

10-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Walls, Jerry (1996) "As The Waters Cover The Sea: John Wesley On The Problem Of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol13/iss4/4>

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"AS THE WATERS COVER THE SEA": JOHN WESLEY ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Jerry L. Walls

John Wesley explained the existence of evil in moral rather than metaphysical terms. His understanding of the fall was fairly typical of western theology and he also enthusiastically embraced a version of the *felix culpa* theme as essential for theodicy. Unlike many influential western theologians, he also relied heavily on libertarian freedom to account for evil. His most striking proposal for theodicy involves his eschatological vision of the future in which he believed the entire world living then will be converted. I argue that his theodicy is implicitly universalist, especially in its eschatological speculations, and show that this is in tension with his strong libertarian commitments.

"I am as full certain of this, that I am free with respect to these, to speak or not to speak, to act or not to act, to do this or the contrary, as I am of my own existence."

"The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth, shall fill every soul of man."

I

Although John Wesley's place in the history of theology is secure, he is more famous for his work as an evangelist and leader in the eighteenth century revival, and for his role in founding the Methodist Church. The figures which sum up his evangelistic career—well known to historians, but perhaps not to philosophers—are truly extraordinary: in the course of a life which spanned nearly a century in time (1703-1791), he preached some forty thousand sermons throughout an itinerant ministry which covered a quarter of a million miles, mostly on horseback. And in the midst of all this activity, and as an integral part of it, he wrote and edited enough material to fill over thirty large volumes.

Despite the magnitude of his literary output, Wesley has not always received the serious consideration generally given to other classical Protestant theologians such as Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. This is partly due to the fact that he did not write primarily for his fellow schol-



ars, but for the persons to whom he ministered. He professed to have little use or patience for speculative theology. His avowed aim was to produce "plain truth for plain people."¹ Consequently, much of his writing comes in the form of short essays, pamphlets, and sermons.²

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that Wesley has not been a major subject in discussions of theodicy, particularly given the rather abstract, and even technical, nature of much of that literature. It is noteworthy, for instance, that John Hick does not so much as mention him in his historically oriented work *Evil and the God of Love*.³

I believe, however, that Wesley had some interesting things to say about evil which deserve attention in the current discussion. Indeed, I believe that his sensitivity to this problem motivated his theology to a significant degree and this is one of the most attractive features of his theology. In what follows, I will construct a picture of his overall theodicy from scattered letters, sermons, and essays and offer a critical evaluation of it along the way.

II

Wesley's early concern with the problem of evil is evident in some letters he wrote to his father during his time at Oxford. In a letter he wrote in 1729 he included a summary of an essay on the origin of evil by Humphrey Ditton. Ditton had particularly emphasized the importance of "liberty" in accounting for the origin of evil, along with "the defectibility and finiteness of a created nature" (BEW, 25:242). Wesley's father, himself an Anglican priest, had apparently pressed the question after John had raised it in this letter, and in 1730 he wrote to his father that: "I pleased myself mightily with the hopes of sending you a full and satisfactory solution of your great question, having at last procured the celebrated treatise of Archbishop King, *De Origine Mali*." King's work was an example of what Hick has called eighteenth century "optimism," the most notable instance of which is, of course, Leibniz's *Theodicy*.⁴ Despite his high hopes, Wesley goes on to report that he was "strangely disappointed" by the book, "finding it the least satisfactory account of any given by any author whom I ever read in my life" (BEW, 25:258). In particular, he rejects the notion that natural evil is a necessary consequence of creating matter, so that God could not have prevented natural evil without refraining from creating matter altogether.

A few weeks later, he wrote again to his father, summarizing King's work chapter by chapter. He goes into some detail on chapter five which dealt with the essential role of "liberty" in justifying moral evil. He offers no further opinion on the work beyond what he had expressed before except to remark that "the superstructure is regular and well contrived" (BEW, 25:264). We may, however, surmise at least a measure of agreement with chapter five since Wesley was, throughout his life, a defender of moral freedom, and this would play a pivotal role in his later writings on the problem of evil.

At this point in his intellectual development, however, it is worth noting that he had a measure of ambivalence about the value and signifi-

cance of freedom even though he did not doubt its reality. This is evident from a sermon he preached at Oxford in 1730, during the very period he was corresponding with his father about the problem of evil. In this sermon he registered serious doubt that we can understand why God allowed evil to have a place in his creation. He went on to spell out the traditional classification of evil as either natural, moral, or penal and to rehearse how these evils are in fact compatible with God's goodness, particularly emphasizing freedom in his account of the latter two types of evil. He continued as follows:

But still this does not come up to the present question—why did God give them that choice? It is sure, in so doing he did not act contrary to any of his attributes; but can we say it would have been contrary to them to have acted in a different manner? To have determined man to God, to have tied him down to happiness, to have given him no choice of misery? It was perfectly consistent with his goodness and justice to set life and death before his creatures; but would it have been inconsistent with them to have let him know only life? Why he chose one of these paths before the other, where is the man that can determine? (BEW, 4:285-286)

These questions reflect the whole tenor of this sermon which emphasizes the limitations of human understanding and calls for intellectual humility. The title of the sermon, however, is "The Promise of Understanding" and it was also Wesley's confidence that in eternity we will be enabled to understand many things which are at present mysteries to us, including the problem of evil. But at this point in his career, he had little confidence that we can, in this life, have much insight into why God has chosen to allow evil in his world.

Notice also that this minimalist account which insists only on the compatibility of evil with God's goodness and justice leaves open the possibility that God might do better in relation to us than He in fact has. Such a notion falls rather short of the picture of God as a loving Father whose overwhelming love for us goes far beyond what may be strictly required by the essential divine attributes.

III

Wesley's most interesting writing on evil appears in a cluster of sermons which he published late in his life. While much of what he writes is typical and predictable, he is also prepared to depart from common wisdom and engage in polemics when he thinks this is necessary to sustain a theodicy which is both biblical and morally satisfying. In this section, I will sketch some of the broad features of his theodicy. In the sections which follow, I will engage critical issues raised by his theodicy, and examine matters which require closer analysis.

To begin with what is typical, Wesley's account of pristine creation is fairly characteristic of traditional western theology. He pictures the

whole of creation as a perfectly connected system which was designed to promote the glory of its Creator. As Barry Bryant has shown, there is a “pronounced aesthetic theme” in his doctrine of creation.⁵ In articulating the goodness of God in creation, Wesley subscribed to a version of the great chain of being: “There was ‘a golden chain’ (to use the expression of *Plato*) ‘let down from the throne of God’—an exactly connected series of beings, from the highest to the lowest: from dead earth, through fossils, vegetables, animals, to man, created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and enjoy his Creator to all eternity” (BEW, 2:396-397). He did not, of course, intend this in the neo-platonic sense that creation emanates from God. Rather, it is more of a metaphor to describe the way all of creation is connected and intelligently ordered by a wise Creator.

While Wesley emphasized the perspective of the whole in defining the goodness of creation, he did not fall prey to the impersonal tendencies which have sometimes marked this tradition in theodicy. He never saw man as merely a link in the chain or a component of a system which is really the important thing. To the contrary, he insisted that “all conspired together to the welfare and pleasure of man” (BEW, 2:391).

One of the pillars of Wesley’s theodicy is the classical notion that the world as we know it is far from its original condition, due to the fall of Adam. The primordial world was thoroughly beautiful and fertile. It was not deformed in any way by rough or craggy rocks or barren deserts or extremes of heat or cold. Nor were there earthquakes and volcanoes. All such defects, blemishes, and corruptions are results of the fall.

Here is a firm foundation on which we may stand and answer all the cavils of minute philosophers; all the objections which ‘vain men who would be wise’ make to the goodness or wisdom of God in the creation....The world at the beginning was in a totally different state from that wherein we find it now (BEW, 2:397).

