

Joseph Smith and The Problem of Evil¹

by Blake Ostler and David Paulsen

Nothing tests our trust in God or challenges the rationality of our belief in Him more severely than human suffering and wickedness. In this paper, we support Truman Madsen's claim that Joseph Smith offers valuable help in enabling us to successfully confront these challenges to trust and belief. Truman first explored the bearing of Joseph Smith's revelations and thought on the problem of evil in *Eternal Man* published in 1966 and returned again to the problem in his book *Four Essays on Love* in an essay that was republished in *The Radiant Life*.² He confronts the problem not abstractly but in concrete situations of persons seeking to maintain faith in the face of horrendous evils.³ Madsen paints the problem in all of its anguish, pain and unfathomable depth:

As a beginning, let's walk through a hospital.

Here. This newborn infant with the lovely face. She could not have worthier parents. But she was born in total paralysis and is blind. The doctors do not know if she will survive, and if she does . . . ?

This bed is empty. Its occupant, a quivering psychotic with a wild stare, is upstairs undergoing

¹This essay is an expansion of a shorter piece, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil" which was given as a forum address at Brigham Young University on September 21, 1999 and which was published in *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000), pp. 53-65.

² Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1966). Ch. 5, "Evil and Suffering," and *The Radiant Life* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1994), ch. 6, "Human Anguish and Divine Love."

³For further treatment by Madsen specifically on Joseph Smith and coping with evil and suffering in life, see *Joseph Smith, The Prophet* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1989), pp. 51-65, and Madsen's contribution in Roberts, B. H. *The Truth, The Way, The Life* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), pp. 612.

shock treatment. He collapsed when his wife and two children were maimed in a fire, one beyond recognition.

Over here is a surgeon who had a rare brain disease and asked his closest friend to operate. The operation failed; and he has been, for nearly three years, a human vegetable. His friend has since committed suicide.

Somewhere tonight the families of these souls are crying themselves to sleep.

Now, if your arm will hold out, write as many zeros after a "1" as will portray similar reenactments of these scenes that are, or have been, or may be, on this planet. And that will be one thread in the tapestry of human misery.⁴

This, then, is the problem. Our moral sensibilities are so outraged by such evils that we may begin to question whether our world is really the product of an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good God. We are at a loss to see how a perfectly-good God could have any morally sufficient reason for permitting such evils to exist. Of course the problem is not merely a conceptual problem nor one only involving the suffering of others. Few of us escape the deep anguish of evil, for it is no respecter of persons and arises out of our own experiences of incurable or debilitating diseases, mental illness, broken homes, abuse, rape, wayward loved ones, tragic accidents, untimely death – and the list goes on. Many of us are constrained to cry out from the depths of our souls: "Why God? Why?" And many of us have prayed on behalf of our loved ones, "Please God, please help," and then wondered as, or so it seems, the heavens are as brass and the silence from the heavens in deafening. All of us struggle with the problem of evil.

We speak of *the* problem of evil, but actually there are many. We want to consider just three: (1) the logical problem of evil; (2) the soteriological problem of evil; and (3) the existential problem of evil. The

⁴ *Eternal Man*, 53-54.

logical problem of evil is the apparent contradiction between the world's evil and an all-powerful and all-loving Creator. The soteriological problem of evil is the apparent inconsistency between the notions that God loves all persons and he has nevertheless consigned a large portion of humanity to hell for no action of theirs and without their ability to accept the gospel in this life. The existential problem of evil is the test of trusting God in the face of evils that challenge our belief that God cares about us.

We believe that the Prophet Joseph Smith received revealed insights that address the problem of evil in its broadest terms. His revelations suggest what might be called a "soul-making theodicy," centered within a distinctively Christian soteriology (or doctrine of salvation), but both framed within a theology that rejects both creation out of nothing and thus the philosophical definition of divine omnipotence which affirms that there are no non-logical limitations to what God can do. The Prophet's world-view dissolves the logical and soteriological problems of evil while infusing with meaning and hope our personal struggles with suffering, sin, and death.

I. The Logical Problem of Evil.

The logical problem of evil is easily stated: A perfectly good being eliminates all of the genuine evils and promotes all the goods that it can. An omnipotent being that is omniscient and brings about all states of affairs out of nothing can eliminate all evils. It follows logically that there are no evils if God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good and creates everything that exists out of nothing. Whence then evil?

A. The Deterministic Tradition.

The problem of evil is especially acute for those traditions which maintain that all things that occur are the effect of God's all-determining causal activity. Such prominent theological luminaries as Calvin,⁵

⁵ John Calvin's views are set forth in *Institutes of Christian Religion* ed. by John T. McNeil, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.13.6.

Luther,⁶ Augustine⁷ (on the dominant interpretation) and Thomas Aquinas⁸ (on the majority interpretation) all held that God predestines and causally determines all events that occur from the moment of creation.

Truman Madsen explains,

Augustine begins with a premise not only that God is all-powerful, but that reality, which is to say all else beside God, was created by God from nothing. Then the puzzle arises as to why a powerful being, so powerful as to bring all reality into being, should have chosen to create such a universe as this; and why specifically, evil and the devil were among those realities which God created.⁹

Indeed, it can be further stated that since on these views God creates the universe out of nothing and himself determines every event that will occur in each moment of the world's existence,¹⁰ he thus intends and causes all murders, rapes, abuses, diseases, cancers, earthquakes, death, pain etc. These traditions make God the author of all evils.

Against the objection that these views impugn the divine goodness, defenders have replied that even though such events appear to be evil, in the end God has a morally sufficient reason for each of them. A perfectly good being does not necessarily eliminate all evils, for some evils may be necessary to a greater

⁶ See, J.I. Packer and O. R. Johnson, *Luther, On the Bondage of the Will* (New York: Fleming H. Revell co., 1957), 784-86.

⁷ Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), 119-24.

⁸ See, Michael Miller, "Transcendence and Divine Causality," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 73:4 (1999), 537-45; Brian Shanley, "Divine Causation and Human Freedom in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 72:1 (1998), 99-122.

⁹ Truman Madsen, *The Problem of Evil* [sound recording] (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1966).

¹⁰ Many in the deterministic tradition maintain that a distinction can be made between God's intending and God's merely permitting evils. However, on our view the distinction simply will not hold. See David Ray Griffin, *Evil Revisited* (New York: N.Y. State Press, 1991), 13-14.

good. For example, a doctor may reasonably inflict the pain of a shot if the benefits will outweigh the pain. Thus, a perfectly good being eliminates only those evils not necessary to a greater good. Thus, the believer may simply state that God is neither evil nor less than all-powerful because some evils occur, for such evils are actually “good” as the logically necessary condition for a greater good when all things are considered.

Yet in the end we believe that it must be admitted that such an answer is not very satisfying. Can it really be believed in the integrity of our hearts that dehumanizing abuse of a little girl is logically necessary to some greater good? If so, what greater good? Those who accept such a divinely deterministic view assert that in some way incomprehensible to human reason every instance of evil is necessary to some greater good. However, in the end they must take refuge in sheer mystery, for we cannot even begin to fathom what the greater goods could be. While it is possible that such evils somehow serve God’s good purposes, such a response is simply inadequate to foster trust in God. As Peter Appleby stated: “If God’s goodness is radically different from human goodness, there is little reason for calling it goodness at all, and still less for praising it as faith is wont to do. The child who is totally ignorant of his parent’s values has no reason for admiring them and still less to emulate them.”¹¹ If the purpose of a revealed religion is to assist mortals to grasp their relationship to God and the meaning of their experience in the world that surrounds them, then the least satisfying theology is one that takes refuge in mystery when confronted with human existence and our experience of evil.

Moreover, it is easy to restate the problem with the notion of “genuine evil,” or evils that occur that are not necessary to some greater good. Is it not apparent that there are evils without which, all things considered, the world would finally be better? All of us actually believe this to be true in our actions even if

¹¹ Peter Appleby, “Finitist Theology and the Problem of Evil,” *Sunstone* (Nov./Dec. 1981), 53.

some are required by their religious traditions to verbally deny it. Otherwise, how could we justify taking action to eliminate crimes, abuses, hunger etc.? Can a believer really assert the view in good faith that these things must be a part of God's all determining plan and therefore we should just let them happen because in the end they are really necessary for a greater good? In reality, believers' practice rarely squares with this belief; it seems clearly at odds with their theology.

