COSMIC THEOSIS: AN INCARNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF PRESENT SUFFERING

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2022

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ABSTRACT

This project (unlike most theodical responses or defenses) seeks to respond to the existential problem for theism presented by what I call the problem of present suffering. In short, the problem of present suffering concerns God's relationship to those experiencing evil. I contend God is uninvolved in evil altogether, and (without God's involvement) actual gratuitous evil exists. Additionally, I argue true meaning for the present sufferer must be found, as I understand it, within divine-human communion (i.e., theosis) and ubiquitously available regardless of suffering. Divine blame or anger for one's suffering, and the disseverment of theosis which would likely follow, is avoided by spurning what I call the post-suffering and instrumental approaches to evil. Hence, I believe theosis (not suffering) remains one's greatest source of meaning within theism.

This point is clarified through a discussion of God's primordial desire for divine-human communion *before* sin and the suffering it causes or what I call cosmic theosis. I also adopt a supralapsarian christology, which, as I use the term, says the incarnation would have happened without the fall (and its subsequent suffering) and is ultimately salvific. I argue my interpretation of the incarnation presents the best picture of theosis and represents the final fulfilment of creation through what I call particular theosis (i.e., the working out of salvation in the context of sin and the suffering it causes) into cosmic theosis. In other words, particular theosis is actualized in cosmic theosis, or God's will for created being. I contend, if God's will for cosmic theosis is achieved through the incarnation, and the incarnation was going to occur before sin, then a personal and corporate meaning (not according to divine will) of Jesus's suffering and the suffering of others is possible without suffering. To emphasize this point, I utilize Jesus's cry of forsakenness on the cross and his descent into hell, demonstrating common responses to suffering which can be had analogously by any sufferer for the achievement of personal (as opposed to divine) meaning

within evil. I further explore what it might look like for a Christian to endure present suffering through a limited and philosophical use of the writings of Gregory of Nyssa.

What really raises one's indignation against suffering is not suffering intrinsically, but the senselessness of suffering.

Fredrich Nietzsche

We hear on all sides, that if everything is pointless, to do well whatever it is you're doing is not. Yet it is, even so. To reach this conclusion, and to endure it, you need ply no trade, or at most, a king's—say, Solomon's.

E. M. Cioran

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ABBREVIATIONS

Ad. Thal.	Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium* Maximos (Nicholas) Constas, *Maximos the Confessor: On the Difficulties in Sacred Scripture and the Responses to Thalassios*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 2018
Amb.	Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* Nicholas Constas, *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, vol. 1-2, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2014
C. Ar.	Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* *NPNF* vol. 2 (4)
Car.	Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Caritate* Polycarp Sherwood, *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life and the Four Centuries on Love*, Angelico Press, Brooklyn, 1955
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum, series Graeca
C. Gentes	Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* *NPNF* vol. 2 (4)
Civ.	Augustine, *De civitate Dei* Henry Bettenson, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Group, London, 2003
Comm. Jo.	Origen, *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* Ronald Heine, *The Fathers of the Church: Origen, Commentary on the Gospel of John*, bk. 1-10 and 13-32 vols. 80 and 89, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 1989, 1993
Conf.	Augustine, *Confessions* R. S. Pine-Coffin, *St. Augustine: Confessions*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1962
De fide.	John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* Fredric Chase, *The Fathers of the Church: Writings*, vol. 37, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 1958
De perf.	Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione* Virginia Callahan, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory of Nyssa Ascetical Works*, vol. 58, Catholic University Press, Washington, DC, 1967
Disc.	Symeon, *Ethical Discourses*

	Alexanderder Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, vol. 1, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1995
Haer.	Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* *ANF* vol. 1
Infancy	*Infancy Gospel of Thomas* JK Elliott*, 'The infancy gospel of Thomas.' In The apocryphal New Testament: a collection of apocryphal Christian literature in an English translation based on M. R. James.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.
Images	John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* Andrew Louth, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 2003
Inc.	Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* John Behr, *On the Incarnation*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, 2011
Mys.	Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, New York, 1987
Opusc.	Maximus the Confessor, *Opusculum* Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, Routledge: New York, 1996
C. Ar.	Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* *NPNF* vol. 2 (4)
Princ.	Origen, *De principiis* John Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, Oxford University Press, 2019
PG	Patrologia Graeca
Triads	Gregory Palamas, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*

INTRODUCTION

Within the philosophy of religion, the problem of evil has been of longstanding concern for theism. While the problem itself has various avenues of engagement, I seek to understand and provide a unique answer to the existential problem of *here* and *now* (or present) suffering. To this end, I define suffering as the (present) experience of evil. As such, I will assume, going forward, a more precise definition of suffering as the cause of an existential crisis in one's life: the instigation of a sense of loss of one's place or purpose in the world and one's suffering. The causation of this crisis of self is various. For example, two people may fight in the same war and have similar experiences. But one comes home without issue, and the other is crippled by post-traumatic stress disorder. At the risk of generalization, I will assume the universality of existential suffering in one way or another: that all people experience existential suffering at one time in their lives.

Therefore, as I understand and use it, evil is a blanket term of convenience (covering both natural and moral evil) used for the purpose of responding to it on an abstract level, whereas my response (and other existential responses like it) responds to the *experience* of evil (or suffering). Since I am taking a broadly Christian approach to the problem, I also understand sin, considered by most Christians as a kind of falling away from God, synonymous with evil and a cause of much suffering.

Additionally, my work is one of philosophical theology. As I understand it, philosophical theology seeks to examine and question traditional theological beliefs for the benefit of better articulating and/or rejecting such beliefs. To this end, I will use philosophical arguments to refine my theological beliefs about God's relation to evil and the world. Any religious concepts and

arguments herein are based on my understanding and use of them for my larger philosophical argument and should not be considered exhaustive.

I refute common theodical methods as wrongly dismissive of the present suffering perspective and threatening to the viability of divine-human communion. Since divine-human communion (or theosis) is considered an inherent personal meaning maker for most theists, I seek to show how, by resisting common theodical methods, a sufferer might retain divine-human communion and possess the greatest medium of personal meaning despite suffering. By respecting the present suffering perspective through affirming (1) one's cognitive sufficiency regarding one's suffering and (2) the existence of gratuitous evil, meaningful suffering within a theistic world becomes unnecessary and the negative ramifications of divine blame and anger—which might result in disseverment of divine-human communion—are avoided.

I believe the above propositions require not only *actual* gratuitous evil exists but one's judgement of suffering it is sufficient. If these claims are true (as I believe they are), then they oppose the traditional theistic position, which argues (a) God has a reason(s) for allowing all instances of suffering (and therefore gratuitous evil does not exist); and (b) sufferers who believe their suffering is gratuitous are incorrect due to a cognitive inability to comprehend divine purposes for the permission of suffering. The traditional position does little for the present sufferer who is, I argue, forced to adhere to what I call abstract belief statements: dictums utilized by the traditional theistic response to evil even if they are contrary to one's present experience.

For example, a person may feel very strongly her suffering is pointless. Nonetheless, she is told it is a purposed suffering the reason for which she is unaware. The personal judgment of gratuitous suffering is considered uninformed, and one is advised to adhere to the belief God is allowing one's suffering for a reason(s) beyond one's ken. This unfortunate state of affairs is

unable to inform the sufferer or encourage understanding. The sufferer, in my opinion, must simply believe something contrary to experience. Moreover, sufferers are customarily invited, with abstract beliefs in hand, to adopt what I call the post-suffering perspective, which says (often from a postmortem view) comprehension—and therefore the compensation or defeat—of one's suffering will finally be granted *after* suffering has ended and the sufferer is able to consider her suffering within the larger context of God's overall plan for and interaction with the world. This post-suffering perspective is considered valuable since it is often touted as synonymous with divine-human communion or the beatific vision. For this reason, it is thought to be the culmination of one's antemortem faith journey, which more than compensates for and even overwhelms one's suffering. But again, this perspective is inaccessible to present sufferers who must adhere to its tenets abstractly, divorced from their present-suffering perspective. I provide herein what is absent from the post-suffering approach by responding to the here and now experience of suffering in a way that seeks to preserve divine-human communion *within* and *despite* suffering. Hence, a divinely intended meaning is maintained, which does not in any way require suffering. The preceding is covered in chapters 1-4.

As I have said, I am taking an existential view of present suffering. But my argument does not claim to compensate for or defeat evil. Rather, since I am assuming the experience of present suffering is concrete and ubiquitous, I believe the need to explain suffering is unnecessary. I think the present experience of suffering does not call for theodical justifications, which reach into an unknow future state of affairs for validation. Instead, I argue what is needed is: (1) endorsement of the sufferer's view (even if she concludes her suffering gratuitous), and (2) an awareness of theosis as an ultimate meaning maker which outweighs any need for a post-suffering view of evil. I claim the truth of these premises results in an ultimately meaningful divine-human communion

within suffering, which eschews the unlikely notion God uses one's suffering for greater ends God cannot otherwise achieve. If true, divine blame and anger can be avoided and divine-human communion preserved; the most meaningful aspect of life (divine-human communion/theosis) remains available to present sufferers to aid in their endurance of suffering without the need for theodical justification, including its common goal of the defeat or compensation of evil.

The remainder of this work (chapters 5-7) explains the theological implications of the philosophical arguments made in chapters 1-4. The theological entailments of these chapters, resulting from the first four chapters, will show how, considering common theistic commitments—such as: divine impassibility and immutability, supralapsarianism, Chalcedonian christology, and theosis—gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world.

To this end, Chapter 1 introduces the logical, evidential, and existential aspects of the problem of evil. I argue the existential feature of the problem, as I understand it, relies on a correct application of the evidential aspect, which is summed up nicely by William Rowe's definition of gratuitous evil. In line with his definition, I define gratuitous evil as any evil the suffering of which does not necessarily or instrumentally involve God. Therefore, I contend God is uninvolved in evil to the degree God in no way utilizes it toward ends otherwise unachievable by God. I believe theism would concur, if God is uninvolved in evil, then such evil *is* gratuitous. Thus, by demonstrating God's noninvolvement in evil and the experience of it, I am also validating the existence of actual gratuitous evil. Within Chapter 1, I also posit six distinctions, which I will assume throughout this project. The distinctions highlight theodicy's tendency to respond intellectually to evil, and I will use them to offer counterpoints favorable to an existential response which caters to the present suffering perspective.

Chapter 2 investigates the existential theodical work of Marilyn Adams and her definition of and response to what she calls horrendous evil. Her understanding of horrendous evil (at least from the sufferer's perspective) is nearly equal to my understanding of gratuitous evil. Since horrendous evil, according to Adams, is any evil that overwhelms the sufferer's sense of personal meaning—thus destroying the sufferer's ability to conceive of a divine purpose in it—from the sufferer's perspective and my definition, horrendous evil *is* gratuitous evil. Adams admits the sufferer's conclusion of pointless suffering is true in *that* moment and in this she rightly stands with the sufferer and proclaims the gratuitousness of her suffering. But she ultimately argues, in the end, the sufferer will come to understand horrendous evil as ultimately meaningful and even necessary to her relationship with God. In this sense, one's suffering becomes both necessary and instrumental to divine-human communion even while Adams seeks to bring validity to one's present-moment conclusion of gratuitous suffering. As such, Adams's position employs the post-suffering approach, and while she wishes to side with the sufferer in her pain and agree her suffering is as she believes it to be, Adams cannot escape the fact she ultimately believes the sufferer's conclusion about her experience incorrect.

Chapter 3 explores the existential theodical work of Eleonore Stump and her response to suffering, which claims to answer for the subjective experience of suffering through consideration of Aquinas's desires of love: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved; and (2) the desire for union with the beloved. These requirements of proper love, according to Stump, display the objective nature of human flourishment. Since divine-human communion, in Stump's estimation, is both the best for human beings *and* the unification (with distinction) of human beings with God, it satisfies both requirements and represents the greatest example of both subjective and objective meaning for a human being.

Stump's response seeks to demonstrate how suffering might be utilized for the fulfillment of divine-human communion even while retaining the importance and truth of the sufferer's experience and her conclusions about it. But according to Stump, suffering as a means to theosis is always worth the heartbreak it causes: the utility of suffering demonstrates God's love toward the sufferer because it integrates an otherwise fragmented will and remakes one's heart's desires, bringing one closer to God. While many think theosis justifies any amount of suffering, the truthfulness of such an idea is unreasonable. Such a claim falls outside the limits of an ethical human experience and is counterintuitive to a properly existential answer to present suffering, which must respect the sufferer's experience and her conclusions as justifiably informative.

Chapter 4 seeks to show how gratuitous evil and the suffering of it can exist alongside theistic commitments regarding God and God's involvement in the world. In this chapter, I offer two sets of distinctions showing God's involvement in suffering is not required to justify it, and by removing this requirement, the present suffering perspective is respected. The distinction I make between inspiration and divine intention (including a sub-distinction between personal and divine meaning) warrants the placement of divine-human communion (a type of divine intention) *within* suffering, which permits it to exist *despite* suffering. Additionally, a second set of distinctions (between material and teleological causes) shows the importance of causal interpretation in understanding God's role in one's suffering. If the distinctions I make are adopted, God cannot be blamed for a supposed necessary process of suffering, and the benefits of divine-human communion can be enjoyed in suffering and not because of it. Moreover, one can achieve personal meaning from suffering without God's involvement, which avoids divine blame without sacrificing the benefits gained from suffering. Since personal meaning does not require God's involvement, it is not instrumentally or necessarily connected to divine-human communion.

The remaining chapters (chapters 5-7) concern the theological implications of the philosophical arguments I make in the preceding chapters. Hence, my use of the theological notions of divine impassibility and immutability, supralapsarian christology, and theosis, reveal the problem of present suffering as not only a philosophical problem but a theological one as well. In fact, the theological entailments of these chapters, I believe, not only arise from the philosophical arguments in chapters 1-4 but also serve to support them. In this way, my response not only offers a philosophical answer to present suffering, which on its own remedies a significant problem in current theodical responses concerning present suffering, but also, through the further theological explorations made in chapters 5-7, burrows deeper into the present suffering experience. Thus, my response shows how it is philosophically possible for gratuitous evil to exist and demonstrates how one can retain theological commitments therein. This further supports the divine-human bond, making its disseverment due to suffering less likely.

To this end, Chapter 5 explains what I call cosmic theosis and shows how theosis is the primordial will of God *despite* suffering. In short, I argue cosmic theosis is God's desire for union with created being, a desire which existed eternally with God prior to creation and its fall. In this chapter I will show how God's desire for divine-human communion (theosis or cosmic theosis) is present within the writings of Maximus the Confessor, the traditional synthesizer of the earliest sources of patristic literature on theosis. Even though my use of Maximus will be limited and utilized in a philosophical (nonexegetical) manner, I believe his writings further clarify my argument concerning God's involvement (or lack thereof) in suffering. Thus, given its primordial origin, I contend humanity's greatest source of meaning is found in divine-human communion and remains present and divinely willed regardless of suffering. In this sense, suffering is no longer

seen as necessary or instrumental toward a greater end (theosis), which God cannot otherwise accomplish, and can remain gratuitous within a theistic world.

Chapter 6 is the first of the remaining chapters of this project to expound upon what I call particular theosis, or God's response to sin and the suffering it causes in the world. I argue for a supralapsarian christology, claiming the preexistent Son of God would have incarnated Godself in the person of Jesus regardless of sin (or the suffering it causes) and for the sake of God's fulfillment of cosmic theosis. Since the incarnation as I understand it represents the superb fulfillment of cosmic theosis, as the unity of the divine and human natures of Jesus demonstrate, then I argue it must have been planned from the eternal mind of God prior to creation and before suffering. As a result, I posit God utilized the already-going-to-happen incarnation to right the wrong of sin and the suffering it causes (which was not an aspect of God's primordial will for cosmic theosis), and this—along with the Christian experience of the veracity of this reality within one's respective tradition—represents particular theosis.

Chapter 7 explores how the cry of dereliction and Jesus's descent into hades relate to the concepts of personal meaning and meaninglessness (introduced in Chapter 4) as aspects of particular theosis within the experience of suffering. Even though Jesus experienced the perceptual loss of the Father on the cross, by his descent into hell, he was able to recover a type of personal meaning for himself and (corporately) for others. The virtuous life, as I examine it through the writings of Gregory of Nyssa in a limited philosophical (nonexegetical) way, is proposed as a way of achieving divine meaning within and despite suffering through divine-human communion.

CHAPTER 1

A CATEGORIZATION OF EVIL

1.1. Introduction

The problem of evil is one of the most discussed problems in the philosophy of religion. However, philosophers' emphases on and responses to it over the last few centuries have nearly exclusively been on the intellectual (or theoretical) dimension. This side of the issue deals with an abstracted consideration of evil, which concerns itself with logical consistency and may also involve the objective observation of evil as evidence against the existence of God. In this chapter, I will shed light on the existential dimension of the problem, which I believe creates a more significant challenge for theists than the intellectual aspect. The existential aspect of the problem, as I take it, focuses on the experience of the sufferer and the effect evil may have on her.

As such, I recognize existential suffering as the experience of an otherwise objective, observable evil. While this may suggest as many definitions of suffering (and evil) as there are persons in the world, it is my opinion one can sense (and thereby "know") suffering (or evil) without objective explanation.[1] In other words, a thing is evil if its observer(s) concludes it causes or would cause suffering to those who are or might experience it. Said yet more succinctly, evil is an objective entity, a term of abstract convenience, while suffering is the experience of evil. When discussing existential suffering, I will concern myself mostly with the experience of evil.

The existential aspect is distinct from the intellectual dimension, which is concerned with the theoretical reconciliation of the existence of God and evil. I argue existing theodicies (i.e., theistic responses to suffering attempting to justify God because of evil) fail to address effectively

[1] I have in mind the 1964 case before the Supreme Court (Jacobellis v. Ohio) where Justice Stewart said, "I know it when I see it," regarding his detection of "hard-core" pornography.

the existential dimension, and a response should be developed which incorporates a personally satisfying meaning in accord with God's primordial will of theosis (or divine-human communion) and achievable outside of suffering and available to the present sufferer *here* and *now*.

This chapter has the following structure. In Section 1.2, I briefly address the so-called logical problem of evil by considering its formulation by J. L. Mackie and Alvin Plantinga's response, encapsulated in his Free Will Defense. I then address the so-called evidential problem of evil and argue it confronts the theistic position better than the logical problem. Rather than abstracting evil from experience and considering it in isolated conceptions, the evidential argument incorporates participation in and perception of evil. I agree with William Rowe and other proponents of the evidential problem that gratuitous evil, i.e., evil that is pointless and unavoidable, exists. For this reason, I will make no attempt to offer a rebuttal to the evidential problem of evil or the existence of gratuitous evil.

Even so, Stephen Wykstra's well utilized objection to the problem—an objection which suggests setting aside one's participation in and perception of evil in favor of adhering to what I consider abstract, objective belief sets—will be briefly stated to show the evidential problem and its retorts are in fact limited to the intellectual dimension and fail to address the existential aspect. I argue meaning and purpose need not derive from evil and may arise from sources external to suffering such as divine human communion (or theosis), which is contrary to the typical theodical response. In this way, I contend meaningful suffering is not required to justify God or maintain a relationship with God. Instead, communion with God can sustain one through suffering regardless.

Section 1.3 will introduce the existential problem of evil by noting its basic structure and how theists have traditionally responded to it. I will claim, even though the typical theistic response to this aspect of the problem involves concern for the individual, it still fails to divorce itself

completely from the common tactics of theoretical responses. The inability of existential theodicists to do this makes them incapable of responding to the problem of evil for present sufferers. Thus, even with an existential response to evil, the ability of the believer to suffer well by maintaining divine-human communion amid evil remains questionable.

In Section 1.4, I posit six distinctions tasked with (1) highlighting theodicy's tendency to respond intellectually to evil and (2) offering a counterpoint favorable to an existential response. These distinctions will parallel my inclination toward an existential answer to evil which incorporates the issue of present suffering. Section 1.4 will serve to introduce the key concepts (in favor and disfavor) of my overall argument, which will be utilized throughout this work. Philosophers' preference for an objective approach to evil which is intellectual in nature seems largely to ignore the needs of present sufferers. I argue present sufferers need a subjective here and now perspective which will aid them in persevering in divine-human communion *despite* suffering. Unfortunately, theists seem to touch on this need only superficially. The distinctions I make will explain what is lacking in current theodical methods and will consider present sufferers and their reaction and ability to cope with existential evil. Section 1.5 concludes.

1.2. The Intellectual Aspect of Evil: The Logical and Evidential Problems

In this section, I will provide only a very brief summary of the logical and evidential problems for the purposes of achieving the larger aims of this project. It is not my intention to provide a thorough survey of the literature on these problems. I will quickly explain the logical problem and its intellectual nature to show its defeat by the Free Will Defense and subsequent inconsequence to an existential consideration of the problem of evil. I will then discuss the evidential problem, which many rightly consider stronger than the logical problem and more closely related to the existential

dimension. The existential aspect of the problem captures the majority portion of the present work and is the topic of the next section because it considers a sufferer's reaction to and ability to cope (and thus suffer) with evil.

I consider first the logical problem of evil introduced by J. L. Mackie. In positing a purely intellectual consideration of the problem, Mackie first asserts an implicit contradiction within traditional theism by laying out its three core tenets: (1) God is omnipotent; (2) God is wholly good; and (3) evil exists. He then procures an explicit contradiction by adding the following quasi-logical rules: (1*) an omnipotent being possesses unlimited power; and (2*) a wholly good being desires the eradication of evil (1955, p. 200-201). Of course, if (1*) and (2*) rightly tell one what (1) and (2) entail, then one cannot logically accept (1), (2), and (3) together.[2]

In response to the logical problem of evil, Plantinga introduced the Free Will Defense, which purports to demonstrate the existence of evil and the existence of God are logically compatible. The defense suggests consequences arising from evil actions (moral evil) are outweighed (and even permitted) by the inherent goodness of freely chosen actions.[3] If the value of choice is great enough God would permit not only choice but also evil resulting from choice, then there is a logically possible set of circumstances where (1), (2) and (3) are true at the same

[2] There are some philosophers who claim no problem with a metaphysical inconsistency within theistic dogma, because they hold that God is "beyond logic" (Conee 1991; Goldstick 1990).

[3] It should be noted here natural evil, i.e., evil which results from circumstances outside human intention (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados), fall outside the scope of this present work's exploration of the intellectual and existential aspects of the problem of evil. Nonetheless, there are certainly events of natural evil which are significant to their sufferers and must be considered. When reflecting upon them, I will make clear the distinction between moral and natural evil.

time.[4] Many philosophers, including Mackie, agree Plantinga has successfully refuted the logical problem of evil.[5]

Hence, the focus of philosophers of religion over the last couple of decades has been on the evidential problem of evil, which William Rowe puts forward. This problem, while still intellectual in nature, rejects God on standards of probability and not logical incongruity alone. The evidential problem says evil is good evidence for the non-existence of God even though the two are not logically incompatible. Important to the evidential objection is the experience of suffering as an objective, observable fact external to the sufferer. But the subjective experience of evil, which concerns one's reaction and ability to cope, does not appear to have a place within the evidential argument from evil. The evidential problem considers how evil is objectively perceived, to what degree such evil is thought to be possible, and reflects on perceived reasons for evil. The problem concludes the non-existence of God based on the objective evidence of intense suffering.

Rowe formulates the evidential problem as follows (1979, p. 336):

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Rowe's formulation is premised on the supposition gratuitous evil exists, it serves no larger divine purpose, nor does its prevention take away any great amount of good or prevent any other equally bad evils (assuming there is no worse evil than gratuitous evil). It is argued a perfectly powerful

[4] Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, the intellectual problem of evil will refer to the evidential problem only. At times, the two words will be used interchangeably. The defeat and irrelevance of the logical problem of evil to my larger arguments will thereby be assumed throughout.

[5] Mackie writes: "Since this defense is [logically] possible, and its principle involves no real abandonment of our ordinary view of the opposition between good and evil, we can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another" (Mackie 1982, p. 154).

and loving deity would not allow needless suffering and would want to stop it. But since such evil continues, the evidential objector claims no such deity exists.

By far, the most prevalent theistic response is to deny gratuitous evil exists. Of the many ways to do so, questioning human perception is fundamental. Perhaps the most often used recourse has been Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA (Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access) response.

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use that she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her (1984, p. 85).

If one were to rework CORNEA so it specifically addresses the issue of gratuitous evil, it might look something like this: if one claims it appears evil is gratuitous, she is entitled to that claim only if she has no reason to think, if evil were not gratuitous, things will strike her much the same. In other words, since human knowledge of divine reasons is limited, one is not entitled to claim evil is gratuitous or that there does not exist an indiscernible reason for evil.

Three things are suggested by the evidential argument (assertion and retort combined): (A) gratuitous evil exists; (B) the perceptual accuracy of one's observation of evil is questionable; and (C) the argument itself remains an intellectual one. (C) is clearest when the evidential problem and its predominant response (CORNEA) are taken together. Even though the evidential problem focuses on experienced gratuitous evil, it remains an intellectual problem overlooking the existential aspects throughout. I will argue below the evidential argument and its responses lack the ability to answer the existential protest in any sufficient manner and for this reason I do not postulate a detailed survey of the evidentialist literature.

In short, CORNEA claims no human being can question whether an instance of evil is gratuitous since one is not privy to all the necessary information. Because humans are not God, so the argument goes, they cannot adequately judge God's reasons for allowing evils which only

appear but are not actually gratuitous. The human being is thus separated from the experience of evil and forced to view it as an objective fact, which encourages, in my opinion, submission to abstracted belief sets (an idea I will explain further in Chapter 4) despite suffering. The division of the human being from the experience of evil via CORNEA goes a long way in proving the evidential problem remains an intellectual one. Non-theists seem to put forward the evidential problem in an intellectual manner, saying the objective experience of evil has evidential value against the existence of God. Likewise, theists answer the evidential problem similarly, exhorting believers to retain their beliefs about God despite the evidence and requiring them to abstractly sustain God exists and possesses an unknowable reason for evil.

The evidential problem has an experiential aspect, which the logical problem lacks. Yet, the evidential problem remains primarily an intellectual problem, contending the objective observation of evil stands as evidence against the existence of God. Throughout this project, rather than contend with premise 1 of the above argument (as most theists do), I challenge premise 2, arguing a good and omnipotent God allows gratuitous suffering, maintaining the idea the fulfillment of God's will in divine-human communion (theosis) remains independent of suffering altogether. Therefore, as later chapters make clear, divine meaning extracted from suffering is wholly unnecessary (even impossible) to God's larger aim of human deification. Nonetheless, God as creator and sustainer of all being, remains present with the sufferer, giving strength, solace, and exhibiting divine compassion.

1.3. The Existential Problem of Evil

Having determined the differences between the logical and evidential responses to evil within a larger intellectual category, I now consider the existential response. This section will only very

briefly underscore the main motivating factors behind existential responses, while Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are reserved for the exploration of the existential theories posited by Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump, respectively. In short, existential theodicists and defenders, such as Adams and Stump, seem unable to separate themselves from meaningful evil as a way to vindicate God.[6]

In times of crisis, believers are confronted more than ever with the strength or weakness of their confessions. Richard Rice points out two common religious reactions to suffering: either one will succumb to the pressure, be filled with doubt, question one's belief, and perhaps renounce one's faith. Or one will be expectantly comforted, confident that what is believed about God is true (2014, p. 15-16). Per Rice, the experience of suffering strips persons of any sense of stability and confidence in their lives. Evil appears to strike mercilessly at the best and brightest as well as the poor and infirmed. In the wake of such destruction and chaos, an unnerving and senseless confusion is strongly suggested.

After a car accident, Rice's mother, as the ambulance sped to the hospital, confidently assured him, "It happened for a purpose" (2014, p. 19). Her response is perhaps characteristic of most people. After all, a strong sense of divine regulation within evil is certainly desirable. One wants to know someone is in control and the world reasonable. In a way, one desires to predict outcomes and avoid fear of the unknown. Theodical responses to the existential problem strive toward this very thing: a sense of prediction and control within suffering. When able to predict and control their surroundings, human beings are more content and have a higher level of total life happiness. Perhaps it is right then that an existential consideration of the problem of evil also tends

[6] Adams and Stump seem to "shine light on the rubble of evil," so to speak, in a desperate search for meaning. Instead, this work proposes the reality of a religious relation (a divine-human communion or theosis), which is characterized by a proper present-suffering perspective that allows the sufferer to achieve meaning despite suffering.

to concern itself with the overall life satisfaction of an individual and how suffering may decrease that satisfaction.[7] In this context, the lamentable aspect of suffering is its ability to extract from an individual a sense of life value to the point existence may even be regretted. The goal of existential theodicy then is to frame evil circumstances in a way where suffering becomes meaningful and the value of one's life secured.

But some suffering is so heinous and overwhelming no artfully chosen words or even the perfect theory can appropriately overcome it.[8] There are times when looking back on one's suffering is not helpful. Doing so may only bring pain. Such a person would perhaps still be left doubting the point of it all. There may be times when it is best not to remember. No theory on evil (even an existential one) is *always* helpful. Sometimes no sense can be made from what happens: to try and do so would only be hurtful. Perhaps, as I will argue throughout, evil is simply gratuitous and meaning conceived elsewhere.

But even as I steer to a more existential consideration of evil, it is apparent current existential responses to suffering have also missed the mark. Existential rejoinders slip into post-suffering perspectives which strive to find meaning within evil *ex post facto*, and so these too fail to help present sufferers. The forthcoming six distinctions have the goal of pointing toward a more existential appreciation of the problem evil presents for religious belief. But they also show the lack of help offered by existential theodicists to those presently suffering and the inability of current theistic responses to answer for pain in its moment-by-moment experience.

[7] Here "life satisfaction" includes the preference of existence over nonexistence, as well as one's happiness within life.

[8] Rice laments the hopelessness of what I call the post-suffering perspective: "In the vortex of great suffering any theodicy can seem fatuous and hollow. Even when time puts a loss like this into some sort of perspective, no explanation accounts for it…. No matter how carefully we hone our thinking, no theory will ever make perfect sense of suffering" (2014, p. 137-138).

1.4. Gratuitous Evil and Six Distinctions within the Problem of Evil

While it may be granted the evidential problem is an intellectual issue that requires a theoretical response, the existence of gratuitous evil, which the evidential problem appeals to, raises existential concerns for theists, too. The existence of gratuitous evil evokes not only the intellectual question of whether circumstances (or suffering) can be meaningful, but also, if given such circumstances, whether one's life in total can be significant to oneself. The consideration of gratuitous evil also draws attention to theodicists' inclinations toward an intellectual response to evil which rings hollow to present sufferers. Thus, the existence of gratuitous evil and the reality of the present suffering it causes demonstrate a need for an answer to evil that is meaningful to present sufferers in the here and now.

The claim gratuitous evil exists serves as a link between the intellectual (evidential) and existential problems of evil. While the evidential problem posits the existence of gratuitous evil as objective evidence contrary to the claims of theism, the existential aspect assumes a problem for theism based on the experience of evil, which results in the loss of personal (or objective) meaning. Both aspects of the problem find unity in the loss of meaning because of some form of gratuitous evil, but the personal protest against theism arising from suffering grants (rather than discredits) theism at least the possibility (not often utilized by theodicists) of admitting the existence of meaningless evil. The fact many people question the purpose of suffering, thus admitting the perceptual gratuitousness of at least some evil, speaks to the relevance of gratuitous evil's existence within the problem of evil and defuses the power of the evidential argument. By admitting gratuitous evil exists, the evidential problem is turned upside down. Instead of arguing against it, my position agrees with the problem and posits the possibility of a meaningful divine-human communion within gratuitous suffering. Once again, for the purposes of this project, I

maintain *all* evil is gratuitous, by which I mean God is *not* instrumentally or purposely involved in any of it. Such a notion is in direct opposition to common theodical responses, which require instrumentally purposeful evil to justify God's goodness in allowing evil. Defining gratuitous evil as God's disinvolvement in suffering takes the focus from suffering as a source of meaning and appropriately places it within divine-human communion (or theosis). Present sufferers are then provided with a source of meaning despite suffering and not because of it. More will be said about how I define gratuitous evil in Chapter 4. But for now, I believe engaging with aspects of the existential problem by asserting and responding to the existence of gratuitous suffering is the best way to retain divine-human communion within suffering.

The intellectual and existential division within the problem of evil has culminated in supposed solutions that cater to each side. Theistic responses fall into either the intellectual or existential category, and it is no surprise most of the effort has been expended on finding intellectually plausible answers to evil. So in the following I will posit six distinctions to introduce and help clarify the existential aspects of the problem of evil. When considering these distinctions, I will first address the typical intellectual response. Then I will offer an existential counterpoint. Finally, I will very briefly consider the implications of the existential counterpoint and its application to present suffering. These distinctions will show philosophers of religion (even those dealing with the existential problem) tend to favor an objective, conceptual approach to the issue that ultimately results in ignoring present suffering altogether.

1.4.1. Distinction One: Global Response vs. Personal Response

Marilyn Adams notes a clear difference between responses to the problem of evil which are generic/global or personal/individual. She states typical solutions to the problem of evil offer

possible reasons for God allowing it. These alleged excuses for God, as she calls them, tend to be "generic in so far as some *general* reason is sought to cover all sorts of evils; global in so far as they seize upon some feature of the world as a whole" (1989, p. 301, emphasis original). As one example, free will acts as a general reason for evil and is seized upon as a feature of the world common to all. Human beings are said to have misused their God-given free will and as a result cause moral evil. Free individuals make bad, evil-causing choices, and choice is applied as a global/generic justification for moral evil. In being global and generic, the free will theodicy/defense lacks the ability to provide an answer that is satisfying to the individual within suffering.[9]

In contrast, suffering begs for responses directly satisfying to sufferers. A difference between the global response outlined above and my preference for an existential solution to evil is found in, according to Adams, evil's ability not simply to contribute to material loss (e.g., the destruction of one's house by fire, the theft of one's property, a bad day in the stock market), but to burrow "into the deep structure of [a] person's frameworks of meaning-making, seemingly to defeat the individual's value as a person, to degrade him/her to subhuman status" (Adams 1999a, p. 26-27).[10]

[9] Even though, as in the case described, free will is utilized as a generic reason for all types of evil, Adams also mentions the idea free will is such a great individual good God allows the possibility of evil so God might be good to created creatures by allowing them to express their choices in complete autonomy (Adams 1999a, p. 32-33).

[10] For example, instead of simply causing the deaths of millions, the Nazis intentionally degraded their victims, stripping them of their dignity and presented them with the likelihood of losing all ability to make meaningful sense of their lives. That relentless energy was spent in dehumanizing people before leaving (and ordering) them to their deaths shows in analogous fashion the characteristic difference between the perspectives of a global and personal theodicy (Adams 1999a, p. 27). When confronting the horror of the Holocaust, global theodicy would wish to examine the evil of death and its commonplace status among humanity and would perhaps posit free will as a cause. Whereas personal theodicy would concern itself, for example, with the death of one's wife via the gas chamber and the potential of *that* evil to ruin the life value of her surviving spouse.

Global theodicy views evil from a global point of view and attempts to derive a global value from suffering, while personal theodicy focuses on bringing value from evils involving a person(s), the main difference being the scope with which suffering is responded to and viewed. Importantly, Adams considers, given any evil, there will be those who stay strong and lose no sense of life value and others who are absolutely ruined. So it seems all the more pertinent individual cases of suffering be examined. Sufferers in many cases (if not all) need to be addressed as individuals, which cannot be alleviated by one-size-fits-all approaches global and generic in nature. The perspective of present sufferers as it pertains to personal theodicy also takes on greater significance. There is perhaps no greater time at which one's life meaning is in question than in the midst of suffering. By putting aside the broad-brush approach of global theodicy and embracing an individual's experience of suffering, personal theodicy is uniquely equipped to address present sufferers at their most vulnerable point.

1.4.2. Distinction Two: Objective vs. Subjective

According to Wykstra and his CORNEA response, the perception gratuitous evil exists is unreliable since divine reasons for evil are often unknown to sufferers and observers alike. A subjective understanding of evil is unimportant and objective creedal adherence is preferred. Accordingly, theists are exhorted to believe, for example, gratuitous evil does not exist, despite what may be perceived and felt within suffering. Wykstra advocates objective creedal adherence by maintaining what he calls Core Theism (the belief God is omniscient). He likens the epistemic state of ignorance to an infant's knowledge of her parents' purposes in allowing her to experience pain for her benefit and claims Core Theism increases the likelihood God's purposes would be beyond one's ken. Using his parent analogy, Wykstra claims parents of greater intelligence are

more likely to reason for the future when allowing their children to undergo painful experiences, while parents of half-wit or no wit at all would fail to plan in such ways. Comparatively, if God is omniscient, then according to Wykstra, it is very credible God has planned into the future to such a degree most events of suffering are instrumentally connected to a future albeit unknowable good (Wykstra 1996, p. 143-145). The objective belief statement of Core Theism plays a pivotal role in Wykstra's argument and many theodical responses to evil. This is so much so the case it seems one must hold to Core Theism at the expense of one's present experience of suffering, whatever that might be.

A subjectively satisfying response to the experience of pain, in contrast, would consider the perception of one's circumstances and seek to understand how subjective value external to suffering (such as divine-human communion) might be attained. Interestingly, the emphasizing of one's subjective experience and perception of evil does not require one sacrifice what one knows of God by creedal observance. For example, people often believe things about God objectively based on how they perceive God, e.g., as loving, powerful, and intelligent (Alston 1991, p. 63). But the most interesting part of including one's subjective experience as a part of a response to evil is its availability to those amid suffering.

A subjectively satisfying solution would not require deferment to suffering's end. The perception of suffering gratuitous evil challenges the CORNEA theist with a dichotomy between what is intellectually affirmed and experienced. The experience itself forces one to trust one's perception or not. In general, the intellectual approach (of which CORNEA is a significant part) is unsuited as a response to the experience of evil since it disregards one's perception of it as unreliable. Theists are encouraged to adhere to dogmatic assertions—e.g., that a good and all-powerful God cannot allow gratuitous evil—even though the experience of suffering may present

a significant challenge to those beliefs. The importance of a distinction between an objective and subjective focus concerning evil, and the subsequent impetus placed on experience, is vital in revealing the intellectual approach's preference to ignore, for the most part, one's experience of evil.

1.4.3. Distinction Three: The Post-Suffering vs. Present-Suffering Perspective

A post-suffering perspective urges sufferers to *wait* for redemption, purpose, and meaning in the midst of suffering. It is unable to assuage the angst of present pain—a type of pain that is very real, perceptual, and able to engulf one's sense of self-worth. Theodical practice often proclaims the evil-defeating capabilities of postmortem experiences of God. Adams, for example, argues it is only in the incommensurate nature of the beatific vision or blissful afterlife that the redemptive usefulness of evil is appreciated. This perspective is a post-suffering one, which relies on retrospective awareness: it asserts a person will only receive meaning *after* suffering, as a direct result of looking back on it. Thus, a postmortem meaningfulness and understanding is sought.

In contrast, a present-suffering perspective answers the existential problem of evil for those amid suffering by making possible the attainment of meaning within and despite pain. The present-suffering perspective jettisons objective, abstract belief statements—which may lead to unmet expectations and false notions of divine-human interaction within evil—and considers an individual's perception of and participation in *here* and *now* suffering. In discounting abstract belief statements, the present-suffering perspective invites a greater experiential comprehension of God and humanity's relation to Godself so comfort, strength and meaning obtain outside and regardless of present suffering. By rejecting a post-suffering perspective, which forces one to look back on past suffering and search for a meaningful context from which to understand it, the

present-suffering perspective affirms the sufferer need not wait, expect, or hope that comfort and/or meaning might exist hereafter. The benefits of the present-suffering perspective are obtainable here and now.

A present-suffering perspective is needed in a context which assumes the actuality of existential suffering. Since the reality of this context cannot be denied (as suffering is ubiquitous), then a response to evil that caters to one in the throes of pain is necessary and useful. This perspective on evil keeps the sufferer of such evil in the experience of what is happening and does not pretend to rescue her with abstract hope and expectation. In a sense, it tells the truth and encourages trust of one's perception and cognitive faculties.[11] From this point, a useful, pain-enduring faith may materialize. Instead of denying a sufferer's present reality through dogmatic expression of hope, eternal bliss and divine purpose, through the present suffering perspective, the sufferer is enabled to experience God in the moment—not solely as a set of beliefs to which one adheres. As one experiences God during gratuitous suffering, it becomes evident a present-suffering perspective invites a participation in the divine that may continue despite and in the midst of suffering.

1.4.4. Distinction Four: Meaningful Suffering vs. Meaningful Relation

To assert all suffering in one's life is meaningful is to contest the claim God allows individuals to suffer gratuitous evil. This assertion also seems to emphasize God is *required* to make evil

[11] My argument assumes the sufferer is cognitively sound. The exploration of the suffering of mental illness, while interesting and of great worth to the many that suffer it, cannot be examined within this project. While not denying the misuse or self-deception of religion (regarding mental illness), Wayne Oates contends "Jesus' mind was passionately in love with reality and abhorred the circuitous deceptiveness characteristic of much religious behavior" (1955, p. 32). See also Menninger 1947, p. 466 and Flugel 1945, p. 166.
I would like to think my project, too, is "passionately in love with reality," and by so being, allows believers to be true to their experiences, thus enabling them to endure suffering perhaps easier than through traditional theodical methods.

meaningful. Moreover, every evil God allows in one's life, for it *always* to have value for the individual, must have purpose. To assert suffering is meaningful is common to most theodicies. For example, Eleonore Stump, in laying the foundation of her existential defense, holds suffering as the sole means by which one is made willing to commune with God. Stump also asserts the purposefulness of evil (one's flourishing) is dependent on choices made *within* suffering: in pain, humans may choose God (and thereby flourish) or not (and thereby flounder). This thought assumes all cases of suffering are purposeful from the divine perspective: God is always attempting to make the sufferer more willing to draw near to God. Although an individual's attainment of meaning may be dependent on choice, Stump's charge God purposefully allows suffering to draw the sufferer—though her suffering and by her choice—into union with God is clear (2010, p. 455). Suffering is thereby made a *necessary* part of one's flourishing (divine-human communion) and inherently meaningful.

In contrast, a meaningful relation, as I use the phrase, contends meaning can arise from sources other than suffering, and suffering is not required to possess meaning-making qualities within a theistic context. The principal source of meaning in what follows is divine-human communion or theosis (i.e., one's perception, participation in, or experience of God), and any meaning attained from it is acquired despite evil. Thus, gratuitous evil is permittable within a theistic context without the total loss of meaning, and a sufferer may rightly perceive an evil gratuitous (since it *is* gratuitous) and meaning still be possible.

Divine-human communion is perhaps best understood as containing two distinct aspects, one external and the other internal. The external aspect involves what one can know *about* the relation, whereas the internal aspect concerns a person's *experience* of the relation. While the internal aspect of the relation is of intense interest to this work, I also recognize the implausibility

of accurately attaining precise information about a person's experience of it. Since one cannot *be* another in the moment of divine-human experience and have an exact knowledge of *that* person's passions, fears, and comforts resulting from that moment, one cannot experience the internal aspect of the relation for *that* individual. One must thereby rely on reports *about* the experience. Nonetheless, what one can know about the relation, by establishing a way of properly thinking about it, will be my principal task. Where possible, the internal aspect of the relational experience will be explored.[12]

I argue the establishment and examination of a meaningful relation (especially a divine-human one) should be a necessary feature of any personal theistic response to suffering. It is often the case the perception of an evil event is negative and more than likely those who suffer wonder of its purpose. They speculate on better ways of accomplishing identical goals and reflect on why things are the way they are. Especially for present sufferers, the importance of a meaningful relation cannot be overstated. For instance, if one assumes God is timeless, meaning God is thought to experience (in some sense) an understanding of past, present, and future as God's "present," then one could also conceive one's present moment as an opportunity to engage in meaningful relation with God.

I believe understanding God and the divine-human communion in this way presents significant evidence of the benefit of engaging the problem of evil from a present-suffering perspective. Utilizing the present moment to retain a meaningful relation with God is possible if one maintains God is timeless and ever-present. In this sense, God remains available to human beings and their needs, and the plausibility of a relation with God within the present is more likely. If this is the case, present sufferers in their here and now experience of pain have the chance to

[12] John Cottingham sums it up nicely: "To *access*, however, is not the same as to *assess*" (2003, p. 100). In terms of this project, I will mostly be *assessing* divine-human communion within existential suffering.

engage with God, the experience of whom would provide meaning within suffering despite evil. A meaningful relation would not only be possible but very needed in the midst of pain. Importantly, the meaning associated with the divine-human relation is of a type that would exist despite evil and the suffering it causes. Therefore, it cannot be viewed as a "blessed" result of evil or even as the cause of evil (so good may result). In no way (positive or negative) is the relation affected by suffering. This allows for the ubiquitous presence of divine-human communion to always be there for the sufferer regardless.

1.4.5. Distinction Five: An Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental View of Suffering

To hold all suffering is instrumental is to contend evil must have a larger (even divine) purpose or reason for its allowance, which is often an outweighing good permitting its existence. Making sense of why God would allow evil in the first place seems a common goal among instrumental theodicists: surely God would have a good and moral reason for allowing evil. Instrumental responses to evil are often presented as moral justifications for God, which allow God to permit evil and remain morally perfect. What receives perhaps the most attention in an instrumental approach to evil is the consequent good which outweighs or defeats the evil that caused it. For example, a beatific vision (brought about by suffering) would outweigh the evil essential to its existence. In this way, there is always a larger and better purpose behind evil, which makes the suffering of it worthwhile. Additionally, theistically treasured qualities such as divine omniscience and omnipotence are secured via the instrumental approach. God can have the awareness of and ability to prevent evil without being required to thwart it if a good and moral reason for God permitting it can be supplied. According to this particular response to evil, using such reasons as

means to morally good and permissible ends justifies God's inaction regarding the presence of even heinous evil and preserves theistic belief amidst suffering.

In contrast, my view of non-instrumental suffering asserts evil does not require outweighing goods or reasons for its existence. I assert evil can happen for no greater reason at all. Since the existence of gratuitous evil (which I believe is essential to the non-instrumental approach) allows no God-justifying explanation for it, the non-instrumental approach also discounts the objective nature of global theodicies which amplify the greater-good results of evil. I argue gratuitous evil makes the instrumental approach to suffering irrelevant, especially if meaning is attainable through divine-human communion regardless of suffering. As soon as achievement of purpose outside suffering and the existence of gratuitous evil are viable possibilities within one's belief framework, an instrumental approach to suffering is not sustainable. I believe the non-instrumental approach relieves the pressure to have an answer for evil and opens the sufferer to obtaining comfort, seizing the present moment, and participating in God. If no reasons for evil are required, then time can be used cultivating the enduring meaning-making experience of divine-human communion (or theosis). I contend the non-instrumental approach is useful, as it changes the focus from a future, not-yet-realized hope, narrowing one's focus to the present. This then begins to answer the problem of present suffering, giving voice to those suffering here and now.

