called "acts of God") usually also are regarded as physical evils—for example, earthquakes, mudslides and avalanches, tidal waves and floods, droughts, lightning strikes, wildfires, hurricanes and tornadoes, and volcanic eruptions.

People sometimes harm others due to insanity, error, or other nonmoral evils. In such cases, both the defect in the acting person and the resulting harm to others are regarded as natural evils.

Two clarifications of the usual distinction

1) The usual twofold division overlooks various defects in human thinking and in human activities and their products—that is, defects that neither result from moral evil nor are parts of nature. People make mistakes in logic, misunderstand communications, and so on. They drop things, inadvertently run into things, trip and fall, miss their targets, utter the wrong word, sing off-key, strike out. Human products are defective, fail to work properly, break down, and often have bad side effects, such as harm to the environment.

2) Many philosophers regard physical pain and psychological suffering as natural evils, and some regard them as the very quintessence of evil. Later in the course, we shall challenge that view by distinguishing between intelligible and sensible evils, treating

moral and natural evils as sorts of intelligible evil, and arguing that physical pain and psychological suffering are only sensible evils.

II. The Problem Stated

Evil is widespread and immense, and the innocent suffer greatly

Even if we avoid judging others, we must admit that very many grave sins are committed. Many of these are injustices, and many victims are innocent. For example, worldwide during the twentieth century, millions of innocent people were deliberately killed by oppressive regimes, including the Nazi extermination of many Jews, Gypsies, and others; tens of millions of people were killed and maimed in wars, including many civilian victims of terrorism, such as the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and hundreds of millions of unwanted babies were killed, most of them by abortion, but many by infanticide and child abuse. Nobody doubts that many of those who committed homicides for oppressors and in wars were morally guilty of murder. And even if many or most of the women whose babies were aborted did not fully realize what they were doing or lacked psychological freedom, some must have been fully responsible and many of the men involved surely were guilty of exploiting the women and evading their responsibility for the consequences.

Natural evils also abound. All of us face the profoundly distressing prospect of death, not only for ourselves but for everyone we love. While the progress of biomedical technology has increased life expectancy, that has only delayed death and changed its likely causes. The technology also has added torments of its own to the natural suffering involved in sickness, decline, and dying. Moreover, natural disasters and accidents not only kill people but make their lives miserable in many ways, and destroy or damage many valuable things that people care about. All these natural evils befall people indiscriminately. However, poor people are less able to cope with many of them. Moreover, under harsh conditions, good people often are victimized by the unscrupulous.

The preceding summary fails to convey the horror of evil and the outrageousness of the suffering of the innocent. One can convey these things only by providing images and detailed descriptions of the repugnant aspects of various instances of evil.

Evil and God's attributes

Monotheistic believers—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—hold that God creates everything, providentially directs everything, cares for each human being, and cannot be prevented by anything or anyone from doing anything he really wants to do. At the same time, believers experience evil: both they themselves and those they love suffer in many ways. So, believers naturally ask: why is God allowing *this* to happen to me (or to my loved one, or to other suffering people with whom I sympathize)? Asking that question and seriously trying to answer it is in no way inconsistent with believers' holding fast to their faith. Indeed, trying to suppress the question is likely to be both a symptom of weak faith and an ineffective way of protecting it.

The philosophical problem of evil begins from the same beliefs and facts that trouble believers. But it is proposed by atheists who do not share those beliefs. Their objective is to explain and argue for their disbelief. (I therefore call them “atheologians.”) They not only point to the common experience of evil, but emphasize how much evil there is in the world and how often and how greatly the poor and the virtuous suffer. Then they argue: If God existed and were all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, he would be fully aware of evil, he could easily prevent it, and he surely would be kind enough to prevent at least much of it, especially the suffering of the innocent. Therefore, either there is no divine reality at all or, at least, there is nothing like the all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good creator and provident Lord in whom monotheists believe.

