

# KIERKEGAARD, HOUGH, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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*Abstract:* This essay responds to ideas in a later portion of Sheridan Hough's book, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector*. It reviews the difficulty of discerning Kierkegaard's position on the theological problem of evil in its traditional forms. As a way into this tangle, I focus on the theme of "good and perfect gifts" that Hough develops. I then review several approaches to theodicy that respond to the existential aspect of the problem of evil, looking for resonances with Kierkegaard's themes. This analysis rules out simple "soul-making" approaches and any theodicy that implies a divine fine-tailoring of evils that human beings and animals experience. Instead, I conclude that a Kierkegaardian approach that takes the existential problem seriously should focus on free will and what is nomologically possible in a law-governed universe.

*Keywords:* Good and Perfect Gifts, existential suffering, soul-making, open theism, horrendous evils, theodicy

## 1. Introduction: James' Paradoxical Dictum

This essay takes its start from a particularly poignant section of Sheridan Hough's many searching reflections in *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector*. In her "Postlude," Hough (LTC)<sup>1</sup> draws a tentative link with one vital but underappreciated aspect of what I generically call "the theological problem of evil." Hough's four-stage analysis of Kierkegaard's vision takes as a leading clue his reflections on the apostle James' dictum that "every good and perfect gift is from above."<sup>2</sup> As she notes, this motif runs throughout Kierkegaard's work from his early upbuilding discourses<sup>3</sup> to his late

<sup>1</sup> Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Hough actually attributes her work to an authorial persona abbreviated LTC. However, for convenience, with apologies to Hough as "editor," I will usually ignore this complication.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> SKS 5, 129–158 / EUD, 125–158.

*Christian Discourses* and last writings.<sup>4</sup> But as Sheridan’s book beautifully shows, James’ dictum has several layers of meaning for Kierkegaard—appearing within the transition from aesthetic attitudes to an ethical life view, again in infinite resignation, and finally in a faith that affirms a basic equality of all persons. In particular, Christianity involves faith that every person, no matter how they may interact with us or view our debts to them, is the gift of an opportunity to love.<sup>5</sup>

Yet this teaching, as Hough says, is far more difficult and “alarming” than it first appears. As the faithful tax collector of *Fear and Trembling* shows, at the religious level, its meaning for Kierkegaard includes the idea that literally any contingent outcome of our efforts and hopes can be received as God’s gift, in which even the bitterest disappointments and wrongs suffered are transformed into goods when we take them to God in faith.<sup>6</sup> Said in a lightminded way without the enigma that Kierkegaard recognizes in it, this paradoxical dictum could be reduced to the naïve aesthetic view that an income and similar embodied needs will “all work out with God’s help”.<sup>7</sup> Or James’ dictum could seem extraordinarily cruel, making it sound as if none of our earthly loves, efforts, or losses matter at all. This could mislead readers to imagine that Kierkegaard is endorsing the very quietism that Pelagius devised his doctrine of free will to resist.<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, as Hough effectively emphasizes, James’ teaching must often leave intact our fallible judgment that someone’s action was wrong in harming us or others.<sup>9</sup> The potentially edifying significance of James’ saying can only emerge as a modification and transformation of our efforts to reason objectively about states of our world,<sup>10</sup> our ethical judgments, and our efforts to bring about finite goods to the extent that we are able.<sup>11</sup> “The faithful sufferer” does not deny her grievous condition, but “takes’ it to

<sup>4</sup> Another convincing argument for the crucial role of the James giftedness theme is developed by Craig Hefner in his *Kierkegaard and the Changelessness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> SKS 5, 152–158 / EUD, 152–158.

<sup>6</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> SKS 22, 32, NB11:47 / KJN 6, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes Kierkegaard’s late Christian reflections on the “lilies of the field and birds of the air” are misread in just this fashion, as a recipe for quietism.

<sup>9</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

God.”<sup>12</sup> At the highest level, this includes rejecting options that amount to vengeance, even if at the ethical level within our ordinary lifeworlds, social systems must enforce demands for criminal punishment or restitution. Without such ethical work to resist and repair human evils and natural misfortunes, the transformation wrought by faith in the face even of terrible harms would lack its starting point.<sup>13</sup> Without moral care, the motif of everything being a “perfect gift” loses its authentic mystery and is misunderstood as merely going-with-the-flow like superficial aesthetes who are “carried along on the wave of the present.”<sup>14</sup>

This means that the picture of the joyful tax collector that so moves Hough and others<sup>15</sup> must be incomplete in one respect: it shows us certain aesthetic details—he gets his wonderful stew or does not, he gets his beloved or loses her—and their transformation by embracing the apparent absurdity of faith,<sup>16</sup> but it hides the middle movement of ethical life that must always be there to leaven these two.<sup>17</sup> At that level, the tax collector is pursuing the particular purposes of his trade and adjusting his tactics according to the finite evidence relevant for everyday beliefs and actions. And, so that he is not an aesthete, the tax collector must have some inward commitment—which Silentio does not describe—to important human goods that he finds in his social roles as a husband, fair assessor for government revenue, daily observer of his home city, and perhaps more. Likewise, Hough suggests that the joy of Silentio’s tax collector must have *aufgehoben* within it the penitent ethical movement of the Gospels’ tax collector, who exemplifies authentic humility according to one of Kierkegaard’s Friday Communion discourses.<sup>18</sup>

*All of this is what the joyful tax collector suspends by virtue of the absurd, in hope for the seemingly impossible through which concrete earthly fulfilment of his ideal is*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 123; compare SKS 5, 51 / EUD, 43.

<sup>13</sup> See SKS 7, 428 / CUP1, 471–472.

<sup>14</sup> SKS 5, 42 / EUD, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Mooney’s work has also often referred to the crucial importance of this figure in Kierkegaard’s cast of characters. Hough’s story to some extent vindicates parts of Mooney’s great enthusiasm for the tax collector.

<sup>16</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> On this idea that several of Kierkegaard’s key motifs, including “good and perfects gifts,” have three interconnected layers of meaning, see John J. Davenport, “Kierkegaard on ‘Sobriety:’ Christian Virtues, the Ethical, and Triadic Dyads,” *Religions* 14 (2023): pp. 1–22.

<sup>18</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 115; see SKS 11, 167–168 / WA, 132.

now realized. He accepts everything as an unmerited gift that his efforts alone, or even a lot of combined human efforts, could never have guaranteed or made certain. While gratitude and sorrow are each sometimes appropriate earthly ethical attitudes towards new events and outcomes, the knight of faith's higher joy underlies and embraces such particular responses: it expresses firm trust that God always knows what is most needful for us, even when we traverse a vale of shadows. As Craig Hefner recently argued, the real object of the perfect gift is always "Godself," which never varies.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, as Hough recognizes, it seems that Kierkegaard at least obliquely addresses the theological problem of evil, which is the topic of her haunting Postlude. There are few accounts of Kierkegaardian themes more humanly necessary or more existentially important than this. One needs only to think of Syria, where the world let genocide prevail yet again, as in Darfur and Rwanda and many other places, thereby denigrating the millions of named and nameless appeals that past victims have left to us.

But Hough's topic is not the problem of evil understood as an intellectual puzzle (as it is commonly taught in philosophy). Rather, her focus concerns how human persons can respond to horrendous evils and the sense of divine abandonment that especially seems to go with them.<sup>20</sup> This theme has recently been explored in an insightful dissertation by Angela Sager titled *The Existential Problem of Evil*. In what follows, I will draw on Sager's claim that there is a practical threat of despair that arises from the "second-order suffering" involved in doubting that there can be ultimate meaning in the face of overwhelming first-order pains and familiar forms of emotional agony.<sup>21</sup> Among other things, I will suggest that this personal problem of evil, which Hough so keenly recognizes, always lies just out of view behind some of Kierkegaard's major themes. But there is good reason for him to address it in the oblique way that Hough indicates.

## 2. Kierkegaard and the Existential Problem

To understand why Kierkegaard is inexplicit about the problem of evil will itself require an indirect route, by exploring possible comparisons and contrasts with a few recent

<sup>19</sup> Hefner, *Kierkegaard and the Changelessness of God*, pp. 120–123.