I digress to consider very briefly why God would allow gratuitous evil in the first place. Wondering at the cause or permission of gratuitous evil is undoubtedly a common and very popular question. But for my purposes—given the fact I am investigating the experience of present suffering—this question does not appear strictly relevant for the following reasons. First, the question assumes (nonsensically) there is a reason behind gratuitous evil: if there were a reason,

such evil would not be gratuitous. Second, an existential consideration of evil concerns a sufferer's experience of evil and does not directly worry about its cause. Often, a person must experience suffering and then, once the suffering is finished, work to make sense of it according to her belief framework. So any attempted answer as to why an evil event occurs can only be met in retrospect: a type of reflection only sufficiently engaged with external to suffering.

Adams notes erecting great social systems in the future would do nothing to defeat or overwhelm, for example, the horrors of Auschwitz. In her words, "No amount of human political action can make the past not to have been or raise the dead." She suggests something greater must be provided, namely, postmortem survival and a divine guarantee horrors be organically and necessarily tied to life so horror participants' lives remain on the whole a great good to them (1999a, p. 198-199). True defeat of an evil is the usefulness of that evil, per Adams, to counteract and overwhelm its unfortunately necessary and horrendous aftereffects to the point of providing lasting meaning for the sufferer. It does not seem rational justifications or any type of social outreach would be up to the task of restoring meaning lost from horrendous (gratuitous) evil. For these reasons, I merely mention the popular question to set it aside and keep focus on the present experience of suffering.

1.4.6. Distinction Six: Philosophical (Rational) vs. Theological (Experiential)

This last distinction cuts to the heart of the intellectual and existential divide and makes clear perhaps in the clearest way the benefit of establishing a theistic preference for an existential consideration of the problem of evil. Theodicists for the most part are working from a rational presupposition, which has pigeonholed the debate, and they rarely consider the possibility God allows gratuitous evil. In other words, to retain God's moral perfection, the majority of theodicists

maintain all evils are meaningful and thereby reinforce an abstracted intellectual (and philosophical) understanding of religious belief and divine-human interaction generally: evil is fleeting and only *appears* meaningless. Gratuitous evil's plausibility is therefore excluded and the experience of it discounted. Additionally, suffering remains a tangible item external to the sufferer that invades one's life but only lasts for a season. Its culmination often brings great reward, and the sufferer is afforded the opportunity to view her suffering in retrospect and examine its benefits. In these cases, a fair consideration of the perception (or suffering) of evil is sacrificed for the sake of intellectual consistency.[13]

Theodicists are frequently caught up with the philosophical rationalism of the intellectual approach and exclude a person's potential for religious experience. The believer has at her disposal the experience of her tradition's historical context (the scriptures, the lives of the saints, the sacraments), the experience of personal devotion (prayer, meditation, religious services), and the experience of God. All these experiences empower the individual whatever her religious tradition. And if one is to consider how a theist may suffer well by keeping divine-human communion intact within suffering, these experiences must be a part of the conversation. Human beings are not only intellectual creatures but also possess qualities that make them unique and provide them with exceptional experiences which specifically prepare them for life and the suffering of gratuitous evil. The sufferer's experiences need to be considered to provide her with the best possible chance of retaining divine-human communion within suffering and thus enduring it.

[13] In fact, Adams seems to support the experiential approach over against the rational approach when she says, "Where suffering is concerned, capacity to conceive follows capacity to experience, in such a way that we cannot adequately conceive what we cannot adequately experience." She compares this distinction to that of a blind person. Although the person may have many and very detailed color concepts, she fails to engage emphatically with what it would be like to experience them and not just know about them (Adams 1999a, p. 36).

In terms of the present distinction, an answer to the experience of evil must also involve one's theological context. This is what flavors the whole of a believer's life, so it should have a place at the table in an existential discussion of the problem of evil. It is a person's context (experiential and theological) that determines how she views present and forthcoming experiences. I wish to discover what helps the believer to "suffer well" or, in other words, maintain divine-human communion in the midst of pain. Engaging in one's faith tradition would no doubt result in experiences that are presently empowering. Currently, the debate within the problem of evil remains abstract and divorced from this experience. This only serves to reinforce the inability of theodicists to provide solace in the midst of pain. The pain is made all the more acute when philosophical (and even theological) reasons for evil are impertinently posited. The sufferer seems incapable of truly connecting with *someone else's* version of how things are. Considering one's theological tradition and the experiences which come from it are paramount in acknowledging one's pain and providing a personally satisfying response.

1.5. Conclusion

Philosophers and theologians alike have too often treated the problem of evil as an intellectual conundrum and consequently left unexamined the existential effect of evil on those presently suffering it. Answering this existential question for present sufferers, especially in terms of its consequences for divine-human communion, undoubtedly has a positive implication for a pastoral approach to evil. But more than this, such an answer fills the existential void—the long reverberated atheistic protest against theism—which wonders if theism can help those presently suffering. By contrasting my approach with current theodical methods (both intellectual and

existential) via the six distinctions above, I hope to demonstrate the need for a different type of answer to evil which addresses the concern of present suffering and provides that answer.[14]

[14] The six distinctions will be used implicitly, variously, but not sequentially throughout the project.

CHAPTER 2

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS'S RESPONSE TO HORRENDOUS SUFFERING

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will consider the merit of Marilyn McCord Adams's response to the existential plight of present sufferers. Recall the distinctions I made in Chapter 1 reveal a true existential response to evil must be: (1) personal; (2) subjective; (3) conducive to a present-suffering perspective; (4) able to draw its meaning from divine-human communion; (5) adopt a non-instrumental view of suffering; and (6) utilize one's religious experience and life context. Some of these requirements are met by Adams in her existential response to evil, but many of them are missed. In her response, Adams defines horrendous evil as prima facie life-ruinous for the sufferer, disabling her meaning-making capabilities to the point positive personal meaning is lost. Thus, Adams seeks to establish a response, which after horrendous suffering has ended, restores an individual's personal meaning.[15] Both Adams and I are sensitive to the existential crisis associated with the loss of personal meaning. But she and I differ on the manner of its restoration. She maintains a postmortem retrospective viewpoint allows sufferers to realize the necessary (and meaningful) function suffering performs in solidifying divine-human communion. And under her view, since all human beings will ultimately die and reach the postmortem perspective, *all* suffering for *all* people is guaranteed meaningful.

[15] Adams contrasts horrendous evil with "everyday evil," the latter leaving the sufferer's meaning-making capabilities intact. This allows the experience of suffering—instead of crushing the sufferer—to benefit and be potentially overcome. Because the sufferer's meaning-making capabilities are left intact, and since the sufferer can potentially learn valuable lessons from it, the suffering of everyday evil by Adams's definition cannot be horrendous. Adams supplies a few examples of the latter in contrast to the former to make her point: "The rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas." See 2006, p. 208; 1999a, p.26.

Conversely, I will argue personal meaning comes not from suffering itself but from a proper perspective and experience of divine-human communion. Where Adams would encourage sufferers to believe in the eventual divine defeat of evil despite present, painful circumstances, I hope to demonstrate the importance of taking the perspective of the present sufferer seriously even if it concludes personal meaninglessness. In this, I do not strive to defeat or compensate for evil. Rather, my concern is the maintenance of divine-human communion (theosis) within suffering and the maximal meaning it provides. In other words, my focus is on the experience of evil, which has the potential of wrecking one's relationship with God and thus extinguishing one's greatest source of meaning and lessening the likelihood of enduring suffering. Hence, my response takes a truly existential position, which contrasts the main concern of theistic arguments: how an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God can justifiably allow evil.

Instead, Adams requires all experiences of evil be necessarily meaningful for the sufferer as a part of God's will. In contrast, my view will show, with a proper understanding of divine-human communion, meaningful suffering and its teleological elements can be successfully resisted. In fact, I believe theosis supplies an intimate togetherness between God and humanity in the present, which if properly applied, can provide a meaning not possible from suffering. In this way, suffering becomes something of a gratuitous necessity in human life but very importantly one which is not convolutedly a part of divine-human communion or an aspect of a larger divine purpose. My interpretation of the incarnation as the perfect picture of theosis and its "before sin" and suffering "plan" within the mind of God, which will be considered in Chapter 6, will only serve to strengthen this point.

By this approach, I hope to guard divine-human communion against misplaced blame resulting from anger and eventual disseverment of the union altogether. My use of Adams's

argument will show present suffering requires a response which addresses here and now suffering without relying on abstract belief statements lacking relevance to present suffering. Present sufferers cannot wait for a postmortem answer to evil. Since the benefits of such a response are inaccessible to the here and now, it is unhelpful to present sufferers.

My critique of Adams's three stages of horror defeat is relevant to my project because it presents, in my opinion, an existential argument against suffering, which attempts to address the problem of the sufferer and her experience (i.e., present suffering). Another response by Eleonore Stump, which will be considered in the next chapter, does likewise. My argument, through its trust of one's epistemic judgements regarding one's suffering, asserts the adequacy of the cognitive faculties of sufferers, which is something Adams's postmortem view misses. Instead, her response relies on what I call abstract belief statements, which, in my estimation, require the sufferer to believe something that may not be true for them in their present experience. They are often told to believe God will make everything right in the end, or God has an indiscernible reason for their suffering. But I believe these types of responses (and Adams's is one of them) are unable to address one's suffering in the here and now without, in some sense, being disingenuous. In effect, someone utilizing Adams's response is likely to agree (per her argument) one is suffering gratuitously. But in the end, as Adams contends, God is ultimately using present suffering for reasons one cannot know until after death, where God will integrate one's suffering into God's final will for the sufferer and the world in general. Therefore, such justifying reasons are inaccessible to present sufferers, unhelpful, and perhaps even hurtful.

Adams's response is properly existential only to the extent she encourages a reply to evil which is personal (by considering the individual) and subjective (by considering the individual's experience of evil). But her argument fails to address present sufferers who are only able to enjoy

the benefits of her perspective post-suffering. Nonetheless, Adams rightly criticizes the intellectualization of evil and theism's responses to it and highlights the experience of sufferers over against the theodical modus operandi of discovering or believing in the existence of morally sufficient (intellectual) reasons for the divine permission of suffering. Adams contends such tactics attribute perverse motives to God. For instance, some have claimed God may have allowed Hitler's genocide as an expression of free will, which for Adams evidences an equivocation of evil by refusing to acknowledge a distinction between abstract and concrete evils. The former refers generally to "some evil or other," which carries the broad theoretical goal of creating a world with the highest possible overall excellence or may be claimed as the regrettable result of the goodness of the creation of incompatibilist free-willed creatures. In contrast, concrete evil denotes evil in the world, which is personally experienced, not simply philosophically conceptualized: the death of a child or a spouse, the suffering of the wounds of war by a solider, the languishing effects of cancer and its treatment. Adams contends theodicists often claim victory over abstract, general evil (e.g., free will and moral evil) while slyly applying that same triumph to experienced, concrete evils. Free will may answer for the conceptual existence of evil generally, but it pales in comparison to the horrible concrete atrocities of the Holocaust (2006, p. 44; 1999a, p. 13-14). Nonetheless, theodicists have unabashedly applied abstract responses to concrete problems of evil and ignored the existential plight of individual sufferers and the personal incompleteness felt by such responses.

Adams also gives attention to the significance of the subjective nature of suffering by recognizing what utterly (and horrendously) crushes one may be with some effort beneficially overcome by another. Adams's response to and ultimate defeat of horrendous evil also treats the individual's estimation of one's suffering, and the subjective worthiness of her life considering it,

as “major piece[s] of evidence” in determining whether horrendous evil has been defeated in the individual’s life (1999a, p. 27).

Adams first explores two sources of horrendous evil and then focuses on their two main consequences. Adams says horrendous evil arises from (1) the metaphysical size gap that exists between the divine and human and (2) the internal spirit-body conflict that is a part of the essential creaturely makeup of the human being.

In Section 2, I will address the sources of horrendous evil and respond to the consequences of personal meaninglessness and divine blame. In Section 3, I will address Adams’s response to the sources and effects of horrendous evil, which include her three stages of horror defeat, the culmination of her response to evil. Christology forms the basis of the three stages of horror defeat and so makes Adams’s answer sufficiently Christian instead of broadly theistic. In Section 4, I will show how Adams’s three stages of horror defeat do not adequately address the lack of personal meaning in sufferers of horrendous evil nor do they do sufficient justice to the human tendency to blame God, especially concerning present sufferers. I believe this inadequacy is due to Adams’s neglect of the present-suffering perspective and the absence in her work of a response to presently suffered horrendous evil. Section 5 concludes.

2.2. The Sources of Horrendous Evil

Per Adams, horrendous evil is the greatest threat to theistic belief. The experience of it results in true existential crisis, causing its sufferer to doubt the very meaning of life. This is often coupled with extreme doubt of faith in God and God’s goodness. In these terms, the problem of (horrendous) evil then is the problem evil presents for a believer’s faith in God. In fact, abstract objections to God’s existence arising from logical incompatibility or evidential improbability do

not factor into Adams's response.[16] The sources of horrendous evil as presented in the next two subsections are to be understood within the existential context of a believer's relationship with God and will cover the ability of God to commune with human beings and the casual importance, or (as I will argue) unimportance, of humanity's internal spirit-body conflict.

2.2.1. Source One: The Metaphysical Size Gap

According to Adams, the metaphysical size gap arises from an extreme difference between the spiritual and corporeal natures of God and humans, and its reality forms the springboard for Adams's arguments concerning God's role in the existence of horrendous evil. Adams's support of divine agency also forms, for her, a foundation from which one may transverse the metaphysical size gap, which is integral to Adams's chief goal of divine-human communion. Once the metaphysical size gap is established as one source of horrendous evil, Adams explores divine-human action within the world and its motivations. I will elucidate Adams's sense of the metaphysical size gap as a source of evil and explore the important role played by divine agency. This will then allow me to consider the motivations of God and humanity concerning the existence and propagation of horrendous evil.

Adams believes ancient and "mainstream medieval" interpretations support the idea God is of a nature different from humans. God is "wholly other," the source of all that is, simple, immutable, eternal. Humanity remains finite, changeable, complex. In fact, it is this stark difference between the two which reveals for most theists God's lack of moral obligation to

[16] Even so, Adams does take advantage of the fact that the logical problem of evil deals in logical consistency alone, not necessary truth-values, and sees the benefits of her position placed within a logical framework. The advantage for her in this regard is she can utilize theological claims within her discussion of evil with atheologians since she deals only with the plausible self-consistency and logical compatibility of certain beliefs with others within the same framework. Adams also says when dealing with prima facie gratuitous evil the search for reasons is automatic, which for her, goes back to the main idea of the logical problem: asserting reasons (not necessarily true ones) for why the existence of God and evil are compossible (see 1999a, p. 15-16).

creatures. God is goodness itself and not just another moral agent, as if differing only in degree to human morality.[17] Adams believes it is this metaphysical difference which is a source of horrendous evil. She endorses mainstream medieval interpretations of the metaphysical size gap but feels medieval theologians are inconsistent in their persistence of what I call a *strong*-metaphysical-size-gap theology regarding the origin of evil and God's responsibility for it. They appear to claim evil is a result of choice gone awry: as if "Adam [could be] responsible and blameworthy in relation to God" (2004, p. 142). Adams sees this as a restraint on the personal aspects of God's involvement in divine-human relations post-fall, and she feels it emphasizes the differences between humanity and God too greatly. God becomes so removed from humanity to shoulder none of the blame, while human beings are left with the consequences in full. In Adams's view, God cannot be blameless for the existence and proliferation of horrendous evil. To make God so—especially given God's inevitable knowledge of the ensuing consequences—is to divorce God from humanity in a way which favors the strong metaphysical size gap position. By this, the divine-human gulf is deepened, resulting in the total exclusion of any personal aspect between the two parties (human and divine). Perhaps more urgent for Adams is the way this view mistakes God for a moral task master whose responsibility it is to ensure mature and fully functional adults obey the posted rules. Instead, Adams would wish to see God as a caring mother. Raising up her infant child by "enabling the child's agency," the caring mother helps the child when it falls and allows it to grow developmentally and personally through adversity (1999a, p. 49).

Regarding the human ability to know God, Adams considers Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Moses Maimonides as advocates for a *strong* metaphysical size gap. This version of the size

[17] Contrary to her own thinking on this subject, Adams later holds God morally responsible for creating an environment conducive to the possibly of evil. This point will be explored below.

gap separates humanity from divinity to such a degree knowledge of the "wholly other" becomes very implausible (2004, p.132-133). The medieval concept of God, in contrast and according to Adams, endows God with personal agency—the ability to act by thought and will. And by favoring the coalescing of the size gap, personal agency makes God knowable. This idea introduces what I call a *middle-ground* metaphysical size gap, which claims God is personal enough to suffer with humanity but removed enough to be a Good which no perpetration or victimization of evil is greater. God remains knowable but also capable to overwhelm and defeat evils (p. 134).

From Adams's perspective, the metaphysical size gap, understood as a source of horrendous evil, must undergo a metamorphosis and place humanity and God on the same plane of culpability. God must accept guilt for the way God constructed the world, and humanity must embrace its part in carrying on in ways multiplicative of evil. This would allow for a dialogue of sorts from person to (Trinitarian) Persons in a way which would rise above the excluding factors of the metaphysical size gap. Also important is the awareness of consequences resulting from evil, which is necessary to wholly defeat it.[18]

2.2.2. Source Two: Human Nature's Natural Spirit-Body Conflict

The spirit-body conflict encompasses the "metaphysical straddling" between the spiritual and material natures of a person. Adams argues the body, with its corporal, animal-like tendencies, distracts the mind (spirit), keeps it from positive contemplation of life, and seduces it so it constantly chooses the lesser good. The mind on the other hand continuously attempts to reign in the effects of bodily passions and encourages the body to aim for higher things. Importantly, this

[18] Because of this, the post-suffering perspective becomes a near necessity in Adams's eventual solution to horrendous evil. But for now, it is only important to acknowledge, per Adams, if the metaphysical size gap as a source of evil can even slightly be overcome, God and humanity can admit fault where it is due and move on to a more meaningful post-suffering understanding. Such a meaningful view would itself be evidence horrendous evil has been defeated.

struggle of nature within the person is just that: an issue of nature, not action. This ontological conflict is therefore not the result of moral lapse or poor judgment. Theistically, God desired the existence of human beings and was therefore, according to Adams, required to create a being with a natural inner spirit-body conflict. In her enumeration of this second source of evil, Adams rejects any notion of a dualistic fight between two distinct natures. Rather, she contends—in step, again, with medieval Aristotelians such as Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham—that "our soul is the form of an organic body," that continues (body and soul together) into eternal, infinite existence (1999a, p. 37). In holding to the natural imperfection embedded in the spirit-body conflict, Adams separates herself once again from free will theodicists who place the entirety of blame on the fallible foolishness of choice in an attempt to exonerate God. In opposition, she believes human beings, as "enmattered spirits," were created by God as less than perfect and vulnerable to perpetrating and suffering horrors (p. 38; 2006, p.142).

Adams argues, because of the spirit-body conflict, humanity is in a natural state of deep-seated "impaired freedom," leaving its perceptions and behaviors distorted. Instead of possessing the ability to make fully considered, rational choices (as a free will defense would argue), impaired freedom often leaves humans making incorrect, harmful choices. Such choices according to Adams find their beginning in poor adaptational strategies developed as children. And because of the inability to discern the full extent of these decisions and their accompanying consequences, solutions (as children and adults) are partial and inadequate. Humans use these solutions throughout their lives as if they were sufficient only to cause further horrors for the many people and various environments they encounter. Therefore, one is left with a vulnerability to horror, the root of which is found "in the incongruity of welding spirit and matter, in the misfitting of personality and animality together in the same nature" (1999a, p. 37, 132).

Adams supplies a few telling examples of the all-too-familiar issues which plague humanity because of its conscious and unconscious actions resulting from its impaired freedom and the efficient cause of the spirit-body problem. She says one's natural, animal life cycle (birth, growth, maturity, decline, death) works against one's instinctual sense of self-preservation, creating a natural anxiety toward death as one comes to accept the certainty of one's eventual demise. One strives to last as long as one can, and in doing so, resources seem scarcer than they are and competition increases. A full understanding of one's environment is beyond one's ken and presents many difficulties for survival. Reponses to these difficulties, also motived by a desire to live, typically culminate in overzealous remedies which often cause additional issues, adding to the frequent horrors of existence (1999a, p. 37). Adams points out as well one's biochemistry can affect one's mental state and perception of reality, as with schizophrenia, clinical depression, and mind-disintegrating diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's (2006, p. 38).

Nonetheless, Adams posits God's love for creation is what led God to create in the first place. God wished to bestow upon humans the ability to be like God (theosis). But God also wanted them to remain distinctly different and possess the capacity to interact with their environment and create new things. Humans learn and become dynamic manipulators of nature for purposes of reproduction and self-preservation and in this process, God gives humans the power to form relationships among themselves and to view the world from a specific, subjective perspective: to make personal judgments and engagements based on their understanding of nature and the other people, animals, and elements inhabiting it.

Indeed, it is this independence of thought and will which interests God the most and makes humans "the frontier of material creation" in God's mind (1999a, p. 165). But even with God's interest in humanity's independent, personal perception, God desired more. God's love for

humanity was so great God decided to enter it: material creation's apex.[19] God took on not only a human nature but a true vulnerability that breaks open the reality of Immanuel: "God with us," which achieves divine solidarity with the human plight. The incarnation, as Adams understands it, bridges the metaphysical size gap and constructs the possibility of a divine-human relationship removed from the negative effects of meaningless (horrendous) evil (1999a, p. 165; 2006, p. 40).

2.2.3. Consequence One: Blaming God for Horrendous Evil

Adams openly blames God for creating human beings capable of committing and suffering horrendous evil. In Adams's mind, it is the spirit-body conflict (the ontological disposition of human beings) which creates an environment conducive to the paramount consequence of horrendous evil: the extinguishing of an individual's sense of meaning/purpose.[20] She maintains God is rightly blamed for the genesis of the *potential* for evil. She is not shy of this claim and critiques what she perceives as free will theodicists' failed attempts at the exoneration of God for evil. She likens an "immature choosers" theodical approach to a three-year-old coxed by her mother into a gas-filled room containing a stove with brightly colored knobs. If the burners are ignited, the room will explode. So the mother tells the child not to turn the knobs. If the child ends up turning the knobs and blowing up the room, any blame ascribed to the child is outweighed by the mother's culpability for having placed her child in such an environment (1999a, p. 39).

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[19] Adams argues God would have incarnated human nature even without the problem of human vulnerability to suffering simply because of God's love for material creation and desire to be with it. More so, God's desire would even motivate God—say, if there were other worlds with other material creations—to incarnate Godself in those worlds as well. Adams says: "God insists on investing Godself into whatever system of things God makes, that God demands to enter into intimate material connection with material creatures…so that we can be adopted into one another's families and function in the same body as parts" (2006, p. 198-199).

[20] This principal consequence of horrendous evil will be explored in the next subsection.

She adds a second analogy to show, even if one assumes a mature humanity, God is still blameworthy. Adams posits a scenario where a terrorist is threatening a village. The terrorist warns: if anyone in the village wears a red shirt on Tuesday, one hundred villagers will be killed. Suppose one villager slips up and wears his favorite red shirt on Tuesday, which results in the death of one hundred villagers. Arguably, if only the absent-minded villager did not wear the red shirt, then the massacre would have been prevented. Some of the blame surely rests with the distracted villager, but a majority of the responsibility lies squarely with the terrorist. But for the terrorist's set up of the situation, which made a benign action lethal, death would have been averted. Adams contends therefore free will theodicies espousing "immature choosers" or those advancing "fully competent, well-disposed and adequately informed creatures," still result in divine culpability even though this is the very thing they try to avoid. No matter how the issue is spun, God created human vulnerability, giving humanity the potential to drastically alter itself and its environment for the worst (1999a, p. 39).

The blame Adams places on God for the inartful (though necessary) conception of the human being and its spirit-body conflict is a major aspect of her response to evil and forms the basis of her understanding of the incarnation. Not only was God's answer to evil revealed in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, it was motivated by divine love and fueled by a desire on God's part to be made right with humankind according to its perspective and understanding. Adams says human beings needed to see God taking responsibility for the manner of their creation. They needed to perceive the divine acceptance of guilt was real and could be felt. So God shouldered the blame for creating human vulnerability (the cause of inexplicable suffering) in the only way God could. God became human. Because of God's great love and care for creation, God found a way to share in human sufferings, and through God's solidarity, chart the way to

suffering's defeat. But in the incarnation, Adams also alludes to God's need to answer for God's sins.

In the scope of Adams's argument, God is guilty of the inadvertent (known but unintended) consequences related to human vulnerability arising from the spirit-body conflict. As the offending party desiring to be relationally right with human beings, in line with Jewish sacrifices and Christian martyrdom, God sacrifices Godself (p. 276). Not only does the death of God reveal God's willingness to suffer with/for humanity, it also demonstrates the clearest target for human anger, one motivated by a populace fed up with horrors and filled with a desire to give "its worst to God." Through the incarnation and subsequent suffering of Jesus, God offers up God's whole self, confessing to the truth of human vulnerability and God's responsibility for it. Adams also sees the sacrifice of the incarnate God as a show of God's willingness to go "all the way," to take the curse upon Godself and thereby reveal God is for humanity rather than against it (p. 277).

2.2.4. Consequence Two: An Absence of Personal Meaning

Adams employs Augustine's "hierarchy in godlikeness" to elucidate the meaning-destroying chaos of horrendous evil: just as humans naturally rise from mere existence, to life, and then to understanding, Adams contends horrendous evil makes a parody of understanding (the highest level of godlikeness) by destroying the positive meaning of existence itself (1999a, p. 42). One cares nothing for godlikeness or the plausible positive effects of evil, including other relatable goods of this world, when the meaning of one's life is extinguished.[21]

[21] The biblical Job was a renowned man of understanding in his pursuit of godlikeness. Nonetheless, self-perceived purposeless suffering brought him to the point of despairing of his own life (Job 3; See also Eccl. 4:3).

For Adams, personal meaning means finding one's place in life in making order out of chaos so a sensible trajectory and clear path to follow (or life purpose) can be established. Some will find this path by connecting with something beyond themselves (a type of self-transcendence). Others will coalesce in a group toward a common goal and strive for a specified aim. Still others may find purpose in the simple fact of humanity's existence. Whatever the means, Adams argues humanity must enjoy and value its relation to the goods of life on a personal level. Whether such joy and fulfillment be found in self-transcendence, the pursuit of common social goals, or a materialist outlook is no difference. For each, the goods pursed (that which brings meaning to life) remain distinctive and important for the individual (1999a, p. 144-145). Compare the vastly diverse yet equally valid pursuits of the stereotypical Wall Street banker and the archimandrite. Though the means vary, the end is the same: each person strives for existential meaning and purpose and hopefully attains it. One may scoff at the pursuits of the other, thinking their striving a waste of life. Nonetheless, for one's life to be a great good to oneself, one must recognize a personal goal or value in it and be able to strive toward that goal and achieve it.

Adams contends horrendous evil forms a seemingly insurmountable barrier to the attainment of positive personal meaning. A life formally substantial, lively, and ambitious becomes blank, empty, and vacuous. The point of life is lost on sufferers of horrendous evil because their self-orientation is skewed by its awfulness. Horrendous evil causes its victims to lose their way of appropriately judging the events of life per their own values, customs, and points of view. The goodness of life, all the goods which they once related to, cannot be recovered because the affront of horrendous evil causes sufferers to believe goodness no longer exists or matters. Gone are the "satisfying relations" of sensory pleasures, the exercise of one's creative capacities, and the engagement afforded by interpersonal relationships (Adams 1999a, p. 147). In the face of personal

meaninglessness, abstract beliefs and the theodicies arising from them cannot recover well enough the pieces of a shattered existential identity or frame of reference. In the sufferer's mind, amidst a now empty life, a theodical response to horrendous evil is unreasonable at best and harmful at worst.

Theodicists draw attention to the greater good of suffering so evil becomes a tool of righteousness or supreme goodness which brings a desirable state of affairs not otherwise attainable. Adams rightly points out educational benefits or any other outweighing good arising from horrendous evil, which calls into question the meaning of life itself, are nonexistent or inconsequential. Horrendous evil by its nature holds the potential to damage the sufferer beyond positive appreciation of any resulting good state of affairs. The sufferer in Adams's words is brought to a point exactly opposite the theodicist's claim where "further antemortem progress from self-centeredness [mere existence as a creature] to other—or God-centeredness [true understanding of the self and an appropriate relation to the goods of life] is virtually impossible" (1999a, p. 53).

The effects of horrendous evil therefore cannot benefit the sufferer, so responding to evil by claiming its educational benefits is discarded by Adams as an inadequate theistic response to the problem. Adams's goal is for the sufferer to realize instead how her existential turmoil can be and in fact is positively integrated into her relationship to God. According to Adams, if one is to mount a successful defense of Christianity against the existence of horrendous evil, focus should be on the individual and her suffering. The goal must be the restoration of positive personal meaning post-suffering, which is finalized through a realization of evil's necessary place within divine-human communion.

2.3. Adams's Response to Horrendous Evil

Adams's response to evil attempts to transform gratuitous events of horrendous suffering into meaningful opportunities for personal intimacy with God. The response is divided into three graduated stages which culminate in an ontological metamorphosis of human being itself. Stages I and II enumerate the necessity of the sufferer's eventual mental awareness of and belief in God's here and now defeat of evil. Stage III concerns the physical change of human nature, so persons no longer suffer or perpetrate horrendous evil. For Adams, the sufferer's ability to accept or believe in the imperceptible reality of God's defeat of horrendous evil (via Jesus's cross and resurrection) is paramount. This datum must be believed even though current conditions may prove otherwise. Nonetheless, Adams argues mindfulness of God's defeat of evil, combined with the willpower to believe despite one's circumstances, sufficiently prepare the sufferer to maintain a strong belief in a not-yet-realized but imminent reality of horror defeat. Still, true horror defeat and genuine restoration of self-worth can only be accomplished after the ontological restoration of one's being postmortem. Only at this point says Adams is the renewed self able to view life in retrospect and confidently proclaim without any doubt gratuitous events of horrendous evil are now pregnant with eternal purpose.

2.3.1. Horror Defeat: Stage-I

According to Adams, what she calls Stage-I horror defeat says God has defeated evil in a very real sense through the theandric life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, yet humans are not and cannot be truly aware and accepting of this truth. Stage-I also solidifies the eventual and necessary intertwining of a person's suffering with her "intimate, personal, and overall beatific relationship with God" (Adams 2006, p. 66). But according to Adams, the actuality of Stage-I horror defeat is

opaque and its wisdom and encouragement hard to find. Since suffering horrendous evil destroys one's meaning-making capabilities (and the spirit-body conflict only multiplies this), Stage-I horror defeat is indiscernible, and I claim, cannot be of any real subjective help on its own. For example, even if in all things God works for the good of those who love God, the value of this truth would, I believe, elude the sufferer because she cannot align it with her present experience.[22] The truth of Stage-I horror defeat cannot, in my view, fit the human perception and understanding of the world and the suffering within it, especially concerning present suffering. Therefore, humans would, it seems to me, find it hard in their current state of suffering to be aware of God's defeat of evil and make use of it.

Nonetheless, a bird's eye view of Adams's argument states objective defeat of evil is sure because of God's incarnation in Jesus, which comprises an aspect of Stage-I horror defeat. The certainty of this belief, for Adams, forces God (through God's love of humans) to remake humanity so it can become *aware of* Stage-I horror defeat (Stage-II) and finally be transformed completely (body and soul) into that which cannot suffer or perpetrate evil (Stage-III). Suffering becomes the medium by which God and humans are brought together.[23] At this point in Adams's argument, there is, I believe, a type of meshing of the objective with the subjective: the incarnation, as she understands it, is God's answer to suffering, which is global (objective), personal (subjective), human-centered (objective), and discoverable (subjective). God's suffering, as I understand

[22] Cf. Rm. 8:28.

[23] From Adams's perspective, it seems to suffer is to be human and vice versa. In this, Adams is making a clear ontological argument concerning the cause and existence of evil since her argument finds its origin in the inner conflict of human nature. Interestingly, she also makes the argument God did not unite Godself with humanity as a type of rescue operation. Rather, God desired to unite with creation out of love for it, because of the goodness of it, and from the very beginning. God created this world, saw it was good, and brought it into being for the precise reason of uniting with it through the incarnation (See, 2006, p. 190-191). Therefore, although God's love for material creation would have been enough eventually to warrant the incarnation even without suffering, that same love also motivated God's humiliation and the incarnation's salvific (horror-defeating) aims.

Adams, brings the objective defeat of evil from a divine level (which is incomprehensible) down to a material level, which is experienceable and palpable.[24]

2.3.2. Horror Defeat: Stage-II

Stage-II horror defeat relates to the overthrow of evil at the subjective level. For horrendous evil to be defeated, evil defeaters objectively furnished by God must be recognized, processed, and accepted by sufferers. But, per Adams, horrendous evil by its nature distorts and breaks down one's ability to make meaningful sense of life. So Adams contends the purpose of Stage-II horror defeat is to heal meaning-making capabilities, and within one's own manner of understanding, make meaningful sense of the evil suffered. Restoration of meaning-making capacities, according to Adams's argument, involves a real process of divine-human calibration. Since God wants to make humans into renewed images of Godself escaped from horror (as Adams assumes is the case), then the process requires divine-human participation and does not consist of simple declarative statements. Depending on one's perspective, Adams believes suffering often makes one question God's love for human beings. Stage-II horror defeat involves the downfall of such misconceptions about God and divine-human communion, which may be keeping sufferers from understanding their and God's proper place within the experience of suffering. Adams argues true healing will only occur as sufferers learn to integrate their beliefs about God and divine-human communion into the rest of their lives and thereby understand their suffering within the same context.

[24] Adams says, "I see Stage-I horror-defeat as secured by Divine solidarity with individual human persons in horror-participation" (2006 p. 197). So the objective defeat of evil surely involves and is only effective because of God's willingness to "be with us," to share in aspects of human existence. Prior to the incarnation, such things were impossible. In a very real way the incarnate God participates in what is horrendous so the necessity of human suffering may be supernaturally transformed into what is necessary to the existence and success of divine-human communion.

Even so, as I understand it, within antemortem existence true healing of meaning-making capabilities and subsequent victory over evil remains in a significant way outside one's grasp. Per Adams, "God cannot solve the meaning-problem without solving the death-problem, because for millions—*life after death* will be required for Stage-II horror-defeat" (2006, p. 207, italics original). This is because, according to Adams, most human beings cannot see past a personal experience of horrendous suffering. They are incapable of seeing life from death, imagining a viable way of moving past their suffering, and thereby creating meaning from prima facie meaninglessness. For them, such suffering becomes what Adams calls *ultima facie*. This is a perspective of one's suffering which strips the person of the ability to see past an event(s) of suffering and view it as purposeful in some larger sense. In this case, Adams says evil is *ultimately* defeating, a defeat from which there is seemingly no recovery. But Adams argues the experience of horrendous evil is person relative, there are those (e.g., the saints and martyrs who faced sadistic manners of death with fortitude) who, in a manner of speaking, are able to see light at the end of the tunnel. This foresight gives them strength and courage to face their suffering (whatever it is) with boldness even if it seems hopeless. They are convinced that such hopelessness or meaninglessness is superficial and only "for a time." For them suffering is not the end of the matter: there is a victory in store, which is obvious to them and overwhelms their transitory suffering (p. 211).

3.3.3. Horror Defeat: Stage-III

According to Adams, Stage-III horror defeat is the salvific purpose of the world itself. It is the final communion of God with the material creation God loves. The divine reconfigures human beingness and everything else material. Susceptibility to and participation in horrors become

impossibilities. Stage-III horror defeat in Adams's words is "God [making] good on the Divine project of *embodied* persons" (2006, p. 212, italics original). Adams makes a point to say God does not simply rescue the soul from a corrupted body but remakes the body imperishable, personal, spiritual, and immune to suffering. Adams says from this remade perspective all instances of suffering are seen in its light and understood as "*ultima facie* blessing." Stage-III horror defeat revolutionizes human beingness itself by making it invulnerable to suffering. It recreates all aspects of material creation and provides a now strong, healthy, divine-communing human being with a positive retrospective view of its sufferings. According to Adams's argument, rather than the gratuitous curses they once were, trials are seen as necessary aspects of divine-human communion. Importantly, sufferings do not become good; they remain evil. But considering eternity, the recreated human understanding views them as required causes of the good now enjoyed by unadulterated union with God (p. 213). At this point, Adams maintains those not able to move past their suffering—from Stage-I to Stage-II—finally see their pain within the context of its defeat and its integration into their communion with God, thus reaching Stage III horror defeat.

As I see it, the focus of all three stages is human/material salvation: its health, wholeness, and well-being. Distinctly for Adams, this process holds together by a proper understanding of the person and work of Jesus. Adams sees Jesus, as the God-human (both creature and divine), uniquely qualified to demonstrate God's willingness to enter human horror-participation (Stage-I), to recognize how objective horror defeat is possible (Stage-II), and then to enjoy a resurrected, recreated flesh which maintains the marks of suffering but understands them from a different, eternal perspective (Stage-III). Taking Adams's argument further, Jesus participates in the suffering of horrors, for example, when the significance of his life is diminished to renouncement, abandonment, betrayal, and humiliation. These are punctuated by a tortuous death which

personifies the summative gratuitousness of Jesus's message and earthly influence.[25] Through horror-participation, it would seem the significance of Jesus's earthly life is made into an absurdity. The jeers of his mockers as he hung crucified proclaim this with gusto.[26]

From my view, if this were the end of the story, Jesus's earthly life and purpose would have been an ironic fraudulence. His followers would have undoubtedly moved on from their wasted years with him and resumed their previous careers. But Adams claims the crucifixion is the prima facie defeat of Jesus and conversely establishes for human beings Stage-I horror defeat. Adams says the experience of subjective and objective defeat for Jesus allows him, as the God-human, to bring the divine into the tangible experience of horrendous evil, which is potentially (and often) materially destructive. But Jesus *qua* God allows Jesus, in the worst moment of his suffering, to perceive God's certain ability to defeat it (Stage-II). In this way, Jesus's suffering, and his near simultaneous awareness of its defeat, enables Jesus *qua* God to experience/understand the human plight of horrendous evil and once and for all defeat it through resurrection and recreation (Stage-III) (p. 189-190).

2.4. My Response to Adams and the Reality of Present Suffering

My response to Adams in this section will highlight what I believe are the inconsistencies in her arguments. I will stress the abstract nature of her existential response to evil and expose the

[25] Jesus's life and message were undoubtedly influential, but the gospel accounts seem to indicate, prior to the resurrection, there was enough collective doubt regarding his identity and purpose—from his disciples and others who knew him best—he is denied and forsaken by nearly all of them. See Matt. 12:14; 20:17-19; 26:4, 21-23, 33-35; 27:26. Mark 10:33-34; 14:1, 18-20, 29-31, 50; 15:16-20, 23-25. Luke 22:2, 21, 33-34; 23:33-34. John 7:30, 8:59, 13:21-27, 36-38.

[26] "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross! …He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:29-32).

unhelpfulness of it for those amid suffering. In Section 2.4.1, I hope to parse Adams's view of horrendous evil to identify an apparent inconsistency in her understanding of a sufferer's subjective comprehension of suffering. In Section 2.4.2, I will connect this internal inconsistency to skeptical theism, demonstrating Adams's conclusions are similarly divorced from one's present experience and impractical to present sufferers, especially those suffering gratuitously. In Section 2.4.3, I will argue her response is incompatible with the traditional (at least Western) notion of God. Finally, in Section 2.4.4, I will argue Adams's focus on the origin of evil draws further attention from present suffering and treats one's perceptions of and reactions to gratuitous anguish as illegitimate.

2.4.1. The Perception of Horrendous Evil

In this section, I argue Adams's definition of horrendous evil concerns the subjective (rather than objective) perception of and/or reaction to evil. The implications of this claim for the sufferer's experience (and the consistency of Adams's argument) are significant. Given Adams's definition of horrendous evil stated earlier in this chapter, objective events/types of evil occupy a large portion of her argument. According to Adams, horrendous evils are actual (objective) occurrences in one's life, which degrade the individual (subjective) to the extent a meaningful sense of life is implausible.[27] Thus, the objectiveness of horrendous evil requires the sufferer's experience and oddly defines the objectivity of horrendousness based on (1) personal conclusions made by those who *might* suffer meaning-engulfing evils, and (2) personal conclusions made by those who *do*

[27] Adams also notes clear instances of horrendous evil resulting in mental (not just physical) torment. Clinical depression and schizophrenia, for example, gnaw away at sufferers' senses of self-perception, making the establishment of meaningful personal existences improbable for them. The examples provided here and elsewhere are, in Adams's mind, seemingly verifiable and concrete and horrendous for *most* people, which convinces her horrendous evils are instances of objective suffering.

suffer meaning-engulfing evils (1999a, p. 27).[28] This is not objectivity in the strict sense of the word. Even though objectivity requires externality to self and discoverability by others, irrespective of subjectivity, Adams sees horrendous evil as the *subjective* conclusions of *most* people who suffer or observe similar evils. If I understand her correctly, Adams is saying, unless one maintains the right (heavenly) *perspective*, certain types of evil (i.e., horrendous/gratuitous ones) *will* overwhelm and spiritually/physically destroy one's sense of self-meaning in *every* instance. In other words, I believe Adams is saying the problem with evil is not with evil itself but rather the perception of it; if one thinks rightly about horrendous evil, especially concerning its necessary part in divine-human communion, then horrendous evil does not exist for that person. It is only with a wrong, short-sighted perspective that one fails to see purpose in suffering and thereby, because one lacks the necessary teleological foresight, participates in self-destructive horrendous evil.

I contend Adams likewise obscures the difference between potentiality and actuality. She claims an *observer* of evil (one who can conceive of examples of suffering as one becomes aware of them) can know suffering in the same way as a *participant* of suffering, which allows both to decide/agree a certain evil is horrendous. In this way, whether one is viewing evil from afar (say, reading it online) or in its midst, both persons can claim they are seeing and/or participating in horrendous evil/suffering. But I believe, bordering on commonsense, observing evil is not the same as suffering it. And if one cannot suffer it, it cannot be known as *personally* meaning-engulfing,

[28] The saints of Christian antiquity, per Adams, are perhaps best suited to serve as exceptions to the rule of what constitutes objective horrendous evil because such evils would *not* overwhelm their senses of self-meaning (contra most people). Saints are recorded as reacting to suffering in a calm, self-assured manner because their minds are focused on a "heavenly country"—a place prepared for them by God beyond this world and its transitory afflictions (Heb. 11:15-16). Nonetheless, Adams argues that one can still talk about objective horrendous evil because her concrete examples are destructive of one's personal meaning for a great *majority* of people (something, say, close to ninety-nine percent).

one of Adams's qualifications for horrendous evil. Thus, I believe it improbable (near impossible) an observer can know horrendous evil the same as its sufferer, both "deciding/agreeing" what is/is not horrendous evil. I come to this belief purely on Adams's understanding of horrendous evil: it must be destructive of one's *personal* meaning-making capabilities. So I claim, unless evil is personally experienced and subjectively concluded horrendous, it remains *not* horrendous for observers and participants alike. As I see it, one's conclusion an evil is horrendous is entirely subjective.

When Adams says most observers of horrendous evil will collectively decide, in an objective sense, it is life-ruinous for participants *and* observers—even though observers have only the *potential* of experiencing it—her statement cannot be taken as objective. I contend an unexperienced evil cannot be considered horrendous (using Adams's definition of the term) until it *actually* (not potentially) defeats the positive significance of the sufferer's life. Unless one experiences an evil, one cannot know whether it is horrendous/gratuitous. And if the potential exists for the discovery of personal meaning in evil and the positive significance of one's life preserved, then horrendous evil so defined cannot exist or do so objectively. [29]

Adams's understanding of horrendous evil—its objectivity versus its subjectivity—concludes, even though an event is horrible and grotesque, it cannot be horrendous without consideration of the participant's perception and reaction. In fact, as I see it, whether an evil is

[29] In *Christ and Horrors*, Adams claims—near the end—that death itself is a horror. In this way, no one seems able to escape horrendous evil. But this claim appears hastily added, which in my opinion, cheapens her three-stages-of-horror-defeat response to evil. The addition bypasses the psychological element present in horrendous evil, namely, the inability of the sufferer to move past the experience of evil. Without this psychological inability to move past evil (which is obviously absent in death itself, for one cannot move psychologically beyond one's own death), the notion of horrendous evil loses its meaning-destroying and overwhelming nature. In these terms, I fail to see how death can be considered a horrendous evil at all. Death is the *only* example provided by Adams that could be described as an objective event of evil that does not necessarily involve the psyche, so it does not appear to be an important aspect to the overall existential or subjective response given by Adams (2006, p. 207).

horrendous is entirely based on one's subjective experience of it. Adams, in arguing the opposite, says what counts as horrendous evil will vary from culture to culture. She points out societal norms erect certain boundaries that if transgressed create inside the transgressor a sense of shame, which degrades the transgressor to the extent norms are kept and communal order maintained. Adams offers this as an example of the objective nature of horrendous evil since society (through its norms and punishments) is largely responsible for forming the personhood of individuals, which mostly determines how one will react to certain evils (1999a, p. 33-34). In contrast, I argue determination of horrendous evil in this way is based on how the sufferer is raised and any resulting beliefs. Therefore, determination of horrendous evil remains wholly outside the event itself since two people raised in dissimilar cultures can view the same evil differently. Hence, this example actually solidifies my argument against Adams's push for horrendous evil as an objective entity. I believe Adams is combating a perceptual rather than concrete conclusion of horrendousness (or meaninglessness), which can be agreed upon by all people (observers and participants alike). Adams's sense of meaninglessness resides only in the mind of the sufferer, which is then self-projected upon the sufferer's life-worth, concluding meaninglessness. Consequently, responding to horrendous evil for Adams is less about explaining away events than about the mental perceptions which interpret those events. My understanding of Adams's argument is to see it as a response to horrendous evil, which proposes a new perspective: a new way of thinking about evil, God, and humanity.

