

## Finitism and the Problem of Evil<sup>1</sup>

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According to traditional theism, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. If God is omnibenevolent, then he would want to eliminate evil. If God is omnipotent, then he would be able to eliminate evil. So, why should there be any evil? This problem is, by far, the most discussed subject in the philosophy of religion. In this paper, I argue that rejecting the traditional notion of God is by far the best way to deal with this problem. First, I explain the nature of the problem, pointing out that it is really three different problems. Second, I explicate the terms involved in the traditional notion of God and what the doctrine of finitism (i.e., the rejection of God's omnipotence) amounts to. Third, I examine the traditional solutions to the problem and show how they fail. Fourth, I show how those same solutions can work when coupled with the claim that God is finite. Here I also show how God's finitude can explain pointless evil. And finally, I respond to objections given to finitism along the lines that it requires that God be too finite.

### *1. Statement of the Problem.*

As J.L. Mackie puts it, "God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false."<sup>2</sup> Of course, Mackie points out that the contradiction does not follow right away, but rather we need a couple of very plausible assumptions in order to get the contradiction. Indeed, if we suppose that (i) *if X is omnipotent then X could eliminate evil*, (ii) *if X is wholly good then X would desire above all else to eliminate evil*, and (iii) *for any state of affairs, S, that X desires X will bring about S unless X cannot bring about S or there is a desire which overrides X's desire to bring about S*, then it follows from the existence of evil that there is no God. This version of the problem of evil is often called "the logical problem of evil". This is because it claims that the problem of evil is an argument which shows that the existence of God is *logically* inconsistent with the existence of evil.

Now many philosophers believe that the logical problem of evil can be solved. The idea is that all one needs to do is to show that it is *possible* that there be an omnipotent and wholly good God and there be evil. But advocates of the problem of evil have insisted that it is not enough just to show that there is some possibility in which God exists and in which evil exists. Instead, one must show that such a possibility is not significantly less likely than one in which the sort of evil exists and there is no God. Indeed, we may grant that it is possible that there is some reason for God to allow the sorts of evils that we see in the world, but we may still argue that it is very unlikely that God would allow such evils. The kinds of circumstances which would justify the existence of the holocaust for example would be very rare indeed. And so the very existence of evils like the holocaust count as evidence against the existence of God, even if

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie [1955], 200.

they do not show that there is some inconsistency in supposing it. This version of the problem of evil is often called "the evidential problem of evil".

Finally, there is a concern which is often discussed in conjunction with the other problems above. The idea here is that real evil occurs and people have to face this evil. Sometimes they are victims of it. How should they deal with it? How does it affect their belief in God? How do we best go about helping them to overcome the affects of this evil? This problem is not really a philosophical problem for the existence of God. Evil may make us pissed-off at God, but our anger alone is not reason to reject his existence. Moreover, the existential problem of evil is obviously one which must be faced by atheists and theists alike, since both suffer evil and must learn to deal with it in some way. And so, we will say nothing more of the existential problem of evil in this paper.

Now it might also seem that we should make our terms clear at this point. We don't really have to define evil itself. Whatever definition we give, everyone, except those of us who are closet Christian Scientists, believes that there is evil in the world. However, it is important to make a distinction between *moral* and *natural* evil. The former is any evil which results from or is part of what an agent does. Natural evil is any evil that is not moral evil. So, the holocaust would be moral evil and the suffering caused by the tornadoes in Oklahoma is natural evil. Some people deny the existence of natural evil. Everything that nature does is supposedly morally neutral according to such a view. But this seems clearly wrong when we consider the fact that we often try to avoid or correct things in nature. We cured small pox. That must be because we thought small pox to be a bad thing. Moreover, most people would think that it would be a bad thing for a comet to hit the earth. But a comet is certainly not an agent. So, there are very good reasons to think that there is natural evil as well as moral evil.

Now in this paper we will be concerned with both the logical and evidential problems of evil and we will be concerned with both moral and natural evil.