III. The Main Attempts to Respond to the Problem

Evil is somehow necessary for finite good

Some religious people who are not monotheists think that good and evil are the two basic principles of, or kinds of, reality. Others think that both good and evil are inevitable, at least in finite, material realities, such as human beings and subhuman things. However, such views are at odds with the monotheistic doctrine that God in the beginning created everything good, and that evil emerged only afterwards. So, confronted with the philosophical problem of evil, a monotheist cannot respond by claiming that limitedness or materiality are themselves evil or that, for any other reason, there simply cannot be finite goods without there also being evils.

Plainly, however, in the complex world in which we live, some evils are necessary for certain goods. Billions of bacteria, each a tiny animal, survive and flourish only by making mammals, including us, sick; antibiotics make us and domestic animals well only by killing the bacteria. Infants’ learning to walk and much of their subsequent learning of all sorts is by trial and error, and the errors sometimes result in injuries and other evils. Christians believe that human salvation somehow depended on Jesus’ suffering and death. In the *Exultet* (a hymn sung during the Easter-vigil liturgy), Adam’s sin is referred to as “profitable” and even as a “happy fault” because it occasioned so great a redeemer. There are no martyrs without persecutors, no great penitent saints (such as St. Paul) without the sin they repented (the pharisaic attitude that led him to cooperate in the stoning of Stephen and the persecution of other disciples of Jesus).

Still, many evils seem conducive to no good or, at least, greater than necessary for the good to which they somehow contribute. Especially puzzling are death and other evils that befall so many babies and little children, whether those evils are brought about deliberately or by diseases and other causes beyond human control. Of course, some of those evils do seem conducive to some goods, but many seem utterly pointless.

The Free-Will Defense

Genesis tells how evil originated in God’s good creation. Partly due to seduction by “the serpent,” the first humans disobeyed a directive God had given them for their own good, and this sin was punished by death and by various hardships. Later tradition iden-

tified that serpent with Satan, an already-fallen intelligent creature, and explained that Satan sinned by his own free choice. And while human sin presupposes temptation by Satan or other factors, Christians always have held that it is an abuse of the capacity to choose freely—a capacity God meant to be used freely to love him, oneself, and others.

Using Genesis and other biblical data as their point of departure, many Christian theologians have articulated a so-called free-will defense. That defense, which is a reply to the philosophical problem of evil, blames creatures' abuse of their ability to make free choices for all the evil in the world. Typically, such a defense argues that death and all other evils that are not themselves sins result from sins (epitomized by the original sin of disobedience). Many theologians regard death and other evils not as arbitrarily imposed punishments for sin but rather as its somehow inevitable consequences. Those consequences, they maintain, are only permitted by God to serve as just punishment and for other good reasons—though admittedly those good reasons often remain obscure to us or even entirely hidden.

Some who offer versions of the free-will defense claim that God's giving creatures the power of free choice necessarily involves his permitting its abuse. Those who take this position maintain that even God cannot prevent people from sinning once he gives them the power to make free choices. However, that view seems incompatible with the common Christian doctrines that God *predestines* some to glory and that everything salvific, including good free choices, depends entirely on God's grace. Believing that the Holy Spirit filled Mary with grace and so preserved her entirely from sin, both original and personal, Catholics hardly can maintain that God could not have given every human being he chose to create all the grace they needed to resist every temptation.

So, the greater theologians who offer versions of the free will defense think that God could have created a world that included some free creatures yet entirely excluded sin. While sin would be *possible* in that world, God would see to it that in fact nobody ever sinned. But in our world, such theologians hold, though God always makes it possible for everyone to resist temptation, he allows some sins and out of them *always* brings a great good. That great good, of course, is brought about for creation as a whole and/or for those who love God, and not—at least, not always—for sinners as such. The *Exultet* reflects this view when it refers to original sin as a “happy fault” (also see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 310-14, 412).

Still, on this view, since people in our world who commit sins really are free, they really *could* have chosen rightly. Therefore, all their sins and all the evils that flow from them really are their fault, not God's.

Though grounded in sacred Scripture and helpful, even such versions of the free-will defense leave many unanswered questions. How do sins lead to death and all the other natural evils? What is the greater good that God draws out of all the evils that afflict the innocent? As traditionally understood, hell involves endless evil. What greater good can God bring out of that?

