

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 25 | Issue 1

Article 6

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1-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Diller, Kevin (2008) "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World? Questions for Alvin Plantinga's Felix Culpa Theodicy," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20082516

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol25/iss1/6>

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# ARE SIN AND EVIL NECESSARY FOR A REALLY GOOD WORLD? QUESTIONS FOR ALVIN PLANTINGA'S *FELIX CULPA* THEODICY

Kevin Diller

Arguably, the most philosophically nuanced defense of a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, born out of serious theological reflection, is to be found in Alvin Plantinga's recent article entitled "Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'" In this paper I look at Plantinga's argument for the necessity of evil as a means to God's far greater ends and raise four objections to it. The arguments I give are aimed at the theological adequacy of explaining the emergence of evil as a functional good. I conclude that Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* approach fails to demonstrate the necessity of evil for heightened intimacy with God, and collides with agent-centered considerations. Moreover, I argue that all *Felix Culpa* theodicies reverse the apparent value God places on means and ends in the economy of salvation, while lending to evil a potentially morally and theologically distorting rational legitimacy.

O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good; more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought forth  
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done, and occasioned; or rejoice  
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring;  
To God more glory, more good-will to Men  
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.

(*Paradise Lost*, xii. 469–78)<sup>1</sup>

In the words of Adam, who has been given by the Archangel a view of God's redemptive plans, this is the *locus classicus* of Milton's expression of the *Felix Culpa*, the fortunate fall or happy sin, in response to which God brings about a greater paradise than the one lost—a

far happier place  
Than this of Eden, and far happier days.<sup>2</sup>





Its presence in Milton may serve to explain why there was discussion of *Felix Culpa* theodicies in the Journal of English Literary History well before it drew the interest of twentieth century philosophers of religion. The Latin expression, 'O Felix Culpa,' has for centuries been found in an ancient hymn incorporated into the Roman Catholic Easter Vigil liturgy, which at length proclaims:

O assuredly necessary sin of Adam, which has been blotted out by the death of Christ!

O fortunate fault, which has merited such and so great a Redeemer!<sup>3</sup>

In Leibnitz's *Theodicy* he states,

I have shown that the ancients called Adam's fall *Felix Culpa*, a happy sin, because it had been retrieved with immense advantage by the incarnation of the Son of God, who has given to the universe something nobler than anything that ever would have been among creatures except for this.<sup>4</sup>

In his 1966, *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick affirms the blessedness of the fall which makes possible our growth and moral transformation.<sup>5</sup> In Paul Helm's 1993, *The Providence of God*, he endorses the *Felix Culpa* approach, explaining that the fall is a 'happy fault,' "because it, and it alone, makes possible the divine redemption from which the blessings of pardon and renewal follow."<sup>6</sup> Arguably, however, the most philosophically nuanced defense of a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, born out of serious theological reflection, is to be found in Alvin Plantinga's recent article entitled "Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'"<sup>7</sup> It is this articulation of a *Felix Culpa* theodicy that I wish to analyze and question. Plantinga's thoughts warrant close and receptive consideration as his contributions to this and other areas of interaction between philosophy and theology are in these fields 'towering and magnificent goods.' In Plantinga's presentation, he puts forward his main argument and then handles some anticipated objections. In this paper, I attempt to summarize the core of Plantinga's argument and then raise some objections both for Plantinga's formulation and for *Felix Culpa* theodicies in general.

### *Plantinga's Version of the Felix Culpa Theodicy*

Advocating any theodicy whatsoever is a new move for Plantinga. He has long argued for a free-will defense but drew a clear distinction between *defense* and *theodicy*. A defense, merely undercuts the argument that the Christian view of God is inconsistent with the existence of evil. A theodicy gives an answer to the question, "what is the source of the evil we find, and why does God permit it?"<sup>8</sup> In his 1983 "Self-Profile" right before his move to Notre Dame, Plantinga says he has never seen a convincing theodicy and that, "a Christian must therefore admit that he doesn't know why God permits the evils this world displays."<sup>9</sup> He appears to maintain this position right up through *Warranted Christian Belief*, which in fact contains in its



closing chapter all of the elements of his *Felix Culpa* approach.<sup>10</sup> His strategy here, nevertheless, is still only to defend against a potential defeater for Christian belief. He refrains from presenting it as a theodicy. In a note included in this final chapter of *Warranted Christian Belief* and referenced again in his *Felix Culpa* article, Plantinga offers a quotation from Abraham Kuyper which provides some confirmation that a *Felix Culpa* theodicy is (from a Dutch Reformed point of view anyway) a safe theological option. The excerpt from Kuyper is as follows:

The angels of God have no knowledge of sin, hence also they have no knowledge of forgiveness, hence again they have no knowledge of that tender love that is formed from forgiveness. Nor have they that richer knowledge of God which springs from this tenderer affection. They stand as strangers in the face of it, and therefore says the Apostle that, with respect to this mystery, the angels are, as it were, jealously desirous 'to look into it.'<sup>11</sup>

The key point in Kuyper, in Plantinga's development of the argument, and in the Easter liturgy itself is the notion that sin is necessary to achieving God's intended greater goods. The chaos caused by creaturely rebellion is the unavoidable collateral damage of a project to bring about good conditions that far outweigh the losses incurred.