<sup>20</sup> SKS 11, 256–257 / WA, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Angela Sager, "The Existential Problem of Evil: Theodicy, Theosis, and the Threat of Meaninglessness" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2021), ProQuest (28496133).

philosophical efforts to address its existential dimension. This requires caution because, as far as I know, there is little scholarly discussion of Kierkegaard and the problem of evil (at least in English).<sup>22</sup> That is not surprising, given that in his published books, Kierkegaard seems not to directly confront the metaphysical and moral issues that Leibniz (for example) meant to resolve in his *Theodicy*—although Kierkegaard knew this text and probably also Gotthold Lessing’s endorsement of Goethe’s defiant humanist rejoinder in his “Prometheus” (along with the related Pantheism Controversy).<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard does not describe natural and moral evil as a challenge to faith that is distinct from the “offense” to reason posed by the demands of faith as a second movement built upon infinite resignation.<sup>24</sup> This may be partly because Kierkegaard had a personal affinity with the sort of view that Eleonore Stump finds in Gregory the Great’s commentary on Job, namely that the person living according to the revealed Word about the Kingdom to come will be more inclined to fear prosperity and good fortune in this world as a temptation, rather than being thrown into doubt by terrible evils.<sup>25</sup>

To that extent, it seems that Kierkegaard might agree with Terrence Tilley’s view that “the evils of theodicy” are a disease of the Enlightenment, which sought rational defenses of a more Platonic form of theism without Christology or the richness of

<sup>22</sup> There is one article in Polish which argues that Kierkegaard thought that divine hiddenness was necessary and denied that a direct experience of God’s presence in one’s consciousness is vital to faith: see Marek Dobrzeński, “Kierkegaard wobec problemu ukrycia Boga / Kierkegaard and the Divine Hiddenness Problem,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 67 (2018): pp. 65–82.

<sup>23</sup> See Susan Neiman’s rich account in *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 57–59.

<sup>24</sup> There is an entry on Evil in *Kierkegaard’s Concepts: Tome III* within the series *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, ed. Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2013), and evil is referenced in many works on *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. But the problem of evil as a challenge to faith rarely receives explicit discussion because Kierkegaard focuses instead on the difficulties of recognizing sin and accepting the Incarnation. The challenge posed by suffering is sublimated within the difficulty in accepting scorn and vilification as the price of rejecting worldly values. Thus he is more interested in Lessing’s sincere rejection of the Resurrection as a basis for eternal happiness (SKS 7, 104 / CUP1, 107; SKS 7, 112 / CUP1, 116n) than in Lessing’s response to finite earthly unhappiness.

<sup>25</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 15. This work includes Stump’s own truly insightful account of everything becoming a gift within our “second-personal connection to God” (pp. 443–450). Compare SKS 10, 163 / CD, 155 on worldly prosperity moving one farthest from the true goal.

religious experiences.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Kierkegaard might say that the existential problem cuts to the core for contemporary people because we are children of Francis Bacon, who have found much more to value in ordinary life and society than our medieval ancestors could, or that the Buddha could in a world that he perceived as *samsara*. Moreover, as Tilley argues, our baseline assumptions already include less conviction that a perfect personal creator exists even before we consider the problem of evil: this shifts the burden of proof so that evils more easily seem to imply God's non-existence, and theoretical defenses of God's goodness seem more urgent.

Thus it is tempting to say that Kierkegaard would simply dismiss the contemporary "logical" and "evidential" problems of evil as false problems that result from trying to approach religion through metaphysical speculation—just as (it is often alleged) Kierkegaard would regard perfect being theology and proofs of God's existence as false starts. After all, he wrote that "to think through doubt" as a theodist might "is a delusion."<sup>27</sup> He also said that reflectively doubting everything and developing systemic answers to doubt became a professional role that undermined faith—much as pursuit of historical evidence did—by disengaging people from the ethico-religious work in which faith is realized.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in an essay on Augustine's free will theodicy, Clare Carlisle reports that "Kierkegaard had little interest in solving the metaphysical problem of evil: he focused on the human condition and the existential task of Christian faith," although he liked Augustine's ideas on negativity and freedom.<sup>29</sup>

This is probably what most Kierkegaard scholars would say if they wondered why he does not refer explicitly to the problem of evil in the terms familiar to us today. Yet that might be too quick: after all, as some commentators have noted, there are ontological portions of the *Fragments* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, and the absolute paradox seems to

<sup>26</sup> Terence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), pp. 221–224. I do not agree with Tilley's claim that medieval and ancient Christian apologists saw the challenges that evils of various kinds pose to faith *very* differently than the moderns. While their perceived burdens of proof, audiences, and framing contexts were unlike ours in important ways, Augustine and Aquinas (like some medieval Islamic thinkers) recognized something close to the need for theodicy.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 8, 370 / UDVS, 274.

<sup>28</sup> SKS 13, 90–91 / FSE, 69–70.

<sup>29</sup> Clare Carlisle, "Evil Part 3: Does Freedom Make us Evil?" *The Guardian* (Oct. 29, 2012): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/29/does-freedom-make-us-evil>. This is one essay in an eight-part series on evil, one of Carlisle's many remarkable pieces of public service in making philosophical themes accessible to wide audiences.

have a metaphysical side. It is also a mistake to imagine that Kierkegaard did not “see” that great evils can cause even faithful people to experience excruciating doubt, or that he dismissed all such doubts as *merely* a disease of modernity. For that, he was too influenced by Kant’s ideas that a good will needs practical religious “postulates,” as well as objective uncertainty about God—and too aware of how deeply ancient Christians like Augustine felt the existence of evils to be an important challenge to their faith.<sup>30</sup> He introduces the theme of good and perfect gifts with a prayer recognizing that it sometimes seems like God closes God’s generous hand,<sup>31</sup> and he mentions a person whose earnest sorrows lead to infinite resignation.<sup>32</sup> In addition, his harshest comments on doubt mostly concern its speculative rather than personally engaged forms.

Of course, philosophical reasoning about these issues cannot by itself bring a person to faith as a lived existential stance engaging the whole person in a way that risks oneself infinitely. But that is consistent with a believer who strives daily for subjective appropriation of a religious promise around which she orients her life, still being led through that engaged attitude to ontological doubts that have very painful practical imports.<sup>33</sup> Even if her doubts have no adequate solution accessible to natural reason in Kierkegaard’s view, her ontological fears can stymie her practical self-formation in ways that are not mere flights of rationalist escapism or weak excuses for failure to trust in God. Call these earnest or wholehearted doubts.

We seem to enter this category, as Thomas Tracy suggests, when we consider cases like Ivan Karamazov’s children whose intense suffering seems never to provide them any proportionate benefits: at best, it looks like they are sacrificed to the larger aims of a utilitarian creator.<sup>34</sup> Although philosophers focus on whether there is a combination of credible metaphysical and ethical theses that would divert blame for such cases away from God, experiences of enormous natural and moral evils can motivate a doubt that is

<sup>30</sup> See Neiman’s explanation of the problem of evil (and the misalignment of happiness and virtue) as central to Kant’s thought: *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 61–67. Kant’s view that “we must believe that all our efforts to be virtuous will be completed” by God in nature in ways we cannot comprehend (p. 66) is not so far from James’ dictum as Hough and I are interpreting it.

<sup>31</sup> SKS 5, 41 / EUD, 31; compare SKS 13, 328 / M, 269.

<sup>32</sup> SKS 5, 43–44 / EUD, 35–36.

<sup>33</sup> Thus MacIntyre pointed out in *After Virtue* that a personal interest in metaphysical questions can grow out of their relevance to practical aspects of one’s existence.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Tracy, “Victimization and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Ivan Karamazov,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 no. 3 (1992): pp. 304–306.

completely existential—a fear, personally appropriated in inwardness, that we are abandoned in a universe without any ultimate significance, or even that we are betrayed by a God who is not Love.<sup>35</sup> What Sager and Tilley call the “existential” problem of evil—“the supplication of a Job or a Jeremiah, overwhelmed by unbearable trials”—is connected, in ways that are hard to spell out, with the more familiar logical and evidential problems.<sup>36</sup>

Because of that connection, the existential problem operates at another level than what has been called the “pastoral” or psychological problem of evil. In the words of Dan Speak, that is the problem of “how to live with it: how to survive it and even counteract it [evil], in our own lives and in the world generally.”<sup>37</sup> This pragmatic problem is continuous with ethical questions about how to prevent and respond to evils of multiple kinds, and such therapeutic questions as how to move past trauma and PTSD. Yet that description from Speak was motivated by a meeting with an excellent student who wanted to know if the philosophical theodicies and defenses could reconcile God’s goodness with the heinous experiences she went through as her father was slowly dying of ALS. Such a student might simply have been hoping for some technique or cognitive therapy, a way of framing the experience that would help her process it and deal with (probably unwarranted) survivor guilt. But it might instead have been something more subtle than the “pastoral” designation indicates. In addition to all of the first-order suffering that her father and the student herself underwent, she was also shaken by doubting God’s existence or goodness—a kind of higher-order suffering or complex neg-value that may dwarf any alleged “complex goods” realized in responding well enough to the many first-order evils in this situation. In short, perhaps she hoped that a theodicy might console her spiritual wound.

We cannot, then, reply that theoretical responses to the logical and evidential problems are not designed to play this role: the existential problem of evil requires them to be capable of inspiring personal consolation. Otherwise they are not adequate *even as*

<sup>35</sup> Compare SKS 8, 367–368 / UDVS, 270.