So, the greater theologians who offered versions of the free-will defense did not claim it *solved* the problem of evil. They only claimed that the truth about free will and

sinner's responsibility together with a sound understanding of other truths of faith mitigate the challenge posed by the reality of evil in our world.

IV. Process Theologies and God's Incomprehensibility

Philosophical errors generated unsound interpretations of God's attributes

Aristotle and the neo-Platonists—among whom the greatest was Plotinus (204–270 AD)—did not believe in God the creator.

Aristotle's universe consisted of many self-existent substances, hierarchically ordered according to their degree of perfection. Aristotle's god was the supreme substance, self-thinking thought, complete in itself. That god influenced lesser intelligences, including human beings, only by provoking their effort to realize themselves by becoming as much like it as they could.

The neo-Platonists' universe was the residue of the self-dispersion of an original One, so absolute that it was beyond being and nonbeing, intelligence and nonintelligence. But the One spontaneously gave rise to a supreme intelligence, which in turn spontaneously gave rise to a world soul, and this to the various kinds of things in the world. In this view, human beings were degraded bits of ultimate reality, and their "fulfillment" was in escaping dispersion and concreteness and rejoining the One.

Neither Aristotle's god nor the neo-Platonic One, supreme intelligence, and world soul were persons who might reveal themselves and invite human beings to share in their nature and intimate life.

Despite those and other great differences from Christian faith, the thought of Aristotle or the neo-Platonists, or both, greatly influenced many of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Of course, those great theologians were holy men and steeped in sacred Scripture. So, they used the light of revelation to correct all the pagan thinkers' *obvious* mistakes. But since the obvious mistakes were central to the Greek philosophers' views, those mistakes subtly affected virtually all their thinking. Hence, when even the greatest Fathers and Doctors, such as Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, used some of the Greek philosophers' thinking in trying to understand the faith, philosophical errors colored not only those theologians' deliberate speculations but even at times their way of interpreting truths of faith.

Still, fidelity to tradition and the oversight of the Church's teaching authority saved the great theologians and many of their less able Catholic successors from falling into gross errors. Consequently, in respect to truths of faith about God and his attributes, the main bad effect among Catholics of the Greek philosophers' errors was to generate the sense that we understand God in a way that, in fact, we do not. So, while paying lip service to Scripture's warnings that God remains incomprehensible to us even as he reveals himself, we are likely to feel that we understand God, at least *in general terms*.

This false feeling of comprehension, in turn, often has led Catholics (including many who eventually broke with the Church) to draw mistaken conclusions from God's perfection, goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence. And some of those conclusions call

into question truths of faith. For example, God's perfection may be misunderstood in such a way as to preclude his hearing and answering our prayers. His foreknowledge and creative causality may be misunderstood in such a way as to preclude free choices (and salvation by *both* grace through faith *and* freely chosen good works). And his attributes together may be misunderstood in such a way as to be irreconcilable with the evil we find in the world.

But the God we worship can hear and answer our prayers. His causality is compatible with our making free choices. His saving grace leaves room for our meritorious works. His attributes are compatible with the reality of the evils from which we hope to be saved. So, something must give—or, rather, must be given up.

Process theologies give up faith itself

Influenced by scientific accounts of natural dynamism (evolution of species, the “big bang,” and so forth) and historical consciousness of pervasive cultural development (including constant development of thought and language), several philosophers during the past two centuries strongly reacted against so-called static world views, including those of Aristotle, the neo-Platonists, and all who borrowed heavily from them. Of course, much of Aristotle's work tried to explain change in the world, and neo-Platonism described a process from the One to the many and back. But the philosophers who reacted against such classical thought not only took processes into account but made process the fundamental reality rather than a secondary reality to be accounted for by something ultimate and unchanging.

Some either identified supreme intelligence with universal process (Hegel) or denied the reality of any intelligence beyond that of humans and extraterrestrial rational animals, if any (e.g., Marx and Dewey). Either of those approaches plainly excluded monotheistic faith. But other philosophers (especially Whitehead) worked out a scheme in which a supreme intelligence was among the fundamental principles of dynamic reality, a leading actor in the universal drama. Though these philosophers supposed that the supreme intelligence was itself in process, some of them called it “God” and described it in a way reminiscent of God the creator, in whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe.