He goes on to reiterate in very strong language his objection to the notion that there is something necessary about evil. He insists that it is intrinsic neither to the world of matter nor to the world of spirit and advises “every sensible infidel” to be “ashamed of making such miserable *excuses* for his Creator!” In taking such a hard line on this issue, Wesley is, of course, depriving himself of a potentially helpful resource for explaining natural evil. But as he sees it, the maneuver of appealing to necessary evil requires a compromised view of God’s attributes. He rejects this out of hand: “His goodness inclined him to make all things good: and this was executed by his power and wisdom....He needs none of us to make *apologies*, either for him or for his creation!”⁶

Since all evil, natural as well as moral, was due to the fall, and is therefore contingent, God’s good creation could, in principle, have remained so forever. Paradoxically, however, it was not best overall for it to remain so. Rather than seeing it as an embarrassment that a perfectly good, omnipotent God would allow His world to be spoiled by the

fall, Wesley enthusiastically embraces the *O Felix Culpa* (O fortunate crime) theme. He readily allows that God could have prevented the fall and all of its attendant misery. "But it was known to him at the same time that it was best, upon the whole, not to prevent it....He saw that to permit the fall of the first man was far best for mankind in general" (2:424). Wesley sums up the benefits we receive as a result of the fall very simply: we have the chance to be more holy and happy on earth, as well as more happy in heaven than we could have been otherwise. Of course, these benefits come to us as a result of the death of Christ, which would not have happened without the fall. Wesley expands on this thought as follows.

So there would have been no room for that amazing display of the Son of God's love to mankind....We might have loved the Author of our being, the Father of angels and men, as our Creator and Preserver; we might have said, 'O Lord our Governor, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.' But we could not have loved him under the nearest and dearest relation, as 'delivering up his Son for us all'....If God *so* loved us, how ought we to love one another! But this motive to brotherly love had been totally wanting if Adam had not fallen. Consequently we could not then have loved one another in so high a degree as we may now" (BEW, 2:426-428).

He goes on to point out that the existence of suffering in the world is the occasion for some of the most sublime expressions of religious faith.

Upon this foundation, even our suffering, it is evident all our passive graces are built—yea the noblest of all Christian graces, love 'enduring all things'. Here is the ground for resignation to God, enabling us to say from the heart, in every trying hour, 'It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth good.'... And in the same proportion as our resignation, our confidence in God, our patience and fortitude, our meekness, gentleness, and longsuffering, together with our faith and love of God and man increase, must our happiness increase, even in the present world (BEW, 2:430).

Despite the controversial and even speculative nature of these claims, Wesley sees them as composing another essential pillar of a satisfactory theodicy. He insists that the idea that Adam's fall was ultimately beneficial is "not a mere curiosity, but a truth of the deepest importance; it being impossible on any other principle 'to assert a gracious providence, and justify the ways of God with men'" (BEW, 2:424).

One of the fascinating aspects of Wesley's development of the *felix culpa* theme is his application of it to the animal kingdom. As he saw it, the problem of animal suffering was a major problem for theodicy. He begins his sermon on the subject by quoting several passages from scripture which indicate that God loves all his creatures and is concerned for

the welfare of each of them. Then he raises the question:

But how are these Scriptures reconcilable to the present state of things?...If the Creator and Father of every living thing is rich in mercy towards all; if he does not overlook or despise any of the works of his own hands; if he wills even the meanest of them to be happy according to their degree—how comes it to pass that such a complication of evils oppresses, yea, overwhelms them? (BEW, 2:438)

Wesley believed this question required a serious answer not only for the sake of being true to scripture, but also to vindicate God's very love and justice.

The answer which he proposes parallels what he says about human salvation. There is a link between the two because the fall of man affected the rest of our world. "Man was the channel of conveyance between his Creator and the whole brute creation" (BEW, 2:440). Before the fall, he was the channel of God's blessing to the lower creation, and when he fell he was the channel of God's curse.

Consequently, Wesley argues, when human salvation is fully achieved and man is raised to a higher level of glory and happiness than he had before the fall, the same will be true of the animal kingdom.

While 'the whole creation groaneth together' (whether men attend or not) their [animals'] groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of him that made them....Nothing can be more express. Away with vulgar prejudices, and let the plain word of God take place. They 'shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into glorious liberty': even a measure, according as they are capable, of 'the liberty of the children of God' (BEW, 2:445).

Wesley dares to conjecture that animals may receive an increased level of understanding, and may even be enabled to know, love, and enjoy God (BEW, 2:448). A rather bold suggestion from one who professed to eschew speculative theology!

Wesley's suggestions about animal suffering are fascinating and worthy of further exploration, particularly in light of ecological concerns and the renewed appreciation in our time for the natural order. I will not, however, pursue them here except to note that Wesley takes pains to reject the notion that the animal kingdom is of equal value to man. While he shows remarkable sensitivity to animal suffering and supports the significance of animals far more than most traditional theologians, he does not go to the extreme of denying or minimizing the special status of human beings.

IV

Let us turn now to consider some issues raised by Wesley's theodicy.

I will begin with an obvious problem which plagues the *felix culpa* theme, particularly as it has been developed in much traditional western theology. The problem arises from the orthodox doctrine of eternal damnation. As Hick has put it, the doctrine of hell "works directly against the theodicy suggested by the 'felix culpa' idea."⁷

Here is the difficulty. If some are eternally damned, this is a particularly great evil which flows from the fall. So along with the benefits which result from the fall also come various evils including one of an eternal magnitude, an evil which counterbalances the great benefits. And this difficulty is exacerbated by the claim of many traditional theologians that God has unconditionally predestined those who are damned to their fate, and moreover, this is the fate of the great majority of the human race. In Hick's view, these difficulties cannot be met without a doctrine of universal salvation. If all are not saved in the end, the *felix culpa* theme is not a successful move for theodicy.

Wesley is aware of these problems and fully agrees with at least part of the critique. If God had unconditionally decreed, before the foundation of the world, that a certain portion of the human race would be eternally damned, he does not see how anyone could thank God for allowing the fall, unless perhaps the devil and his angels. "But, blessed be God, this is not the case. Such a decree never existed. On the contrary, every one born of a woman may be an unspeakable gainer thereby; and none ever was or can be a loser but by his own choice" (BEW, 2:434; cf. 424). The point that everyone may greatly benefit from God's allowing the fall is very important for Wesley's case. Otherwise, it may be argued that some benefit at the expense of others in such a way that God is treating the latter unfairly. If not all can benefit, then it would seem that the losers are offered as a sort of sacrifice for the sake of the winners. But as Wesley sees it, no one is in this unfortunate situation.

Wesley's assessment, then, seems to be that both of the following propositions are true: 1) The world* in which God allowed the fall of Adam is overall a world* whose good outweighs that of a comparable world without the fall, given the great benefits which some receive as a result of the death of Christ, even if some are eternally damned in that world*. 2) This judgment is morally justified because the benefits of Christ's death are available to all, so that the only ones who do not actually benefit from his death are those who are unwilling to do so.⁸

This brings into focus the crucial role which freedom plays in Wesley's theodicy, and in his theology generally. Indeed, the logic of both of these requires a substantial notion of human freedom. We need to determine, then, how he construed freedom, and whether his account of freedom can bear the weight he places on it.

A good place to begin our investigation is with his portrait of primordial man. In a manner typical of the tradition, he paints a rather exalted picture of Adam as originally created in the image of God. More specifically, he emphasizes certain spiritual qualities as the essence of the natural image of God. "In these, in the power of self-motion, understanding, will, and liberty, the natural image of God consisted" (BEW, 2:439). Wesley goes on to elaborate the extent to which these qualities, especial-

ly the latter three, were exemplified in Adam.

His understanding was perfect in its kind; capable of apprehending all things clearly, and judging concerning them according to truth, without any mixture of error. His will had no wrong bias of any sort, but all of his passions and affections were regular, being steadily and uniformly guided by the dictates of his unerring understanding; embracing nothing but good, and every good in proportion to its intrinsic goodness. His liberty likewise was wholly guided by his understanding: he chose or refused according to its direction. Above all (which was his highest excellence, far more valuable than all the rest put together) he was a creature capable of God, capable of knowing, loving, and obeying his Creator. And in fact he did know God, did unfeignedly love and uniformly obey him (BEW, 2:439).

It is particularly important for our concerns to notice Wesley's distinction between will and liberty. This is fully explicit in the following lines.