If Adams's notion of horrendous evil is based (as I believe it is) on one's perception of it—including one's observation, reaction, or experience—then horrendous evil as an objective event is of no consequence. The deciding factor is instead with the sufferer's or observer's subjective conclusions. I believe Adams's response is not about the eradication of evil but simply wishes to

change how people view it. Additionally, I argue her response makes it very unlikely any real and lasting perceptual change will occur this side of heaven. That a person is convinced for the sake of belief God has defeated horrors is the optimal antemortem goal (Stage-I horror defeat). This belief may be parentally induced (beliefs held since childhood), encouraged by one's religious congregation (beliefs which allow one to remain a part of a group), or perhaps even reside on the shaky ground of commonsense (beliefs thought to be held by most people). But *true* understanding and acceptance of that belief comes, according to Adams, only after death (Stage-II horror defeat).

I maintain on one hand, Adams believes horrendous evil exists for the sufferer and on the other asserts faithful devotees (both observers and participants of suffering) should trust evil is *not* horrendous but an essential part of one's relationship with God. As such, I believe horrendous evil as defined by Adams cannot exist. In fact, Adams posits without horrendous evil, one's communion with God would be missing something significant since it is ultimately integrated into what divine-human communion is for each person. Objective meaning furnished through suffering is the exact opposite of what Adams means by horrendous evil. Adams's solution to evil concentrates on transforming it into perceptual meaningfulness and suggests persons cannot determine for themselves what is and is not meaningful. For example, evil, which is rightly concluded horrendous by a sufferer, can alternatively be personally meaningful to another. And considering Adams's postmortem beatific vision will eventually allow *all* people to see *all* evil as meaningful, the sufferer is left to assert—though she may not accept or believe it *at the time* of her suffering—horrendous evil does *not* exist. Since all evil (including what is horrendous) exists as an intricate part of God's relationship with humanity, even if its purpose remains unknown, it is ultimately meaningful.

I contend, for the living, Adams's response remains an abstractly fideistic pronouncement. Those this side of heaven can only believe what she is advocating is true since the required postmortem experience is presently impossible for them. Thus, she shares a strong commonality with logical theodicies and defenses in positing rationally possible premises, albeit with some dogmatic flare. Adams's response, in my opinion, does very little for present sufferers overwhelmed by the experience of horrendous (gratuitous) evil. As I argue, her notion of horrendous evil is not objective since its existence cannot be confirmed by sufferers and non-sufferers equally. Her definition of horrendous evil requires an experience of suffering and subsequent conclusion of meaninglessness. Clearly, observers of evil do not meet this standard. I assert Adams is not precise enough in her definition of horrendous evils. She oscillates between the subjective conclusions of sufferers being given their just weight and the objectiveness of God's defeat of evil. Given the presently unknown reality of Stage-I horror defeat, one's life may be subjectively ruined and yet remain objectively and covertly meaningful. Adams wishes to change the perceptual conclusions of sufferers but is unable to do so. Rather, I maintain she encourages a distrust of the sufferer's experience and subsequent conclusions of horrendousness (meaninglessness) because of the objective and personally unknowable fact of God's Stage-I defeat of evil. This is similar to Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA defense except Adams is inconsistent in positing the present horrendousness (gratuitousness) of evil while concurrently asserting its inherent significance.

2.4.2. Adams's Response Compared to Skeptical Theism

Although Adams says she rejects global theodicy for its insensitivity to those suffering, the inconsistency between her understanding of horrendous evil as gratuitous and her insistence God

infuses such evil with subjective and objective meaning *always* (thereby defeating it) places her argument among the very ones she critiques. I argue her position is abstract, distrustful of a sufferer's perception, and essentially global; her view, therefore, is the opposite of what I believe present sufferers require. I argue present suffering is best addressed when sufferers are responded to in a personal way which believes/trusts their experience is (according to their perceptual judgments) veridical. In contrast, I believe Adams's argument cannot, if she is to present a case addressing the problem of present suffering (which she claims to do) respect the subjective experience of horrendous (gratuitous) evil. Her view invites what I call abstract belief by encouraging beliefs which are isolated from one's suffering and its accompanying emotional responses and aftereffects, obliging one to believe something which is not, based on one's judgment of one's present suffering, *not* true for oneself.

One finds similar reasoning in Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA response, which was discussed and set aside in Chapter 1. As one recalls, Wykstra claims it inappropriate for any person to judge evil as gratuitous due to ignorance of the complexities of the plans of an infinite, omniscient God. This forces the believer to ascribe to a certain belief-set despite evidence to the contrary, which I call an abstract set of beliefs. As I have said, this presents a fundamental distrust of the believer and one's perceptual judgments. Such thinking, in my estimation, is outside the realm of an existential defense of theism altogether, as one's feelings, thoughts, and personal reactions to suffering are discredited. Adams even states her response to horrendous evil (which remains theoretical and *not* existential in my view) is a philosophical statement which may not be appropriate in the presence of "burning children." Nonetheless, in her opinion, the suffering of burning children will eventually have its relevance revived in the sufferers' post-suffering/postmortem reflections. She compares theodicy to arithmetic, saying calculus (theodicy)

is not appropriate for first graders (present sufferers), so it should be withheld from them until they are ready. In other words, theodicy—and Adams's position as well—is good only for post-sufferers in a reflective state (1999a, p. 187-188). As I see it, Adams's response, because of its similarity with Wykstra's, is more suited for the evidential (not existential) problem of evil.

I believe, because of the logical nature of Adams's response and its likeness to CORNEA, the sufferer must in both cases espouse beliefs which may not conform to her here and now suffering. Rather, I contend one is pushed to accepting beliefs which are solely logically (abstractly) aligned with, for example, the tenets of classical theism. Theodicists (such as Wykstra and Adams) "know" theism to be true and any experience to the contrary is a problem with the experiencer, not theism. Clearly dismissive of one's experiences, this abstracted notion equally pretends there is an objective truth of theism, which confesses every negative human experience outside the omni-attributes of God is somehow justified even if that justification remains unknown. Similarly, as I understand it and thus argue, classical theism (traditionally understood and for the most part) is, especially concerning the experience of suffering, based not in knowledge but belief. In positing abstract belief sets over against a believer's experience, it too at its core sacrifices self-reported knowledge for the sake of belief. In the same way, greater-good theodicy, I believe, in treating present sufferers as a means to a greater end, also seeks divine justification in contending all evil is permitted for the express purpose of bringing about a good greater than it. Theodicies such as this, and I believe Adams's is one, in some cases give an appearance of compassion for the present sufferer without addressing their plight and instead treats their suffering as a means to a greater end necessary to the fulfillment of God's will.

I believe it is evident Adams and Wykstra, if their suppositions are simplified in the following way, claim *x* is true in both times *a* and *b* even though *x* appears false in time *a* and true

only in time *b*. In terms of Adams's argument, time *a* is one's antemortem reality, while time *b* is one's postmortem, heavenly existence. The truth of *x* remains true between time *a* and *b*, but the awareness of it changes. The truth of *x* requires all sufferers believe God defeated evil (according to the Jesus events), although this datum remains unclear in the present. Furthermore, these belief sets are meant to encourage sufferers as they patiently wait for the eschaton, reassuring each other of God's victory in the *eventual* and complete defeat of evil.

Adams's main motivation in reinforcing Wykstra's defense is found, I contend, in her drive to make all evil meaningful. But I believe evil's destruction of the world and its degrading of society stands as a sad testament to the fact evil is not defeated and often overwhelms the lives of even the strongest. As a result, questions, doubts, and objections from atheists and theists alike abound. In the face of such supposed objective/subjective proof of God's non-existence, it is clear to me Adams (and many others) have simply changed the battlefield. Instead of dealing with the rocky terrain of life and the suffering it contains (which seem to disprove God), they move the battle to a heavenly venue full of nothing but goodness, peace, and calm, a setting very favorable to the existence of God. After all, heaven is thought to be a place where no evil can exist (save the heavenly fall of Satan and his demons) and no slight against God can stand, so the reality of God and divine goodness is preserved. Many say (including Adams) from this vantage point evil will be seen for what it is: an experience which in various ways leads sufferers to heavenly victory over evil. Adams wants sufferers to adopt abstract belief sets such as these despite the evidence of their present experience and encourage others to do the same. I believe such belief sets, which counter the present experience of suffers, are not only distrustful of their epistemic condition but potentially harmful to their faith in God and ability to engage in divine-human communion.

I contend, although Adams's position offers an abstract response to evil, it is dissimilar to CORNEA in its inconsistency. Her simultaneous claims of validity of an *ex post facto* perceptual victory over evil and a sufferer's subjective antemortem conclusion evil is horrendous (meaningless) presents an inconsistency not seen in CORNEA. To differentiate herself from the logical, global stance of Wykstra's view, Adams attempts to addresses the subjective element of suffering. However, I believe she is inconsistent in maintaining horrendous evil *is* and is *not* gratuitous. Her argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Horrendous evil is actually gratuitous for the one who sufferers it.
2. God has defeated all evil (through the Jesus events) and thereby made all evil meaningful by making it an intricate part of divine-human communion.
3. So horrendous evil is not actually gratuitous, except in the (present) sufferer's mind.

These propositions reveal antemortem belief in (1) results in the present sufferer's delusion given the objective reality of (2).

Adams attempts to diverge from theodicists before her by framing her answer to evil around the perspective of the sufferer. But I contend, if her position is to retain cogency, she would have to address the above inconsistency and admit victims of horrendous evil are or are not deceived in their understanding of their suffering. If they are deceived (which I believe Adams's response claims they are), then in-the-moment solidarity seems improbable. Even though Adams attempts to avoid agreeing with the skeptical theist out of compassion for the sufferer, I assert her response also concludes the sufferer of horrendous evil is perceptually deceived. And if her response concludes as much (which I believe it does), she in fact adopts the same global theodicy she decries

and encourages an objective notion of God and evil, maintaining God infuses all suffering with meaning in the end regardless of one's present perception.[30]

2.4.3. The Goodness of God: Adams's Misconception

Adams's response to the problem of horrendous evil is, I believe, incompatible with the traditional (Western) Christian notion of God as goodness itself.[31] Per Adams, God created humanity with the potential to suffer and therefore has the obligation to correct it. For example, the obligation is one, as I understand it, of conditional necessity given the ontological state of the human beings and God's love for them. But it is true as well that Stage II and Stage III horror defeat *require* God transform human ontology so it is not left in life-ruinous states. Additionally, Adams speaks of God "guaranteeing" each human being a life which is a great good for it—God "must," in other words, make good on horror-participation through Adams's understanding of the incarnation and its afterlife effects—which cannot happen until horrendous evil is defeated (1999a, p. 82-83, 143, 158 and 2006, p. 45, 50, 212-213). Adams in my estimation therefore judges the quality of the *essence* of God based on worldly events. She obligates God to certain moral tests, which if God fails, God remains not good in essence. But as I understand it, this notion opposes classical theism—via divine simplicity—which posits God cannot be judged as one performing actions considered morally right or wrong apart from God's being: God is good by divine essence and not

[30] It is unlikely that one utilizing Adams's response to console another would be able to escape the fact that whatever the sufferer is feeling now will make no difference in the end. This is the very thing those of Adams's Wrestling Church teach. They encourage one another with their dogmata about divine victory over evil as they wrestle with the fact of actual suffering, which appears prima facie inconsistent with the viewpoints they espouse (2006, p. 201-202).

[31] I have in mind here the typical omni-attributes of God (e.g., omnibenevolence). But I will later dispute this traditional notion in favor of a more apophatic view, which is more consistent with, for example, an Eastern Orthodox theological approach to the understanding of God.

because certain moral obligations are fulfilled.[32] She maintains God's goodness (via divine interaction with the world) will not allow Godself to fail or permit existential meaninglessness due to suffering. God's goodness revives meaning within evil because of a moral obligation, which God is required, by the goodness of divine nature, to fulfill. Even so, God allowed the potential of suffering in human beingness through the spirit body conflict, and it is for this God is found guilty by Adams and required to grant restitution.

To say that God *must* restore humanity's loss of meaning due to the suffering of horrendous evil, I argue, is to judge the goodness of God based on moral action (a worldly relation) and not God's moral being. Such judgment sullies the divine nature so if God performs *x* God is good in essence; if not-*x*, then God is not good in essence. Nonetheless, per Adams, God's love of creation (the fact it exists rather than not) transcends human morality or any fault humanity might find with God and the decision to create. Essentially, Adams offers an argument, when considering God's love as a reasonable justification for creating humanity's spirit-body conflict, that such love compelled the act of creation. But for allowing the creation of humanity as God did (with the spirit-body conflict, thus making horrendous evil possible), Adams believes God is therefore guilty of causing untold amounts of horrendous evil and is required to compensate humanity and answer for God's sins via crucifixion. In her view, God is morally guilty for God's love for humanity, which caused God to create humans the way God did, and God must pay the price (2006, p. 216). In opposition to Adams's idea of love as a motivation for divine creation, Andrew Gleeson provides

[32] One may argue divine simplicity invalidates the problem of evil altogether. By claiming it nonsensical to believe in a standard of goodness external to God (by which God is judged), there appears no way for humanity to relate the good/bad circumstances of this world to a good/bad God. There is then no manner by which God is known or something about God can be stated based on observable actions alone. If this divine-human relation of goodness/badness cannot be made based on the (in)action of God, then the problem of evil cannot exist. For the problem itself precisely judges the (in)action of God via an external standard of commonsense goodness and finds worship of God incomprehensibly unjust.

the analogy of parents who conceive a child fully knowing she will suffer greatly because the world into which she is conceived. Presumably, one would not hold such parents ethically at fault since their motivation is a non-moral one. Such is rather an impulse born of a type of love bypassing moral consideration. Gleeson calls such love reckless and sacred: sometimes what morality condemns, love will sanction and even demand (2012, p. 34-36).

I believe Gleeson's view is more in line with divine simplicity, but Brian Davies, in my opinion, offers a position which I think is better suited to the traditional notion of God. If this is so, then God escapes moral responsibility for creating anything at all, which will be an important notion for upcoming chapters. Davies claims God has a *non*-moral or functional goodness: in other words, a goodness bestowed to things existing per their proper being or function. Certain objects for instance may be said to have functional goodness if they succeed in being whatever they are (e.g., a knife, motorcar, or a tree) (2006, p. 201). A knife cannot help but be a knife, just as a tree cannot help but be a tree. So the knife and the tree are good *qua* knife and *qua* tree—the *esse* of a thing (not its action) being the genesis of such goodness. Thus, God is good only because God exists *qua* God. In this sense, a thing is only "bad" when its nature is corrupted or it is missing some part of its proper *esse*, i.e., a privation of its ontological goodness (p. 177). Davies's argument further clarifies my own, which will be fleshed out in forthcoming chapters: God creates from God's will, which issues forth from God's being.

Thus, unlike Adams, my argument places no necessity or culpability on God for creating humans as God did. For example, I say the spirit-body conflict arises from the changeability of creation, which gives it the ability to commit actions contrary to God's will and thus, in Adams's terms, create untold amounts of horrendous evil. God is thus not guilty (or blameworthy) of horrendous evil but can be the comforter of those within it. This is not to say I believe a cause to

evil is important or necessary to my argument. But as I will show, the spirit-body conflict —which, according to Adams, is the cause of horrendous evil—is unavoidable if God is to create anything at all. For by bringing something from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), then God introduces change and thus the ability for creation to turn against God's will. While this is an explanation for the cause of evil, it remains a placeholder within my argument as a frame of reference used for convenience only. I believe my larger argument that gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world remains cogent without it.

Additionally, I argue Adams, because of the goodness of God (as she understands it), further mandates God make all suffering meaningful by necessarily grafting it into most people's lives for their benefit. But, as I pointed out, this is only done *after* death, the sole point where horrendous evil ends. By this, Adams says God is required to act temporally, allowing humans to discover postmortem purpose for their antemortem suffering. As I see it, there is no in-the-moment divine-human consolation, no bringing up of the immanent into the transcendent, the temporal into the eternal. Suffering simply occurs, and its negative effects on the individual, her social context, and divine-human communion are dealt with *ex post facto*. This means, I believe, each person is a lifetime away from enlightenment, not able to comprehend the meaning of one's grief prior to a postmortem victory provided by Stage-II horror defeat.

I contend Adams's argument entertains two notions which are impermissible within a traditional Christian framework. First, Adams obligates God to make suffering meaningful for the sufferer, saying it is necessary to theosis. Thus, I believe she constructs a standard external to God, which must be met to maintain omnibenevolence. Namely, God must appear and be judged good by humanity or be found imperfect in God's nature. According to Adams, humans must conclude God infuses gratuitous evil with divine meaning or else God in God's nature is flawed and *not*

good. Second, her stance implies humanity is originally and by design flawed (i.e., not made as an aspect of the goodness of God but something that rather *implicates* God). Therefore, according to her, a human ontological change is needed. But, as I understand it, theosis prior to this metamorphosis is opaque. Divine-human communion seems even less likely amid suffering, especially when Adams's assertion of God's guilt and anger against God seem to be requirements of antemortem existence.

2.4.4. The Causality of Evil within Adams's Existential Response

Adams understands horrendous evil in a manner akin to the logical notion of cause-and-effect: the principal cause of evil being the spirit-body conflict.[33] Causes of evil have traditionally afforded possible answers to why evil exists in a theistic world and often strive to exonerate God. They have undoubtedly been the fodder for innumerable theodical creations.[34] And it is this foundational search for the causality of evil which fails to offer a response to present suffering. Adams is stuck with the same causality-seeking motivation of logical theodicists by choosing to deal with suffering in abstract terms. She focuses attention on the spirit-body conflict as the cause of horrendous evil and forms it into a modified good effect via Christian glorification. Specifically, the spirit-body conflict (as a cause of evil) is extinguished as the person and work of Jesus remake humanity into co-operating spirits and bodies. But none of this is recognizable, once again, until one obtains a proper post-suffering perspective, which, as I argue, is unhelpful to the present

[33] I note here only one cause from the two listed above because the metaphysical size gap is a direct result of how human beings were created (as enfleshed spirits with a spirit-body conflict). But this should not take away the importance of detailing the metaphysical size-gap and the effects it has on divine-human communion (especially concerning the possibility of divine-human interaction).

[34] Ironically enough, Adams's response goes the opposite way, and the "problem" of the spirit-body conflict becomes the impetus for the eventual death of God, not his absolution.

sufferer. The sufferer is left only to ponder upon an unidentifiable past-obsessed cause of evil (the spirit-body conflict), which creates God-directed anger for making the person with a conflicted nature in the first place. The sufferer is furthermore taunted by a recondite, beatific future of which she is presently barred.

Adams and other theodicists only confront *perceived* gratuitous evil, which is (per them) the sufferer's mistaken belief her experience of evil and overall life as a result is conclusively pointless. It is the job of Adams's defense and other theodical methods to reconstruct the person's crumbled sense of self.[35] I believe theodicy strives to be the molding force which helps sufferers perceive meaning amid randomness. But its striving frequently, as I see it, leads to the erection of false patterns, which aim to restore the theodical hallmarks of prediction, expectation, and control. The crux of this remains the human ability to flourish through prediction and stability (or a sense of control) and live a personally meaningful life despite suffering. In my opinion, the end goal is noble enough but bypasses the experience of the present sufferer whose realistic here and now perceptions of suffering consume her attention. It is inappropriate therefore to discard such perceptions even if they conclude pointless evil. I contend theodical methods such as Adams's are indeed dismissive of such personal, present experiences and preserve cause-and-effect rationality for the sake of predictability. Evil, according to theodicy as I describe it, cannot help but have a clear cause and effect nature, so it is obvious why Adams adopts the same understanding in her response. But, as I argue, establishing cause and effect within evil events on an individual or global

[35] Adams describes a situation regarding the refugees of the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. Recalling what a therapist treating one of the refugees remarked to her, she says the therapeutic goal was not to restore the refugees' sense of life-significance but simply to give the refugees strategies "that enable them to get through the day." Their sense of personal meaning was so shattered, in Adams's words, they were like Humpty Dumpty: they could not gather the pieces of their lives together sufficiently enough to restructure them into meaningful wholes (2006, p. 207).

basis must be resisted if (1) the sufferer's assessment of her experience of evil is accepted, and (2) attention is to be reoriented toward divine-human communion (theosis) instead of suffering itself.

2.5. Conclusion

In my opinion, Adams advocates for divine-human *separation*, not communion. She begins by detailing what separates humans from God (the metaphysical size gap and the spirit-body conflict) and uses these points of separation as causes for divine-human contention (or divine blame and anger). The differences between God and creature, which are visually demonstrated in the spirit-body conflict and all its accompanying struggles, put great distance between the two parties, especially since God is blamed for the creation of the spirit-body conflict.[36] Not only is God blamed, but God is also made to be the target of the totality of anger for all humanity has endured due to its inner conflicted nature. As I understand it, Adams sets a stage favorable to the production of sufferers who are angry with God and who blame God for their problems. Worse still, God is put in the position of a beggar seeking the forgiveness of humanity for what has been done to them. God offers Godself as a sacrifice so humans can rip and tear at God's flesh, doing their worst to God as they take their revenge: "God in Christ crucified offers us His Flesh to chomp and bite and tear with our teeth, invites us to get even, horror for horror, urges us to fragment God's own Body in return for the way God has allowed horrors to shred the fabric of our lives" (Adams 2006, p. 294).

If there is a communion to be found here, I believe its presence unremarkable. To call it separation is euphemistic, and it remains near impossible to see how any sufferer (albeit from a heavenly vantage point) could maintain faith under such conditions. This is especially so since, as

[36] Even so, Adams does concede God did not have a choice in the way human beings were created.

I have pointed out, recognition of God's defeat of horrendous evil will not occur for most people antemortem. The best a believer can do is assert her faith in principles which in the moment seem alien and disconnected. Amid blaming God, believers are told God loves them. In their anger, they are to forgive. They are not to trust their eyes or minds, and they are to push faithfully forward without hesitation. This would be a hard (near impossible) faith to keep in suffering, and it would be very unlikely, I believe, for one during suffering to maintain divine-human communion. For this reason, I contend Adams's post-suffering, existential response to evil is unsuited for present sufferers.

In the next chapter, I will explore Eleonore Stump's defense of theism, largely contained within her magnum opus *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*.[37] She approaches the issue of suffering similarly to Adams, albeit from the perspective of the sufferer's willful response to God. Instead of placing the onus of divine-human union on God and divine goodness, Stump says it is the sufferer's responsibility through the processes of justification and sanctification to successfully utilize her suffering to the point of final union with God. As will be shown, I believe the direction Stump takes leads to the use of instrumental suffering and the post-suffering perspective, but her take is also important for my purposes as it concerns the human response to God within suffering and will reinforce my claim theistic responses to suffering have failed to provide adequate answers for present sufferers.

[37] Stump expressly labels her work a defense in the sense she aims to demonstrate a possible worldview the context of which provides ample evidence that the nature of evil, the world, and divine human communion is such that her positions about them are likely true (2010, p. 15).

CHAPTER 3

ELEONORE STUMP'S RESPONSE TO SUFFERING: THE DESIRES OF THE HEART

3.1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I revealed an inconsistency in Marilyn Adams's theory concerning her view on horrendous (gratuitous) evil. On one hand, she posits a person's present suffering can be subjectively gratuitous. But on the other hand, she argues suffering is always objectively meaningful. So, although a sufferer may legitimately conclude her suffering gratuitous in the moment, Adams argues a postmortem perspective will prove God's purpose in it from the beginning. Eleonore Stump's defense in *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* sidesteps this inconsistency by successfully maintaining a subjective perspective on evil throughout, utilizing Aquinas's objective viewpoint as a foundation for her own response. Stump, unlike Adams, also effectively distinguishes between the objective and subjective nature of good and evil and permits the possibility of antemortem change of mind. Thus, a meaningful perspective on one's suffering is not relegated solely to a postmortem reality. In these respects, Stump's theory is preferred over Adams's. Nonetheless, Stump fails, as I will argue, to provide a theory which caters to those presently suffering.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate Stump's existential position is not suited to present sufferers because she is similarly committed to: (1) a post-suffering view, which confers meaning on suffering *ex post facto*; (2) ascribing an instrumental nature to suffering and thus mandating a greater good (i.e., divinely directed) nature to suffering; and (3) suffering as a meaningful (necessary) aspect of divine-human communion. On these grounds, I believe Stump's position is an inadequate response to present suffering. My critique of Stump's response addresses the issue

of present suffering (which a sufferer may conclude gratuitous) by resisting the notion God utilizes suffering for ends God cannot otherwise achieve. In my opinion, this is a compelling argument on my part against what I define as the instrumental approach to the problem of evil. By disavowing this approach, I claim if a present sufferer concludes her suffering gratuitous, she is right since I believe God does not utilize suffering for anything. Therefore, God is not involved in suffering (as the instrumental approach requires), which makes it, as I define the term, gratuitous. As such, I believe the present sufferer's perspective is respected as veridical, divine blame avoided, and divine-human communion retained.

This chapter will have the following structure. Section 2 will explore the fundamental beliefs underlying both Aquinas's and Stump's theories on suffering: the will, love, and theological epistemology. Section 3 will highlight the subjective element of Stump's response to suffering by comparing it to Aquinas's objective response. In Section 4, my response to Stump's argument concerning present suffering is offered, arguing her position is more existential than Adams's, and more subjective than Aquinas's, but still inadequate as a response to present suffering. Section 5 concludes.

3.2. Eleonore Stump's Reason for Suffering: The Will and the Heart

In this section, I will lay the foundational elements of Aquinas's and Eleonore Stump's responses to suffering, which I will examine in detail in the next section. Stump's understanding of suffering concerns the power of a disintegrated will to cause and perpetuate suffering in the individual, including one's interpersonal relationships. Stump draws heavily on Aquinas in this regard and only parts with him vis-à-vis the subjective experience of suffering. Stump believes only an integrated will around the good can truly love another, including God. I will examine Stump's

claim (which is in line with Aquinas) only an integrated will can actively seek union with the good, thus successfully engaging in interpersonal (and divine-human) relationships.

Like Adams, Stump's defense for theism concerns an individual's experience of suffering and how evil arises from within, affects, and potentially advances the sufferer in divine-human communion. She likewise rejects global theodicy as inadequate to people's reaction to evil whether through participation or observation and defines suffering as the destruction or taking away of one's deepest heart's desires. She contends global theodical responses speak past this chief concern by considering only what is broadly beneficial for most people.[38] Nonetheless, the foundation of Stump's response is also rooted in Aquinas's notion of objective human flourishing, which requires the integration of the will and its union with the good (God). Stump's view of suffering is therefore two-fold: suffering goes contrary to human nature by "undermin[ing] (partly or entirely) her flourishing [i.e., objective suffering], or it deprives her (in part or in whole) of the desires of her heart [i.e., subjective suffering], or both" (2010, p. 11). Stump also makes an important distinction between pain and suffering, which further solidifies her personal approach. Childbirth, for example, causes pain but is not considered suffering because most people assent to it. Conversely, when one steals from another, the victim suffers because the action was committed against her will. The will is thus central to Stump's existential defense as it forms the basis (via Aquinas) of its structure from both a subjective and objective stance.

Aquinas and Stump believe the will is corrupted and disintegrated because of sin, and the purpose of personal suffering is to orient the will around the good. But Stump admits the process of this orientation is long and slow and accomplished only through the theological notions of

[38] For example, free will, important in a broad sense, fails to reach the average person's everyday awareness. To Stump, as well as other existential theologians, global theodicies are inadequate, offensive, and untranslatable to the personal loss of one's heart's desires.

justification and sanctification (leading ultimately to glorification or theosis). The fragmented will is more than a corporeal disorder: Stump argues it actively works against integration of the will and its subsequent union with goodness (God). When a person's will is fragmented, what is unnecessary to flourishing or will integration is desired (via her first-order desires). For example, a heroin addict is led by a desire for the next "fix." This causes other desires, which are characteristic of life—one's place within family, city, country, etc., (i.e., second-order desires)—to become destructively unimportant.

Per Stump (and Aquinas), second-order desires comprise the will of the true self from which emanate all-things-considered desires. Second-order desires are meant to inform and control the "lesser" (i.e., situation-specific) first-order desires, which motivate in-the-moment decisions. According to this line of reasoning, one continually desires internal integration as an aspect of one's second-order desires, but one's first-order desires are likely to be in natural tension with that goal. Nonetheless, this does not entail all first-order desires corrupt; they are simply the path by which the will is fragmented if acted upon against second-order desires. As such, it is always true, according to Stump (and Aquinas) first-order desires should be brought into harmony with second-order desires, not the contrary (2010, p. 134).[39]

If a will is fragmented to the above extent, it is internally and externally disintegrated. Stump calls the phenomenon of external disintegration "willed loneliness." A person not only possesses and entertains misguided desires but is also unable to desire or enjoy the good for or union with others. Such a person is thereby unable truly to love or be loved. According to Stump's modus

[39] Some have even argued that by acting in opposition to one's second-order desires (and in conjunction with one's first-order desires), such a person is acting, desiring, and reasoning *without* free will. For, if one wishes to act freely, he or she must act per one's second-order desires, which characterize the *true* self. But the true self (second-order desires) is, in this case, controlled by what is contrary to itself (first-order desires), thus acting against its will (Frankfurt 1971, p. 13).

operandi up to this point, the basis for this is found in Aquinas and his two criteria for love: (1) to desire the greatest good for another (or oneself), and (2) to desire union with another (or oneself). Both stipulations are not in the strict sense possible with a divided will. The internally fragmented will does not truly know what it wants—or it wants (in a first-order sense) what its true self (in a second-order sense) does not. A fragmented will deliberately cuts itself off from others through intentional disintegration. The concepts of guilt and shame are utilized by Stump to illustrate this point.

Guilt is emblematic of the first desire (for another's good) and shame is characteristic of the second (for union with another). One's guilt accompanies a transgression of a personal or societal standard. For example, when one breaks one's diet regimen, one may feel guilty (and thus deserving) of any extra weight gain. Likewise, if one drives at an excessive speed, a ticket is expected and accepted. Both instances show guilt as a symptom of actions, which prove contrary to one's good or wellbeing. Thus, in the cases above, the offender believes punishment is deserved. One "has a conviction that [one's] actions warrant others in desiring that [one] have what [one] takes to be opposed to [one's] good." (p. 145). The shamed offender, in contrast, isolates oneself from others, fearing the consequences one's transgressions.[40]

The relational standards set by Aquinas's notion of love concerning the true self and interpersonal relationships are as he meant them to be relevant to divine-human communion. By desiring good (God) for others, people work toward what is good on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. Additionally, there is a desire to be a part of that good. People are connected not

[40] The darkness of depression while not a transgression works similarly. The sufferer is unable because of her mental state to function (in mind or actuality) per societal standards. Thus she is forced into isolation, avoiding the stares of others and their perceived judgments. The shamed sufferer feels undesirable, unwanted, and therefore union with such a person is impossible. She "has a conviction that something about [her]self—[her] own ugliness, on some standard of desirability—warrants others in repudiating a desire for [her]." (Stump 2010, p. 145).

only to other physically, emotionally, and spiritually balanced people, but they also find connection with God. For example, one loves God by desiring the best for God and being in union with God. Per Stump, the only way to desire the best for God is to desire other people—those made in God's image and the ones God loves—experience union with God. By working with others so they are rightly integrated around the good and eventually seeking union with God, one is likewise doing what God desires and therefore desiring the best for God (2010, p. 100-101). Balanced people, operating by their controlling second-order desires, want the greatest good (God) for each other. So the implications of the connections between guilt, shame, divine-human communion, and the two desires of love are evident, especially vis-à-vis the remedies for guilt and shame. The remedy for guilt is forgiveness. But shame's remedy is not so transparent. According to Stump, since the shamed person is shunned from society, her restoration must include acceptance and a renewed sense of personal usefulness. Stump advocates celebrating the shamed person's life (who she is) since shame has damaged it. In turn, the person will have a restored sense of self and purpose, a second-order-based self-context from which she can ground her first-order desires once again (p. 147).

I believe guilt and shame are easily transferred theologically: the concepts of forgiveness, acceptance, and the possibility of restored union with God are evident. In a state of forgiveness and acceptance one is finally able to love oneself (and others) again. Love, as Aquinas puts it, is itself based in objectivity and encompasses what is truly beautiful, eloquent, and efficient (Adams 2010, p. 93). When one desires good for oneself or another (the first requisite of love), such is rooted in what is truly good for oneself or that person. Since true goodness is, in Aquinas's thought, synonymous with God, the absolute standard-bearer of goodness for oneself and others is God (the second requisite of love). Forgiveness and acceptance further demonstrate an integrated

willingness to extend one's love to another. Stump makes an important caveat concerning interpersonal love. Every expression of love (person-person, divine-human) must exist within the limitation of an "office" of love. Such offices establish the grounds rules for how one appropriately, through words and actions, shows love to another. For example, the relationship between spouses is of a kind that is inappropriate between a child and its parent. If one transgresses an office in one's love for another, such a person is not rightly loving the other because the right office is not established and union with that person becomes impossible (2010, p. 98-99). For the one who experiences forgiveness and acceptance, it is likely one will exercise the self-acceptance and self-forgiveness necessary for not only reciprocation of love but a renewal of her desire for theosis. With forgiveness, as in love, the offended may forgive unilaterally (by desiring reconciliation—the good of and union with the offender). But reconciliation cannot actualize (just as love can be unrequited) unless the offender wants to receive what is good for her and be brought into union with the offended. (And God faces the same issue with humanity) (p. 106-107).

Stump's focus on desires of the heart (and their fundamentally relational nature) requires an epistemological underpinning which emphasizes how a person *knows* some*one* or some*thing* by description or experience. For example, one may comprehend a thing (or person) by qualia reducible to knowledge *that* (i.e., reason) or by simple experience without the ability to identify what or who it is descriptively. One may know facts *about* a song—who wrote it, when, why, its lyrics, etc.—without knowing it by its sound, sense, or feeling. Or the opposite can be true: one can *know* a song without necessarily discerning its name or artist. Stump calls this second type of knowledge "knowledge of experience" (or "knowledge of persons" and "Franciscan knowledge"). Per Stump, knowledge of experience is ineffable, requiring a metaphorical expressiveness

combined with a type of metaphysical experience, which cannot be described or simply comprehended.

Stump utilizes a typological application, comparing Dominican and Franciscan preaching. Dominic was an effective preacher skilled in argumentation and often defeated his interlocutor with superior logic. Francis on the other hand, called people to a personal relationship with God through experience afforded by story. For this reason, stories about Francis (including his personality and interaction with others) abound, whereas Dominic's arguments emphasized the logic and rightness of belief in God, which outlasted stories. Importantly, Stump's use of stories, favoring an experience of God—or an experiential knowledge of God—individualize her response to suffering: each person can have an experience common only to oneself even within the context of Aquinas's objective notion of love (2010, p. 43-46).

Stump believes there is a certain amount of knowledge indecipherable apart from *joint* or *sharing attention*. She supports this notion through the scientific discovery of mirror neurons by which, for example, neonates recognize the facial expressions and gestures of their parents in their first hour of life. Stump claims mirror neurons also give fully functional adults the ability to "read the minds" of others and *interpret* the feelings and intentions of others through facial expressions and gestures, completely bypassing the need for audible language or the normal reasoning process (2010, p. 69). Mirror neurons allow someone to know another's actions *and* emotions/intentions: "These neurons not only code the observed motor act but also allow the observer to understand the agent's actions" (Fogassi et al. 2005, p. 662). The act of understanding another's emotions and intentions through mirror neurons is *not* reflective/conceptual reasoning (as previously thought), but rather, direct simulation of the observed action through the mirror neuron (Stump 2010, p. 70). Stump admits the mirror neuron system is not the sole enabler of Franciscan knowledge: there are

"other neural systems that enable…mind-reading," such as knowledge *in* pictures (rather than *about*), which is experienced as an observer of art sees "into" a picture. Stump classifies this as an example of the knowledge of persons, as it is distinctly non-propositional. Further supporting the notion the mirror neural system is not an exhaustive source of non-propositional knowledge of an immediate sort, she cites Martin Buber's I-Thou relation as non-deducible, non-inferable but simply confronted, addressed, and immediate (p. 71-73). Stump further refines this type of knowledge of another by what she calls "second-person experience," which is when a person is minimally aware of the other who is conscious and present to her in an immediate and direct way. Stump provides an example of what is *minimally* required for a proper second-person experience. Paula is aware of Jerome as a person (call the relation Paula has to Jerome in this condition 'personal interaction'); (2) Paula's personal interaction with Jerome is of a direct and immediate sort; and (3) Jerome is conscious (p. 75-76).

Stump demonstrates a second-person experience is different from a first or third-person experience because (a) a first-person experience is an experience only of oneself, and (b) a third-person experience is an experience only of knowledge *about* another person, which does not require consciousness of the other person being "experienced." With a first-person experience, there is simply not another person of whom to be aware. A second-person *account*, rather, is a report of a second-person experience by a written or oral record so the receiver of the account connects to it as if a part of the experience itself (p. 78). Stump's "knowledge of persons" and her use of second-person experiences/accounts are important for Section 4 when I respond to Stump's defense and contrast cataphatic and apophatic theology as an aspect of that response. But for now, I leave these notions to one side to enumerate her defense and compare it with Aquinas's theodicy in the next section.

3.3. Stump's Subjective Response to Suffering

In the last section I considered the theological, relational, and epistemological propositions Aquinas and Eleonore Stump use in their responses to suffering. For both theologians, sin is the cause of evil, the suffering of which God utilizes to form the will toward perfect goodness and love. In this section, I will compare Stump's subjective contribution to Aquinas's objective greater-good theodicy, and I will respond to Stump's argument in the next section. Stump believes her subjective response can be added to Aquinas's to build an all-encompassing (subjective/objective) way to human flourishing through suffering, which fundamentally includes what is missing from Aquinas: the satisfaction of one's heart's desires. She does not believe what she calls Aquinas's stern-minded view of human flourishing—which understands theosis as an outweighing good over every other desire or person—is sufficient for those suffering the loss of their hearts' desires. Such persons in Stump's estimation can both desire certain things more than their own flourishing *and* require their lost hearts' desires back in new and "refolded" ways. Thus, their suffering, according to Stump, is redeemed only by the personal way required by Stump's defense. These differences make Stump's argument more subjective than Aquinas's. But suffering, according to her view, still requires necessary and meaningful evil within the context of a post-suffering view. Unless such stipulations are met, Stump is unwilling to say suffering is defeated and God's goodness vindicated.

The following will demonstrate how Stump correlates her subjective requirements for suffering-defeat with Aquinas's stern-minded, objective approach. Thus, I will rely on Stump's understanding and use of Aquinas's view. As the previous section showed, Stump is heavily reliant on the classical Christian (i.e., Thomistic) notions of sin and redemption through justification and

sanctification, which form the basis of how she understands suffering and its subjective defeat. Because of the many similarities between Aquinas's and Stump's views, I will use their names interchangeably where their theories agree, unless otherwise indicated. Even so, key differences in the two approaches, especially concerning Stump's subjective theories on human flourishing and suffering-defeat, are evident. I will begin this section with Aquinas's view and note the differences between the two approaches as necessary.

Aquinas's objective-value argument, which defines what suffering is and how it is defeated, begins with the assumption the will is fragmented due to sin. Fragmentation of the will is common to all human beings and a condition of human nature itself. Although one may not show overt signs of sin, its effects remain ontologically dormant as the cause of suffering. The sin condition is such that without help the will suffers, persisting in a divided state and unable to properly desire, love, know, or commune with the good in others, including God. Aquinas supports a restoration of the will, but it *requires* suffering. In fact, Aquinas believes that suffering is a necessary part of the Christian life; therefore, Christians cannot be considered people suffering simply against their will. A Christian may desire or permit suffering in her life as an aspect of her sanctification (Stump 2010 p. 383). Suffering, led by the grace of God, is how God effects change in the will through justification, leading to sanctification, and finally to glorification (theosis). By this, God moves the will of a person to a state of indifference, which Stump considers a "letting go" of resistance toward God and God's will (p. 166). This allows one to choose freely whether to align oneself with God: it is up to the person, post-justification, to choose a "pro-God" will or an "anti-God" will.

To illustrate the change of mind from hostility, indifference, and finally acceptance, Stump utilizes a significant aspect of Augustine's life. From Augustine's own account, he was originally

opposed to entering the priesthood since he adamantly rejected the celibate lifestyle (an anti-God will). But after reading a certain biblical text supporting celibacy, he was led into a solitary place where he wept uncontrollably (a will of indifference). As he was weeping, he heard a child's voice urging him to read yet another text, which was the deciding factor for Augustine (2010, p. 167). At that point, Augustine acquiesced to the call of celibacy (a pro-God will). Such is an apparent work of justification: the grace of God moved Augustine's will to a place where he no longer resisted the call of God in his life. Nonetheless, Augustine made the choice by his own will to follow God (*Conf*. 8.12.).

Once one's will has been "justified," God's grace begins a cooperative work on one's second-order will called sanctification, which allows persistence in seeking after and doing what is pleasing to God and desirable for oneself (i.e., theosis). This is not a usurpation of the will; rather, on the Thomistic view, it is an enhancement of the will. Through sanctification God enables one to achieve what one really wants per one's post-justification, second-order desires (Stump 2010, p. 160). One's desires at this point include both what is best for one (the integration of the will and union with the good) and what is best for God since God lovingly wishes to be in union with humanity (p. 162). In the end, Aquinas believes for one to maximally flourish one's will must be in a ready state for communion with God's will. Only two wills desiring (in second and first-order harmony) the same thing (each other) can be in union with one another. So on Aquinas's view, justification and sanctification, as processes of realignment of the will toward God, are necessary and can only take place through suffering.

Again, Aquinas's stern-minded approach to human flourishing believes nothing is more important than union with God even deeply held desires. Stump offers an extreme example illustrating, in her view, the illogical nature of the stern-minded approach: a monk's abbot

commands him to throw his child in the Nile as a test of his commitment to spiritual growth. Stump believes the abbot is commanding a stern-minded approach to spirituality, which gives up everything, even the love and care for one's child, for its sake (p. 423). The example seems counterintuitive to a father's love for his child and paves the way for Stump's consideration of one's heart's desires in suffering, which will be explored later.

As noted, the Thomistic/Stumpian goal is maximum human flourishing by a change of will, effected through suffering. The goals diverge only in method of achievement, which I will detail later in this section. For now, Stump believes what is opposed to maximum flourishing (e.g., separation from God) is a potential reality and creates a "scale of value": one may have a closer union with God than another. This shows, for Stump, varying degrees of theosis and suggests theosis is not a one-size-fits-all goal of suffering. But Aquinas does not consider this a problem, as he sees God's goodness via theosis as infinitely distributable and given only in proportion to a human being's desire for it. Not all human beings will want the maximum amount of goodness available to them because their wills are only integrated around the good to a certain degree. Certainly, there will be some in heaven who are more "spiritually mature" and willfully integrated; these will be closer to God. But everyone in heaven will receive the maximum amount of good/God they *want* based on the degree of integration of their wills around the good at the time of their death. There will be no disappointment at the amount of good received by another. If true, to disagree with Aquinas's assessment would be, in Stump's estimation, to confuse the will to love with the will to win. Those in heaven have the will to love and so are not jealous of others who may be closer to God. All people in heaven have everything they could ever want (p. 391-392).

Aquinas believes one's utmost desire should be for God alone, whereas Eleonore Stump allows for varying desires (and their fulfillment) even though they may run contrary to one's

flourishing. On Aquinas's stern-minded view, earthly life is expendable for the sake of the afterlife. Union with God in heaven, no matter where one falls on the "scale of value"—which includes greater and lesser degrees of communion with God—is considered compensation for any degree of suffering (Stump 2010, p. 390-391, 398). The necessity of suffering and its instrumental nature make it, on the Thomistic/Stumpian perspective, eternally meaningful. Like Adams, Stump and Aquinas believe the goodness resulting from suffering outweighs it to the degree sufferers would not wish it away if given the chance. Even if one viewed another's suffering (without participating in it) and saw the resulting "glory" it caused, one would also conclude the suffering of the other worth it (p. 402). An important aspect of Aquinas's and Stump's view, which can only be mentioned in passing, concerns the two reasons they posit God has for allowing suffering which divide on whether a person is a believer. One's even implicit faith determines the benefit (i.e., reason) one will receive from suffering. God allows suffering in a believer's life as suffering *secundum quid*, meaning God allows involuntary suffering for bringing forth a great good in the sufferer's life. Non-believers suffer s*impliciter*, God's purpose being the prevention of greater harm, would not materialize but for the suffering. Aquinas does not believe a Christian can suffer involuntarily *simpliciter* (i.e., as an unbeliever) because she explicitly embraces the life of sanctification, a life of suffering (p. 392).

3.3.1. The Importance of the Subjective Desires of One's Heart

Eleonore Stump and Aquinas's views have converged up to this point. But I wish now to consider where Stump differs from Aquinas. As mentioned, she believes Aquinas's theodicy addresses the objective aspect of the desires of the integrated heart. But Stump feels there is something more: the *subjective* aspect of the heart's desires. In other words, one can desire a thing or person even

more than one's flourishing. Such desires are central to all other desires and are derived from objects desired because of a person's love for them. They do not have to have intrinsic value (2010, p. 431). I believe her claim is extreme, especially considering how she and Aquinas define human flourishing. But as will be shown, I argue against Stump's assertion there is a way in which God, *by suffering*, can reproduce lost subjective hearts' desires so the subjective and objective aspects of the sufferers' desires become one. According to Stump, a sufferer's subjective heart's desires must change through suffering to emulate their objective counterparts.

As previously mentioned, Stump defines suffering as what deprives people of their hearts' desires and/or goes "significantly contrary" to their nature. Suffering is a function of what human beings care about, robbing them of what they deeply desire (2010, p. 418-19). As stated previously, heart's desires can agree with the goal of theosis, but not necessarily. By saying one's heart's desires are an important aspect of Christian suffering, Stump differs from Aquinas's stern-minded approach, which views theosis as the only legitimate purpose of suffering.[41] Nonetheless, both agree an afterlife is crucial to a Christian understanding of suffering. Stump compares theodicy without heaven to examining suffering within a hospital without the broader context of health and wellbeing, which is the purpose of the hospital (p. 419-20). Theodicy without the compensation of an afterlife would be most callous and miserable. But Stump is also attentive to the place of the individual within suffering. While the aim of the hospital is overall health, Stump wants to shed light on helping the patient regain and improve her ability to accomplish the purposes on which her heart is set: to finish a marathon, write a novel, complete a series of paintings, and so on. Each desire is specific to the individual, can be impeded by suffering, and is *not* required for theosis.

[41] Aquinas is stern-minded in his view of suffering for most things, expect when "great goods" are lost like family or close friends. He does allow expressions of grief (similar to the apostles grief at the Lord's ascension), but the focus remains on theosis (Stump, p. 425).