Process philosophy of the more conservative sort appealed to many theologians who rightly wished to avoid the problematic conclusions that follow from the misunderstandings that resulted from borrowing too much from Greek philosophy. Some liberal Protestants led the way by freely synthesizing much of that sort of process philosophy with as much of traditional Christian doctrine as seemed to them worth salvaging. In the process, however, they replaced God the creator and Lord of the universe with a supreme intelligence that realizes itself by working to organize everything else. In doing that, they gave up Christian faith itself.

Without going so far, many recent and contemporary Catholic theologians, including some who are regarded as entirely orthodox, have used elements of process thought. In doing so, they undoubtedly have planted the seeds of future trouble for the faith.

The illusion of divine comprehensibility must be given up

The alternative to giving up faith itself, I am convinced, is to give up the illusion that we understand God. But that alternative raises an obvious objection. A bright, non-believing student stated it quite well:

I'm not sure what to say about your claim that God is incomprehensible. I can see the reason why you say it: God is supposed to be so great that the human mind cannot take in his reality. But if you try in this way to show that evils in the world don't contradict your faith, the concept of God becomes completely empty. Then it is not at all clear what you think you are worshipping.

To hold your beliefs that God is faithful and merciful and so forth, you must be able to talk about him, at least to some extent, in human terms. Of course, that doesn't mean you need to claim to know God exhaustively or that you need to anthropomorphize him completely—for example, by supposing he has bodily functions, sense knowledge, and feelings.

But you can't very well say: "I believe in God though I have absolutely no idea what the word *God* means." If you try to defend monotheism in that way, you seem to be becoming a convert to agnosticism.

In other words: If we do not understand God, at least in general terms, how can divine revelation make sense to us? And, if it does not make sense to us, how can we believe?

V. We Know that God Exists but Do Not Understand Him in Himself***God's power and divinity are known through the things he has made***

Though he did not always adhere to it, St. Thomas Aquinas clearly and concisely stated the principle for solving the problem: "We cannot grasp what God is, but what he is not, and how other things are related to him" (*Summa contra gentiles*, 1:30). To begin to understand this principle, one must consider how the created world manifests its creator.

In the case of any and every positive reality that we can experience, we can understand what it is without thereby knowing whether it actually is. Nothing in our understanding of any experienced thing accounts for its real being. Common sense reflection and scientific inquiry account for the real being of some positive realities only by considering them in the wider context of the real action of other positive realities—whose real being is taken for granted. So, though such inquiry is very worthwhile, it does not even begin to account for the real being of the universe as a whole.

Atheologians suppose that the universe simply is, and that nothing accounts for it. Regarding that view as absurd, monotheists are likely to argue against it by invoking the supposedly self-evident principle that every fact must be accounted for. However, there are exceptions to that so-called principle. For example, each and every time anyone freely chooses *A* rather than *B*, that fact cannot be accounted for. (To say, "The free choice is accounted for by the person's freely making it," simply repeats the fact rather than accounts for it; to say, "Something else accounts for the free choice," is to say it was

not free after all.) Therefore, the view that nothing accounts for the universe as a whole is logically possible and not absurd in the strict sense of the word.

Indeed, that view would be acceptable if there were no plausible alternative. But there is a plausible alternative: the real being of the universe as a whole depends on a positive reality that, unlike the universe and everything in it, is real of itself. That reality is not directly experienced, of course. But any reasonable person will infer it, just as he or she will infer *something* to account for any fact except one, like free choice, that obviously cannot be accounted for.

Now, if we understood anything at all of what that source of being is like, we would thereby know not only that it actually is but that it cannot not be—in other words, that it necessarily is. So, by reasoning in this way, one arrives at God, the creator of all things. Still, people who wish that God did not exist can refuse to make the inference.

We know what God is not, and how other things are related to him

It will be enlightening to set aside for a little while everything we think we know about God, including what we hold by faith. Having done that, we will look at how the preceding argument itself both empowers and regulates our thinking about God.