<sup>36</sup> See Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p. 229, quoting Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1963), p. 60. The deeper link between the pastoral and theoretical aspects is evident, I think, in a recent essay by Jerome Gellman critiquing skeptical defenses against the evidential problem of evil: see Jerome Gellman, “On a New Logical Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 32 no. 4 (2015): pp. 439–452.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Speak, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Polity Press, 2015), p. 16.

*theoretical contributions*. David Ray Griffin put this well in his process theodicy: “the theoretical side of the problem of evil is a significant aspect of the existential problem to be met.”<sup>38</sup> This connection between ontological theory and personal formation through commitment and inward conviction is evident in the phenomenology of responses to great evils by both believers and nonbelievers in a personal God. Theodicy is originally motivated by heartbreak and horror, by infinite personal need for sound grounds to believe that God has good reasons for creating a world with such evils, and can overcome them. Bad theodicy can destroy faith. Anyone who thinks otherwise I invite to watch Will Smith in the film *Collateral Beauty*, which portrays a father shattered by the suffering and death of his young daughter.<sup>39</sup> Even when no theodicy up to this task can be offered, an authentic response must affirm the need for it by tracing out the empty space where such an existential theodicy would go.

One scholar who ties Kierkegaard’s thought directly to this existential problem is Martin Matušík, who argues that the need for a new kind of radical hope becomes urgent in the face of diabolical evils for the sake of pure cruelty that Kant refused to see.<sup>40</sup> Matušík finds an anti-religious exceptionalism in transcendent forms of cruelty that exceed ordinary ethical evaluation—in agreement with Kierkegaard’s descriptions of defiant despair. But Matušík also distances his project from traditional theodicy and looks for a kind of indirect answer in agapic love.<sup>41</sup> Tellingly, though, his poetic and subtle account never gets free of the unmet need for some way to understand God’s relation to the whole range of evils (including the diabolical). Similarly, while he seemed to ignore theodicy, Kierkegaard’s unpublished essay on doubt, titled *Johannes*

<sup>38</sup> David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 16. Tilley effectively criticizes Griffin’s theodicy as inadequate for this existential task, but he cannot deny that it needs theoretical inputs: see Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, p. 230. Notably, Griffin’s preface to the 2004 edition of his book now agrees with Adams that “a fully satisfactory theodicy requires an eschatology” that promises a kind of “ultimate victory of good over evil” (Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004], p. 10).

<sup>39</sup> *Collateral Beauty*, dir. David Frankel (New Line Cinema, 2016). Thus I am inclined to respond to Tilley both that (a) the burden of proof shifted onto theists not only because of science’s implicit naturalism but also because of earlier doubts arising due to experiences of horror; and (b) this burden that he traces to Enlightenment *sources* supports David Griffin’s claim that the existential problem now makes theoretical confusions about God’s relation to evils more personally urgent.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Matušík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 5–9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 243, and 263–264.

*Climacus*, introduces an existential version of Pascal's Wager, arguing that in an epistemically ambiguous life-situation, it is worth the risk of being deceived in order not to miss out on the chance of being correct about the divine. While commentators have made connections with Reformed Epistemology, this argument is linked with his theme in *Works of Love* and several discourses that faith is never deceived. Kierkegaard recognizes the existential problem of evil even more clearly when writing on James' motif.

In his first discourse on Good and Perfect Gifts, Kierkegaard imagines a person overcome with anger at God for his sufferings<sup>42</sup>—anticipating the later description of demonic rebellion that wants to spite God for some personal cross, as described in *The Sickness Unto Death*.<sup>43</sup> It is only a short step from this to Ivan Karamazov's almost infinite fury with God on behalf of the innocents who have experienced heinous cruelties in this world. It is plausible that an ethical life-view could bring a person to an Ivan-like point of denouncing God, if that is what it takes to stand fully with the victims. And yet Kierkegaard does not directly address this looming personal obstacle to faith, even though he candidly recognizes horrors which seem to show that "humanly speaking," we cannot absolutely rely on anyone, "even God in heaven."<sup>44</sup> That is, no human calculation or way of invoking God can shield us.

However, I will explore the possibility that, even while seeming to demand a faith that dispenses with theodicy, Kierkegaard's indirect approach indicates a way towards addressing the existential problem of evil on its own level. To see this requires considering a few strengths and weaknesses of recent proposals, each of which seems to resonate with some Kierkegaardian themes.

### 3. Kierkegaard and "Soul-Making"?

Here are four closely related and problematic positions to which someone might mistakenly assimilate Kierkegaard's convictions. First, his many remarks on suffering imply that, like most Danes in his time, he imagined that God providentially controls the details of the history's unfolding, such as who gets ill and dies during a plague, or

<sup>42</sup> SKS 5, 46–47 / EUD, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Anger or wrath, we are told in the third discourse on Good and Perfect Gifts, is always an obstacle to righteousness (SKS 5, 141 / EUD 138; compare SKS 13, 327 / M, 268).

<sup>44</sup> SKS 10, 271 / CD, 257–258.

who gets rich or poor, so as to prompt spiritual growth. This image of governance as divine stage-managing of particular events in life, which is sometimes called “meticulous providence,” underlies accounts like C.S. Lewis’ famously inadequate suggestion that pains are God’s clarion call to wake us up from our sins—as if people’s massively different sufferings are proportioned to the jarring that each one needs according to their inner faults.<sup>45</sup> Lewis had to rethink this view later, when his young wife died of cancer: he finally recognized what his successors have since come to call “gratuitous evil” that is not necessary for spiritual growth, or that fails to occasion greater spiritual goods sufficient to outweigh it in this life.

Second, as William Hasker has argued, this evidence contrary to meticulous providence also affects Molinist conceptions which imagine God as creating the best combination of feasible persons to minimize evil results, given choices that all possible creaturely persons *would* make in each possible choice-circumstance. If we accept that there are such subjunctive facts about unmade free choices, then God at least sometimes creates person A in part because A’s evil choices will bring out the best in person B. But Kierkegaard, like later existential thinkers, rejects such Molinist personal essences prior to the person’s existence. Third, “skeptical” defenses argue that we cannot know enough about all the possible good outcomes connected with great evils. Unfortunately, this reasoning applies equally to possible knock-on *bad* consequences and thus hardly makes theism more probable, given our experiential evidence.<sup>46</sup>

A fourth route includes less meticulous soul-making accounts, which focus on the complex goods that become feasible (although not necessarily actual) through our *chosen responses* to simple harms or first-order bads and their secondary effects. These approaches have also grown more subtle over time. Hasker considers the early (1985) version of Eleonore Stump’s Thomist theodicy claiming that God must—even though we cannot grasp the details—be governing the moral evils resulting from misuses of human free will so that *each individual’s* suffering is outweighed by a sum of inner and

<sup>45</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1962), pp. 96–97. Lewis admits that he does not know why the distribution of pain is what we see (p. 104), but he is sure this is part of a larger “tribulational system” designed to purify us of worldliness (p. 105)—as we also see in Abraham’s trial (p. 101).

<sup>46</sup> William Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), ch. 7, pp. 171–197. I selected Hasker’s analysis as one of the best accounts I have found within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

outer goods that it produces (or facilitates) *for that individual*. These benefits flow, she suggested, mainly through the way that suffering can bring people “to turn to God in faith and repentance.”<sup>47</sup>

Hasker condemns this account as “absolutely appalling” because, as D.Z. Phillips warned, it could undermine our will to respond appropriately to the sufferings of others.<sup>48</sup> It is easy to see why, if we start to imagine that sufferings which we could alleviate or prevent might actually be the “medicine” that a sick soul needs. While there are times when it may be morally right to make such a paternalistic assessment, they must be few and far between for any moral view that is adequately concerned to reduce human suffering. The implausible notion that no suffering is really gratuitous for its subject could make us second-guess all individual and collective efforts to address needs or prevent injustices—and thus revive the danger of quietism.<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard seems instead to insist that even if we think (a) our neighbor P could well end up better off in the long run if they suffer a looming harm H, because it will teach them a needed lesson or remind them of what really matters, etc., (b) it would (normally) be morally wrong for us not to prevent H when we could easily do so. He even insists that we reduce a wrongdoer’s shame, while maintaining his understanding of his fault, by expressing our fundamental equality with that wrongdoer.<sup>50</sup>

Yet some of Kierkegaard’s claims might easily be taken in a Stumpian direction. For example, he writes that an apostle knows that his “thorn in the flesh is given him so that he will not be arrogant.”<sup>51</sup> In later religious writings such as *Christian Discourses*, he says that Christians must discover “eternity’s hope” planted in our “innermost being” through hardships;<sup>52</sup> give others hope through mustering faith while in dire poverty;<sup>53</sup> be willing to give up every earthly good for a proper relation to God; and bring troubles

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 189–190.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 191. Compare Tracy, “Victimization and the Problem of Evil,” p. 308. However, this is virtually the only point that Hasker finds compelling in Phillips’ many-sided Wittgensteinian anti-theodicy, which Hasker thoroughly and perhaps decisively demolishes (Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 42–54).