While a heavenly afterlife for most presupposes a divine-human relationship which results in maximum human flourishing, Stump feels Aquinas's stern-minded approach neglects the fact everyone has different heart's desires. She argues the self-denial of the stern-minded approach leaves one with no self at all: one becomes nothing more than a clone of the other one is emulating, adopting the other's desires as one's own (2010, p. 429). Stump says one who has no self to deny is a part of what she calls the "Whatever Faction": whatever happens is a good regardless since God allowed it as a function of God's will. For example, those of the Whatever Faction would not grieve at the loss of a loved one: it is God's will and thus compatible with their desires. Stump argues this is counterintuitive to reality and the Christian message of denying oneself, which presupposes a self to deny. Examples are found in Abraham and his contrary-to-God desire not to sacrifice his son and Christ's contrary-to-God desire to avoid crucifixion (p. 430).

Rather, the truly fulfilled person is one who is objectively and subjectively satisfied so true flourishing is achieved by obtaining both what is desired and needed. This calls attention to the individual and one's heart's desires lost in suffering so they might be recovered. Stump believes God recovers these desires for everyone in the afterlife. But they are received differently than before: they are refolded and recognized by the sufferer as being acquired in a better condition, which is more desirable and fulfilling. Stump addresses the obvious paradox between the fulfilling of one's heart's desires and one's attainment of maximum flourishing. On her view, it would appear the former is greater than the latter. She does so by adopting Harry Frankfurt's notion of "final ends." Here one desires a thing in and of itself and not to another end. Stump says final ends are necessary for human flourishing and other heart's desires are not. Nonetheless, she asserts a person's flourishing requires the fulfillment of desires which are not means to it, ultimately maintaining that the "lesser" desires will converge with those necessary to flourishing or one's

"final ends" (2010, p. 431-432). By excising Aquinas's stern-minded approach in this regard, the attaining of one's heart's desires can become a type of personal/subjective flourishing (p. 430).

3.3.2. Heart's Desires Explained through Narrative

The typological narratives of Mary of Bethany, Abraham, and Samson demonstrate to Stump how, through suffering, heart's desires can converge with one's flourishing. Each person in his or her respective narrative possesses heart's desires which are not connected with theosis. They are earthly desires of personal importance. Stump believes the narratives reveal what might happen in a figurative sense to heart's desires in the afterlife as they are refolded through suffering as intricate aspects of a person's flourishing. Consider each narrative: Mary has a desire that her brother Lazarus be restored to health and not die. She believes Jesus's love for her and her brother will accomplish this. But Jesus does not come in time and Lazarus dies. Abraham wishes for a son who will make from him a people great in number. But God requests the sacrifice of Abraham's only son. Samson wants to conquer the enemies of his people with his great strength but is captured, made weak, and blinded by the very people he meant to decimate. Each person is heartbroken, having their heart's desires unmet. As shown in these cases, Stump believes there is something more than mere objective flourishing in the afterlife. Healing of heartbreak for each person is needed. *But the healing comes from the heartbreak itself*. Consider the outcome of each narrative: Mary receives her brother back by resurrection at the hands of Jesus. Her desires for her brother's restoration and a caring relationship with Jesus are confirmed. Abraham receives his son back in a type of resurrection by being permitted to sacrifice a ram instead, and he becomes the father of many nations. Samson is finally able to conquer his enemies as he is granted strength through a renewed commitment to God and brings down the temple upon his enemies (p. 435).

Stump believes each story shows how one's heart's desires can be gained in a greater way by their loss, which would not otherwise be possible. She demonstrates this best in her retelling of the raising of Lazarus. Mary receives more than what she wanted, which would have been impossible if she did not first suffer the loss of her brother and its accompanying heartbreak. Once Jesus raised Lazarus, Stump says Lazarus became a gift given to Mary by Jesus so "Mary loves Jesus in loving Lazarus, and she loves Lazarus in loving Jesus" (p. 443). Mary's two loves, Jesus and Lazarus, became interconnected through Jesus's gift of Lazarus to Mary. By understanding one's heart's desire is a gift from God, Stump says the subjective desires of one's heart become likewise interconnected with one's love for God. The subjective desires of the heart and objective desire for theosis can work together in the idea of "gift" if God is understood as the gift giver. Stump says human beings cannot set their hearts on anything other than God, for God is the only appropriate gift giver, the only one who has power to give human beings what they care about most. Within Stump's theory, there is an essential focus on God as the primary and proper desire of a person, which informs the other heart's desires and are no less important in the overall divine-human relationship of gift-giving. This action also assumes they occur within second-person experiences since such gifts are not simply charitable donations.

In the next section, I offer my critique of Stump's theory. Stump proposes a novel point of view in her evaluation of Aquinas's stern-minded approach and her advocacy for the subjective desires of the heart within it. Her concern for the subjective perspective is much needed, but it does not go far enough as a sufficient response to present suffering. Stump fails to separate suffering from theistic instrumentalism by involving God in the use of human suffering. Thus, she is forced to infuse all suffering with meaningfulness, requiring sufferers to see God's action in it.

3.4. My Response to the Stumpian View of Suffering

In this section, I will show how Stump's defense does not adequately provide an answer to present suffering. Within my larger critique of her instrumental view, I contend (1) Stump's approach fails to explain away all instances of evil, thus gratuitous evil remains; and (2) Contrary to what Stump assumes, the meaning of one's suffering is based on one's interpretation of it. Lastly, I will (3) demonstrate how Stump's use of Franciscan and Dominican knowledge reveal a close association to the cataphatic/apophatic theological divide, which will show an additional inconsistency in her greater-good theodical argument. This will further support my claim for an existential response over against a logical one, which is one of the six distinctions I outlined in Chapter 1.

My critique of Stump's instrumental view of suffering varies from my evaluation of Marilyn Adams's response since I see Stump's instrumental response as counterintuitive. I will demonstrate in the context of her defense that instrumental suffering (as a foundation of most theodical methods) is unhelpful when responding to present suffering. According to Stump, suffering as a means to theosis is always worth the heartbreak it causes. Even though she decries Aquinas's response as inadequate to the subjective needs of the sufferer, the end is the same: theosis outweighs suffering in every case. The only difference, as I showed above, is the means by which the end is achieved. In fact, the utility of suffering, according to Stump, is supposed to show God's love toward the sufferer because it integrates one's will, bringing one closer to God. As such, Stump's view of love compels God to allow suffering to befall those God loves since love requires at least two people who want what is best for each other and who desire to be together (and suffering, in this case, would be the best and most apparent medium to that end).[42]

[42] Aquinas also says one feels closeness to God in direct proportion to one's suffering because one becomes "more open to the love of God" (Stump, p. 406).

3.4.1. The Problem of Instrumentalism

The consequentialist overtones of the Thomistic claim of spiritually medicinal suffering are apparent. Instrumental theodicy and Stump's defense remain ethical issues seeking morally sufficient reasons to exonerate God amid suffering. But this steamrolls the present sufferer's experience as negligible, preferring to consider its effects alone. Because of the severe outcomes possible with an instrumental approach, and Stump's excessive use of it within her defense, I spend considerable time within this subsection discussing my objection to it. Many of my objections herein can be applied to other theodicies and defenses as well.

While many may think theosis justifies any amount or severity of suffering, this notion is unreasonable. For example, allowing people to die to control overpopulation or executing a jaywalker to arrest rising crime are sinister ways of achieving intrinsically good results, which seem morally impermissible (Hollinger 2002, p. 35-36). Stump interprets Jesus's allowing Lazarus to expire as justified because his resurrection allowed the giving back of Lazarus to his sister as a gift, which she thus appreciated more. I believe such reasoning is implausible and akin to God allowing a child to drown only to resurrect him later so his parents appreciate him more. I argue, in this case, God could have saved him before he died.[43] An alternate interpretation is warranted. Such rationalizations fall outside the limits of an ethical human experience and are counterintuitive to a properly existential answer to present suffering, which heavily respects the sufferer's experience as justifiably informative.

[43] Richard Swinburne likewise supports the moral instrumental view but goes even further by arguing God as the source of being of the universe has a right over divine-dependent human life to *cause* suffering for the overall good of the sufferer. He says, "And it follows that this right is greater if our harm is the necessary means to some good to the sufferer or others. It will inevitably be the case that God will only cause harm for the sake of good" (1998, p. 230-231). Swinburne also allows for the possibility of a net balance of bad in a person's life, saying postmortem eternity will compensate her to the degree this life and the next are on balance good for her (p. 236).

The counterintuitive nature of Stump's argument is supported by my understanding of the early Christian rejection of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which records Jesus striking a child dead for bumping his shoulder. Jesus later resurrects him (and reverses all his earlier curses on the village). A theodicist might argue, as in Stump's case, Jesus killed the child so he could later resurrect him. By this, Jesus was "call[ing] them [the parents of the child and others] to the things above." The two extended quotes below show the oddity of instrumental suffering.

> After this he again went through the village, and a child ran and knocked against his shoulder. Jesus was angered and said to him, 'You shall not go further on your way', and immediately he fell down and died. But some, who saw what took place, said, 'From where was this child born, since his every word is an accomplished deed?' And the parents of the dead child came to Joseph and blamed him and said, 'Since you have such a child, you cannot dwell with us in the village; teach him to bless and not to curse. For he is killing our children.' (*Infancy*, 4.1-2.)

> And while the Jews were trying to console Zacchaeus, the child [Jesus] laughed aloud and said, 'Now let those who are yours bear fruit, and let the blind in heart see. I have come from above to curse them and to call them to the things above, as he who sent me ordained for your sakes.' And when the child had ceased speaking, immediately all those who had fallen under his curse were saved. And no one after that dared to provoke him, lest he should curse him, and he should be maimed (*Infancy*, 8.1-2.).

Stump's view and others who share its instrumental structure see suffering as utilized by God to bring forth events not otherwise possible. Traditional Christianity seems to, likewise, view suffering in this way: it is either punishment for sin or a purity test for the faithful. Such interpretations are fueled by the idea nothing is outside the omnipotent control of God. Everything happens either because God caused or allowed it. For a thing or an event to exist outside God's control is unthinkable from the Stumpian/instrumental view. Because of this, such theodicists have embraced the Greco-Roman opinion human beings are meant to learn from experiences of suffering, and by considering the bigger picture, endure them with dignity (Gavrilyuk 2016, p. 1-2). But if God desires/wills what God creates to exist, then anything which perverts or destroys what exists cannot be God's will. Given this and based on Augustine's famous maximum evil is a

privation of good, evil *can* exist outside God's will. (*Civ*., 11.9.). In other words, there can be a chaotic, unpredictable, and destructive nature to suffering, which lacks divine control or purpose.[44] I believe present suffering strongly suggests this state of affairs even though theodicists maintain gratuitous evil impossible. I contend rather a genuine experience of gratuitous evil need not equate to a loss of faith and disseverment of divine-human communion. Instead, gratuitous suffering can be responded to, thus maintaining or increasing one's faith and comfort in suffering. This is possible because one's perspective can be trusted, addressed, and made personally productive by my response even while one's suffering lacks divine instrumentality.

I believe instrumental theodicy and the examples so far given are not in line with belief in a loving God because they implicate God in utilizing the suffering of innocents as a means to God's will and for *ex post facto* benefit. Instrumental theodicy (being consequentialist in nature) is incongruous to the experience of present sufferers because they cannot experience or comprehend a state of being after their suffering. They are confined to their circumstances and must find a way to maintain and engage God amid them. Prior to and after suffering one may subscribe to Stump's defense conceptually, considering the power and goodness of God in abstraction. But amid suffering, a type of cynicism and mistrust of what is taught and believed *about* God can take hold. In these moments, the notion of God using one's suffering (e.g., the death of one's entire family as happened to Sonali Deraniyagala during the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka) for "greater ends" is a bitter pill to swallow and communion with one who orchestrates such

[44] I do not here intend to make a claim in favor of process theology. In fact, because I believe human knowledge of God is to a large degree mysterious (I will explain more about this later), I do not believe it is very profitable—especially from the perspective of present suffering—to ruminate on the possible origins of evil. My only intention is to make a clear distinction between my view and that of a theodical method which utilizes the notion of instrumental suffering.

atrocity hard to bear.[45] Thus, I believe the refusal by a sufferer of divine-human communion is more likely if Stumpian instrumentalism is adopted. In rejecting the instrumental approach to evil espoused by Stump and others, I posit no suffering is an aspect of a larger divinely directed plan and *all* human suffering is pointless according to the former. In other words, from my view, God does not utilize suffering for ends God cannot otherwise accomplish *and* any meaning whatever must come only from a personal (i.e., human) perspective through the possibility afforded by inspiration. I will explain terms such as personal meaning and inspiration in this chapter and the next. For now, it is only necessary to contrast them with the idea God uses suffering for greater ends not otherwise accomplishable and thereby further refine my argument. I am thus advocating for the existence of gratuitous evil as such, not only to be anti-theodical or to respect the sufferer's plight, but to suggest, as well, the existence of pointless evil is not a disqualification for theistic belief.

3.4.2. The Problem of Refolded Heart's Desires

According to Stump, evil can be mistakenly thought pointless because the refolding of one's heart's desires is sometimes complicated and unclear. Stump gives the example of Clara Claiborne Park, a nonbeliever, to bolster this point and utilizes autism as a type of suffering. But first, I want to mention another example provided by Stump, which is similarly unconvincing. Even though I will not consider it in detail, I still find it helpful in furthering my claims about the Clara Park story.

[45] See Deraniyagala's memoir, *Wave*, which recounts her experience during and after the 2004 tsunami that struck off the coast of Sri Lanka and claimed the lives of her parents, husband, and sons (Deraniyagala 2013).

Stump describes John Milton's life with the following dichotomy: Milton sets his heart on both advancing the Puritan cause politically and writing great poetry. As it turns out, his political affairs force him to give up poetry, so his heart's desire for political ambition conflicts with his deeper desire to flourish as a poet. The failure of the Puritan political endeavor causes Milton much suffering, so much so he is forced into circumstances which grant him time to write the greatest poetry of his life (2010, p. 469-469).

Stump says this in an example of a person's heart's desire initially conflicting with his flourishing but because of suffering both are successfully brought into harmony. Milton flourishes as a poet as he writes poetry, which simultaneously advances the cause of Puritanism. In my opinion, Milton's life appears unhelpful to Stump's overall thesis, which wants to make a distinction between objective and subjective flourishing. In this case, she assumes the subjective heart-desires of Milton and concludes they have been granted in a refolded way. But it is clear from the story he obtains the desires of his heart in a mostly posthumous manner, so the fulfillment of these desires cannot achieve true subjective appreciation by him. One might wonder if Milton would have wanted subjective fulfillment of his desires in this way. If not, then one would question the worth of their attainment. And as a last point, I do not understand how Stump determined which pursuit was inimical to Milton's flourishing. Politics could be just as subjectively desirable and honorable so one might be said to flourish in practicing it. But even if Stump maintains what is necessary to individual flourishing is closeness to God, then one could argue neither desire directly effects Milton's closeness with God, so they can both be viewed as being inimical to his flourishing.

As the mother of an autistic child, Clara Park relates her experience of "growing as a person" because of what Park considers the suffering of raising her autistic child. In Park's view

and up to the point of her child's diagnosis of autism, she believed she had the perfect family. Stump relates how Park's heart's desires were her children: she believed her family was "lovelier than anybody else's" (2010, p. 470). But, in Park's view, having an autistic child changed that belief. She was confused and forced to struggle raising a child with unique challenges, which did not fit her into picturesque family. Nonetheless, Park eventually concluded the experience made her a better person, and if given the chance, she would not change it. In fact, in her words, she would welcome her child's suffering autism (assuming for the sake of argument autism a type of suffering) with outstretched hands.

I would like to offer a counter interpretation to this story. First, it seems to me what changed Park was her decision to view her child's situation differently, as an opportunity for growth instead of complaint.[46] It is equally apparent to me it was possible for her to change her mind about adversity (or suffering) in a way which did not require the suffering of her child. Park even says she learned "the simple knowledge the whole world knows" of becoming a better person through experience (2010, p. 470). So it was Park who, via her will, made her situation better, not the experience itself. As I argue, Park's situation (which Stump uses as an example of suffering) holds no intrinsic meaning as the *only* way one can learn and grow as a person. Instead, through inspiration (or the ability to learn from suffering on a human level), people can achieve heightened knowledge of themselves, those around them, and their world. Additionally, Park's willingness *not* to untangle her daughter from the unique challenges of autism for *Park's* sake is disturbing

[46] Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, talked to *Time* about the sudden death of her husband, saying, "I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice…. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning" (Luscombe 2017). Sandberg realized the choice before her, between an empty void and personal meaning, and the power she had to make it. This is the choice before all who suffer, and divine instrumentalism is concerned with neither one.

and an example of what I call spiritual (or self-growth) selfishness, a form, I believe, of benefiting from the suffering of others.

It seems highly improbable to me a mother could see so much worth in the suffering of her child (again, assuming autism a type of suffering) and thus not desire its eradication. I am not claiming autism itself or the suffering of it a bad state of affairs but only that Park's understanding of the situation, in my opinion, places her (perhaps unintentionally) in the position of desiring the suffering of another (in this case, her daughter) for her own benefit. And this, at least on its face, seems to me less than laudable. In fact, I think Park's position is similar to the Stumpian God who sees untold amounts of suffering but refuses to stop it for its *ex post facto* value. Park maintains, I believe in a spiritual (or self-growth) selfish manner, that the good derived from the suffering of her child is so great she cannot give it up. This assessment, although in line with Stump's instrumental gift-giving view above, appears counterintuitive to a mother-daughter relationship and likewise a loving God and should be rethought. If instrumentalism as utilized by most theodical responses is excluded, and the previous examples show, in my opinion, that it should be, then consideration of the existence of gratuitous evil (and the present suffering of it) can begin.

Autism at first "happened to" Park's child and struggle ensued. But to Park's credit, she did not remain passive to the experience and chose to learn something from it, to become a better person and adopt a new perspective. There are many ways to view and respond to suffering, and in Park's case, it was her *choice* how she responded. The instrumental value to suffering is not lost here, but it is also clear to me Park's response is not unique to others caring for autistic children. There are likely many other parents who attempt everything to make their children "well." Perhaps a parent can help by changing a child's diet, being consistent with one's schedule, rewarding good behavior, and paying attention to a child's sensory sensitivities to name a few. But it appears, on

its face, unlikely a parent would see autism (in perhaps most cases) as a benefit to themselves. Nonetheless, the meaninglessness of suffering (or unwilling hardship) does not entail no meaning whatever. Rather, through personal inspiration (on a human, not divine level) varied and positive outcomes from meaningless suffering are possible without the theodical requirements of instrumental and necessary evil.

To define my position further, consider a believing mother, who like Park, has discovered her child is autistic. But instead of finding meaning within suffering, she accepts the situation as gratuitous (on a divine level) and finds *inspiration* within the experience (on a human level), rejecting theodical instrumentalism. In other words, she jettisons the notion God is using the suffering of her child for the benefit of herself or anything else. Thereby, she denies meaning on a divine level and seeks opportunities for inspiration on a human level (i.e., learning about autism, meeting other parents with autistic children, appreciating the constructive aspects of autism, etc.). Importantly, inspiration, as I define it, is separated from the divine use of suffering for greater ends. Rather, it remains up to the person whether or not and to what extent she is inspired by suffering. Thus, inspiration is not a divine goal otherwise unreachable and remains possible within a gratuitous framework on a divine level.

Under my view, through inspiration, the mother respects the suffering of her autistic child as an experience which allows her to gain benefit from the raising of her child without granting intrinsic (or divine) meaning to suffering. Rather, she gains a new perspective which is supplemented by various means: besides the joy of raising her child, perhaps reading books about autism, receiving counseling, or talking with friends are all helpful in her self-growth. Ultimately, her inspiration is a change of the mind *she* initiates. At the same time, even though the mother is able to learn all she can about autism, meet many interesting people at support groups, and perhaps

become a gentler person because of the experience, she would not, I believe, wish her child to remain autistic for *her* sake. So, in this case, spiritual (or self-growth) selfishness is avoided, and Stump's assertion, for example, that the mother's life experience (and her child's) would be a type of "refolding" of desire—making her somehow grateful and desirous of the experience as a whole—is also countered.

Within traditional Christianity, the martyrdom of the saints seems emblematic of suffering also often thought to have an instrumental nature. While there are those within early Christianity who extolled martyrdom as an example of the sufferings of Christ, such as Clement of Alexandria, it is also true (at least in the contemporary sense) stories of martyrdom are passed down through the traditions of the church precisely because they are inspirational to the faithful. As such, I confine the following to the inspirational qualities of the martyrs, which are known by and inspirational to contemporary believers. My treatment of martyrdom therefore is not exhaustive and limited only to its application to my larger argument regarding gratuitous evil.

In my opinion, it appears what is most significant about the martyrdom stories is the martyr's life and devotion to God, which instigates the martyr's death. The suffering itself appears incidental and inherently meaningless if not connected to the larger narrative of a devoted life, which is always written *after* the event. Moreover, a martyr's death is an instance of apparent inspiration for the early Christian faithful, supporting my notion of personally inspiring suffering over and against suffering that is inherently meaningful. Theodore the Studite, during a time of scant martyrdom, interprets the struggles of the iconophiles in the language of martyrdom comparing them to a "new martyr…exhibit[ed]…to the world as a true servant of the emperor of the universe" (Skedros 2016, p. 19). He moreover uses these examples as encouragement to the rest of the faithful, reinterpreting martyrdom as that which does not necessarily lead to death and

can be inspiring to others. Origen viewed traditional martyrdom as equally inspirational for the faithful, saying the blood of the martyrs plays an intercessory role in crying out to God on behalf of Christians. John Chrysostom and other church fathers "preached the martyrs" in their homilies as reinforcement to live faith-filled lives, slaying the sinful passions, sacrificing their needs and desires as their brothers and sisters sacrificed their lives (p. 20-21). St. Symeon the New Theologian says the faithful can become equal to the martyrs: "While those [the martyrs] stood up against tyrants, we hold against demons and the destructive passions of the flesh which day and night and at every hour tyrannically attack our souls and force us to do things which do not belong to piety and anger God. Therefore, if we stand against these…we shall in consequence be martyrs ourselves" (*Disc*. 10).

The devoted lives of the martyred faithful were the causes of their death, not as a way, it would seem, of divine testing necessary for Christians, but as a display of true belief against all odds that is inspirational to hundreds of thousands of contemporaries and future generations. Such inspiration is personal, profitable, and powerful for those within and without suffering.

While my notion of inspiration may appear a type of rehashed instrumentalism, the chief difference comes in its motivation as noted above. Rather than having a divinely ordered plan for suffering which leads to an otherwise impossible good, inspiration lacks a divine plan. Inspiration from suffering is not the necessary product of an organized divine plot. It is simply personal inspiration gained by experience and based on one's decision to understand an experience of suffering in a productive way. This view further encourages the existence of gratuitous evil: inspiration remains contrary to the typical theistic idea of meaning within suffering, which exists as an intricate part of God's supposed plan for the betterment of the world. This theistic notion

permeates the theodical response to evil. Everything, including suffering, must find its place in this overall plan. If it does, then suffering is worth it and purpose filled.

By distinguishing between inspiration and the effects of instrumental theodicy, as I have done, several things are clear. God's involvement in evil is not required to justify the Christian faith experience, and God's goodness is likewise not justified by God's (in)action. Evil, on my view, is no longer considered a necessary part of God's plan for humanity, requiring human suffering so God can realize good ends not otherwise achievable. Instead, I argue suffering is a gratuitous part of human existence, which is lamentable. But human beings can, through my notion of inspiration, learn from it and become, for example, better, more empathic people. Because I do not focus on the results of suffering (as many greater-good theodical responses do), attention is, I argue, reoriented to one's present-suffering experience and one's communion with God. God remains an ever-present help within suffering, and the sufferer need not spur such help by blaming God for causing or allowing it. Thus, in my opinion, divine-human communion (theosis) can be maintained within suffering, and the sufferer can obtain consolation through theosis.

3.4.3. Support for My View and Further Rejection of Instrumentalism

I am suggesting a different perspective on suffering, which refocuses sufferers on divine-human communion. Divine-human communion (or theosis) is, as theism typically argues, one's greatest source of life-meaning, no matter the circumstances. I believe what troubles the faithful in times of pain is the slow disseverment of communion with God it often causes. The greatest catalyst to this is perhaps the question which motivates the problem of evil itself— "why?" Unfortunately, in my opinion, theodicy has been bated by this question and focuses exclusively on trying to answer it. Stump's instrumental defense shows divine goodness justified only in providing divinely willed,

positive self-building answers (or results) to suffering. But traditional (Western) Christianity, as I have shown in Chapter 2, declares God's goodness flows from Godself, not God's (in)actions. Therefore, I believe it is unnecessary to justify God's goodness in light of anything. The implications of this idea will be fleshed out in Chapter 6 when I apply the notions of divine immutability and impassibility to my larger argument regarding the existence of gratuitous evil. I will show that these commonly held doctrines are significant to the philosophical arguments I am now making and will, as well, support my argument gratuitous evil is possible in a theistic world.

Furthermore, theories like Stump's require meaningful suffering by obliging God's involvement in it. So the problem of evil from the theodical standpoint is really a question of God's contribution to the course of evil. Theodicy claims God is involved in the process of suffering so God's providence over all things can be sustained. But since I posit God is *not* involved in evil in the way supported by most instrumental theodicies and defenses such as Stump's, I believe theodicies have gone overboard in trying to answer for the origin and purpose of evil and have consequently missed an opportunity to help present sufferers. A response to present suffering can only be done properly in my view if God remains uninvolved in suffering and God's will firmly against it.

Of course, this does not mean suffering cannot bring about any good whatsoever. Rather, my view only entails since theodicy seems to measure the meaning of suffering by whether God is involved—so if God is involved, suffering is teleologically *consequential* and if God is *not* involved, suffering is teleologically *inconsequential*—God's non-involvement in suffering would by this standard entail gratuitous evil. Therefore, there is still the possibility of goodness arising from suffering, but not in a way which involves God. Instead, suffering can effect goodness without demanding it. By utilizing what I have been calling inspiration, sufferers can be motivated

to effect change in their own circumstances. For example, if a person goes through the pain of a prolonged divorce, she is better equipped to help others going through a similar circumstance. Common instances of inspiration arise when sufferers are filled with empathy for others going through comparable situations because they know what it is like to suffer.[47] Suffering can inspire others to do great feats of altruism: for example, helping the poor, making great sacrifices to create change in societies, promote interreligious dialogue, or help aging populations. The possibilities are unending. I will be discussing my use of inspiration and God's involvement in evil in greater detail in the next chapter.

3.4.4. The Experiential Approach Over the Instrumental Approach

My criticism of instrumental suffering and Stump's use of it also supports my preference for an experiential approach to the problem of suffering over against a rational one (a distinction introduced in Chapter 1). Stump's instrumental approach, in my estimation, is unmistakably rational, abstracted from the experience of the sufferer. It tells sufferers about God and how God is utilizing suffering to bring them into a loving relationship with Godself. However, Stump does transition to an experiential approach concerning a sufferer's second-person experience with God where focus on divine-human experience becomes evident. In this, she acknowledges the limitation of a rational approach to the problem of suffering. While using the typological distinction—Dominican (rational) versus Franciscan (experiential)—and preferring the latter, Stump regrettably does not apply this rational limitation to the instrumental aspect of her defense. Instead, she maintains there is always a reason for suffering even if it is not obvious within the

[47] See 2 Cor. 1:3-4.

sufferer's experience. The connection between suffering and the benefit derived from it, according to Stump, is what defeats suffering; a benefit must always be present even if it is indiscernible.

Stump's Dominican/Franciscan distinction, in my view, is interestingly similar to the difference between cataphatic and apophatic theological approaches, the latter serving as a corrective to the former in a synthesis that brings "them together as a single method of knowing God" (Lossky 1976, p. 26). I begin first with a brief explanation of the two approaches and then move into my comparison of them with Stump's distinction between Dominican and Franciscan knowledge. Simply put, cataphatic theology says positive aspects of God can be known (e.g., God is good, omnipotent, omniscient, etc.), while apophaticism tempers these statements with God's incomprehensibleness. In other words, God is good, but human beings lack the appreciation of its fullness. Therefore, humans are left with contradictory statements, which are "negative" in nature: God is *in*describable, *in*comprehensible, brilliant darkness, wrathful compassion, an *in*visible presence, etc. When these theological methods are taken together, certain Christian traditions believe God is better esteemed and experienced.

Vladimir Lossky remarks further: dogmas are purposeful antinomies that resist conceptualization, leading one to theosis.

> …[apophaticism] will only be attained in the way which leads not to knowledge but to union—to deification…. This is why the dogmas of the Church often present themselves to human reason as antinomies, the more difficult to resolve the more sublime the mystery which they express (1976, p. 43).

Just as cataphatic reason or conceptualization is eventually negated (or surpassed) for the greater experience of theosis, even though it remains necessary to the process, Stump's argument in favor of Franciscan over against Dominican knowledge, I believe, follows a similar path. But she still fails, in my opinion, to negate fully Dominican reason. Thereby, I argue she maintains support for

greater-good theodicy and its exclusively reason-based notions by saying benefits of suffering justify God's goodness in allowing it.

As noted above, Stump distinguishes two types of knowledge (Dominican/Franciscan), which in my mind, are similar to the cataphatic/apophatic divide just outlined. She says Franciscan knowledge (based in story, not reason) best expresses what is not "amendable to crisp definition and precision" by being "evocative, memorable, and illuminating" in its narrative form rather than simply descriptive (2010, p. 41).[48] Here apophatic theology stands easily in place of Franciscan knowledge, which is favored over the cataphatic similarities of Dominican knowledge. Stump also notes Franciscan knowledge is not meant to disavow Dominican knowledge entirely, only to fill in the gaps left by its abstract descriptions of God (p. 42). The Franciscan and Dominican typologies she uses stress varied ways of knowing God. Dominic emphasized right belief and argument, working toward intellectual persuasion of others to his dogmatic view. Francis instead accentuated relationship with God through an experience with Jesus. He believed God is personal and so preached the foundation of reality as involving relationship with God and others. He put action ahead of belief, holding that one's experience of another's "fire for God" would convict of any wrongdoing, leading to salvation (p. 46).

By favoring Franciscan over Dominican knowledge, Stump shows preference for an apophatic view of theological epistemology, which transcends reason without forsaking it. But I argue Stump retains (beyond practicality) the effects of reason and abstraction over experience by maintaining a strong hold on a greater-good theodical perspective, which reduces the experience of suffering to simple causal reasoning. In this way, I believe Stump fails to weaken the Dominican

[48] It is important to note that, strictly speaking, Stump uses her typologies to establish the differences between analytic (Dominican) and typological (Franciscan) epistemology. But her descriptions of each follow a similar apophatic/cataphatic divide, both leading to the importance of experience over abstraction (p. 41).

aspect of her approach sufficiently enough for a proper response to present suffering. The fact one can possess knowledge *that* (Dominican) about a piece of music by memorizing its lyrics but experience it to a more significant degree when heard (Franciscan)—so that one finally *knows* the music—reveals the limitation of reason compared to a theological epistemology fueled by experience. (I will discuss the theological aspects of my larger philosophical argument in chapters 5-7.)

Stump, to her credit, utilizes the experience of love, which I believe better explains her position. But her response still cannot in its current form answer for the problem of present suffering. In describing the experience of love versus its concept, Stump uses Mary as a fictional example of one who knows everything about love but is kept by imprisonment from ever being loved, remaining ignorant of its feeling. One day, she is rescued and reunited with her mother who loves her deeply, and through second-person experience, she can finally *know* what it is like to be loved (2010, p. 51-52). Stump says one *can* come to *know* a person without having personal contact with her (e.g., about a brother from the words of one's mother or about a fictional character from the words of an author). But this, on my view, contradicts the importance she places on second-person experiences. In effect, by knowing things *about* a person (knowledge *that*) Stump says one can come to a Franciscan knowledge "to one degree or another" about her (p. 53). Said otherwise, abstract knowledge (*about* God or whatever) can lead to experiential awareness (*of* God or whatever). But Stump's desire to draw one from suffering to a knowledge *of* (not about) God does not, in my estimation, require the abstract element of her response. One could simply know *of* God through experience of God. As such, Stump's epistemological position makes it essential she (in my mind) disavow an abstracted greater-good theodicy in favor of a truly existential defense. This alteration would serve the experience of the sufferer over against often-offensive abstracted belief

statements divorced from the sufferer's reality. But since she fails to do this, her position, based on her own narrative, does not meet the requirements of a present suffering response.

Instrumental theodicies and defenses like Stump's allow for any amount of suffering in the world if it results in an overall net benefit for sufferers. The effect of suffering *and* its means is proof of God's love for the sufferer. God is the orchestrator of human suffering and the guarantor of its effects. Suffering is defeated by its allowance, and the maturation of the sufferer is its anticipated product, which could not have materialized otherwise. But the defeat of suffering by these methods is, as I have demonstrated, often experienced only postmortem. In this respect, I believe earthly life remains a benefit net loss for the sufferer. And since the whole of a sufferer's life is not at once present to the sufferer, whether within or without suffering, it is not possible, in my opinion, to say God is granting anyone a net benefit in present suffering. The positions of Stump and Adams become no better than skeptical theism, offering sufferers a theological "best guess," demanding trust, and contributing nothing concrete.

I believe the position of the present sufferer is precarious under views like those espoused by Stump and Adams. Although one is suffering *here* and *now*, unable to see past one's suffering, trust abstract belief sets, or consider the whole of an existence not yet complete, one is encouraged to maintain belief in God. But I argue this is more unlikely than not given one's present suffering, the high potential of divine blame, and the likelihood of disseverment of divine-human communion. Were the latter to occur, the present sufferer would lose her greatest source of meaning, which can (and, I believe, does) serve as a bulwark against the experience of gratuitous suffering.

3.5. Conclusion

Aquinas and Stump understand the will and love in a manner which allows them to combine the notions of suffering and a God intimately involved in one's suffering. But I believe they get lost by explaining *why* God needs to allow suffering to accomplish the process of salvation. According to them, God must change the will (*against* the will) toward a manner of desire favorable to divine ends. And since love is defined by Stump as a lover wanting what is best for the loved and to be in union with her, Stump says, as I understand it, God allows suffering because God loves the sufferer. In my opinion, this concept is unacceptable from the present suffering perspective, and any theodical attempt which accepts this line of reasoning inevitably leads to wholesale embrace of instrumentalism and the necessity of suffering.

Stump tries to redeem Aquinas's stern-minded approach, which in her estimation has disastrous consequences for sufferers. But she fails, I argue, to appreciate the effects of her own view. She successfully introduces a subjective element to Aquinas's opinion and considers the importance of it concerning individual desires. But a strand of instrumentalism remains throughout her argument. Even though she wishes to account for individual desires (and experiences), I believe her argument disrespects the desires of present sufferers. Under her view, sufferers must wait until a future time (mostly postmortem) to obtain their "refolded" hearts' desires, but she fails to explain what one is supposed to do between the moment the desire(s) is lost and then gained back. This lack of explanation demonstrates Stump's response to suffering cannot answer the problem of present suffering in a helpful way. In the next chapter, I will explain in more detail my argument concerning gratuitous evil, its place in a theistic world, and the implications for properly responding to the problem of present suffering.

CHAPTER 4

MY PERSPECTIVE ON DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN SUFFERING

4.1. Introduction

I argued in the previous chapters abstract and existential responses to the problem of evil either claim evil is meaningful and necessary because God is utilizing it toward greater ends not otherwise possible, or evil is morally defensible even though its reasons for justification are unknown. I concluded even the existential responses offered by Marilyn Adams and Eleonore Stump, while allowing for an appearance of gratuitous evil, ultimately determine it cannot actually exist. These suppositions result in, I believe, arguments which are distrusting of the sufferer's perception and instrumental in nature, making them inadequate to the task of responding to the problem of present suffering. Simply put, the meaning they assign to evil, in my opinion, is presently unknowable and not able to be appreciated until after suffering or death. I contend the arguments put forward by Adams and Stump fail present sufferers by necessitating the meaningfulness of suffering and requiring God's direct involvement in evil, thus encouraging divine blame and threatening divine-human-communion, which is maximally meaningful for most Christians.

One might question the need for a present suffering response by claiming one's personal growth from time *a* to time *b* within suffering creates positive life change and thus defeats suffering. I agree people change over time, but as I will further define in this chapter, such change, while arising from suffering, does not require divine involvement. In this sense, I argue God does not defeat suffering through personal growth but instead helps the sufferer endure it by God's presence as the comforter (not orchestrator) within it. As stated previously, the focus of my

response is not defeat, but endurance; not compensation, but divine presence. Growth and inspiration are on a personal level independent of divine involvement, which entails God does not use suffering for ends otherwise unachievable. Rather, I contend God remains uninvolved in suffering altogether. I also argue personal growth from suffering, or anything at all, can only happen in the present. The sufferer, as I have alleged, is not able to experience future, evil defeating/compensating states of affairs. Therefore, I reject any "future state" proposition in favor of helping the present sufferer.

In this chapter, I will show, from an existential perspective, the problem of present suffering and the actual existence of gratuitous evil do not entail the nonexistence of God. Since present suffering can lead one to think one is suffering gratuitously, I will ultimately defend the existence of gratuitous evil in its actual (objective) and apparent (subjective) forms. I will show how this claim respects the present suffering perspective as true and thereby helps preserve divine-human communion amid suffering. By permitting actual gratuitous evil (and maintaining *all* evil is gratuitous), I resist the majority opinion among theists, which says evil is both necessary and instrumental to God's will to produce goods not otherwise available to God.[49] Therefore, concerning the experience of evil, I define as gratuitous any suffering which is *not* necessary and instrumental to God's will to produce goods not otherwise available to God. My position assumes:

1. If God makes the divine purpose for suffering (or lack thereof) obvious to people, then present sufferers can correctly judge whether they are suffering gratuitous evil.[50]

[49] Within this project, I understand evil as nothing more than a natural consequence of mutable human existence, which is *not* utilized by God in a necessary and instrumental way. I also reject the idea of free will as a greater-good reason for evil in itself.

[50] Skeptical theism directly contrasts this notion, claiming there are reasons for evil beyond our ken. Nonetheless, I do not believe such a theory is applicable to the problem of present suffering because it requires that some *future* and *unknown* good outweigh some *present* evil. Such a notion is heavily abstracted from a sufferer's present experience so as to be ineffectual.

2. If present sufferers can correctly judge whether they are suffering gratuitous evil, and there are people who judge they are suffering gratuitous evil, then there are people who are suffering gratuitous evil.

3. There are people who judge they are suffering gratuitous evil.

Therefore,

4. If God makes the divine purpose for suffering (or lack thereof) obvious to people, then there are people who are suffering gratuitous evil.

This argument accepts the experience of the sufferer and the inferences drawn therefrom as veridical. In fact, (1) and (2) are in part the foundation of the evidential problem of evil which inductively assumes: since *x* appears as such, *x* is as such. William Rowe says of inductive reasoning: "All of us are constantly inferring from the A's we know of to the A's we don't know of. If we observe many A's and note that all of them are B's we are justified in believing that the A's we haven't observed are also B's" (1991, p. 73). (2) suggests it is at least reasonable to believe God does not necessarily and instrumentally use evil for the sake of greater goods not otherwise achievable by God. By agreeing with the evidential argument concerning evil, (1) and (2) disarm the force of it against theism.[51] And according to (3), in the absence of overwhelming evidence to the contrary (especially in present suffering), one's initial judgement should take precedent.[52] While this argument is an abstract one, which requires at least one present sufferer conclude her

[51] Skeptical theism counters (1) and (2), but my inference has credence when dealing with the *present* suffering perspective, from which one may conclude her suffering gratuitous.

[52] I will not consider any more than I already have the familiar theistic requirement that a *morally* sufficient reason accompany all instances of evil because it is not necessary for the success of my argument. My reason for this is threefold. First, I do not believe a present sufferer would be comforted, and thus the divine-human communion remain intact, even if a morally sufficient reason for her suffering was known and the reason benefited her personally. This is because existential suffering and its pain must still be endured regardless of its moral justification. Secondly, the provision of a reason for suffering, even if it is morally sufficient, would involve God directly in the causation or permission of evil, which could threaten divine-human communion because of divine blame. Thirdly, skeptical theism, as the most common critique of the evidential argument, says such reasons are often unknown due to the limited cognition of human beings. Since skeptical theism disregards present awareness of such reasons, the consideration of them in this context seems unimportant.

suffering gratuitous, it lends itself toward an existential end. By including the perspective of the sufferer, it is able to move beyond the abstract and into one's experience. The perspective of the sufferer, as said by (3), is taken so seriously so as to be sufficient. Thus, the sufferer's perception/conclusion she is suffering gratuitously suggests actual gratuitous evil exists.

If a present sufferer thinks her suffering gratuitous, I believe her conclusion is credible. Moreover, from the present suffering perspective, I contend the most worthwhile goods are those the sufferer can reasonably consider and/or experience *now*. So if the sufferer cannot consider and/or experience any outweighing goods now, then for her such goods, in my opinion, cannot exist. Even if I were to allow some future good state of affairs *x* outweighs some present evil *y*, I still do not believe this would matter to the present sufferer in her moment of suffering. Present suffering considered gratuitous is often intense and overwhelming and prevents reasonable consideration of goods the sufferer's experience lacks. In this way, such goods seem irrelevant to here and now suffering. I believe the present suffering perspective is the only perspective worthwhile in *that* moment and for *that* person.

Many theists argue the present experience of the sufferer cannot be indicative of other realities except the here and now and therefore remains deficient. They prefer the post-suffering, eternal, or postmortem experience, where one can see one's suffering differently: within a positive light and therefore a better-informed perspective. But since I am responding to the problem of present suffering, I can only respond from the present perspective of the sufferer. From this vantage point I then draw the rest of my conclusions within this and later chapters, including my claim of the existence of actual gratuitous evil.[53] This is the only way I believe to take seriously the sufferer

[53] The later philosophical/theological claims of chapters 5-7 assume this present suffering perspective.

and her perspective.[54] Present sufferers should, in my opinion, be believed and given an account of evil which meets their present reality. If successful, I trust my position provides a reply to the problem of present suffering and allows sufferers to suffer well by remaining engaged with God during suffering. By "suffer well" I mean the successful endurance of suffering through a vibrant experience with God via an intact divine-human communion. Additionally, my allowance of the possibility of apparent *and* actual gratuitous evil avoids the belief the sufferer is self-deceived or lacking sufficient cognitive faculties to judge the quality of her suffering. Moreover, God remains uninvolved in suffering, thus evading divine blame. By this, divine-human communion is spared and remains a maximally meaningful reality and viable response to present suffering.

In the next section, I will define the problems of apparent and actual gratuitous evil and for present purposes briefly comment, once again, on the logical and existential divide which exists among responses to the problem of evil. In Section 4.3, I will discuss the possibility and ramifications of the existence of gratuitous evil within a theistic world by explaining in greater detail some of the problems I see in the overall theistic response to evil, which includes its existential aspect. This section will explore the instrumental and post-suffering approaches introduced in the last chapters, including the claim the human epistemic condition is deficient in its ability to discern purpose in suffering. Section 4.4 concludes.

4.2. The Problems of Apparent and Actual Gratuitous Evil

As I previously stated, the problem of evil claims, while God is omnipotent and good, there are many evils in this world (including those that are gratuitous) which an omnipotently good God

[54] I am aware there could be other ways of respecting the plight of the present sufferer but recognizing/respecting the perspective of the present sufferer seems best to me. For example, regardless of the perspective of the sufferer, one could offer a sympathetic ear and a willingness to help, but such things would still require one to be present with the sufferer and vice versa.

would be able and want to prevent. Thus, the improbability of God. As I mentioned, I understand gratuitous evil to be any evil which lacks divine purpose/involvement. In other words, under my view, God does not need or utilizes suffering to accomplish goods not otherwise achievable by God. Therefore, I believe such suffering lacks divine necessity and instrumentality and is gratuitous. Commonly, gratuitous evil is bifurcated into evils apparently or actually gratuitous. Apparent gratuitous evil is a mistaken conclusion by the sufferer (or an observer of suffering) that what is being suffered is gratuitous. Such suffering is thought to be gratuitous but is not. Actual gratuitous evil is truly gratuitous, regardless of one's (or an observer's) conclusion. Most theists reject the existence of the latter, while some allow for the former. Those allowing for its appearance however often conclude actual gratuitous evil does not exist. The problem of actual gratuitous evil follows:

A. If God exists, actual gratuitous evil does not exist (as God would not permit it).

B. Actual gratuitous evil exists.[55]

Therefore,

C. God does not exist.

There are two types of replies by which most theists have responded to the charge actual gratuitous evil exists. One is logical and the other existential. Examples of each type of response were covered in chapters 1-3. Both types of responses counter (B) and conclude God does exist, but they arrive at this conclusion differently. In countering the problem of actual gratuitous evil, the logical type of response (introduced in Chapter 1) often ignores or undermines as unreliable the perspective of the sufferer and any conclusions she might have regarding her suffering. The

[55] William Rowe's definition of actual gratuitous evil fits well with mine as "instances of intense suffering which [God] could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" (1979, p. 336).

point is to provide a way of understanding evil which brings consistency between the existence of God and objective suffering. This type of response often claims God must use evil to accomplish certain goals God could not otherwise accomplish. In other words, the logical response says evil has both a divinely necessary and instrumental function, which justifies its existence. Since the sufferer's perspective is unimportant to this type of response, and evil must be necessary and instrumental, the existence of actual gratuitous evil is rejected outright**.**

The existential type of response is similar but considers the perspective and subjective conclusions of the sufferer. Because of this, defenders and theodicists utilizing this type of response can allow for the existence of apparent gratuitous evil (thereby agreeing in a way with the experience of the sufferer) without permitting actual gratuitous evil. In other words, an existential type of response (such as those considered in chapters 1-2) allows the sufferer to conclude rightly her suffering is gratuitous. But in the end, mainly because of a resulting greater good, suffering is understood (like in a logical response) as a divinely necessary means to a greater good not otherwise attainable by God. The logical and existential responses deny the existence of actual gratuitous evil even though the existential response permits the appearance of it.

Since the denial of actual gratuitous evil, either from a logical or existential view, ultimately considers as false the perspective of a sufferer who thinks her suffering gratuitous, I dismiss both types of responses as illegitimate retorts to the problem of present suffering. Instead, my own response, which takes seriously the present perspective of the sufferer, avoids divine blame, preserves divine-human communion amid evil, and thus safeguards theosis as a meaningful response to the problem of present suffering.

4.3. My Criticism of the Theistic Response

Some may find theodical responses effective when considered from a logical perspective, divorced from here and now suffering. But in my mind, the problem of present suffering, which must be considered from an existential point of view, remains unsettled. In this section, I will show how certain theistic arguments (like Adams and Stump's) fail to respond to the existence of gratuitous evil and its experience. In effect, my critique is a response to the problem presented by the present suffering of gratuitous evil. I will consider and reject various arguments, which share similarities with my critiques of the responses of Adams and Stump for three reasons: they adhere to an instrumental view of suffering; they are post-suffering in nature; and they fail to trust the sufferer's epistemic condition.