Since God necessarily is, for him to be, he need only be *what* he is. By contrast, whatever any creature is, its actual being neither is included in nor flows from what it is or any characteristic it has. So, whatever God is in himself cannot be anything that any creature is. And whatever any creature is, God is not *that*. Therefore, when we talk about God and use words in the same sense we use them to express something we understand about any creature, whatever we affirm about the creature must be denied of God.

It follows that God is not a body, matter, or energy; he does not evolve or change in any way; he is not spatial or temporal. God has no size or shape, is neither a whole nor a part. God has no sensible properties, no dispositions or capacities like those found in natural things. In the sense in which experienced things can be self-identical or polymorphous, above or below, inside or outside, God is none of these.

But if God does not change, it does not follow that he is standing still, fixed, inert, or rigid, for those also are intelligible features of creatures. If God is not moved by our pain, it does not follow that he is callous. If he is not above or outside, it does not follow that he is the ground of being or that he pervades the universe as its Force or Life.

If God is not a body, neither is he a mind or conscious subject—using *mind* and *conscious subject* in the same sense we use them about ourselves. If God does not hate others and take revenge as we do, neither does he love others and have mercy as we do. Similarly, by experiencing ourselves and one another, we know what it is to be morally good, to know, to choose, to be a person. But what is true about us is false about God. So, using the words with exactly the same sense to deny of God precisely what we affirm of ourselves, we must say: God is not morally good, does not know, makes no choices, and is not a person.

Can we even say that God causes? Not in any of the senses in which we say that a creature causes. However, our analysis began from the experienced universe, whose

actual being needed to be accounted for. The problem was unlike any other: Why is there a universe rather than nothing at all? That unique *why* led us to a unique *because*—to an ultimate source of actual being.

Now, various sorts of things within our experience are called “causes” in diverse senses. For instance, in one sense of *cause*, the words readers see on this page when they read this sentence were caused to be here by a computer and a printer; in another sense of *cause*, these words were caused to be here by my use of them to express what I have in mind; and in a third sense of *cause*, these words were caused to be here by my interest in providing an example to help readers see that *cause* has many meanings. Though those three causes cause in very different ways, those diverse sorts of things are called *causes*, though in diverse senses, because they answer *why* questions: they account for things. So, when we ask the why question about the universe—Why is there a universe rather than no universe?—it is appropriate to say that what answers the question and accounts for the actual being of the universe is its cause, using *cause* in a unique sense.

Where did that unique sense of *cause* come from? It developed in the argument and emerged from it, along with a unique sense of *is*, when we concluded that there is a cause of the universe. Except insofar as the question being asked and the answer being reached by that argument are unique, that generation of fresh meaning is similar to what occurs when we ask other *why* questions and answer them by reasoning to something we had not previously known or even thought about. For reasoning is not merely a way of organizing what we already know; it is also, and far more importantly, a way of discovering realities we did not yet know.

In sum, though we do not know what God is, our knowledge about the relationship of created things to him enables us to say, with an entirely clear and definite sense, that God causes. Without understanding anything of what God is in himself, we know something about him: he has what it takes to account for the actual being of the universe. However, by contrast with our insight into how causes within the universe bring about their effects, we do not know and cannot imagine how God creates the universe. Thus, though we really do know God from the things he has made, he remains hidden and utterly mysterious.

VI. We Know about God Only from Relationships of Other Things to Him

A classic account of God as personal and provident

A classic account of how we know that the creator understands and wills goes back, at least, to St. Anselm, the eleventh-century founder of scholastic philosophy and theology. That account presupposes a certain framework. It begins from the premises that creatures receive their whole reality from their creator, that their whole reality includes all their perfections, and that nothing can give what it does not possess. From these premises it seems to follow that God must somehow possess in himself every perfection we find in creatures, and that all creatures by virtue of their perfections more or less resemble God.