## 2. Definitions.

Not only do we need to make some clarifications about the nature of evil but we should also make it clear what we mean when we say that God is omnipotent or when we say he is finite. I take it that the claim that God is *omnipotent* in some way amounts to the claim that God is unlimited in power. And then the claim that God is *finite* is just a denial of the claim that God is omnipotent. So, where we have different definitions of omnipotence we will also have different definitions of finitism. We do not want to say that God is omnipotent in the sense that there is no sentence of the form "God cannot do X", where X is replaced by the description of any action. This is because such an understanding of unlimited power winds us in logical contradiction. The traditional problem of whether God can create a rock so large that he cannot lift it shows us this. Moreover, notice that when you say to me "You cannot create a round square" you really haven't slighted my power in any way since the object you propose is impossible. Similarly, to say that there are some true claims of the form "God cannot do X" where X involves a logical contradiction is not to impose substantive limitations on God. Logical limitations are not substantive ones.

So, we may want to say that God is *omnipotent* just in case he can bring about any logically consistent state of affairs. This is a very common way of spelling out the idea that God is unlimited in power. There are some fairly technical problems even with this definition---i.e., it is not clear that it avoids contradiction---one of which we will discuss below. But this definition is good for now. Given this definition of omnipotence we can define finitism in the following way: S is *finite* if and only if there is some logically possible state of affairs A such that S can do nothing to bring about A. Now notice that this is not to say very much about how powerful S is. Indeed, I am finite and so are you. But extremely powerful "deities" such as Zeus and Q---the latter is familiar to Star Trek fans---are all finite. Interestingly, a being can be finite and yet "almighty" in the sense that the being has power and influence over all beings.

### 3. *Traditional Solutions.*

There are many traditional attempts to solve the problem of evil, and so we cannot discuss them all. However, there are two solutions which seem to be the most popular among philosophers of religion. The first of these is what is often called "the soul-building theodicy". The second is "the free will defense". We will take these in turn. But first we should make it clear what these solutions attempt to do. Essentially they try to show that even if God is omnipotent and wholly good, he would not necessarily eliminate all evil. And so these theodicies must disagree with one of our premises (i)--(iii). We will see that the most questionable premise is (ii), i.e., the idea that God would want to eliminate all evil.

The basic idea in the soul-building theodicy is that God allows evil because it makes us better persons. Evil is instrumental in bringing about the greater good of turning us into God-like creatures. The analogy often raised is one of a parent and her daughter. The parent has the choice of sheltering her child from the world and denying her the opportunity to learn, or she can allow her child to suffer the many defeats and traumas in the real world in order that she may become a better person. God allows us to suffer through disasters because it gives us the opportunity to become better persons by helping the victims or learning to cope with such suffering.

Now there are some well-recognized problems with this theodicy. I will give these problems names for ease of reference. The first problem is called *the incoherence of instrumental evil*. It is not at all clear that there can be such a thing as instrumental evil. Instrumental for what? Well, presumably it is instrumental for some greater good. If we are consequentialists of any sort then the incoherence is obvious at this point. But even if we are not consequentialists we can recognize the problem by focusing on the analogy often offered by the soul-making theodicy. The parent allows the child to undergo difficult experiences in order to help her to become a better person. Is the parent doing something wrong? Clearly, not. Are these difficult, painful, and even traumatic experiences evil? It seems hard to say that they are. They serve to help the child. If there were a really bad thing that might happen to the child (say like in Littleton) and the parent both knew about it and could stop it, then she should. So, it is not even clear that those "bad" events that we undergo to become better person are in any real sense "evil". If this is right then the soul-building theodicy is really a version of Christian Scientism.

Now even if we grant that there may be some evil which is instrumental toward a greater good, it would remain the case that the soul-building theodicy would face problems. One example is *the soul-building minimum* problem. Here the problem is that it is not at all clear that we have reason to think that all the evil in the world really contributes to soul-building. Indeed, we all know of cases where victims of accidents or crimes have become worse persons as a result of their trauma. Moreover, some suffering that occurs doesn't help the victim because the victim dies and also doesn't help anyone else because no one knows about the death of the victim. Finally, it is not at all clear that if there was just the smallest bit less evil in world---for example the fall that my daughter experienced this morning did not happen---then the world would be any less soul-building than it is. The idea behind this problem is that there is some minimum amount of evil that is sufficient for the sort of soul-building that God wants, and we have some reasons to think that the evil in this world exceeds that minimum---i.e., there could be less evil and yet we would still "soul-build" just as well as we do. But certainly if the soul-building theodicy works then the amount of evil in the world is the soul-building minimum.