4.3.1. The Instrumental Approach

Many theistic responses to evil (as shown in the last three chapters) share an instrumental structure, which emphasizes both the attainment of a goal by means of a necessary process of suffering and a logical structure which requires bad states of affairs to produce good ones. Both aspects of this approach vest meaning with suffering itself as the only way God can achieve certain goods. God is thus involved in suffering as God *must* utilize it for good.

According to the free will theodicy, for example, free will and the incarnate Son of God stand as goods worth and necessitated by the possibility and eventual actualization of evil and the suffering of it. This is enshrined in the Catholic *Exsultet*: "O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!" In this case, the outweighing good of the incarnation required evil as it, in my understanding, occurred because of sin and would not have happened without it.[56] The free

[56] For an overview of the free will theodicy and its application to natural evil, see (Allen 2003). At the beginning of his article, Allen quotes *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God…and although his action may cause grave injuries of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature to each man and to society, the action is permitted by divine providence, which, with strength and gentleness,

will theodicy is unsatisfactory as a retort to the problem of present suffering because it vests evil and suffering with a supposed meaningfulness, which becomes a vital and necessary goal of divine goodness (i.e., salvation). This becomes a problem for the present sufferer who concludes her suffering gratuitous. The instrumental approach is unhelpful, which in my view, steamrolls the experience of the present sufferer for the sake of what is effected by suffering: the goal of a necessary process rather than a concern for one's present suffering. I believe the meaningfulness offered by the instrumental approach is not available to one within suffering who has not yet completed the necessary process toward a meaningful good: such a process may take years or a lifetime to accomplish.

As a standard of the instrumental point of view, justification by any logical means, I contend, disappoints when applied to the experience of evil. For instance, Richard Swinburne utilizes the hypothetical example of a railway accident, showing how others can benefit from another's suffering and even death. In this case, new railway signaling is installed after the death of a passenger in a train accident. Swinburne claims the passenger's family can take comfort in the fact the victim did not die in vain, that she perished for a purpose. To this end he claims: "It is good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them, which will at least in part compensate for those experiences" (1996, p. 42). In this case, Swinburne admits evil is only compensated for (not overwhelmed), and one suffers for the benefit of *others* rather than oneself. I believe it hard to imagine, as implied here, the family of the victim would prefer any subsequent railway reforms to enjoying life with the now deceased family member. In fact, I believe it is (as

guides human and cosmic history." Allen goes extensively into the traditional view of the free will theodicy, which contends moral good cannot be achieved without moral evil. In fact, persons without free will (who, lacking free will, are not persons at all but automatons) could only provide "sham kindness, love, [and] gratitude" (Sec. 3, para. 4).

in the case of Clara Claiborne Park discussed in the last chapter) of the utmost spiritual (or self-growth) selfishness to prefer any personal benefit over the life of another. But this is, in my opinion, what the instrumental perspective at times requires as a justification of evil and suffering. Swinburne suggests the price of one life is worth the good of being of use to others, but I think the price—for example, a life for the sake of railway reform—is too high and fails to consider sufferers amid evil.[57]

4.3.2. The Post-Suffering Approach

It is clear to me the post-suffering approach can work in tandem with its instrumental counterpart to justify evil by its outcomes. But its difference lies in its requirement that sufferers *wait* for postmortem existence to appreciate the meaning of their suffering. The usefulness of this approach is limited to consideration of one's experience of suffering as a part of a complete, immutable picture of the totality of one's life. Until that time, sufferers are encouraged to adhere to what I call abstract belief statements, which tell them what to believe about their suffering and its eventual end even though such statements may be contrary to their experience now.

As I previously stated, an abstract belief statement or system, in the context of suffering, is any belief or set of beliefs which says evil is always meaningful, and in saying so, strongly encourages sufferers to believe a worldview about suffering which may be contrary to their experience of it. In this way, I contend such beliefs cannot speak to the experience of present

[57] Even Eleonore Stump argues against Swinburne's supposition when considering the issue of guilt. She points out no amount of money or anything else can assuage the guilt of the offender (perhaps according to Swinburne's example: the designer of the railway or the conductor) for having at least in some way caused the death of the passenger. If adequate compensation were possible, Stump surmises the wealthy would be in a more advantageous position psychologically and spiritually than the rest (2018, p. 54).

sufferers because the theodical language is typically logical/abstract in nature and unable to harness the pain of the present sufferer (or observer) adequately enough to help.[58]

John Hick is another theologian (along with Adams and Stump) who endorses the post-suffering approach when addressing gratuitous evil. Such evil under his view remains only apparently (not actually) gratuitous. In Hick's use of what he calls the soul-making theodicy, I argue the benefits remain nonapplicable and gratuitous suffering unjustified for present sufferers. Even though Hick claims gratuitous evil exists, he maintains instances of it receive a newness of character in the afterlife where they are viewed "in the retrospect of God's completed work…as stages in the triumphant fulfilment of the divine purpose of good" (2010, p. 364). Gratuitous suffering, according to Hick, cannot be worked out in the soul-making process and must be purified in a postmortem purgation before entry into the kingdom of God.

In my opinion, there is no solace in this view for the present sufferer but the hope or expectation of a future state of bliss inaccessible in the moment. During suffering, according to Hick, one is at an "epistemic distance" from God "as if there were no God" because God's purpose in the soul-making process is opaque (2010, p. 323). Hick says, if one could comprehend the purpose behind the pain, one would "accept…life in its entirety as God's gift" (p. 319). I believe the distance between a finite humanity and an infinite God forces here and now sufferers, under Hick's view, to hold to an abstract belief system, which is supported by expectation of compensation for suffering. God remains distant, and meaningful suffering is found only in postmortem retrospect.

[58] Origen (c. 184 - 253 CE) offers a spiritual understanding to the difference between *believing* in God (as one might via an abstract belief statement) and *knowing* God. "But knowing God can also indicate something else—knowing God being something other than simply believing in God…. Therefore it is said in Psalms, 'Be still and know that I am God.'" (*Comm*. *Jo*. 19.16, cf., Ps. 45:11). He also says later: "Then, when they [children of God] have come to be of God, they also hear his words, and no longer only simply believe, but now also perceive the realities of religion in a more discerning manner" (*Comm. Jo.* 20.288).

Interestingly, the incongruence developed between, for example, the experience of gratuitous evil and a belief system which insists such an experience is always meaningful can be conversely, and in favor of my larger argument, an opportunity for a change in perspective which respects and empowers the sufferer to retain divine-human communion amid suffering. G. B. Madison says:

> Only when the theoretical system tied in with common sense itself proves inadequate, only when, that is, the theory itself falters or breaks down, does one begin to think in the fullest sense of the term—creatively. Thinking or active understanding, on the higher level of theory, is the response to a 'paradigm crisis' and involves the creation of a new, revised paradigm. This active understanding amounts to basically nothing other than a change in vision. One no longer sees the world in exactly the same way after the act of creative understanding (Madison 1982, p. 161).

Likewise, an experience of gratuitous evil over against a belief system which denies its existence provides opportunity, as I see it, for sufferers to consider a higher plane of understanding. I claim furthermore divine-human communion, in the present context, is that higher plane. The dialectical struggle between one's experience and opposing belief structure, I believe, provides opportunity to open a relation to God which would otherwise be hindered by a belief system denying one's reality. By adopting this new paradigm, I argue one's perception of God and God's relation to evil can transform, thereby allowing one to remain engaged with God during suffering. In a sense, inspiration or even imagination, what Madison calls creativity, stand as a conduits for divine-human communion according to Madison's dialectical structure. In this sense, I argue divine-human communion—as a new paradigm, a novel and creative understanding—is limited only by one's imagination. The imagination is limitless and stands, I believe, as the only thing able to "contain" a relationship with an infinite, limitless God. I believe one must feed and shape one's imagination by constantly challenging and changing what is possible. (According to Madison, such challenge and change *is* new, creative understanding.) In doing this, one can, as an example, live

in a way which enjoys the limitless divine within and without suffering. The theological cataphatic/apophatic distinction discussed in the last chapter stands as an instance where the logical, theoretical boundary is pushed, and the imagination takes precedence, moving beyond boundary lines into new possibilities of divine-human communion.

4.3.3. The Human Epistemic Condition

Distrust of the sufferer's ability to judge for herself the quality of her suffering—whether it is gratuitous or not (her epistemic condition)—is, in my opinion, the heart of the problem of skeptical theism, which I believe invalidates the sufferer's experience as uninformed. As such, any theodicy or defense which espouses a compromised epistemic condition cannot, in my view, serve as an adequate retort to the problem of present suffering. In Chapter 1, I introduced and critiqued Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA defense, which is the foundational theory upon which many other defenses have been mounted against gratuitous evil, favoring a limited epistemic condition for sufferers and others alike. As I argued previously, this distrust of the sufferer's perception/experience encourages adherence to abstract belief statements, which are unhelpful to present sufferers.

Kirk Durston's complexity of history thesis and William Hasker's existential argument, both rooted in skeptical theism, claim the human epistemic condition cannot possibly account for all the billions of consequences of a given evil each possessing positive and negative intrinsic values.[59] The consequences of evil are "beyond our ken" thus leading to what I consider an overreliance on abstract belief statements and a mistrust of the sufferer's perception. The complexity of history thesis offers a causal perspective entailing purposed evil, and for the

[59] See (Durston 2000) and (Hasker 2004) for a more detailed treatment of their respective arguments.

argument's success, forces consideration of *all* events (past and future) as compensation for suffering. Similarly, Hasker focuses on evil events necessary for one's existence: if one desires existence, then one cannot regret evil events necessary for existence.

I believe both perspectives go outside the bounds of the present experience of evil by claiming morally justified reasons for God's permission of evil even if they are unknowable (either in the past or future). Durston even claims the rape and murder of a five-year old may be (perhaps must be) morally justified. "If permitting the rape, beating and murder of a five-year old girl resulted in the prevention of over 300 similar events in the next 125 years, then that information would certainly be relevant in evaluating whether or not God was justified in permitting that instance of evil" (2000, p. 68). The greater-good element is ostensible: one for 300 seems a good enough trade. But I question: what of the murdered five-year old, her parents, friends, and all the individuals she positively affected with her presence, her laugh, and above all, her innocence?

This reasoning is the basis for the creation and sustaining of abstract belief statements. Within Christianity, such statements abound; although, as I will show, they are variously interpretable. Some of the more common ones in relation to suffering are: God never gives one more than one can bear; suffering produces perseverance and perseverance creates character; suffering leads to one's perfection; God's power is made perfect in human weakness, etc.[60] I believe, in the context of present suffering, such statements, if interpreted along the lines of common usage by theodicists, may prove contrary to one's experience, causing more harm than good. Amid suffering, I argue one may not be able to conceptualize the possibility of these statements and so they become unhelpful and perhaps offensive. One may feel as though God has

[60] See 1 Cor. 10:13; Rm. 5:3-4; James 1:3-4; 2 Cor. 12:9. These scriptural examples can be reinterpreted as instances of what I call inspiration, a term I will explain further in Section 5.

failed in preventing more grief than one can bear. A sufferer may conclude her suffering has not made her a better person, and she may not be willing to experience heartache for the glorification of God. I contend, once again, abstract belief statements are logical and objective and do not meet the existential requirements for a response to present suffering. They fail to consider the experience of suffering and can run counter to one's conclusion of gratuitous suffering.

To posit an unknowable reason for suffering which is gratuitous ignores the perception of the sufferer who believes she suffers gratuitously. Because it is thought God's involvement within evil becomes theistically unbearable or morally unjustifiable if suffering is without purpose, I contend (with Erik Wielenberg), skeptical theism permits a type of divine deception, which is used against the present sufferer who cannot (according to skeptical theism) ascertain a reason for her suffering. Wielenberg introduces an interesting caveat to the issue with his supposition regarding divine deception. Assuming CORNEA, he makes the following claim concerning the reasonableness of the belief "God has declared that all who believe in the Son will have eternal life." If CORNEA is true, Wielenberg's argument looks like this:

> Is it reasonable for H [a human familiar with Wielenberg's preceding arguments supporting divine deception] to believe that if it were not the case that all who believe in the Son will have eternal life, H's cognized situation would likely be different than it is in some way discernable by H? (Wielenberg 2014, p. 247).

Wielenberg answers in the negative. He supposes many possible worlds in which all who believe in the Son will have eternal life (p) is false, especially in possible worlds where God does not exist or worlds in which God does exist but has not declared p. But there are also possible worlds where God has declared p but p is false. He calls the latter B-worlds and they contain "some great good beyond our ken that can be attained only if God deceives us into thinking that p is true" (p. 247). Therefore, according to Wielenberg, there is no way for H to know whether p is true even if H is told God has declared p true. H could be in a B-world, and God could be deceiving H for a greater

good. While I disagree with Wielenberg's conclusion God may be deceiving humanity into thinking through the Son it has eternal life, his argument shows, in my opinion, the breakdown of the skeptical theistic position, which some have argued, much like Wielenberg's claim, leads to a type of total skepticism

Skeptical theism would rather one not know God's reason(s) for allowing evil (even though it is claimed a reason(s) does exist). I believe theodicists hide behind this agnostic position because in my (and perhaps their) estimation it is easier to defend and remains a surer foundation for abstract belief statements lacking empirical support. Agnosticism about divine reasons for evil may prove to be a suitable way for theists such as Wykstra and Durston to explain away instances of evil through human ignorance. But I argue the position is intolerable for one amid suffering who finds no relief within abstract belief statements. Rather, it seems obvious enough to me a present sufferer possesses sufficient perceptual information about her suffering to judge its worth, granting or deducting value from her life without the use of morally justified abstract belief statements couched in agnosticism.

Skeptical theism's main premise is that an ill-informed perception cannot be trusted. And in relation to God, human beings are ill-informed (Wykstra says like a one-month-old infant to its parent). I offer here one simple but well-known critique and counter argument to skeptical theism so the issue can be considered more adequately. Even if skeptical theism were to be taken seriously, some argue total moral skepticism results, especially in circumstances of the moral obligation to prevent suffering (Draper 1989; Almedia and Oppy 2003; Piper 2007). Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa point out, contrarily, to escape total skepticism, skeptical theism relies on the justifying principle *God* would not permit gratuitous evil—not human beings. In other words, God may permit an evil for a greater good, but this does not necessarily permit human beings do the same.

They also consider (1) the fact human beings cannot be justified in doing something bad if the resulting good is unknown, and (2) the role differentiation between God as creator and human beings as created. God has permission over good and evil, and human beings do not. Under the moderate skepticism following from these considerations, moral principles seem to stand (2004, para. 23).[61]

4.4. Gratuitous Suffering in a Theistic Universe

In the following section, I will develop my view further and avoid the problems highlighted within the earlier responses by Adams, Stump, and others. I believe the problem of evil according to theism is essentially the problem of God's involvement in suffering, whether God is or is not involved and to what degree. Theism often requires God's involvement in suffering from beginning to end and always with a specific goal in mind. I will make distinctions below showing God's involvement in suffering is not required to justify it, and by removing divine involvement, the present suffering perspective can be accounted for and respected. The forthcoming distinctions will also create the basis of a new take on divine-human communion, which will allow it to exist despite suffering. If the points I argue are adopted, God cannot be blamed for a supposed necessary process of suffering, and the benefits of divine-human communion can be enjoyed within suffering and not because of it. Thus, God is a source of one's comfort in suffering, not blame or anger.

In claiming God does not have to be involved in the production of goods through evil, I am affirming the existence of actual and apparent gratuitous evil. (Most theists, I think, would agree God's abstention from the utilization of evil strips it of its meaningful purpose thereby concluding

[61] For a significant counter argument to the one presented by Trakakis and Nagasawa which also considers skeptical theism via *God's* permission of evil for the sake of unknown goods and its effect on divine-human communion see Gale (1996).

gratuitousness.) In making this claim, I am aware of the near unanimous verdict from most theodicists actual gratuitous evil impugns God's goodness and power. But the present experience of gratuitous evil cannot be ignored. The angered, disillusioned, hurt, and disappointed responses to most theistic claims of purposeful and necessary evil must also be considered. In fact, the resistance to affirming the existence of actual gratuitous evil, and the ensuing negative responses from present sufferers, present what I believe is the greatest chance for disseverment of divine-human communion amid suffering, which my position seeks to avoid. Quoting Arno Schmidt, Dorothee Soelle records the anger of an observer/interpreter of extreme suffering:

> And one of the children was almost entirely torn to pieces, neck and shoulders, everything, by two huge shell fragments. The mother kept on holding the child's head and staring in astonishment at the huge carmine of blood…. The pastor comforted the weeping woman by saying, 'The Lord gave; the Lord has taken away.' And damn him, that coward and sycophant added, 'Blessed be the name of the Lord!'…. Have these people never considered that God could be the guilty one (1975, p. 20)?

The anger expressed in this quote, I believe, can be avoided by severing God from suffering. For surly Schmidt is railing against the pastor's understanding of God's omnipotent ability to "give and take away" the mother's child. And this seems especially rejected by him not only for the horrendous nature of the suffering (for God must have allowed this, too) but of the praising of God, which results from this type of thinking, a philosophy I would consider abstract (with its resulting belief system) and distrusting of the mother's horrid experience in that moment.

The perspective on divine-human communion which I posit is maintainable within suffering but only within a suitable context. First, I believe the existence of divine-human communion assumes God and human beings can and desire to interact with each other in meaningful ways. Second, I argue it is necessary, in communion, each attain some measure of a thing, which each desire and cannot get on their own or without the other. The benefit God derives from divine-human communion, I believe, is the willingness of human beings to engage God in a

relationship of worshipful love. Hence, human beings, in worshipful love of God, assume a life narrative informed entirely by their conclusion God exists, and they are in communion with God.[62] Robert Nozick explains how belief in God stops an infinite regress into meaninglessness.

> About any given thing, however wide, it seems we can stand back and ask what its meaning is. To find a meaning for it, then, we seem driven to find a link with yet another thing beyond its boundaries. And so a regress is launched…. Thus it was that religion seemed to provide a stopping place for questions about meaning, an ultimate foundation of meaning, by speaking of an infinite being which was not properly seen as limited, a being from which there could be no place to step back in order to see its limits, so that questions about *its* meaning could not even begin (1989, p. 167, emphasis original).

I argue divine-human communion is considered within theism to be the most meaningful reality for a human being. The threat to it presented by many theistic responses to suffering (which can result in divine blame) is thus significant when considering the preservation of personal (not divine) meaning amid suffering. In presenting a new perspective on divine-human communion, which responds to the problem of present suffering, I bifurcate meaning into two types: what meaningfully inspires the sufferer toward beneficial action and what is divinely intended. After briefly considering the first type of meaning, which is significant due to its ability to inspire sufferers toward beneficial action, I will outline my perspective on divine involvement (or what I also call divine intention). My view will preserve divine-human communion amid suffering by taking God out of evil so God's intervention in and utilization of it is not required for its justification.

4.4.1. Inspiration: The First Type of Meaning

The perspective I offer permits the consistency of theism amid a world where actual gratuitous evil exists. Nevertheless, I admit evil does often produce goods advanced only by suffering. People

[62] David Bentley Hart summarizes Maximus the Confessor: "The purpose of created autonomy is…its ultimate surrender in love to God, whereby alone rational nature finds its true fulfillment" (2009, p. 313-314).

profit from new perspectives and "grow," becoming gentler, more patient, compassionate, brave, and altruistic. The experiences of such people are motivated by what I call inspiration: they are clearly *inspired* by suffering toward a good end personally or for another. The key difference between the above responses and inspiration is the latter lacks God's direct instrumental involvement. In this sense, it is not the case inspiration is the result of God's use of evil to accomplish a good not otherwise achievable by God. So inspiration is not meaningful in the way most theists in the context of suffering understand meaning. Suffering which begets inspiration is therefore still gratuitous because God is not directly involved. Inspiration remains on the personal (not divine) level of meaning, which is therefore not necessary to the fulfilment of God's will (e.g., theosis). So, according to my notion of inspiration, humans decide for themselves how they react to evil. They either find personal meaning in it, or they do not. The key difference between the common theistic understanding of meaning (which includes God's necessary involvement in evil), and my notion of inspiration is it arises from personal choice to better one's life without divine involvement for the sake of otherwise unattainable ends. God, under my view, only remains involved in suffering as a source of comfort and ultimate meaning and not as an orchestrator of it.

Inspiration leading to concrete difference in the life of the sufferer is comparable to my philosophical use and understanding of the tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1-9. The account, as I understand it, tells of a common purpose to build a tower/ziggurat to the heavens, but the plan lacked divine intention and involvement and was in fact *against* God's will. No doubt, the construction of the tower represented ingenuity and skill and for this reason can serve as an allegorical example of the construction of meaning resulting from inspiration apart from divine will, something akin to a sufferer's ability to construct meaning from suffering. While the

construction of personal meaning from suffering need not be against the divine will in the strict sense (as in this case), it always, in my use of the term, exists independent of it.

An example of personal meaning combined with divine meaning (divine meaning as that which is always the establishment of divine-human communion), is, in my opinion, seen in the early church experience at Pentecost where tongues of fire remained above the heads of gathered believers as they spoke in various languages through the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-12). According to my philosophical use and understanding of the event and in contrast to the tower of Babel narrative, humanity's personal meaning (or inspiration) to attain heaven independent of God and God's desire for cosmic theosis by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for me reveal a way inspiration/personal meaning can exist in line with God's will for theosis. But the important aspect of this is inspiration, and the personal meaning which can result from it (especially concerning present suffering), arises without the necessary involvement of God.

Nonetheless, divine intention and inspiration/personal meaning can align, but this collaboration is not required since the latter can flourish without the former. What is missing from the tower of Babel narrative is, I believe, divine intention. The story makes clear humanity was acting against divine intention and achieved a personal meaning which was quickly extinguished. In my view, for the sake of cosmic theosis, God desired a greater unity with humanity than it could achieve on its own. This divine intention, in my opinion, is actualized in the Pentecost experience. Furthermore, I believe the experience is an example of what I previously stated: divine intention for cosmic theosis can exist alongside personal meaning. A choice toward achievement of personal meaning, which is in line with God's will for cosmic theosis, is also revealed in Peter's speech (a

type of personal meaning) after the Pentecost experience, which resulted in three thousand baptisms (a type of divine intention).[63]

Consider also the biblical story of Joseph, which I utilize in a philosophical rather than exegetical way. Joseph is rejected by his brothers, thrown into a pit, and left to die. He is later sold to Potiphar in Egypt: he goes from a son of the patriarch of the promise of Israel to a slave. What is worse, Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of rape, and he is thrown in prison. Because of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, he is brought into Pharaoh's court and eventually made second in command of all of Egypt. In the course of time, a famine strikes the land, giving opportunity for Joseph's brothers to come before him, requesting food. Joseph, after everything, shows mercy to his brothers, saying, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive (Gen. 50:20).

One might suppose from this statement God used Joseph's suffering as an instrument of divine intention to save Israel through Egypt. But under my view, this would be a mistake. First, throughout Joseph's trials, the narrative says the Lord is with him, yet the trials continue (Gen. 39:2, 21). In line with my argument, this would suggest Joseph enjoyed divine-human communion despite his sufferings. Second, the prospering of Joseph in whatever situation is always in contrast to what he suffers. This further suggests his sufferings were opposed to the divine intention for his life, which was to, in various ways, prosper. Finally, Joseph's statement to his brothers quoted above, in my assessment, should be taken as his personal interpretation of the events he suffered up to that point. I believe Joseph's crying at the sight of his brothers shows an evident change of heart or perspective toward them, which is an example of personal meaning arising from inspiration. Joseph personally decided not to allow the evil acts of his brothers to ruin his life

[63] See Acts 2:1-40.

(43:30; 45:2). The naming of Joseph's firstborn Manasseh, which means, "for God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house," also suggests his ability to move past his sufferings (41:51).

I argue inspiration can only result in personal (not divine or divinely involved) meaning and occur as people make concerted efforts because of their suffering to learn about themselves, their environment, and the people within it. Because of their pain, they learn how to react to, cope with, and understand themselves and their world better. In the spirit of the scripture verses referred to earlier regarding perseverance in suffering, they can even choose to draw closer to God, strengthening divine-human communion. In this sense, there is a choice involved. The sufferer decides whether she is going to view her situation differently, in a positive (personally meaningful) or negative (personally meaningless) light, but God remains uninvolved. In negative situations, where the sufferer experiences "a loss of dignity…[causing] a vicious cycle—comprising loss of dignity, further suffering, and an increase in pity from others—out of which sufferers feel the need to break free," Ingrid Harris suggests sufferers can reclaim their dignity by being open with others about their plights and how they live with them (2007, p. 68). Thus, suffering is brought to the fore and corporately delt with in ways which may prove helpful and personally meaningful to the sufferer.

This decision to view one's suffering in a positive or negative light is, I believe, motivated first by an automatic response to suffering as when one might not be feeling well (either physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually) and seeks help from a doctor, trusted friend, therapist, or priest. Once well enough—assuming one's suffering is so horrendous no personal meaning from it is possible prior to such help, and especially since entire wellness is not necessary for personal meaning—she may consider the context of her suffering and affirm it as personally meaningful or

meaningless.[64] But the context of the personal nature of suffering is always communal in the sense no one suffers or understands suffering in isolation: "The definition of suffering is connected to the culture in which it is defined, to the ethos of the society, and to the way an individual communicates suffering within that society" (Harris 2007, p. 61). A cultural understanding of suffering allows sufferers to see their suffering as personally valuable or not, even considering it an outrage, while simultaneously calling people to address issues of misfortune as all persons of one culture or another are affected. In this sense, the idea of personal meaning is also one of personal responsibility. Human beings can be responsible for one another and the environment in which they live without God's involvement even though, as previous stated, demonstrations of personal responsibility for one another can be aligned with the divine will. Through suffering, in my view, one can, within themselves, learn valuable lessons without God's participation, and if one draws closer to God because of suffering, the presence of God for this person and the fact of theosis does not change—it is there regardless. The help of others remains unnecessary but often personally beneficial for a sufferer, and any positive or negative changes because of suffering are made by the sufferer independent of God's interference toward a greater good.

According to my view, the decision to adopt either position ultimately lies with the sufferer and depends on the severity of the suffering, its subsequent interpretation, and how it fits into the context of one's life. Meaning in this manner is motivated by personal choice and not dictated to the sufferer by a set of abstract beliefs placed upon her by religious creed. One might contend suffering so horrendous no meaningful sense can be made of it. It is simply personally meaningless, and a positive understanding of it in the here and now is not possible. People in this situation must have their perspective respected, be comforted without the advocating of abstract

[64] Ingrid Harris says "suffering [is] a catalyst to producing change both negative and positive—and the role of attitude and action in playing out whether the result will be spiritual maturity or not" (2007, p. 80).

beliefs, and (when inspirable) slowly encouraged toward an understanding of divine-human communion and God's role (or lack thereof) in their pain.

Instead of suffering simply happening to someone, many times one can decide to make something positive of the experience. According to Harris, "pain can be 'transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying…one'" (2007, p. 89). This is a clear example of inspiration working itself out in suffering. One first decides to open one's mind to the varied angles by which one's suffering may be viewed and utilizes them toward personally meaningful ends. One can transcend theodical determinism and actively pursue personal transformation in a way which makes suffering personally meaningful without divine involvement. Harris's view of pain transformation is by no means the only way to view one's suffering in a personally meaningful way. But seeing one's suffering in a positive manner also does not entail, according to my position, that suffering *must* be personally meaningful. Suffering can remain personally meaningless and nothing more. One might repudiate one's suffering and want nothing to do with it, seeing no purpose in it even within the context of divine-human communion and the totality of one's present circumstances both individual and corporate. In fact, one may only see it as a hindrance to life: in one's estimation life would be improved and more fulfilled without it. Either way, the most important and fixed aspect of my argument remains God's noninvolvement in evil in all aspects. Any meaning (or not) created from evil is on a personal level and does not concern the divine will. Therefore, God remains present with the sufferer even within personal meaninglessness and divine blame for meaningless suffering and the lack of personal meaning can be avoided.

4.4.2. Divine Intention: The Second Type of Meaning

Meaningfulness achieved by divine intention, as I have been using it here, remains self-essential and does not depend on suffering for its significance. Theism near unanimously maintains divine-human communion (orchestrated by divine intention) as the most meaningful engagement of God and humanity.[65] For this reason, I argue the meaningfulness of divine-human communion (or theosis) permits the existence of actual gratuitous evil: for if God's involvement in something makes it maximally meaningful, and divine-human communion is the point at which God is maximally involved with humanity, then God's involvement in evil is simply *not* required to procure meaning within suffering. In fact, as I have said, the abdication of God's role in evil as I understand it would make evil (without God's involvement) theistically vacuous and unable to fulfill any larger divine plan. In other words, evil without God's involvement *is* gratuitous. Therefore, I believe divine-human communion/theosis becomes the alternative medium by which God orchestrates the divine will for human beings despite evil. The fact God can be experienced within evil through divine-human communion engages God within suffering without requiring God's direct involvement and utilization of it. Thus, God and God's relation to suffering remain important aspects of my response.

As an example of divine-human communion/theosis (or divine intention), Eastern Orthodox Christians use icons and a specific type of prayer to interact with God and achieve meaningful communion with God. Such actions are important as acts of ritualistic faith and take the practitioner beyond the limits of what is bodily and intellectually possible, standing as ways to attain a significance which informs the whole of material and spiritual life. Their use among the faithful procure meaningful communion regardless of suffering and demonstrate a greater meaning

[65] According to Christianity, God is alive and the source of life for all that lives (John Chrysostom, *Homily on John*, 47; John 5:26). The New Testament says God is the one who "gives to all life, breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25-26). Communion with such a being, according to theism, must be essentially meaningful.

is possible (especially greater than can be effected by suffering itself). At the very least, they and other spiritual disciplines similar to them show believers can faithfully obtain divine meaning even within great suffering. Put differently, no matter the circumstances of one's life, the ways of communion with God remain open and divine meaning attainable. I contend one simply chooses the way to God which works best for oneself (such as those prescribed by Eastern Orthodoxy), and this ignites a meaningfulness within one's life consistent with theosis and independent of evil or any divine role in it. Furthermore, religious rituals, like those I describe below, stand as points of communion with God despite one religious feelings. Hence, even if one is incapable of "feeling God" in one's moment of pain, rituals remain ways in which divine-human communion can be maintained. As one "goes through the motions" so to speak, one nourishes faith despite suffering and connects with something bigger and more comforting than what is possible alone. In what follows, I will briefly define my understanding of two ways (cited above) which allow communion with God despite suffering even though, of course, other mediums of communion exist in various traditions.

4.4.3. Icons, Pure Prayer, and the Eucharist

According to the Orthodox theological tradition, the use of icons employs a material reality (wood and paint) to commune with or venerate a spiritual archetype, a transcendental experience not possible otherwise. Jesus, according to this tradition, stands as the prototypical physical gateway or icon by which heavenly realities can be met. Jesus assumed flesh, glorified it, and caused "its very elements [to be] changed into incorruption" (John of Damascus, *Images*, 3.9). Accordingly, it is maintained, just as God is revealed through the physical body of Jesus, material objects can be used as signifiers or access points to a more meaningful spiritual reality with God (much like

Karl Jasper's idea of cipher over symbol).[66] The faithful can commune with Jesus, who infuses the lives of the saints depicted on icons. According to John of Damascus, the icon, as a here and now connection point to a reality both contemplative and motivational, grants knowledge, discloses divine secrets, helps one work out one's salvation, and steers one from evil (*Images*, 3.17).

Within the same theological tradition, the Eucharist, the partaking of the body and blood of Christ (as with other Christian traditions) stands as the near pinnacle of what it means to be deified, or experience divine-human communion (2 Pet. 1:4).

> Deification is not brought about by human effort. Its source is the divine philanthropy. And its point of departure is always Jesus Christ, who manifests divine love in the mystery of the incarnation, the redemption, and the institution of the Eucharist. 'For the divinization of man, which is based on the incarnation and the redemption of Christ, is effected in the sacraments [or rituals] of the church (Russell 2004, p. 255).

Orthodox believers and theologians contend by partaking of the body and blood of Christ, they are partaking of the Lord (his flesh and his blood) in a literal sense to the degree they are tasting the Lord and seeing he is good (Ps. 34:8). This results in participating in the divine life [i.e., cosmic theosis] in a noetic manner and thus bringing about deification—an intimate and ultimately meaningful communion with God. Through this ritual, regardless of one's state of mind, one can participate in God for one's spiritual benefit and comfort. As alluded to, it is not through effort (or desire) one comes to God in this way but trough divine *philanthropia* and grace. One can engage

[66] See John 14:9. For more on Karl Jasper's notion of cipher, which seems to fit well with the Orthodox understanding of icons, see Bennett-Hunter 2014, p. 78-104. "A cipher…does not refer to something else in the world but to Transcendence which transcends the subject-object dichotomy" (p. 79). Elsewhere, Bennett-Hunter quotes Jasper as saying a cipher "is that which brings transcendence to mind without obliging transcendence to become an objective being, and without obliging *Existenz* to become a subjective being" (p. 92). Taken together, these quotes point to the cipher as allowing human beings to experience God in a way that transcends knowledge *about* God to an apophatic, energetic realm where one experiences the uncontainable and indescribable God. The icons of the Eastern church seem to reflect this capability.

in this and other rituals independent of one's feelings resulting from suffering and thus possess a way to participate in divine-human communion despite suffering.

Prayer of the heart (or pure prayer) is an individual exercise within the Eastern tradition, which brings the devotee into direct communication and presence with God. It gives access to a "spiritual realm…which is ultimate and eternal" (Stewart 2008, p. 752). Pure prayer accordingly transcends all thoughts of the divine and enters an apophatic experience of God like "brilliant darkness" (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mys*., 1:997B). This same tradition asserts the heart is the essential nature of the human being and therefore the place of unification (in prayer) of mind, reason, and will, "awaken[ing] the loving attachment of the will to Christ" (Staniloae 2002, p. 277). The exercise of pure prayer, common within the monastic tradition, can be practiced by all desiring a closeness with God, which transcends circumstance.

Anthony of Egypt withdrew to the solitude of the desert to devote his life to asceticism and prayer, and he was at one point told by God there was a man in the city who had a career as a doctor and was his spiritual equal. This story emphasizes the ability of anyone to approach God in prayer and meaningfully experience present communion God, which is when "time touches eternity." In the present, "humans have an experience analogous to the experience [God] has of reality as a whole" (Lewis 2001, p. 75). In one's present moment of suffering, I argue one can meet God through prayer and engage in a meaningful communion which does not depend on evil.

The vernation of icons, the Eucharist, and prayer, as ritualistic examples of divine-human communion, which are divinely willed or intended within the Eastern tradition, represent mediums by which, in accord with my argument for a present-moment experience of God, God can be reached within and without suffering. This demonstrates a meaningful understanding of one's reality can coexist with suffering or despite it. Each point of access, according to Orthodox

Christian theology, exists only because of the incarnation of Jesus: his willingness to be the proto-image, and by union of the divine and human natures within him, usher humanity's prayers to God and deify those who partake of the Eucharist. With these meaningful mediums, it is hard to see, in my opinion, why theism needs meaningful evil as a necessary or divinely willed aspect of existence. Instead, one can separate inspiration from divine intention and see God is not involved in evil and only concerned with creating and maintaining divine-human communion.

4.4.3. God and Expectations

My argument encourages the ousting of certain expectations of God motivated by a causal reasoning which assumes *y* results from *x*.[67] Such expectations might conclude for example: if one is a good person, good things will happen; or if one prays, God will answer. My focus will be on the latter, and I contend the story of Daniel's friends in the Hebrew scriptures (as I understand and use it for my present philosophical purposes) illustrates what I allege is a more helpful perspective within suffering concerning God and prayer; whether God answers prayer or not does not appear to matter.

> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us from your hand, O king. *But if not*, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up' (Dan. 3:16-18, emphasis mine).

According to my use and understanding of this portion of scripture, whether one is saved or perishes, God can be engaged in a communion which rises above circumstances. Divine-human

[67] Because the articulation of the "experience" of God is improbable, as it is exceptionally subjective, the perspective on divine-human communion I outline below is an existentially "objective" help to present sufferers of gratuitous evil. I mean objective in the sense the perspective on divine-human communion I offer is a one-size-fits-all approach which can be objectively applied to many people who then utilize it to transform their understanding of suffering and how it relates to divine-human communion for themselves.

communion, in this case and according to my view, is the most meaningful thing to oneself and not dependent on outcomes of suffering. This would also be true regarding the misplaced notion God "allows" suffering. One might argue the three friends were prepared for God to allow them to suffer. But I believe, on the contrary, it would not have mattered to them one way or the other. It seems to me they were able to rise above their circumstances, and the reality of divine-human communion made it so that such questions, like God's allowance of suffering, faded into obscurity. There are myriad reasons why one might suppose God "allows" suffering, but they pale in comparison to the present-moment experience of God. Nonetheless, I will entertain this idea in the forthcoming chapters, which centers on God's creation of anything at all.

I believe another way of understanding prayer and its purpose within suffering (given the context of the above story) is found in the hesychastic tradition and the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." A form of this prayer is also enshrined in the Eastern Christian Divine Liturgy, when the deacon and cantors cry: "Lord have mercy!" Through practice of the Jesus Prayer with the mouth, Elder Joseph says, "The nous [inner soul/mind/self] will grow accustomed to saying it with the inner voice. Then the nous will bring it down into the heart" (1998, p. 311). As one practices the prayer continually, one begins to see God constantly present in health or sickness. The elder again says:

> Since God is continuously present, why do you worry [about your health]? For in him we live and move. We are carried in his arms. We breath God; we are vested with God; we touch God; we consume God in the Mystery [the Eucharist]. Wherever you turn, wherever you look, God is everywhere: in the heavens, on the earth, in the abysses, in the trees, within the rocks, in your nous, in your heart (p. 161).

The elder is showing prayer's true purpose: the realization of God in, though, below, and above the world, despite illness or suffering. For this reason, petitionary prayer can be nothing more than the Jesus Prayer: a prayer for mercy. But through this mercy, the one suffering and those around

may see God everywhere, "continuously present." If this is achieved, then prayer will have been answered and the present sufferer comforted.

If expectations of any sort assume formulas created to bring about particular results, then to arrive at any expected outcome, one must know the formula and ensure it is performed correctly to achieve the desired result. Considering the theistic responses to suffering so far examined, one's mind is often filled (unintentionally or otherwise) with notions *about* God, which assume a formula-like thought process, expecting certain results. It would seem these can come from what one has been told about God or how one has experienced God in the past. Nonetheless, beliefs are formed, and expectations firmed. And unfortunately, when things do not end the way expected, feelings of dejection can set in, and God (and communion with God) is often blamed and rejected.

Expectations of God, arising mostly from a cataphatic viewpoint, misunderstand or misapply, in my opinion, the transcendent nature of God. Understood apophatically, God (as I understand it) is far beyond human comprehension, making such expectations improbable. In terms of the problem of evil generally, the following expectations about God follow: God is good; God is omnipotent; and God is omniscient. These are clear cataphatic statements, which assume God possesses these qualities *qua* God. By possessing these qualities, it is thus *expected* God will act in good ways according to the power and knowledge possessed by God. This cataphatic declaration about God sets up natural expectations which are either met or not. And if unmet (especially within suffering), confusion, anger, and blame toward God may result. Additionally, such expectations serve as catalysts to moral judgments of divine actions, which inappropriately assume God is similar to human beings, and like them, should act in morally exemplary ways. Thus, evil is a problem for theism because no divine being with qualities exemplifying that of a moral person should cause or permit evil.

For this reason, I embrace an apophatic theological stance, which claims to know nothing of God except what God is *not*. In other words, God is *in*comprehensible, *in*finite, *in*describable. In this way, positive (cataphatic) statements about God leading to inappropriate expectations are avoided. In my view, abstract expectations are traded for personal experience with God. Such is the nature of one's communion with God as a partaker of the divine nature, which is exemplified, among others, in the Eucharistic celebration. The experience of God is beyond words, greater than any suffering, and available in the midst of it. It should be noted, however, positive attributes of God as theism understands them are not to be jettisoned completely. Rather, the cataphatic and apophatic expressions of these statements work in tandem so the limited nature of a cataphatic expression is tempered by the incomprehensibleness of an apophatic one. In other words, I believe "God is good" should not be limited to a simple understanding of human goodness—as if the goodness of God and humans is the same or even similar—but should be seen as an expression of divine quality transcending comprehension and appearance, a quality which is in its essence inarticulable.[68]

I believe, although a trivial example, the relinquishment of expectations of God is similar to being cut off in traffic. Immediately, one feels a personal injustice committed. One's plan to go from point A to point B is interrupted, and anger ensues. If the expectation of going from and to these points without interruption was not present, then one might assume the reaction to this minor inconvenience would have differed.[69] Likewise, expectations about God's relation to one's

[68] Nonetheless, one, it would seem, can experience God through God's uncreated energies even though one can never experience God in God's essence. See Gregory Palamas, *Triads*, 3.2.5-15.

[69] Tom Vanderbilt, in his book *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do and What it Says about Us*, says roads in the United States and elsewhere are constructed with the road, vehicle, and driver's expectations in mind. "'You can't violate driver expectation,' … Tests of what researchers call 'expectancy' routinely show that it takes drivers longer to respond to something they do not expect than something they do expect" (2008, p. 183). If true, this would only add to the frustration of a driver trying to get to where she is going, perhaps resulting in an unintended collision, something even more frustrating!

suffering should be at least malleable. My response lies in one's present communion with God as the most significant source of meaning, which does not rely on past experiences or future expectations but remains in the here and now. Hence, one can remain engaged with God during suffering, avoiding divine blame. One can suffer well because one is in present communion with God to the extent one accepts any outcome to suffering, relying on God as most meaningful in a type of radical acceptance, independent of ill-informed expectations.

Expectations from causal thinking, or an imperfect view on prayer and their relation to God and one's circumstance(s), I contend, result from natural anticipations of an ordered world where one takes for granted nothing happens without a reason or cause. They also result, in my opinion, from the perception life is logical, and it is thus, in some way, humanity's job to bring order from the chaos of suffering or the otherwise incomprehensible. In fact, Marilyn Adams notes human beings tend to simplify the world into generalizations to make it orderly and understandable. Patterns are sought after to make sense of the complicated or anything considered beyond one's ken. She also compares simplicity by generalization to sanity, and in contrast, the failure to match one's experience to the objective orderings of the world as textbook insanity (1999a, p. 145).

4.4.4. Distinguishing Between Material and Teleological Causes

But I believe expectations alone, especially regarding suffering, while reasonable, are counterproductive when applied to the supernatural.[70] Most of theism incorrectly applies them to God's relationship to evil and the experience of it, and a confusion develops between what are called material and teleological causes. A material cause is anything which happens because a

[70] In other words, it is *logically possible* if God exists gratuitous evil does not.

natural reason. A teleological cause is anything which happens because a divine purpose.[71] In the present case, a material cause is natural, while a teleological cause is supernatural. For example, when lightning strikes a tree and it falls, one may say the tree fell (effect) because lightning struck it (cause). But it would be inappropriate, under my view, to apply this to God, saying God struck the fruit tree with lightning because the villagers (who lived on nothing but fruit) had offended God with their sin. Many theists contend any natural (material) occurrence of evil and its experience is tied by necessity to a supernatural (teleological) purpose, infusing suffering (no matter what kind) with a meaningful nature.

In addition to confusing causality, applying the expectations as described above ignores one's experience and firm belief of actual gratuitous suffering. According to the perspective I am offering, all evil can originate from material/non-teleological causes, complete with natural effects which can be horrendous, and God can remain uninvolved in the origination and orchestration (or manipulation) of evil and suffering toward divine ends. Sufferers can be inspired by their own suffering (including observed suffering), and divine-human communion can be maintained within evil without the risk of divine blame. Furthermore, expectations common to the natural world are not misplaced as supernatural ways God acts within suffering.

In positing all suffering results from material causes so everything happens for a mundane/material reason, the idea of radical acceptance stands as one example favorable to my argument, which is responding to the problem of actual (and present) gratuitous evil. Responding to suffering in this way proposes situations can be accepted (even if not desirable) with the purpose

[71] For an interesting examination of this bifurcation see Banerjee and Bloom, 2014a and 2014b. Bruce Little endorses the same distinction between material and teleological causes but opts to classify them as "reason" and "purpose" respectively. Little says that "purpose has to do with end [or a larger goal], while reason only explains cause" (2013, p. 44).

of eventually enabling a change of perspective. Key to radical acceptance is knowing everything is caused. Every painful event is traceable to a mundane cause even though, in complicated cases, the cause may be unknown. This view, importantly, is not concurrent with theological determinism. Radical acceptance only maintains past events cannot be changed, and this view is hardly arguable.[72] Understanding every painful event has a material/mundane cause reveals circumstances cannot be different than they are, and the cause of suffering cannot be changed. One might wish the cause did not occur or circumstances were different. But this is not living in the reality of now and resists the acceptance of one's experience for what it is (Linehan, 2012).

Marsha Linehan gives the following example. Imagine a child is riding her bicycle very fast down a hill and coming to an intersection. At the same time, a car is approaching the same intersection. The car is maintaining the speed limit and the intersection has no stop light, stop sign, or any markings that would otherwise indicate the car should slow down. By accident, the car strikes the child, and she dies from her injuries. One (especially the child's parents) might object, saying this set of events should not have occurred; it is not fair. But Linehan cautions against unacceptance of the child's death since the causes of death happened and remain in the past (2012). Reality is what it is, no matter how painful. By knowing every painful event has unchangeable causes, one, I think, is better equipped to accept them. Through radical acceptance, combined with my idea of the material causality of suffering and my larger notion, which states God is not allowing or orchestrating suffering for a larger goal not otherwise achievable (i.e., evil is gratuitous), the sufferer is less likely to question why suffering is happening. Therefore, divine

[72] The arguments of quantum physics, while interesting, fall outside the scope of this project. Nonetheless, interesting theological points can be considered (hinted by Hasker's existential argument above) by pondering the ramifications, for example, of traveling back in time and killing Hitler when he was a baby or changing (possibly extinguishing) oneself by murdering one's grandfather.

blame and anger is avoided, and the sufferer can move forward in acceptance toward goals of inspiration and divine-human communion (theosis).

4.4.5. Some Objections

By allowing for (actual) gratuitous evil, one might argue I am devaluing the experience of suffering as unimportant or useless. Either the sufferer sees no point in it and becomes dejected, or God is perceived, by not preventing it, as uninterested in the experiences of those God loves.