Most of the perfections we find in creatures, however, are called “mixed,” because they are inextricably involved with bodiliness, interdependence, and other sorts of complexity and limitation that are regarded as imperfections and that plainly cannot be ascribed to God. It is said that God does not have mixed perfections as they are found in creatures but that he has them only “in a more eminent way.” But what is that eminent way of having a rose’s blooming, a batter’s hitting a home run, or a chaste newlywed couple’s consummation of their marriage? No intelligible essence of those perfections can be distilled and attributed to God. To say that God has them in an eminent way can mean only this: nothing of what we understand of those perfections can be attributed to God, but he must have whatever it takes to create them.

Given this framework, the classic account of God’s knowledge and will can be understood. By contrast with mixed perfections, such spiritual perfections are said to be “absolutely simple.” Though human knowing and willing always involve obvious imperfections, those contaminants, it is claimed, can be removed, so that the distilled essence of the perfection found in us can be attributed to God as belonging to him perfectly and infinitely. At this point, some suppose that knowing and willing can be attributed to God without further argument, while others argue from other perfections, as St. Thomas argues to God’s knowing and willing from his immateriality and unalloyed actuality. But in either case, according to the classic account, *knowing* and *willing* said of God and of us have both some common intelligibility and some differentiating elements, with the result that these and other absolutely simple perfections are predicated according to a four-term analogy: God’s willing is to God as our willing is to us.

Venerable as that classic account is, it seems to me only partially sound. It does include two truths. First, because creatures really are related to the creator, the creator really must have what it takes to be the other end of that relationship. Second, whatever can be affirmed about God must be predicated by analogy.

But I think that the perfections of human knowing and willing are inextricably involved with complexity and limitation. If one conscientiously persists to the end in removing all complexity and limitation from human knowing and willing, then, like the child duped into trying to peel an onion completely, one will end with nothing. Moreover—and this is the decisive point—the underlying claims that God must have all the perfections found in creatures and that creatures must resemble their creator derive their plausibility from other sorts of cause-effect relationships. But, as has been explained, the creator-creature relationship is unique, and trying to understand it by introducing intelligible aspects of other cause-effect relationships is bound to confuse rather than help.

Therefore, I do not think that absolutely simple perfections of knowing and willing can reasonably be directly attributed to God. Moreover, I do not think an argument grounded in the creator-creature relationship can justify their attribution, as St. Thomas tried to do.

(Note that the account of “creation” in Genesis is concerned not only with the creator-creature relationship but also with the natural religious relationship to be considered below.)

God's personhood is manifested by our religious relationships to him

Still, something of what we know about human knowing and willing can be reasonably attributed by analogy to God. However, such predications are reasonable only if they are grounded in relationships that clearly authorize them and are limited by what those relationships authorize.

Are there such relationships? Certainly. Even the religious relationship human beings naturally have with God is rooted in experience that requires us to think of him as intelligent and benevolent—that is, good-willed—toward us. And the relationship of people of faith to the God of revelation provides an additional ground for talking about his plan and will. But just as what we mean by saying *God causes* is limited to what is required to account for the being of creatures, what we mean by saying *God knows and wills* is specified by what is involved in our religious relationships to him.

What must be borne in mind is that the ground provided by our relationships to God for our thought and talk about him does not authorize us to project upon him all that can be deduced from our knowing and willing. One is tempted to do that, to say to oneself: “I know what God’s knowledge and choosing are like. They are like mine, except, of course, that his are simple and unlimited.” Then, we proceed to attribute to God what cannot be true of him. When we talk about God’s knowing and willing, our religious relationships to him both ground and limit what we can mean. We are authorized to attribute to God only what it takes for him to be the other end of those relationships.

The law written on our hearts manifests the creator and leads us to cooperate with him

Consider the religious relationship that human beings *naturally* have with God. The basis for it is in the principles of our practical reason. Just as everything we learn from others about the world presupposes our own experience and basic understanding of it, so all the moral formation we receive from others presupposes our own insight into basic human goods. We could never be taught about right and wrong if we did not know beforehand that good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided; and that life and health, truth and skills, harmony with others, and so on are goods to be safeguarded, sought, and promoted, while their opposites are evils to be avoided and resisted.