<sup>49</sup> Compare Tracy’s point that in a world where natural evils were proportioned to moral desert, external carrot and stick incentives would crowd out the Kantian good will (Tracy, “Victimization and the Problem of Evil,” p. 307).

<sup>50</sup> SKS 9, 333–335 / WL, 338–340.

<sup>51</sup> SKS 5, 319 / EUD, 329.

<sup>52</sup> SKS 10, 121 / CD, 110.

<sup>53</sup> SKS 10, 127–128 / CD, 116.

on ourselves voluntarily by challenging worldly values.<sup>54</sup> In 1849, we find journal passages reemphasizing his claim that “every earthly hope” must be lost before true faith can emerge.<sup>55</sup> Kierkegaard also wrote a whole discourse on the theme that “the School of Sufferings Educates for Eternity.”<sup>56</sup> That certainly *sounds* like soul-making,<sup>57</sup> although he did not present it as a theodicy.

The resonances become even stronger if we consider Stump’s later and deeper elaboration of her theodicy derived from Aquinas and bolstered by the insight that we often know too little about “the inner life and psychic trajectory of the sufferer” to guess why God would allow their particular suffering.<sup>58</sup> Yet Stump does not rely solely on this skeptical move; she nuances it by referring to her own extensive argument that second-personal narrative can give us some insight into the complex inner life of persons as they interact with other people and with a divine presence—even if they often do not realize that they are “wrestling with God.” Glimpses of that interaction within their life stories may make it more plausible that God allows their individual pains “because, through their suffering and only by its means, God gives to each of the protagonists something that these sufferers are willing to trade their suffering to receive,” once they understand that these or similar sufferings are necessary for them to come to a deep personal relationship with God.<sup>59</sup>

Thus Stump defends “the fractal nature of providence,” meaning that the benefits for each person defeat that person’s involuntary and unmerited sufferings (setting aside just punishments for chosen evils).<sup>60</sup> For God “cannot be close” to a human person who is volitionally fragmented; faith requires “an act of will that is a global second-order

<sup>54</sup> SKS 10, 190 / CD, 179.

<sup>55</sup> SKS 22, 66, NB11:118; KJN 6, 62.

<sup>56</sup> SKS 8, 347–360 / UDVS, 248–263.

<sup>57</sup> Yet the main theme of this discourse is that we can, if we choose, appropriate sufferings inwardly in a way that calms the unrest which arises from selfishness, and helps us to obedience. While it portrays sufferings as potentially “medicinal” or educative by weaning us from addictive pursuit of riches, fame, status, etc., it is most focused on willfulness as an inward obstacle to accepting the need for forgiveness. Although this sounds like soul-making, the discourse does not explicitly argue that these potential complex goods *justify God in allowing* specific sufferings, nor does it imply that God tailors them as individual therapy. So its theme is not a response to the problem of evil per se.

<sup>58</sup> Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 373.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375. I take this passage to be a statement of the main thesis in Stump’s deep and subtle tome on the problem of evil.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 378–384.

desire [or volition] for a will that wills the good”—compare this with Kierkegaardian purity of heart. That unity is impossible without the “medicinal” value of even massive and undeserved suffering.<sup>61</sup> Or at least, Stump says, that is plausible within any epistemic perspective that does not *already* rule out heaven, resurrection, or beatitude on grounds unrelated to the theological problem of evil. Nor does this account deny that people can and often will choose to respond to their sufferings in ways that move them farther from God.<sup>62</sup> This Thomistic account only requires that (a) their sufferings could be medicinal for such sufferers if they allowed it and (b) some such sufferings on this order are plausibly necessary for many (perhaps all) human persons’ spiritual growth.

All of this sounds like Kierkegaard’s “Gospel of Sufferings.” After all, he writes that innocent suffering is an opportunity to learn;<sup>63</sup> and earthly adversity can help to turn a person towards eternity and enable her to comfort others.<sup>64</sup> Unlike more abstract skeptical theodicies or Molinist free will defenses, Stump confronts existential crises directly in the personal narratives that she considers. She thus meets the existential problem of evil on its own level as an intrapersonal crisis and authentic threat to faith. So maybe we should just conclude that this is what James’ motif of everything being a perfect gift means for Kierkegaard. But I think not, for two reasons.

First, the sufferings that Climacus and then Kierkegaard find most spiritually valuable are those that we voluntarily accept as the likely price of ethical efforts to love and be religious witnesses, rather than other entirely “accidental” sufferings or “misfortunes.”<sup>65</sup> Thus he wrote that “common human sufferings” are not by themselves “the narrow way” of faith, although faith involves dealing patiently with them.<sup>66</sup> Second,

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395 and 399.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403–404. If this is combined with complete divine foreknowledge of human futures, it implies that God allows particular enormous sufferings even when God knows that these will not bring the human soul around: God gives such people their best opportunity even while knowing the medicine will not work in their case. An open theist view reduces this tension.

<sup>63</sup> SKS 8, 353 / UDVS, 255.

<sup>64</sup> SKS 10, 163–165 / CD, 155–157.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, SKS 5, 319–321 / EUD, 330–331 on divine comfort that requires the higher suffering of spiritual trial; SKS 7, 404–405 / CUP1, 445 on religious suffering; and SKS 8, 348–349 / UDVS, 250 on choosing to suffer; compare SKS 10, 109 / CD, 97 on choosing to see all one’s earthly sufferings as lasting for a brief moment, even if they continue for seventy years.

<sup>66</sup> SKS 13, 89 / FSE, 67.

there is a way of taking Kierkegaard's meditations on James' dictum that goes in the more enigmatic direction to which Hough points. Before trying to describe her unique contribution, let me clarify the main problem that motivates her account.

#### 4. Horrendous Evils and the Existential Inadequacy of Soul-Making Theodicy

The great difficulty with the world-picture offered by Stump's subtle theodicy, despite its many riches, is that it still envisions God as undertaking a *particular tailoring* of each suffering to each individual (and to the extent that this allows, also to groups). Such tailoring is implied at several junctures in Stump's descriptions. God "allows" Job to suffer great loss at the hands of raiders who freely choose to attack his household; God "allows Samson's dreadful suffering" as a curative; God sometimes tests his best servants with harder trials; and God even permits wars and other causes of enormous sufferings for whole societies without which their trajectory would be worse (although human limits prevent us from knowing how such worse counterfactuals would unfold).<sup>67</sup> Stump tries to meet Hasker's objection that this theodicy would callously encourage us to allow other people's sufferings: in response, she retreats to the skeptical point that we cannot (absent some special revelation) know that any particular suffering looming for others is one that God wants to allow. Thus we should *not* second-guess our inclinations to help someone avoid that suffering.

Yet a dilemma arises from combining this skeptical response with belief in any non-Molinist form of libertarian free will (which both Stump and Kierkegaard endorse).<sup>68</sup> For if it is true in a given case with looming suffering S that God either (a) wills to allow S for soul-making reasons, or (b) wishes to prevent S because it will not ultimately help the victim V, then it seems our free choice might defeat God's plans either way. If (a), then a good Samaritan helper H may intervene to stop S and even credibly think that morality requires this of her. This holds unless we stipulate that H's

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 393, 399–400, and 409. However, I think the picture of the world as an arena or stage on which people are tested, which Kierkegaard also sometimes seems to endorse, is different than the picture of the world as a kind of hospital for souls who are like children too young to understand the therapies they need to survive.

<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard could not have accepted Molinism, which he would have known in its Leibnizian form, because his central idea that free will is only an *existing* process in time is a rejection of the notion that any specifics hold true *sub specie eternitatis* about what a merely logically possible free being would choose in particular choice-circumstances.

choices can never be effective in blocking any suffering that God wills for soul-making purposes—say, because God can always facilitate some equally effective alternative suffering that cannot be defeated by human efforts to aid others.<sup>69</sup> Or if (b), then there will be cases in which some human beings are able to cause or facilitate S by their intentional acts or omissions—unless we stipulate that God can always reverse S-promoting effects of their choices, whether directly or via the agency of persons concerned to prevent S.

This problem is not avoided by invoking the popular distinction between God’s “perfect” and merely “permissive” will (although that contrast may play a useful role later, as we will see). For the problem is not about whether God merely permits useless suffering to happen to a victim V, or permits a well-meaning person H’s efforts to save V from useful suffering, as part of a *general policy* to sustain free human efforts. Rather, it concerns whether or not God is (i) able to intervene to ensure that S or similarly efficacious suffering comes about no matter what V and H choose, and thus (ii) perfectly wills S (or its equivalent) *as a particular* spiritual medicine for V, no matter what else God permissively wills—and the opposite when S would be spiritually useless or counterproductive for V. If we think God often permissively wills that persons like H prevent S due to God perfectly willing meaningful, free creaturely agency, even though S was needed for V’s spiritual progress, then we have rejected (ii).