This [liberty] is very frequently confounded with the *will*, but it is of a very different nature. Neither is it a property of the will, but a distinct property of the soul, capable of being exerted with regard to all the faculties of the soul, as well as the motions of the body. It is a power of self-determination which, although it does not extend to all our thoughts and imaginations, yet extends to our words and actions in general, and not with many exceptions (BEW, 4:23-24).

It is not altogether clear what distinctions as well as relations he intends between "properties," "faculties," and "powers" of the soul. It is quite clear, however, that Wesley wants to draw a definite distinction between will and liberty and that the latter is the true seat of freedom.

It is also important to note that Wesley generally identifies will with the affections. Consider, for instance, his description of Adam as "endued with a *will*, with various affections (which are only the will exerting itself various ways) that he might love, desire, and delight in that which is good; otherwise his understanding had been to no purpose."⁹ But again, it is liberty which made Adam significantly free.

Without this both the will and the understanding would have been utterly useless. Indeed without liberty man had been so far from being a *free agent* that he could have been no *agent* at all. For every *unfree being* is purely passive, not active in any degree....And observe: 'liberty necessitated', or overruled, is really no liberty at all. It is a contradiction in terms....It may be farther observed (and it is an important observation) that where there is no liberty there can be no moral good or evil, no virtue or vice....There is no virtue but where an intelligent being knows, loves, and chooses what is good; nor is there any vice

but where such a being knows, loves, and chooses what is evil (BEW 2:474-475).

Wesley's concern for liberty is obviously closely connected to his conviction that there can be no genuine vice or virtue without it. Notice the three verbs in the last sentence just quoted and how they correspond with the respective roles of understanding, will, and liberty. That is, the understanding knows the good, the will (or affections) loves it, but only liberty can choose it. All three are required for virtue, properly speaking.

The sermons just quoted were written in the last decade of Wesley's life, and thus presumably reflect his considered judgment. Notably, however, he seems to have held essentially the same views early in his life. Recall that in his early sermon "The Promise of Understanding," he expressed a measure of ambivalence about the value of freedom and wondered whether it might not have been better for God to have determined us to Himself and to happiness. Despite this, he has no doubts about the reality of freedom, for without it, he sees no hope of explaining why evil is, in fact, in our world. In his first "university sermon" delivered in St. Mary's at Oxford only two weeks after he first preached the sermon just mentioned, Wesley's subject was "The Image of God." After describing Adam's original understanding and will, again in rather exalted terms, he spoke of liberty as follows.

Man was made with an entire indifference, either to keep or change his first estate: it was left to himself what he would do; his own choice was to determine him in all things. The balance did not incline to one side or the other unless by his own deed. His Creator would not, and no creature besides himself could, weigh down either scale. So that, in this sense, he was the sole lord and sovereign judge of his own actions.¹⁰

Still one thing was needed to ensure freedom, and it is this which explains how man lost his original perfection:

the liberty of man necessarily required that he should have some trial; else he would have had no choice whether to stand or no, that is, no liberty at all....to secure him from transgressing this sole command, as far as could be done without destroying his liberty, the consequence was laid before him: 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (BEW, 295-296).

Wesley offers no explanation of how a creature as well endowed as Adam could fail the test, but what is important for our present concerns is to note Wesley's commitment to a strong conception of Adam's freedom, early in his life as well as late. Adam was a perfectly free agent in the libertarian sense that his actions originated entirely from himself, and were in no sense necessitated or determined by anything or anyone outside himself.

Notice, however that Wesley qualified his earlier claim that nothing

inclined Adam "to one side or the other" when he noted that God encouraged Adam to obey by laying the consequence of disobedience before him. His account of libertarian freedom, then, is apparently compatible with one having considerable inducements to make the right choices. Indeed, Wesley says God secured Adam from falling "as far as could be done without destroying his liberty." Nevertheless, a sturdy conception of libertarian freedom remains intact since he retains the power of choosing either way and how he chooses is finally up to him.

Let us come back to the difficult question of how a being with such perfections as Wesley ascribed to Adam, not to mention his further inducements to obey, could have fallen. Although he offers no help on this question in his 1730 sermon, he does address it in his later ones.

Indeed it has been doubted whether man could then choose evil, knowing it to be such. But it cannot be doubted he might mistake evil for good. He was not infallible; therefore not impeccable. And this unravels the whole difficulty of the grand question, *unde malum?* 'How came evil into the world?' It came from 'Lucifer, son of the morning': it was 'the work of the devil'....the author of sin; the first being who by the abuse of his liberty introduced evil into the creation (BEW, 2:476).

Note that this passage is from the same sermon, quoted above, in which Wesley clearly distinguishes will from liberty. Earlier in the sermon, he had already sounded the note of Adam's vulnerability in the realm of "understanding."

Yet his knowledge was limited, as he was a creature; ignorance therefore was inseparable from him. But error was not: it does not appear he was mistaken in anything. But he was capable of mistaking, of being deceived, although not necessitated to it (BEW, 2:474).

On this account, then, the fall was due to the deception of Satan, who took advantage of man's limited understanding. Man's peccability was a function of the fallibility of his understanding.

Of course, the appeal to Satan only raises the question of how the angels fell, especially since they were even better endowed spiritually than man. On this matter, Wesley offers the following tentative, albeit traditional, thoughts.

We do not exactly know (because it is not revealed in the oracles of God) either what was the occasion of their apostasy, or what effect it immediately produced upon them. Some have not improbably supposed that when God 'published the decree' (mentioned Psalm 2:6-7) concerning the kingdom of his only-begotten Son to be over all creatures, these first born of creatures gave way to pride, comparing themselves to him....(BEW, 3:18).

This underlines the fact that for Wesley, evil ultimately originates in the misuse of free will. Its ultimate origin is moral rather than metaphysical or physical.

But let us return to the fall of Adam. In his sermon "On the Fall of Man" Wesley draws a subtly different picture than sketched above. As before, he emphasizes that Eve was deceived by the serpent. But when he comes to the sin of Adam, the accent falls in a different place.

He sinned with his eyes open. He rebelled against his Creator,
as is highly probable,

Not by stronger reason moved,
But fondly overcome with female charms.

And if this is the case there is no absurdity in the assertion of a great man that 'Adam sinned in his heart before he sinned outwardly, before he ate of the forbidden fruit;' namely by inward idolatry, by loving the creature more than the Creator.¹¹

If the accent in the sermon quoted above is upon the fallibility of the understanding, here it is upon the vulnerability of the affections to be wrongly attached. But whether evil makes its appeal to the understanding or the will (affections), it is only liberty which can choose how to respond.

Before proceeding, it is worth pausing a moment to reflect on a tension in Wesley's account of unfallen man. On the one hand, he paints a picture of Adam which emphasizes his lofty, though finite, intellectual and moral perfections. "He created him not only *in knowledge*, but also in righteousness and true holiness. As his understanding was without blemish, perfect in kind, so were his affections" (BEW, 2:475). On such an account, Adam seems mature, complete, as finished a product as such a creature could be.

On the other hand, Wesley emphasizes that liberty is an essential component of the image of God and that there can be no true virtue or righteousness without it. And given his claim that temptation is necessary for liberty, it would seem to be the case that true virtue and righteousness can only be realized when trials are successfully met and negotiated. In this case, God could not create Adam with fullblown virtue, but only with some nascent version of it which required the proper exercise of liberty to bring it to full fruit. There are passages in Wesley which suggest this latter possibility. For instance, in one of these he describes man in relation to the rest of material creation as "a creature of a higher rank, *capable of wisdom and holiness*" (BEW, 2:409; my emphasis). Of course, the word *capable* is ambiguous between a mere capacity and an actually realized characteristic. But if he is using it here the way he used it above when he described Adam as "capable of mistaking, of being deceived", then Adam would be poised between falling into deception and achieving holiness. His liberty would determine which would be the case.¹²

V

So much for Wesley's account of freedom in unfallen Adam and Eve. Let us turn now to examine his picture of fallen man and see what conception of freedom holds there. I will focus on two essays in which Wesley articulated his view of freedom in some detail, namely, "Predestination Calmly Considered" and "Thoughts upon Necessity".¹³ Both of these essays were largely inspired by his controversies with Calvinist theologians. The former of these Wesley explicitly related to the project of theodicy, as is evident from his prefacing it with the famous quote from Milton expressing the latter's desire to "assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men." The second of these essays is notable because it "carried Wesley as far into the arcanum of speculative theology as he ever got."¹⁴

One of the fundamental issues between Wesley and the Calvinists was how God effects salvation in his fallen human creatures. But this dispute was carried out against a background of significant agreement. Both agreed that fallen man is in a condition of spiritual bondage due to darkened understanding and misguided will, bondage which he cannot escape without divine grace. Fallen man, left to his own resources, is capable only of sin and disobedience. Moreover, both rejected a doctrine of universal salvation. The controversy concerned how to account for the fact that some are saved, while some are finally lost. Given these assumptions, Wesley stated the options as follows.

