

# I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER, ALMIGHTY

Kelly James Clark

## 1. Introduction.

The Apostle's creed contains a ringing endorsement of God's benevolent and nurturing care for his creatures as well as his awesome power: "I believe in God the Father, almighty..." The theist affirms God's tender loving paternal care as well as his unsurpassable ability. In that very affirmation, however, lie the seeds for a potent argument against the existence of God. If our heavenly Father cares for his spiritual children as an earthly father cares for his biological children then God the Father is bound by similar moral obligations and enjoys similar permissions incumbent upon earthly fathers. Earthly parents have a *prima facie* obligation to prevent certain harms from coming to their children; therefore, God has a *prima facie* obligation to prevent those same harms from coming to his children. God, in contradistinction to merely human fathers, has the ability to prevent harms that a comparatively impotent earthly parent cannot prevent. God, therefore, has an obligation to prevent the same harms that an earthly parent would be obliged to prevent and, being almighty, has the ability to prevent such harms. But such harms have not been prevented; there are countless harms that have occurred that an earthly parent, if present and able, would have been obliged to prevent. Hence, God the Father, almighty does not exist.<sup>i</sup>

In this essay I intend to refute the claim that God would have obligations closely analogous to those of earthly parents. My strategy is not conventional for philosophers. The bulk of the essay is an *a priori* conceptual analysis of the role of father and what the father/child relationship entails with respect to moral obligations and permissions. I will argue that the Christian will not be obliged to make the same plausibility judgments that the atheologian makes about what God ought to do in this and similar circumstances of horrific evils.<sup>ii</sup> I shall follow J. L. Mackie's strategy of assessing the theist's set of beliefs and values: "Since I am charging the theist with holding

incompatible beliefs, it is his conceptions of good, evil, and so on that are in play here.”<sup>iii</sup>  
I will conclude that, given these theistic conceptions of good, evil and so forth, it is epistemically permissible to believe in God the Father, almighty in the face of horrific and unexplained suffering.

The atheologian’s complaint begins with a simple query about moral obligations. The atheologian objects to belief in God because of the counterintuitive belief that God could permit evils which human persons, if they had the power, would be morally obligated to prevent. So, for example, God allows children to drown, fawns to suffer and die, and people to starve; any of which he, presumably, has the power to prevent. His lack of moral action, therefore, either counts against belief in his goodness or his very existence.

But is it so clear that God has the same obligations to his creatures as we have to one another? Is God’s lack of acting along the lines of human moral obligations evidence against his existence? To put the matter in Christian terms: If God is Father, does it follow that he has obligations identical with those of human fathers? While the image of God as Father rightly suggests the providential care of the divine, the dissimilarities between the divine and human parent will create crucially different obligations for the two kinds of fathers; God the father will have substantially different obligations to his children than any earthly parent has to his or her children. Indeed, the difference in obligation will prove so great as to nullify judgments that the atheologian makes about what is or is not plausible to believe about the obligations of God the Father.<sup>iv</sup>

## **2. Human Obligations**

One suggestive way of conceiving of obligations is in terms of roles that one fulfills. I am a son, father, husband, teacher, driver, citizen, etc. Hence I have obligations as a son, father, husband, teacher, driver, citizen, etc. My obligations differ depending on

my roles and the roles of others. I have obligations to my mother that I do not have to my students or to others whom I have never met. Some of my obligations may change over time: I may, for example, acquire an obligation to vote upon obtaining the age of majority or to serve my country in times of war. I am doubtful that every obligation can be cast in terms of roles, but surely many can.

Consider the differing obligations created by the differing roles of father and baby sitter. I have occasionally judged that it would redound to the overall benefit of my son if I did not interfere in his activities and allowed him to experience certain kinds of evils or harms. For example, I have at times not prevented him from touching hot surfaces, being selfish to his friends, or falling short distances; and I have good reasons for permitting these harms: it seems that my son learns best by experience and that he needs to get burned, scorned by his friends, or skinned knees to learn appropriate behavior. I cannot persuade him to be careful or be a good friend through reasoning alone. So, occasionally, I permit harm to come to my son for the realization of a greater good or the prevention of a greater harm. Indeed, it falls under my purview as a parent to adjudge and to allow my child to experience such harms in the service of a greater good. While there are evils that I could prevent, it is morally permissible, by virtue of my role as parent, to allow my child to suffer such harms.