The soul-building theodicy may respond that the evil in our world *is* at a soul-building minimum despite appearances. And this response certainly works against the logical problem of evil, since it shows that it is possible that God would allow the evil in the world. But it is not clear that it responds to the evidential problem, since given the appearances it seems more likely than not that the world could have had less evil and yet still have sufficient evil for us to soul-build. And certainly God, being omnipotent, would be capable of bringing this about.

The third problem is *the soul-building without evil* problem. Here the idea is that God, being omnipotent could clearly create us perfect in the first place. We don't need to build our souls. And if the result is all that matters, as the soul-building theodicy seems to think, then things would be better this way. One may object that we are better off if we have built our souls ourselves. This may be right, but certainly God could do this without any real evil. All he needs to do is to put us in virtual reality machines which make the world appear to us the way it in fact does. Then God can cause us to experience apparent evils in these machines and allow us to try to overcome them. But of course these evils don't really occur, and so although we learn the lessons we would learn from them if they did occur, we do so without having the problem of having those evils in the first place.

The fourth problem is that there is a hell---*the problem of hell*. What I mean by this is that not every soul achieves that state which God intends it to achieve. Some should end up in hell, so to speak. But if the soul-building theodicy is correct then the evil can only be justified if in the end everyone is benefited by it. If God is omnipotent he can bring it about that everyone is saved. Now, a natural response to this problem and perhaps some of the others is "what about free will?" But notice here we are not considering the free will defense yet. We are considering the soul-building theodicy alone. If we have to assume free will in addition, then the soul-building theodicy really doesn't work on its own.

So now let us consider the free will defense. The central idea behind the free will defense is that the presence of evil in the world can be explained by the existence of free will. The idea is that God believes correctly that a world in which we have free will is better than one in which we do not, even if that free will sometimes leads to evil. And so God may not eliminate all evil

in the world because it would require him to eliminate free will. Now here the evil is not quite instrumental since the evil does not directly result in a better state of affairs, as it does in the soul-building theodicy. Instead, the evil is a by-product of something which a good God has to allow.

The central problem with the free will defense is *the possibility of correct choice*. It is surely possible, if we have free will, that we all choose to do the right thing. And if God is omnipotent then he can bring about any state of affairs such that this state of affairs is possible. So, God should be able to bring it about that we are both free and we choose to do the right thing.

Alvin Plantinga, a Calvinist philosopher, has given an extensive and somewhat technical response to this objection. He argues roughly as follows. That God is omnipotent does not entail that God can bring about any logically consistent state of affairs. Indeed, God cannot bring it about that we are both free and we choose to do the right. He considers an example like the following. Suppose that in the actual world Saul T. Lake offers Olympus a bribe of \$1,000 for Olympus to hold his annual convention in Saul's hotel. Olympus declines. Saul then wonders "What would he have done if I had offered him \$2,000?" Clearly, it is either true that (a) if Saul offered Olympus \$2000, then Olympus would have accepted or it is true that (b) if Saul offered Olympus \$2000, then Olympus would have declined, but not both. If Olympus is free with respect to this act it is just as clear that both are possible. But whichever one is true, there is a possible world which God could not have actualized, since if (a) is true then it is beyond God's power to make it such that Saul offers Olympus the \$2000 bribe, God makes Olympus free with respect to this decision, and God ensures that (b) is true. That is, it would be beyond God's power to create a world in which both Saul makes the offer and Olympus declines.

Now this is not yet enough to defend the free will defense from our criticism. We might argue that it certainly seems possible that when God is deciding who to create he can just create someone, S, of whom all the true counter-factual conditionals have S doing what is right. And it would also seem that it would be possible that God could just only create people who are like S in this way. Plantinga wants to respond to this by the postulation that it is possible that in every possible world that God can actualize everyone will go astray.<sup>3</sup> This is what he calls *transworld depravity*.<sup>4</sup> Now I have argued elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that it is possible for each and every person to do the right thing in all cases. This does not contradict what Plantinga says. Instead, he just argues that it is possible that God cannot bring it about that we all do the right.