Plantinga's argument progresses from a discussion of the comparative value of possible worlds. The value or disvalue of a possible world is a calculation based on an aggregate weighting of the relative values and disvalues of the good and bad states of affairs in that world (p. 5). Creaturely goods and creaturely evils are factored in the equation along with all other value-measurable states of affairs. There are, however, some states of affairs that are of exceedingly high value, such that the balance of the equation is irreversibly tipped towards the positive. No amount of creaturely evil could outweigh it. One of these states of affairs is the existence of God which single-handedly gives a world unlimited value (p. 9). And because God is a necessary being, thus existing in all possible worlds, there is no possible world that is not a world of unlimited value—and therefore, "every possible world is a very good world." It might be interesting to think about the value of an argument that stopped there, but Plantinga is looking for more than just a defense of God's goodness. "Christian philosophers should also turn to a different task: that of *understanding the evil* our world displays from a Christian perspective" (p. 5, emphasis mine).

In Plantinga's view, although all possible worlds are such that God exists and are therefore worlds of unlimited value, some are better than others (p. 9). There is in fact a second great-making feature of some possible worlds: the "towering and magnificent good of divine incarnation and atonement" (p. 9). God's decision to become incarnate and redeem sinful creatures was an act of free grace. There are, therefore, possible worlds in which sinful creatures are not redeemed. Such worlds would still be very good worlds; since, in all possible worlds, God exists. But worlds containing incarnation<sup>12</sup> and atonement would be far better still. In fact, "any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any without it" (p. 10).<sup>13</sup> Once



again, no amount of creaturely good or evil can compare with the value of this state of affairs. Plantinga seems to suggest that its unrivaled value has a two-fold derivation: first, and foremostly in his exposition, it is derived from its being an unsurpassable display of love (p. 7), and second, from the fact that it not only effects salvation, but enables a greater intimacy or fellowship with God than would have been possible without the sin and suffering (pp. 18–19). The conclusion of all of this is quite obvious. In order to have incarnation and atonement, there needs to be a state of affairs for which atonement is required. So, “a necessary condition of atonement is sin and evil” (p. 12). Therefore we can conclude, “sin and evil is a necessary condition of the value of every really good possible world. O Felix Culpa indeed!” (p. 12). This argument is a new species from Plantinga in the genus of responses to the problem of evil. This is a theodicy, not merely a defense, not merely a defeater defeater, but an explanation for why God allows evil—a reason for evil, that does not remove all the perplexity, but at a general level gives us an understanding for why it exists.

In addition to the theodicy, Plantinga proposes that this explanation sheds light on other related matters. Most significantly, it shows that the Supralapsarians were right to argue that the decree to save precedes the decree to permit the fall. The fall was a regrettably necessary part of the broader, and in that sense logically prior, decision to enhance the world through incarnation and atonement.<sup>14</sup>

In the later part of his essay, Plantinga defends his proposed theodicy against a number of objections. Possibly the most significant clarification that comes out of his engagement is an argument for the instrumental value of suffering. Suffering is not just a necessary byproduct of the plan to effectuate incarnation and atonement, but it also allows us to have a kind of intimacy and solidarity with Christ that would not otherwise have been possible (pp. 18–19).

Though Plantinga raises a number of other interesting issues in his exposition, this brief summary highlights the key features of his argument. The great-making value of incarnation and atonement has a dual aspect, providing both an unparalleled display of love and an enhancement to human intimacy with God. The benefits depend on incarnation and atonement, which in turn depend on the emergence of sin and evil in the world. Were it not for sin, therefore, this world would miss out on benefits that incalculably surpass the costs. This leads to the conclusion: ‘O happy sin.’

### *Objections to Plantinga's Version of the Felix Culpa Theodicy*

#### *1. The Towering Good of Incarnation Requires no Fall*

Plantinga reasons that a world with incarnation and atonement must contain evil, since atonement implies that there is sin that needs atoning for. But if we consider the incarnation alone it is not clear that evil is a prerequisite. While it may be true that atonement requires incarnation, it is certainly not clear that a world that contains the incarnation must be a world that contains evil and atonement. It may be argued that incarnation is a necessary part of God's taking *human* suffering on himself, but it is not clear that incarnation requires suffering,<sup>15</sup> nor is it clear that God's purposes in becoming human were exhausted by those which involve



suffering. Thomas Aquinas, in response to the question "whether, if man had not sinned, God would have become incarnate?"; responds that "even had sin not existed, God *could* have become incarnate."<sup>16</sup> To what extent does this impact Plantinga's argument? At no place does Plantinga seem to hang his argument on the incarnation alone. The incarnation is significant to the argument in that it makes more explicit one aspect of divine condescension that contributes to the whole magnificent enactment of sacrificial love, and Christ's human suffering and death would have been impossible without it.