Now consider the role of baby sitter and its corresponding obligations. Suppose I were to return home and to discover my child burned, friendless, and with skinned knees. Upon querying the baby sitter, suppose I discovered that these harms were within his power to prevent but that he deemed it in my son's best interest to allow them to occur. I would surely, in this instance, be justifiably angry with the baby sitter, as he would have failed to fulfill his obligations as baby sitter. In the absence of special permission from a parent, his role does not permit him to allow these harms to come to my son; he is not permitted to allow such things to occur independently of my permission. Hence, his role restricts the domain of what he is morally permitted to do

with respect to my son.

Why may the baby sitter not allow my son to suffer harms that he could prevent, while a parent is so permitted? Let me offer four initial reasons. First, the parent is ultimately responsible for the care and moral upbringing of the child while the baby sitter is not. The moral development of the child is primarily the role of the parent and only secondarily or tertiarily the role of the baby sitter (and even then only by permission of the parent—although some minimal permission is assumed). Second, the baby sitter usually lacks sufficient knowledge of the child's history, his moral development, his tendencies and abilities, his previous shortcomings and punishments, etc., to make a responsible moral decision. Third, sitters usually lacks the powers of moral discrimination because of their youth and inexperience. Fourth, the parent is generally in a better position to rectify the situation by turning harm into a good. Consequently, it is not properly the baby sitter's role to make significant moral choices for children unless granted permission by the parents. The parent is permitted to allow preventable harm to come to the child, while the baby sitter is not (or is allowed to only in the most elementary ways or, in more serious matters, only by permission).

An additional factor in one's permission to allow harm to another, other things being equal, is one's love and commitment to another. While my baby sitter has little moral permission to allow my child to suffer harm, my mechanic or a stranger has even less moral permission to allow my child to suffer harm. If my child were to explore the inner recesses of my mechanic's bays replete with half-repaired cars, gasoline and oil supplies, exhaust fumes and dangerous tools, it is the mechanic's moral duty to prevent my child from harming himself. If she were to decide to teach my child a lesson by allowing him to play with sharp tools, she would have usurped my role and made a decision that was not properly within her moral purview. My baby sitter has more moral permission to allow my child to suffer harm, and my mother has even more. In the domain of human relations, my wife and I have the most moral permission to allow

my son to suffer harm, provided we do it for some morally sufficient reason. The amount of harm that I can permit to my child is partly a function of my will to benefit the child. If my motives toward my child become wicked, my moral permission to allow harm is correspondingly weakened. The permission to allow harms to come to a child corresponds to the benevolence one has towards one's child.

Love and commitment alone, however, are insufficient for granting moral permission for allowing preventable harm to come to another. Consider my love and commitment for a friend or for my wife; the moral development of my friends and wife is not ultimately my responsibility. But, at least for now, the responsibility for the moral development of my child is mine, and that gives me the responsibility and the permission to determine when it is appropriate to allow preventable harms. I can permit harms to come to my child that others cannot because the child is mine. Suppose I were walking with my child at the shopping mall and corporally punished him for running off. Suppose further that an expert in child psychology had viewed the entire scene and scolded me for my behavior, explaining that the child should be reasoned with and disciplined less harshly; citing all manner of scientific studies, she tried to demonstrate the inappropriateness of my behavior. Although the child psychologist may have more information relevant to the proper treatment of children, the child is simply not hers. I do not suggest that this gives parents license to do whatever they please with their children, I only mean to argue that the dependence of child on the parent and the legitimate responsibility that one has for the moral and spiritual development of that child are crucial factors in the permission that one has to allow harm to come to that person.