You may drive me, on the one hand, unless I will contradict myself, or retract my principles, to own a measure of free-will in every man; (though not by nature, as the Assembly of Divines) and, on the other hand, I can drive you, and every other assertor of unconditional election, unless you will contradict yourself, or retract your principles, to own unconditional reprobation (*Works*, 10:232).

For Wesley, the latter doctrine was utterly abhorrent. It was altogether inconsistent with the scriptural account of God's justice, universal love, and express desire to save all people. If all are not saved, it cannot be because God unconditionally chose not to save them, but rather, because they freely refused to accept his offer of salvation.

This is the theological rationale for Wesley's well known doctrine of prevenient grace. It represents the only available alternative to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election. The essence of this grace is a counteraction of the effects of the fall so we have a renewed freedom to accept God's offer of salvation or to refuse it. Wesley is very clear that such freedom is not natural to our fallen condition. He alludes to this in the quote above, but spelled it out explicitly in an earlier passage.

Natural free will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will

supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which "enlightens every man that cometh into the world."¹⁵

The supernatural light which Wesley refers to he elsewhere identifies as conscience (BEW, 3:479-490).

Now in light of the fact that sin entered our world by way of fallible human understanding and vulnerable affections (will), it is no surprise that prevenient grace acts particularly on these faculties. While prevenient grace is not limited to conscience, notice that the following passage can be largely understood in those terms.

His first step is to enlighten the understanding by the general knowledge of good and evil. To this he adds many secret reproofs, if they act contrary to this light; many inward convictions, which there is not a man on earth who has not often felt. At other times he gently moves their wills, he draws and woos them, as it were, to walk in the light. He instils into their hearts good desires, though perhaps they know not from whence they come (*Works*, 10:232-233).

Here is a description of how God works in the lives of all people, including those who know nothing of his special revelation in Christ and the scriptures. Particularly interesting is Wesley's claim that God instils, often secretly, good desires into our hearts. This is noteworthy because it means that God's activity on our behalf goes beyond attempting to persuade us by appealing to our understanding. God also positively inclines us toward good, but in such a manner that our liberty is not overridden.

In addition to this activity on God's part, Wesley goes on to comment on how God uses his revelation in scripture to appeal to fallen people.

To reclaim these, God uses all manner of ways; he tries every avenue of their souls. He applies sometimes to their understanding, showing them the folly of their sins; sometimes to their affections, tenderly exhorting with them for their ingratitude, and even condescending to ask, "What could I have done for" you (consistent with my eternal purpose, not to force you) "which I have not done?" He sometimes intermingles threats....sometimes promises... (*Works*, 10:233)

Notice again that God's speech actions are directed to our understanding and our wills, and it is this, apparently, which restores liberty. Or to put it another way, the restoration of liberty through prevenient grace is not a distinct act above and beyond the acts of enlightening our understanding and enlivening our affections. Rather, liberty is restored in the process of performing those actions. Given sufficient understanding and strength of desire for the good, the power to respond positively to God is restored to our souls. Indeed, positive inducements to respond

favorably are also provided, not unlike the encouragement to obey which God gave Adam and Eve. But our very liberty also makes it possible to resist God by suppressing good desires and turning away from truth.

Wesley's Calvinistic opponents maintained that it detracted from God's glory if it is up to us whether or not we accept his grace. He argued in response that God's justice, mercy, and truth are all more clearly manifested in saving man "by such grace as it is in his power either to concur with, or to resist" rather than irresistibly (*Works*, 10:231). He admitted that sometimes God did work irresistibly, but thought it was a mistake to infer that that was his general way of dealing with people (*Works*, 10:204-205; 254). The choice to accept salvation or not appears, then, to be a matter of libertarian freedom, much like Adam and Eve's original choice of whether or not to obey God.

Let us turn now from "Predestination Calmly Considered" to consider "Thoughts upon Necessity." Wesley begins this essay by posing the question he wants to consider, namely, whether man is self-determined or determined by some other thing or being. He then surveys a range of views which he saw as denying man genuine freedom, including those of Stoicism, the Westminster Confession, David Hartley, Jonathan Edwards, and Lord Kames. Some of these, such as Hartley, frankly denied freedom and responsibility. According to Wesley, he held that "all our thoughts depend upon the vibrations of the fibres of the brain; and of consequence vary, more or less, as these vibrations vary....and consequently our actions...unavoidably follow those vibrations" (*Works*, 10:458). Others, such as Edwards emphasized the "voluntary" nature of our actions, even though those actions are determined by God, and thus continued to maintain human responsibility. Yet another variation is represented by Kames, who acknowledged that we have a natural feeling of freedom and spontaneity, but insisted that feeling is illusory.

While recognizing the distinctions among these authors, Wesley believed all of them shared a similar underlying deficiency, namely, that every one of them "implies the universal necessity of human actions" (*Works*, 10:462). This conclusion was fundamentally unacceptable to Wesley for one reason: if our actions are all determined, "there can be no moral good or evil; there can be neither virtue nor vice, neither good nor bad actions, neither good nor bad passions or tempers" (*Works*, 10:463). If all we do is determined, we do not even act, properly speaking, and nothing we do "is either rewardable or punishable, is either praise or blameworthy" (*Works*, 10:464). For Wesley, this "strikes at the foundation of Scripture" since the latter clearly teaches the "doctrines of a future judgment, heaven and hell" (*Works*, 10:467).

In addition to this general evaluation which he applied to all these theories, he also offered specific criticisms of each distinct view. I will highlight a few of these which are particularly helpful for getting clear on Wesley's view of freedom.

First, let us consider his objection to Edwards's view that men can be rightly punished or rewarded for their actions, even though those actions are determined. For Edwards, an action is free if it is not

coerced. The heart of Wesley's objection is that it is not sufficient for moral responsibility for a man's actions to be voluntary if the will is determined. This distinction is an important one which he does not always clearly recognize. Sometimes he writes as if he thinks theological determinists hold that God forces people to act as they do or overrides their will. Here he recognizes that for Edwards no persons are coerced or forced to act against their will. Rather, all willingly do what they have been determined to do. But for Wesley, problems remain if our wills are determined, and our actions flow necessarily from our wills.

If so, they are no more blameable for that will, than for the actions which follow it. There is no blame if they are under a necessity of willing. There can be no moral good or evil, unless they have liberty as well as will, which is entirely a different thing. And the not adverting to this seems to be the direct occasion of Mr. Edwards's whole mistake (*Works*, 10:467).

Once again it is clear that for Wesley the true seat of freedom is liberty, which he proceeds to define as "the power of choosing either to do or not to do, (commonly called liberty of contradiction,) or to do this or the contrary, good or evil (commonly called liberty of contrariety)."¹⁶

Second, it is noteworthy how Wesley responded to the notion that our sense of freedom might be illusory. To admit this he thought would be to "sink into universal scepticism." All of our sense beliefs would be undermined "if I cannot believe what I feel in myself, namely, that it depends on me, and no other being, whether I shall now open or shut my eyes, move my head hither and thither, or stretch my hand or my foot" (*Works*, 10: 471-472). This was unthinkable for Wesley for the Cartesian reason that it would make God a deceiver. In a different context he expressed the same unshakable confidence as follows: "I am as full certain of this, that I am free with respect to these, to speak or not to speak, to act or not to act, to do this or the contrary, as I am of my own existence" (BEW, 4:24).