So we can only make libertarian freedom compatible with Stump’s soul-making theodicy by positing that God (normally) undoes the effects of free choices that would otherwise prevent medicinal suffering or cause non-medicinal suffering. This carries the existentially disastrous implication that each actual serious suffering is perfectly willed *qua* particular, or handpicked by God. It also radically reduces the significance of human

<sup>69</sup> This first horn of the dilemma briefly indicates apparent metaphysical difficulties with imagining that the levels of suffering we see are *just right* for each individual’s spiritual progress towards beatitude, to the extent that being metaphysically compatible with each other allows. So the alignment between teaching Satan a lesson and upbuilding Job that Stump finds in the Book of Job (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 219) cannot be universalized. For a level of suffering that might be necessary to bring individual A around to a relation with God may take her towards beatitude on a route that involves causing or allowing suffering for other people B, C, etc. vastly in excess of what they spiritually need on a Thomist view. If so, then for each individual to receive at least the minimum needed amount of spiritual medicine, some must be massively overdosed—maybe to the point of defeating their pilgrim’s progress. Notice that this argument does not deny the plausible idea that some complex goods may be psychologically possible only through responses to great evils.

efforts to prevent or remediate suffering, because it allows us to succeed or fail in preventing sufferings only insofar as that still leads to the precise pattern of suffering-outcomes that God selects as optimal means to soul-making, given whatever else God is directly causing. Instead of making us second-guess our good motives, this defense makes our choices superfluous either way relative to spiritually needed suffering. Are Christians who take the Fall seriously, as Stump and Kierkegaard do, to say that even this defeated none of God's plans?

But there is another even more important cause for doubt: the existential problem of evil seems to rebel especially against the idea of particular tailoring. The idea that God "allowed" Ivan's young girl to be unspeakably abused by her parents for months before her death is precisely the basis for Ivan's conviction—embraced with infinite pathos as that on which he stakes his whole self—that such a God would not be worthy of worship. His extreme thesis that it would be better for the world never to have been created than for this to be done to the innocent girl seems to be a distinct further claim, to which I will return below.

Ivan's girl illustrates what Marilyn Adams has taught us to call the problem of particular "horrendous evils" that make it *prima facie* doubtful whether the life of one undergoing or participating in them could be "a great good to him/her on the whole." Such evils can destroy a person's framework for understanding life as meaningful, ruining its entire earthly potential for worthwhileness in one fell swoop. I will spare us Adams' own Dostoevskian examples because we already participate sufficiently in the special second-order psychic harm of knowing that horrendous evils occur, and we probably have at least a dim inchoate sense that we could not even conceive "plausible candidate reasons" why God would select for these specific evils.<sup>70</sup>

This second-order sense that divine reasons-why are absent, or even offensive to imagine, can flower into the existential problem of evil when people are encouraged to believe that according to their religion, God must have sufficient reasons *particular* to each enormous evil. The message that God tailors all sufferings medicinally to each individual becomes a pit: at its bottom, the would-be pilgrim suffers the great new evil of temptation to despair in part because no theodicy she has heard or can envision seems plausible anymore, even while the need for ontologically ultimate meaning is

<sup>70</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 25–28.

sharpened by the horrors that she has witnessed or undergone. This is a special existential suffering that might—if it leads to willing despair rather than merely invincible ignorance—even prevent otherwise generally good individuals from attaining infinite final communion with God (on non-universalist conceptions like Kierkegaard's).

As a result, Alvin Plantinga was wise to direct his initial defense of theism (devised in response to Mackie's argument from evil) only at showing that God might be unable to avoid moral and natural evil *in general*, given the great value of free will that God aims to realize. This generic reason-why implies a divine permissive will to allow human-made sufferings in general, but without the complete particular tailoring of sufferings that has lured so many would-be believers into existential doubt or despair.<sup>71</sup> A similar point emerges in Hasker's critique of William Rowe's condition that any harms arising from immoral choices be offset by other simple and complex goods *somewhere* "that God could not have obtained without permitting the evil in question." While this is less demanding than Stump's condition, it can still motivate "passivity and fatalism," because it implies that God would not permit us to ignore others' suffering unless that suffering would later be offset by net gains that would not occur without it.<sup>72</sup>

Hasker is concerned with this point because the evidential (or probabilistic) problem of evil is usually formulated with Rowe's requirement, or something similar to it. Hasker instead suggests that the possibility of evils that are gratuitous for their individual sufferers might, *as a class*, be an unavoidable side-effect of God's efforts to secure the goods that come from limited free will among created persons. As Tracy puts it, some evils are individually "dysteleological" in the sense that "the good [which] God intends could be achieved without the occurrence of these moral evils, but not without permitting the choices that generate them"—or, better, choices of *this kind*.<sup>73</sup> More precisely, God does not select each responsible human choice that foreseeably causes

<sup>71</sup> However, Plantinga's defense turned out to depend on Molinism, and the Molinist idea that God chooses the best combination of possible persons may imply a partial tailoring, as Hasker recognizes.

<sup>72</sup> Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 192–195.

<sup>73</sup> Tracy, "Victimization and the Problem of Evil," p. 305. For clarity, we should then distinguish between evils that are *individually gratuitous* in that those suffering them did not need to undergo them to reach their highest good or fulfill God's plan for them, and evils that are *collectively gratuitous* in that this entire class of evils or their causes did not need to exist for a morally perfect God's plans to be fulfilled. It is the latter kind of gratuity that Tracy and Hasker seek to avoid.

gratuitous evils, but God permits the entire category of free choices that includes some massively immoral choices as unintended side-effects of God's permissive will.

Hasker's open theist approach thus implies that God must take great risks in creating beings with morally responsible free agency. It rejects divine "meticulous control" over every event in time, including the narrow tailoring of sufferings.<sup>74</sup> This open theist account stays at the level of overall reasons for the phenomena of gratuitous and horrendous evils *in general*—reasons that do not purport to justify the widely varying distribution of suffering among people of apparently similar moral worth or need for spiritual maturation.

But Plantinga's and Hasker's different arguments that God's goodness is compatible with the existence of individually gratuitous evils as a category may still not provide plausible reasons why God would allow such evils in the degrees we see, including horrendous evils, which appear at first to be worse than the generic goods of free will would require.<sup>75</sup> Would it not have been enough to make morally responsible freedom significant if created persons could cause gratuitous sufferings only up to (say) a threshold of around one percent of everything that Stalin's or Mao's or Putin's horrendous choices triggered? Nor will Plantinga's or Hasker's global defenses show that the lives of those who are involved in horrendous evils are worth living on the whole; such persons may simply look like casualties of God's efforts to secure global goods through creating finite free wills.<sup>76</sup>

Soul-making approaches bite back here: they at least insist that God's reasons for creation as a whole, including free will, must respect the importance of *each* suffering person (and some would extend this to animals too). As Tracy puts the main deontological restriction, God morally would not bring it about that some persons "are so profoundly and permanently victimized" by moral or natural evils that "it would be

<sup>74</sup> Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, pp. 203–204. Compare William Hasker, "Why is There So Much Evil?" *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 3 (2014): pp. 238–242 (responding to Michael Peterson).

<sup>75</sup> Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, p. 196. So even if Hasker's quietism objection defeats a premise needed for Rowe's Evidential Argument against theism, that is not by itself enough to show that the levels or distribution of apparently gratuitous evils we find in the world are sufficiently explained by the need to allow morally free wills to develop. As Rowe implies in his response, we seem to be well above the threshold of potential-for-evil needed for free will to have robust moral significance. The needed *intermediate* reasons-why lie between generic reasons for allowing whole categories of evils, and specific reasons for allowing particular sufferings of individual persons.

<sup>76</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 29–30.

better for them never to have existed at all.”<sup>77</sup> Consider just the latest of those who we may call Ivan’s children: a three-year old boy trapped under the rubble of a bombed-out building in Gaza, dying slowly over a period of three days, all alone next to the unresponsive body of his dead mother.

### 5. What Would an Existentially Adequate Answer Involve? Building on Adams

These problems with prior accounts when measured against the threat of existential despair may indicate what a more existentially adequate answer to Ivan Karamazov’s challenge would require. After such an answer is outlined in this section, we can consider whether Kierkegaard could move us towards such a view.

In agreement with Stump and Tracy, Adams begins by considering ways of restoring overall agent-relative worth to human lives afflicted by horrendous evils. One is C.E. Rolt’s suggestion that the highest goodness is found in suffering love that moves us “from self-assertion to cooperation” and self-sacrifice. Through imitation of Christ’s suffering, we participate in a good that redeems even the most afflicted lives. This comports with Hartshorne’s view that God suffers *with us* as well as for us, and we commune with God in our suffering (in medieval terminology, God incarnate is passible). A more extreme position is Simone Weil’s view that we see into God’s essence most truly through suffering that transcends human limits.<sup>78</sup>

Notably these responses all connect with Dostoevsky’s own indirect response by way of portraying Father Zosima’s devotion to the deepest and most expansive agapic ideal imaginable. In Zosima’s view, we should feel a kinship with all human persons (and other animals) because of our shared capacities to suffer. Similarly Matušík emphasizes God’s suffering *with us* as a model for redeeming evils by accepting our “coresponsibility” for them.<sup>79</sup> But if taken to Weil’s extreme, this idea is prone to the Nietzschean objection that it is just a total value-inversion. On the contrary, the objector will say, Jerome Gellman’s phenomenology of horrendous evils rightly describes them as experiences in which the absence of God’s will appears manifest.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Tracy, “Victimization and the Problem of Evil,” p. 310.

<sup>78</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 159–162.

<sup>79</sup> Matušík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, pp. 30–32 and 261–262.

<sup>80</sup> Jerome I. Gellman, “A New Look at the Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1992): pp. 210–216. As he argues, the “felt need for a theodicy” arises not from intellectual puzzlement but instead from

Instead, in a more Kierkegaardian way, Adams argues that only eschatological hope can render lives touched by horrendous evils ultimately worth living for those individuals (such as the boy buried alive in Gaza). The compensating good of “postmortem beatific intimacy with God is an incommensurate good for human persons” (as Stump also affirms): retrospectively from the beatific state, we will see that in experiences of horror within our mortal life, we were sharing something with “the crucified God” that could be fully shared in no other way. The suggestion is not that such horrors are necessary for soul-making; on the contrary, a very fortunate horror-free life could in principle still lead to beatitude (although Kierkegaard would insist that at least some difficulties are needed to awaken us to ethical concerns).<sup>81</sup> Rather Adams’ suggestion is that even when a horror facilitates no complex goods in this life, persons touched by it would not “retrospectively wish it away” because in heaven, they see that in these traumatic events, God was with them in a unique mode different than within our more positive experiences.<sup>82</sup>

The resonances with Kierkegaard’s concept of imitating Christ are evident here, but does this proposal address the existential problem on its own terms? In my view, there are three ingredients in Adams’ approach that are necessary for meeting the existential problem. (1) First, Adams rightly shares with Stump the sense that collective goods realized in human groups or larger cosmic structures are not enough: it must be possible for existence on the whole to be worth it for *each* created person. (2) Second, like Hasker, Adams appears to deny that God tailors particular sufferings; at least her God would not omit to prevent specific horrendous evils when God could have done so, consistent with God’s much larger cosmic goals. So no horrendous evil is perfectly willed by God for soul-making; at most, God tolerates their general possibility as a horrendous side-effect of the only means that can secure other great individual and cosmic goods, as long as condition (1) is also met. And (3), like Kierkegaard, Adams emphasizes that only eschatological goods can counterbalance horrendous evils for individual persons.

experience of horrifying evils in which the absence of God is manifest, i.e. experiences that are *prima facie* evidence for God’s nonexistence (p. 215). This is the existential problem.

<sup>81</sup>See SKS 22, 76–77, NB11:127; KJN 6, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 166–167.

I am not sure that this needs to involve a postmortem transformation of experiences of horrendous evils into more complex goods within communion. For that suggestion is still looking for a good that is directly connected with horrendous evils and achievable in no other way—despite affirming that God would have strongly preferred a history without this specific good and the horror on which it supervened. Fealty with the victims of horrendous evils, which Ivan and Gellman rightly demand of us, is most unequivocal if God utterly rejects those evils as not worth what they add to communion with the divine reality that may nevertheless be attained in them. The key idea is rather that eschatological goods “defeat” those evils.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, even when terrible sufferings produce moral growth of character in this life, they were not God’s specifically chosen means to such spiritual development.

For some Dostoevskians, this may still seem inadequate. Ivan will doubt that any goods made feasible by creation of free wills are worth the range and depth of horrendous evils that we see. Gellman will hazard that our world contains “irredeemable evil” which is so terrible that “there is no possible world in which its existence should be allowed,” no matter what goods flow from its conditions of possibility.<sup>84</sup> Thomas Hardy will protest on behalf of his heroine, Tess, that no heaven could justify allowing her or the suffering animals he describes to be mistreated so badly. Yet, much as I empathize with their sentiment, perhaps at this point Ivan et al. have gone beyond what their evidence entitles them to say. Perhaps here, the skeptical theist response implied at the end of the Book of Job is in order. Kierkegaard would surely insist, with Adams, that human minds cannot begin to imagine the goods that will flow from the coexistence of created free wills in a shared physical order, when we enter eternity.

Still, for faith that horrendous evils are redeemable, the promise of eschatological compensation in a generic sense might not be sufficient by itself. We need plausible reasons-why related to conceivable purposes for creation. Adams doubts this, or worries

<sup>83</sup> Even postmortem Ivan might not be satisfied by seeing that the girl he described is now redeemed in heaven and now recognizes her abandonment as something that God suffered with her. Still, there is something to the idea of a unique kind of I-Thou encounter within suffering. Matušík thinks this answer is enough: see Matušík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, p. 263. Tilley critiques the co-suffering answer as it is offered in the initial version of David Griffin’s theodicy. Yet what Matušík adds, following Hans Jonas and his example of Etty Hillesum, is that we can reintroduce a fragment of divinity into horrendous evils by willingly suffering them with others (*ibid.*, pp. 29–30).

<sup>84</sup> Jerome Gellman, “A Surviving Version of the Commonsense Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2017): p. 84.

that tentative “partial reasons why” will get inflated into “total explanations” or justifications, which can worsen the existential crisis by “attributing perverse motives to God.”<sup>85</sup> Yet among free will defenses, she only considers soul-making and “free fall” varieties, with the latter including Augustinian just punishment models that indeed make God sound disproportionately cruel and comparatively unjust.<sup>86</sup>

Open Theism instead offers plausible global reasons why God could not simply have created us all *directly in heaven* and skipped the agonizing steps involved in this life. Even though our development does not conform to tailored soul-making, a process involving difficult free choices must still precede the heavenly state, because only that which shapes itself via a (situated and partial) independence from its creator has the requisite kind of *alterity* needed for the beatific relationship.<sup>87</sup> We are inherently interpersonal beings, grounded in our creaturely relations to God; but, as James Collins put it, each person is also “aware of himself as an inalienable center of existence and freedom” that is responsible for its identity and not subsumable without remainder into any collective. Development of these creaturely selves requires interaction with other persons whom we are called to love in time, and thus a matrix for our coexistence.<sup>88</sup> Why this matrix needs to be concretely physical-spatial remains a mystery, but one that invites the hypothesis that the heavenly state may somehow take up this physical matrix into its transformation of everything—like a *synthesis* of the eternity “before” this universe with its spatiotemporal manifold. In fact, as I have argued, Kierkegaard’s conception of the religious stage suggests exactly this synthesis.<sup>89</sup>

This picture still faces two hard questions. First, can it reduce existential doubts arising from natural evils, of which animal suffering makes up the greatest share? For

<sup>85</sup> Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, pp. 155–156. She expresses a modest version of the Karamazov-Gellman doubt that a good God would accept horrendous evils as the price of a “very good world with as favorable a balance of moral good over moral evil” as choices of created persons will allow (p. 30). Tracy, like Adams, insists that a “loving relationship with God” in the hereafter is “so great a good” that it defeats even horrendous evils and makes creation worth its risks.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3, pp. 32–55.

<sup>87</sup> SKS 11, 131–132 / SUD, 16.

<sup>88</sup> James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* [1958] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 259.

<sup>89</sup> John J. Davenport, “Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64, nos. 2–4 (2008): pp. 879–908; and John J. Davenport, “Eschatological Faith and *Repetition*: Kierkegaard’s Abraham and Job,” in *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Dan Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 79–105.

example, Hasker offers credible arguments that it is good for the natural world to exhibit partial autonomy via inherent powers; that it is good for sentient and rational creatures to exist; that for all we know, it may be metaphysically impossible for God to generate sentient and rational creatures within a natural order including autonomous secondary causation except through an evolutionary process; and that for all we know, it may be metaphysically impossible to achieve this with laws of nature and fundamental constants that produce far less natural suffering than we see, while still sustaining the evolution of sentience and symbolic thought.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, if quantum-mechanical indeterminism is essential for libertarian freedom to interact with a relatively independent physical order, as might well be the case, then this indispensable condition might make it logically impossible even for God to predict all the macroscopic results of such laws together with the universe's initial constants.

However, while these components of a “natural order theodicy”<sup>91</sup> seem plausible, they drive up the risk-costs of the wholistic goods that provide divine reasons for a system of natural order including free being. The cosmic goods realized in a natural order capable of generating life, consciousness, reason, and free will have high costs that are distributed somewhat randomly among sentient creatures. As a result, these reasons will be inadequate to the existential problem of evil when they are disconnected from the first and third features of Adams’ response, including eschatological meaning that makes suffering involved in natural evils worth it (for all sentient beings).

Second, Hasker’s open theism faces the objection already mentioned that horrendous evils go beyond anything conceivably necessary to give significance to our free will, as Rowe says, which leads Gellman to his irredeemability thesis. Perhaps it is true that, if God interrupted most of our evil choices, we would be too overawed to act freely—so the risk of some horrendous evils is inherent in free will. Nevertheless, at some point, more metaphysical room for us to cause horrors might add little to the practical significance of our freedom.

<sup>90</sup> Hasker, *The Triumph of God over Evil*, ch. 5, pp. 101–146; also note his reference to “the kabbalist doctrine of *Tzimzum*” (contraction, or hiding) that “God ‘steps back’ to allow the creation room for an existence of its own,” i.e., for a kind of alterity (pp. 202 and 141–143). Also see William Hasker, “The Need for a Bigger God,” in *God in an Open Universe*, ed. William Hasker, Thomas Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 15–29.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99 and 138. I have defended the need for libertarian freedom as a condition of responsibility in other work, and assume this for the sake of simplicity here.

This basis for existential doubt implicitly assumes, I think, that God can still directly intervene on occasion or make small adjustments, as long as the natural order is not too disturbed. Kierkegaard obviously takes for granted that God can intervene in this way, as had Leibniz. Hasker and other open theists also tend to assume this kind of “latitude” in the natural order—presumably because they believe that some miracles are necessary for Christianity or biblical theism in general to make any sense. “Frequent and routine intervention by God” is ruled out, but occasional intervention is not. So, even though his natural law theodicy denies any particular tailoring of natural evils for divine purposes more specific than general cosmic goods, Hasker still suggests that God can prevent “any specific evil”—although doing so regularly enough to make a big difference would “seriously undermine the regular operation of nature” and human responsibility.<sup>92</sup> But this belief brings back a sense in which each horrendous evil is “allowed” by a specific divine act of omission. Then God’s reasons for not (say) making the lightning hit a rock rather than a tree that triggers a wildfire, or not nudging a young Hitler’s thoughts away from Jewish conspiracy theories, or not distracting one particular Nazi from noticing Sophie and her two children, would come down to a consideration of comparative fairness: because God cannot *always* do that without voiding the natural order, God judges that it would be wrong to arbitrarily pick these few cases in which to intervene.<sup>93</sup> Ivan will reject such a God.

To avoid this residual tailoring, we need a fourth and probably most controversial component (sketched here with fear and trembling). (4) I believe a natural order theodicy will be adequate only if it is strengthened to say that *God cannot intervene directly to alter events within this natural order without destroying the natural laws that bind it together*. Only such a robust Natural Law defense, which builds on Thomistic ideas of “hypothetical necessity,” explains why God may not be able to prevent horrendous evils if God

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 163, 140–141, and 205. Hasker rejects divine tailoring of natural evils at p. 140 and p. 176.

<sup>93</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 44–46, for Hasker’s poignant discussion of these transcendent evils. Or perhaps on the occasional intervention view, we imagine that God has already calculated the number and depth of feasible interventions and has already done some (and planned others) to prevent even greater horrors than the ones we have witnessed and will see in the future. But in that case, God would be faced with an endless series of Sophie’s choices. For similar reasons, I have to reject Tracy’s suggestion that, as a supererogatory act, a perfect God would not allow a person to suffer any great evil when its “elimination” by God would bring about a better overall balance of goods over evils (Tracy, “Victimization and the Problem of Evil,” pp. 312–313). For this condition suggests that God is selectively reducing horrendous evils—maybe sometimes by blocking choices that would cause them—on a case-by-case basis.

pursues the cosmic goods enabled by natural order, including the development of individual minds and personalities that can experience eschatological meaning. I will not pause here to consider whether this constitutes a retreat to a sort of deism that Kierkegaard would call Religiousness A (in fact, I think it remains compatible with the Resurrection).<sup>94</sup> But we know a lot of things that were not available to Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century which make such a strong Natural Law thesis independently plausible. For example, directly causing an event contrary to the laws of physics on a macroscopic level could constitute a tear in the spacetime continuum that would spread at the speed of light from its point of origin, eventually engulfing everything.<sup>95</sup>

If this Natural Law thesis (4) is added to the first three components, at last I believe we have a defense or partial theodicy that is adequate to Ivan's challenge. On this defense, God does not perfectly will any horrendous evils, or even foreknow them on the basis of Molinist subjunctive conditionals of free choice; rather, horrendous evils are simply made possible in general by preconditions of natural order, mind, and free will in ways that may be metaphysically unavoidable if life, sentience, and moral agency in general are worth the price. As Hans Jonas also suggests, drawing on Kabbalah traditions, God has to withdraw divine power in order to allow room for a universe like ours to develop. But individual persons are not thereby sacrificed for the collective goods of such a created order, because it is a temporal pathway to eschatological consolation. The horrors in which creatures partake cannot be undone in the hereafter; their traces remain etched forever in the firmament of reality as part of What Was. But much of the damage they did to creaturely minds and wills will then be overcome.

In the face of this combined hypothesis, if Ivan still condemned God on the grounds that such a creation was not worth its incalculably high prices, the skeptical theist could cogently reply that even Ivan is not in a position to judge *this much*. In isolation, this last component of epistemic modesty (5) would be ad hoc, a trite dismissal of the existential problem. But it is not arbitrary when combined with hypotheses (1)–(4) in our existential defense: these accommodate the judgments that Ivan is well-positioned to

<sup>94</sup> See John J. Davenport, "A New Existential Model of God: Open Theism, Agapic Personalism, and Alterogenesis," in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 567–586.

<sup>95</sup> See Leonard Susskind, *The Cosmic Landscape* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 2008), p. 89. This claim does not depend on a naïve scientific realism that is incompatible with undetermined consciousness; it only requires belief that the laws of nature constitute real limits with a kind of objective necessity.

make, namely that there is no morally possible justification for specifically selecting particular horrendous evils as parts of a divine plan.

This, however, is all a philosophical-theological story. The real test is whether the defense here cobbled together from Adams, Hasker, and strong laws of nature is *existentially* adequate. For I have suggested, following Sager, that the existential problem of despair in the face of gratuitous and horrendous evils—both in their collective enormity and in their transcendent concreteness as particulars—involves a deeply personal need for a plausible ontological explanation of why a morally perfect God would create a world with such harrowing features. This existential problem lives at the intersection between the reflective enterprise of theodicy and the practical problem of acting responsibly and finding meaning in the face of natural and moral evils. As we saw, this interaction generates the false impression that we can conquer by dividing these two “problems” of evil, addressing the first with speculative tinkering and the second with therapy, prayer, and wisdom gleaned from arts, literature, and scripture. Not so: the person in despair before horrendous evils cannot *personally appropriate* inadequate speculative defenses or theodicies.

I believe that the new existential defense outlined here will meet this need (or come close to it), because it rejects specific tailorings, offers a plausible cosmic picture that squares with hard evidence, and finally rests on the eschatological promise, with all its seeming absurdity. But the real test concerns whether it is personally appropriable in ways that alleviate despair. Such an existential defense cannot by itself reduce PTSD or help people articulate worthwhile new goals and pursue them effectively after participation in horrors. Therapy and pastoral care will remain vitally important. But the existential defense may be able to abate the sense of abandonment by God that can lead either to hatred of a God who seems cruel, or to a nihilistically appropriated atheism resting in bone-deep anger.

## **6. Back to Hough and, finally, to Kierkegaard**

This detour through theoretical responses to the problem of evil has wandered far from Kierkegaard’s form of Christianity. As noted earlier, while different strands in Lutheran and Arminian thought in his time addressed intricate ontological considerations about grace and freedom, Kierkegaard was militantly skeptical that they had much spiritually edifying value. Nevertheless, my thesis is that the existential defense just sketched may be upbuilding for believers (or would-be believers) who are moved by central themes in

Kierkegaard's multilayered portrayals of the human-divine relation. Thus Hough is right to measure Kierkegaard's theme of good and perfect gifts against the existential problem of evil.

She faces this spiritual sickness squarely in her Postlude, recognizing the depth of the abyss. We descend into it with her description of Aleksander Hemon and his wife Teri losing their baby daughter Isabel.<sup>96</sup> Hough affirms with Kierkegaard that this is truly a horror, not to be magically reconstrued as some kind of blessing in disguise.<sup>97</sup> In other words, she rejects the superficial idea that it is tailored for the Hemons' soul-making. The good and perfect gift that Kierkegaard affirms, even in such situations, cannot be on the same level as our human ethical evaluation of Isabel's dying, or any growth of character that comes from experiencing it (directly or indirectly).

I read Hough as saying that the "gift" James refers to has no clear propositional content,<sup>98</sup> i.e. as a specific value or good with practical import subject to rational assessment or interpretation in light of evidence.<sup>99</sup> "Subjective dwelling" in the faith that we are receiving good and perfect gifts does not, for example, suggest that Isabel will return in this life. About *what* will heal our existential wounds or overcome our deepest sorrow, it is silent, or gives only the enigmatic answer that it is "God's love" and that God will fulfill God's promises.<sup>100</sup>

This accords with the third component of the existential defense sketched above. As Hough argues, dwelling subjectively in faith does not necessarily require "suffering" in all the ordinary senses (including first- and second-order pains<sup>101</sup>): although the ethical demands and religious promises of faith will often prompt scorn and hostility from

<sup>96</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 119.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>99</sup> The Spirit's gift is, then, far more elusive even than the gift of Christmas that everyone in Whoville received during that one special December when they received no gifts at all in the ordinary sense—although this event illustrates surprisingly well a part of what Kierkegaard had in mind.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126–128. This will be so even if we think we have some inkling of it, or have some partially concrete vision of heaven or the highest good. For example, I have three or four images that tend to prevail whenever my thought wanders towards heaven; but as profound as they are for me, these images must be infinitely inadequate next to a reality that infinitely transcends them, and is barely even imagined through a glass darkly.

<sup>101</sup> By a second-order pain, I mean suffering experiences that arise from people's reactions to first-order pains.

others, it is the suffering of resignation that is the essential antecedent to faith;<sup>102</sup> and this is outwardly invisible.<sup>103</sup> What follows resignation is not any kind of direct answer to the theoretical quandaries about God and evil. Hough portrays the second movement of faith as making every small thing that happens into part of an ongoing miracle, and she illustrates this with a stunning story from Corrie ten Boom concerning her sister Betsie, who construed even the fleas in a concentration camp as a gift from above. Crucially, this is *not a denial* of the horror of the prisoners' situation in these camps; it concerns something else that transcends horror, in which the horror is *aufgehoben*. Such a faith in perfect giftedness is a love of life, the earth, and all persons—which is outwardly absurd because it is so unmerited by the actual states of the world as seen in aesthetic and ethical terms,<sup>104</sup> as Ivan views them. Kierkegaard's three early discourses on Good and Perfect Gifts clearly imply that the gift involves an ability to love all as equals, and to do this joyfully, forgiving people's offences against us (and forgiving ourselves), and not even demanding gratitude in return—because we cannot in the deepest sense really “own” what we give to others.<sup>105</sup>

To do this in the face of moral horrors, even while testifying to their horrendousness, does indeed seem miraculous. Yet it happens, as Hough illustrates. But two questions still remain for such a Kierkegaardian response. The first concerns how the distinct levels—the ethical and religious—are connected. By itself, the commitment to love and belief that love will never be deceived or proven wrong in the deepest sense look simply like deeper aspects of an ethically committed will. As Hough avows, even as we accept that everything is a good and perfect gift,<sup>106</sup> all our ethical efforts must continue—including our efforts to heal sick infants and ensure that no child is ever placed in a concentration camp, or bombed for being Palestinian.

Of course, as emotional temperaments vary among persons, many of us may not muster the same joy that Betsie did while continuing to strive and patiently endure our outward material failures. At least we may not manage joy in its ordinary emotional sense. But there is something more to the religious stance of the “joyful” tax collector.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 130–133.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 143–145.

<sup>105</sup> SKS 5, 51–56 / EUD, 43–48; SKS 5, 140–141 / EUD, 138; SKS 5, 146–150 / EUD, 144–149; SKS 5, 156–158 / EUD, 156–158.

<sup>106</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 142.

His faith is a kind of trust;<sup>107</sup> as we see in the discourse on Job, it affirms the importance of earthly sorrows while transcending them.<sup>108</sup> This is a way of being, an adverbial “how” that cannot really be captured in any propositional “what.” Yet it includes the idea that this love we receive and try to emulate *will conquer*—will ultimately be proven “true” (in a sense that is not ordinary correspondence, and thus hard to render into words). It is because the ideally faithful knight already lives and participates to some extent in this miracle-to-come that she can persist in love against all odds, no matter what comes, experiencing the giftedness of her varying contingent states unto the end. It is not Ivan’s fault that he does not manage this movement beyond resignation; who among us can?

Second, while Hough’s approach gently shifts to the side both the logical and evidential problems of evil, is this enough to meet the theological problem’s existential underside? Should we simply affirm the epistemic limits of human reason as a basis for saying that we cannot begin to understand why this personal God would shape the universe in a way that makes possible the natural and moral evils we see? Perhaps. The pastor’s sermon at the end of *Either/Or*, as Hough’s thoughts on it helpfully clarify, is focused on meeting moral evils with a forgiving attitude that is willing to hide a multitude of sins.<sup>109</sup> There is a connection between the levels in this: even if we are striving for justice, clearly the pastor’s faith will alter how justice is interpreted and applied in a restorative and reconciliatory direction.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps Kierkegaard sometimes understates how big a finite/worldly difference in the content of ethical prescriptions an agapic ethics makes. It is not *only* an inward change, and signs of this slip out here and there in his writings on neighbor-love. Again, Dostoevsky’s Zosima exemplifies this same oblique response to the awful doubt or despair voiced by Ivan: there is a love that transcends and transforms all horrors.

Yet this response that Hough develops from James’ dictum *is oblique*. Because it moves indirectly towards the sufferer from the religious sphere, it may not be enough by itself to meet the existential need that the Hemon parents and Ivan reveal. They require some basis for believing in the promise that divine love will conquer all, when

<sup>107</sup> SKS 5, 49–50 / EUD, 41.

<sup>108</sup> SKS 5, 126–127 / EUD, 122.

<sup>109</sup> Hough, *Dancing Tax Collector*, pp. 84–87.

<sup>110</sup> Compare SKS 9, 328–329 / WL, 333–341 on reframing one’s success in winning a wrongdoer’s remorse as only God’s victory, God’s gift to all involved.

the face of horrendous evil has opened its maw to deny this. Matušík suggests that “taking radical responsibility for others” and suffering with them can fill this need,<sup>111</sup> and surely Kierkegaard would agree that this is a necessary *part* of the answer—especially when strengthened by the testimony of religious experiences. But those sharing Ivan’s despair also need a way to connect the paradoxical possibility of infinite love with at least partial “reasons-why” God’s world includes horrendous evils. To my mind, Kierkegaard did not quite manage this kind of aid to the wounded soul, and that is why the problem of evil has remained an issue on the margins of thinking faithfully with Kierkegaard. To remedy this, I have only outlined how one kind of open theist existential defense could be integrated with several of his religious themes.

Hough’s earnest efforts also point in this valuable direction. They show that Kierkegaard’s motif from James and the joyful tax collector do meet this most wrenching of all spiritual trials on its own terms: obliquely at least, they acknowledge the existential problem of evil and affirm the worth of the person suffering from it. What they offer in return is not merely skeptical theism or the cruel words of Jobs Comforters that make the trial so much worse, but rather the paradoxical possibility that, even when we cannot imagine reasons-why, we can experience *there being an Answer* that is hidden but will ultimately be revealed—which is the most elusive religious sense of “giftedness.” Kierkegaard, on Hough’s interpretation, says that if we persist in trying to love even before we can believe in everything being good and perfect in the paradoxical religious sense, we will eventually find that there *is* something more than the infinite sorrow and outrage that we rightly feel with Ivan. Those feelings are authentic responses to the faces of evil that so mar this “blighted star” (Hardy’s description); they should never be rejected, minimized, or finessed away by cheap or handwaving theodicies. But in or through this sorrow, one who persists in loving every other person and the natural world like Zosima—as good and perfect gifts—will come to feel a support from above, even when they descend into the abyss and perhaps lose themselves there for some time. This paradoxical communion with the source of giftedness comes from elsewhere, or what has been called the Hereafter, even when we feel utterly abandoned by God.

Some may say this is false—they have tried to follow such counsel, and it will not work. Contrary to what Everyman says, there is no guide who will, in our worst need, be at our side. Kierkegaard and the apostles affirm the opposite. Recent literature on

<sup>111</sup> Matušík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope*, p. 265.

the “hiddenness of God” is full of this debate. But either way, it is important to emphasize that Kierkegaard gives no assurance that we will directly sense a divine presence in answer to prayers; nor does he try to explain why God created the universe, as if we could really comprehend God’s full intentions. Instead, even more incredibly, Kierkegaard promises that we may experience even now the Fact that there is a reason which, when revealed, will utterly vindicate infinite love—and so there is “collateral beauty” even in the horror, although we have not yet seen it. It is as if you asked someone to prove that they love you, or explain why they made you doubt them, and they responded only with a look or a touch that made you perceive their love. This “answer” to the existential problem is an existential condition—agapic love—which provides the condition for experiencing that a positive final Answer awaits us at the end of time.