Plantinga is surely right to single out the incarnation as a great-making feature of the world. But what makes the incarnation of great-making value to the world may also have to do with its significant value outside of the part that it plays strictly in our redemption from sin. In becoming human God creates an opportunity for human intimacy and fellowship with God that would not otherwise be possible. The New Testament seems to advance the notion that, because God became human, believers are grafted together *in* Christ, and enabled thereby to commune with God in a way that would otherwise have been humanly impossible. If something like this is the case, then it is by the incarnation that we are, "invited to join the charmed circle of the Trinity itself" (p. 18). It may not be therefore, as Plantinga—citing Edwards—suggests, that it is *primarily* by virtue of our suffering that greater intimacy with God becomes possible.<sup>17</sup> Neither is it certain—following Kuyper—that this intimacy can *only* be known by those once lost who experience forgiveness and rescue. It is extremely difficult to imagine what might have been, if sin and evil had never arisen. The fact is we are those once lost who now experience forgiveness and rescue. The story of the enactment of God's sacrificial love is the one in which we find ourselves and at the heart of our worship is a reenactment and participation in the *broken* body and *spilled* blood of our Lord. Yes, the eucharist would not be a proclamation of Christ's death if it had not been for sin and the atonement. But this proclamation of his death is only "until he comes," after which intimacy with Christ will presumably continue and intensify. While it may be true that in our suffering we are able to participate in the sufferings of Christ, it does not follow that there is a unique quality and value to this kind of intimacy or avenue to intimacy that could not otherwise be achieved, perhaps by the incarnation alone, without suffering and evil.<sup>18</sup> The body of Christ may have been *given* to us, without needing to be *broken* for us.

I would propose that, with *or without* the fall, the incarnation might serve as God's means of drawing us into the kind of closer communion with him that transforms us and our relationships. Additionally, incarnation alone is a towering and magnificent act of divine condescension and self-giving, incommensurate with creaturely goods and evils. If this is so, could a world with incarnation and no fall be just as good as world with atonement that included suffering and evil?<sup>19</sup> I mentioned that in Plantinga's theodicy the unrivaled value of a world with incarnation and atonement has a two-fold derivation. The second of the two was the way in which sin and suffering enable a greater intimacy or fellowship with God than would otherwise have been possible. But this benefit of greater



human intimacy with God may be won for us by the incarnation alone, which in no way requires sin and evil.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. *The Value Assumption of the Atonement and Relationship with God*

If we remove from calculation any reference to the incarnation alone, we are still left with the central and singularly sufficient component of Plantinga's theodicy. The atonement requires the fall, but the atonement is well worth the fall. The atoning work of God in Christ is an act of such profound and costly divine love that it stands above all other imaginable values (p. 10) and outweighs all other creaturely disvalues. At the heart of Plantinga's argument is the assumption that the enactment or display of love that we see in the atonement<sup>21</sup> is a great-making state of affairs. But just what is it that is of such great value in a world that contains so triumphant a display of sacrificial love? We could easily here become embroiled in a debate over the nature of love, essence and action. But the question is worth raising; would the depths of God's love for creation have been any less if sin and evil had not entered the world? Surely not. In all possible worlds God is such that he *would* take suffering and sin onto himself if that were required for our redemption and for enabling the kind of communion with creatures that he desires. Even in worlds without sin—if such worlds are indeed possible—the counterfactuals of God's love are the same.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Plantinga's view is not that there would be anything lacking in God's love for us without atonement, but that there would be something lacking in our perception of that love.<sup>23</sup> It is reasonable to think that it is part of God's loving purposes that the beloved would understand how loved they are. The argument, in this case, would be that the enactment of God's love in redemption gives us a view of the nature of that love which we would not otherwise have had. But how could we know what God's limitations are with respect to communicating to us a knowledge of the depth of his love?<sup>24</sup> The weight of the theodicy rests on this assumption, but we are not given a good reason to accept it.<sup>25</sup>

Another assumption that is worth probing has to do with how value is derived in Plantinga's calculations. In a footnote, he explains that he avoids taking a position on whether it is "states of affairs or objects or events that are the primary locus of value; in either case states of affairs will be good or bad" (p. 5 n11). This is a helpful move, I find, but it may still be that underlying assumptions about the primary locus of value are operative in the comparative assessment of the values of states of affairs. For instance, in addition to objects and events, there are of course other candidates that might serve as the primary locus of value. Perhaps we could take a *relational* view. It could be that the evaluation of the states of affairs in a world *W* derives primarily from the kind of right relationships that are established by God in *W*. If this is the case, then with respect to the atonement, higher value will be placed on the state of affairs that God accomplishes through suffering, rather than on the extraordinary suffering itself that God endures. Assessing value in this way seems also to respect the apparent order of means and ends in the narrative of divine grace. That is to say, the traditional interpretation of the atonement is that it is the means to accomplish the end of our redemption. In a *Felix Culpa* theodicy means and ends are changed.<sup>26</sup> The fall now becomes the means to the