Next, Wesley examines the argument that actions arise from motives and that our choices must always be determined by the motive which seems best, upon the whole. Such motives "which seem best" are apparently not understood as strongest felt desires. Rather, they represent one's final judgment as formed by his impressions of things. Wesley distinguished six distinct but connected claims in this theory and denied all of them. Two of these are particularly noteworthy for our concerns. First, he rejected as "absolutely false" the notion that our choices are determined by the motive which appears best upon the whole. "It is flatly contrary to the experience of all mankind. Who may not say on many occasions, *Video meliora*? I know what I do, is not 'best upon the whole?'" 17. Second, he denied that the will necessarily follows the judgment in its preferences. "Indeed it does not. The mind has an intrinsic power of cutting off the connection between the judgment and the will" (*Works*, 10:472).

Finally, it should be noted that Wesley would not concede his account

of freedom even if everything were granted which is contended for by those who say our actions are determined by vibrations of the brain, and the effects of those: "Suppose there be naturally the strongest concatenation of vibrations, sensations, reflections, judgments, passions, actions; cannot [God], in a moment, whenever, and however He pleases, destroy that concatenation?" Wesley is convinced that a God of love not only could, but would, so act to preserve freedom in his human creatures. It cannot be "that he should see the noblest of his creatures under heaven necessitated to evil, and incapable of any relief but from himself, without affording that relief" (*Works*, 10:473)

I take it that Wesley means here to describe a condition of determinism which is even more comprehensive than that of the sinner who suffers from bondage of will without the assistance of prevenient grace. Such a sinner would not be capable of doing true good, but presumably he would not be thoroughly determined in all his actions. He would be free only to sin, but presumably it would be up to him to choose which sins to commit and, moreover, he would be free in matters which are morally and spiritually indifferent. By contrast, the person whose every action was determined by vibrations of his brain would not enjoy even this limited sort of freedom.

At any rate, Wesley describes God's help for persons in this unfortunate condition along the same lines as his account of prevenient grace. He gives them conscience which judges both passions and actions. And he provides the power to be cured of evil for those who so choose. But God will no more necessitate anyone to be happy than he will allow anyone to remain under a necessity of being miserable. Wesley concludes his essay with the following sentence.

I am not careful therefore about the flowing of my blood and spirits, or the vibrations of my brain; being well assured, that, however my spirits may flow, or my nerves and fibres vibrate, the Almighty God of love can control them all, and will (unless I obstinately choose vice and misery) afford me such help, as, in spite of these, will put it into my power to be virtuous and happy for ever.¹⁸

This conclusion, along with the rest of our analysis, confirms what we have seen all along, namely, that Wesley held a strong libertarian view of freedom.

Recall in particular his insistence that determinism is inconsistent with true freedom, along with his conviction that a free act is more than a voluntary one, which distance him from characteristically compatibilist views. Moreover, his repeated insistence that true freedom requires the "power of choosing either to do or not to do" and his deep conviction that such freedom is necessary for moral responsibility echo typical libertarian themes.

I have taken some pains to detail Wesley's commitment to such a view of freedom because it is central to his theodicy, and indeed, to his theology as a whole. The reality of libertarian freedom plays a major

role in Wesley's account of why our world is presently full of evil, even after the coming of Christ. In his sermon "On Divine Providence" he reiterates the scriptural depiction of God as "loving to every man, and his mercy is over all his works," and points out that this entails that God is constantly concerned with the welfare of all his human children. He proceeds to concede, however that: "It is hard to comprehend this; nay, it is hard to believe it, considering the complicated wickedness and the complicated misery which we see on every side" (BEW, 2:540). So why does God not simply eliminate evil by revoking freedom? Wesley answers as follows.

Were human liberty taken away men would be as incapable of virtue as stones. Therefore (with reverence be it spoken) the Almighty himself cannot do this thing. He cannot thus contradict himself, or undo what he has done. He cannot destroy out of the soul of man that image of himself wherein he made him. And without doing this he cannot abolish sin and pain out of the world. But were it to be done it would imply no wisdom at all, but barely a stroke of omnipotence. Whereas all the manifold wisdom of God (as well as his power and goodness) is displayed in governing man as man; not as a stock or a stone, but as an intelligent and free spirit, capable of choosing either good or evil....He commands all things both in heaven and earth to assist man in attaining the end of his being, in working out his own salvation—so far as it can be done without compulsion, without overruling his liberty (BEW, 2:541).

Notice particularly that Wesley, in a manner reminiscent of contemporary free will defenders, emphasizes that if God grants us real freedom, he simply may not be able to rid our world of evil, even though he is almighty.

Wesley wrote this sermon in 1786 and it represents his mature thought on the nature and significance of freedom. It is clear that his earlier reservations about the value of freedom have vanished. While he defended essentially the same view of freedom throughout his career, recall that in his early years he had doubts not only about the rationale for God's giving us such freedom, but also little confidence that we can have much insight into why God allowed evil into his world. Now he is fully convinced that "liberty" is a necessary faculty for significantly free creatures who are to be capable of genuine moral choices and character.

This judgment is crucial for his whole theodicy because it is logically prior to his commitment to *felix culpa*. For not only was the fall an act of libertarian freedom, but such freedom is also necessary to receive the benefits of Christ's death after the fall. Without freedom, there can be no virtue or holiness either before or after the fall. And it is the value of holiness which underwrites the *felix culpa* move, namely, because the fall makes possible higher degrees of holiness than would have been possible without it. The overwhelming love of God as shown in the incarnation and atonement of Christ makes it possible for us to love him more

profoundly and intimately than we could have loved him if we had known him only as Creator. And the deeper our love for God, the higher the levels of holiness to be achieved and enjoyed.

In short, then, Wesley's views on the problem of evil underwent significant development. The somewhat ambivalent free will defense of his early years at Oxford, which insisted only on the minimalist claim that evil is compatible with the divine attributes, blossomed over time into a rather full orb'd theodicy which accented the expansive love of God for his fallen creatures. Libertarian freedom was the central pillar of this theodicy, flanked by the doctrine of an historical fall on the one side, and by *felix culpa* on the other.¹⁹

VI

There remains a large and nagging question for any theodicy which embraces *felix culpa*, particularly if one does so as enthusiastically as Wesley did. In short, the question is this: if the coming of Christ is the reason why God allowed the fall, and is ultimately the solution to the problem of evil, then why have the benefits of Christ's death been received by so few, relatively speaking? Or as he himself put it: "Who can explain why Christianity is not spread as far as sin? Why is not the medicine sent to every place where the disease is found?" (BEW, 2:581). These questions increase in urgency if one maintains, as did Wesley, that God's providence is designed to do everything possible to bring all people to salvation. This difficulty is mitigated by appeal to libertarian freedom, but hardly eliminated.

Wesley was aware of this problem and it is apparent that he struggled with it. In his sermons, he not infrequently catalogs the numerous instances in which the Church has failed in its mission to the world, particularly in its failure to live in a holy fashion before the world in order to demonstrate the truth of the gospel (cf BEW, 2:452-470). This, he thinks, largely accounts for the failure of the Church to win the world to Christ. Nevertheless, he had a hopeful view of the future, and was confident that the Church is not forever doomed to repeat its history of failure. And this confidence plays a vital role in his theodicy.

With evangelistic zeal, Wesley spelled this out most fully in a visionary sermon entitled "The General Spread of the Gospel." Here too he begins by describing the dismal condition of the human race on a global scale. He cites the statistics of one of his contemporaries who concluded "that only five in thirty are so much as nominally Christians!" (BEW, 2:486). He goes on to describe the ignorance, the savagery, and the moral corruption which covered so much of the earth, despite the fact that the "medicine" for the healing of such ills has come in Christ. For him, this was perhaps the most poignant aspect of the problem of evil. Here is how he states it, and here is how he believes it will be resolved.

How is it possible to reconcile this with either the wisdom or goodness of God? And what can give ease to a thoughtful mind under so melancholy a prospect? What but the consideration

that things will not always be so; that another scene will soon be opened. God will be jealous of his honour; he will arise and maintain his own cause....He will 'give' his son 'the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession'. 'The earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth, shall fill every soul of man (BEW, 2:488).