One must also consider the moral maturity of the agents involved. My judgments about what I will allow my son to suffer in order to learn lessons for his greater good or for the prevention of greater evils, depend in part on my judgments about his moral maturity. His inability to reason and to be reasoned with on many

moral matters (indeed, so far on most matters), imply that I must adjudge the best means for providing moral instruction for him. Although I wish that he would learn to stop jumping on the couch, touching hot surfaces, and being selfish through the gentle persuasion of reason, alas it simply does not seem to work that way. So I must allow him to fall occasionally, get burned, and to anger his friends so that he can learn appropriate behavior through those preventable harms.

Let me develop my permission to allow harm as a function of my power to benefit my child. I can allow harms only insofar as I can work to make the situation redound to my child's greater good. Although I may intentionally expose my child to chicken pox in order to avoid the greater pain of later exposure, I cannot infect my child with the sickness unto death. I lack the power to bring good to my child if he is dead. There are clearly a great many harms that I cannot legitimately allow to come to my child because I lack the ability to enable them to work to my child's greater good. I have a *prima facie* duty to my child to prevent harms that I can prevent, if I cannot redeem those harms with a greater good. My permission to allow harm to come to my child is limited by my capacity to turn that harm to good. The benefit that one may justifiably offer must redeem the evil that one has allowed. Indeed it is this factor which makes some suffering horrific: we lack the power to benefit the victim; it is horrific from our perspective because of the limitations on our power to do good.

### **3. Divine Obligations**

Now let us extend this moral analysis to God, as is licensed by the appellation of Father when speaking of God.<sup>v</sup> His role is similar to that of father to child; hence he may allow evils and harms to come to his children provided that they are done for a morally sufficient reason. This should not be taken to imply, as the athelagian contends, that whatever is implied concerning human parent to child is also implied for divine parent to child. Our permissions to allow harm are limited by our finite capacity to benefit the

child. God is not so limited; because he is almighty, he has the ability to bring good to situations that are unredeemable from a merely human perspective. God's infinite ability to benefit those suffering harms greatly increases his permission to allow them. What sufferings one may allow depend in part on the capacity one has to defeat them. We cannot defeat the evils suffered some victims and that's what makes them horrendous; but God can. The athelagian's argument here is flawed—she treats unequals as equals; she has not operated *mutatis mutandis*. God is both more loving and more powerful; this grants him, in his role of Father, more moral permission to allow harm than is allowed for earthly parents. When the athelagian draws her conclusion, she has not changed everything proportionally; in humans benevolence, dependence and the power to benefit are finite, but God has these properties infinitely. These increases serve to nullify her judgments about what it would be plausible to suppose God ought to do in such circumstances.

We should not, therefore, be surprised if we find that we had an obligation to and could have prevented some evil and that God did not. His role may permit him to justifiably allow such harms. My argument suggests that God does not enter into the network of human obligations in any simple way; his obligations to humans only remotely resemble the obligations of parent to child.<sup>vi</sup> Because of the vast ontological difference between God the Father and earthly fathers, there is no simple inference from the kinds of obligations and permissions that an earthly father has to his child to the kinds of obligations and permissions that God has to his children.

It is also a consequence of this view that we would not know how God's allowing such harms would redound to the greater good of each individual. Just as the baby sitter lacks the relevant information to make responsible moral judgments concerning the allowing of harm to my child, even more so do we lack such information with respect to other human beings and God's intentions. We do not know each person's character, her past, or how she responds to suffering (this may partly explain why some

clearly suffer more than others, often in ways that we cannot understand.)

Furthermore, God might allow suffering to come to his creatures because we could not learn the appropriate lessons any other way. Just as my son is not open to persuasion by reason, our hardened hearts and our commitment to self may close us off to divine persuasion by reason. Knowing the law is not sufficient for doing the law. Hence, God may need to allow harms to come our way in order to attain certain greater goods. Of course, as I will suggest shortly, there may be other values at stake than merely ensuring obedience; God may desire us to *freely* choose to love Him and to conform our wills to His will.<sup>vii</sup> Hence simple infusion of goodness and love, given our nature, may not suffice to attain the desired end.