ultimate end of the display of God's love in the suffering of the atonement. What makes the world great on the *Felix Culpa* view is the towering good of the costliness of God's loving action, not *primarily* what is accomplished by that action. If right relationship with God is the primary locus of value for the states of affairs that make a world great, then the *Felix Culpa* view, it seems to me, would have little to commend it. Relationship with God appears to be undervalued, such that it is worth severing the relationship so that God can act out in love to restore it. In response, the *Felix Culpa* defender could return to Plantinga's suggestion, following Kuyper and Edwards, that there is a special excellence to the quality of relationship that can be known by those once lost who are redeemed.<sup>27</sup> While this suggestion may resonate with some of our own experiences in an *already fallen* world, grounding this claim is fraught with difficulties. How would we establish the general principle without suggesting, for instance, that the strongest marriages are those that have involved a period of divorce, or that the deepest mother-daughter relationship is enabled once the daughter commits patricide or the like?

One might propose that any world in which God establishes a means of right relationship between God and fellow creatures is a world that contains a great-making state of affairs that is incommensurable with creaturely goods and evils. Evaluating states of affairs in terms of their positive or negative contribution to right relationship with God seems to correspond better to the priorities of the gospel. The good news made known in Christ is that God loves us so much that becoming human he was willing to suffer and die to rescue us for relationship with him, not that he loves us so much that he was willing to let that relationship be broken in order to orchestrate an opportunity to demonstrate the depths of his love.<sup>28</sup> Another way to form the objection is to consider how God himself might view the value of the atonement. If God's purpose in atonement is to restore relationship with us, then it is proper to think that close relationship with creation is to God of greater value than the cost of the atonement. Restoring relationship is worth the sacrifice. The *Felix Culpa* approach swaps cost and value in the equation such that the value of the sacrifice of atonement is considered worth the cost of breaking relationship with creation. Furthermore, this objection, it seems to me, has application not only to Plantinga's formulation but to all *Felix Culpa* theodicies.

### 3. Agent Centered Restrictions on Suffering and the Question of Supralapsarianism

A *Felix Culpa* theodicy maintains that a fallen world is better than one where there is no fall. It could be asked, however, better for whom? Plantinga argues that even if it had been within God's power to create a world where free people freely chose not to rebel, it would be better to create the world where the rebellion occurred. Now, unless universalism is in view, the benefit does not appear to accrue to each agent personally. We might grant that God would permit a person to suffer for the benefit of others and the world, but would God permit someone to suffer *eternally* because their suffering is an element in the best world God can actualize?<sup>29</sup> This seems to violate the notion of "'agent centered restrictions' on the way in which a holy, just and loving God would treat us" (p. 23). Plantinga is sympathetic to the theological conviction that



God would ensure that in addition to whatever worldwide value is derived from the suffering of any particular individual there would also be some benefit for the individual him/herself. He says, "perhaps it is also true that he would not permit me to suffer for that end, an end outside my own good, unless he could also bring good for me out of the evil." But if agent-specific restrictions are to be taken seriously, must they not at least stipulate that the good which is brought out of the evil for the individual be valuable enough to offset the personal toll? However, for Plantinga's theodicy to be successful, he must hold that a world including all of the same people would be better off with a fall than without a fall, even though it could not be better for those who suffer eternally broken relationship with God. The good of having participated in making the world a better place would not individually offset the quite personal cost of entering hell or even being annihilated? Barring a commitment to universalism,<sup>30</sup> it seems once again, from this angle, that on the *Felix Culpa* view the value of the extravagance of God's sacrifice is made to be more valuable than the right relationship with God that the sacrifice is meant to restore.

On a related note, Plantinga maintains that one positive byproduct of his *Felix Culpa* theodicy is that, "we get a clear resolution of the Supra/Infra debate: the Supras are right" (p. 12). He casts the debate as a question about the order of God's decree with respect to salvation and permitting the fall. As Louis Berkhof puts it, "the question is, whether the decrees to create and permit the fall were means to the decree of redemption."<sup>31</sup> If it is the case that God's decree to permit sin is in fact motivated by his desire to provide salvation, then it is his decree to save which is the more basic or fundamental. It seems to me that theologically there is much to affirm in Plantinga's position, particularly the priority of God's self-giving love over God's decision to permit evil in the world. I have argued against Plantinga's notion that evil itself is *necessary* to fulfilling the dictates of God's love. But this in no way detracts from the fact that we have, in the incarnation and the atonement, the revelation of God in the mind-blowing radicality of his love for creatures. Furthermore, it seems altogether correct to view all that God does, including his *permitting* evil and suffering, to be apart of and motivated by his love. But this may also give us a reason to step back from any traditional supra- or infralapsarianism.