Now Plantinga's free will defense may already sound a bit like finitism, since Plantinga says that there are possible worlds which God cannot actualize. However, I think that his position is not finitistic. Recall that by "omnipotent" we mean that God is unlimited in power. This means that there are no substantive limitations on God's power. We already noted that not being able to make a contradiction true is not a substantive limitation on God's power. This

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<sup>3</sup> Notice that he cannot just say that *someone will* go astray, since presumably in this world everyone does. A world in which one person goes astray is better than one in which everyone does.

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga, [1974], 186.

<sup>5</sup> "The Myth of Inevitable Sin," forthcoming in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and "Moral Dilemmas and Inevitable Sin," presented at the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, 1999.

seems to indicate that God can do anything logically possible. And we cashed this in by saying that God could bring about any logically possible state of affairs. But what Plantinga has shown us is that this definition is contradictory, and not that God is not unlimited. If God could bring about any logically possible state of affairs then God could bring it about that God does not exist. This is clearly impossible, even though it is possible that God not exist. So, what we should say instead is that God is omnipotent *if and only if* God can bring about any possible state of affairs such that his bringing about that possible state of affairs does not involve a contradiction itself. On this understanding of omnipotence, it may be that there are possible worlds which God cannot actualize and yet it is clear that there is no substantive limitation on God's power.

Plantinga's free will defense is the most sophisticated response to the logical problem of evil in the literature. Most philosophers, including most atheists, believe that it works. However, it is not a response to the evidential problem of evil. The problem here is that it seems more likely that transworld depravity is false rather than true. It seems more likely that there is at least one possible world which God could actualize in which we all choose the right. After all there are quite a lot of possibilities out there and we only need one. Moreover, when we note that transworld depravity entails that every world that God could create is one in which *everyone* goes astray, the likelihood seems to diminish even more.

But I am even skeptical of the free will defense's ability to respond to the logical problem of evil. What I am worried about is the coherence of the doctrine of transworld depravity. Plantinga argues that this doctrine is possibly true, and that is all he needs. But if we can show that it is contradictory then his defense does not work. Elsewhere I have argued that the very nature of moral obligation entails that we can do the right.<sup>6</sup> We can live perfect lives if we so choose. This is because the fact that I ought to do X implies that I can do X---call this *Kant's principle*, after the famous philosopher who emphasized it. This is a principle which applies to individuals. It implies that for each individual there is a possible world in which he does the right. But it does not imply that for each group of individuals there is a possible world in which every member of the group does the right. Only a collective version of Kant's principle would imply this: If there is a rule that each member of a community ought to obey, then the community can obey this rule conjointly. That is, if I shouldn't kill you and you shouldn't kill me, then it is possible that you don't kill me and I don't kill you. If the collective version of Kant's principle were true, then it would follow that for any group of possible persons there is a possible world in which they do what they ought to do. Call this *the doctrine of morally perfect alternatives*.

Now the doctrine of morally perfect alternatives does not yet entail that transworld depravity is false. But notice what is the case if transworld depravity holds. Then any possible world where we are created by God is one in which we will all inevitably fail in our moral obligations. That is, it is impossible that there be a God and we also do what God commands. This seems very strange indeed. And the same reasons we might have for wanting to reject the doctrine of inevitable sin are reasons we would want to reject the conclusion that God can give us commandments which we cannot keep. In other words, on Plantinga's view, God ought to

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<sup>6</sup> "Moral Dilemmas and Inevitable Sin," presented at the *American Philosophical Association*, March 1999 (unpublished).

give us commandments and we ought to keep them, but we cannot fulfill our obligations if God fulfills his. And this contradicts the doctrine of morally perfect alternatives. If we are right then there must be some world in which God can fulfill his obligations and we ours. And this means that transworld depravity must be false given the nature of moral obligation.

Before we consider finitism, it may help to consider another problem for traditional theodicies. This problem, *the problem of practice*, is that theodicies which explain evil in terms of a greater good always seem to imply that we should not eliminate evil ourselves since this would undermine God's plan. Such theodicies imply quietism; and quietism is morally unsavory. The idea is that if these evils are for the greater good then we make things worse by eliminating them. But surely we should eliminate evil when we can. Now Hick has a response to this problem in *the claim of epistemic distance*. He claims that we and God are so far apart with respect to what we know that we cannot be in a position to know what it is that makes these evils allowable. So, we should try to eliminate them.

However, this response will not work since it remains the case that we should work with God's plan and we *do know* that all evil is part of God's plan. And so even if we cannot see why, then we should allow the evils that we allow. We will see below that finitism offers a better solution to the problem of practice.

#### 4. Finitist Theodicy.

We should point out that the logical problem of evil, as it is usually stated and as it is stated in this paper is solved immediately once we adopt the premise that God is not omnipotent. And indeed, some proponents of the problem of evil claim that finitism is quite enough to avoid the problem of evil altogether.<sup>7</sup> But this picture is too simple. Indeed, even if God is not omnipotent it does not follow that we have shown that God's existence is consistent with the existence of evil. Indeed, it may be that God is "omni-po-beneficent" where this is a property that applies to a being just in case that being has enough power to eliminate any of the evils which actually occur. And since we have good reason to suppose that God might be quite powerful after all, we also have reason to attempt to solve the problem of evil.

Now I want to show that the problems which are encountered by the soul-building and free will theodicies can be solved if we adopt the additional premise that God is finite. First consider the soul-building minimum problem. This problem with the soul-building theodicy says that the world could have been a little better than it is and yet have had the same amount of soul-building value as the world in fact has. But then God should have made things just that much better. But if God is finite then it is perfectly possible that, although he can keep the amount of evil at the level that it is in the actual world, he couldn't reduce it without that amount's dipping below the soul-building minimum. This is not an option for an omnipotent God, since it is certainly logically possible that the amount of evil in the world be just a bit less than it is.

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<sup>7</sup> See Mackie [1955], for example.

Next consider the soul-building without evil problem. Here the problem was that it seems possible for a God to build souls with only the semblance of evil. So, why doesn't he do so, if he is omnipotent? The finitist can answer that God doesn't do so because any deception that he could pull off would not be as valuable a learning tool as the real thing. The omnipotent God can pull off a deception which is indistinguishable from the real thing.

The problems of hell and the incoherence of instrumental evil are more complicated. In the case of the problem of hell it is clear that we must employ the existence of free will in an attempt to solve this problem---either that or we must countenance pelagian universalism.<sup>8</sup> But finitism can help the free will defense immensely. Notice that the problem with the free will defense was the possibility of correct choice. Plantinga had to come up with his sophisticated doctrine of transworld depravity to respond to this problem. But we don't need any such complexities once we have the finitist assumption. Indeed, if God is not omnipotent then we can just deny that it is possible that God give us free will and also ensure that we are in such a situation that we will do what is right.

As for instrumental evil, it seems clear that if God is finite then it might be the case that he can only accomplish certain things by using evil means in some cases. If God is finite, then these evil means may not be logically necessary, since it could have been brought about in another way (but a way not available to the finite God).

Now there is a further problem with both the soul-building theodicies and the free will defense which we have not mentioned. It seems that perhaps some evil is pointless, where by "pointless" we mean that it neither serves to help in the soul-building process nor is it a product of free will. Now the traditional theodicist is just going to have to deny that any evil is pointless. But this is hard to do when we are faced with examples. I have already mentioned the case of someone who suffers a very painful (but natural) death without anyone else knowing about it. This death may have natural causes, and hence is a natural evil. And yet it does not help the person who suffers it, nor does it help other people.

However, if God is finite, then the existence of pointless evil can be explained. But here we do not employ the use of the soul-building or free will theodicies---God's finitism is the sole explanation. This means that in some sense God cannot eliminate the pointless evil that exists. Importantly, this means that God cannot eliminate all the pointless evil that exists. It does not mean that God cannot eliminate a particular instance of pointless evil which occurs, but we will come back to this point later in our discussion of the objections to the finitist solution to the problem of evil.

Now recall the problem of practice. This problem says that if evil is an instrument to greater good then we cannot explain why we should not try to eliminate it. However, notice that we have argued that there is such a thing as pointless evil. Given the claim of epistemic distance between us and God, we can never be sure that any case of evil is one which is not pointless. And so we should be actively engaged in eliminating any evil that we can, since any of it may be

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<sup>8</sup> This is the doctrine that not only are all saved but all are saved because they choose to do things which would bring about the fact that they are saved. I am sure that Pelagius was not a universalist.



pointless. But if finitism were not true, then there could be no pointless evil at all; and thus, without finitism we cannot respond to the problem of practice.

### 5. *Objections to Finitism.*

The first objection to finitism is *the problem of an unsuccessful God*. The problem here is that if God is not omnipotent then he might very well fail in his plans. And so we cannot be sure that God can successfully save us and ensure that justice reigns. Notice the claim that God is omnipotent *does* entail that God will be able to succeed in any logically consistent plans. But that God is not omnipotent does not imply that he can fail in his plans. We might claim that God is *redemptively sovereign*<sup>9</sup>, where this means that God is sufficiently powerful that he can ensure our redemption and salvation. Getting the exact definition here is a bit tricky. It is not enough to say that S is redemptively sovereign just in case S can carry out his plans, since S may just have very minimal plans. But we also cannot say that S is redemptively sovereign just in case S can carry out her plans whatever they may be, since this would imply omnipotence at least. Instead, we must say something like the following: S is redemptively sovereign just in case S has substantive plans for the salvation of mankind and can carry out these plans. Now clearly God can be redemptively sovereign and yet be finite. And this is enough to respond to the problem of the unsuccessful God.

There is one possible problem with redemptive sovereignty. It might raise a new version of the problem of evil. This is because it makes a substantive claim about the amount of power that God does have. When we make the negative claim that finitism makes about God's power we avoid the problem of evil because it can always be as a result of God's limitation. However, when we couple this with a positive claim about God's power, then we run the risk that the evil that exists exceeds the amount that should be allowed by a being with that much power. This is also why I think we should reject the alternative non-absolutistic definitions of omnipotence that have sometimes been offered. For example, it is sometimes said that the Mormon God is omnipotent just in case he can do whatever is consistent with the nature of eternal existences. Or better: God is omnipotent just in case God can do whatever is physically possible. The problem is that it might very well be the case that much of the evil that exists is not physically necessary and so using the non-absolutistic definitions of omnipotence (besides confusing the issue) does not make much headway. I don't know what to say about redemptive sovereignty. I am inclined to think that God is redemptively sovereign, but I am also tempted by the idea that God's plan is like James says it is, a wonderful one with great result should it succeed, but also a risky one with a real chance for failure if we do not cooperate.

The second problem is *the problem of cured evils*. Here the problem is that sometimes human beings do a pretty good job of getting rid of evils themselves. But what about the fact that these evils were around until humans were capable of eliminating them? If the fact that God allows these evils is explained by his inability to eliminate them then it would seem to follow that God is less powerful than human beings in this respect. This objection is made in print by

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<sup>9</sup> David Paulsen invented this term for the purpose of responding to this very problem.

P.J. McGrath;<sup>10</sup> he uses the example of the elimination of small pox. Given the way we have described finitism it should now be clear how the problem of cured evils is no problem at all.

Finitism does not merely explain evil by claiming that God cannot eliminate it. In some cases, this is the explanation, as for instance in the case of pointless evil. However, in many cases this does not apply. Much evil that exists is such that God could only eliminate it by causing greater harm, like eliminating opportunities for growth or eliminating free will. So, God could allow evils which we could eliminate and still remain more powerful than us on the finitist's solution.

One may press the problem of cured evils further. Here one focuses on pointless evil. One would argue that there is some pointless evil which humans have eliminated, or could eliminate, which God does not eliminate. For example, consider the case of the children who died in the car trunk last summer. Certainly, if God is godlike at all he must be able to release the latch of the trunk, and yet he fails to do so. If one of the neighbors had become aware of the children's plight she could certainly release them. So, why does God fail to act?

