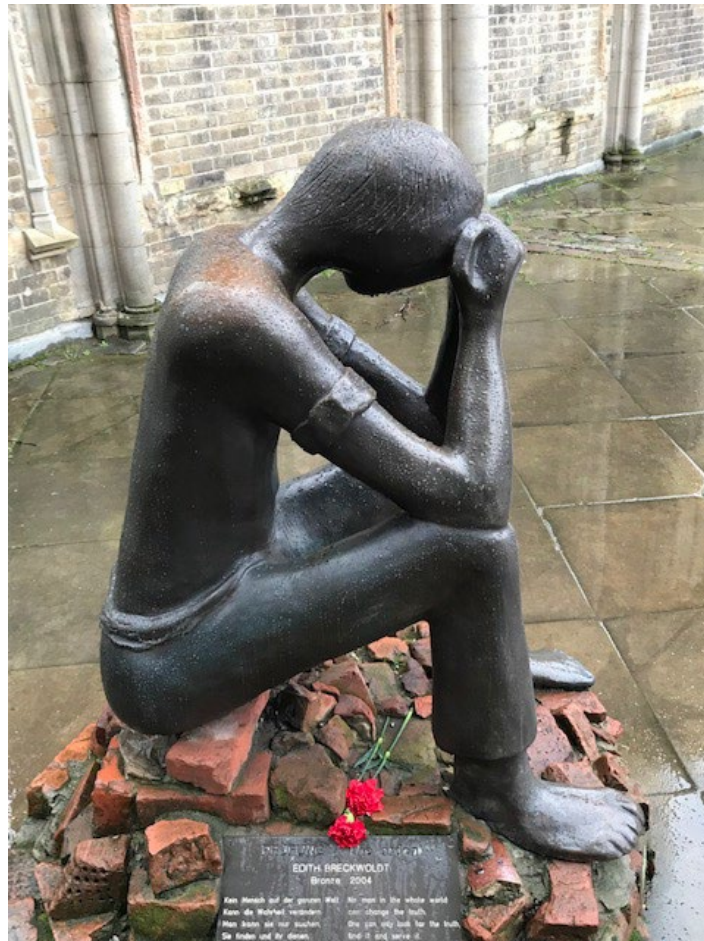


The Problem of Evil and Radical Agnosticism

Robert Hanna



“Prüfung/Test,” by Edith Breckwoldt (Hamburg DE, 2004) (Author’s photograph, 2019)

What do you believe is the strongest philosophical case against Christianity, and what’s your response to it?

I suppose the most powerful case against Christianity is the problem of evil. And that’s a serious problem for all human beings—Christians, non-Christians. My view on that has come to be something like this: A classic view was that God makes everything happen, and Augustine’s view was that evil in the world was sort of like dissonance in a fugue of Johann Sebastian Bach. It has to be there. It plays a significant role in the whole, entire composition.

I’ve long been impressed by the early-20th-century writings of Karl Barth on God and evil, and what Barth highlights in Christian Scripture is just a note of a battle going on. What

the New Testament writers called the principalities and powers. God's not doing everything, but there's something mysterious—Barth uses the German term for “nothingness” —that's abroad in the world. Other writers in Scripture call it Satan. And so what strikes me, Pete, as a deep theme in Christian Scripture is that God is dismayed, not displeased, but dismayed by some of the things that happened in human affairs.

In 1983 your eldest son, Eric, died at the age of 25. In the immediate aftermath of Eric's death, can you describe what happened to your faith? Also, many people might wonder why you didn't give up on God after that.