B. The Free Will Defense.¹²

It is commonly accepted by philosophers that Alvin Plantinga has solved the logical problem of evil. It must be noted that Plantinga does not intend to give a theodicy, or believable explanation of God's permission of evil. He is only interested in showing that "God exists" is logically consistent with "evil exists." Plantinga responded to J.L. Mackie who argued that it is logically possible for an omnipotent being to create a world containing free creatures without any evil. Christians believe that Jesus, though tempted and free to sin, remained spotless throughout life. If there is no logical impossibility in a person's choosing the good on one occasion, then there is no logical impossibility in a person's choosing the good on every occasion. Thus, it is a logically possible state of affairs that all persons choose good on all occasions. Mackie argued that if God can bring about any logically possible state of affairs, as Christians maintain, then he can bring about the state of affairs of all persons always freely choosing the good. Moreover, if God is perfectly good, that is certainly what God would have done.¹³ It follows that there cannot be any moral evils.

¹²In his works, Truman Madsen examines and rejects four theories of evil that attempt to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil. These include what he labels the punitive, illusory, perspective, and privative theories of evil. A fifth that he believes is at the center of Joseph Smith's view is the instrumental theory of evil. We will not explicitly address these here, but for his commentary see *The Radiant Life*, 59-62.

¹³ J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (April 1955), 254.

Now it must be recognized that Mackie's argument is valid against those in the deterministic tradition who maintain that human freedom is compatible with causal determinism, like Augustine, Calvin and possibly Aquinas.¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga bases his defense on a stronger version of freedom known as "contra-causal" freedom. On this view, free will is not compatible with causal determinism. Thus, Plantinga begins with free persons who cannot be controlled by God to the extent they are free in a morally significant sense. Thus, God cannot consistently create persons and also *bring it about* that they freely choose the good, for that would amount to God causing their actions. Thus, the fact that a person who can always choose what is good is logically possible does not entail that God could bring about such a person. God could create persons who always choose good, but not even God could consistently *cause* a person to choose the good *freely*.¹⁵

However, we question whether Plantinga has fully resolved the logical problem of evil. Merely showing that "God exists" is consistent with "evils occur" is not enough if the notion of God involved in the analysis is divorced from the full conception of God accepted by believers. For in addition to affirming that (i) God is all-powerful and (ii) perfectly good, traditional Christian theologians also affirm (iii) God created all things out of nothing, and (iv) God has absolute foreknowledge of all of the outcomes of His creative choices.¹⁶ Although apologists have labored to reconcile evil with God's goodness and power, they have often failed to grapple with the much more difficult task of reconciling evil in addition with God's foreknowledge and creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁴ See James F. Sennett, "The Free Will Defense and Determinism," *Faith and Philosophy* 8:3 (July 1991), 340-353.

¹⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 45-53.

¹⁶ Traditional theologians are divided over whether God's foreknowledge consists in "simple foreknowledge" or knowledge of what will in fact occur in the future, or in "middle knowledge," which includes all things that could occur in addition to what will occur.

Twentieth-century philosopher Anthony Flew takes these additional premises into consideration in his attempt to show that evil cannot be reconciled with God's existence. It is appropriate in the face of apparently genuine evils to seek some saving explanation that will show that in spite of appearances, there really is a God who loves us.. But Flew argues that believers have traditionally assigned God attributes which block a saving explanation altogether:

We cannot say that [God] would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if only he knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others. Indeed an omnipotent, omniscient God must be an accessory before (and during) the fact of every human misdeed; as well as being responsible for every non-moral defect in the universe.¹⁷

Thus, given the traditional view of God, God is an accessory before the fact and ultimately responsible for every event that occurs – including evil events. God is responsible for every evil because he created the world *ex nihilo* and he could have had a different world. He could have created a world with persons who are morally more sensitive than we are, or brighter and more able to prevent abuses and natural disasters. The fact that we are more able to prevent evil, or that we are morally more sensitive certainly does not reduce our free will. He could have created a world without smallpox and cancer without affecting free will in the least. If so, then why didn't he?

There is also a deep metaphysical dilemma in Plantinga's free will defense. Plantinga essentially recreated Luis deMolina's notion of God's "middle knowledge" whereby God's knowledge includes not merely knowledge of what will in fact happen, but also what *would happen* if creatures were placed in any

¹⁷ Anthony Flew, "Theology and Falsification" in Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: MacMillan, 1955), 107.

specific circumstances.¹⁸ According to Plantinga (and Luis DeMolina), before the creation out of nothing God surveyed all of the possible worlds that were open to his power to create and He “saw” the *individual essences* of every person who could be created in those worlds. He also knew the truth value of all of the propositions which describe what those persons would do if created, including their free actions. (These propositions are known as “counterfactuals of freedom”). To his horror, argues Plantinga, it is just possible that God discovered that every individual essence He could create in the possible worlds open to him would suffer from *transworld depravity* because it commits some evil action(s) in every world God could create. Thus, not even God could have created, for example, Zeno without instantiating (i.e., bringing about in creation of possible worlds) those distinguishing properties essential to him, defining him uniquely as Zeno in every possible world. The property of “transworld depravity” could be a part of every creaturely essence according to Plantinga.

The problems in Plantinga’s defense arise from the ontology of persons which it assumes, for this ontology is not consistent with creation *ex nihilo*. Plantinga assumes that there obtain contingent realities (i.e., not logically necessary) which condition God’s power even prior to the creation. However, for Plantinga, these contingencies are not actually existing intelligences or spirits who have existed from all eternity and were not created by God; rather, they are merely “individual essences” of possible persons who come to exist only if God chooses to create them. But we must ask how there could be any such limitations on God prior to his creation out of nothing? What could have determined what a free creature would do prior to its having been

¹⁸ For excellent recent expositions of the notion of middle knowledge see Alfred J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge* (Part IV of the *Concordia*), translated with an introduction by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), and Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Plantinga’s more sophisticated treatment of the free will defense and middle knowledge is presented in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974).

created? It can't be God who determined it, for then the person wouldn't be free. It can't be the circumstances in which the possible person may be created, otherwise the person is not free in a contra-causal sense. It can't be the possible person, herself, because the merely possible doesn't exist to bring anything about. It is impossible that the possible persons in question do so because they don't yet exist until after God's creation of the world.¹⁹ How could a merely potential person, say "Grog of Gorg" who God chose not to create, bring about the truth value of any propositions? Mere potentialities don't bring about anything. The notion that there is a truth about what such possible persons would do which could be known prior to the creation *ex nihilo* seems to be absurd.

Further, Plantinga's defense has a devil of time explaining "natural evils" – or those evils which are usually thought to not be brought about by free persons but as a result of the natural order like earthquakes, cancer, disease, tornados and so forth. Plantinga argues that it is logically possible that natural evils could be brought about by evil spirits who have free will. And indeed it is logically possible – if creation of such spirits

¹⁹ The issue as to what or who brings about the truth of counterfactuals of freedom is an ongoing debate in the philosophy of religion. Thomas Flint argues that the truth value of counterfactuals of freedom assumes that *actually existing* persons have a type of "counterfactual power over the past" or ability to bring about the truth value of counterfactuals before they even exist through backward causation. See his "A New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), 299-305. However, he does not show how the truth value of counterfactuals could be brought about by possible persons who are never created and therefore never exist! Flint is responding to William Hasker, "A New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), 291-297 and "Middle Knowledge A Refutation Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy* 12:2 (April 1995), 223-36. The literature on the argument is legion. See, William Hasker, "Anti-Molinism Undefeated!" *Faith and Philosophy* 17:1 (January 2000), 126-131; William Lane Craig, "On Hasker's Defense of Anti-Molinism," *Faith and Philosophy* (15:2 (April 1998), 236-40; Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 150-60; Thomas Flint, "Hasker's God, Time and Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 60 (1990), 103-15; William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992), 89-110; Timothy O'Connor, "The Impossibility of Middle Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 66 (1992), 136-66; Robert Adams, "An Anti-Molinist Argument," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (191), 343-53.

with such powers is consistent with God's goodness in the first place. However, Plantinga has not shown (or even attempted to show) that God could have a morally sufficient reason for granting evil spirits such powers, especially granting them such powers when God foreknows they will exercise them to bring about horrendous evils. The attempt to pass off the blame for natural evils to evil spirits does not relieve God of ultimate responsibility for natural evils. As Stephen T. Davis observed in his attempt to elucidate Plantinga's free will defense:

Obviously, whether one speaks of the devil or not, it is *God* who is ultimately responsible for natural evil. He created the world in which natural evil occurs and, although God has the power to prevent natural evil (whether proximately caused by the devil or not), does not do so. Why does he not do so? Because of reasons he knows but I do not it will turn out best that he not do so.²⁰

That evil spirits bring about natural evils thus does not exonerate God from responsibility for what they bring about, for God is responsible for creating these spirits in the first place. It is obvious that God need not grant powers to manipulate natural causes such as creating cancer, earthquakes and so forth to evil spirits as a necessary condition of their exercise of free will, for we are created free on this view but do not have such powers. If God created these evil spirits out of nothing knowing beforehand all of the actual consequences of his creative choices, then he is an accessory before the fact and ultimately responsible for every moral and nonmoral defect in the universe. He is responsible for the evil acts of these evil spirits. Unless these spirits themselves could have some morally sufficient reason for creating cancer, earthquakes, diseases and so forth, then God cannot be morally justified in creating them with such powers. Unless it can be argued that creation

²⁰ "Davis's Response," in Stephen T. Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 97.

of these evil spirits and granting them such powers leads to a world that is better, all things considered, than one without them, Plantinga's argument merely leads to a new kind of evil.