According to my view, divine-human communion exists as an overwhelming good, which undermines the force of gratuitous suffering. In cases where theism has utilized divine-human communion as a prodigious good which conquers evil, it nonetheless comes awkwardly after suffering and is too late for those amid its devastation. However, the inclusion of divine-human communion within many theistic responses to evil also testifies to its potency and acceptability within a large portion of theism as an effective subjugator of evil. My view continues this practice but places the usefulness of the communion within suffering as an appropriate vehicle for meaning. By deriving one's meaning from divine-human communion, which is not dependent on suffering, the need for meaningful suffering is, in my opinion, absent. This in turn allows the perception of sufferers who believe they suffer gratuitously to be treated with significance rather than contend the perception is mistaken. Therefore, the point of suffering (for the sufferer) is to endure by remaining engaged with God. In my view, while participating in and with God during suffering, the sufferer's perspective is valued and no longer simply a means to an end. I believe this significantly removes the chance the sufferer will become dejected and divine-human communion dissolved.

To suggest if God is interested in human experience, then God would prevent gratuitous suffering is a conclusion based, in my mind, on the assumption suffering must be necessary, instrumental, and thus meaningful to be justified. (This is assuming the experience of evil ubiquitous.) I agree suffering (and, in my case, gratuitous suffering) is ubiquitous. But I do not believe, by the existence of gratuitous suffering, divine-human communion is excluded. I contend, if one is able to experience God within suffering, then God wishes and is able to be experienced regardless of it. Whether or not one's experience of evil is meaningful (on the personal level) is unimportant to one's accessibility to divine-human communion and God's loving presence within it. In my view, the existence of a meaningful divine-human communion, which is accessible within suffering, is consistent with theism, and as I see it, my view is more palatable than the responses so far considered. One might also question the appropriateness of seeing the existential aspect of the problem of evil as best suited to answering the problem of present suffering. I admit, even if the existential question of *how* one reacts to evil is addressed, the cause of evil (the *why* question) still lingers. While, in a strict sense, the latter question is unrelated to a response to present suffering, I will nonetheless briefly address it in later chapters as a theological outgrowth of my larger philosophical argument.

There are two other possible objections: (1) God's omnipotence makes the denial of God influencing suffering for good ends improbable; and (2) God's goodness requires justification in the way provided for by theodicy; otherwise, God can be perceived, at worst, as evil. The first objection requires a definition of omnipotence, which I understand as God's ability to do anything consistent with the divine character, adding God can only do what God wills (Oden 2008a, p. 75). If omnipotence is defined in this way, then the following claims can be made. First, God hates evil (Hosea 9:15; Ps. 97:10; Prov. 8:13). And if God hates evil, it is improbable God would have

anything to do with it. Instead, God might will, for example, to counter it by greater divine-human intimacy. Second, it is conceivable God's driving desire for divine-human communion outweighs God's interest in influencing evil, which under my view, is vacuous. Suffering (as the experience of evil) remains significant for its effects on people: there is real and lasting suffering which cripples people and their zest for life. Some people, by inspiration, can turn these events into lasting positive, personally meaningful change for themselves and others. But for those who cannot, divine-human communion (as with inspired persons, too) stands as an ultimate and eternal significance despite their personally meaningless(ful) suffering. So it is conceivable, and along the lines of theistic belief, God's will and character permit God's focus on divine-human communion to the exclusion of the existence of gratuitous evil. Nonetheless, God can be intimately concerned with the suffering of it, where God remains ubiquitously present and accessible. In this sense, God can "permit" suffering while willing theosis.

The second claim concerns God's goodness and evil's impugning it without the justification provided by theodicy. To answer this critique, I consider the nature of God as defined by Aquinas's analogy of proper proportionality. According to Aquinas, "being belongs intrinsically to all that is and to each and every thing *analogically*, that is, *in proportion to its nature*" (Phelan 1973, p. 8, emphasis original). One can say one's dinner is *good* and one's shoes are *good*. And "good" in this sense would be understood analogically since there is a relation (in both being good) between one's dinner (and what it ought to be) and one's shoes (and what they ought to be) even though they are different (p. 14-15). Aquinas says, "In analogicals it is not *diverse realities* which fall under consideration but *diverse modes* of existence of the self-same reality" (p. 39, emphasis original). In this sense, human beings and God both possess goodness. Humanity has a standard of goodness whereby it judges the goodness of other humans, which is

in proportion to human goodness. But God's goodness is different. God possesses goodness on a wholly diverse level. God's mode of existence is varied from human beings in that "God *cannot be thought of* as something other than his essence or nature" (Davies 2011, p. 57, emphasis original). One cannot distinguish God from God's goodness since God is good in essence. And from this, one can conclude God's goodness is not predicated on God's (in)action vis-à-vis human beings. Rather, God is good by nature, irrespective of God's (in)action. Therefore, it is inappropriate, in my opinion, to justify God's goodness by God's use of evil or suffering and God's (in)action regarding it.

4.5. Conclusion

The theistic responses so far considered represent, in my opinion, a significant threat to divine-human communion for present sufferers. By assuming the sufferer is incorrect in evaluating her experience of evil as gratuitous, a mistrust of the sufferer's perception is created. Present suffering is thus ignored using abstract belief statements, some of which place the focus of the defeat of suffering on postmortem existence alone. Additionally, the instrumental nature of the above responses suggests God must utilize suffering for the sake of good. Thus, I believe the sufferer's experience is cheapened as a means to an end. Present sufferers cannot benefit from the instrumental viewpoints of such responses, which suggest the perception of the sufferer cannot be trusted. My argument presents a more meaningful response to present suffering, which does not require divine involvement (avoiding divine blame), takes the perspective of the present sufferer seriously by allowing for gratuitous suffering, and permits a meaningful reality within suffering through divine-human communion.

CHAPTER 5

COSMIC THEOSIS AS GOD'S PRIMORDIAL INTENTION

5.1. Introduction

As I show, Marilyn Adams, Eleonore Stump, and others offer responses to the problem of evil which fail to contend effectively with the problem of present suffering.[73] Especially relevant to my project are those amid suffering who have concluded their pain is gratuitous, and the theories so far considered deny gratuitous evil exists. Any conclusion which embraces the existence of gratuitous evil and thereby denies God intentionally and instrumentally uses one's suffering is, according to them, reasonable confusion which will be cleared up in the afterlife. According to these responses, Christian death and the resurrected life are akin to a clearing of the mind and a straightening of perception, so sufferers come to a common "aha" moment wherein they understand and agree their suffering was utilized by God for their good.

Essential to this, at least where Adams and Stump are concerned, is divine-human communion. For Adams, horrendous suffering, which is meaningless on its face, becomes (by the incarnation of the Son of God) a redeemable, integral aspect of divine-human communion. Horrendous suffering is therefore made necessary and meaningful (i.e., not horrendous). Stump likewise posits divine-human communion as the endpoint of evil. But instead of forming divine-human communion anew, suffering for Stump changes the human being internally so an "anti-God" will eventually become a "pro-God" will, culminating in the loving of God with the whole of one's heart.

[73] The theories put forward by Adams and Stump are considered in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively.

Even though divine-human communion takes a prominent place within Adams's and Stump's responses, its position is awkwardly placed after suffering. This means a meaningful understanding of suffering resulting from experience of divine-human communion does not occur until after suffering and/or death. Both responses demonstrate the Christian response to evil ought to include divine-human communion as an ultimate meaning-maker and defeater of evil, but the effectiveness of these responses is, in my opinion, blunted by their inability to provide present sufferers with a sense of comfort and meaning in their moment of pain.

As I showed in Chapter 4, a meaningful divine-human communion amid suffering is, I believe, essential to suffering well as it allows the sufferer to remain engaged with God during suffering, avoiding the risk of divine blame and the disseverment of communion. A meaningful present-moment experience of divine-human communion despite suffering removes the necessity of God's instrumental involvement in evil, allowing the sufferer to suffer well (or endure) through a vibrant participation with God.

In what follows, I will explicate the finer points of divine-human communion through a limited exploration of the Christian understanding of theosis (deification), which is synonymous with my use of divine-human communion in previous and forthcoming chapters and meant to express a reality which is both a present-moment experience and a hoped-for future state of ongoing perfection. The latter serves as a further clarification of my view concerning the benefits of a heavenly reality for those who suffer. However, I argue a hoped-for heavenly reality cannot be the only consolation for suffering. I believe my argument allows the present sufferer to benefit from a relationship with God in the here and now without the need (in the moment) for a future, presently inaccessible heavenly reality. The promise of heaven, and the renewed perspective on suffering it is purported to cause, cannot help the present suffer except through the assertion of

abstract belief statements not consistent with the experience of gratuitous suffering. To use this reality in the manner utilized by the above responses ignores the present suffering perspective and treats it as uninformed, and at worst, nonveridical. The knowledge afforded by an expanded heavenly perspective—which, within a Christian context, I believe is true—cannot, in my opinion, be the only answer for present sufferers since they cannot take advantage of it. In contrast, my view of divine-human communion regardless of suffering can provide ultimate meaning for the present sufferer and simultaneously serve as a vehicle of spiritual growth toward an ineffable, limitless divine reality.

Supposing the idea of theosis, my larger argument—that gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world because divine-human communion (theosis) provides meaning-making power for present sufferers, which far outweighs the need for necessary or instrumental evil—remains cogent. This chapter will explore what I call cosmic theosis (what I consider the divine intention for created being *before* sin) and aspects of what I call particular theosis (what I consider the divine intention for created being *after* sin as acted out and achieved in the theandric life and work of Jesus, especially my interpretation of the incarnation). Both types of theosis work to describe and achieve the same end: divine-human communion. Therefore, divine-human communion should be in mind when I discuss both terms. I will also use particular theosis and redemption interchangeably, while cosmic theosis remains the goal or fulfillment of particular theosis.

Ultimately, as I understand it, Christian redemption (including everything required for it) and particular theosis describe the process whereby the primordial divine intention of cosmic theosis is finally achieved by the renewal or recapitulation of all things both spiritual and physical through my understanding of the incarnation of the Son of God. Therefore, it is also correct, in my view, to refer to the final outcome of particular theosis as cosmic theosis, theosis, deification, or

divine-human communion, terms I will use interchangeably to express the "before sin" reality of (cosmic) theosis, or God's desire for divine-human communion before (and without the need for) suffering.

The account of the incarnation I present in this chapter is not an exclusive one, and I would imagine, even if my larger philosophical argument regarding gratuitous evil is supposed, various interpretations of the incarnation could be just as cogently applied. While I will not entertain such interpretations here, I contend they are possible. Likewise, the version of cosmic theosis (or the ultimate goal of divine-human communion), which I argue for within this chapter (including previous chapters), is not considered by me to be exclusive either. In many ways, my use of "cosmic" is a term of convenience meant to denote what existed before anything else. In the sense I use it, cosmic theosis is my understanding of God's will for theosis before creation and any act performed by it. The importance of cosmic theosis to my argument, which states God does not use suffering to achieve ends God cannot otherwise achieve, is, in my estimation, ostensible. Union with God (or theosis), I contend, is therefore not dependent on evil, and God can remain a comfort to present sufferers by avoiding divine blame and anger. Such anger could possibly result in disseverment of divine-human communion, which appears to be the likely result (based on the previous arguments explored in chapters 1-4) of the divine use of suffering as a means to a larger (or more important) end.

The personal aspect to my argument is what sets it apart from other theistic responses to suffering. In Chapter 1, I divided the problem of evil between intellectual and existential types and responses. The intellectual responses are by nature more abstract. As such, they include, as I have bifurcated the terms, defenses against evil as an objective entity. The existential arguments are personal in nature, thus appealing to the subjective aspect of suffering (i.e., the experience of evil),

and appear to answer, given suffering, the "now what" question. The typical existential arguments, while often engaging in a type of anti-theodicy, fall short by failing to resist the kneejerk reaction to justify God amid suffering (see chapters 2 and 3). The novelty of my view, which was presented in Chapter 4, is its disregard for the justification of evil or its defeat within a theistic world. My view instead contends, if God is not involved in suffering (thus making it gratuitous), then God remains available to the present sufferer, who may also conclude her suffering gratuitous, for comfort to the point of endurance or what I called "suffering well." In short, my argument is one for the endurance of present suffering rather than an explanation or justification of it, including its compensation or defeat.

The present chapter will explore my idea of cosmic theosis (or deification) via God's will for the unification of created being with Godself before the introduction of sin. (Of course, while theosis is intimate divine-human union, creation and God, according to a majority of Christian theists, remain unconfused and distinct from one another within it.) One of the key aspects I explore as it relates to cosmic theosis is divine intention. Understanding this aspect of my argument (as it was introduced in Chapter 4) is important as it shows God's intention for cosmic theosis is logically prior to sin and never includes an intentional or instrumental use of suffering. Therefore, it is also the case (assuming my claim and understanding of the primordial nature of cosmic theosis correct) God, as I contend, cannot intend or will suffering of any kind for any reason. Thus, as I argued in Chapter 4, the divine intention remains "above" suffering in the sense it is not required for the fulfillment of such an intention. In fact, because of cosmic theosis, I claim God's intention for creation has always been and continues to be the unification of humanity with divinity. Furthermore, if theosis (God's primordial desire) is seen clearest in the incarnation, as I argue, then cosmic theosis existed and continues to exist as a "before sin" divine intention and thus is

present to humanity regardless of suffering. In this way, as I will explain in the next chapter, a supralapsarian ("before sin") christology is entailed. Therefore:

1. If cosmic theosis represents divine intention before sin and the suffering it causes (and so God does not use suffering in any way), then divine intention lacks the need for sin and the suffering it causes to accomplish cosmic theosis.

2. Cosmic theosis represents divine intention before sin and the suffering it causes (and so God does not use suffering in any way).

3. So divine intention lacks the need for sin and the suffering it causes to accomplish cosmic theosis.

Hence, cosmic theosis cannot help but, in my opinion, explicitly manifest my larger philosophical argument of God's noninvolvement in suffering, as if God required suffering as a means of achieving God's will for theosis. And if, as I claim, God does not take part in suffering (except to comfort the sufferer and help one to endure suffering through theosis), then God is, in my view, that magnificent comforter to the downtrodden, especially the present sufferer: God remains able and willing to lift one up from the pit into which one has fallen. If, as I assert, God is not intentionally making use of one's suffering and thus achieving a goal that is otherwise impossible for Godself, God's power, presence, and love are in a real sense "a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). In this way, my claim of God's total abstention from the use of evil becomes an anchor to my larger argument, which is posited as a here and now aid for those presently suffering and says suffering is indeed an aspect of experience but does not in any way form a key or necessary part to divine-human communion (or theosis). Rather, communion with God would, I believe, supply the sufferer with sufficient personal and social meaning (since God is the *telos* of life) without the need for suffering. Moreover, my argument shows suffering is superfluous to divine-human experience, which provides ultimate meaning regardless. Of course, one might find oneself strangely close to God because of suffering, but this experience, while good, does not

necessitate suffering for the sake of divine-human communion (or theosis). Instead, I argue all can come to God and participate in divine-human experience myriad ways, and sometimes one does so because of suffering.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Because Maximus the Confessor is considered the final synthesizer of theosis as a doctrine within Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant churches (Lutheranism, Anglicanism, etc.), I will present my understanding of some of his ideas throughout the chapter. In Section 2, I will utilize the Confessor's work briefly and in a limited way to define my philosophical use of cosmic theosis further and suggest its "before sin" characteristics as God's primordial intention for human beings apart from suffering. In Section 3, I will consider the unnecessary use of suffering concerning the virtuous life (a topic further explored in Chapter 7). Section 4 concludes

By drawing upon Maximus's work in a philosophical rather than exegetical manner, which I believe is a representative sample of a Christian understanding of theosis, I will further articulate my understanding and use of cosmic theosis for my philosophical ends and will have set the stage for a proper understanding of the place of particular theosis (what I also call redemption) within my larger philosophical/theological argument concerning the primordial will of God (cosmic theosis) in the next chapters. In accordance with my understanding of Maximus, comprehending cosmic theosis arises first from the belief humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). If this is the case, it remains germane to my argument to emphasize the way one may apprehend the difference between cosmic and particular theosis as I use the terms. Again, cosmic theosis, which I argue is the primordial divine intention, is I believe, evident in how God created human beings in the divine image and therefore according to the divine likeness. In other words, I agree with Maximus (and most Christians) humans are created by and called to be like God. To be godlike is

considered a process whereby, for example, through ascetical struggle, Christians mirror their lives in accordance with the divine mandate, making themselves image bearers of the Son of God. The divine likeness is then, according to Christian theism, imprinted upon their ontological structures.

As I understand him, Maximus believes the struggle to conform oneself to the divine image within a mêlée of subjective and objective forces whose path is clouded by the consequences of the first sin—in contrast to one's ontological stamp of inclination toward, as I call it, cosmic theosis—is the process of redemption (particular theosis) by which human beings are, as I conceive of it, redeemed from the wayward path and straightened toward divine-human communion. I call this latter part of the Christian's spiritual life particular theosis because it requires certain/particular choices made by particular human beings who wish to ascend to God. According to my use of the term, being made in God's likeness through the process of particular theosis does not, in line with my philosophical argument, require suffering (e.g., as an exclusive means to character formation) but remains only a method to cosmic theosis. Nonetheless, I argue, in accordance with the Christian notion of sin, particular and cosmic theosis are necessary aspects of one another even though, in my estimation, cosmic theosis remains the greater of the two and the goal of the former.

5.2. Cosmic Theosis Refined

Although I been discussing my understanding of cosmic theosis as the primordial intention of God for created being, this does not exclude my concern for what I am calling particular theosis. Quite the opposite: a consideration of particular theosis, synonymous with the entire process of redemption as understood within the Christian tradition—from the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus to the ascetical life of the Christian—is vital. Cosmic theosis is, I contend, foundational to a proper understanding of redemption/particular theosis, so a proper placement and

comprehension of cosmic theosis within one's ideas about God, God's actions in the world, and suffering are paramount. A fuller discussion of particular theosis, especially as it concerns the central Christian belief in and my interpretation of the incarnation, will be discussed in the next and forthcoming chapters.

In what follows, I will draw upon my understanding of Maximus the Confessor's definition of theosis to demonstrate my larger philosophical argument that gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world, which means God is uninvolved in suffering and divine-human communion within suffering is possible. My treatment of Maximus is confined to defining the idea of cosmic theosis as a "before sin" divine intention, so my treatment of his works is not meant to be exhaustive. Maximus's understanding of theosis is limited in the present work since I am utilizing his writings (and my understanding of them) to articulate a central term within my larger philosophical argument already discussed in previous chapters: divine-human communion (or theosis). My use of Maximus extenuates the idea of cosmic theosis as a "before sin" plan of God only. For I argue, if theosis and God's desire for it is prior to any worldly action—sinful or otherwise—and therefore not dependent on them, then theosis, as the will of God, existed prior to any action which caused and/or causes suffering. God's will for theosis and humanity's participation in it, according to my argument, do not then require suffering but can exist as maximally meaningful for the sufferer within or without it.

5.2.1. Mutability as a Possible Cause of Suffering

Before discussing cosmic theosis further, I believe it is important to consider a possible cause of suffering. Since my philosophical argument is existential in nature, concerning the experience of the sufferer here and now, this consideration is not directly related. But I do regard it as helpful to

aspects of my argument fleshed out in the next chapter. In short, the cause of suffering, in my view, sets a context for my argument without being required by it. While I maintain determining a cause of suffering is needless, when discussing any cause of suffering (whether human mutability or sin), it should be understood within the exclusive sense defined in the introduction of this work between evil as an objective term of convenience and suffering as the experience of evil. Similarly, I place mutability and sin in the former category and suffering resulting from either in the latter. Specifically, mutability remains within the objective category of evil for its *potential* to cause suffering even though I argue it is an ontological aspect of what it means to be human created *ex nihilo*. Therefore, I define mutability as change from nonexistence (nothing) to existence (something). This nascent ability to change, before sin or suffering, represents humanity's mutability and thus its capacity to change from one state to another (e.g., from a good state of affairs to a bad state of affairs). This does not mean human beings become evil but only capable of it.

I will introduce this concept by quickly reviewing, rejecting, and reworking Marilyn Adams's argument detailed in Chapter 2. One of her sources (causes) of horrendous evil is what she calls the "spirit-body conflict." By this, she blames God for making humanity the way God did, and thus, for horrendous suffering. This sets up her larger argument, which states God must answer for evil. In her opinion, God does this by assenting to incarnation (and its accompanying suffering) along with crucifixion, where humanity gives its worst to God for creating them the way God did.

If I am to consider a cause of evil at all, Adams's argument is, in my opinion, the perfect foil. My argument up to this point has made clear God cannot be blamed for suffering (for God did not intend it from the beginning) and desires theosis without the need for suffering since God

desired it prior to anything else. So, as I have argued in previous chapters, I believe Adam's blame of God has been refuted. But I wish to focus on her notion of the spirit-body conflict. Adams says God made humans with a spirit-body conflict, which causes suffering. I, on some level, do not disagree. But I would not go so far as to blame God in the way I believe Adams does. Rather, I would argue five points based on my philosophical use of Maximus (discussed further below):

(1) God created humans (and all things) *ex nihilo* (as a Christian, I believe Adams would agree with this).

(2) From my understanding of Maximus, c*reatio ex nihilo* is a type of movement from a state of nonbeing to being.

(3) So, from my understanding of Maximus, God's creation of humans (and all things) is a movement from a state of nonbeing to being.

(4) If, in being created by God *ex nihilo*, humans experience movement from a state of nonbeing to being, as I believe Maximus argues, then they are, because of their creation as such, mutable and thereby able to decide for better or worse, potentiality causing suffering.

(5) Therefore, if my understanding of Maximus is correct, and God creates humans, then mutability creates the ability to decide for better or worse, potentially causing suffering.

I believe Adams assumes God had a choice in *how* to create human beings. But the above shows this is not the case. According to my understanding of Maximus, if God were to create anything at all, then God had to create mutable beings able to suffer. I would argue the only choice, on God's part, is to create or not. The choice was never, I believe, a decision between *how* God was going to create humanity, as I believe Adams suggests.

As I will argue in the next chapter, the incarnation as I understand it, solved the mutability problem by uniting flesh with the Son of God, which was God's primordial desire. Such is, I contend, the perfect picture of theosis, which suffers with humanity and demonstrates the conquering of suffering in the resurrection. Therefore, God is not blamed for the mutability

problem, and God solves it, as well, through theosis. For the purposes of my argument, I will focus (in Chapter 7) on the cross and Jesus's descent into hades to accentuate this point.

Maximus is thought the final synthesizer of the doctrine of theosis, a tenet which begins with the belief the world was created *ex nihilo* and God is the first cause of everything. According to Maximus and my understanding of him, he believed (1) human beings are created by God and find fulfillment in God (*Amb*. 7 PG 1084A), and (2) since human beings were originally created by God, they do not *naturally* oppose God, or move away from God (*Opusc.* 7, PG 80A-B). Instead, they were, from the beginning, created for participation in God or divine-human communion, and it is natural for them to do so. Thus, the *telos* of humanity is assumed unfulfilled until it finds rest in God, and it is unnatural for humanity to resist God as its cause of being.[74] These ideas from Maximus (and others who share them) suggest the accuracy of my philosophical claim regarding cosmic theosis or divine-human communion: theosis is a maximally meaningful experience with God, which invites rest and endurance of suffering since it existed prior to it and avoids divine blame.

Although theosis remains the primordial will of God before sin, this does not excise a moral, God-fearing, and active devotional life (via particular theosis), which might include actions such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Hence, in the way I intend the terms, cosmic theosis requires—after sin and the suffering it causes—particular theosis: the redemptive acts of the Jesus events and the Christian devotional life, which require active movement toward God and nullifies any notion of a simple, passive belief in God even within suffering. As I argued in Chapter 4, the

[74] Cf., Augustine of Hippo's famous line: "For thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee" (*Confessionum libri XIII*, 1.1.1); and a similar line from Maximus, "No created being has yet ceased from the natural power that moves it to its proper end, neither has it found rest from the activity that impels toward its proper end" (*Amb.* 7 PG 1073AB).

above avenues of devotion, which might move one toward God, remain ways one might, within suffering, obtain personal meaning and thus endure suffering. Additionally, I do not intend, even though the Jesus events (such as my understanding of the incarnation) happened within a suffering world, and so therefore *after* suffering, this was God primordial will. As I see it, the incarnation (as the perfect picture of theosis) would have happened anyway regardless of sin or suffering, and this notion (supralapsarianism) will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

At this point, the placement of theosis (divine-human communion) can be more narrowly defined as the natural disposition of human beings to seek God even while they possess an infralapsarian ("after fall") propensity to sin. Sin (and the suffering which follows from it) appears against the will of God for theosis and the nature of human beings who are created to desire and seek after God. If theosis (as maximally meaningful) is the first and natural desire of human beings created in the image of God, then it cannot be, I argue, a result of the instrumental or necessary use of evil. Rather theosis (or divine-human communion) is quite independent of such things. In fact, as I will contend below, sin/suffering/evil do not need to be a part of the divine will for theosis at all, and one's focus within evil remains on divine-human communion and the endurance of suffering it bequeaths.

5.3. The Unnecessary Nature of Evil and the Power of Virtue

Drawing upon Maximus as I understand him, I also posit the nonexistence of inherent evil. Otherwise, if evil is inherent, and human beings act in evil ways, then human beings are, one might suppose, inherently evil. But these suppositions contradict my philosophical use and claim regarding my understanding of Maximus above, which says humans act only in potentially evil ways through movement away from God. For if it is natural for human beings to exist in God as

their purpose of being, as I believe Maximus maintains, then it would be unnatural for them to resist God's will for theosis through evil actions which cause suffering. If what I believe Maximus is saying is true, humans, in fact, as image bearers of God, are inherently and immutably good at their core. Additionally, as I have argued in this and previous chapters, evil and the suffering it causes cannot be necessary for the accomplishment of God's will for theosis. Rather, I contend suffering occurs when humans act contrary to God's will (or cosmic theosis). As stated above, by acting contrary to God's will, humans are acting in ways opposite their nature. My argument therefore entails such acts and the suffering they cause cannot be necessary to the very thing they destroy (divine-human communion/theosis).[75] Drawing again upon Maximus, I reject the idea evil is useful or necessary to theosis. Rather, evil results only from the freely willed misuse of the natural abilities and gifts of humankind granted by God (thus suffering is effected), namely those which can draw one close to God. However, as a reminder, causes attributed to suffering remain ancillary to my argument and fall within the objective category of evil generally, and therefore, any terms used to describe causes of evil are used for convenience only.

To demonstrate my point evil is not inherent to humanity, I draw upon the following two claims from Maximus's *Capita de Caritate*: (1) "Nothing created by God is evil" (*Car*. 3.3), and (2) "Food is not evil, but gluttony; nor is the begetting of children, but fornication; nor money, but avarice; nor glory, but vainglory. If this is so, nothing among creatures is evil except misuse which comes from the mind neglecting to cultivate itself as nature demands" (*Car*. 3.4). These affirmations, as I understand them, support my assertion evil (and suffering especially) is neither useful nor necessary for theosis. From this, I further affirm, as an objective term, evil begins and

[75] Paul says the end of sin (as contrary to one's nature) is death, but righteousness (i.e., a life lived in accord with one's nature and the divine will) is life (cf., Rm. 6:21-23).

ends with the misaligned actions of human beings. Instead of being necessary for or instrumental to theosis, evil remains averse to it. As such, I argue all evil and the suffering it causes remain outside the will of God and something God cannot, if God is to remain true to God's will, utilize for any greater end. For evil to exist is for something to exist which is diametrically opposed to God's will for theosis. So God's will, I believe, requires evil's eradication, not its use.

Once again, if my understanding of Maximus's writings is correct, then the natural disposition of humankind (before sin or suffering) exists always as an inclination toward what is good for it and its true purpose (God and divine-human communion) and supports my argument theosis (as maximally meaningful) can be achieved and enjoyed without the need or use of evil and the suffering it causes. Therefore, theosis—as the good and natural end of humankind—is furthermore defined as exactly opposite what is achieved through suffering. If so, then divine intention can accomplish its will independent of suffering and not as an aspect of a goal otherwise unachievable. Thus, gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world.

My limited use of Maximus's work has further articulated my understanding and use of theosis (divine-human communion) as a maximally meaningful reality which defeats suffering by making it irrelevant to one's experience of present suffering. Of course, the experience of suffering is real and hurtful, but the existence of theosis apart from suffering does not (because of theosis) require meaningful suffering. Rather, the present sufferer can gain maximal meaning through theosis and thereby endure her suffering to the end. I have so far suggested the mutable nature of created being possesses an ontological potential for suffering, which is actualized only in the expression of freely willed desire. Although God, according to the arguments above, created human nature as such, I assert God is blameless. For God, if God willed to create (which creaturely existence suggests God did), then God in creating, was certain to create something—if not

Godself—mutable (existing and thus changeable) and capable of going one way or the other. Nonetheless, as I have contended, God's will for human beings remains divine-human communion, and I have demonstrated this goal is achievable despite evil. And, once again, any notion of mutability or anything else as a cause of suffering should be placed under the broader, objective category of evil as the source of suffering.

As such, in the next chapter, I will explore what I term particular theosis. I understand this aspect of theosis as a type of divine "Plan B," which was "activated" the moment human beings moved away from God. In keeping with cosmic theosis as a "before sin" plan within the mind of God (and the incarnation—according to my interpretation of it—was a manifestation of that reality), "plan" is used very loosely and only as a term of convenience since particular theosis, as a response to sin, was never an aspect of cosmic theosis. Rather, I assert particular theosis, and the plan of redemption it produced, is a response by God prompted by sin. This is not to say I see the incarnation as a response to sin *simpliciter*, but rather, I claim the incarnation was going to happen anyway, and God simply decided to use this fact to demonstrate the reality of theosis and thus bring forth the possibility of divine-human communion. As I discuss particular theosis, I will define my understanding of supralapsarian christology, which extols the incarnation as a "before sin" plan and through it the culmination of cosmic theosis. Assuming Christian rules of redemption, I hope to demonstrate the likelihood of God righting the wrong of sin through particular theosis (especially the incarnation) and reestablishing the primordial desire for cosmic theosis *without* the use of suffering.

From the arguments I make in the upcoming chapter—if one supposes abandonment and hell to be a type and place of suffering for which the incarnation is a response—Chapter 7, concerning Jesus's dereliction on the cross and his descent into hell, follows. Assuming the

dereliction of Jesus and his descent into hell occurred, both are, as I see them, personally and corporately meaningful events. Considering terms outlined in Chapter 4, personal and corporate meaning create a state of affairs where one can be inspired toward good ends, which would still exist outside God's utilization of suffering. These claims of mine further encourage the larger argument of this project that all evil is gratuitous and therefore not utilized or necessitated by God for any greater-good purpose.

5.4. Conclusion

My use of Maximus has set the parameters by which I understand theosis on the cosmic level and how God's goal of it for humanity factors into the existence and experience of evil. Indeed, because of the mutable nature of created being, there exists an ontological potential for suffering. Although God created human nature as such, God cannot be blamed, for God was bound to create something—if not Godself—with a mutable nature capable of going one way or the other. Nonetheless, God's will for human beings remains divine-human communion, and I believe this goal achievable despite evil. Even though one might consider mutability a *simpliciter* cause of suffering, I do not believe this is the case for reasons outlined above. Mutability remains within the objective category of evil for its *potential* to cause suffering even though it is an ontological aspect of what it means to be human created *ex nihilo*.

As such, in the next chapter, I will further explore my notion of particular theosis. This aspect of theosis—in the way I conceive of it—is the divine "Plan B," which was activated the moment human beings sinned, causing suffering. Certainly, "plan" is used very loosely and only as a term of convenience since I firmly believe particular theosis, as a response to sin, was never an aspect of the primordial *telos* for human beings. Rather, particular theosis, and the plan of

redemption it produced, was a response by God prompted by sinful choice, which ultimately resulted in (through humanity's rejection of God) the death of the incarnate Son of God. As I discuss particular theosis, I will cover the necessity of, according to my view, a supralapsarian christology, which extols the incarnation as a "before sin" plan toward the culmination of cosmic theosis. Ultimately, I will demonstrate, because of sin, God redeems humanity via the incarnation so, through particular theosis (or the process of redemption), God is able to right the wrong of sin and reestablish God's primordial desire for cosmic theosis or divine-human communion.

CHAPTER 6

PARTICULAR THEOSIS AND SUPRALAPSARIANISM

6.1. Introduction

Particular theosis, as I use the term, is a postlapsarian divine conditional response to sin and encompasses the entire process of Christian redemption: from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to the individual and corporate actions of Christians. Importantly, as I have said before, the incarnation was going to happen anyway (thus, demonstrating the primordial divine will for theosis), and God, I believe, used this already-going-to-happen event for the redemption of humankind from sin (which, as explained, was a possibility from creation) to bring humanity back into the will of God for theosis. This chapter will explore the details of particular theosis with a supralapsarian (before sin) christological focus. As such, I will explore what I believe is the divine motivation for the incarnation and argue the theandric life of Jesus, given what I have argued in previous chapters, is indicative of theosis. But first, since I discussed in detail the positions of Adams and Stump in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively—contending they misjudgingly placed the enjoyment of divine-human communion at the end of their arguments (and therefore, I believe, as a reward of suffering)—it is appropriate to mention perhaps yet another motivation of theirs for doing so, which is extenuated by their view of the incarnation and its purpose.

It would seem Adams and Stump understand divine-human communion as the reward (and even purpose) of suffering since they conceive of the incarnation as a response to sin *simpliciter*. Thus, they make the incarnation—I believe the greatest representation of divine-human communion, or as they understand it, the greatest good—contingent on sin. In this way, sin (or suffering) causes the incarnation and the possibility of divine-human communion, and it cannot be

otherwise. Adams says she views the incarnation as "conditionally necessary" (2006, p. 188-189). But by this she means, if God did not create humanity, thus necessitating sin because of the metaphysical size gap between humans and God and the internal spirit-body conflict (detailed in Chapter 2), the incarnation would have occurred. But I see this as a distinction without a difference. Given the present world, there is no situation where, according to Adams, humans do not sin. Therefore, the incarnation, if the world contains humans, is always effected by sin. Under these conditions, both sin and the incarnation are in fact necessary and not contingent, the former causing the latter. The following shows this entailment.

1. In any possible world (W_1) where God and humans exists, there is a metaphysical size gap between God and humans in W_1.

2. If there is a metaphysical size gap between God and humans in W_1, then humans will sin in W_1.

3. If humans will sin in W_1 and sin causes the incarnation of the Son of God, then the incarnation is the only valid response to sin.

Therefore, in any possible world where God and humans exists, then the incarnation is the only valid response to sin.

Eleonore Stump likewise endorses an infralapsarian position, contending God is required to incarnate Godself because of sin. Otherwise, God could have intimately communed with non-sinful beings without becoming what they are, which as Stump points out, is already possible for God as evidenced by his relationship with the angels (2018, p. 172). As a Thomist, Stump would likely support Aquinas's position regarding the motivation of the incarnation. Aquinas plainly states the incarnation would not have occurred without sin; although, he makes a distinction between what is necessary in the sense the "end cannot be without it" and when the end is achieved "better and more conveniently" than another way. He places the incarnation with the latter, saying

God could have achieved the salvation of humankind myriad ways. Aquinas is aware of the debate and advises caution but in doing so argues the incarnation was a response to sin, nonetheless.[76]

The contingency of the incarnation on sin is in line with how Adams and Stump understand suffering, the necessary good they believe arises from it, and explains why divine-human communion (displayed by the incarnation) must be reserved for the end of suffering. But if the motivation for the incarnation is understood differently—perhaps demonstrating a free act of divine love not contingent on sin—then the benefits of divine-human communion do not have to be relegated to the end of suffering. Instead, they can be effective during suffering. Although it is important, as I have done here, to enumerate the opinions of Adams and Stump on the motivation for the incarnation and being that the positions of Adams and Stump have been, in my estimation, sufficiently treated in previous chapters, my discussion of their views will end here.

This chapter is divided into eight sections. Section 2 further defines my notion of particular theosis. Section 3 explores my interpretation of the enfleshment (incarnation) of the Son of God. Section 4 brings in concepts such as the immutability and impassibility of God and their relevance to a supralapsarian christology, which I assume. Section 5 shows how the love of God and God's desire to sustain the world as motivations for the incarnation contra sin. Section 6 discusses how the baptism of Jesus is a demonstration of the incarnation as the salvation of the world without the need for suffering. Section 7 explores the position of Athanasius, as I understand it, on the incarnation, and Section 8 concludes.

6.2. Particular Theosis Further Defined

[76] See *Summa Theologiae*, 3 q.1, a. 3.

As said previously, I intend particular theosis as a secondary, lesser "plan" of God, and I argue cosmic theosis is the intention of God for *all* created being before the creation of anything at all. Instead of a response to sin, I see the incarnation as the fulfilment of creation and used as the means of redemption only in an ancillary sense. This line of reasoning supports my earlier argument (see Chapter 4), where I state God does not intend or allow evil so good(s) not otherwise possible might result. Rather, I say God responds to evil not for greater-good ends but for the sake of the primordial divine intention for divine-human communion (cosmic theosis), which the incarnation, in my supralapsarian interpretation of it, is a supreme example. As such, I argue salvation is best understood, in my estimation, as the fulfillment of God's will for all created being into cosmic theosis. Thus, I further contend the achievement of cosmic theosis is the goal of a supralapsarian incarnation.

From an anthropological sense, as I argued in the previous chapter, the inherent being of a person (which is immutable) and the mutable actions or choices made by such a person, sinful or otherwise, set the stage for what my interpretation of the incarnation seeks to redeem—the mutable aspects of a fallen *mode* (or way) of being.

Said otherwise:

1. If *theosis* is the purpose of life, then *theosis* is an overwhelming good.

2. If *theosis* is an overwhelming good, and there is a postlapsarian struggle of the will between a mutable mode of being and the immutableness of the inherent being of a person, then there exist two aspects of the will: one mutable and the other immutable.[77]

3. There is a postlapsarian struggle of the will between a mutable mode of being, and the immutableness of the inherent being of a person.

Therefore, if *theosis* is the purpose of life, then there exist two aspects of the will: one mutable and the other immutable.

[77] Cf. Rm. 7:18-20.

Thus, I argue if one aspect of the will can and in fact does fall, it is evident this aspect of the will is changeable, and in a positive sense, and according to a majority of Christian thought, redeemable toward theosis. Therefore, I also contend my supralapsarian interpretation of the incarnation is an opportunity for Christian redemption and martializes, as an ancillary aspect of its larger goal, for the renewal of the mutable aspects of humanity. If so changed, according to my view, then action and choice (or movement) through particular theosis are placed in alignment with a person's inherent being, the latter expressing actions in line with the divine intention for cosmic theosis or divine human communion. A supralapsarian christology as I interpret it involves (1) a belief in the incarnation as the primordial intention of God before suffering and (2) the conditional nature of the Jesus events (in the incarnation), including Jesus's death and resurrection.

If my preceding claims are true (as I believe they are), the incarnation and resurrection, according to my understanding and application of them, stand as powerful reconstitutions of humankind from death to the limitless heights of immortality. In the upcoming section, I will claim Jesus (the incarnate Son of God) ushered in particular theosis, and this process of redemption brought humanity back within God's primordial intention for cosmic theosis. In seeing the incarnation as a supreme communion of divine and human nature, I claim, on its own, it remains salvific in its accomplishment of cosmic theosis. The cross in this light is not unimportant by any means. Rather, I understand it as taking fallen humanity from its rejection of God (the cross) to God's triumph over death, which is demonstrated by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. I assert these actions result in or are directed toward cosmic theosis.

Before considering the type of human nature assumed by the Son of God, I mention here an important theological side note concerning my use of the infralapsarian/supralapsarian debate, which traditionally centers on the placement of election (and by implication my interpretation of

the incarnation) within the will or decree of God. Customarily, infralapsarianism says the logical order of God's eternal decrees concerning election and the fall (or lapse) of humanity are as follows: God wills creation; God permits the fall; God responds to the fall through election—electing some to salvation and others to damnation *prior* to the creation of the world. A supralapsarian position on the other hand says God wills creation, election, and then permits the fall (again, prior to creation). The key difference between each position, especially for the purposes of my argument, hinges on when election is logically ordered within God's pre-creative will. And importantly, election is concerned with salvation, where some are saved to everlasting life and others are not. Additionally, the cornerstone of salvation is the work and life of Jesus. So the debate hinges on the placement of the incarnation: when and why the incarnation is an aspect of God's overall plan. The incarnation, the vehicle of salvific election, was either a before-the-fall idea in the eternal mind of God—it would have happened no matter what—or it was a response to sin. In other words, infralapsarianism claims the incarnation, understood as God's vehicle of salvation, was logically and eternally ordered "after" the fall and would not have happened were it not for the fall. My understanding and use of supralapsarianism stands in direct contrast to this, stating the incarnation, as I interpret it, would have happened anyway. In other words, the incarnation was within the pre-creative mind of God before the fall and the suffering it caused.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will bypass the finer points of this largely Reformed theological debate and focus only on the divine motivation for the incarnation *simpliciter*. I will take the supralapsarian position and claim the incarnation was not a response to sin: it would have happened anyway. Thus, I assert the sharing of the divine and human natures in the incarnation is a primordial revelation of divine-human communion. In this way, I posit the life of Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, is the salvific medium by which divine-human communion is both displayed

and achieved. Within this framework, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, I argue, demonstrate God's love for humanity in God's willingness to become human, suffer fallen corporeal existence, and reveal Godself to human beings through terrestrial action.

The points considered in this chapter directly relate to issues breached in previous chapters. If the vehicle for salvation (or theosis/divine-human communion) is perfectly mirrored by the incarnation as I understand it, and the incarnation existed, according to my claim of primordial divine intention, prior to sin and suffering, then salvation (cosmic theosis/divine-human communion) cannot be dependent on sin and suffering. Thus, God is not required to use suffering to achieve theosis. Additionally, since suffering is not used by God for the achievement of salvation (theosis), then theosis can be accomplished and experienced within present suffering and serve as a source of comfort therein.

6.3. The Son of God Enfleshed

In this section, I will discuss, according to my interpretation and philosophical use of the Christian tradition, the type of flesh assumed by the Son of God at the incarnation. Many Christians believe Jesus had to assume a flesh like postlapsarian humanity to redeem its accidental property of fallenness, which causes decay of carnal nature, leading to death. If the gospel accounts are accurate, I believe Jesus shared this accidental property of fallenness, which allowed him to experience senescence and finally die. Many Christians would also maintain it is never enough simply to say Jesus experienced humanness in the limited senses of hungering, thirsting, or experiencing sadness. These experiences cannot be had by an uncreated divine nature alone, but according to my understanding of the gospel narratives, Jesus experienced these and more. His death and even his ability to die often causes theologians to claim Jesus knew the human condition

in its absolute fullness, expect sin. Therefore, I argue it is more likely than not Jesus assumed a fallen flesh. I will reflect on the implications of this assumption, considering the divine nature of Jesus as well. Supposing the veracity of the preceding notions, I will finally posit the place of the incarnation within my view of particular theosis and its fulfillment into cosmic theosis. While this has already been touched on in the last section, it is important to see in detail how my view of the incarnation relates to particular and cosmic theosis, especially concerning the viability of divine-human communion within suffering.

The importance of my understanding of the relationship between the human and divine natures of Jesus is evident in the ability of the incarnation to reveal the possibility of theosis for human beings. In the way I see the incarnation, God shows God's ability and willingness to condescend to terrestrial experience, take fallen flesh, and redeem it. For example, according to Christian theology as I understand it, it is through the incarnation (and Jesus's ascension) that humanity can exist in God's heavenly presence in the first place. This, in short, encompasses God's part in my definition of particular theosis: God taking fallen flesh and renewing it for the purpose of divine-human communion.

As I previously argued, sin (as a type of evil) is a moving away from God toward nonexistence. As such, sin is antithetical to human life and God's will for its existence. Not only are actions (and even the ability to act) apparently compromised by sin and a sinful disposition respectively, but one would consider flesh assumed by Jesus in a postlapsarian world to be (more likely than not) capable of sin. By the fact of his divine and human natures working in concert, Christianity argues Jesus remained capable of but always without sin. More so, if one continues to assume this line of argument, Jesus, by the growth and aging of his body, experienced the added consequences of living in a fallen condition, ultimately culminating in death. Jesus was not guilty

of sin, but he (like the rest of humanity) did not (and apparently could not) escape the consequences of a sinful world where creation unnaturally decays.

The way I understand and use the concept of the incarnation to prove my larger philosophical argument about the existence of gratuitous evil is supported by the idea Jesus possessed a fallen, postlapsarian flesh. For if Jesus's flesh is like humanity's in every way, then the combination of divine and human nature in Jesus demonstrates God's will for union with humanity within suffering and its postlapsarian condition. I believe, by bringing divine immutability and human mutability together in the incarnation, human union with God is created and made possible within or without suffering, thus fulfilling the primordial will of God for cosmic theosis.

I will contrast the preceding with what Oliver Crisp calls weak original corruption, which according to him, is one of two ways to interpret the view of original sin and espouses the idea Jesus had an unfallen flesh. This notion is in contrast to my argument Jesus assumed a fallen flesh and was even "liable to passions" because of a postlapsarian environment.[78] By emphasizing both the commonality of Jesus's flesh with humanity's and its redemption, including what I argued above, my claim the fulfillment of the divine will for cosmic theosis is independent of sin and the suffering it causes is bolstered.

First, to better appreciate my claim about Jesus's fallen human nature, a comparison of two views on original sin is in order. From an Eastern Christian theological perspective, the imputed/inherited guilt of original sin is eschewed for a postlapsarian condition, which suffers the

[78] See *Ad. Thal*. 42, CCSG 287. John of Damascus agrees, saying: "Moreover, we confess that he assumed all the natural and blameless passions of man. This is because he assumed the whole man and everything that is his, except sin—for this last is not natural and it was not implanted in us by the Creator." He goes on to say, "Now, these passions are natural and blameless which are not under our control and have come into man's life as a result of the condemnation occasioned by his fall" (*De fide*. 3.20). The passions remain innocent but an aspect of postlapsarian flesh nonetheless, a flesh that, according to John, Jesus assumed.

natural consequences and corruption due to sin and recognizes both a change in the condition and order of creation. This is distinguished from the inherited/imputed guilt view common to Western versions of Christianity (e.g., Catholic and Protestant). While my argument leans toward the former, Oliver Crisp (a Reformed analytical theologian) claims the latter, and a juxtaposition between my view and his reveals the import of my assertion, that Jesus, possessing a fallen, postlapsarian nature, does not (contra Crisp) require sinfulness. Instead, I maintain the sinlessness of Jesus is compatible with his fallen humanness. Additionally, a comparison of each view will focus attention on my claims about God's primordial will for cosmic theosis and how the incarnation, as I see it, is the supralapsarian actualization of cosmic theosis in the reconstitution of human mutableness, making theosis possible for all.