Subhuman nature cannot have given us principles that provide intelligible direction. Experience and/or theoretical reflection cannot have provided direction to what is still to be. Previous human action cannot have provided principles that guide all human actions. These basic principles are natural—they come with our being. They are like a law written on our hearts to shape our deliberation and guide our free choices and actions. A law written by whom? By our creator.

Even if only dimly aware of all this, almost all human beings recognize that we are subordinate to, though not puppets of, a greater-than-human, quasi-personal reality, with whom we ought to cooperate for our own good. That recognition leads to prayer and sacrifice. Of course, most people overlook the fact that we cannot grasp what God is, and so they engage in anthropomorphism—that is, they begin by imagining God with all the essential characteristics a human person has, and modify that picture only insofar as they

become convinced they must. Then too, many people are more eager for God to cooperate with them than they are to cooperate with him, and so they try to refashion God rather than shape their lives according to his guidance. Thus, the relationship to God that grounds natural religion also occasions many sorts of erroneous thinking, idolatry, and violation of human goods.

Nevertheless, the awareness of divine guidance toward our own good, from which natural religion springs, compels us to think of God as intelligent and benevolently interested in our welfare. He directs our actions by providing reasons for choosing and yet allows us to choose freely, even when our choices are at odds with his guidance. Since he is the source of our being and guides us in this way, God seems somewhat like a good father who gives sound advice to an adult child but does not back it up with force.

At the same time, we realize that knowing, willing, and goodness as we know them cannot be in God. Hence, while our relationship to God in virtue of the first principles of our practical reason requires us to think of him as intelligent and good, we can attribute knowledge and goodness to him only by analogy. And since the analogy is grounded solely in our relationship to God, who directs our deliberation and free choices toward our good, we have no warrant for supposing that there is any similarity between our and God's knowing and goodness beyond what that relationship requires. Therefore, there can be no inconsistency between anything that relationship authorizes us to say about divine knowing and goodness and any truth about the created world—for example, that human beings make free choices and that some of them are evil and lead to other evils.

VII. God Incomprehensible but Revelation Intelligible

God reveals himself by shaping our relationship with him

Now, consider the relationship of believers to the God who reveals himself. One can easily see how the preceding analysis applies to it. Revelation is accomplished by means of a set of created entities: human words and observable events in the world—ultimately by the human nature and life of Jesus of Nazareth. By all these together, the creator makes it clear that he invites all human beings not only to purify the relationship involved in natural religion but to commit themselves freely to the more intimate relationship he offers and to shape their entire lives by that relationship's requirements.

This relationship, being interpersonal, demands that we listen to God and respond to him. So, we must think of him and speak of him as personal, as intelligent and free. Nevertheless, even as believers we know that, apart from our relationships with God, we do not know what he is, but only what he is not. He remains hidden; he does not present himself for direct inspection. He makes it clear that he is not offering a description of what he is and he rejects numerous attempts at such a description. As the Fourth Lateran Council teaches, what God is remains incomprehensible and ineffable, and the dissimilarity between him and us always is more marked than any similarity.

Revelation primarily transforms our natural relationship to God and shapes us for intimate communion with him, and this practical point determines and limits its meaning.

How we are to relate to God is not summed up in any one statement, but by the whole of Scripture, read in the context of the tradition and life of the Church. So, when we are told, for example, to call God “Father,” we are given one element of the whole formation we need for relating to him. We realize that in addressing God as Father we do not imply that he has in a higher and more perfect way the paternity we experience in our natural family life. Rather, we imply that God has what it takes to be the other end of the relationship with him in which and for which this way of thinking and speaking are forming us. So, nothing the relationship authorizes us to say about God’s plan and will can possibly be at odds with the freedom either of the choice some people make to accept the relationship or of the choices they make about carrying it out.

Misunderstandings to be avoided

The preceding account of revelation and faith must not be misunderstood. I am not denying the literal truth of what revelation tells us about God. For example, though I hold that what we understand about ourselves must be denied of God, I affirm the literal truth of the proposition that we are made in his image and likeness. By including that truth, Genesis confirms and clarifies what the principles of our practical reason already imply: we have been created to know God and to cooperate freely with him, to procreate, to care for subhuman creation, and to fulfill ourselves in other ways.