Finally, Plantinga's defense is wildly implausible. Few have seriously suggested that evil spirits actually cause earthquakes, cancer etc. Of course, Plantinga is not interested in a position that is true or plausible, but merely to show that the proposition that "God exists" is compatible with the proposition that "evil exists." Yet such a defense is wholly inadequate to respond to the problem of evil that actually confronts believers. He treats the problem as a mere exercise in logic. Such a limited response does nothing to vindicate trust in God in a world wracked with horrendous evils. Plantinga assumes that faith is not challenged as long as God's existence is not logically impossible given the existence of evil. That assumption is simply not adequate to the reality of our experience. Observing that **P** has been shown to be consistent with **Q** is simply not satisfying to a person seeking to give meaning to their experience of evil in the world.

C. John Hick's Theodicy.

A theodicy is an attempt to reconcile God's goodness with the evils that occur in the world. Contemporary philosopher of religion John Hick has developed a complete theodicy in his fine book *Evil and the God of Love* which is widely recognized as the watershed work on the problem of evil.

Hick constructs a "soul-making" theodicy that is reminiscent of Joseph Smith's revelations in many respects, although he retains the notion of creation out of nothing. Hick rejects the Augustinian position that Adam and Eve originally were created as perfect beings and then inexplicably chose evil. Instead he constructs an "Irenaean theodicy" which harks back to Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon circa 220 A.D. Both Hick and Joseph Smith affirm that God's fundamental purpose in creating us and our world environment is twofold: First, to enable us, as morally and spiritually immature agents created in God's image to develop into God's

likeness through a process of deification or *apotheosis*.²¹ Second, to enable us to enter into an authentic (that is free and uncompelled) relationship of love and fellowship with Him. Hick argues that persons could not be created in this relationship already as spiritually perfect beings, for such a relationship would not be authentic because it would be coerced and contrived by God unilaterally. Rather, a genuine relationship must be freely chosen.

Thus, to achieve these ends it was necessary for God to endow us with the power of self-determination (or as Hick calls it, incompatibilist freedom) and, to preserve that freedom, to place us at an epistemic distance from God. God effects this distancing, Hick suggests, by having us emerge largely self-centered creatures out of a naturalistic evolutionary process. We begin our existence, according to Hick, as spiritually immature creatures who can at length be made into the image of God. Joseph Smith also maintained that we begin spiritually immature, or in a state of innocence and capable of spiritual growth through our experiences (see 2 Nephi 2:23 where Adam and Eve were described as being in a state of innocence) ^{and D&C 93: which states that every spirit was innocent in the beginning.} Joseph Smith also maintained that an epistemic distance is necessary to our spiritual growth; however, the mode of creating this distance in Joseph Smith's view is God's veiling of our memory of Him in our premortal existence so that we could exercise faith. Like Hick, the Prophet also maintained that God gave us our freedom to act for ourselves and not merely to be acted upon. (2 Nephi 2:26-27) The world is divided into "both things to act and things to be acted upon." (2 Nephi 2:14). Further, He gave us our agency "to act for" ourselves by placing in an environment of "opposition in all things" so that we might know the sweet by tasting the bitter, knowing joy

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In expounding B.H. Roberts' treatment of the problem of evil, Truman Madsen has suggested that suffering is necessary to obtain such attributes and experiences as love, gratitude, and joy. Thus, the world environment containing evil is a positive thing in the sense that it satisfies some prerequisite for obtaining at least one divine attribute: love. See *The Truth, The Way, The Life*. pp. 609-612, and "The Meaning of Christ" *BYU Studies* 15, #3 (1975) pp. 284.

by experiencing misery, and knowing good because we are also free to choose evil. (2 Nephi 2:16, 23). God also endowed us, Hick says, with a rudimentary awareness of Him and some tendency toward moral self-transcendence. The Prophet identifies this awareness or predisposition as the light of Christ, or the Spirit, which “enlighteneth every man through the world” (D&C 84:46) Soul-making, that is spiritual development into the likeness of God, occurs as we overcome our self-centeredness by making moral choices within an environment fraught with hardship, pain, and suffering where there is a genuine risk.

To this point, the world views of Hick and Joseph Smith are strikingly similar. However, they diverge over whether the world is created *ex nihilo* or by organizing a chaos into a cosmos. Hick affirms creation *ex nihilo* whereas Joseph Smith denies it. With the affirmation of creation out of nothing, Hick affirms all four theological postulates – perfect goodness, absolute power, absolute foreknowledge, and absolute creation – which confront him head-on with Flew’s complicity argument. To his credit, Hick expressly acknowledges the logical consequences of his position: God is ultimately responsible for *all* the evil that occurs in the world. Hick explains why this is so:

One whose action, A, is the primary and necessary precondition for a certain occurrence, O, all other direct conditions for O being contingent upon A, may be said to be responsible for O, if he performs A in awareness of its relation to O and if he is also aware that, given A, the subordinate conditions will be fulfilled [God’s] decision to create the existing universe was the primary and necessary precondition for the occurrence of evil, all other conditions being contingent upon this, and He took His decision in awareness of all that flowed from it.²²

Given Hick’s admission that God is ultimately responsible for all the evils that occur in the world, how can he possibly claim that God is perfectly loving? Unlike those who affirm divine causation of all events,

²² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 326.

Hick need not show that *every* evil is a logically necessary condition for the realization of a greater good. Rather, Hick need only show that evil is a necessary consequence of the type of world necessary for God's purposes of bringing us to His likeness and loving fellowship. However, Hick is stuck showing that virtually every creature will realize this goal if created. Thus, Hick affirms a doctrine of universal salvation. In Hick's view, all of us will finally achieve an authentic relationship with God in a postmortal life, the value of which will far outweigh any finite evil suffered here. He explains:

We must thus affirm in faith that there will in the final accounting be no personal life that is unperfected and no suffering that has not eventually become a phase in the fulfillment of God's good purpose. Only so, I suggest, is it possible to believe both in the perfect goodness of God and in His unlimited capacity to perform His will. For if there are finally wasted lives and finally unredeemed sufferings, either God is not perfect in love or He is not sovereign in rule over His creations.²³

Though we find Hick's reasoning compelling and appealing, its scriptural warrant is questionable and it gives rise to conceptual difficulties of its own. We will consider here five:

1. Though in Hick's view God endows us with a strong power of self-determination, it does not follow from his view that our choices are made in a vacuum. They are always choices of particular persons with a particular nature. Recall that Hick describes our primordial nature as being largely self-centered with a rudimentary awareness of God and some tendency toward morality. Since in Hick's account God creates out of nothing these primordial tendencies in our human nature, we can see no reason why God could not have made us significantly better or more virtuous than we are. Why not, for example, give us some significant reduction in our sometimes overwhelming tendencies of self-centeredness or selfishness which leads to

²³ Ibid., 376.

violence, rape, stealing etc.? Why could God not have increased our natural aversion to violence? Why couldn't He have made us more morally sensitive or more intelligent and compassionate so as to see the consequences of our actions on others? Such creative choices on God's part may have narrowed the options over which our own choices range as live-options for choice, but such limitations are neither incompatible with a strong notion of self-determinative freedom nor God's soul-making objectives. It appears fairly transparent that Hick's absolute creator could have made a much better world than ours without forfeiting the goals of bringing us to His image and into fellowship. Indeed, such changes would increase the likelihood of realizing these goals immeasurably.

2. On the other hand, it is hard to see how it could possibly be certain (as Hick claims) that God, without compromising anyone's freedom, will *inevitably* lure every finite creature into a loving relationship with Himself. Given that in Hick's view we must have incompatibilist freedom as a necessary condition to enter into an authentic personal relationship with God, how can it be certain that there won't be, as C.S. Lewis suggested, "rebels to the end," with "doors of hell ... locked on the *inside*"?²⁴ How can this possibility be precluded? Hick suggests that although theoretically God cannot guarantee that everyone will finally be saved; nevertheless, as a practical matter it is precluded because:

God has formed the free human person with a nature that can find its perfect fulfillment and happiness only in active enjoyment of the infinite goodness of the Creator. He is not, then, trying to force or entice His creatures against the grain of their nature, but to render them free to follow their own deepest desire, which can lead them only to Himself. For He has made them for

²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 127, emphasis in original.