The supra/infra debate was not merely about the relative priority of salvation to the fall.<sup>32</sup> This debate was focused squarely on the nature of the election and reprobation of individual people in God's sovereign decree.<sup>33</sup> Negatively, the question was about whether God actively reprobates some (Supralapsarianism) or passively chooses not to elect some of the fallen (Infralapsarianism). The Supras held that in the logical order of God's decree his decision to elect some and reprobate others was primary. The Infras held that, in the logical order of God's decree, permitting the fall came prior to election. God then decrees to elect some and leaves the rest in their sin. Plantinga's gloss on Supralapsarianism seems superior to the traditional view because it moves the debate away from reprobation and focuses us on the priority and great-making quality of God's redeeming love. We are left, however, with the unanswered agent-centered concerns. A traditional Superlapsarian holds that what is primary for God is his decree to, "glorify



Himself, and particularly to magnify His grace and justice in the salvation of some and the perdition of other rational creatures."<sup>34</sup> The question I would raise to Plantinga's formulation in light of this is: given the nature of God's personal self-sacrificing love, could the value of the world in general actually be advanced by means of the cost of an eternally broken relationship with God for some particular individuals?

*Is Theodicy a Good Idea?*

These objections, I believe, have enough force to question seriously whether, from a Christian point of view, a *Felix Culpa* theodicy ought to be embraced. But does this mean that all attempts at theodicy are somehow mistaken? Who is right, the Plantinga of 1983 who says that Christians should admit that we don't know why God permits evil, or the Plantinga of the new millennium, who recommends that Christian philosophers should turn to the task of understanding evil from a Christian perspective? It's possible that both are correct. Seeing evil from a Christian perspective may bring us to the affirmation that we don't know why God permits it. We are, it seems to me, bounded by two important convictions. First, the world actualized by God, taken not just in its present condition but including also its eschatological consummation, is good. It must be, it is the world actualized by the God made know to us in Jesus Christ. By his own incarnation, obedience and suffering, God reverses the death and undoes the suffering effected by sin, such that the eschatological end outweighs the pain and cost of permitting evil. Affirming this much stops short of making sense of evil, and for good reason. The second binding conviction for the Christian is that evil is thoroughly evil. It is not good in evil clothing. And, therefore, evil does not make sense—it is irrational. Understanding why God might permit evil is one thing, understanding how it is that evil emerges as something to permit is something else entirely.

A free will theodicy and a *Felix Culpa* theodicy can be helpfully contrasted to illumine the point. In a theodicy that explains evil as something that arises as a result of the misuse of creaturely freedom, we are given an explanation as to why God might *permit* evil, but evil itself is not made a *necessary* component of achieving a higher good. Though evil might be inevitable, we do not know that it is, because we are given no explanation for why evil emerges in the exercise of creaturely freedom. If a good creature understands that an evil choice will distort relationship with God and lead to death, there is no explanation possible for why a creature might choose evil which does not already presuppose some prior evil that has degraded in some way the proper function of that free creature's will.<sup>35</sup> In Christian scripture evil is not explained, we find that it is permitted, con-founded and finally eradicated.

In a *Felix Culpa* theodicy, evil is made a *necessary* component of achieving a higher good.<sup>36</sup> This imbues evil with purpose and makes evil finally reasonable. We now do have an explanation for evil, though we still have no immediate explanation for how evil might emerge in the exercise of creaturely freedom. A Molinist like Plantinga would still maintain that God does not directly cause or commit evil. The emergence of evil remains a mystery. But we do know that evil is intentionally and originally willed



by God, he *desires* it to emerge. Unlike a free will theodicy, in a *Felix Culpa* theodicy God *desires* evil as a means to his good purposes. This move has a dangerously distorting moral and theological impact. We can no longer condemn evil and injustice as wholly antithetical to what is good. Evil is ultimately the will of God. So much so that we can say of the fall: 'O happy sin.' Defenders of either theodicy may maintain that God's hands remain clean, creatures carry the blame for evil, evil is ultimately destroyed and creation is redeemed. The contrast between these two theodicies is a razor's breadth but a chasm's depth.<sup>37</sup> In a free will theodicy it is the *permission* of evil that is essential to the greater good that God intends, in the *Felix Culpa* theodicy it is the *evil itself* that is essential to the greater good. Evil is made reasonable as a functional good.<sup>38</sup> While the goodness of God may not be thrown into question it still creates for us moral vertigo of theological proportions. Evil that makes sense, is no longer so bad—'O *Felix Culpa*' indeed. It seems, therefore, prudent from a Christian perspective to worry about theodicies that attempt to explain the emergence of evil in terms of the functional good of *evil itself*, rather than perhaps the functional good of *the permitting of evil*. Moreover, should we not resist a theodicy which would attempt to explain the source of the evil in a way that would make the emergence of evil rational or sensible?