6.3.1 Oliver Crisp and Jesus's Fallen Human Nature

Oliver Crisp first acknowledges imputed guilt (he prefers this to the idea of inherited guilt) is a hard sell, namely because guilt does not easily transfer to an otherwise innocent party. He offers a simple example: suppose Person A steals a watch. Person B offers to pay the fine associated with the crime of Person A. Person A is set free, having his penalty paid by Person B. Nonetheless, Person A remains guilty of the crime even though the fine was paid by Person B. In this case, Crisp shows guilt cannot be transferred to another person even if she agrees to take the other's punishment (2007, p. 99). For this reason, Crisp rejects the idea of imputed guilt and instead defends the notion of "original corruption," which is one aspect of his modified notion of original sin. Original corruption is nothing more than the corruption of human nature resulting from the fall, but his argument hinges on the supposed fact there are two types of original corruption: weak

original corruption and strong original corruption. The former entails corrupt persons who actually sin, while the latter entails corrupt persons who *inevitably* actually sin.

These entailments are so because, as Crisp argues, originally corrupted persons are acting without the assistance of prevenient divine grace, and in such instances, corrupt persons could actually sin (at least once) or inevitably actually sin (at least once) (p. 109). With both types of original corruption, sin will either likely (weak) or definitely (strong) result. So Crisp argues in either case corruption entails at least proneness to sin, which in itself is loathsome to God. Since Jesus, who was sinless, cannot be thought to have assumed a corrupt, prone-to-sin flesh loathsome to God, he maintains Jesus did not assume fallen flesh, one that—in his words—is "morally vitiated" (p. 112).[79]

Lastly, Crisp claims an impeccable divine nature cannot be hypostatically united with a fallen humanness since the latter is sinful and therefore loathsome to God. The only option available to God, argues Crisp—if Jesus's human nature was indeed a fallen one—would be some type of Nestorian union of the divine and human natures so the Word in Jesus "lives a sort of parallel existence to [his human nature]" (p. 113). Of course, this is not possible after the council at Chalcedon (451 CE), so Crisp rejects it.

Since Crisp has excluded the idea of imputed guilt, the only worry concerning my argument remains his interpretation of original corruption. Even if it were the case original corruption could be summed up adequately as either weak or strong in the senses explained above, in relation to Jesus and the Christian theological notion of the hypostatic union, I contend both options incorrectly dismiss the powerful influence of the divine nature as an aspect of that union. Because

[79] This language is reminiscent of Augustine: "We bring with us, at our birth, the beginning of our death, and with the vitiation of our nature our body is the scene of death's assault, or rather of his victory, as the result of that first disobedience" (*Civ*. 13.13).

the divine nature was hypostatically united to a fallen human nature, any propensity to sin present in Jesus's humanness would have conceivably been restrained by the divine nature. As I see it, there is no need to "purify" the humanness of Jesus for the sake of the hypostatic union. In fact, the union itself impowers Jesus's fallen flesh to act in ways consistent with God's will. Said another way and consistent with my understanding of theosis, the humanness of Jesus in union with the preexistent Son of God (again, a perfect picture of cosmic theosis), is able to but does not sin. If Crisp's notions were endorsed, it would seem the incarnation as I interpret it could not stand as an example of theosis—the mutable united with the immutable—and therefore could not be salvific in itself. Rather, something more (perhaps suffering) would be needed to exemplify this reality.

I also contend, in contrast to Crisp, a postlapsarian human nature is *not* loathsome to God. Rather, God's interactions with human beings are more positive than Crisp suggests. By rejecting Crisp's notion of a loathsome human flesh in favor of a fallen human nature assumed by the Son of God, I argue new avenues are opened vis-à-vis God's action and motivation for action, respectively. When speaking of these and other theological issues below, I will use them only as needed to prove my larger philosophical claims.

As such, God's act of creation and incarnation (including how each are related) and God's motivation for each, also broach the important theological doctrines of the immutability and impassibility of God. These topics, discussed below, will further demonstrate my philosophical contention God's will for cosmic theosis (which is maximally meaningful to humans) is available independent of sin and the suffering it causes or any other human action, the reality of which provides, I believe, present sufferers with the best way to endure suffering. Additionally, if theosis is maximally meaningful, then ascribing meaning to suffering seems superfluous. Traditional

theodicies and defenses therefore, in requiring meaningful suffering, show a disregard in my opinion for sufferers who conclude their suffering meaningless and claim such people ill-informed of the will of God for their lives (theosis) and encourage distrust of their ability to correctly perceive the evil they suffer, much less their comprehension of God in relation to meaningless suffering.

Action in the traditional/corporeal sense entails movement from potentiality to actuality and has thus customarily been denied God. Since God cannot be thought to decay or to improve God's essence in any way, then God cannot be said to change from a state of inaction to action. If it is assumed God's motivation for action and God's action in the world can be discerned, then I maintain a greater appreciation for the changes of Jesus's human nature (being *not* loathsome to God) can be had. This will serve to appreciate further the purpose of my claim the incarnation is the fulfillment of cosmic theosis.

6.4. God as *actus purus* and the Incarnation

With my rejection of Crisp's notion of a loathsome human flesh, consideration of the action of God in creation and the incarnation—and God's relation to created being itself, especially in its fallen state—becomes more possible and significant. If Aquinas's notion of God as *actus purus* is assumed, God is free of potentiality and thereby absolute perfection. God's eternality and *purum actum* permits an additional claim: God remains the *active* force within the manifestation of God's will and being demonstrated by the act of creation and incarnation. By exploring this claim, I will show to a greater extent the plausibility of a supralapsarian christology, which is important to my assertion God acts independent of human action, including evil and the suffering it causes. David Bentley Hart summarizes it this way: "God is not a finite subject, whose will could be other than

his being, and so is truly fully himself in all his acts *ad extra*, and the *taxis* of his salvific activity toward us is the same *taxis* that is his triune life" (2003, p. 159). Understood this way, God's act of creation cannot exist within temporal succession—as if there was a time (t_1) when God was resting and another time (t_2) when God was creating—but, as I assert, creation (and the incarnation as its fulfilment) exists as a physical manifestation of intra-trinitarian life (God's being), which is clearest in my interpretation of the incarnation as supralapsarian in nature. Athanasius of Alexandria, as I understand him, also makes a connection between creation and incarnation, both occurring via the Son of God and by the power of the Holy Spirt and showing the act of creation and incarnation as common manifestations of the will and being of God.

> Anyone, beginning with these passages [Jn. 1:1-3, 14; Phil. 2:6-8] and going through the whole of the Scripture upon the interpretation which they suggest, will perceive how in the beginning the Father said to him [the Son of God/Logos], "Let there be light," and "Let there be a firmament," and "Let us make man;" but in fullness of the ages, he sent him [the Son of God] into the world, not that he might judge the world, but that the world by him might be saved, and how it is written "Behold, the Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel," which, being interpreted, is God with us (*C. Ar.* 3.29).

Here, in my philosophical, nonexegetical use of Athanasius, it seems while creation is a manifestation of God's will and being, the incarnation, according to my supralapsarian interpretation, also has its existence in God and manifests God's being to a *greater* degree than creation by itself according to the divine will. This appears evident, since the incarnation comes after creation and is thus, as "the fullness of ages," its fulfillment.

Therefore, I argue the incarnation within the eternal mind/plan of God—eventually fulfilled in Jesus—reveals the fulfillment of God's desire for creation, and God's unification with it, as the proper and perfect manifestation of God's own will and being from eternity. As it is traditionally God who gives life to what would not otherwise have it, I contend God is properly manifested in what displays life or flourishes. Hence, if God is perfect actuality, then my assertion

the act of creation (outside of time) and God's act of incarnation (inside of time) share a common efficient cause in the eternal will and being of God is entailed, which suggests supralapsarian christology as I understand it. If God is not dependent on creation for God's will and being to manifest (but creation is dependent on God), then I argue God's act of incarnation, as an act of the fulfillment of eventual creation through the Son of God, "planned" before time, would have "occurred" before creation and therefore independent of evil or the suffering it causes.

The importance of this idea cannot be overstated. If all things issue from God's will and being independent of human action, and God willed the incarnation in a supralapsarian way as a manifestation of God's being, then the incarnation was prior to sin/evil and the suffering it causes. Therefore, I argue God did not need to use the incarnation as a response to sin/evil since it was already going to happen. Moreover, since the incarnation is the perfect picture of salvation (or divine-human communion/theosis), then this too is not dependent on suffering but exists apart from it and can serve as a source of comfort and endurance for the present sufferer within gratuitous suffering as maximally meaningful. This would also mean justifications for God amid evil, whether one posits divine reasons for evil or claims such reason cannot be known, become unnecessary and perhaps, in some cases, harmful.

I contend God, through the Son of God, both creates and unites with creation via a supralapsarian incarnation as creation's ultimate fulfilment (i.e., cosmic theosis) independent of sin or the suffering it causes. Therefore, cosmic theosis represents the perfect manifestation of the will and being of God without the need for suffering. Hence, I assert there is no way (as far as I can see) for such a grand fulfillment to be contingent on the sinful/evil action of human beings or for created being to be loathsome in God's sight, as Oliver Crisp alleges. For cosmic theosis to be dependent on the contingencies of humanity, and if cosmic theosis is God's will (as I argue), then

this would suggest the divine will is dependent on such contingencies. Since God is traditionally alleged the transcendent source of all that is, and there is therefore no necessity upon God, such a view, in my opinion, should be excluded. What seems loathsome to God is not created being with the accidental property of fallenness but the very destruction of that being, which is the result of sin/evil and the suffering it causes.

In the previous chapter, I argued sin is a movement away from God or one's source of being. Therefore, as I asserted, to suffer is a worldwide consequence (not punishment) of moving away from one's source of being toward nonexistence and a catalyst to creaturely breakdown. If God is the creator of all that exists, then the breakdown of creation is very likely against God's will. Hence, I have defined sin as evil since it is, I believe, against God's will. For this reason, it seems very unlikely also God would utilize suffering, a result of evil, for God's purposes. Assuming my interpretation and use of supralapsarianism and God's immutability, then God's will, the act of creation and the incarnation, are expressive of God's being, and God's being and the act of creation and the incarnation are expressive of God's will, which are entirely independent of human action or any evil/sin and the suffering it causes.[80]

As I stated previously, created being has the potential to move away from or toward God: to decay or flourish. Such potential is impossible for God as an eternal being, while what is actual for God is the proper expression of God's being and the movement of God's will in and through creation to the fulfillment of cosmic theosis. In my supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation, I assert God takes human beingness at its point of decay and in the resurrection and ascension of

[80] Aquinas makes this clear: "[Augustine] call[ed] every operation a movement, even as the acts of understanding, and willing, and loving, are called movements. Therefore, because God understands and loves himself, in that respect they said that God moves himself, not, however, as movement and change belong to a thing existing in potentiality, as we now speak of change and movement (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 9, a. 1, ad. 1).

Jesus manifests it to its highest actuality: correctly (and eternally) manifesting the true will and being of God for humanity through cosmic theosis independent of suffering.

6.5. The Love of God and the Sustainment of Creation

In support of divine immutability and impassibility, Hart remarks, as *actus purus*, God exists transcendently above all contingent reality, including created being. God is not affected either way by the good or bad done by and to human beings: God "both wills the ultimate good of all things and accomplishes that good" even as God "knows the good and evil acts of his creatures" (Hart 2009, p. 316). Considering Hart's claim God exists above all creaturely action (including evil and the suffering it causes), I argue God is not indifferent to creation but is accomplishing the always already reality of God's will for cosmic theosis irrespective of suffering. This is especially clear in my supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation. In other words, God's abstention from worldly affairs (for the sake of God's will and being) supports my contention evil is gratuitous because God is not involved in it for any necessary or instrumental reason, the results of which cannot be had without suffering.

Again, my assertion of the existence of gratuitous evil is helpful to present sufferers who conclude their suffering meaningless because it fully respects the deduction as veridical, avoids divine blame, and thereby maintains divine-human communion (theosis) amid suffering. Furthermore, it is the incarnation, as I understand it, which makes possible and demonstrates theosis in the fully divine, fully human natures of Jesus. The actualization of theosis in Jesus, I allege, is the supralapsarian point of fulfillment of God's primordial will for the realization of theosis. And, if this is true (as I believe it is), then the fulfillment of theosis (divine-human communion) in the incarnation was a before-sin (supralapsarian) plan and exists as a help and

comfort to those within suffering, especially since such suffering is not being used for a greater good not otherwise achievable by God.

In the creative act of God, I believe an expression of love between the divine and created becomes tangible. The fact something exists rather than not is, in my opinion, an affectionate demonstration of God's love, mercy, and presence in the world. Again, the creation of anything at all *ex nihilo* points to an instability in what is created: without an outside influence or source of being, creation would naturally decay into nothingness. So it would seem to me the constant sustainment of creation reveals God's desire for and care of created being without the need to conceive of God as acted upon or influenced by God's creation and its sufferings. I believe the love, mercy, and presence of God are therefore essential to the accomplishing of God's will as a manifestation of God's being (or sustainment) in the world, and no external cause is needed for God to demonstrate such things, which are clearly shown by what has been created and sustained.[81]

My larger philosophical argument is assisted by these important postulations. In a supralapsarian manner, by God's will, God created and willed to unite with creation prior to suffering. Hence, in theosis God is acting according to God's desires independent of human action. The same can be said for my supralapsarian interpretation of the incarnation, which as a perfect picture of theosis, represents the fulfillment of God's will for creation prior to and is not dependent on creaturely action. This declaration of mine separates God and the fulfillment of God's will from suffering, thus demonstrating God's will *simpliciter* is achieved independent of suffering. God becomes then, as I claim, the magnanimous comforter to the sufferer in her moment of pain, a supposition which avoids divine blame, anger against God, or disseverment of divine-human communion.

[81] Cf., Rm. 1:20.

Hart, in continued agreement with the immutable/impassible doctrines, calls God's creative act an "act of self-outpouring love" by which he means, as I have argued, creation is by itself evidence of God's being and love for creation (2009, p. 315). My philosophical rather than exegetical use of Athanasius posits a similar claim: "For God, being good and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by him…for this cause God by his own Word gave the universe the order it has, in order that since he is by nature invisible, men might be enabled to know him at any rate by his works" (*C. gentes* 3.35). Khaled Anatolios suggests a similar conclusion: "For human beings to actually exist, human 'nature' must be radically complemented by the dynamic of 'grace', *charis*, which corresponds to the divine *philanthropia*" (2004, p. 41). He cautions further grace should not be seen as *ad extra* to creation. Rather, grace is inherent in creation, as creation would not be possible if not for the grace of God (p. 42). Creation and its sustainment by grace are palpable evidence of the otherwise invisible reality of God's being. As suggested in the first epistle of John, "God is love," and concerning what I have argued so far, creation and its preservation remain a direct revelation of that love without the need of sin and the suffering it causes. In effect, since creation is a manifestation of God's being and since as a perfect being God would only possess and show perfect love, the only way for God to do so is through love of Godself as an impeccable being existing in perfect loving relationship. By this, I claim God rightly and effortlessly loves creation. In God's love for humankind, the world does not become God. Rather, the world, as I have demonstrated, remains a manifestation of the divine will and being as a conduit of God's love of Godself through the fulfillment of cosmic theosis. In this sense, I add another layer to the notion of cosmic theosis: it is also the fulfillment of the perfect relationship of love between God and created being through God's intimate and immediate communion with it, especially evident through "works," such as my supralapsarian interpretation of the incarnation.

The existence of created being reveals what would otherwise be invisible and much harder to discern: God's loving relationship within the triune nature of Godself. This revelation of God through creation, which expresses the love, mercy, and presence of God available to created being, provides creation with an opportunity for theosis. More than this, if the incarnation (as I claim) is the fulfillment of creation before sin (i.e., cosmic theosis), then it stands as the most supreme revelation of the love, mercy, and presence of God through theosis without the need for suffering. As long as created being exists, such love, mercy and presence is available, and according to Christian tradition, by the fact of the resurrection and hoped for recapitulation of all things (what I consider an aspect cosmic theosis), created being is destined to have an eternal existence.[82] Therefore, I believe the love, mercy, and presence of God is not only available and active among and within created being now, but it will be so forever. Certainly, my contention of the permanence of God's union with created being in cosmic theosis (independent of suffering) cannot help but surely comfort those within suffering and allow them to endure even meaningless evil. Even more so, since the first epistle of John claims God's love is equal to God's being, and I affirm God's perfect love is acted out through what God wills to create, then the love of God and the divine demonstration of that love are dependent only on God's will, not on creatures actively loving God or any evil actions which produce suffering.

I also suggest, even if one were to forsake God, God's love, mercy, and presence would remain with that person by the fact of her existence and sustainment. Since divine love, mercy, and presence are not dependent on humans, I emphasize they are ubiquitously active in and through

[82] Irenaeus describes the recapitulation of all things in the following way: "The Church, though dispersed through…the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: … The resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father 'to gather all things in one,' and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess' to Him…" (*Haer.* 1.10.1).

the world regardless of the affections of particular persons for God. I stress this fact can only further increase the comfort and spiritual security of anyone in the throes of suffering and therefore aid in helping to maintain divine-human communion regardless. This assertion of mine also underscores the helpfulness of the immutability and impassibility doctrines. The claims provided by these doctrines demonstrate God is "everywhere present and fills all things" regardless of human affection toward Godself. Based on what I previously argued, God only creates and sustains what comes from God's will and being, which are eternal and permanent. Therefore, I say again: God wills and accomplishes the eternal existence of anything God creates without the need for suffering.

By the nature of their existence, I believe human beings have proof of a divine *pathos* which is an expression of these affections through divine *action* rather than reaction. If this is so, then my claim of a supralapsarian christology is entailed. As I have argued, since creation comes forth *ex nihilo* from the active being of God (and so is a manifestation of God's will and being), and God's communion with created being is the final and most complete and visible fulfillment of that will and being (theosis), then the incarnation, as I understand it, must issue forth from the eternal being of God as an always already transcendent reality *not* contingent on human action (or sin and the suffering it causes) but that which is fulfilled because God exists and wills created being to manifest God's being as such.

As I interpret it, the incarnation cannot therefore be a response to sin since I argue God does not respond and thereby affectively change according to the (in)action of human beings. According to my argument thus far, if God does not respond to the actions of humans, then the incarnation (the communion of the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus) is not an infralapsarian means for God to rescue humanity from its unintended fall. Rather, it is, I contend,

a supralapsarian and necessary expression of what it means for God to create anything at all, for God's will to be done, and for God's being to be fully and accurately expressed, which is the *telos* of creation (theosis). My larger argument is thus made more evident. Because God fulfills God's will independent of anything, then God's creation and its fulfillment in theosis (demonstrated clearest in my supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation), show suffering is not necessary or instrumental to the accomplishment of God's will, and divine-human communion can enjoy expression and thus meaning in a present sufferer's life regardless of suffering.

And again, the purpose of my larger argument is not to provide a defeat of evil per se. Rather, I wish to offer a way someone can better endure suffering by understanding one's plight not as a necessary means to a divine end, but a vacuous experience of suffering. From here, the present sufferer can build meaning not from suffering but from theosis (divine-human communion). Thus, she can avoid divine blame and maintain her relationship with God within suffering, which is most meaningful—supremely more meaningful than anything provided by suffering. In this way, I admit suffering exists in the world as an unavoidable fact of life. But instead of explaining it away or otherwise justifying it, I contend the experience can be countered by treating it with veracity. If the sufferer concludes her suffering is meaningless—which is, I presume, likely for all people if theodicy and other justifications for evil are avoided as unhelpful and even hurtful—one comforting her can agree with her instead of offering reasons for why she is wrong to think so. Such reasons for suffering have been provided and rejected in chapters 1-4. In this situation, the sufferer now has both an earthly comforter (maybe in the form of a minister or other religious authority) and a heavenly one in God (as divine blame and anger for suffering has been avoided). I believe this is a much better state of affairs and provides the best way to endure suffering.

6.6. The Baptism of Jesus and God's Incarnational Salvation of the World

The incarnation, as I take it, is a visible expression of the intra-trinitarian life of God, which issues forth from God's being and will for the sake of the existence of created being.[83] Many Christians believe something similar is revealed in the baptism of Jesus, which is recorded in the gospel accounts as an audible, physical, and visual demonstration of the Trinity. The Holy Spirt descends on Jesus, and the Father says Jesus is the Father's Son in whom the Father is pleased.[84] According to this account of the incarnation and simultaneous revelation of the Trinity, I assert the act of incarnation is like the act of creation: a trinitarian act, which itself (with creation) is a physical and visible expression of the will and being of God. As I argue, the Son of God assumed fallen human flesh. Hence, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus's dual natures of flesh and divinity and very likely began the work of sanctifying Jesus's flesh from (as I and others within the Christian tradition allege) decaying matter and redirecting it toward renewal, bringing newness of life to it.[85] The Father approves of this work, declaring Jesus as the Word incarnate, performing a pleasing and fruitful work (the incarnation), which is in its very act, as in the beginning of creation, good. "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."[86]

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[83] Kathryn Tanner, in agreement, points out the characteristic roles of the trinitarian persons in the incarnation: "There are clear irreversible relations and roles here maintaining the distinctiveness of the persons: the three are always working together [toward the same purpose] but they do not do so in the same ways. The Father commends the incarnation, the Spirit enacts it, the Son is the one who actually becomes incarnate…. Son and Spirit are both sent by the Father but not in the same fashion; only the Son is incarnate, not the Spirit. The Spirit is the enabling and animating principle of the Son's taking on humanity in Christ, but the Spirit does not have that humanity for its own" (2010, p. 173).

[84] Cf., Matt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22.

[85] This deifying work of the Holy Spirit upon and within the fallen flesh of Jesus started at his baptism and is completed only after the resurrection and ascension.

[86] Isa. 55:11.

I contend creation is similar to the baptism of Jesus: the divine person of the Spirit with its active creative power through the Father's spoken Word (the preexistent Son) brings life from nothing, which was "without form, and void," the darkness of uncreated potential and non-being brought to life by the "hovering" Spirit of life, which gives form to the formless. In the same way, the Spirit descends upon Jesus "in bodily form like a dove" at his baptism, thus demonstrating its power to fill all things with and in created being. In the act of creation, the Spirit serves as the breath of life to all materiality, making way for God's communion with it in the fulfillment of cosmic theosis by way of a supralapsarian incarnation.[87]

If created being is the manifestation of the will and being of God and is thereby an active expression of God's perfect love, mercy, and presence, as I argue, then that same act which calls forth something from nothing, according to God's will, will ensure, regardless of suffering, created being is preserved against decay. For as God is eternal, so will created being exist by the active providence of God forever. Since created being through sin (resulting in suffering/decay) chose nonexistence, it is incumbent on God, I believe, to ensure the reversal of such a dismal state, for God's very will and being require it. In this, there is no necessity placed on God. Rather, God is acting simply according to God's own will and being. Through supralapsarianism, I claim God's will of renewal (cosmic theosis) is palpable in the incarnation and accomplished prior to suffering and thus does not require it for the fulfilment of ends God cannot otherwise achieve, which most theodicies require.

The fulfillment of God's will in this way, as demonstrated by cosmic theosis, reveals the fact, contrary to the opinion of Crisp for example, God, I assert, will rescue and restore not just some or most of created being but all of it in a total and complete recapitulation. I believe God's

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[87] Cf., Gen. 1:2; Lk. 3:22; Gen. 2:7.

prevenient grace is not only for a few but is given liberally to all. Moreover, it is clear God will, according to my argument, indwell and assume created being from its present point of decaying existence, which leads to suffering. To redeem creation, as to create in the first place, requires, in my opinion, real risk on God's part. If God created mutable beings, then it appears God took the risk such beings, able to go the wrong way, would and did. In the incarnation, I believe God also took the risk Jesus, because he assumed a fallen, mutable flesh, could sin. But, according to most of Christianity, by the preexistent Son of God's assumption of the fallen human nature of Jesus, God ensured, based on what I alleged so far, the renewal of that nature. The deification of the humanness of Jesus was not only a work of the Son of God but the Holy Spirit, which was active and powerful in the created life of Jesus.[88]

According to my understanding of the gospels, Jesus suffered through tears and pains of various sorts because his flesh was fallen. He agonized as he actively struggled against its decay and the very pain which resulted from the sanctifying medicine of the Holy Spirit. This power not only sanctified the fallen human nature of Jesus, but, according to my interpretation of the gospel accounts, people were healed and raised from the dead by it. Such are the works of the Spirit of life according to many Christians, and they disclose God's providential care of created being. Even though creation is mutable, as stated previously, God does not, I contend, leave it to itself but infuses and leads it by God's grace and power, which were (and even now are) present at the acts of creation and a supralapsarian incarnation. Thus, I claim creation and the incarnation are vehicles toward fulfillment of cosmic theosis, which according to the supralapsarian argument I made,

[88] "[Jesus] in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb. 5:7-9).

began before the beginning of time. The life and ministry of Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit demonstrated that same initial creative power (the Holy Spirit working through the Son of God in creating the world) and brought forth the possibility of redemption, first in the mutable flesh of Jesus, and then into the world in fulfillment of cosmic theosis: the primordial will of God independent of suffering. From the beginning, God made a way for redemption and divine-human communion, which is the fulfillment of God's will through the power and manifestation of God's being in creation.

According to the preceding claims, and since I view creation and incarnation as acts of God which issue forth from his eternal will and being, a supralapsarian christological view is entailed. In the next section, I will discuss Athanasius's view of the incarnation in the context of my claims about cosmic theosis and the incarnation in a philosophical rather than exegetical manner. Once this is done, I will then be able to explore through a philosophical lens the experience of Jesus on the cross: his abandonment by the Father and his harrowing of hell.

6.7. Athanasius and the Incarnation

Athanasius seems to argue God is likewise motivated to incarnate Godself to bring theosis to fruition. According to my understanding his view, since it was God's will to create humans, it was "improper" and "most absurd" God would fail to attain God's purpose. Thus, God *must* save humans from themselves for the sake of Godself (*Inc*. 6). In this scheme, as said above, God acts in the incarnation from a single will that is simultaneously the fulfillment of the manifestation of God's own being. Thus, my exploration of Athanasius below, while not exhaustive, will serve as a point of reflection on Jesus's experience on the cross and his descent into hell in the next chapter.

6.7.1. Athanasius and the Divine Image Within

If the claims above regarding supralapsarianism are true (as I believe they are), then the forthcoming consideration of Athanasius's writings (limited as it is) shows the import of this notion when separating the incarnation from sin and the suffering it causes. In fact, what I hope will be evident is the salvific nature of a supralapsarian christology apart from suffering. As such, supralapsarianism stands as a demonstration of God's will for divine-human communion regardless of the actions of human beings and the suffering which may result.

To this end, Athanasius appears to endorse the notion human beings along with all things were created *ex nihilo*, and as I also claim, possess a derived and mutable being which depends on God for sustained existence. "From nothing and having absolutely no existence God brought the universe into being. … Seeing that by the principle of its [humanity's] own coming into being it would not be able to endure eternally, he [God] granted them a further gift…giving them a share of the power of his own Word" (*Inc.* 3). Not only does this claim apparently show, as I have argued, the potential of created being to decay, but I believe, on its face, demonstrates humans were granted God's image within themselves with "a share of the power of his own Word." As I understand it, as image bearers of God, human beings were made in the image of the Word of God, the one and only true image of God, and they were given as much of the Word as they could possess without becoming God. Thus, it would seem from the beginning humans were rational beings with some ability, as "image bearers," to commune with God.

The significance of this is seen furthermore in the supralapsarian incarnation of the Word of God according to my interpretation of John's gospel. Not only was "the Word [Son of God]…with God," but "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:1, 14). I assert, when this happened, parallel to most Christian theological traditions, immediately a perfect *human*

image of God existed in the person of Jesus, made of a mutable, passible flesh. In this moment, based on my claims above, human beingness became what it was meant to be in Jesus: the divine-human image of God via theosis. As I have been arguing, created being, through cosmic theosis, was at last, by the incarnation, a mutable flesh which, at least after the resurrection, would not and could not experience decay by leaving its source of being (God) for nonexistence. After the resurrection, moreover, the destruction of created being through sin, which I allege causes suffering and is against the divine intention and God's will for theosis, need not be a point of division between God and humankind. This can only be so—according to previous claims I made regarding creation, the incarnation, and theosis—because in Jesus, as Word and flesh, created being and God are now one. Jesus perfectly existed as the incarnate image of the Father in God's likeness and thereby achieved the purpose for which creation was brought into being: cosmic theosis. In short, by achieving/demonstrating theosis, Jesus was the perfect, living image of God's will for all created being.

> Athanasius, I claim, considers the significance of the miraculous works of Jesus.
>
> > From the works he did through the body he made himself known to be the Son of God [i.e., image of the Father]. Whence he cried out to the unbelieving Jews, saying, 'If I do not do the works of my Father, do not believe me; but if I do, even if you don't believe me, believe my works, that you might know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (*Inc.* 18).

From here, one can see, according to my understanding of Athanasius, not only is Jesus as the Word made flesh the perfect image of the Father—so if one sees him, one sees the Father—but the works he accomplished during his earthly life were on their faces intended to show the significance of this and my claim the incarnate Son of God was a pristine physical picture of theosis. And again, the import of the incarnation as itself one of those works is revealed through its ability, because of the Son of God's enfleshment, to make what is mutable and able to decay prepared instead for

eternity. Athanasius apparently shows how the miracles of Jesus displayed this same divine intention for theosis (both present and future). They not only revealed Jesus as the divine Son of God but also his purpose to renew created being itself so what did not originally exist could live forever.

> For who, seeing him give what was lacking to those whose creation [*genesis*, origin] was deficient and opening the eyes of the one born blind from birth, would not think that the creation [*genesis*, origin] of human beings was subject to him and that he is their Creator and Maker? For he who supplied what the human being did not have from birth [*genesis*, origin] most clearly is he the Lord also of the creation [*genesis*, origin] of human beings (*Inc*. 18).

I included the word "origin" to show, based on an additional translation of *genesis*, to what I think Athanasius refers. He not only seems concerned with the healing of birth defects by Jesus but something more total and ontological. The Son of God, as the means of the world's creation, in the incarnation, appears to, according to my understanding of Athanasius and my claims above, manifest the fulfillment or completion of creation, bringing life and an eternality to an otherwise decayable nature. In this is, I argue, a perfect picture of theosis. The fulfillment of theosis, as I am using Athanasius's quote above, is brought forth by Jesus's performance of miracles and is thus bringing creation from a state of potential (and actual) decline to an eternal communion with the divine, where the created and the Creator are known by one another on an entirely new level of life-giving intimacy and knowledge. Because of the incarnation as I understand it, humanity can now enjoy a new closeness to the Wisdom/Word/Son of God as the Word made flesh. If so, humans can know God in a more intimate way, which is, I contend, the primordially intended and accomplished goal of theosis independent of sin and the suffering it causes. This is effected not only through my supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation and its actualization (and the miracles performed therein) but creation generally as a manifestation of the will and being of God.

In *Contra Gentes* 3.35 above, Athanasius states God gave the universe a certain order so through that order, since God is invisible, humankind might come to know Godself through what is visible. On its face, Athanasius seems to call creation one of the "works" of God. If so, then it is very likely, as I have claimed, one can see the incarnation not simply as an additional work of God alongside creation but creation's actual fulfillment. Therefore, I argue it is one and the same work, a single creative oeuvre of God, which is the manifestation of God's will and being for the purpose of theosis, thereby making Godself known and relatable to created being. From the beginning, if one assumes my argument that creation and the incarnation are a single work of God, then I can further posit both events have the intended purpose of uniting God with created being in the fulfillment of cosmic theosis prior to and from the instant creation came into being. Therefore, only because God first created and then united Godself with creation in the incarnation (as a supralapsarian divine intention) is creation able to exist in intimate divine-human communion forever.

According to my conclusions thus far, it would appear creation is no longer deficient, and everything has been provided for it in God becoming human. Furthermore, if I understand Athanasius correctly, when he says, "For having in ourselves faith, and the kingdom of God [because of the incarnation]," instead of created being existing as something separate from and external to God, it can now—because its source of being is permanently within itself—flourish forever unimpeded by external circumstances (*C. Gentes* 2.30*)*. Of course, a distinction remains between humanity and the divine, but the union concerning the two is so close one can properly be said to be a part of the other. If previous claims I made about the incarnation and my understanding of Athanasius are taken together, through God's remaking of mutable nature by the incarnation and as a result of possessing the kingdom of God within itself, humanity is now

permitted and even directed (as it was in the beginning) to use its nature as a medium of connection with God. While looking within oneself for God was previously the origin of one's falling away from God in idolatry, self-absorption, or misaligned passion, the incarnation, as I understand it, makes possible the inauguration of one's ascent to God. (Importantly, according to most of Christendom, human beings remain strictly dependent on God as their source of being and cannot properly seek God within themselves without help from the divine.) I argue the incarnation stands as the most evident example of this help, and its manifestation appears necessary to one's ability to seek and find the kingdom of God within oneself, thus experiencing theosis.

In other words, I claim, through this intensely close divine-human connection, theosis is established by the incarnation as the fulfillment of creation. Because of the incarnation, cosmic theosis is inaugurated and actualized for humanity. As well, the primordial desire for God's union with humanity is achieved independent of human sin and the suffering it causes and solely motivated by the divine intention for theosis. This state of affairs would provide the present sufferer with a perspective on God and God's will for theosis which would encourage divine-human communion within suffering without getting bogged down with notions of God's use and thus the necessity of evil and the suffering it begets. Theosis then encourages endurance of suffering as one suffers with God, having one's perspective and conclusions about one's suffering respected, and without blaming God, thus threatening the most meaningful reality for human beings (theosis).

If, as I argue, the love of God motivated the incarnation as an act simultaneous to creation, while redemption from sin (particular theosis) remained an ancillary goal to God's chief end of theosis, then the incarnation as I understand it was the fulfillment of creation and thus intended before creation. The incarnation was therefore the manifestation of God to and *with* human beings.

Because of Jesus, humans can be like God, deified partakers of the divine nature.[89] This is an evident demonstration of cosmic theosis and the lived reality of divine-human communion.

As a result of my interpretation of the incarnation, entailing a supralapsarian christology (and according to my understanding and use of Athanasius), God will not leave humanity. A divine humanity remains with a distinction between the two that is "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."[90] In this way, those who suffer can be encouraged God will never leave them, because the incarnate life of the Son of God makes present and eternal divine-human communion possible. Since God always intended cosmic theosis regardless of sin and the suffering it causes, and the incarnation remains the clearest expression of God's active fulfillment of cosmic theosis (all of which I have claimed in this chapter), sufferers can be confident God's will is not dependent on the use of their suffering for any greater good and remains a sure help to them in the midst of their pain.[91]

6.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued divine-human communion, synonymous with God's primordial will of cosmic theosis, shows the incarnation, as I understand it, to be the perfect realization of divine-human communion, which was issued forth from the will and being of God prior to sin and as an aspect of the fulfillment of God's original act of creation. To this end, I claimed Jesus assumed a fallen flesh to reconstitute its mutability and reorient it toward eternal life through the

[89] Cf., 2 Pe. 1:4.

[90] See the Caledonian Definition (451 CE).

[91] Cf. Rev. 13:8: "All who live on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written since the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slaughtered" (NASB). Per this translation, over the New King James Version, salvation takes precedent over the slaughter of the Lamb as that which occurred "since the foundation of the world."

sanctification of the Holy Spirit. An understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus inspired by a supralapsarian christology avoids, in my estimation, the need for suffering for the sake of divine-human communion. As I will show in the next chapter, supralapsarianism invites a conception of suffering, which removes God from the involvement of suffering and enables the sufferer to suffer well by maintaining divine-human communion amid and despite suffering. The incarnation, which I see as the ultimate occurrence of a direct and personal extension of divine desire toward communion with humanity, possesses the fulfillment of cosmic theosis as both its motivation and goal.

CHAPTER 7

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AND THE ENDURANCE OF SUFFERING

7.1. Introduction

If the incarnation is the fulfillment of God's primordial will for cosmic theosis, then I contend the experience of God finds its center in the incarnation as well. In chapters 5 and 6, I argued cosmic theosis—the unification of God and humankind without confusion, itself an experience of God—is the primordial will of God before the existence of sin and the suffering it causes. I also claimed the incarnation, even though it solves the sin problem, did so in an ancillary sense. The reconstitution of human mutability through divine-flesh assumption, thus demonstrating theosis, was its main purpose. I used the mutability problem as a foil to Adams's spirit-body conflict, initially discussed in Chapter 2. Instead of blaming God for the spirit-body conflict (as if God had a choice in *how* God created humanity), I argued if God created anything at all (especially *ex nihilo*), God had to create something mutable. In effect, it was a choice between creating or not, and God desired to create. If one were to blame God for the act of creation, one would, it seems, blame God for existence itself, including oneself. Assuming a love for life, many would find this undesirable. Nonetheless, an eternal humanness (cosmic theosis) through the reconstitution of a mutable human nature was/is the primordial divine goal accomplished exclusively through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

From the claims above, if the purpose of the incarnation, as I understand it, is theosis, then the purpose of the incarnation existed prior to sin and the suffering it causes. As I have argued, the purpose of the incarnation is theosis. So the incarnation existed prior to sin and the suffering it causes. Moreover, if the incarnation, as I understand it, results in theosis, then theosis was willed

by God, preceded creation, and thus occurred despite human (in)action. This argument preserves both the effects of theosis (i.e., the reconstitution of mutability and divine-human communion) and the divine immutability/impassibility doctrines.

As chapters 5 and 6 discussed cosmic theosis as God's primordial will and explored supralapsarian christology (an aspect of particular theosis), respectively, the present chapter continues the discussion on particular theosis with a focus on the individual's experience of God within suffering and how one might seek and find comfort within one's pain and not because of it: such is an experience of theosis, what it means for one to experience God while in union with Godself amid suffering. By separating the experience of God from (but still within) pain, divine blame is avoided and one's greatest source of meaning (God) remains present and able to help in the midst of suffering. By these claims, I contend one (at least the present sufferer) is able to endure suffering in a way superior to typical theodicies or defenses

To this end, Section 2 discusses the cross and examines Jesus's cry of dereliction: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*?" as an important aspect of Jesus's suffering. Mark translates the original Aramaic as, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The phrase is perplexing to say the least and leads one to believe the Father has abandoned the incarnate Son in his greatest hour of need. Nonetheless, I will argue Jesus's cry provides a way of understanding one's personal sense of divine abandonment during suffering while still contending (1) Jesus's (and the sufferer's) perception of abandonment was (is) true and actual and (2) Jesus (and the sufferer) was (is) never abandoned. This contradictory set of propositions will be explained in Section 2 by applying my concepts of personal and divine meaning(lessness), which I introduced in Chapter 4. Section 2 will also show how a personal awareness of theosis can be achieved in suffering without such suffering being divinely necessary and instrumental to its achievement. One's awareness of theosis, I argue,

is one's realization of God's presence and action in one's life regardless of suffering. I maintain it remains an "as much as humanly possible" experience of the divine energies of God, for example, through the various sacraments of the church worldwide and its theological traditions and can be experienced in varying degrees. However, God's common and active grace, as claimed in the last chapter, is everywhere present and available in God's sustainment of creation. This does not exclude the fact that the personal awareness of theosis can be achieved in suffering or without it, and its achievement through suffering is neither logically necessary nor divinely preferred even though one might argue many people achieve personal awareness of theosis through suffering. Nevertheless, based on what I have previously argued, God, as far as I can tell, seems to desire the personal awareness of theosis through virtuous living (leading to theosis) regardless of suffering.

Before discussing the importance of the virtuous life, Section 3 will juxtapose the cry of dereliction with Jesus's descent into hell. When compared, these events in the life of Jesus, I argue, shed light on the importance of personal meaninglessness and meaningfulness, the place each has within God's primordial will, and how they are experienced in one's life. Section 4 will discuss the endurance of present suffering through acts of virtue as exemplified by my understanding of Gregory of Nyssa's *De perfectione*. For the purposes of my larger philosophical argument, this is the only treatise of Gregory's I will consider. Additionally, like Maximus, I will use Gregory's work for my own philosophical (nonexegetical) ends. Gregory's work provides a virtuous pathway to the personal awareness of theosis, and the key difference between it and suffering remains God's desire for the way of virtue (within particular theosis) over against suffering.

Nonetheless, I believe the awareness of theosis, even via acts of virtue, is no guarantee of the perseverance of suffering, and this project makes no such assurances. My point is only God is not blamed for one's suffering because God is not instrumentally or necessarily using it for ends

God cannot otherwise achieve. Thus, divine-human communion can be maintained within suffering. The examples may be innumerable of people who do not blame God for their suffering because they believe God is not using it for ends God cannot achieve otherwise but cannot, to no fault of their own, endure the anguish of their suffering. One glaring instance of this is the suffering of suicide: the ending of one's life for the purpose of relief from suffering. I use the phrase "suffering of suicide" because, although the sufferer's life has ended and experiences no more pain, what led up to it—whether mental anguish or otherwise—is a severe type of suffering, extreme enough one feels one can bear it no longer. Additionally, loved ones of the sufferer remain broken and hurt and must endure their own suffering as a result. Section 5 concludes.

7.2. The Cry of Dereliction

The cry of Jesus from the cross before his death is bone-chilling. It appears the incarnate Son of God, abandoned by the Father and forsaken by his closest friends—in an excruciating moment of pain beyond expression as his body slowly suffocates—is left alone to die. To sense a loss of theosis in this moment, which Jesus seems to have experienced, would be in many ways soul crushing, perhaps worse than the pain of dying, and even an impetus to despair of life itself.[92] In this section, I will explore the meaning of the cry of dereliction within the parameters of my larger philosophical argument, especially the experience of Jesus's suffering and what it might mean for the *here* and *now* suffering of gratuitous evil and its endurance.

Before discussing in greater detail Jesus's experience on the cross and his descent into hades, concepts like *kenosis* (self-emptying) or vindication, which are traditionally (as to the

[92] I am not here endorsing the idea Jesus's death was a form of suicide, as D. R. Cooley does, but only suggesting the events that resulted in Jesus's being on the cross, evidenced by the cry of dereliction, brought him to a place where he, more likely than not, despaired of life. See Cooley 2020.

former) applied to Jesus on the cross and (as to the latter) Jesus after the cross, deserve mention. These terms mean to express the idea, in accord with the Father's will, Jesus humbled (i.e., emptied) himself to the point of death on a cross, and in the resurrection, was vindicated by the Father from his former humiliation.[93] In this way, Jesus's humiliation/kenosis and glorification/vindication are considered inseparable parts of God's will for the salvation of humankind.

While I do not explicitly use or apply kenosis or vindication in their traditional senses to my philosophical argument, nor do I think it necessary to do so, I believe it worth mentioning how one could use them within the context of my philosophical claim regarding God's abstention from evil and its gratuitousness, especially since terms such as kenosis and vindication are customarily thought valuable within consideration of the cross. Thus, I believe a jettisoning of these theological terms can be avoided and my philosophical argument upheld.

For example, one could use kenosis within my argument as an umbrella term to include: (1) my use and interpretation of the incarnation as an aspect of God's will, (2) the crucifixion as humanity's rejection of God (and therefore, it would seem, against God's will), and (3) Jesus's descent/ascent to/from hades, which I say is within God's will. Additionally, as I see it, the descent/ascent to/from hades, which Jesus experiences at some point before his resurrection, can be considered a type of glorification of Jesus as he overthrows hell. In this way, while the application is different, kenosis and vindication (if one cannot part with the terms) can be preserved within my larger argument.

Nonetheless, in the forthcoming, I will use Fleming Rutledge's understanding of the cry of dereliction to draw forth my claims regarding the same. Rutledge says "there can be no honest

[93] Phil. 2:6-8; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; Jn. 17:1

interpretation" of the cross without consideration of the cry of dereliction (p. 97). She also quotes John Weightman who says, given the cry of dereliction, "Jesus himself was a near-Absurdist," by which he means (according to Rutledge) Jesus at least in his humanness and in *that* moment concluded life was meaningless or absurd (p. 97). Ultimately though, Rutledge maintains something close to the majority opinion among Christians that the abandonment of the incarnate Son was no monstrous forsaking by the Father but a willingness on the part of all Persons of the Trinity (the Son included) for the Son to be abandoned. In other words, the abandonment of the incarnate Son by the Father was real *and* in accordance with the will of all Persons of the Trinity for the sake of the redemption of humanity—that somehow, in a mystical way, the entirety of the world's sin was placed upon the damaged and weak shoulders of Jesus, almost as salt on a festering wound (p. 100). It remains the gravity of sin, the disgust of it, and its resulting corruption which, according to Rutledge, forces God to conquer sin *through* the Son and his abandonment. The abandonment is required for nothing other than the seriousness of sin by which Rutledge believes the cross redeems humanity (p. 292).

Rutledge also considers Jesus's descent into hell after his death on the cross. She sees the descent as a type of abandonment of the Father by the incarnate Son. By going into the depths of hades, a place *without God*, Jesus enters the fullness of his kenosis, and experiencing abandonment by the Father on the cross, *willingly* "separates" himself from the Father in his descent (p. 407). The descent is in stark opposition to the cry of dereliction, for it is here Jesus "forsakes" the Father.

As will be clear, I disagree with Rutledge concerning her first argument, that the abandonment of Jesus was the will of the Trinity and in this sense (as I take it) an aspect of the primordial will of God. But on the second point, that Jesus's descent into hades represented a willingness on the part of the Son to forsake the Father, I agree and will develop below. But first,

when I apply words such as "separation" or "forsakenness" to these Jesus-events as I understand them, they should not be considered in their literal senses but rather as terms of convenience in attempting to explain otherwise dense matters of theology for my own philosophical ends. While I think Jesus's experience of suffering on the cross and his overcoming/enduring it in the descent have both theological and philosophical import, I will apply the events in a philosophical way according to terms defined in Chapter 4, such as personal meaning(lessness).

Regarding Rutledge's first point, I believe the cry of dereliction, far from expressing the will of all Persons of the Trinity (especially in a primordial sense and considering my larger argument), was the result of a gruesome rejection of the incarnate Son of God by human beings. By seeing the cry as the *result* of human rejection of God, it does not require, I argue, consistency with God's will. Theologically, if both the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures are true (as I believe they are) and taken literally, human rejection of divine-human communion is against God's will (Eze. 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9). Jesus's cry, without parallel, demonstrates God (as the incarnate Son) truly suffered, and it would seem divine-human communion in that moment was broken. The cross was an instrument of death devised for a purposefully excruciating and slow demise of the brokenness of divine-human communion.