This is Wesley's eschatological vision, and this is the capstone of his theodicy. He envisions a great renewal in which the entire world will be converted to Christianity. As a result, the sin and misery which now cover the globe will be displaced by holiness and happiness.

Notice that Wesley sees this as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, as indicated by his quotation of Psalm 2:8 and Habakkuk 2:14. This is perhaps a further aspect of his understanding of the *felix culpa* theme. If so, then his claim is that God foresaw that He could accomplish this marvelous renewal in the far off future and this helps to explain how He knew it would be better, on the whole, to allow the fall. On this interpretation, the future great revival would not be merely a matter of hopeful speculation, but a matter of divine foreknowledge and revelation. If so, it makes more intelligible Wesley's hearty endorsement of the *felix culpa* doctrine.

Nevertheless, his eschatological proposal raises numerous questions, as Wesley readily recognized. No sooner had he articulated this magnificent scene than he began to confront the incredulity which he knew would arise in the minds of his readers. Just how is God going to achieve such a marvelous feat? He quickly dismissed the notion that it would be accomplished by an act of irresistible power on God's part. The reason, of course, is that to do so would destroy human liberty. This is out of the question for Wesley. If God were willing to do this, He would have eliminated all evil long ago. This means, then, that God will achieve this great renewal without in any way undercutting human freedom. Instead, true freedom will be enhanced.

There seems to be a plain, simple way of removing this difficulty without entangling ourselves in any subtle, metaphysical disquisitions....May we not then conceive how he *will* work on the souls of men in times to come by considering how he *does* work *now*?...You know how God wrought in *your own* soul when he first enabled you to say, 'The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' He did not take away your understanding, but enlightened and strengthened it. He did not destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty, your power of choosing good or evil; he did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you, like Mary, *chose* the better part....Now in the same manner as God *has* converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he

can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world. And it is as easy to him to convert a world as one individual soul (BEW, 2:489-490).

Notice Wesley's characteristic emphasis on the understanding and the affections (will) as the faculties which God directly acts upon in performing his converting and transforming work. He believes God can enlighten, strengthen, and invigorate these without in any way overriding liberty.

In the next few pages Wesley sketches a remarkable scenario for the conversion of the entire world. He begins with the Methodist revival and takes this as a model of how the gospel might spread around the globe. He envisions a revival of true Christianity spreading from Protestant communities to Roman Catholics; then to the Jewish community, from there to Islamic countries, and finally to pagan lands. He even dares to dream that: "Last of all the wise and learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will be convinced that they are fools; will 'be converted and become as little children, and enter into the kingdom of God'."! (BEW, 2:494).

Wesley's key assumption here is that when Christianity is truly demonstrated through holy living and truly preached through the power of the Holy Spirit, then no one would have any reason or motive to reject it. This is evident from his following remarks.

The grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of the Christians, the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words. And as their words will be clothed with divine energy, attended with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, those of them that fear God will soon take knowledge of the Spirit whereby the Christians speak....The holy lives of the Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist; seeing the Christians steadily and uniformly practise what is agreeable to the laws written in their hearts, their prejudices will quickly die away, and they will gladly receive 'the truth as it is in Jesus' (BEW, 2:495-496).

Such powerful preaching and holy living also serve to have an impact on both the understanding and the will. It is as if seeing holiness lived out provides unbelievers for the first time a true understanding of what Christianity really is. This would naturally appeal to their affections as well for Wesley believed that the only way to achieve the happiness which all persons desire is to become holy. This connection between holiness and happiness is latent in the fact that the "holy lives of the Christians" agree with "the laws written in their hearts".

Wesley does not so much as suggest that there would be some who would continue to refuse to repent when faced with such impressive evidence, or otherwise qualify his all embracing account of the conversion of the entire world. Indeed, if God can convert a whole world as

easily as he can convert a single soul—with libertarian freedom intact!—then why should he suggest that any would continue to hold out?

It is perhaps tempting to take Wesley's visionary language as nothing more than revivalist rhetoric which he did not intend with full seriousness. So construed, this sermon is merely an inspirational piece to rally the troops for the cause of evangelism, but not a sober theological proposal. This might be plausible were it not for the fact that Wesley ties his eschatological vision so tightly into his whole theodicy. He could easily have given an inspirational call to engage in evangelism without making this connection. But as he sees it, the ultimate success of the evangelistic enterprise is necessary to vindicate God in the face of the current predominance of evil. Wesley underlines this in the conclusion of his sermon where he reiterates in striking terms his vision of "universal holiness and happiness," and states again how crucial this hope is for an adequate theodicy: "This I apprehend to be the answer, yea, *the only full and satisfactory answer* that can be given, to the objection against the wisdom and goodness of God, taken from the present state of the world" (BEW, 2:499, my emphasis; cf 466).

VII

Given such unqualified claims, the question inevitably arises of whether Wesley was some sort of universalist. The answer to this question is not simple. If we take his most explicit pronouncements on the subject, the answer is surely no. Earlier in his career, for instance, universalism was one of the points of controversy between him and the Moravians, and he was clearly critical of the universalistic tendencies he discerned in their theology. Moreover, in some of his sermons which are directly relevant to the issue, such as "Of Hell" and "Dives and Lazarus", he defends a typical traditional view of hell as a place of eternal misery which will have many occupants (BEW, 3:30-44; 4:5-18).

Noting this, however, does not settle the question. For it is possible that Wesley is simply inconsistent on this point. His explicit teaching on hell may not cohere with the logic of his theodicy. If so, he would have to modify his views at some point to restore consistency. But merely to note the inconsistency does not establish where the modification should be made. Since Wesley is not here to tell us where he would revise his views, the best we can do is to try to determine which of the two incompatible positions lies closer to the heart of his theology as a whole, and which therefore, he would not be willing to give up if pressed.

But perhaps we are moving too quickly in suggesting that the logic of his theodicy leads to universalism. Does universalism really follow from his belief that at some time in the future the whole world will be converted to Christianity? Does he not mean only that all those persons *then living* will be converted? It does not follow from this that all persons in all ages will be saved. Those who have died in unbelief in ages past are surely lost, according to Wesley.

But once again there is a question about consistency. Does Wesley's eschatological scenario have any implications about how God can deal

with persons who have died in earlier generations? If it does, there is a good case to be made that his theodicy entails the possibility of universalism, and that his theology as a whole is *implicitly* universalist.

Here is the basic argument. If God can at some time in the future convert the entire world, and do so as easily as He can convert an individual soul, then it seems to follow that He can likewise actually convert all persons who have ever lived. Moreover, Wesley believes that God does everything He can, short of overriding anyone's freedom, to save all people. Unless he believes that people in the past were more perverse, or more invulnerable to God's grace than the future generation which will be fully converted, there does not seem to be any reason why God could not save all of them as well.

Or to put it another way, if persons in the past who have died in unbelief would have been converted if they had lived in the future generation which is wholly converted, then it seems that in some sense they are lost because of the contingencies of when they lived. They are on the unfortunate side of what Linda Zagzebski (modifying Bernard Williams's well known phrase) has called "religious luck".²⁰ Due to circumstances or conditions outside their control, they do not have as good an opportunity for salvation as those persons in the future generation who will experience optimal conditions for salvation. This hardly seems fair, particularly if God loves all people and equally desires the salvation of all.

Wesley was aware of this sort of problem and recognized it as serious challenge to Christian revelation. Here is how he posed it.

How many are from their very infancy hedged in with such relations that they seem to have no chance (as some speak), no possibility of being useful to themselves or others? Why are they, antecedent to their own choice, entangled in such conditions? Why are hurtful people so cast in their way that they know not how to escape them?...Why is it then that so vast a majority of mankind are, so far as we can judge, cut off from all means, all possibility of holiness, even from their mother's womb? For instance: what possibility is there that a Hottentot, a New Zealander, or an inhabitant of Nova Zembla, if he lives and dies there, should ever know what holiness means? Or consequently ever attain it?...From the time he comes into the world till he goes out of it again he seems to be under a dire necessity of living in all ungodliness and unrighteousness. But how is this? How can this be the case with so many millions of the souls that God has made? Art thou not the God 'of all the ends of the earth, and of them that remain in the broad sea'? (BEW, 2:582-583)

It does not seem right to Wesley that some, indeed many, people should be deprived of the most important thing in life, namely, a full opportunity for salvation. Many are deprived of the positive influences which encourage godliness, and many more seem to have no chance at all even to hear the gospel.