### Conclusion

If I have understood Plantinga correctly, there are two aspects to the great-making value that incarnation and atonement give a world which outweigh the required evil and suffering. The first aspect is the radically self-sacrificing display of God's love for creatures that have rejected him. The second is the potential for deeper intimacy with God that comes through suffering or through the experience of being rescued. Against the second aspect I advanced the argument that perhaps it is the incarnation alone which wins for us the great enhancements in the intimacy of our relationship with God. It is not primarily our participation in Christ's suffering or experience of redemption that enables an unrivalled closeness with Christ; it is instead, the fact that the Word became flesh which enables an unparalleled divine-human communion. But the incarnation alone does not require suffering and evil, so neither then is evil required for enhancing the intimacy of human relationship with God. If it is not an enhancement in our relationship with God that necessitates evil, then Plantinga's argument stands solely on the first claim: that the value of the atonement, which outweighs the required evil and suffering, is its being an, otherwise impossible, towering display of God's love. I have offered three challenges to this claim. First, I suggested that it is the nature of God's immutable love, unchanging across all possible worlds that gives incomparable value to those worlds. Sin or no sin, all possible worlds are such that God *would* have suffered to procure the redemption of his creatures even in the face of their rejection of him. And, there is no reason to think that atonement is the only way God has to communicate to his creatures the depths of his love. Second, the *Felix Culpa* view seems to operate against the possibility that the locus of the value of states of affairs is derived from their contribution to right relationship with God



and all that that entails. On the *Felix Culpa* view it is worth severing relationship so that God can act out in love to restore it. And third, the *Felix Culpa* view treats the cost of atonement as an end rather than a means, elevating the action of suffering love over God's purpose and goal of right relationship between God and creatures. In addition to these objections I raised the concern that, in Plantinga's formulation, there appears to be an unmanageable tension between the good of a world for a particular individual and the good of the world as a whole. If we are to take agent-centered concerns seriously it is difficult to imagine a personal gain for one who remains eternally alienated from God. And finally, I argued from a Christian perspective against any formulation of the *Felix Culpa* theodicy, because it attempts to defend God's originally permitting evil by turning evil into a functional good, thereby giving evil a kind of ambiguous rational legitimacy.

There is nothing ambiguous about the Christian position on evil, sin, suffering, injustice and the fall. "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor. 13:4, NIV). It seems to me that the *Felix Culpa* defender agrees with this. What is worth rejoicing about is not the fall itself, but what God does in response to it. What is happy is not sin, but who God is, that he will do and has done everything that it takes to overcome evil and give us close, personal, life-giving communion with him. What is fortunate is that the God of all power, wisdom and love has revealed himself to us in the incarnate Christ who suffered, died and rose again to invalidate evil and suffering.<sup>39</sup>

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## NOTES

1. John Leonard, ed., *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton. 1674. (London: Penguin, 2000), 38:42.
2. *Ibid.*, xii. 464–65.
3. *O certe necessarium Adae peccatum: quod Christi morte deletum est. / O Felix Culpa: quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem*. Translation taken from Victor Yelverton Haines, "Drawing Evil with a Happy Face: The Iconography of the *Felix Culpa*," in *The Problem of Evil: an Intercultural Exploration*, ed. Sandra Ann Wawrytko (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 77. For a discussion of the Gallican origins of the hymn and its incorporation into the Roman vigil see L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution: a Study of the Latin Liturgy up to the Time of Charlemagne*, 5th ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1923), p. 254; and Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," *The Journal of English Literary History* 4, no. 3 (1937): pp. 169–71. For further inspirational reading on the topic, see the treatment of Winnie-the-Pooh's fall from a tree into a gorse-bush, in C. L. J. Culpepper, "'O Felix Culpa!' the Sacramental Meaning of Winnie-the-Pooh," in *The Pooh Perplex, a Student Casebook: in Which it is Discovered That the True Meaning of the Pooh Stories is Not as Simple as is Usually Believed, but for Proper Elucidation Requires the Combined Efforts of Several Academicians of Varying Critical Persuasions*, ed. Frederick C. Crews (London: Robin Clark, 1963).