Himself, and their hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him.²⁵

But now Hick is waffling, for it appears that we are not free after all. For our natures compel us to God on Hick's view. If so, then Hick's position is inconsistent. To account for moral evil, Hick asserts that God gives us incompatibilist freedom and genuine independence to choose for ourselves – even contrary to His desires for us. But given Hick's affirmation of absolute creation and absolute foreknowledge, Hick sees that God's perfect goodness is possible only if not one soul is lost. To salvage God's goodness, Hick is forced to accept some mode of determinism that undermines his free will defense. Hick's way out, as appealing as it first seems, is on analysis incoherent.

3. Hick suggests a reason why God cannot simply create morally virtuous creatures. Hick argues that God cannot simply create us perfectly virtuous from the beginning because such virtue is less valuable than a virtue that is hard-won through real life experience and overcoming temptations. A value-judgment underlies Hick's argument that God is justified in creating a less than perfectly virtuous human nature in us. This value judgment is cogently stated by Hick: "One who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptation, and thus by rightly making responsible decisions in concrete situations possesses a virtue more valuable than would be one created *ab initio* [from the beginning] in a state of moral innocence or virtue."²⁶

However, Hick's justification for creating a less than perfectly virtuous human nature is not consistent with the notion of God's perfect goodness which he seeks to defend. If tried moral virtue is somehow of

²⁵ Hick, *Evil* 380-81.

²⁶ *Id.* 255.

greater value than untried moral virtue (and we agree with Hick that it is), then mortals who progress in moral virtue by rightly making virtuous decisions in concrete situations and in the face of genuine temptation possess a virtue greater than the absolute God who possesses such virtue necessarily, and therefore without overcoming moral obstacles and temptations. Indeed, if F. R. Tennant is correct that our very notion of “good” has meaning only in the context of genuine temptation and trials, then calling God “good” is contradictory.²⁷ To maintain consistency, Hick either needs to concede that untried virtue can be as valuable as virtue tried in the crucible of human experience, or, as Joseph Smith suggested, that God underwent such a crucible as a means of attaining His virtue.

4. Hick’s free will defense also has a difficult time explaining the existence and sheer magnitude of natural evils that occur in our world. Hick suggests that God’s purposes of soul-making and bringing us to fellowship with God could not be accomplished in a hedonic paradise where we never confront genuine challenges that may overwhelm us. Instead, the world must be constructed in such a way that it can appear as if God does not exist to allow room for us to come to God in faith and by our choice. Further, the moral development of souls is best accomplished where there are genuine challenges that test our mettle in the fullest and give us opportunities to develop courage, compassion, tried virtue and so forth. Hick claims that the world must appear broadly as our world does. Moreover, whatever level of evil exists, there will always be a “worst type of evil” that seems unbearable and unacceptable.

We see two gaping holes in Hick’s explanation of natural evils. We grant that the world cannot be an hedonic paradise to function as a vale of soul-making. However, Hick appropriately admits that the sheer magnitude and often soul-destroying weight of natural evils in our world is the most difficult feature of our world to explain in terms of God’s perfect love. While some natural evils may be explained as instrumental

²⁷ Frederick R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* (London: Cambridge, 1933), 188-89.

in the development of moral courage and Christian compassion, just as often the human spirit is crushed and the character paralyzed under the excessive weight of natural evils. Hick attempts to justify the fact that soul-making cannot be viewed as completed in this life in terms of an eschatological bliss, where all pains will finally be recompensed in the after life.²⁸ Such a view may hold that God is finally generous but it does not exonerate God for failing to prevent devastating diseases and horrendous hunger throughout time. In addition, Hick's theodicy leaves unexplained the amazing disproportion between trials and temptations which leave some lives in relative peace and prosperity and others in pain and poverty, regardless of personal righteousness.

At least, it is obvious that certain diseases previously rampant in the world are not necessary to a vale of soul-making. For example, smallpox have been completely eradicated by our ingenuity (and perhaps by divine inspiration). It is easy to envision a world where diseases, mental illness and cancer never existed – and God could have created such a world on Hick's view because everything that exists is the result of divine fiat. Mental illness in particular is difficult to explain for Hick because it destroys rather than develops the character of those who suffer from it. Diseases like Alzheimer's, chemically induced schizophrenia and personality disorders seem to be contrary to God's plan for soul-making. It is true that these disorders may give opportunity for others to develop compassion; however, it seems unjust for God to use people as a mere means without their consent for the soul-building of others.²⁹

²⁸ Hick, *Evil* at 337-39.

²⁹ Eleonore Stump has argued that using others as a means to benefit others in a context where those so used cannot consent is itself a violation of perfect love. She holds that God's permission of evil is justified only if it benefits those who suffer, it is the best possible means in the circumstances for their benefit, and God knows that this is so. See, Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), 392-423; and "Providence and the Problem of Evil," in Thomas P. Flint (ed.), *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1990), 51-91.

Infant deaths are also difficult to explain if God created this as a world of soul-making. These little ones hardly get the chance to get started here. Hick in fact allows that there may be other lives in which persons continue to be tested and grow beyond this one. However, it seems that the pain experienced here by those who die in infancy is wasted and unredeemed. Such pain does not seem to be necessary to their further soul-making odyssey because they die before they can begin the process of character development here. Hick's theodicy is elitist. It provides that persons who fully possess cognitive faculties (at least those who are not crushed by the weight of the world's evils) can progress and fulfill the measure of their creation in the process of soul-making; but it leaves out of God's plan those who cannot begin such progression such as those who are mentally retarded, psychotic, or who die in infancy.

5. Both John Hick and Joseph Smith agree that ultimate purpose of creating this mortal world is to bring us to God's likeness through the crucible of its refining fire, for overcoming temptation and the experience of suffering can themselves perfect us.³⁰ We are works in progress with the final goal being deification of persons. Now it is well known that there is a tradition, especially strong in the Christian East, that persons shall be made divine. As Irenaeus himself stated: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."³¹ Irenaeus did not hesitate to say that the goal was that we may be gods: "we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods."³² The goal of deification is a very great good indeed, for there is no imaginable greater good. The tradition that it was possible to achieve such a goal was dominant

³⁰Madsen suggests that Christ endured suffering as a part of his growing process, "But Christ went through what he had to in order to generate in his own center self compassion for us." *The Highest in Us* (SLC: Bookcraft) p. 30.

³¹ *Adverses Haereses*, Bk. 5, Preface.

³² *Adverses Haereses* Bk. 4, 38,4.

in the early Church. As A. L. Williams explains:

What is human destiny? To become God. That, at least, was the belief of the earliest Christians. Such an understanding is evident in the letters of St. Paul (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:49; and 2 Cor. 8:) and the first Christians found it in the pages of the Hebrew Bible (Ps. 82:6, quoted in John 10:34). Above all, the nascent theological tradition pointed to 2 Peter 1:4: “Thus has he given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from destruction that is in the world because of him, and may become participants in divine nature.” As the tradition reflected on these texts, deification became the dominant model of salvation and sanctification in the patristic period, from Ignatius of Antioch to John Damascene, in the West (in the writings of Tertullian and Augustine) as well as in the East.³³

Yet neither Hick nor the earliest theologians of the tradition can consistently assert that we shall be as God is, or that we shall truly be gods. The problem is the doctrine of absolute creation from nothing. There is an infinite ontological gulf between God’s mode of existence and ours on such a view. God necessarily exists, He cannot *not* exist. However, persons are created and have merely contingent existence. Not even God on such a view can create us with the potential to be what He is, for not even God can create an uncreated being. Now Hick realizes this and asserts merely that we shall be a “finite likeness” of God. But what is a created “finite likeness” of the infinite Uncreated Creator? The very notion expresses a vast and infinite difference that can never be bridged. In the end, the notion that humans may be as God is must be seen as a conceptual contradiction for the tradition that maintains creation out of nothing. That of course is why so

³³ A. N. Williams, “Deification in the *Summa Theologiae*: A Structural Interpretation of the *Prima Pars*,” *The Thomist* 6/12 (1997), 219.

many in the tradition reject Joseph Smith's revelation that as God is, we may be.