God's obligations, moreover, are not merely a function of my being dependent upon him, but also because *everyone* is dependent upon him; indeed God is Father not only to me but to all of his creatures. Bruce Russell asks us to consider the following instance of horrific suffering: a five-year-old girl from Flint, Michigan who was raped, beaten and strangled to death by her mother's boyfriend.<sup>viii</sup> The case of this suffering girl cannot be isolated, as the Russell has done; God must consider his relation to all other creatures as well. He may, for example, allow certain harms to come to some of his children because of the benefit that may accrue to others of his children (although I don't intend to defend the view that this was God's reason for allowing the harm in the case of the Flint girl). God's universal fatherhood creates obligations and permissions that entail that this incident cannot be considered in isolation. If God is Father to every creature then we cannot draw simple inferences concerning his presumed behavior toward one of his children; his universal Fatherhood creates a huge system of often competing obligations.

The athelagian rejects the notion that God's role would grant him moral permission to allow the death of the Flint girl in order to benefit one of his children. Russell offers this objection:

Dr. Frankenstein is more the author of his monster's being than normal parents are of the being of their children, but he does not have more rights over it than they have over their children. And even if God has greater rights over his children than we have over ours, it does not seem that the rights he has are so great as to make it permissible for him to benefit one of them at the awful price paid by the little girl in Flint. (Russell, 127)

Again the athelagian's reasoning is faulty because he is not operating *mutatis mutandis*. Both Dr. Frankenstein and his monster are within the domain of creatures and are subject to the obligations binding on creatures; Dr. Frankenstein stands fully within the framework of human values and, hence, it is not permissible for him to allow such harms. But the primary reason that Dr. Frankenstein cannot allow such harms to come to his monster is because he lacks the ability to rectify the situation—he cannot bring a good to his monster significantly great enough to outweigh the harm. But God is not so limited. Hence, the Dr. Frankenstein/God analogy fails. God may be permitted to allow many harms that human parents, even Dr. Frankensteins, are not allowed because of his vastly superior ability to bring great good to his creatures.

The Christian theist also believes that God is sufficiently different from Dr. Frankenstein to permit such harms. Perhaps it is God's perfect goodness and love or those attributes in combination with his power to do good that make this difference. Perhaps it is the utter ontological dependence of creature upon creator that makes the difference. What is it about the nature of God that gives him the moral permission to allow harms that come to his creatures that neither a parent nor Dr. Frankenstein have? Suppose the Christian does not know what the difference is that makes this difference, but simply believes that there is one. Is the Christian noetically deficient for being unable to specify this difference? It could be that the theist knows that God is wholly good and that He is permitted to allow such harms without understanding the ontological grounding of such properties. It is a question of his being rational in acquiring and maintaining the prior beliefs. So the question of the theist's rationality in

maintaining belief in God in the face of such horrific suffering resolves into the rationality of belief in God simpliciter.

It should be recognized, finally, that God's relationship to his creatures is not limited to the father-child analogy. God is also creator, sustainer, judge, redeemer, and much more. God also values more than merely making human beings happy or preventing their suffering. These additional roles and values present God with other obligations and permissions. Hence it would be improper to make judgments about God's obligation to persons simply on the basis of the father/child analogy. Let me give an earthly example. Parents have a *prima facie* obligation to do all they can to prevent their children from harm; suppose (not implausibly) that spending time in prison harms one. My ability to prevent this harm from coming to my child is limited by my power as well as by my child's autonomy. But suppose that one is not only father but also judge and that one is in the unenviable position of determining the punishment of one's son. In this instance, the role of judge may create obligations that defeat one's obligations as parent. So, too, God's many roles may create *ultima facie* obligations that defeat his *prima facie* obligations simply as parent. The complexity of the roles of God precludes the hasty judgments of plausibility that the athelogian makes about the kinds of *ultima facie* obligations that God would have if he were our Father.

If, therefore, one is not obliged to follow the athelogian's judgments about what it would be plausible for God to do in this circumstance, then one need not draw the same conclusions that she draws about the irrationality of belief in God. The more rational position for the unbeliever, let me state it baldly, would be agnosticism. But the theist will surely reject the athelogian's judgments and will, therefore, resist her conclusions. Whether or not the theist is rational in so doing will depend upon whether or not her belief in God is rational. And this must be settled independent of the athelogian's version of the problem of horrific suffering.

#### 4. A Very Brief Theodicy Sketch

If God is allowed to permit much more suffering than any human parent then one would like to know what morally sufficient reason might God have for allowing his children to suffer. While I don't know what that reason could be in the case of the little Flint girl, some general answers may be ventured. I believe that any fully adequate theodicy will include, but not be restricted to, the moral and spiritual development of human persons without violation of their nature as free creatures. God could directly stop many of the evils that occur but only by violating the nature of his creatures—by robbing them of their free wills. Within the context of significantly free human choices, God allows suffering to bring us both to moral perfection and to himself. As St. John of the Cross writes: “Suffering is the quickest beast to carry us into perfection.” Scripture reports that Jesus the Christ had to suffer to learn obedience to the father (Hebrews 5:8). Even more may suffering be essential for our moral development.

I don't mean to suggest that all the sufferings of person  $p$  are instrumental to some greater good for person  $p$ ; not all evil is pedagogical. I do not believe, to cite Russell's example, that the suffering of the Flint girl was necessary for the attainment of some greater good for that girl. Indeed, horrific evils are often ignobling rather than ennobling. So, at least for some evils and some persons, I do not mean to suggest that the reason why those evils occurred was instrumental.

Atheologians often reject these sorts of theodicies separately because they do not believe that freedom of choice simpliciter, nor the opportunity to become morally and spiritually good persons simpliciter are sufficiently valuable to defeat horrific evils. It does not follow, however, that such theodicies are not at least partly correct. I concede that such theodicies, even taken conjointly, are clearly not sufficient in the case of horrific evils in which the victim is robbed of any opportunity for significant moral and spiritual development. Could such sufferings be justified simply because they are part of the best sort of system for people on the whole to develop morally and spiritually?

While this sort of aesthetic theodicy has had popular currency, it violates my intuitions about God's goodness. Although the overall system may possess, as Plantinga writes, the greatest balance of good over evil, this does not seem a sufficient understanding of the divine goodness.<sup>ix</sup> Ivan Karamazov raises the right question: "If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future?" God's goodness ought to be construed in terms of his goodness to individuals.<sup>x</sup>

Why should the Christian reject the overall harmony conception of divine goodness and construe God's goodness in terms of his being good to individuals? Is this simply an Enlightenment elevation of the individual and a modern, but unbiblical, understanding of individual rights? Surely not; the overall harmony view would make God a simple consequentialist—performing that action which maximizes goodness and minimizes badness for the universe as a whole. It ought to be rejected because it countenances the sacrifice of an individual's preferences merely for the maximization of utility. Could God's goodness consist simply in his power to create a world which displays the best proportion of good over evil? And could the suffering of the innocent be justified only on the grounds of its contributing to just such a greater good? Surely not; given our divinely instilled intuitions about justice, the Christian should reject consequentialism as an adequate understanding of divine goodness. If God is good then His goodness extends directly to individuals.

I do not mean to imply that God cannot make any moral decisions on consequentialist grounds; I only mean to imply that consequentialism is not a sufficient understanding of God's goodness to creatures. Some of God's creatures may consent to sacrificial suffering on behalf of other human beings. The Christian believes that Jesus voluntarily offered the greatest human sacrifice of himself for the good of all mankind.

Furthermore, some may not be in a position to decide to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. But, counterfactually, if they had been asked they would have consented to God. God may justifiably allow such suffering to occur if this is the case. An earthly analogy may be appropriate here: some parents today have given birth to children because one of their children required the donation of an organ for their survival. Of course the second born had no choice in this decision and the choice was made for them. What might justify this moral choice is that the newborn baby, if fully aware and morally sensitive, would have decided to be born and to give an organ to their sibling. Similarly, God may justifiably allow harm to come to us for the greater harmony if we would have consented if sufficiently apprised of the situation. Moreover, God may allow some to suffer for the greater good, even if, counterfactually they would not have granted God permission to allow it to occur; he can justifiably do so if they ought to have granted God permission to allow it to occur. On occasion being a virtuous human being entails that one ought to make decisions on consequentialist grounds, even if one is the suffering victim of the decision. And finally God may allow some to suffer for the greater harmony and then bring a greater good to their lives individually.

I do not mean to suggest that only a priori moral considerations militate against the sufficiency of the overall harmony view of God's goodness. The Christian believes that God's greatest expression of divine love and goodness was in Jesus Christ and Jesus was good to individuals. His concern for individuals was expressed in giving the blind man sight, bringing Lazarus back to life, changing water into wine, and dying for our salvation. While these were also done for the greater harmony, perhaps to bring glory to God, they were not done solely for that greater good. God's glory is not incompatible with God's being good to individuals; as the Westminster confession expresses it: "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

How can God can be good to victims of horrific evil? I suggest that God can be good to them in such a way that their suffering is silenced; I don't mean to suggest that

God is good to them by providing outweighing or overriding goods that favorably tilt the balance somehow away from the evils that have occurred. Here I borrow and adapt John McDowell's distinction between silencing and overriding considerations.<sup>xi</sup> McDowell contends that in matters of virtue one does not weigh competing desires and then determine that the outweighing desire is balanced in favor of virtue; rather, he writes:

Their [the virtues] proper manifestation is a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would value highly (physical pleasure, security of life and limb). The lack of struggle is ensured by keeping the attention firmly fixed on what Aristotle calls "the noble"; not by a weighing of attractions which leads to the conclusion that on balance the virtuous course is more desirable. (It is true that the competing course could not really satisfy a virtuous person. But that is not to say that he judges it on balance less desirable; it records a consequence of his conviction that in these circumstances the attractions of the competing course count for nothing.) (McDowell, 26-27.)

McDowell's distinction can be adapted for our purposes: The proper manifestation of God's relational goodness within the context of the life of sufferers of horrific evil is a renunciation, without struggle, of something which in the abstract one would disvalue highly (horrific suffering). The lack of struggle is ensured by keeping the attention firmly fixed on the *viseo Dei*; not by a weighing of goods and evils within the context of an individual's life in which the goods outweigh the evils and which evils are considered necessary for the attainment of such goods. A consequence of this conviction is that now one regards one's suffering to count for nothing.

It is not my contention that all suffering for a person *p* is necessary for some greater good for person *p* which would outweigh the particular instance of suffering (at least within the context of an individual life; it may nonetheless be necessary for a global greater good). I would argue, rather, that the goods are so great that they silence the effect of the horrific evils. An example of a silencing consideration is the joy of a mother at the birth of her child. When a woman gives birth to a child she suffers

terribly, but in retrospect the suffering is forgotten. Since the suffering is not necessary for the attainment of the great good of having a child, the later good need not outweigh but nonetheless silences the former suffering. While she is suffering, however, the good is not yet fully present to her. Perhaps the victim of horrific suffering's perspective on suffering is like a woman's later perspective on childbirth where the good is now present and transforms her attitudes toward her suffering.

By virtue of what do silencing considerations silence in the case of horrific suffering? The desires to blame or accuse God, to feel bitter or that one has lost out on something are silenced because one knows new things and sees things differently. One comes to know and admire God in a way that one believes that God's allowing the suffering is acceptable and good. One's sufferings become part of a whole without becoming a means to an end. What one values has changed for one. Although one cannot know how God's goodness works in any detail, the Christian believes that fellowship with God is sufficiently good to silence any evils suffered in this life.<sup>xii</sup> God can be good to victims of horrific suffering by allowing them to participate in the divine life. The sufferings of this life can be defeated by sharing in God's joy in the next life and finally gaining the sabbath's rest.

## **5. Conclusion**

The problem of horrific pointless suffering is a serious problem for the rational acceptance of theism. Yet the athelogian often ignores dissimilarities between God and human beings which are relevant to one's judgments—God may be morally permitted to allow harm that earthly parents are not. Furthermore, the theist may see ways in which God could be good even to sufferers of horrific evil. While the considerations that I have brought to bear are not decisive solutions to the problems that the athelogian has raised, they do militate against the athelogian's conviction that it is irrational or epistemically improper for the theist to believe in God. One is still rationally entitled to

affirm that God, indeed, is the Father, almighty.<sup>xiii</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional deductive argument from evil alleges a logical incompatibility between the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good God and the fact of evil. That is that

(G) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good.

is logically incompatible with

(E) Evil exists.

While Alvin Plantinga's free will defense is generally accepted as having refuted the charge of logical inconsistency, the problem of evil has been raised in other forms. While most atheologians concede no incompatibility between the sheer existence of evil, many argue that the vast quantities of evil are evidence against the existence of God, others argue that while God and evil are not logically incompatible, the existence of evil makes God's existence unlikely or improbable and still others argue that God's existence is incompatible with unnecessary evil.

<sup>2</sup> I define "horrible evil" as an evil which no human being could rectify by the introduction of a greater good.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> The atheologian's crucial problem is in treating the analogical predication of "Father" of God as univocal.

<sup>5</sup> I shall continue to use the curious notion of permissions when speaking about God. It is clear

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that my babysitter is granted permission by me to allow certain harms, hence the term “permission.” It is not so clear whom the atheologian thinks grants human parents their permission to allow harms. It is even less clear who is doing the granting of permission to allow harm in the case of God. I will nonetheless continue to speak of God’s permission to allow harm; it will serve as a locution for “God may allow harm.”

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn Adams takes this a step further: she believes that because of God’s unique ontological status as Creator and sustainer of the world, He is not drawn into the network of human obligations at all. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1988, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> Although it is not a consequence of my role centered theory of obligation and moral permission, it is not inconsistent with it that a parent be grieved to the point of allowing her child to do irreparable harm to herself. Presumably when the child has come of age, is sufficiently morally responsible to make her own choices, and repeatedly ignores the moral implorings of her parents, the parent may justifiably allow the child to go her own way. When the child has “come of age” the parents’ role begins to shift. An intransigent child may force a parent to forego otherwise normal obligations—say to provide shelter, food, finances when needed desperately. This may be a morally responsible course of action for the parent of a drug addict, alcoholic, etc. who repeatedly refuses the advances of his parents. There comes a point where the parent is no longer under the usual moral obligations to prevent harm from coming to her child. These obligations may not be reinstated until the child returns to the parents determined to accept their assistance and to live a new life. This is not to say that the parent no longer has any obligations to help the child; in these sort of circumstances the parent has special permission to allow harms that otherwise would not be allowed in order to prevent even greater harms. The parent, of course, at a certain stage may only prevent such harms when they do not interfere with the child’s autonomy. The same may go for God; He surely may allow the incorrigible and unrepentant sinner to

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freely go her own way. God may not be obligated to ensure the repentance of his creatures (indeed, given the nature of free will, he may be unable to attain this end).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 6, no. 2, April 1989; 121-139.

<sup>9</sup> I don't mean to suggest that Plantinga is offering this as his understanding of divine goodness. He has offered it as a *possible* reason that God might have for allowing evil which is sufficient for his free will defense.

<sup>10</sup> See Marilyn McCord Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1988, p. 135ff.

<sup>11</sup> John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. v. 52, 1978, 13-29. I am grateful to my colleague, John Hare, for making me aware of this distinction.

<sup>xii</sup>As the apostle Paul writes: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that it to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18)

<sup>xiii</sup> I am grateful to Marilyn McCord Adams for many valuable comments on this paper. I am also indebted to the supererogatory work of Calvin's summer colloquium which included Clifton Orlebeke, Kenneth Konyndyk and special guest, Paul Helm.