Although Wesley casts the problem primarily in geographical terms, it can also be stated in terms of chronology, psychology, and so on. The basic issue is one of the apparent inequality of opportunity to be saved. How this can be the case since God loves all persons in the entire world, and cares equally for all, is acknowledged by Wesley to be a deep mystery. In this sermon, he suggests that the only way we can avoid the force of this objection to Christian revelation is by “resolving all into the unsearchable wisdom of God, together with a deep conviction of our ignorance and inability to fathom his counsels” (BEW, 2:583).

I want to suggest, however, that there are grounds in Wesley’s own theology for saying more than this. In particular, I think he could argue that if there will be a measure of grace available in the future sufficient to convert the whole world without destroying libertarian freedom, then God could find a way to bestow such grace upon all persons who have ever lived. This would solve the problem of unfairness and unequal opportunity which he described in the passage above.

This suggestion has additional force when we reflect on Wesley’s strong conviction—over against Calvinism—that God desires to save all persons, and when we further take into account his emphasis on God’s marvelous resources for reaching people. Consider his response to the problem of how the heathen will hear the gospel in the future great renewal.

And can he ever want means of sending [preachers]? No: were there no other means, he ‘can take them by his Spirit’ (as he did Ezekial), or by ‘his angel’, as he did Philip, and set them down wheresoever it pleaseth him. Yea, he can find out a thousand ways, to foolish man unknown. And he surely will: for heaven and earth may pass away; but his word shall not pass away. He will ‘give his Son the uttermost part of the earth for his possession’ (BEW, 2:497).

If God can use extraordinary means to make sure people hear the gospel in the future, there seems to be no reason why He could not do so for others as well, including those who have lived in the past. And given God’s salvific will, should not Wesley argue that “he surely will”?²¹

VIII

Let us suppose now that God can and will offer optimal grace to all persons. Does it not follow, given some of Wesley’s other assumptions that all would be saved? In particular, as noted above, Wesley’s key assumption is that no one would have any reason or motive to reject the gospel when it is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit and faithfully lived by those who preach it. Such impressive evidence of the truth of the gospel would break down all resistance, so that all would freely—in the libertarian sense—embrace it. It is striking how similar in spirit and substance his argument is to that of contemporary universalists such as John Hick and Thomas Talbott. Compare Talbott’s claim that there is no

intelligible explanation for why anyone would ultimately choose damnation.

What could possibly qualify as a motive for such a choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly 'free' to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself....Because our choice of roads at any given instant is truly free in the libertarian sense, we are genuinely responsible for the choices we make; but because no illusion can endure forever, the end is foreordained.²²

The choice of evil, then, is finally a matter of deception and illusion. When the illusion is broken, all persons will eventually choose God and the good.

It is noteworthy that persons who hold this view often argue in the same vein that traditional views of the fall are likewise incoherent. If Adam was as well endowed with understanding and the knowledge of God as the Augustinian tradition claims, then he would have had no motive for rebelling against God.

As I pointed out above, in at least one of his accounts of the fall, Wesley insisted that Adam "chose to do his own will rather than the will of his Creator. He 'was not deceived', but knowingly and deliberately rebelled against his Father and King" (BEW, 2:410). Now since Wesley holds that a being as well endowed as Adam could deliberately rebel against God, should he not allow that some persons could continue to rebel even when the gospel is lived and preached before them with full power and integrity?

Not necessarily. Perhaps Wesley might appeal to *felix culpa* to preserve consistency. He might argue that it is possible to rebel against God when he is revealed only as *Father* and *King*, but that no one can finally resist God when He is fully disclosed as our gracious *Redeemer*, who gave his life for us.

But even if Wesley's universalism is compatible with his account of the fall, there are still problems in reconciling it with his strong account of libertarian freedom. As he enlarges on the future great renewal, he seems to lose touch with the serious obstacle posed by human freedom, despite his explicit acknowledgement of it, and to think that anytime God chose, He could "arise and maintain his own cause" and convert the whole world. Perhaps, however, this is unfair to Wesley. Perhaps the picture he means to paint is one of gradual renewal and revival which must reach a certain mature stage before even God Himself can convert the whole world. In other words, God has chosen to work through human agents, and their cooperation, especially through holy living and evangelism, is the necessary groundwork to create the favorable conditions in which all the world can be converted.

Even granting this, the issue remains of whether Wesley reckoned

sufficiently, in this particular sermon, with the factor of human perversity. Here he seems, like Hick and Talbott, to view evil and unbelief as ultimately a matter of ignorance, illusion, and misunderstanding. Once these are eliminated, belief naturally follows. The question we must ask, however, is how this squares with his own insistence on the possibility of perversity as an implication of true freedom. Recall for instance his emphatic denial of the notion that we always act on the motive which appears best on the whole. He cited Ovid in this connection and maintained that we can knowingly choose evil against our better judgment. Now surely the choice of salvation is the best on the whole even if it means acting against our sinful desires. So if we can choose what we know is not the best choice, we can choose to reject salvation. Wesley made this explicit in the conclusion of the same essay, where he argued that God would never leave us in a condition of being unable to choose happiness over misery, regardless of what special actions he would have to perform to assure this. Despite such assistance from God, he recognized the possibility that some may "obstinately choose vice and misery" rather than their own happiness.

If this is a real possibility, it is at odds with Wesley's eschatological speculations. To put it another way, pressure from the central pillar of Wesley's theodicy (libertarian freedom) seems to produce cracks in the capstone of his theodicy (his vision of the future great renewal).

But on the other hand, Wesley's account of prevenient grace raises questions as to whether he should insist on the possibility of irredeemable perversity. Those who argue for the possibility of not choosing what is judged best on the whole typically explain this phenomenon in terms of desires which are in conflict with one's best judgment. For instance, Richard Swinburne argues that we do not always choose what we view as the overall best, but remarks that: "In the absence of beliefs about worth in conflict with desire, agents will act on their strongest desire."²³ Now in light of Wesley's belief that prevenient grace includes God's giving us "good desires," does he have any basis to maintain that some could still perversely refuse their own happiness?

Presumably Wesley means at least that such desires counteract evil desires and restore persons to a condition of moral equilibrium. Indeed, they may even provide some positive inclination toward the good, as noted above. And beyond this, when their understanding is enlightened by grace, it reinforces such good desires by indicating that holiness is the way to happiness and that holiness can only be achieved by submitting to God. For all this, however, it is still up to liberty to decide. But if this is Wesley's picture, and these persons were, moreover, surrounded by Christians living consistently holy lives as in his eschatological scenario, it is admittedly difficult to conceive of how anyone could "obstinately choose vice and misery." For recall that Wesley believed that the holy lives of Christians would be "agreeable to the law written in their hearts" and that this would have the effect that "their prejudices will quickly die away."

This suggests that the most truly free choices would be ones which flowed from desires deep within their own hearts, desires put there by

God at creation. Such desires would be elicited afresh when prejudices were cleared away by a true understanding of what Christianity really is. Genuine freedom would then be a matter, as Wesley put it, of "gladly" receiving the truth as it is in Jesus. It would consist, finally, of achieving a profound consistency of character which would result when our understanding and will were aligned in such a fashion that we would exercise our liberty naturally and spontaneously to act as God originally intended.

On this interpretation, Wesley's libertarianism would ultimately be a freedom to choose God and the happiness which comes only though gladly accepting his grace. The option of obstinate refusal would be viable only up to a point, namely, the point at which sufficient understanding were achieved to discern the correlation between holiness and happiness along with the recognition that only Christ can make us holy.

But return again to Wesley's claim noted above that: "The mind has an intrinsic power of cutting off the connection between the judgment and the will." Does this not raise the possibility that one could refuse to allow the insight received through the understanding to affect the will? This would amount to an act of self-deception, a choice to refuse to allow what one knows at one level fully to "sink in" and affect the rest of one's personality. It would amount to a refusal to attend to what the understanding has delivered and, in effect, to ignore it.