D. Joseph Smith's Way Out.

Joseph Smith's way out of the logical problem of evil is to not go in by rejecting the fundamental premises that give rise to the problem in the first place, including prominently the premise of creation out of nothing. Truman Madsen describes Joseph Smith's view of God this way:

He is not the *total* cause of anything...God is forever surrounded by us, by co-eternal intelligences, and by the self-existent elements and principles of reality...In His relationship to us, "all things are possible" that are possible. But some things are impossible.³⁴

In contrast to the absolute creator of traditional theology, Joseph Smith affirmed that God is related to and hence conditioned by an eternal environment which, because it is not totally His creation, is not absolutely subject to divine fiat. The importance of this fundamental departure from traditional theology can hardly be overstated. The Prophet taught that God is a dynamic being involved in progression and process of time who intervenes to bring order out of chaos. God did not bring into being the ultimate constituents of the cosmos – neither its fundamental matter nor the space-time matrix which defines it. Hence, unlike the Necessary Being of classical theology who alone could not *not* exist and on which all else is contingent for existence, the God of Mormonism confronts realities which exist of metaphysical necessity independently of God's creative activity. Such realities include inherently self-directing selves (Joseph Smith called them "intelligences" or "pre-mortal spirits"), primordial elements (mass-energy), the law-like structures of reality, and eternal moral principles grounded in the intrinsic value of selves and the eternal requirements for their growth and fellowship in love and happiness. With respect to creation, Joseph stated:

You ask the learned doctors why they say the world was made out of nothing; and they will

³⁴*Eternal Man*, 56-57.

answer, “doesn’t the Bible say He created the world?” And they infer, from the word create, that it must have been out of nothing. Now the word create came from the [Hebrew] word *baurau* which does not mean to create out nothing; it means ... to organize the world out of chaos – chaotic matter Element had an existence from the time [God] had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.³⁵

Joseph Smith also taught that persons were not created. Thus, God did not survey all of the possible persons he could create and then pick and choose those which he wanted. He started with us as raw material! His task was not to create us out of nothing, but to provide a plan for our growth if we were willing to confront the risk inherent in such an undertaking. As Joseph Smith explained:

We say that God himself is a self-existent being ... [But] who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles The mind or intelligence which man possesses is co-equal [co-eternal] with God Himself....

The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding that he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because He was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have the privilege of advancing like Himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they may have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence which is requisite in order

³⁵ Joseph Smith, *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 350-52. The view that matter is eternal and that God created by organizing chaotic matter is also taught in the Book of Abraham ch. 3-4.

to save them in the world of spirits.³⁶

Indeed, these intelligences had freedom and will. Truman Madsen explains what this means in terms of God's ability to influence events in the universe:

Actually, as soon as it is recognized, as in modern revelation it is, that there is more than one eternal will in the universe—indeed, an infinity of such wills or autonomous intelligences—we have cut the thread that supposes God can “do anything.” In all important ways even He, the greatest of all, can only do with us what we will permit him to do. ^{FN}

Of critical importance in Joseph Smith's view is the realization that we were not thrust into this existence without our consent. Truman Madsen also spells out this aspect of Joseph's world view,

Again, you assume that God alone accounts for your being here...Instead, you and the child of your bosom counseled intimately with God the Father. Freely, fully, and with courage...you elected and prepared for this estate. The contrasts of the flesh, its risks, its terrific trials were known to you. ^{FN}

According to Joseph Smith, God had a plan to prepare for our growth by exercising free agency in the presence of genuine danger where we would not be coerced to choose God. There was no guarantee that we would return to God's fellowship and gain the goal of eternal life or God-like existence if we reject God in this life. Satan also had a plan to coerce all persons to choose God and take all of the risk out of mortality. We were given a concrete choice regarding whether to confront this existence with its inherent risk as a means to grow into God's likeness, or we could choose to not confront the risk and be “damned” or stopped in our progression toward incommensurate joy in the God-like existence of eternal life. All of us who confront the evils of this life chose to take on the experience by confronting genuine evils and temptations. However, we were also promised a Savior who could redeem us from our evil choices if we freely chose to enter into

³⁶ Id. at 352-354.

relationship with Him. (These points are discussed in Joseph Smith’s revelations found in D&C 29:35-43; Moses 4:1-4; 5:9-11 and Abraham 3:23-28).

Further, we agreed that it would be necessary for our awareness of the premortal life to be blocked from our conscious memory while in this life to allow us to live in an environment where we could come to God in faith. However, God has created a way to recognize, know and remember Him that will not interfere with our free agency and exercise of faith. According to Joseph Smith, God has made us so that our hearts remember and respond to Him at the level of feelings and stirrings in the soul. (D&C 8:2; 9:8) Thus, only those who have softened and perceptive hearts open to God’s loving overtures will be aware of His existence and constant presence. We can choose to shut Him out completely if we choose to harden our hearts. (Alma 12:9-13) Thus, remembering and entering into relationship with God are a function of our choosing to be open to His love rather than the presence of his magnificence and overwhelming glory.

God’s purposes for us in creating the world were to provide an environment in which we could learn by our experience to grow from grace to grace, enter into a loving relationship with God and gain the possibility of becoming as God is. Some of the laws were instituted by God to facilitate our growth. Elsewhere Joseph Smith taught that there are also “laws of eternal and self-existent principles”³⁷ – normative structures of some sort, we take it, that constitute things as they eternally are. What are some examples of such uncreated laws or principles? First, “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence or the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be. All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.” (D&C 93:29-30) We take this to mean that humans are eternal and inherently free to act for themselves independently of God, otherwise they could not exist. Second, we were not equal in intelligence, but our intelligence varies in an infinite

³⁷ Id. at 181.

gradation of intelligences and it has been eternally so without creation. (Abraham 3:18-21)

From these eternal principles we draw two conclusions. First, persons are eternally self-determining. If we were not free to act for ourselves, we would lose our essential identity as individuals, for it is through the exercise of our free agency that we express our uniqueness and individuality. Second, the level of our growth and intelligence is not a product of God's creative choice, but a primordial fact of the universe. We cannot complain that God did not make us more virtuous and intelligent, for such factors are essentially up to us in conjunctions with God's divine assistance.

Second, there are eternal principles which define the ways in which matter may be organized. While it is more or less clear that there would be only chaos without God's organizing power (See Abraham 4), it is less clear which laws are instituted by God and which are eternal. Nevertheless, we suggest that Joseph Smith contemplated that matter has inherent tendencies which are eternal and define the ways that matter can be organized. In other words, God could not create matter out of nothing, he could not create matter that is not in space-time; he could not create the laws which define how matter acts once it is organized along law-like principles. Rather, the natural tendencies of matter once organized are based on eternal principles. For example, there could be elements of oxygen and hydrogen which have been organized at the atomic level but are subject to further organization at the molecular level; however, not even God could organize an atom of oxygen and two atoms of hydrogen without the properties of water emerging from this organization. For example, if God organizes oxygen and hydrogen into a water molecule, it has a natural tendency to freeze at 32 degrees F. Because these natural tendencies of organized matter exist independently of God's creative fiat, the possibility of indiscriminate natural evils is necessary to any creation God could bring about. For example, if God creates water, the possibility that persons may drown is also present.

Third, Lehi made reference to what we believe are some further eternal principles in the enlightening

explanation of evil as recorded in 2 Nephi 2 of the Book of Mormon. (In fact, Lehi provides a rather complete theodicy in this chapter). According to Lehi, “Adam fell that man might be, and men are that they might have joy.” (2 Nephi 2:25). However, to attain this joy, Lehi taught³⁸,

it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so ..., righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, nor holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad....

And [so] to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parent ..., it must needs be that there was an opposition in all things; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter.

Wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other.

[If Adam and Eve had not fallen] they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery, doing no good, for they knew no sin. (2 Nephi 2:11, 15-16, 23)

According to Lehi, God’s purpose in creation was to provide a way for us to grow through experiencing opposition and thus to know joy. However, there are apparently states of affairs that even God, though almighty, cannot bring about. Even God could not bring us to joy without moral righteousness, moral righteousness without moral freedom, or moral freedom without an opposition in all things.³⁸ With moral freedom as an essential variable in the divine equation for our growth, two consequences stand out: (1) the possibility of genuine moral evil is inevitable; and (2) we need a Redeemer.

On Joseph Smith’s view the obtaining of a mortal body is a great good that allows us to grow toward

³⁸Madsen says that the law of opposition—the “have to suffer,” is eternal. See *The Meaning of Christ*, p.279-280.