7.2.1. My Argument of Personal Meaninglessness Applied

Jesus's cry reminds me of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus pleads with the Father—sweating anguished drops of blood—to allow death on a cross to pass from him (Luke 22:41). But while nailed to the cross, experiencing the death he pleaded to escape, he experiences what I believe is a human perceptual loss of God's presence. Due to extreme and incomprehensible suffering, Jesus could not, with body, mind, and heart (his whole self), appreciate or experience

theosis. In this sense, God perceptually left Jesus, and Jesus naturally cries to the Father, just like he pleaded with God in the garden. I suggest, in this moment, Jesus is ready to die and perhaps *wants* to die: what other response could he have, ripped from communion with the Father, a relationship which sustained him from the beginning? Surely the emptiness and meaninglessness Jesus felt was vast. From this suggestion, I claim this experience (for Jesus and analogously for the present sufferer) *was* meaningless. Jesus's experience is nothing more than the horror of what I called personal meaninglessness in Chapter 4, a gratuitousness that is concluded by the sufferer *within* suffering that is deep, abiding, and the antinomy of personal meaningfulness (also discussed in Chapter 4).

Jesus's abandonment, I argue, is similarly gratuitous precisely because God is absent, not utilizing Jesus's suffering on the cross for any grander purpose. So Jesus, like the rest of humanity, had the opportunity to find a personal meaningfulness in suffering through what I called, in Chapter 4, inspiration, which does not involve God in suffering and is *not* contrary to God's will. This form of inspiration will be discussed below through the lens of Jesus's descent into hades.

While the Lukan narrative above recounts Jesus sweated drops of blood, the cause of this anguish seems to be Jesus's submission to God's will (Lk. 22:42). While this is traditionally taken to mean the cross was God's will, and Jesus had to take it, I contend merely because something is permitted (in this case, the forsakenness of Jesus on the cross) does not entail it is the will of God. Rather, as I understand it, God's will for theosis with Jesus outweighed what Jesus suffered. So Jesus's suffering before and during the cross were *permitted* and not willed by God. Allowing for creaturely free will, which results in both suffering and good, is one aspect of divine permission over divine will. Humans might not always act consistent with the divine will for theosis (divine permission), but theosis will be accomplished still (divine will).

I argue the hopelessness as seen in Jesus's abandonment on the cross is an *apparent* divine forsakenness that in one's moment of greatest pain and tragedy God is nowhere to be found. This statement does not require the sufferer who feels forsaken by God to be fooled into thinking so (thus suggesting the same problem entailed by a limited epistemic condition, which I rejected in Chapter 1). One may *feel* forsaken by God but *know* one is not. Both epistemological realities share a commonality with Eleonore Stump's "Franciscan knowledge," which does not rely on knowledge *that* but is informed by experience and steps beyond the limits of language and rational thought (see Chapter 3). What I am contending (which will be discussed below) is two types of experiential knowledge where one is true and the other false. This allows a knowledge which is beyond human experience alone, lifting it into divine life where apophatic antinomies are the norm. A further response will be detailed below but first I will demonstrate the difference between personal and divine meaning*less*ness (the former being introduced in Chapter 4).

7.2.2. Personal vs. Divine Meaninglessness

Personal meaninglessness is different than and should not be confused with divine meaninglessness, the latter being, I believe, incongruent. I will consider the incongruency first. To say something is divinely meaningless is to say God wills meaninglessness. But if something is meaningless (as I use the word within this project), it lacks God's necessary and instrumental involvement (whatever it is) and must therefore, I argue, be against God's will. That which is *not* God's will cannot simultaneously *be* God's will. Additionally, as I have argued, if suffering is similarly meaningless, it too must be against God's will, God remaining the source and sustainment (not the destruction) of being. Instead, I believe God wishes to unite with created being in theosis, which is divinely meaningful and cannot be meaningless in any way whatsoever.

In short, meaninglessness of any kind must be placed on a personal or mutable level, not a divine, immutable one. Personal meaninglessness occurs on the personal level, is a personal conclusion of circumstance/suffering, and is *true* for *that* person in *that* moment. Sufferers can feel forsaken by God—as Jesus did on the cross—and personal meaninglessness, due to extreme pain, can prevent one from experiencing God even when God is present. But what is most important in this case is the *personal* (not divine) nature of personal meaninglessness.[94]

Even though one might argue personal meaninglessness (compared with divine meaning) is nothing more than the epistemic distrust of the sufferer rehashed, which I have argued against from the start, this is not the case. Rather, as I defined both personal meaning*ful*ness and meaning*less*ness in Chapter 4, so I define personal meaning*less*ness here: it remains personal and therefore separate from the divine will. Any bad resulting from suffering, including one's interpretation of it as a bad event(s) (i.e., as personally meaningless), just as any good resulting from suffering, including one's interpretation of it as a good event(s) (i.e., as personally meaningful, what I also call inspiration), remains apart from the divine will and solely the conclusion of the sufferer. And, in both cases, the experience and conclusion of the sufferer should be respected and considered veridical.

In most situations, I believe human beings, because of their cognitive limitations—even while I consider such limitations are well-informed concerning, for example, personal experiences of suffering—will experience personal meaninglessness different from Jesus (assuming Jesus knew more than the average person).[95] But this does not change the fact personal meaninglessness suffered by Jesus and humans alike is indeed against God's will. Suffering and the personal

[94] Later in this chapter, I will consider one's ability to appreciate the reality of theosis within suffering, which is a type of vindication and conquering of suffering even during it.

[95] See Jn. 1:48.

meaninglessness which results need not happen in any divinely necessary or instrumental way. But God, as I contend, still cares for and helps the sufferer because human suffering is an actualized condition for which God must be a part (through the incarnation via particular theosis) if God is to accomplish the divine will for cosmic theosis. God is involved in suffering, consistent with what I have argued up to this point, only to the extent God unites with humanity and reconstitutes it according to my interpretation of the incarnation. I argue cosmic theosis involves God only as a presence in suffering, not an orchestrator of it.

7.2.3. Gratuitous Suffering and Theosis Simultaneously Experienced

At least in the case of Jesus, because of his divine and human natures, I contend he concurrently understood his experience of personal meaninglessness on the cross as truly meaningless and thus soul-crushing *and* as temporary and soon to be overcome. This fact is suggested when considering Psalm 22 in its entirety, the psalm from which the cry of dereliction is taken. The psalm itself appears as a testament to the possibility of one's faith despite what I would take as a personally meaningless situation like Jesus's. The same faith can, but is not required to be (at least in all cases all the time), available to the present sufferer in an experience of personally meaningless suffering.[96] Such an experience and the possibility of transforming it into a type of personal meaningfulness, is rooted, I believe, in the reality of theosis, which is present in the incarnation and solves the problem of personal meaninglessness by providing *divine* meaning. Even in such a state, one's circumstances and conclusions about them, whether they be personally meaningless or not, can be considered true on the level of personal (actual) experience. Therefore, I claim one's epistemic condition is not distrusted but validated because God does not will one's suffering even

[96] Importantly, the truth or availability of such faith does *not* necessitate a "faith experience" helpful in suffering.

as God desires, through theosis, to alleviate it. According to my argument, God is accomplishing God's will for cosmic theosis independent of meaningless suffering, including that of Jesus and the present sufferer.

Hence, one is left with an experience of actual gratuitous suffering *and* the existence of divine meaning (i.e., theosis), a meaning which remains present regardless of suffering. And I claim both can exist together, side by side, while not commingling. But, at this point, it is necessary first to reiterate the conclusion reached in Chapter 4, namely, gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world in such a way one's personal and present experience of it does not affect one's ability to endure it. This is because of theosis (as ultimately meaningful), which is present with the sufferer regardless and not because of her present suffering.

I should also like to recall the demarcations made in Chapter 1 between intellectual and existential responses to evil. From the beginning, I have been concerned with the existential aspects of evil: one's experience of and ability to endure it. As such, the principal aim has been to construct a more likely than not response to present suffering where the present sufferer might conclude her suffering meaningless. I would agree her suffering, in the present moment, is meaningless, thereby respecting the sufferer's perspective as veridical, and avoiding the potential for divine blame by maintaining God does not use suffering in any way whatsoever. Additionally, the reality of cosmic theosis and supralapsarianism (chapters 5 and 6) outline a possible (but not exclusive) theological conclusion to this philosophical problem. In both the reality of cosmic theosis and supralapsarianism, God's will for theosis despite suffering is revealed. As ultimately meaningful in most (if not all) of Christendom, theosis (divine-human communion) stands as ultimately meaningful for the present sufferer regardless of suffering. In other words, suffering is not required to effect theosis as the most meaningful experience of God.

This is in direct contrast to the arguments of Adams and Stump detailed in chapters 2 and 3. Both philosophical theologians wish to make suffering meaningful by blending it with the divine will for theosis. In contrast, because of what I have argued so far about the incarnation and theosis, an experience of actual gratuitous suffering with the simultaneous and unmingled truth of theosis (i.e., divine meaning) is possible. Meaningful suffering is not needed for divine meaning (and vice versa) to be present and available for the sufferer. One can experience gratuitous evil, personally conclude it as such, and still experience divine meaning through theosis. Here too is where Stump's notion of Franciscan knowledge is helpful. Through the concomitant but unmingled experiences of suffering and divine meaning (or cosmic theosis and its fulfilment), one is confronted with gratuitous suffering *and* the presence of God in a manner which allows one to experience *both* realities fully. The latter truth encourages one to endure the painfulness of the former, and this is all the truer when God is not involved in suffering or blamed for it, as I claim.

I have thus argued, as an experience of personal meaninglessness, the cry of dereliction presents an anguished example of true and utter forsakenness and despair. The rest of Psalm 22 shows the "ultimate" reality—that God hears God's children—but does not in the least deny the truth of Jesus's statement in Psalm 22:1. Per my contention, on the personal level, Jesus's feeling of forsakenness was total and true even while theosis (on the divine level) remained present and meaningful. The cry of dereliction, as I have articulated, demonstrates humans can lack awareness of theosis (depending on circumstances) and thereby not always enjoy its benefits, making theosis appear absent even while the divine will for it remains true and active; the achievement of theosis as the primordial will of God will be accomplished regardless. But suffering may be so intense one cannot comprehend God (and so one is "forsaken" by God). Or one is so powerfully broken that strength for a virtuous life remains improbable. It would seem, according to my claims, Jesus's

suffering on the cross, and his cry of forsakenness, is a loss of awareness of theosis.[97] God did not "leave God," but in his suffering, Jesus "lost" sight of the Father (or theosis). With the last bit of his remining strength, wondering where the Father had gone—the one he knew from his mother's breasts and even from all eternity—Jesus cries to him: "Father, where are you?" I conclude this a true feeling of forsakenness on a personal level. But from the divine perspective, Jesus remained vindicated and his forsakenness by the Father only true for him in *that* moment. As I have said, Jesus's suffering is against God's will, but God remains with him, and his vindication is certain. But on the personal level, Jesus felt forsaken and *was* forsaken. I believe no other conclusion is possible, unless one argues Jesus spoke falsely or was confused.

As I have shown, the personal experience of gratuitous evil and the sure accomplishment of cosmic theosis can exist together without blending, resulting in situations similar to Jesus's experience on the cross. For this reason, many have used his experience to move through and beyond their suffering. My only contention is suffering (whatever it is) is meaningless, and cosmic theosis retains *all* meaning, regardless of circumstance or one's ability to rise above one's suffering to comprehend such meaning. Therefore, there is no need, given my arguments, to devise justifications for evil to make suffering meaningful. There are clear times when one might not share an awareness of theosis due to extrinsic factors (e.g., extreme emotional upheavals such as major depression or bipolar disorder, the suffering of suicide, infidelity, divorce, etc.). Examples are multiple and varied as persons on the earth because, as Marilyn Adams points out, what might crush one, another can endure. This is no fault to the sufferer, but only a fact of the variations of life and the suffering of evil they bring.

[97] Virtue is not entirely absent from Jesus's experience on the cross. One may be inclined (as I am) to think Jesus's forgiveness of his tormentors while on the cross a type of virtuous behavior.

Simply because a sufferer, due to extreme suffering, cannot see the meaningful aspects of theosis for a time, does not invalidate theosis as a source of meaning for the present sufferer, nor does it require meaningful suffering. Even within suffering where an awareness of theosis is absent, one might engage in personally meaningful rituals, such as: liturgical services, prayer, the veneration of icons, or giving to those in need. These actions are typically aimed at increasing awareness of theosis and can be engage despite suffering. See Chapter 4 for greater detail on the practices of prayer and the veneration of icons within Eastern Christian practice.

One might recall, again in Chapter 4, where I argued personal meaning from gratuitous suffering was possible. Various ways were presented, and the inability to find any meaning whatsoever in suffering was discussed. I suggested the first place for the present sufferer to start, especially for suffering traumatic, to the point of irreconcilable, cognitive difficulties (or whatever the issue may be), might be a trusted friend, therapist, or priest. Afterwards, one can decide, according to my definition of inspiration, to view one's suffering in a positive or negative way (or personally meaningful or meaningless, respectively). A further example: say a man loves his wife deeply, so much so he never stops thinking about her. And each time he thinks of her, he wells up with joy. This same man is invited to go on a fishing trip with one of his friends. He has never been on a boat before, but he figures with a life vest he will be fine. After all, he wants to protect himself so he can keep thinking about his wife. Not thirty-minutes into the boat ride, the man becomes extremely seasick. He has never been this sick or felt these feelings in his life. He is sure he is going to die. His friend tells him to look at the horizon, and he will feel better in time. His misery is so bad he—for the first time in his life—stops thinking about his wife. The only thing he can think about is how sick he feels. While the latter example is with tongue in cheek, it suggests how something most meaningful to another, given very extreme circumstances, can fade from

conscious awareness. Therefore, it would seem nothing is immune from the horror of meaningless evil, and one might need additional help before being able to appreciate the reality of divine-human communion.

In the same way, while human knowledge may lack to a specific degree the certainty Jesus had of his coming vindication, the cry of dereliction is a direct example of exacerbated suffering revealing a moment in time where Jesus, sharing all things in common with humans except sin, becomes desirous of death, motivated by the proverbial final straw: a lack of presence with the Father (or awareness of theosis). Even if one argues Jesus was well-aware of the vindication to come and knew it to be true, it seems reasonable to assume he did *not* and could *not* care. His mind was, I surmise, completely preoccupied with the suffering at hand even to the point of desiring death, a wish to end the wretched experience altogether. If so, it would seem to *wish* for death, the expiration of what God formed, in the strict sense as argued above, is *not* sinful but rather a symptom of extreme suffering, the end point of what is possible for a mutable being to bear and what Jesus came to redeem.[98]

As I have articulated, Jesus's cry from the cross shows the dual experiences of personal meaninglessness and theosis simultaneously and without blending. Jesus did *feel* forsaken by God and concurrently *knew* the Father would vindicate him. But this did not spare him from the depths of sorrow and hopelessness. For Jesus to feel truly forsaken by God, at least in *that* moment, his situation must have been justly hopeless. Jesus underwent an experience of personal meaninglessness, and as a result, very likely despaired of life and wanted to die. He is, it would

[98] Job says, "May the day perish on which I was born," and Paul echoes something similar when he says, "We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life" (Job 3:3; 2 Cor. 1:8).

seem, granted his request after crying out to God. “Jesus cried out [again] with a loud voice, and breathed his last” (Mark 15:37).

The burden Jesus carried, according to the gospels, was heavy. During his ministry, (not including his crucifixion) Jesus became frustrated at the slowness of belief, wept, expressed anger and annoyance, extended compassion to the sick and hungry, and experienced agony at humanity’s response to his purpose. At the instant of his death (which was personally meaningless for Jesus), the tearing of the curtain, the earthquake, and the blackness of the sky, I argue, show God’s vindication of Jesus. In this moment, personal meaninglessness gives way to the divine will; theosis is actualized (although not fully), and humanity because of Jesus begins its rebirth as a renewed being made in the image and likeness of God.

Before theosis can be fully actualized, Jesus—not yet resurrected—must, according to wider Christian tradition, descend into hell. At the descent, it seems the roles are reversed between the incarnate Son of God and God the Father. Instead of the Father "abandoning” the Son, resulting in personal meaninglessness for Jesus, the Son now “abandons” the Father into hades. The cry of dereliction shows the incarnate Son experienced personal meaninglessness as an aspect of suffering. But it is his descent into hades that turns the tables. Instead of feeling the intense agony of the absence of the Father, Jesus (vindicated by the Father) “forsakes” the Father for hell’s redemption. In this way, I argue a picture of personal meaning*ful*ness is created which grants Jesus and those he redeems a personal meaningfulness *within* their suffering, uniting them with the divine meaning of theosis *despite* their suffering. Thus, I contend what is at first only personally meaningful for Jesus (the tearing of the curtain, etc.) becomes divinely so for everyone as Jesus empties hell in his quest to establish cosmic theosis. In this, I believe personal meaningfulness and divine meaning are brought together and shine the light of God’s presence in the darkness of the

underworld. In a sense, therefore, Jesus completes in total his intention of heralding the kingdom of God to all people, including those in hell. In the descent, I think the human and divine natures are present in Jesus to the degree God is in a way present in hell, and in his ascent to heaven (as he "passed through the heavens"), Jesus brings humanness into God's presence, providing a way for humanity to approach God in time of need (Heb. 4:14-16). I argue both actions reveal and establish the divine will for cosmic theosis from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven.

7.3. The Descent into Hell

In light of the previous section, and with death finally and mercifully overcoming Jesus's mutable body, another event—Jesus's descent into hades—will now be considered. This event takes the personal meaninglessness (as defined in Chapter 4) of Jesus's cry on the cross, and I claim, creates an opportunity for personal meaning*ful*ness (also defined in Chapter 4) as Jesus actively takes part in the redemption of humankind through his raiding of the underworld. He—not God the Father—is the one who enters hades and depletes the devil and his demons of their powers. Jesus goes to a place that is "*without* God" and establishes the will of God: the redemption of all. And I believe it is this singular action and willingness on the part of the incarnate Son which gives his venture into hell its personal meaning for Jesus. Since this early Christian belief in Jesus's descent into hades (found in the New Testament and later Christian writings) has the redemption of humankind (or theosis) at its heart, I contend it represents a clear combination of personal meaningfulness on the part of Jesus and the fulfillment of cosmic theosis on the part of the Father. To bring together personal meaningfulness and theosis, while not always possible or necessary, I believe represents how one might suffer well amid pain. While, as I have argued, personal meaninglessness is never an aspect of the will of God and remains always separate from the fulfillment of cosmic theosis,

personal meaningfulness is different. While not necessary to cosmic theosis and extrinsic to suffering and any divine meaning, it remains the case, according to my argument, that personal meaningfulness can nonetheless result from suffering, leading to inspiration, self-understanding, compassion/altruism, and other aspects of personal growth.

So it seems helpful to consider how these positive aspects of human growth might be integrated into divine meaning but still and always remain unnecessary to it. Of course, this does not include the suffering of pain for which personal meaning is indiscernible and even impossible. But, according to my contention, it does remind the sufferer (especially without divine blame) that even during personally meaningless pain there remains the always meaningful existence of cosmic theosis, which is forever separate from one's suffering and one's ability to achieve personal meaning from it. Stump's advocation for the desires of the heart (discussed in Chapter 3) is like this except she makes the fulfillment of the desires of one's heart (personal meaningfulness) a necessity for divine-human communion. I instead maintain they are extrinsic to it.

Jesus is traditionally understood as the first fruits of a redeemed humanity previously dead and now experiencing resurrection with him (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). More directly, the writer of Matthew reports at the death of Jesus many saints resurrected from their tombs and appeared to others in the city (Matt. 27:52-53). Once the mutable body of Jesus expired and was laid in the tomb he was, as I understand it, in hades (even in "prison," a place reserved for the wicked) preaching to the dead for the sake of their postmortem conversion.[99] In this way, people (the righteous and wicked alike) were apparently given a second chance at salvation (or theosis): "For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" (1 Peter 4:6). In this context, Hilarion

[99] See Eph. 4:9; 1 Peter 3:18-21.

Alfeyev says those before Jesus's advent "did not perish eternally" but were given "another chance of salvation by the preaching to them the Gospel of the kingdom so they might live 'according to God in the spirit'" (2009, p. 19).

Taking the above in a philosophical, nonexegetical, way, I claim Jesus's death is salvific only in what it allowed him to accomplish. Jesus descends and preaches to those in the underworld, a world ruled by dark forces, which are nevertheless powerless to hold human beings from deification (theosis) through Jesus. As I understand it, the descent and the preaching to those in hades are actions on the part of Jesus which can for him demonstrate personally meaningful outcomes to his suffering on the cross. Of course, one cannot enter into the mind of Jesus to confirm this presupposition, but the order of events suggests the hypothesis. The tradition (from the second century) of Jesus's descent into hell sees it not as a defeat of Jesus by the devil but rather a willing "storming of hell"; Jesus is a victor over hades, the devil, and his demons (Alfeyev, 2009, p. 30, 34). His action is clearly personal and meaningful as he willingly brings redemption to those who would not otherwise experience it.

The "I" statements used in the second century poem below, regarding Jesus's descent, show he is the one performing the work of harrowing hell. Hence, I claim, based on the differentiation I make between personal and divine meaning, the action was personal to him, as the Son, and not by necessity an aspect of the primordial will of God (although, I believe it was). Rather, the descent was a personally meaningful action on the part of the Son for the benefit of humankind within the framework of particular theosis. But, as I have said (and in this case I believe it true), personal meaning can, but does not have to, converge with divine meaning. Thus, since God's will is, as I assume from the biblical witness, all human beings not parish, then personally meaningful actions which bring this about (i.e., the harrowing of hell) are aligned with God's will.

> The Lord, when he had clothed himself with man…
> arose from the dead and uttered this cry:
> "…I am the one that destroyed death
> and triumphed over the enemy
> and trod down Hades
> and bound the strong one
> I carried off man to the heights of heaven;
> I am the one," says the Christ (Alfeyev, 2009, p. 35).

According to the terms defined in Chapter 4, while the cry of dereliction represents an aspect of personal meaninglessness for Jesus as he wished for death, the descent into hades stands as a triumphal reversal, is thus personally meaningful, and works toward accomplishing God's primordial will of cosmic theosis through actions performed within the framework of particular theosis. Below I quote at length *Ode* 42 from the *Odes of Solomon*, which was a well-known third or fourth century document used by various Christian writers. It demonstrates further, as I have been arguing, the personally meaningful aspect of the salvific act of the descent and its juxtaposition with the personally meaningless cry from the cross.

> Sheol [Hades] saw me [Jesus] and was shattered,
> and Death ejected me and many with me.
> I have been vinegar and bitterness to it,
> and I went down with it as far as its depth…
> And I made a congregation of the living among his dead…
> And those who had died ran towards me;
> and they cried out and said, Son of God, have pity on us.
> And deal with us according to your kindness,
> and bring us out from the bonds of darkness.
> And open for us the door by which we may come out to you;
> for we perceive that our death does not touch you.
> May we also be saved with you, because you are our Savior.
> Then I heard their voice, and placed their faith in my heart.
> And I placed my name upon their head,
> because they are free and they are mine.[100]

[100] *Ode* 42, as quoted by Hilarion Alfeyev (2009, p. 41-42).

While much can be said about this ode, the main focus will remain on two lines. The first will be considered now and the second later. The first line says, "for we perceive that our death does not touch you." As I understand *Ode* 42, the dead in hades saw Jesus for who he was, the *living* incarnate Son of God and perfect picture of divine-human communion. They desired him and the renewed, eternal life possible with and through him. Though Jesus died and went to hades, death paradoxically could not touch him for the sake of his divine nature as the eternal Son of God and medium of creation/life.

Concerning a demonic reaction to Jesus and the human response in the above poem, a story in Mark provides a stark contrast. I utilize this story to further clarify my larger philosophical (nonexegetical) argument. According to Mark, a legion of demons possesses a man who resided away from the people "in the tombs, crying out" (Mark 5:5). The demons recognize who Jesus is, but it is the man who runs to Jesus and worships him. The demons ask that Jesus "not torment [them]," which harkens back to hades, the prison, or place of punishment: they do not want to go back. Interestingly, the man runs to Jesus from his imprisonment in the tomb (like the people in hades in the poem above), but the demons want nothing to do with him. Jesus eventually excises the demons (much like a prelude to the harrowing of hell), and the man is placed "in his right mind" (5:15).

Within the context of my larger philosophical argument, this story once again reveals how personal meaning and theosis can align. Jesus sees a suffering man—which according to my argument is against God's will—and heals him, putting him in his "right mind." I believe the relief of his suffering is in line with God's will but only for the awareness of theosis it may bring. Nevertheless, the end of suffering, as I have stated, is not a requirement for the experience of theosis or its awareness. But perhaps the man's sickness was so grave, awareness of theosis was

dim (a situation I considered in this chapter and Chapter 4), and it was his healing which brought about not theosis *simpliciter* but an awareness of it. This caused the man to desire to be with Jesus and perhaps draw closer to God (Mk. 5:18). It was not suffering per se which brought about divine-human communion, as if the former was a requirement for the latter, but the man's ability now to see his need for God and theosis.

This is similar to my example of one, in a certain case of extreme suffering, needing a friend, therapist, or minister, through inspiration, to become aware of theosis. This may also be compared to the notion I put forward previously that one may draw close to God because of suffering (or the sudden absence of it, as in the case of the demon-possessed man), but this need not mean God is utilizing such suffering to accomplish God's will. In fact, one may experience theosis (or divine-human communion) despite the presence of suffering or lack thereof. That said, Jesus's ability to "torment" the demons in the above narrative further demonstrates his authority not only on earth but heaven and below the earth and provides contextual support for his eventual vanquishment of hades, which resulted in the bestowing of life for those entombed. As I have said, the overthrowing of hell expresses an alignment between the personal meaning Jesus experienced and God's will for cosmic theosis, and the authority shown by Jesus in this story, in my mind, entrenches this notion.

As I see it, even in the place of death, Jesus brought forth life. John's gospel testifies regarding Jesus earthly ministry that: "[Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it," but the story in hades is very different. According to my interpretation of the above poem, the dead, with a special knowledge (or non-ignorance) of divine things unknown to the living, perceive the life in Jesus and run to it. In Jesus, they see the vanquishment of death. They cry out to him for mercy, and he hears them.

The second verse I will consider from the above poem says, "He heard their voice, and placed their faith in my [Jesus's] heart." I argue, when compared with the cry of dereliction, which in my estimation is an example of personal meaninglessness for Jesus, this statement gives voice to the voiceless and shows forth the mercy of God upon those who, one could say, are presently suffering. According to *Ode* 42, Jesus's conquering of hell results in a complete reversal of his experience of personal meaninglessness on the cross. Here *he* is the one hearing the cries of the people and placing their faith in *his* heart. Again, the action is personally meaningful for Jesus as an aspect of particular theosis, but it also accomplishes God's primordial will of cosmic theosis, where God ultimately "hears" and thus renews mutability forever in Jesus's ascension into heaven.

7.4. The Virtuous Life

I believe the cry of dereliction and Jesus's descent into hell illustrate he, like any human, was able to experience the depths of personal meaninglessness (on the cross) and the heights of personal meaningfulness (at the descent), while still successfully maintaining the vital chasm between suffering and God's will for theosis. If one assumes (as I do) Jesus's cry at the cross was against God's primordial will for theosis and his vanquishment of hell demonstrates a synthesis between his experience of personal meaningfulness and the fulfillment of God's will for cosmic theosis, then the retelling of these events shows Jesus in his humanness was no different than any other in his ability to suffer *and* experience personal meaning within suffering because of God's will for theosis.

Within the present section, I will explore what it might mean for a Christian to suffer like Jesus, to experience both personal meaninglessness and meaningfulness within suffering, without attributing suffering to God's will. The spiritual disciplines/virtues of the Christian theological

tradition are varied, so I will use virtue as an all-inclusive concept, which might include practices such as self-control, patience, and prayer.[101] Additionally, virtue, as I use it here, includes, for example: peace, power, life, justice, light, and truth, which remain foundational ideals motivating virtuous action. Within this section, I will utilize my understanding of Gregory of Nyssa's ideas regarding the virtuous life, which are found in his treatise *De perfectione*. My use of this work will be for the purpose of suggesting further evidence toward my overall philosophical argument and should not be considered as a complete picture of Gregory's thought or writing. With that said, as I understand it, Gregory applied the foundational ideals of virtue (above) as cataphatic descriptions for an otherwise apophatic divine nature. These virtues were evident in Jesus's life, and according to Gregory, therefore available to the Christian for imitation (*De perf*., trans. Callahan 1967, p. 105).[102]

Gregory of Nyssa, as I understand, held the common belief of his time that matter (or all things material/created) was mutable and believed Christianity, through its prescribed virtues, exhibited an opportunity for persons to imitate Jesus toward salvation (or theosis).[103] Even with humanity's changeable nature, which I argued for above, Gregory believed one could unchangeably (or permanently) choose God by "imitating, as far as is possible in our changing

[101] Self-control is considered a fruit of the Holy Spirit and cannot therefore be accomplished without the Spirit's help. The virtue also comes in the form of self-denial (*askesis*), which is the human response to the Spirit's empowerment. Patience is variously understood as endurance in suffering or as a "waiting for," as when in the parable of the ten virgins they wait expectantly for the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13). Both senses will be assumed in this section, as they are useful for the present endurance of suffering and hope for something better in the future. Additionally, although not mentioned specifically in this section but discussed in Chapter 4, prayer is the foundation of any spiritual life, and in my opinion, labeling it as a virtue goes without saying. I mention it here only because of its commonness.

[102] Although perhaps too far a reach, this is reminiscent of the Hesychastic controversy of the fourteenth century, which ultimately decided God interacts with humans via his energies, which remain distinct from his essence but are nevertheless uncreated and equally divine.

[103] Cf., 1 Cor. 10:4.

nature, the unchanging and permeant nature of the master." This was to be accomplished through virtues such as wisdom, peace, etc., which would simultaneously provide everything needed for "firmness and permeance of our virtuous life, that is, in the steadfastness of our endurance of suffering" (*De perf*., p. 108). For example, in imitation of Jesus's display of self-control, the Christian is afforded a way to remain steadfast and permanently "in God" within suffering. In my opinion, no matter the circumstance, one need not acquiesce in mind or body to one's suffering for a divine greater good even though it must be endured, nonetheless. Because of the reality of theosis, one can, like Jesus, strongly desire the eradication of gratuitous suffering and its horrid experience and endure it.

Importantly, according to my interpretation of Gregory, mutableness (or one's fleshliness) is not destroyed by virtue but remade into an endless increase of perfection in participation with God (theosis). In fact, this is, as I understand it, the goal of the Christian life now and postmortem: to always be increasing in virtue and thus drawing into greater intimacy with God, becoming more like God and more likely to endure antemortem suffering.[104] Gregory says, "Let us struggle, therefore, against this very unstable element of our nature…not becoming victors by destroying our nature, but by not allowing it to fall" (p. 122). Not only does this, in my mind, remind the Christian to remain steadfast in virtue (as a way to endure suffering) but is suggestive too of one's postmortem existence in one's participation with God: although able to fall, one will *not* fall because one will permanently and forever choose the all-consuming interpenetration of divine humanity, which is the fulfillment of cosmic theosis.

[104] "Therefore, I do not think it is a fearful thing (I mean that our nature is changeable). The Logos shows that it would be a disadvantage for us not to be able to make a change for the better…. Therefore, let no one be grieved if he sees in his nature a penchant for change. Changing in everything for the better, let him exchange "glory for glory," becoming greater through daily increase, ever perfecting himself, and never arriving too quickly at the limit of perfection. For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection" (*De perf*.; trans. Callahan 1967, p. 122).

Furthermore, assuming the Son of God is the medium of creation (a notion I explored in Chapter 5), Gregory wonders: "What person who believes that he lives 'from him and through him and unto him' will dare to make the one who encompasses in himself the life of each of us, a witness of a life that does not reflect him" (*De perf*., p. 107)? Much like humanity's heavenly existence, for Gregory, it seems an antemortem life led by virtue is a near necessity of fact given creation and the incarnation of the Word of God. More so, the virtuous life, it would seem, connected as it is to humanity's mutableness, has a changeability to it which reinforces the goal of godlikeness "as far as humanly possible," which is echoed by Gregory: "For this is truly perfection: never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection" (*De perf*., p. 122). As I understand it, this flexibility of virtue allows for the possibility, perhaps within gratuitous suffering, of an inability to perform some (or most/all) of the prescribed disciplines and only do what is possible in that moment. If so, then even though virtuous actions are an imitation of Jesus *simpliciter*, there remains flexibility within suffering regarding its application in the pursuit of godlikeness as far as humanly (and presently) possible. This is similar to what I discussed in Chapter 4 where, in losing an awareness of theosis due to extreme suffering, one may need the help of another before one can be thus inspired toward personal meaning and an eventual awareness of theosis.

Even so, because the Son of God became incarnate, I believe mutable human beings have the opportunity and ability to imitate Jesus in his life of sinlessness and closeness to God even in gratuitous suffering. But I contend the virtues do not exist as burdens for the Christian, especially in the midst of suffering.[105] Rather, according to my understanding of Gregory, they are ideals of

[105] Gregory says clearly the virtuous life is one that imitates Jesus: "When we do understand this, we shall, as a consequence also learn clearly what sort of persons we should be shown to be as a result of our zeal for this way of life and our use of his name [i.e. Christ] as the instructor and guide of our life (*De perfectione*; trans. Callahan 1967, p. 96).

perfection (enigmas of the divine essence, so to speak) of which Paul could only express apophatically: awesome traits of the Godhead made tangible through Jesus for the purpose of imitation by the Christian. I argue, as one strives for the ideal, one may fail a time or two (or many times), but such is the idea of being godlike as much as humanly possible. This view is vital, I believe, as the virtuous life becomes harder or offers less benefits than one might expect because of extreme suffering. One might recall what I said in Chapter 4 about expectations of God and how they affect one's ability to maintain divine-human communion by misappropriating one's source of meaning away from God and toward suffering. In extreme suffering, one might lose sight of God and despair of life; one might expect to be delivered or to commune with God in a special way during this time. But if none of this comes, only extreme suffering remains. If one holds to these expectations, I argue one is in danger of disseverment of divine-human communion. But if expectations are relinquished, then it is possible to bear suffering (a type of radical acceptance) without blaming God for unmet expectations. One's source of meaning remains with God and the fulfillment of cosmic theosis, which remains sure despite circumstances.

I quote Gregory at length below, as he describes what Jesus went through on the cross by patiently enduring what he did not deserve. And it is important to note that patience, as Gregory uses it here, is not passive but active: a patient endurance of injustice that leads to active forgiveness. After discussing the varied ways by which virtues can be beautifully displayed in one's life as in a painting, Gregory considers Jesus's sufferings on the cross.

> Another color is patience [the first being meekness] which appears quantitatively in "the image of the invisible God." A sword, clubs, chains, whips, slaps in the face, the face spat upon, the back beaten, irreverent judgment, a harsh denial, soldiers mocking, the sullen rejection with jest and sarcasm and insults, blows from the reed, nails and gall and vinegar, and all of these terrible things were applied to him without cause, nay, rather, in return for innumerable good works! And how were those who did these things repaid? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Was it not possible for him to bring the sky down upon them, or to bury these insolent men in a chasm of the earth, or to

> throw them down from their own mountains into the sea, or to inundate the earth with the depths of the ocean, or to send down upon them the Sodomitic rain of fire, or to do any other angry deed in revenge? Instead, he bore all of these things in meekness and patience, legislating patience for your life through himself (*De perf.*, p.111).

Several themes already discussed are present in this revealing quote. Jesus's suffering is apparent, but more important is his response. And Gregory, as I understand him, believes Jesus's response is applicable to everyone, especially those within suffering. Under excruciating pain and humiliation—at the greatest point of injustice—and with all the powers of heaven at his disposal, Jesus chooses (even as he hangs on the cross gasping for breath) to forgive; not to exact retribution but to recognize sin for what it is ("they do not know what they are doing"). I contend he patiently waits for (and perhaps even desires) death for the glorification of himself for the sake of the Father. Jesus actively waits for what he knows is sure to come, looking beyond his circumstances while simultaneously staying focused in the present and resolute enough to pray for and offer forgiveness to his tormentors.

In imitation of Jesus, perhaps Christians can similarly react to and endure suffering: clinging to God as God clings to them, not exacting revenge on others or themselves as they experience theosis, or depending on the severity of suffering, wait for an awareness of it. I assert, in emulation of the quote above, in present suffering (especially that which is extremely excruciating), there might be a moment in time where one, having lost sight of God, despairs of life and cannot see the desired end. Such a person, as previously argued, needs a support system in place which will not judge or try to justify her suffering. Instead, the support system (whatever it might be) must, as much as possible, lift the sufferer to a place where she might see how she can garner personal meaning from her experience. As argued, personal meaning at that point can (but not necessarily so) combine with (while remaining separate from) divine meaning, or theosis.

But even if this is not possible for one reason or another, a salve to the pain, however slight, will surely begin, I argue, by knowing God is not responsible for or utilizing one's suffering for greater ends not otherwise achievable by God; thus, suffering remains gratuitous but without divine blame. Therefore, God is the comforter within and without pain, strengthening one's endurance. If personal meaning is possible, then the virtues stand to enact this meaning and grow it in ways leading to theosis. In this manner, personal meaning combines with God's will for theosis, and the sufferer experiences God afresh.

Of course, the experience of God is never (nor could it ever be) limited to this set of circumstances. Instead, what I argue here is what is possible given my previous assertions. There are many possible states of affairs (perhaps an infinite number), which involve God and the sufferer in a way where suffering is gratuitous, experienced as such by the sufferer, and God reaches out to the sufferer in a way particular to the person and circumstance. But I argue, in any one of these infinite possibilities (and within the present world), God does not and would not use suffering to achieve God's ends, which could cause divine blame and disseverment of divine-human communion.

7.5. Conclusion

The cry of dereliction and Jesus's descent into hell demonstrate how a Christian might experience personal meaninglessness and transform it into personal meaningfulness. This can be done myriad ways, some of which have already been discussed in Chapter 4. But it is vital, on my view, such meaning, being personal in nature, is separated from divine meaning or the divine will for cosmic theosis. In Jesus's experiences on the cross and descent into hell, one is confronted with, I argue, events outside the will of God but nonetheless made meaningful by Jesus's direct intervention.

This same decision for personal meaning amid an otherwise meaningless situation is available to Christians perhaps by (to varying degrees) a change of perspective or some other action.

Additionally, the virtuous way, in my view, should be understood as a pathway to the experience of God within particular theosis. But its way is often hard and unpleasant (especially within suffering), so those going through intense suffering should not have the virtues placed upon their backs like boulders. Instead, grace and mercy should be extended until one is able to follow the virtuous path or anything else which might result in personal meaning. Regardless, suffering of all kinds—great or small—remain gratuitous because God does not use it for ends God cannot otherwise achieve. Therefore, in my view, God is on the side of the sufferer without qualification, and perhaps most helpful of all, the present sufferer can know this and be comforted in her suffering.

CONCLUSION

Through the centuries, the argument for evil has been neatly divided between the logical, evidential, and existential aspects, each with their own subgroups. In Chapter 1, this project began its discussion with J. L. Mackie's formulation of the logical problem and its defeat by Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense. The evidential and existential problems were then considered, where I deemed the evidential argument a perfect springboard for my case in favor of theism amid the existence of actual gratuitous evil. Such a claim deviates from the common theistic response, which contends there are divine reasons for evil of which one is ignorant and therefore God is (for God's own reasons) allowed to permit evil. By agreeing with the evidential argument that existential suffering, which results from evil, is gratuitous, I disarmed its force against theism and sought to explain the experience of gratuitous suffering through existential considerations. In this, I asserted gratuitous suffering the result of God's noninvolvement in evil, which makes it (or anything else) meaningless. As such, my argument did not seek to compensate for or otherwise defeat evil. Rather, it sought to refocus the present sufferer toward God and theosis. I argued, since theosis is ultimately meaningful, a present experience of it provides sufficient meaning, so endurance of suffering is possible. Therefore, my response to gratuitous suffering sought to encourage, not its defeat or compensation, but the endurance of it.

I claimed one's meaning should be derived solely from one's relationship with God, which I termed variously as divine-human communion, theosis, cosmic theosis, salvation, etc. From here my argument used the evidential problem of evil and its understanding of gratuitous suffering as a way to consider existentially the problem of present suffering. My project is the first I know of to consider the plight of the present sufferer and not relegate relief from suffering (or its meaning) to

a heavenly, postmortem existence. Therefore, as I argued, if ultimate meaning can be gained from divine-human communion in the here and now, then meaning ascribed to suffering is unnecessary and actual gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world. More than that, if one thinks one's suffering is gratuitous, then I believe such testimony should be respected as veridical and not beyond one's ken, as most theodists allege.

Chapters 2 and 3 considered the existential responses offered by Marilyn Adams and Eleonore Stump respectively and demonstrated both, while wishing to respond to the sufferer in a personal or subjective way, ended where they started. Each position affirms what I called the post-suffering perspective, which says the sufferer's present conclusion about her suffering (as either gratuitous, or as Adams put it, horrendous) is incorrect and will be righted postmortem. In the throes of suffering, Adams tries to say one can correctly conclude her suffering gratuitous. But she maintains a post-suffering perspective by saying the afterlife will afford appreciation of one's suffering as in fact meaningful. So I asserted Adams's view is contradictory in saying suffering is no longer (nor was it ever) gratuitous. Adams goes so far as to say suffering is a necessary aspect of one's relationship with God. I rejected this position as unhelpful to the present sufferer due to its support of the post-suffering perspective, its assertion the sufferer is not aware of the reasons for her suffering, and its claim the experience of evil is necessary for divine-human communion.

Eleonore Stump is similarly committed to a post-suffering view, which in her assessment, necessarily allies meaning with suffering through divine-human communion. In other words, like Adams, suffering becomes an integral aspect of one's relationship to God, thus granting it a substantial part of one's life. According to Stump, God uses suffering to change one's will to a "pro-God" will, and in trying to produce a Thomistic account of love that is also subjective, she defines suffering as the loss of one's heart's desires. But she fails to explain, with one's heart's

desires lost through suffering, what the sufferer is to do until her desires are gained back postmortem. The responses by Adams and Stump to the experience of evil present major issues concerning how the sufferer is to be understood and treated within a present suffering framework. Each of them requires the sufferer to believe she cannot fully understand what is happening to her and must wait for death to comprehend it: no sense of hope within suffering is offered except what points the sufferer to a postmortem heavenly existence, which is inaccessible to her in that moment.

Chapter 4 sought to show how gratuitous evil can exist in a theistic world by obtaining meaning solely from divine-human communion, not suffering. I argued divine-human communion remains the ultimate meaning-maker within many theistic responses, but it is oddly placed at the end of life. This does nothing to help the present sufferer. To divorce meaning from suffering, I offered distinctions between material and teleological causes, inspiration and divine intention, and personal and divine meaning. With these distinctions in hand, a different view of God's involvement (or lack thereof) in the experience of evil was established. The will of God was affirmed as the establishment of divine-human communion (theosis) outside suffering. Any meaning (which remains meaningful, but of a different sort) derived from suffering was shown to be on a personal (not divine) level of meaning. In this way, I claimed sufferers can learn from their experiences through inspiration (rather than divine intention) in personally helpful ways, which may even draw them closer to God. The distinction I made between material and teleological causes of suffering I believe concerns human interpretation of the experience of evil and has major implications for present sufferers and how one understands God's noninvolvement in evil. Taken together, these distinctions revealed present sufferers can live inspired lives and enjoy divine-human communion independent of and even within suffering.

Chapter 5 discussed the meaning of cosmic theosis and its independence from suffering. I showed cosmic theosis is, as I use it, God's primordial desire for divine-human communion before sin and the suffering it causes, which if it existed *before* suffering, cannot be dependent on it. This chapter expanded my view of divine intention in the previous section. By further articulating my view of divine-human communion and its non-reliance on suffering, this chapter contained a significant part of my response to present suffering. If my view of cosmic theosis is assumed, I believe a present sufferer is less likely to blame God for her suffering and thus able to maintain divine-human communion within it. This chapter employed a limited and philosophical (not exegetical) use of Maximus the Confessor's anthropology and his understanding of theosis since he is considered the traditional synthesizer of the doctrine. By this I demonstrated God, as I understand it, intended theosis before the fall of humanity and therefore before suffering.

Chapter 6 discussed further what I called particular theosis: God's response to sin and the suffering it causes. Particular theosis brings up interesting issues in terms of God's will and the order of God's decrees for humanity. In this chapter, I rejected my understanding and use of infralapsarianism, and embracing my use of supralapsarianism, defined it as God's will for the incarnation before sin. Therefore, the incarnation (as representative of God's will for theosis) was shown to be prior to and not dependent on sin and the suffering it brings.

Finally, Chapter 7 considered what it might look like for a Christian to suffer well amid suffering. To this end, I utilized Jesus's cry of forsakenness on the cross and his descent into hell, both events demonstrating common human responses of Jesus, which can be had analogically by any sufferer. Importantly, both the cry and the descent, in my view, are experienced by Jesus's human nature and therefore reside firmly on the personal rather than divine level of meaning. Therefore, I argued the cry is equal to Jesus's experience of personal meaninglessness, and the

descent is, for him, synonymous with personal meaningfulness as I defined in Chapter 4. Amid personal meaninglessness on the cross, after death, Jesus "abandons" the Father for the sake of those lost in hell and rescues them. He, not the Father, is the one who breaks the chains of those constrained in hades and thus achieves a type of personal meaning for himself which overshadows the meaninglessness he experienced on the cross. Lastly, I discussed what the Christian might do to overcome personal meaninglessness, and this was found most poignantly in Gregory of Nyssa's encouragement to imitate the life of Jesus. Taken together, these represent a place for grace and encouragement toward an endless end (as Gregory might put it) of divine-human communion, which does not require suffering.

I believe I have shown the unnecessary nature of suffering toward what is most meaningful: divine-human communion (theosis). As such, suffering can remain gratuitous without impugning the justice or goodness of God. If the possibility of suffering exists from the creation of mutable creatures, then God cannot be blamed for evil any more than God can be blamed for creating anything at all. The incarnation, as I understand it, remained God's primordial solution to the mutability problem and secondarily the sin problem. Additionally, if the divine intention for theosis existed prior to creation but also motivated its existence, then it must be independent of suffering. Therefore, I argued God does not use suffering toward ends not otherwise achievable, and it remains the responsibility of sufferers, if they are able, to make sense of their suffering on the personal level of inspiration. But regardless of this ability, God remains ever-present and helpful, and without divine blame, divine-human communion remains untouched and strengthened within or without suffering.

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