What happened to my faith, insofar as I understand myself, was that I didn't give it up. I remember sort of experimenting with giving it up. But then once again, it was this extraordinary, immense, awesome Creation. The Resurrection. I can't give it up. But it became more mysterious. God became more mysterious to me. It seemed to me after Eric's death, when I reflected on how I thought of God previously, the image that came to mind was, well: My God had been a sort of housebroken God, comfortable, steady, reliable. And now I had these questions. I don't know why. I can't even guess why. God remained just as real but more mysterious. No longer housebroken. Maybe that's the best I can do. (NYT, 2025)

I recently read—as per the quotations directly above—a thought-provoking New York Times interview with the contemporary theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, which covered, among other things, Wolterstorff's personal and theological struggles with the untimely death of his 25-year old son Eric in a climbing accident in 1983 (NYT, 2025). As Eric Wolterstorff's death demonstrates, it's a self-evident fact that natural evil and moral evil¹ exist in this thoroughly nonideal, actual natural and social world, almost everywhere you look. Indeed, Edith Breckwoldt's stunning sculpture *Prüfung*, or in English, *Test*, in the bombed-out ruins of St Nicholas Church in Hamburg, is a moving artistic expression of this self-evident fact. Appropriately, the inscription below the sculpture is a quotation from the work of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered by the Nazis at age 39. More generally, reflecting on the self-evident fact of the existence of natural and moral evil naturally makes you wonder whether God exists or not. In philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, this is known as *The Problem of Evil*.

By *the concept of God*, I mean the concept of a being that is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (all-good). This is also known, for short, as the concept of a 3-O God. By *theism*, I mean the doctrine that a 3-O God exists. And by *atheism*, I mean the doctrine that a 3-O God does not exist. Correspondingly, the classical *Metaphysical Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil* runs as follows:

¹ On the distinction between natural evil and moral evil, see (Hanna, 2024a).

(1) Assume that a 3-O God exists. (Premise.)

(2) Assume that evil exists in the world — both natural evil (for example, disasters and diseases) and also moral evil (wicked choices and acts, or just bad things that happen to people). (Premise.)

(3) Then *either* a 3-O God is responsible for the existence of evil, in which case a 3-O God is Her/Himself evil and not all-good, which is a contradiction with God's assumed 3-O-ness. (From 1 and 2.)

(4) *Or* a 3-O God is not responsible for the existence of evil and yet knew that it was going to happen and could not prevent it — so a 3-O God is not all-powerful, which is also a contradiction with assumed God's 3-O-ness. (From 1 and 2.)

(5) *Or* a 3-O God would have prevented evil but did not know it was going to happen, and is not all-knowing, which is another contradiction with God's assumed 3-O-ness. (From 1 and 2.)

(6) Therefore, given the existence of evil, which contradicts God's nature in three different ways, necessarily a 3-O God does not exist. (From 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.)

If The Metaphysical Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil were sound, then it would be logically necessary that a 3-O God does not exist.

In the classical response of theism to this atheistic argument, it's claimed that it is at least logically possible that God has a sufficient reason for permitting evil that we are either capable of knowing, or else simply incapable of knowing, given our limited, "human, all-too-human" powers of knowing. Perhaps this sufficient reason is the Leibnizian "this world is necessarily the best of all possible worlds" doctrine (brilliantly mocked in Voltaire's *Candide*); perhaps it's free will; perhaps it's moral progress; perhaps it is all of these taken together; or perhaps it is something else completely unfathomable by us. Let us call this classical theistic response *Theodicy*. In response to *Theodicy*, the neo-classical *Evidential Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil* says that even if it is logically possible that God has a sufficient reason for permitting evil, nevertheless it's significantly more rationally justified to believe that God does not exist, than to believe that God exists. And so the theist and the atheist are locked in a seemingly endless and forever unresolved dialectical struggle.

But there's another, sharply different way of thinking about all this—see, for example, (Hanna, 2016, 2018)—which I'll now very briefly spell out and defend, and

which, I believe, provides an adequate resolution to the dialectical impasse between theism and atheism that's opened up by The Problem of Evil.

By the phrase, "human, all-too-human," riffing on Nietzsche, I mean *finite, fallible, and also thoroughly normatively imperfect in every other way too*. Correspondingly, according to my view, human perception and human knowledge are strictly limited to what falls within the scope of (i) our "human, all-too-human" senses, (ii) our "human, all-too-human" imagination, and (iii) our "human, all-too-human" concepts and theories— even when these perceptions, imaginings, and concepts are extended by the basic natural sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology, by the basic formal sciences of logic and mathematics, or by philosophy, and allow for the "human, all-too-human: knowledge of many non-empirical necessary truths and empirical, contingent truths alike (Hanna, 2015). So, by its very nature, a 3-O God, simply by virtue of Its/His/Her very nature as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, falls beyond all possible human perception, imagination, conceptualization, and theory. Therefore, just by knowing the inherent limitations of all human perception, imagination, conceptualization, and theory, we do know this fact with a priori certainty: *that we cannot know what's God's nature is, nor can we prove whether God exists or does not exist*. Let's call this doctrine, *radical agnosticism*.

If radical agnosticism is true, then not only The Metaphysical Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil, but also Theodicy, as well as The Evidential Argument For Atheism From The Existence of Evil, are equally rationally unjustifiable and unprovable. Indeed, if radical agnosticism is true, then God's existence and God's non-existence alike are equally rationally unjustifiable and unprovable: for, as a "human, all-too-human" animal, given the inherent limitations of your cognitive powers, then you cannot rationally justify a belief in God's existence and you cannot rationally justify a belief in God's non-existence. So if radical agnosticism is true, then theism and atheism alike are equally rationally unjustifiable and unprovable.

These radically agnostic facts, in turn, put The Problem of Evil in a completely new light. For if natural evil and moral evil both exist, and there is evil of both kinds at all times and everywhere in this world, but God's nature is humanly unknowable and God's existence and non-existence are equally rationally unjustifiable and unprovable, then there's an intolerable tension in us between belief and disbelief, and faith and doubt; and although apathy and quietism are possible options, the tension is dynamic and must be resolved; hence we discover that *we can't just do nothing about natural and moral evil*.

On the contrary, we find that *we've got to deal with them*. Therefore, natural evil and moral evil are entirely up to us to deal with *collectively and individually*, that is, *they're sociopolitical and existential problems*. We and we alone, collectively and individually, must

deal with natural evil and moral evil, as best we can, in nature, society, and ourselves, by protecting, cleaning up, or fixing up the natural world when it is threatened or breaks down, and by responding effectively and with compassion and courage to even the most horrific and monstrous moral evils, whether in ourselves or others, and above all by trying wholeheartedly to treat everyone with sufficient respect for their human dignity in this thoroughly nonideal actual natural and social world (Hanna, 2023), as a lifelong sociopolitical and existential task. Indeed, in my opinion, this is also the essential message of the widely-misunderstood concluding sentence of Voltaire's *Candide*: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*, "we must cultivate our garden" (Hanna, 2025).

We can look at it this way. *Either* God does *not* exist, and then we're dealing with natural and moral evil for our own sake, all on our own. *Or else* God *does* exist, natural and moral evil are both parts of God's plan for the world, we must do God's work, under God's jurisdiction, and then we're dealing with moral and natural evil for God's sake. If radical agnosticism is true, however, then we know with a priori certainty that we cannot know either way. Nevertheless, either way, given the dynamic tension between belief and disbelief, we must do *something*, and dealing with natural and moral evil is a lifelong sociopolitical and existential task. Therefore, collectively and individually, *let's leap!*, and *wholeheartedly try to do something constructive* about natural and moral evil, i.e., *we must cultivate our garden*.

Correspondingly, let's call this *the radically agnostic leap of faith*. But since this is a short essay, I'll leave the comparisons and contrasts between the radically agnostic leap of faith, Pascal's Wager (see, e.g., Hanna, 2024b), and Kierkegaard's writings, as a much longer story for another day.²

² I'm grateful to Martha Hanna and Alan Johnson for thought-provoking correspondence on and around the main topics of this essay, and especially to Martha Hanna for drawing my attention to (NYT, 2025).

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