God's likeness and to overcome those who seek to defeat us. If all that were accomplished in this life were to obtain a body, that in itself fulfills a primary purpose of mortality.³⁹ Joseph Smith stated:

The first step in the salvation of men is the laws of eternal and self-existent principles. Spirits are eternal. At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it. We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body.⁴⁰

Finally, this life is not all that there is. Indeed, this life is only a moment in comparison to the eternity for which we are here preparing. If there had been no Savior, all would have been lost and our suffering truly unredeemed and meaningless. However, because the Savior has overcome both spiritual and physical death, we can be brought back into God's presence and overcome death, (2 Nephi 9) All will enjoy that degree of joy and divine glory that they are willing to abide, with those willing to keep all of God's commandments granted the supreme joy of eternal fellowship with Him as gods and goddesses, (D&C 76:51-58; 88:20-32).

Given these considerations, it seems that we must modify the traditional definition of omnipotence in favor of a notion that fits better with these conditions. B. H. Roberts plausibly suggested that God's omnipotence be understood as the power to bring about any state of affairs consistent with the natures of

³⁹ Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 62, 19 January 1841, McIntire Minute Book. "Joseph said that before the foundation of the Earth in the Grand Counsel that the Spirits of all Men were subject to oppression & the express purpose of God in Giveing it a tabernicle was to arm it against the power of Darkness..." Spelling retained as in original.

⁴⁰ Id. at 60, 5 January 1841, Extracts from William Clayton's Private Book.

eternal existences.⁴¹ So understood, we can adopt an “instrumentalist” view of evils wherein pain, suffering, and opposition may become means of moral and spiritual development. God is omnipotent, but He cannot prevent evil without preventing the possibility of greater goods or ends – the value of which more than offsets the dis-value of the evil: soul-making, joy, eternal (godlike) life in a relationship of intimate unity with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Armed with Joseph Smith’s doctrine of entities co-eternal with God and our revised definition of omnipotence, let us consider again the logical problem of evil and Flew’s argument charging God with complicity in all of the world’s evils. From Joseph Smith’s theological platform, it does not follow that God is the total or even the ultimate explanation of all else. Thus, it is not an implication of his world view that God is an accessory before the fact to all of the world’s evils. Nor does it follow that God is responsible for every moral and non-moral defect that occurs in the world. Within the framework of eternal entities and structures that God did not create and that He cannot destroy, it seems to us that, “the [logical] problem of evil...and a host of traditional paradoxes dissolve.”⁴²

First, God is neither the total cause of existence nor of all events that occur. Free agents have a power of self-determination that cannot be caused by God consistently with their free will. They possess this power of free agency eternally. Thus, God does not and cannot control the free action of agents – at least not without obliterating their identity as individuals. Personal identity is such a great value that the evil to be perpetuated unless their agency were destroyed would have to be great indeed to justify such an action. Indeed, we doubt

⁴¹ B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy’s Course in Theology* vol. 2 (Dallas: S.K. Pub. Co., 1976), fourth year lesson, 12, 70. More technically, we can say that an agent A has maximal power (i.e., the greatest power coherently possible) at a time *t* if A is able to bring about any state of affairs SA such that: (a) SA does not entail that “A does not bring about SA at *t*”; and (b) SA is compossible with all events that precede *t* in time in the actual world up to *t*.

⁴² Truman Madsen, *Joseph Smith Among the Prophets* (SLC: Deseret Book 1965) p. 11.

that perfect love could ever sanction destruction of a person's identity by destroying that person's agency. Thus, the problem of an all-determining deity is avoided. Given Joseph Smith's view of eternally free intelligences and the gift of agency as a necessary condition to our growth to His likeness, the possibility of moral evils is a necessary feature of any world that could accomplish God's purposes for us.

Second, Joseph Smith's view is not plagued by genuinely evil events arising from the natural order such as diseases, earthquakes, cancer, etc. These events are features of any natural order that can exist as a cosmos rather than a chaos. God's choice was to have a chaotic state of affairs or an ordered state of affairs having the natural laws that actually obtain. Because only an ordered state of affairs can function as a vale of soul-making, the choice to create this world and the ordered cosmos is an expression of His love for us. We hasten to add that Joseph Smith's view of natural law arose out of the notion that all aspects of reality, including the most minute particles, exercise some degree of intelligent creativity of their own and respond to God in faith. Indeed, the ordering of the universe occurs because all elements "obey" God's word through their faithful response to Him.⁴³ Thus, God's power to bring about miracles is increased by a faithful response from the realities cooperating with Him in the process of this ongoing creation. God cannot work such miracles where faith is not present given these eternal principles. Further God is able in virtue of His divine knowledge to use eternal laws to overcome the effects of other natural laws. For example, it is possible to lift tons of steel into the air by virtue of a jet engine and air foil without revoking the law of gravity. In a similar manner, God utilizes His knowledge of eternal principles to work what appear to us to be miracles or violations of the natural order. Thus, because God has superior knowledge, he can utilize eternal principles to overcome the effects of some natural evils, the way that creating a vaccine for smallpox eradicated the

⁴³ *The Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 1, 22, state: "It was by faith that the worlds were framed – God spake, chaos heard, and worlds came into order by reason of the faith there was in Him."

disease.

Moreover, it is not necessary given Joseph Smith's ontology of persons to explain why God did not create better, more virtuous, or more morally sensitive creatures than us. God never had the option of creating just the persons He wanted from nothing. Rather, those persons who actually exist have always existed in their most essential form. His choice was to express His love for us by providing a way whereby we could experience consummate joy by become like Him in a relationship of intimate unity and love. To do that, it was necessary to pass through this mortal life with all of its attendant dangers.

Further, Joseph Smith's view does not have to explain how God can morally use some as means without their consent to teach others the lessons necessary to soul-making. It just may be that those who die in infancy needed to accomplish nothing more in mortality than the great good of obtaining a body that would allow them to further their progression in eternities beyond this life. Further, it just may be that those who suffer at the hands of others, or who experience only a short life in pain due to disease or birth-defects, consented before this world to the possibility of being subjected to such evils as a means to assist their brothers and sisters to learn the lessons in this life that would best serve them to progress toward the goal of godhood. For example, a child who dies in infancy from a birth-defect may have consented in the premortal life to undergo such an experience to gain a body and also to be a means whereby another could learn compassion, courage, faith and love. It just may be that those who die young do not need to learn further lessons in this life because they have progressed so far even in the premortal life. We don't pretend to know the actual course of such agreements and consents in the premortal life, but such a vision of our consent to God's plan for us in this life is consonant with Joseph Smith's teachings and revelations. In any event, no one can complain that they are a victim of God's having thrust them into this world without their consent. We chose this life because we wanted the possibilities that it offered us.

Finally, Joseph Smith does not make a value judgment about virtuous character for persons to which God is the chief exception. God also experienced a mortality in which He confronted genuine temptation and confronted real challenges. His virtue is not a virtue achieved by theological bootstrapping, but by a long process of demonstrating His faithfulness in concrete situations and that He is worthy of our trust to always keep his word. Further, Joseph Smith need not hedge on the glory of the good that can be achieved through human experience of evil. It is Joseph Smith alone who can consistently assert that it is God's purpose for us to come to His likeness to be as God is to realize the greatest good conceivable. The greatest good conceivable is to be united in a relationship of love and divine glory just as the Father and the Son are one. Yet only Joseph Smith's view allows that we may truly have a relationship of intimate unity and the fullest love because the Father has brought us to be His peers rather than His ontological inferiors.

Joseph Smith's view not merely dissolves the logical problem of evil, it also throws a bright light upon the experience of evil as we actually encounter it. We do not believe that we can, or that any theodicy has an obligation to, explain why God allows particular evils. However, there remain genuine evils, both moral and natural, which cannot be explained away and whose reality means that they are also real for God. In Mormon thought, God too is confronted by evil. God does not stand aloof; rather, he struggles endlessly against evil in a continuing course of luring us with His love and enhancing our capacities to feel joy in relationship with Him. God shares humanity's struggle, feels genuine sorrow for human failures, rejoices in human moral triumphs, and suffers when we suffer. God waits on our faith in Him to enable Him to accomplish more to eradicate evil. There is an earnestness in human experience because the possibility of genuine triumph entails also the possibility of genuine defeat. God really loses when humans choose evil over good. Yet the chance at victory makes mortality an option that justifies its harsh conditions; we freely chose to encounter it. We

are truly co-laborers together with God in the work of eradicating evil, for God has not created evil nor the physical conditions from which it inevitably arises, nor would he allow evil could He end it without thereby making the victory impossible. Truman Madsen concludes,

Thus, it is not a “decree” that stress and pain are part of growth and enlightenment. The universe and the selves within it simply operate that way. It is enough to know that God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, though not the source of tragedy, yet have the power to enable us to climb above it, into everlasting joy.