4. Gottfried W. Leibnitz, *The Philosophical Works of Leibnitz*, trans. George M. Duncan (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1890), pp. 194–95.
5. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 400.
6. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 214.
7. Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). All in-line references are to this essay.
8. Alvin Plantinga, "Self-Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), p. 42.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 35. When Plantinga first delivered his *Felix Culpa* paper at a conference at Calvin College in May of 2000, he mentions his earlier disparagements of theodicies and then quips: "and so once more I'm obliged to eat my words," Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'" (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, May 23, 2000), DVD Video, 38:42.
10. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 489.
11. As quoted by Plantinga, *ibid.* Plantinga draws on Kuyper and Edwards for a theological endorsement of his position. See Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" p. 18.
12. All references to "incarnation" refer to divine incarnation—the incarnation of Jesus Christ.
13. Plantinga calls this affirmation *the strong value assumption*. While Plantinga is inclined to accept this affirmation, he also tells us that his argument would still work on a more modest assumption (pp. 10–11). It seems that the bare minimum Plantinga needs is the assumption that incarnation and atonement make "a world of great value," one that outweighs its costs of implementation.
14. According to Plantinga, light is also shed on the proper interpretation of the perplexing notion in Colossians 1:24 that seems to suggest there might be something lacking in Christ's afflictions. On Plantinga's view we could interpret this lack to be that "necessary condition of the goodness of truly good (highly eligible) possible worlds that is not and cannot be satisfied by Christ's suffering" (p. 13). Perhaps more could be done to strengthen this exegesis, but it seems unlikely to me that Paul's readers would have understood him to be referring to his sharing in the regrettably necessary repercussions of fulfilling the pre-conditions of atonement. Aaron Kuecker has proposed to me what is to my mind a much more satisfactory interpretation that reads this verse in line with Paul's ministry of suffering for the churches. Along with a reading of the verse in its original word order, this recommends that we understand the *lack* to refer to something lacking in Paul's flesh as he shares in the sufferings of Christ for his church. There is no indication whatsoever in the verse that something is lacking in Christ's atoning work.
15. If we assume that being physically embodied inevitably involves suffering, then the Christian eschatological hope for the eradication of suffering is in conflict with the notion of ongoing human embodied existence.
16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 3.1.3 (emphasis mine). See also Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, 3.19.1.
17. Plantinga follows Kuyper and Edwards with the conviction that having fallen then being redeemed gives us enhanced intimacy with God. In the previous quote from Kuyper, he suggests from 1 Peter 1:12 that unfallen angels miss out on the depth of fellowship with God only possible for fallen and then redeemed creatures. But are there any strong reasons to take this



view? It seems more sensible to maintain that God's becoming human and not an angel is the key discriminator and sufficient to account for the special depth of relationship God has with humanity. Moreover, there is no indication in 1 Peter 1:12 that the longing of the angels is a 'jealously desirous' longing that must go unfulfilled. The exegetical grounds for Kuyper's position are extremely thin. Karl Barth understands 1 Peter 1:12 not to indicate either an epistemological or relational disadvantage for angels, but simply that angels are interested in what God is revealing, "their knowledge being obviously dependent upon events" (CD 3.3, 499–500). I am also indebted to Kelly Liebengood for pointing out that while angels usually announce good news, 1 Peter 1:10–12 indicates that the revelation of Jesus Christ was given to the church directly while angels eagerly listen in.

18. While of course we gain greatly through suffering and the experience of redemption as God turns evil for our good, we should guard against the notion that it is our suffering or our experience of being lost then found that achieves for us something *on its own* that enhances our relationship with God. And it is important to notice that the question of theodicy has to do with the emergence of evil whatsoever into the world. In a world that has already fallen, it is clear that God uses evil functionally to overcome evil. God uses evil against itself. But when it comes to the question of why there is any evil at all, it is a non-sequitur to leverage an explanation that already presumes the existence of evil. There is a circularity to the suggestion that the reason for God's actualizing a world where evil emerges is so that evil can serve the functional good of overcoming the evil that has emerged. Plantinga's argument is different from this. He argues that it must be the overcoming of evil which not only supplies the good of overcoming evil but supplies an incomparably greater good of intimacy with God that could not be achieved by a means that did not involve evil. My point here is that perhaps the incarnation alone, regardless of evil, provides the ontological basis for the closest possible human fellowship with God.

19. When speculating about the relative value of possible worlds it is important to remember that while we can purposefully entertain the theoretical notion of possible worlds and their gradations in value, we may not be in the right position to render an evaluative judgement. It seems highly likely that we are not aware of the full range of constraints that limit the scope of possible worlds. Plantinga himself seems to observe the distinction between logically possible worlds (those in which we perceive no logical contradiction) and the smaller subset of these worlds which are *in fact* possible (the kinds of worlds God could create given all of the relevant constraints, of which we may be mostly unaware.) If it is the case that, given who God is, God would only create a world that is in the set of the best of all possible worlds, then it would be right to say that, on the one hand, while many worlds are possible, in that, free from any external or logical necessity, God could have chosen to actualize them, on the other hand, only the best worlds are possible, given who God is. It is logically possible that this set of the best of all possible worlds is a set with only one member. It could be that there is *in fact* only one possible world—the actual world. Therefore, queries into the comparative value of logically possible worlds may *in fact* be irrelevant questions. When it comes to comparing an unfallen world with incarnation to the actual world, one could argue that there is *prima facie* evidence that a world with sin and suffering may be unbeatable by any sensible standard of measurement, it is after all the world that the God of all wisdom and goodness choose out of all possible worlds. The goal of a theodicy is to tell us why—a goal that is frustrated by the same human epistemic limits encountered when attempting to compare and identify possible worlds.