The response here must be different. We cannot say that God fails to eliminate the evil just because he would have to eliminate an opportunity for growth or free will, since we are considering pointless evil. To see how we can respond, consider *the case of the over-burdened doctor*. This doctor has the problem of having too many patients. She has three. The first is very seriously injured and can be saved with a long involved operation. But if she spends the time on the first then she won't have time to get to the second and third before they die. The second and third have life threatening injuries but saving them is less complicated and so if the doctor treats the second and saves him then she can also treat the third one and save him. Obviously, the benevolent doctor can save the second and third without being held morally accountable for the death of the first, even though she could have saved the first---and would have done so if she could have while saving the others. Now I want to claim that sometimes God may be in a similar situation to the overburdened doctor. There are evils that God could have averted but which occur at a time in which it is more important for God to attend to other matters. It is hard to know what could be more important than saving the lives of children dying in a trunk, but it is certainly not hard to imagine that there is possibly something.

Peter Appleby gives an objection to finitism which is very similar to the problem of cured evils.<sup>11</sup> He argues that if God could do the miracles described in the scriptures then there are certainly many evils present in the world today that he could and should eliminate. So, for finitism to work God must be less powerful than we think him to be. But this seems wrong and the response is similar to the problem of cured evils. First, we don't know which of the contemporary evils are ones which contribute to soul-building or are by-products of free will. And finally we can claim that for some of such evils God is busy "helping other patients".

Another less convincing objection to finitism is that if God is finite then he is not worshipable. This objection is much more amorphous than the other objections. Indeed, I am

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<sup>10</sup> McGrath [1986], 63-4.

<sup>11</sup> Appleby, [1989].

not even sure what it is supposed to say. The advocate of this objection surely must give us a non-trivial criterion of worshipability. And why would we think that this would have to include omnipotence? I don't know exactly what to say in response to this criticism until this problem is clarified by the objector. But clearly the burden of argument is still on the shoulder of the objector here. I can point out that if a God is redemptively sovereign, then it would seem that we would have good reason to worship him since he is perfectly benevolent and very effective in achieving his goals.

A final point in this section is about *ex nihilo* creation. Joseph Smith clearly denies this doctrine. It might be thought that we cannot explain evil well enough without denying this. The idea is that if God created a world with evil then he must be responsible. But if certain things have always existed then that evil may be inevitable. This does not follow. If God is omnipotent then he could certainly eliminate any evil, even if it is in an eternal world. Moreover, if God is finite, it might very well be the case that God is limited in what worlds he can create *ex nihilo*. I fail to see that a denial of *ex nihilo* creation is a significant part of the best Mormon theodicy.

#### 6. *Why God is Finite Anyway.*

You might wonder: "This is all well and good. But Mormonism believes in an omnipotent deity and so we cannot opt for finitism. After all, it says that God is "omnipotent" in the Book of Mormon." It is one thing for the Book of Mormon to use the word "omnipotent" to describe God and another thing for it to use this word in the traditional sense that I explicated above. In that sense, Mormon theology denies that God is omnipotent and this is because it contradicts what Joseph Smith tells us God is like. God, we are told, is embodied. So, I argue that God must be finite. The argument is simple. Let a body be any space-time region which is filled with enough fundamental material to be such that we can run up against it, so to speak. Now whatever is embodied is by virtue of that fact located wherever its body is. So, if God is embodied he is located in a particular space-time region. Now take a given time and God is at one and only one location at that time. And so God cannot be multiply located. But there are certainly things which can be multiple located. For example, the property of redness is located in my daughter's fire engine truck and my sleep deprived eyes simultaneously. So, it follows that there is something which is logically possible which God cannot accomplish. This I submit shows that God must be finite.<sup>12</sup> Couple this with the fact that finitism so nicely solves the problem of evil and it follows that Mormons should no longer ignore this very reasonable aspect of their brand of theism.

#### References

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Burke, M., [1987] "Theodicy with a God of Limited Power: A Reply to McGrath," *Analysis*, 47:1, 57--8.

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<sup>12</sup> This argument needs a lot more to fill it out. For example, the definition of a body is neither rigorous nor uncontentious. But I submit that any rigorous definition will inevitably entail that bodies are at only one place at one time. And this is the key to the argument.

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