II. The Soteriological Problem of Evil

We believe that most discussions of the problem of evil have been too narrow and especially unfair to the Christian believer because the problem failed to take into account the strongest solution – the incarnation of God the Son in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his triumph over sin, suffering, and death through his atonement and resurrection. Ironically, the strongest solution to the problem of evil becomes itself another problem when it is cast in the traditional theology. How can this be?⁴⁴

There are two types of soteriological problems. The first type of soteriological problem of evil arises out of the New Testament teaching that salvation comes through and *only* through Christ. We call this the “exclusion problem.” The second problem we will call the “foreknowledge problem” and arises because God created persons knowing that they would be consigned to hell.

The exclusion problem arises because some are said to be excluded from salvation in such a way that

⁴⁴Madsen raises another kind of soteriological problem of evil in his works on B.H. Roberts: If God created all evil, then the Atonement of his Son is a drastic and cruel solution. But because of Joseph Smith’s teachings, specifically those explained above, there is rationale for the Atonement. The eternal law of justice requires it. See *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, p. 605.

seemingly makes God unfair to them. For instance, John reports Jesus as having claimed this very thing: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6) Similarly, Peter: “Neither is there salvation in any other name: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby they may be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Yet, without question, many have lived and died never hearing of Jesus Christ or having a fair chance to understand and accept His salvation.

Thomas Morris, professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, in his book *The Logic of God Incarnate*, calls the exclusion “a scandal” and explains it this way:

The scandal ... arises with a simple set of questions asked of the Christian theologian who claims that it is only through the life and death of God incarnated in Jesus Christ that all can be saved and reconciled to God: How can the many human beings who lived and died before the time of Christ be saved through him? They surely cannot be held accountable for responding appropriately to something of which they could not have knowledge. Furthermore, what about all the people who have lived since the time of Christ in cultures with different religious traditions, untouched by the Christian gospel? How can they be excluded fairly from a salvation not ever really available to them? How could a just God set up a particular condition of salvation, the highest end of human life possible, which was inaccessible to most people? Is not the love of God better understood as universal, rather than as limited to a mediation through the one particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth? Is it not a moral as well as a religious scandal to claim otherwise?⁴⁵

Claremont professor of philosophy Stephen Davis expresses a similar perplexity. In a recent issue of

⁴⁵ Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 174-75.

Modern Theology he put the problem this way:


Suppose there was a woman named Oohku who lived from 370-320 B.C. in the interior of Borneo. Obviously, she never heard of Jesus Christ or the Judeo-Christian God; she was never baptized, nor did she ever make any institutional or psychological commitment to Christ or to the Christian church. She couldn't have done these things; she was simply born in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Is it right for God to condemn this woman to eternal hell just because she was never able to come to God through Christ? Of course not ... God is just and loving.⁴⁶

The problem that Morris and Davis state can be expressed in terms of an inconsistent triad, a set of three premises – all of which are apparently true, yet the conjunction of any two of which seemingly entails the denial of the third:

1. God is perfectly loving and just and desires that all of His children be saved.
2. Salvation comes only in and through one's acceptance of Christ.
3. Millions of God's children have lived and died without ever hearing of Christ or having a chance to receive salvation through Him.

Premise 3 is indisputable, forcing us to give up either 1 or 2 - both of which seem clearly warranted on biblical authority. So how do we resolve the problem? One proposed answer is universalism, or the view that God will finally save all of his children. Universalists reject premise 2. On the other hand, exclusivists affirm premise 2, concluding that Oohku, and millions of others like her, must be lost. But this leaves them at a loss to square their view with premise 1 -- for they seemingly must deny that God is just and loving in the

⁴⁶ Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (January 1990), 176.

way he deals with His children. Neither view seems satisfactory for a Christian. 

However, Joseph Smith added another premise in his theology which renders the other three compatible:

4. Those who live and die without having had a chance to respond positively to the gospel of Jesus Christ will have that chance postmortemly.


Addition of this premise surely resolves the problem. Work for the dead is an expression of God's love for His children.

The foreknowledge problem is similar, but it focuses on God's complicity in creating agents he knows will be damned and languish in hell. Why didn't God create only those persons He could foresee would be blessed and not those whom he could see would be damned? The notion that God creates persons He knows will perpetrate great evils and suffer eternally for it is inconsistent with perfect love. A related problem is: Why didn't God foresee which of the damned would be moral monsters, perpetuating much more evil than good in this life, and refrain from creating them? The responses to these problems are similar to the exclusion problem. Some adopt universalism and deny that there are any persons who are damned – but universalism struggles to resolve the second version of the foreknowledge problem, for certainly there are persons who are moral monsters (Hitler comes to mind). Others admit that some persons are damned, but deny that hell is a place of eternal suffering and punishment. Indeed, perhaps the damned freely choose hell and would be unhappy in God's presence so it is a better result that they are placed in hell than in heaven. However, we are still left with the second version of the foreknowledge problem. God's creation of the devil with perfect knowledge that he would rebel and wreak havoc on this earth is simply inexplicable given traditional theology. We believe that the doctrine that perfect love creates out of nothing the embodiment of evil in the person of the devil points to a deep incoherence in the traditional theology. If God creates the devil knowing of his

rebellion and that he will enroll all that he can in the depth of horrendous evils, then God is ultimately responsible for these evils -- indeed He is the initial perpetrator of and accomplice in these evils. Stephen Davis responds to the question of why God didn't avoid creating those agents whom he foresaw would be moral monsters:

Again I must say here that I do not know. It is similar to ... particularly heinous events in world history: Christians need not feel that they can explain why God allowed them to occur. Ultimately it comes down to trust. Some people trust in God and some do not; the ones who do trust in God choose not to question him inordinately.⁴⁷

But surely this refusal to countenance honest questions is unacceptable. Davis says that we will just have to trust in God, but the view that God has created devils knowing that they will perpetrate all the evil in the world that they can certainly seems to be a breach of trust. To give the devil special powers to bring about natural events, as Plantinga countenances, is simply unwise and inexcusably negligent. After all, if I knew that a friend had knowingly recommended a child molester to watch my children, with awareness of tendencies that would lead to abuse, I would be entirely justified in distrusting my friend's judgment. Moreover, if my friend knew that the person he hired to watch my children had a plan to molest my child, then my friend would be culpable as an accomplice in the crime -- and he wouldn't be my friend! The view that God created Satan to tempt others to perpetrate evils on children leads to the same conclusion: God is an accomplice in Satan's evil.

 Traditional theology apparently has no answers to assist us to maintain both our intellectual integrity and trust in God who created a devil knowing beforehand of his plan to perpetrate unimaginable evils

⁴⁷ Stephen T. Davis, in *Encountering Evil*, 82.

throughout all time. It seems to be inconsistent for the traditional theologian to maintain that God creates any persons who bring about more evil than good, or who will be unredeemed. Perhaps the traditional theologian could respond that after this life, the persons who have perpetuated so much evil will repent and bring about goods that outweigh the evils they have perpetuated. Yet such a view of personal growth and repentance after this life is at odds with the traditional view that persons are “damned” and consigned to hell, whatever it is like, after death. Only a view that sees humans as continually progressing toward God’s likeness even after this life can offer such a response.

Of course, Joseph Smith significantly mitigated the foreknowledge problem by rejecting the crucial assumption that God created persons of His own choosing out of nothing. For Joseph Smith, God started with us as actual intelligences having a definite personal identity prior to any creative activity on His part. Thus, the opportunity to experience this world, with all of its trials and evils, its blessings and beauties, is an expression not only that we trusted God, but God also trusted us. Moreover, on Joseph Smith’s view there is no need to answer the embarrassing question as to why God created the devil knowing beforehand all of the vile evils he would perpetrate. Lucifer is as eternal as the other intelligences and inherently free to rebel if he so chooses. However, Joseph Smith’s revelations suggest that God uses even Lucifer’s rebellion as a means to move his plan forward by providing an opposition in all things. That is how God deals with genuine evil: He prepares a way that it can be healed and turned to good within the scope of His plan on the condition that we will cooperate with Him in the enterprise. Because Lucifer only has whatever power mortals freely give him, Lucifer’s evil is merely an extension of human evil. Moreover, God has armed us against those who seek our destruction, such as Lucifer, by giving us the opportunity to obtain a body that can be glorified.