Again, I am not saying: “God is not really our Father; we are only being asked to treat him as if he were.” Rather, I am saying that, whatever God is, his reality is such that it is entirely appropriate for us to relate to him as we are led to do by his entire revelation, including Jesus’ instruction to say: “Our Father.” So, while the meaning of *Father* said of God is specified by our relationship in faith to him, a statement using the word with that meaning to say that he is our Father is literally true. Consequently, if we eventually see God as he is, we will not be disappointed. We will grasp the literal truth of everything revelation now tells us to say about him.

Objection:

There seems to be a contradiction between the truth of faith that God made human beings in his own image and likeness and your position that nothing can be affirmed of God in the same sense in which it is affirmed of a creature, and that perfections such as intelligence and freedom have no core of meaning that can be predicated of both humans and God by four-term analogy—for example, divine intelligence is to God as human intelligence is to human beings.

Reply:

I am confident that the contradiction is only between what I am saying and a common *misunderstanding* of the truth of faith that God made man in his own image and likeness.

If I told you that a friend who is a professional sculptor made an image of me that is a very good likeness, you would know a good deal about the statue, because you already know me. And, if someone who does not know me saw the statue and were told it is a good likeness of me, that person would thereby learn a good deal about me.

On that model, one can suppose that “God made man in his own image and likeness” tells us not only that certain things—such as personhood, intelligence, and freedom—can be predicated truly of God and human beings but also that such predications are by a four-term analogy and express a common core of meaning, so that they tell us what God is like, at least in general terms. One is especially likely to read the scriptural statement in that way if one thinks that human beings naturally are so like God that they will be able to find their fulfillment only by sharing in the divine persons’ intimate knowledge and love of one another.

However, predication by four-term analogy only works when one knows what both subjects are. For example, *beautiful* can be said of many diverse things—ranging from babies and sunsets to mathematical proofs and complex natural processes—some instances of each of which have a beauty proper to their kind. But if someone tells me that he saw a beautiful splarg and I have no idea what a splarg is, I also have no idea what *beautiful* means when said of a splarg. Hence, to suppose that one can predicate of God by four-term analogy is to presuppose that one knows what God is. But we cannot know what God is. For knowing what God is would be incompatible with his differing from us by being of himself, as the source of our being must.

Moreover, the New Testament makes it clear that no human being will share in the Trinity’s intimate life on the basis of natural kinship with God. In order to share our fallen condition, the eternal Word had to become man by really assuming a human nature. Likewise, to enter into everlasting life with the divine persons, humans must share God’s nature. They must really become divine by being “born” again of water and the Spirit (Jn 1.12-13, 3.3-10) or by “adoption” into the divine family (Rm 8.14-17, 22-23, 29-30; Gal 4.4-7).

As I explained, our very awareness that God is the source of our being and of the being of everything we understand makes it clear that whatever we understand of other things cannot be true of God. Still, “cause,” “intelligent,” “freely wills good,” and therefore “personal” can be predicated truly by analogy of both God and human beings. But the analogy is based on our awareness of God through and in our real relationships to him: we depend on him both to be and to be directed to act by free choices for true human goods. Moreover, the latter relationship leads us to think of God as father-like and compels us to regard ourselves as cooperating with him whenever we abide by the direction of our own practical reason. Therefore, without telling us what God is in himself, those relationships nevertheless manifest something about him: he really does have whatever it takes to be their other end.

That analogous knowledge about God may seem inadequate to allow a plausible understanding of *God made human beings in his own image and likeness*. However, truly predicating “intelligent,” “freely wills good,” and “personal” of both human beings and God distinguishes both God and us from subhuman creation, including higher animals.

Then too, God’s creating human beings in his own image and likeness is programmatic for them. As God creates everything and directs human beings to their own good, so human beings are to procreate and exercise dominion over subhuman things. Moreover, unlike subhuman things, human beings can freely accept God’s direction and thus cooperate with him, and Genesis teaches people to do that by telling them that God created them in his own image and likeness.