This may be the fundamental issue at stake here. Do we have the power to close our eyes to truth, to deceive ourselves indefinitely and keep our desires misguided in such a way that we forever prefer evil, despite all that grace can offer? Our answer to this question will determine whether the tension we have noted in Wesley's theodicy should be resolved in the direction of universal salvation or eternal damnation.²⁴

IX

Let us come back for a moment to the more general question of how Wesley himself might have modified his views if faced with the apparent inconsistency between the implications of his theodicy and his explicit preaching on eternal hell. The answer to this depends, I think, on how deeply he was committed to his theodicy in general, and in particular to his account of how God will be able to convert the whole world. The sermons in which Wesley expresses these views come from his later years, and presumably reflect his mature thought. Moreover, his reflections on theodicy appear in several related sermons, so they are not isolated to only a sermon or two. Also, Wesley was concerned his whole career to articulate a compelling vision of the goodness of God. In view of these considerations, a case can be made that Wesley's theodicy lies very close to the heart of his theology.

It is also worth asking whether Wesley might have been aware of the universalist implications of his theodicy. Given his commitment to logic and his facility with it (he taught logic at Oxford for a period and even published a small text on the subject), it is hard to imagine that these implications never occurred to him. But perhaps he never articulated

them because of their speculative or controversial nature. Consider in this light a passage from a letter he wrote in 1771 to Joseph Benson, a Methodist who had universalist sympathies: "Likewise think whether you can abstain from speaking of Universal Salvation and Mr. Fletcher's late discovery. The Methodists in general could not bear this. It would create huge debate and confusion."²⁵ This suggests the possibility that Wesley never drew out the universalist implications of his theodicy for pragmatic reasons. He feared that it would be disruptive for the Methodists and for the revival in general. This is, of course, only a guess and not much hangs on it.

What I am certain of is that Wesley's theodicy deserves far more consideration than it has received to this point. He managed to develop a theodicy which was at once biblically motivated, theologically rich, daring in its speculations, and deeply practical in its implications. Indeed, he advocated a practical theodicy long before the term became popular. Wesley is best known for his work as an evangelist, and his most significant theological contribution is his development of the doctrine of entire sanctification. Moreover, his evangelism was constantly accompanied by vigorous engagement with the ills of society. In a fascinating way, Wesley has shown how relevant socially engaged evangelism and holy living are to the problem of evil.

Writing about evil and trying as best we can to make sense of it are surely part of our responsibility. Wesley's life is a powerful demonstration that those who engage this task need not be insensitive to the harsh reality of evil in our world. Wrestling with theodicy was in his case an integral component of a life wholly given to doing everything possible to further the day when "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea," and God's goodness and power shall be fully vindicated.²⁶

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NOTES

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1:104. This Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's Works was begun by Oxford University Press and was continued by Abingdon Press. The first four volumes in the series, which contain Wesley's sermons, and from which this quote was taken, were not the volumes initially produced by Oxford. Most references to Wesley will be in the text in parentheses and will be from the Bicentennial Edition (BEW). There will also be several references to material in the 1872 edition of his works, edited by Thomas Jackson, material yet to appear in the new edition. This material will be cited as *Works*.

2. Thomas Oden, however, has recently argued that Wesley's theology is more systematic than generally has been recognized. He offers an interesting demonstration of this, including a section on theodicy, in his book *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

3. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977. Revised Edition

4. For a discussion of King's theodicy, see Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*,

148-154.

5. Barry Bryant, "John Wesley on the Origins of Evil," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30:1, Spring 1995, 113. For his full discussion of this point, see pp. 113-124.

6. BEW, 2:399. Wesley's target in these remarks was Soame Jenyns who had argued for the necessity of evil in his *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*. See the note in BEW, 2:398. This is reminiscent of his earlier rejection of the same view as defended by Archbishop King.

7. *Evil and the God of Love*, 177.

8. There is a distinction between saying that a certain good *outweighs* an evil, or a competing good, and saying that one is *justified* in allowing the evil because of the good. The latter claim must also be sustained in order to provide an adequate theodicy. Otherwise it could be argued that God treats some people unfairly in allowing a certain evil even if that evil is part of a world whose good outweighs the good of another world. Although Wesley did not draw this distinction explicitly, I think he covers both concerns in these two propositions. This distinction was drawn to my attention by Michael Peterson.

9. BEW, 2:474. See also 2:409; 540-541; 4:22. Richard B. Steele claims Wesley did not identify the will in terms of affections. See his "Gracious Affections" and "True Virtue" According to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley (Metuchen, N.J., & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1994), 310-311. Steele misreads the passage from *Works*, 10:468 which he cites in support of this claim. Wesley's point in the passage in question is that it is a mistake to collapse will into affections if this means denying the will is a distinct power, a power which Wesley thinks should more properly be named "liberty" to avoid such confusions.

10. BEW, 4:295. According to Outler, Wesley is here disputing the notion that the will is determined, as in a balance, by the heaviest weight, i.e. strongest motive, a notion associated with the infamous case of Buridan's ass. See n. 13 on this page.

11. BEW, 2:403; cf. 410. Wesley's verse is a paraphrase of Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ix. 998-999.

12. Those familiar with Hick's broad distinction between Augustinian and Irenaean theodicies may wonder which of these two categories Wesley's view of the fall would better fit. In my view, his account is broadly Augustinian but has hints of the latter view. His overall theodicy may be more compatible with the latter view as well. I will not pursue this further here.

13. Note that references in the text to these two pieces are from the 1872 edition of his *Works*. Both of these pieces can also be found in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 425-491.

14. According to Outler in *John Wesley*, 472.

15. Notice that here, as in the previous passage quoted, Wesley speaks of "free-will" rather than his more characteristic "liberty." For a discussion of prevenient grace and its relation to freedom, see Irwin W. Reist, "John Wesley's View of Man: A Study in Free Grace Versus Free Will," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7:1, 25-35.

16. *Works*, 10: 468-469; cf BEW, 4:24. For the historical antecedents of Wesley's distinction between liberty of contradiction and liberty of contrariety, see Outler's n. 19 in the latter citation.

17. *Works*, 10:472. Wesley's Latin phrase is apparently a reference to Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk. VII, l. 20.

18. *Works*, 10:474. It is somewhat surprising that Wesley doesn't invoke

his belief in soul-body dualism to rebut the alleged determinism flowing from brain vibrations and so on. cf also pp. 469-470. His solution in the passage cited seems to be some sort of occasionalism. But perhaps his point is that even if dualism weren't true, God's goodness would still assure our freedom. For examples of his dualism see BEW, 2:282-283, 405-406; 4:283. See especially 4:21-23.

19. Doubts have been raised about the adequacy of Wesley's account of freedom by Richard B. Steele in "*Gracious Affection*" and "*True Virtue*" According to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, 306-314. I think Wesley's account can be defended but I do not have the space to do so here.

20. Linda Zagzebski, "Religious Luck," *Faith and Philosophy* 11, July 1994, 397-413. I have dealt with this problem in *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 85-93.

21. It should not be inferred from what I have said that Wesley assumed that all unevangelized persons are lost. He had a more hopeful view of such persons than many traditional theologians. See BEW, 3:295-296; 494-495.

22. Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7, January 1990, 37, 39.

23. Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1986), 117.

24. I have argued, against Talbott, that libertarian freedom requires the power to deceive ourselves and therefore the power to choose evil deliberately and decisively in *Hell*, 113-138. For Talbott's response, see his review of my book in *Faith and Philosophy* 12, 143-148.

25. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. John Telford, (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 5:228.

26. I am grateful to several people for help in writing this paper. Edward Madden read an earlier version and offered insightful criticism and advice. My colleague Ken Collins, a specialist in Wesley studies, read the paper and provided helpful information and evaluation. I benefitted from a stimulating discussion of the paper at a conference at St. Thomas University with Billy Abraham, Frank Gourley, Sandy Menssen, Russ Pannier, Paddy Roche and Tom Sullivan. Marilyn Adams's incisive comments on earlier versions of the paper have been invaluable.