III. The Existential Problem of Evil

Truman Madsen suggested that in terms of evil, “The problem you and I face is not simply the problem of exonerating God, but of coping with actual evils.”⁴⁸ The existential problem of evil arises because the evils in the world challenge our ability to trust God. The challenge arises from a simple fact: the world can appear as if it were not made by a loving Father but by blind chance or a wicked, malevolent being. The depth of the problem was stated perhaps most forcefully by Dostoyevsky in his *The Brothers Karamozov*. The fictional character Ivan Karamozov sets the problem in bold relief:

This poor five-year-old girl was subjected to every possible torture by those educated parents. They beat her, birched her, kicked her, without themselves knowing why, till her body was covered with bruises; at last they reached the height of refinement: they shut her up all night, in the cold and frost, in the privy they smeared her face with excrement and made her eat it, and it was her mother, her mother who made her! And that mother could sleep at night, hearing the groans of the poor child locked up in that vile place ... I’m not talking about the sufferings of grown-up people, for they have eaten the apple and to hell with them⁴⁹

In light of such horrendous evils, Ivan then tempts his brother Alyosha with this piercing question: Imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture only one tiny creature, the little girl ... would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?⁵⁰

⁴⁸*The Problem of Evil*.

⁴⁹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, trans. David Magarshack (England: Penguin, 1982), 283.

⁵⁰*Id.* At 287..

Ivan rebels. He cannot accept any way of reconciling such innocent suffering with a theory of “higher harmony.” He rejects the idea that the ends justifies the means – especially for a being who has absolute control not only over the purposes to be achieved, but the infinite array of means to achieve them. In the end, the means appear to Ivan to be wholly unjust and immoral regardless of the glory at the end. Ivan’s protest is based on the simple fact that he cannot understand how there could possibly be any morally sufficient reason for permitting such evils. His rebellion is not necessarily a rejection of God’s existence, but of God’s goodness. His outrage is that his trust has been breached by what others say is a God of love. His point is not that God does not exist, but a cry in the dark: “How can I trust God if he allows the most unthinkable evils to destroy innocents like the little girl?”⁵¹

We believe that Joseph Smith has a valuable contribution to make to responding to the existential problem of evil – the challenge of living trustingly and faithfully in the face of what personally seems to be overwhelming evil.⁵² Joseph left us much by the way of revelation that speaks to *this* problem of evil, but perhaps his own life speaks more powerfully than words.⁵³

In 1831 Joseph Smith resided in Hiram, Ohio at the John Johnson farm. Emma had lost a child in child-birth. In part to salve the pain of the loss, Joseph took in twin babies, Julia and Joseph, who were born to a church member whose wife had died in child-birth in Kirtland. On the evening of 24 March 1831, the

⁵¹ See, Brian K. Cameron, “A Critique of Marilyn McCord Adams’ ‘Christian Solution’ to the Existential Problem of Evil,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 73:3 (1999), 419-23.

⁵²In a hypothetical dialogue between Joseph Smith and a mother of an infant born blind and paralyzed, Truman Madsen paints a dramatic picture of Joseph’s response to the existential problem of evil. See *Eternal Man*, 53-61.

⁵³ Madsen writes that Joseph Smith “. . .said adversity had become second nature, but had only ‘wafted me much closer to Deity.’” *Joseph Smith Among the Prophets*, pp. 21-22.

twins were infected with measles and Emma took Julia, while Joseph fell asleep on a trundle-bed just inside the door of the farmhouse with baby Joseph. While Joseph slept, a mob broke down the door to the house. The men beat and choked Joseph Smith until he lost consciousness and ^eth^ry dragged him and Sidney Rigdon to a nearby field where they were beaten and tarred and feathered. The pain of the beating was severe; the pain of removing the tar was excruciating. The morning following the assault, though he was exhausted and still in pain from being up all night after the beating, he preached a sermon at the John Johnson farm to a crowd which included many of those who had beaten him the night before. He baptized three people that day. However, baby Joseph had been exposed to the cold of winter, and the baby boy died within a few days as a result. Four of Joseph Smith's 11 children, including twins son, died at birth, and a fifth died at 14 months. In the face of such overwhelming loss, the Prophet taught: "All of your losses will be made up to you in the resurrection provided that you continue faithful. By the vision of the Almighty I have seen it."⁵⁴

Joseph's assurance was not a matter of speculation and argument but of prophetic vision. He knew that in the resurrection those who have lost children will have the opportunity to raise them -- that is how the loss will be fully made up.⁵⁵ Further, little children who die in infancy are assured exaltation. (D&C 137:10) Their death is not an ultimate loss, for there is the assurance that God in his perfect love has provided a way to overcome the loss. Their exaltation in great joy with the Father of us all is guaranteed. These are words of comfort and love indeed.

Joseph Smith's view of God's plan of salvation for us is also a source of trust in God's perfect love.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 296.

⁵⁵ *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 347, 354.

⁵⁶ Truman Madsen speaks to this point extensively in the chapter of *The Radiant Life* titled, "Human Anguish and Divine Love."

The knowledge that we consented to confront life's challenges as an opportunity to obtain the crown of eternal life in endless fellowship with God removes a sense of betrayal when life presents challenges that appear to be overwhelming. If the challenges were not real, the victory could not be won. Rather than Ivan's question, Joseph Smith envisioned a God who asked us something like William James's famous proposition in his *Pragmatism*:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does his own 'level best.' I offer the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?"⁵⁷

Thus, our willingness to take on the challenge of mortal life was the ultimate expression of trust – trust in God, trust in others who would face the challenges with us, and trust in ourselves to see it through. The question we face is whether we will keep the trust and win the victory.

Perhaps another experience from the Prophet's life will illustrate the depth of grasp of the meaning of evil in human experience. Even Joseph, who walked so closely to God, on occasion in his life experienced the troubling sense of God's absence when he begged Him to be there. In the dark days of 1838, a vast number of Mormon families had been burned out of their homes by mobs. Fathers were tied to trees and bullwhipped. Thirty-four people, including women and children, had been massacred at a settlement known as Haun's Mill. Shortly thereafter, the Mormon settlement at Far West, Missouri, was besieged and sacked

⁵⁷ William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1946), 290-91.

by state militia. Soldiers raped some of the women so many times that they died from the torture. Joseph Smith was betrayed by a friend and turned over to “military” mobsters to be killed. He was taken to a small dungeon called, in perhaps the worst abuse of nomenclature in American history, “Liberty Jail.” During their four months of imprisonment, Joseph and his companions were abused, beaten, fed human flesh, poisoned and left in unspeakably filthy conditions where the stench of human waste was ever present.

Joseph Smith agonized over the tales of abuse of his beloved family and friends who had been pillaged and turned out in the cold of winter. Joseph felt abandoned by God. The world was upside down – the Saints were homeless and destitute while the mobs enjoyed the spoils. In a prayer Joseph questioned from the depths of his soul:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea they pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? (D&C 121:1-2)

In response to this prayer of the souls utmost desperation, God heard and spoke:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high...

... Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.

The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he? (D&C 121:7-8; 122:7-8)

Confronted with what seemed to be overwhelming evil, Joseph found meaning in his suffering, maintained hope, trusted God, and kept the faith. And God spoke peace. Truman Madsen summed up Joseph Smith’s triumphant message:

The mortal experience will enable us to fly if we will let it, help it, use it with faith in the Christ who ‘descended below all’.... There is meaning in all that we suffer; that ‘all these things’ can be for our good, however empty and barren they now appear. The elements of truth in the classical theories have been caught up into a greater whole. The Lord is not playing games with us. The outcome will far exceed the price; the ‘chastening’ will be visioned as our blessing, the fiber of our souls-quality will leave no regrets, only an infinite and eternal gratitude, and the partnership forged with Him before we entered into this refining fire will loom as marvelous to us as it does the face of a loving mother in the eyes of the child who has just emerged from a fever ... healed, alive, and prepared for life, eternal life, life like God’s.⁵⁸

The bottom line for Joseph is that the God we worship participates in our struggles, suffers when we suffer, fails in our failures and rejoices in our triumphs. We cannot complain that God doesn’t know, doesn’t understand, has never been there, for both the Father and Son joined us in the mud and blood of human experience. God is our fellow laborer, for He has not created the agents of evil, He did not contrive the natural world to overwhelm us with crushing evils, nor would He allow genuine evils if He could simply eliminate them by divine fiat. The ultimate purpose in human life is revealed through the experience of moral struggle and the instances of suffering we are challenged to respond to in love. As Madsen said regarding Joseph Smith, “The blows, the searing trials that fell repeatedly on his mind, spirit, and body came trip-hammer hard. Yet his life, thoroughly documented by friend and enemy, shows that the sevenfold furnace need not destroy man. It may ennoble him and perfect him.”⁵⁹ We could have remained in a world where such challenges were not presented, but we chose life because through it we can come to the incomparable joy of fellowship in

⁵⁸ *The Radiant Life*, 68.

⁵⁹ *Joseph Smith Among the Prophets*, p. 23.

eternal life with our God, and thereby to grow in His likeness.