20. Affirming the priority and sufficiency of the incarnation also keeps us from the somewhat masochistic notion that suffering is the place of deepest relationship with God.

21. There is an ambiguity about the term atonement that must be carefully navigated in this discussion. Atonement may refer to the sacrificial and costly act whereby God effects our redemption. But atonement may also refer to the condition attained by means of that costly act ('at-one-ment'). Or, atonement may be taken broadly to refer to both the costly act and its consequence. A *Felix Culpa* theodicy seems to say that it is the sacrificial act of atonement which, as a demonstration of God's love, is the great-making feature of the world. Of course the sacrifice would not be a demonstration of love if it were not aimed at the condition that is attained by means of that costly act. It is not however, the condition attained by the act, but the act itself that is held to be most valuable in the *Felix Culpa* view. Effecting the condition of 'at-one-ment' does not in any obvious way entail sin, whereas the sacrificial act of atoning for sin certainly does.

22. This is a helpful way to think about the immutability of God. No matter how the activity of God might differ from one possible world to the next, in every possible world God is such that he would do what he freely does in any particular possible world.

23. My thanks to Alan Torrance for suggesting this interpretation of Plantinga's argument.

24. Plantinga acknowledges this weakness in his argument and simply proposes ignoring it: "It is hard to imagine what God could do that is in fact comparable to incarnation and atonement; but perhaps this is just a limitation of our imagination. But since this is so hard to imagine, I propose that we ignore those possible worlds, if there are any, in which God does not arrange for incarnation and atonement, but does something else of comparable excellence" (p. 10).

25. As Luke Tallon suggested to me, one could argue that by the incarnation alone God reveals that he has given *himself* to us. No greater gift of love than this could be perceived.

26. It may be noted that there is some pattern resemblance between this objection and one Plantinga credits to Michael Schrynamacher under the heading: 'Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy?' (pp. 21–25). But the objection here is not that a *Felix Culpa* theodicy has God treating people as means instead of ends. My objection is that in a *Felix Culpa* theodicy the sacrifice involved in atonement is misconstrued as an end instead of a means. The sacrifice of the atonement is a means to the real great-making feature of the world, right relationship with God. In no obvious way does right relationship with God require sin and evil.

27. Perhaps, as one of the editors suggested in response to an earlier draft of this paper, the prodigal son can have a relationship of greater value than the son who never went astray. Of course this fails for all sorts of exegetical reasons, but most importantly the fact is that each son experiences estrangement from the father and both would have been better off never to have turned away from the love of the father. The fact that "he who is forgiven little, loves little" is merely an assessment of the darkness of our hearts in our already fallen condition. It is not grounds to assume that the fall was required to enable a depth of love otherwise unreachable.

28. There is something to the Munchausen objection—that the *Felix Culpa* view makes God out to be "like a father who throws his children into the river so that he can then heroically rescue them" (pp. 21–22). Greater value is placed on the heroism of the rescue as a demonstration of great love than is placed on the condition achieved by the rescue, secure and right relationship with God.



29. This language parallels Plantinga's usage, p. 23.

30. Accepting universalism would have massive implications for both the problem of evil and the supra-infra debate, and for that reason it is assumed that if universalism were considered a live option Plantinga would make more of it.

31. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 119.

32. The reference Plantinga gives highlights the importance of election (p. 1). "The terms supra and infra stipulate whether the divine decree to elect some to salvation comes logically before or after the decrees to create and to permit the fall." Carl F Henry, *God Who Stands and Stays* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), p. 88. Berkhof notes that in its early form the debate was over whether the fall was decreed or simply foreknown. It is more widely discussed in its later form where the debate focuses on the logical order of the decree, the nature of predestination and its personal extent, Berkhof, pp. 118–25.

33. In the first footnote of his essay Plantinga mentions the place of reprobation in the thought of Supralapsarians, (p. 1).

34. Berkhof, p. 119.

35. The garden story involves the deception of an already fallen angel, and we are given no reasonable explanation for the fall of Satan.

36. Donald McKim's definition is deficient in this regard. He explains *Felix Culpa* as, "an expression of faith in God's ultimate power to bring good out of evil." Clearly *Felix Culpa* directs its attention to the allegedly good and necessary role that evil plays in God's plans, Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 108.

37. An expression used by Karl Barth in another context, *CD I/1*, 213 ("Messers Breite, aber abgrundtief," *KD I/1*, 223).

38. I am not suggesting that we deny that evil is in fact used for good. Once evil is permitted and then emerges in the world God confounds evil, bringing good results from it. The chief example is the atonement, the suffering and human death of God which God uses to undo evil permanently. But this is merely affirming the triumph of God's goodness over senseless evil, it is not suggesting that God's goodness needs evil in some ultimate way.

39. My thanks to Alan Torrance, Luke Tallon, Dennis Laub, Ronald Feenstra and the editors for their critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper.