2021

**God and Rescuer**

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

GOD AS RESCUER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY
CLINTON NEPTUNE
CHICAGO, IL
DECEMBER 2021
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who made this dissertation possible, starting with my close family and friends. Words are difficult to find to express the love and appreciation I have for my wife, Sara, whose unfailing encouragement and support throughout this process has been the single greatest reason this project is completed. Thank you. May God bless my children, Hannah, Luke, Jack, and Grace for making our home a place of happiness and rest that I long to be in after long days of working and writing. My father, Steve, I thank for being a paragon of wisdom – he kept my eyes on the bigger picture and how my work could impact the world, while always being a ready and adept interlocutor for the ideas in this project. My mother, Susan, instilled in me the adventurous spirit, which has characterized my academic and intellectual journeying, both geographically and ideologically. My best mate, Tony, embodies the intellectually virtuous life; his curiosity and openness provided the breeding ground for the ideas in this project.

I would also like those who invested in my professional and philosophical development. My committee chair, advisor, and friend, Dr. Paul Moser, opened my eyes to a new way of seeing religious epistemology and I am grateful for his care and patience. Dr. Kristen Irwin gave me the gift of her presence, was a trusted source of wisdom during my time in graduate school, and had a genuine care for how my life was going beyond academics. Father Harry Gensler helped me get my first paper published, which is now substantially included in this project, and provided excellent comments throughout my proposal process. I also thank my fellow graduate
students in the Philosophy Department, in particular Corbin Casarez, David Atenasio and David Bukenhofer, for their friendship, being sharp thinkers, and helping me hone my philosophical skills through long talks and intellectual sparring.

I would also like to thank Heartland Community Church, both the staff and congregation, for providing the space and support for me to finish this project in absentia.
To Sara.
Your love, encouragement, and sacrifices made this possible.
I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

ABSTRACT ix

CHAPTER I: THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT AND CONCEIVING OF GOD 1
   The Main Contention 9
   A Word on Concepts 11
   Perfect Being Theology 17
   Scriptural Theology 27
   Conclusion 30

CHAPTER II: THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF DEATH 31
   Clarifying the Terms 31
   The Argument 36
   Flaws in the Argument 38
   Conclusion 49

CHAPTER III: THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF MORAL FAILURE 51
   The Problem of Moral Failure 52
   Moral Saints 54
   Strangeness of Moral Properties 56
   Moral Gumption 58
   A Rescue Plan 65
   Objections 69
   Conclusion 71

CHAPTER IV: THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF APPARENT GRATUITOUS EVIL 73
   Apparent Gratuitous Evil 76
   Implications for a God as Rescuer 82
   Addressing the Problem of Gratuitous Evil 85
   Conclusion 95

CHAPTER V: OBJECTIONS TO THE GOD AS RESCUE CONCEPT 98
   The Argument for God as Rescuer 98
   Objection 1: The Rescuer Should Not Be Called “God” 101
   Objection 2: God is Ineffable, and so, Religious Inquiry is Pointless 109
   Four Views on Divine Ineffability 112
   Objection 3: The Argument Doesn’t Account for the Relativity of Existential Significance 120
   Objection 4: We Just Need More Time 123
   Objection 5: God Should Let People Know a Rescuer Is Available 125
CHAPTER VI: THE UPSHOT OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD AS RESCUER FOR RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Filling Out the God as Rescuer Concept 127
The Possibility of Personal Death 128
The Predicament of Moral Failure 132
The Predicament of Apparently Gratuitous Evil 136
Interest in Privately-Available Evidence 137
Is There a Place for Fideism? 146
Conclusion 148

BIBLIOGRAPHY 150

VITA 155
ABSTRACT

I argue that the best concept of God, for the purposes of inquiring into God's existence and nature, is one derived from considering the human predicament and how to satisfy the existential yearning of human inquirers. Other popular methods of conceiving of God, such as some perfect being theologies and scriptural theologies, miss this vital motivational component in their God-concept construction. The concept of God on offer in this project, God as Rescuer, characterizes a being who is willing and able to rescue humanity from the predicament of the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous evil. It will turn out that this conception of God is not so unlike traditional conceptions; in order to rescue humans from their predicament, God would have to be extremely powerful and intelligent, morally perfect, everlasting, and relational. Equipped with this conceptual foundation and after addressing a number of objections, such as religious skepticism motivated by concerns about divine ineffability, we can examine the epistemological implications if such a being were to satisfy the concept of God as Rescuer. The properties that this being would have if it existed and the reasons humans would be justified in ascribing them, indicate that certain religious epistemologies are misguided, such as some versions of fideism and natural theology.
CHAPTER I

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT AND CONCEIVING OF GOD

Some, if not most, human inquirers want to know if God exists. It is reasonably clear to understand why this is. A general curiosity and desire to be acquainted with the world as it really is drives some to search for evidence of God’s existence. So, discovering that the world includes God increases one’s understanding of reality. But there seems like a clear existential motive as well. God, as traditionally conceived in Judeo-Christian circles, is at least a very powerful, wise, and loving being that wants what is best for human beings and has some sort of providential plan for their good. Finding out that such a being exists could have an enormous impact in shaping an individual’s values, efforts, and priorities, among other things.

I want to acknowledge that this present project finds itself in the midst of the West’s increasingly post-Christian and secular cultural climate. As such, the discussion space on topics revolving around and including the God-question has arguably never been more diverse; in fact, contemporary scholars and popular influencers offer rather ambivalent perspectives on religious inquiry. Some decry such efforts as futile if not dangerous. Others remain open toward a general “spirituality” unfettered by the systems and doctrines of mainline denominations and sects of the more popular world religions. While others remain committed to defending conservative orthodoxy on all fronts, worried that yielding an inch to modernist thinking will lead to losing a mile. I do not want this project to appear tone deaf to the overall lack of consensus on religious matters or to seem to sidestep these concerns.
Instead, I hope this project offers a path forward – that whatever perspective one has toward the constellation of religious issues and topics there would be a useful paradigm here for religious inquiry.

My key motivation for this project is that I remain convinced that nothing is as existentially important as discovering whether God exists. Hopefully, the reasons for this will become clearer as we uncover a more foundational question in this project – how are we going to use the word “God”? The word “God” and its non-English equivalent counterparts have seen quite a bit of traffic throughout human history, and you and I are likely bringing uniquely nuanced conceptual content to the table. It is not my intention for you to shed your cherished conception of God, but rather to consider together if there is a conception of God that is poised to serve us well in our inquiry into whether God exists while addressing the predicaments all human beings face.

To do this, to come to a shared understanding of a concept of “God” and to explore its existential significance, let’s start with some ideas about the general human experience and situation. There are some interests that all human beings ought to share. That is, there are states of affairs that bear on all people and are worthy of our attention. We might lump all of these into the category of the “human situation”. So, let the “human situation” be the set of all states of affairs that impinge on human beings in an existential way – it deeply matters to their way of being in the world and depending on how they are addressed will greatly impact what gives significance to human life. Allow me to briefly address how I am using the word “ought” in the above paragraph. By “ought”, I have in mind a standard-relational theory.¹ On this view, an

“ought” refers to “a three-place relation between an agent, an act, and a system of rules, where the rules are imperatives specified by a certain context.”

In this way, there can be moral oughts, prudential oughts, etiquette oughts, and so on each with differing sets of rules that govern the proper usage of “ought in a context.” As we will unpack over the next few chapters of this project, the human situation may contain items that ought to be cared about in different ways, i.e. some may be moral, some may be prudential.

Now, of course, the various components in a description of the human situation bear more importance than others. Indeed, thinkers across multiple disciplines have described the human situation in diverse ways to highlight or to place more significance on certain features over others. Some have conceptualized the human situation with a theory of motivation, wherein certain states of scarcity and/or depletion give rise to felt needs that propel human behavior. Abraham Maslow famously argued that certain human needs have greater “prepotency” or influence over our actions and only once those needs have been met can we address higher levels of needs. For instance, hunger and thirst must be satisfied before one can attend to the need of self-actualization or realization. What it means to be human in the world is to climb up and down the hierarchy of needs depending on whatever felt need is impinging on one the most. This is one way to describe the human situation. Or one might suggest that the predominant feature of the human situation is the presence of desire at all. Recognizing that human beings are

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3 I will help myself to the thesis that the moral domain overrides the other domains of practical reason. For instance, prudence, etiquette, and morality might demand contradictory behavior, but moral constraints and demands on action supersede the dictates of the other domains.

conscious, some have distilled consciousness down to a series of desires to have (cravings) and desires not to have (aversions). Siddartha Guatama, whose sayings are catalogued in the Dhammapada, says that following about desire:

Harassed by craving, people
scurry about like a hunted hare
Therefore, let the practitioner,
longing to be free from passion,
dispel craving from himself.

The person who is without cravings,
yet intent on the forest of desire,
who, freed from the forest of desire,
runs back to the forest of desire—
just look at that person:
released, he runs back into bondage.\(^5\)

This is in contrast with Maslow. Maslow argues to embrace the desire, fulfill it, and move on to the more significant, meaningful desires. Whereas, Guatama argues that we ought to try to remove desire since it is the cause of suffering. We will say more about the merits of eastern religious conceptions of spirituality and God later, but it is important to note that Buddhist traditions offer us a view of the human situation that sits in the conversation with other Western views.

This project jumps into the ongoing conversation concerning the contours of the human situation and does so in order to determine the implications for religious inquiry. And again, more specifically, of current interest is discovering just what are those features of the human experience that apply to all people and carry significant existential weight. In pursuit of that interest, I’d like to make a distinction between aspects of the human situation that are within our

control and those that are not. The craving for food is not within my control, but in principle, I am able to satisfy this craving by acquiring food and eating it. The daily need for rest and sleep is outside of my control in the sense that it is part of what it means to be human to experience fatigue and weariness. Yet, I do in principle have the power to meet this need for myself. Of course, certain circumstances, including the malicious behavior of others, might prevent me from exercising the power to meet a number of my needs, but were I given free reign and had access to various resources, I could meet those needs.

So, what are those aspects of the human situation that are, in principle, not within our control, or our ability to accomplish a given goal or manipulate variables in such a way as to produce a certain outcome? I can’t control my family of origin, of course. Decisions and events occurred prior to my birth that produced the family situation I find myself in. I can’t control, at least in a very fine-tuned way at all, the rhythm of my own heart or various other autonomic bodily functions. Certain mechanisms and processes will occur in my body and mind that I have little to no control over.

There are certainly others on this list, but it is important to recognize that these different areas where humans lack control vary in their existential importance. Existential importance has to do with the impact a given event has on how one’s existence will play out, both in terms of quality and quantity. Sometimes we talk about existential threats to humanity. Global nuclear war is an existential threat – it threatens to either make humanity extinct or at least severely diminish the quality of life of humans by sufficiently radiating the planet. But existential concerns could also be more broadly conceived. Included in this expanded notion might be the search for significance, the freedom from suffering or bondage of various sorts, or to escape the bad and embrace the good. Considering all of this in our idea of existential concern, for this
present project I am interested in those things that are *most* existentially important; and I want to answer the following question. What are the aspects of the human situation that impinge on us the most and affect the length, quality, texture, and significance, meaning, and overall satisfaction of our existence?

I claim that there are three main concerns that fit the above criteria. The features of the human situation that most impinge on us existentially are (1) the possibility that our personal deaths will occur at the time of our physical deaths\(^6\), (2) that it seems we are unable to achieve moral blamelessness on our own, and (3) that the world, and our lives, could contain quite a bit of gratuitous evil. Why? Because each of these three features contain branching paths, at least from the perspective of the inquirer; and some of the possible outcomes are truly bad or extremely unchoiceworthy. Chapters II-IV of this project explore the negative paths of each of these three at length, but I will give a short description here. First, there is a great loss of value if it is the case that I will undergo personal death – the final death of my person after which I am no more. Even though I will likely physically die and undergo bodily failure, I am not certain that I will personally die. But I may. And so might everyone I have ever cared about; and there is nothing any human being can do about it, at least not in my lifetime. On my view, this is a bleak outcome, but there are some scholars who disagree and contend that personal death is

\(^6\) I do not mean to assume any kind of dualism here. I think people are very strongly justified in the belief that the body they have will one day die, barring startling technological developments that could indefinitely stave off death or other surprising turns of events. They will experience system failure of one kind or another. The concern is whether the locus of personhood, their self, will also die at the moment of bodily death. It is this “personal” death that is existentially worrisome. Arguably, one need not be a dualist to hope for personal existence after bodily death. For an extended discussion, see both Lynne Rudder Baker, “Christian materialism in a scientific age,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70, no. 1 (2011): 47-59 and Peter van Inwagen, “The possibility of resurrection,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1978): 114-121.
choiceworthy over everlasting life. I engage with these thinkers and offer rebuttals to them in Chapter II.

Second, even if the first problem of death was solved, I might be in an existence where I am perpetually stuck in some degree of moral failure. Not only are there sometimes harms external to myself occurring due to my immorality, but it is reasonable to suppose that such shortcomings harm myself also. My life does not go as well and I live a less flourishing existence because of my spurts of wrongdoing. We pay a great toll in society for our lack of moral uprightness, and there is no clear evidence as of yet to suggest that humanity could pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps and overcome wickedness. No moral philosophy or religious system developed by human beings has properly equipped us with the ability to transcend moral malpractice. This is to be lamented. Yet, some authors and worldviews promise this kind of transcendence or decry it as undesirable, and I will interact with them in Chapter III.

Third, even if we lived forever and were perfectly excellent to each other, our world would still be plagued by evil. Of course, we can all think of certain cases where evil leads to positive outcomes, and thus it is worth enduring such evil and its attending suffering in order to attain some good result. But this calculus is far from clear for an enormous number of events. Parents lose children to vicious diseases. Hurricanes devastate cities and local economies for decades. Seemingly random occurrences of nature inflict damage upon us leading to all sorts of horrific ailments and injury. It all feels like a bit too much. It seems as though there is gratuitous evil. I will work through this problem of evil and explore how it affects religious epistemology in Chapter IV.

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7 This may not be the case for certain views of moral perfection which include the notion that the self can be trained to never properly suffer.
These three features, for shorthand I will just use “death, moral failure, and evil”, constitute the existential unholy trinity. And now I will shift to using more normative language regarding this human situation, because it is not merely a situation – it is a predicament. Or at least, on one branching path it is a predicament. I argue that it is rational to not want this to be the track the universe is on – it is unchoiceworthy compared to the other, better paths. Given a life that would generally be considered good, immortality is more valuable, and should be accorded more value and desirability than personal, final death.\(^8\) A life of moral perfection and blamelessness has more value and is choiceworthy over a life of moral imperfection. And a life where evil is always meaningful and never gratuitous is more valuable and better than a life where there is sometimes pointless, gratuitous evil and its attending suffering. So, the rational religious inquirer will want to know if there is some kind of rescue from the human predicament they find themselves in that not only saves them from the bad situation, but ushers them onto this better path.

By no means should the religious inquirer sit idly by and hope a sign is given to indicate how the universe is one way or the other. Instead, she can begin the quest for evidence that could indicate that the universe is on this better, different track.\(^9\) And crucially, the existential posture of the inquirer ought to be one of desire toward a better outcome. It would be good to avoid the predicament of personal death, moral failure, and gratuitous evil. So, the inquirer will want to be particularly attuned for evidence that there is some avenue of rescue or escape from

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\(^8\) It is difficult to determine at what point on the spectrum of goodness to badness that a life would no longer be worth living forever. We will touch on this briefly in Chapter II.

\(^9\) It is almost certainly the case the no one finds themselves in the position of our imagined religious inquirer at a fork in the road. Instead, most people find themselves already walking down one of the roads. Yet, I think careful mindfulness and deliberate shedding of various biases and long-held beliefs can help one reach a place of genuinely open inquiry.
the predicament she finds herself in – the predicament of uncertainty regarding her future existence, value, moral improvement, and the apparent gratuity of evil.

**The Main Contention**

The purpose of this present project is to offer a way of conceiving of God that will cut through many of the various barriers that get in the way of free and effective inquiry into God’s existence. The preceding discussion lays the foundation for a common starting place that religious inquirers ought to find existentially compelling. The predicament of the possibility of personal death, intractable moral failure, and gratuitous evil is worrisome and all inquirers have a vested interest in discovering if there is a way out of this mess. It is from this observation that I would like to offer what we can call the “Existential Method” for constructing a concept of God. Here’s how it works. First, discover the states of affairs that ought to matter most to human beings on an existential level. We just did this exercise above and found the possibility of personal death, unconquerable moral failure, and the possibility of gratuitous evil to be the core of humanity’s existential concern. Second, consider what kind of traits a being would need to possess in order to rescue people from this predicament – these will be the component parts of our concept. We will spend some time in the next few chapters cataloguing these, but for now we might think great power, knowledge, moral perfection, concern for humanity, and everlastingness to be among the properties we would reasonably ascribe to this being. Whatever set of traits we end up deriving, the idea is that rescuing humanity from their predicament would not be possible without them. Finally, let the term “God” refer to the being that is willing and able to rescue humanity from its predicament. What ought to matter most to human beings on an
existential level is salvation from the apparent predicament we find ourselves in. Let’s just call the being that could potentially rescue us from our bad situation “God”\(^\text{10}\).

Let me be clear: I am not claiming that a reason for thinking that God exists is because God’s existence would lead to immense existential value. The argument is not of the form, “Because I really want God to exist, therefore, God exists.” I do not think the mental state of desire plays any evidential role in building one’s justification for a belief in God’s existence, nor does it serve as a truth-maker for any proposition regarding God’s mind-independent existence. Instead, the line of reasoning goes like this: I really want to be rescued from the predicament I am in. My concept of God is that which is willing and able to rescue me from my predicament. Thus, it would satisfy my deep existential yearning if God actually existed. It would also help assuage my worries and uncertainties regarding the future if I could presently have knowledge of God’s existence. In addition, I’d want to know if there is anything that God expects or wants from me in order for my rescue to take place. Therefore, my religious epistemological efforts will be tailored to discovering all that I can about the God as Rescuer, if such a God actually exists.

As the last clause exemplifies, at no point in this project will it be assumed that any sort of god exists, let alone the God as Rescuer. No metaphysical commitment toward anything resembling theism is required to adopt the ideas presented here. Not only will God’s existence not be assumed, but I will not be giving arguments or evidence that God does, in fact, exist. Rather, this is a project about conceiving of God in a way that is best suited for the purpose of

\(^{10}\) Chapter VI will offer a longer discussion of what a potential rescue might look like, and the stages such a process might include. At this point in the project, we should leave open a host of options regarding such possible rescue-stages. It could be the case that if the God as Rescuer exists, then God has been in the process of “beginning to rescue” all or most human beings and awaits noncoercive cooperation in some way from human beings to realize the state of “fully rescued” in their lives.
discovering whether God exists and noting the implications for religious epistemology. I will
leave it to others to offer arguments and evidence for the existence of God.

A Word on Concepts

This is fundamentally a project about choosing a method to construct concepts and the
resulting concepts those methods generate, specifically a concept of God. I’d like to address
why this is important. Why make the move from discussing the human predicament to offering a
way of conceiving of God? A driving thought for this project concerning methodology is that
the way we conceive of God will have a significant impact on the kind of evidence one would
expect God to offer. For example, I could build into my concept of God, among other things,
that God is a physical being residing on a distant extragalactic planet. If this God exists, then at
least one route to acquiring evidence of God’s existence would be to physically travel to this
planet and gather sensory evidence of such a being. In this case, the barrier of access to evidence
is merely physical and technological; this God would prize physical exertion and scientific
achievement as worthy traits to acquire evidence of God’s existence. Alternatively, someone
may insist that God is a nonphysical being, and thus, gathering the evidence for such an entity’s
existence would likely look much different and require other characteristics from those searching
for evidence of that God. One’s concept of God greatly affects one’s religious epistemology,
and thus, we should think carefully about which concept of God we select.

Furthermore, this selection process is primarily influenced by one’s purposes. That is,
concept adoption and usage is largely purpose or goal-directed. We use concepts to achieve
something. They are purely instrumental and are the currency of communication and language.
Think of it this way. Concepts are like arrows, and you, the communicator and thinker, are the
archer. Imagine a field of vastly different sorts of targets or goals of your communication. Some
are 50 feet wide, some are only big enough to fit your arrowhead. Some are made of hay, some of thick steel. In this analogy, it matters what type of arrow you use in order to make contact with your target.

This way of thinking about concepts helps explain why there can be legitimate conceptual variability. Depending on the type of target you are trying to hit, you will want to use an appropriate concept for that goal. And so, we can ask the following question of our method of conceptualization: what am I trying to achieve with the concept I am constructing on the basis of this method? Consider some common ways concepts of God are used. Suppose one is entering into a time of worship or adoration. Perhaps the concept of God to be employed here is one that is maximal in its property attribution, which includes everything one knows about such a being. It may include properties and traits tangential to investigating evidence of such a being’s existence like immutability, aseity, omnipotence, among others. Or, suppose one is a Christian and is speaking to an audience of Christians in a Sunday-school class setting. Here, one might employ a robust concept of God that heavily borrows from the Christian Scriptures. The purpose of such a study may be to discern certain truths about Christian theology, and thus a concept of God filled out with extra details from Scripture may be more appropriate. Or perhaps one might find themselves in a markedly ecumenical setting where a more hollowed-out, less specific concept of God as Ultimate Reality or Higher Power achieves one’s aims at the time. The idea is that context helps determine which concept of God is most appropriate to use. This, of course, does not mean that one can just choose any old concept for God. One would not want to use conflicting or contradictory concepts of God for various purposes; one’s concept of God should

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11 We can wonder whether these properties are truly unimportant in the search for evidence of the divine, but let’s table that discussion for now.
be consistent among the various purposes one has in using a particular concept of God. We could picture instead our various concepts of God that we use for different purposes as concentric circles. The innermost circle would be the most thin concept, containing the lowest amount of detail and resolution, and the outermost circle would contain everything in the inner circles and more, resulting in a more thick, robust concept. We would be confused to suppose that our more robust concept could have properties that are contradictory to properties in our more thin concept.

Furthermore, purpose or goal adoption is person-relative, and it is not immediately clear that any particular methodology necessitates a certain goal. For example, one could employ the method of Perfect Being Theology, which we will discuss further in the next section, for a variety of purposes. One might be trying to capture an exhaustive list of all the properties that God has – to accurately reflect the details of divine reality to the best of one’s linguistic apparatus.¹² One might use Perfect Being Theology as the concept generation method of choice to procure a working concept to use for worship - this person might find the maximally honorific concept generated as deeply moving and worshipful. One could also use this method with the intention to caricature God - maybe someone finds properties like omniscience and omnipotence to be deeply problematic and wants to show belief in such a being to be silly. Using a certain method does not imply that the user of the method has any particular goal, only that they have some kind of goal.

¹² We could wonder if this task is even possible considering that having beliefs counts as properties, and according to PBT God would be omniscient and believe all and only the true propositions. But, it has been argued that the set of all truths is infinite given Cantor’s theorem and the explosive engine of power sets. See Patrick Grim, “Some Neglected Problems of Omniscience,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1983): 265-276.
Though a method of concept construction does not necessitate a particular goal, it could still be the case that some methods and their conceptual products are better suited for a particular goal. In the case of conceptualizing God, a common goal is to discover whether such a being actually exists that exemplifies the parameters laid out in the concept. Now, of course, the more you load in to your concept of God for this purpose, the more difficult it will be to compile enough evidence to get a justified belief that God exists. For example, suppose that your concept of God includes omnipotence, and you developed this concept for the purpose of discovering whether God exists. It may be hopelessly challenging to locate evidence that a being actually has the property of omnipotence. Is this inquirer then forced to withhold judgment on God existing, since what it means to use the word “God” according to this person is that such a being is omnipotent yet there is no evidence of omnipotence? I think yes. But the problem for the religious inquirer here is not that our experience does not contain enough evidence to justify the assertion of omnipotence; rather, it is that we built this into our concept of God in the first place. God may be omnipotent after all, but I do not think the absence of evidence for justified belief in God’s omnipotence should be a stumbling block to belief in God. I would rather rethink how we are constructing our conception of God and consider the epistemological implications of our conceptual apparatus.

This example demonstrates that we need to think carefully about the goal of our concept development and use. We do not want to be shortchanged epistemologically because we shot for the moon on the conceptual level. This is a primary criticism of other prevalent methods of divine conceptualization. They usually encounter problems for one of two reasons: Either the

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13 Not all concept users have this as their goal.
method allows for a concept that is so robust that no one could have much hope for attaining enough evidence for the existence of a being that exemplifies the concept; or the concept produced is so vacuous that the potential entity outlined by the concept is not very interesting or important enough for inquirers to invest significant energy in pursuing salient evidential requirements for knowledge.

A worry here might be that this view is guilty of wishful thinking or imposing our will on a reality that exists independently no matter what we think about it. It is true that the entities we call trees, cars, and even God, if God exists, exist independent of human mental states. That is, their existence does not hinge on whether a mind is currently thinking about them. To be sure, it is very likely that cars would not have existed had minds not created a design plan, specific parts, and arranged them in a car-like way. Yet, the situation “that my car is parked in my driveway right now” is not a mind-dependent state of affairs in a concurrent sense – that right now a mind needs to be thinking about it to sustain its existence.

Importantly, the claims about concept teleology do not violate the notion of mind-independent reality. Rather, the key insight is that our way of carving up reality by our use of concepts is mind-dependent. This is the nugget of truth the naive idealist brings to the table. “Cars” do not exist mind-independently in the sense that calling an entity a “car” and the attending conceptual features that cars have in common are artificial, mind-dependent categories we place upon the world and the various patterns we find therein. Similarly, we might say that there are no “forests” in a manner of speaking, we just so happen to call certain sizes and groups

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14 Some religious systems deny this. A fairly thick concept of divine sovereignty may include the idea that God sustains the existence of all things that exists. In this case, reality is mind-dependent in the way described.
of trees and plant-life “forests;” that moniker is an accident of history and is entirely dependent on the mental activity of persons.

In this way, it is entirely up to you and me to use whatever concepts we want to try to make sense of the world. The conceptual products we make with this open license can fare better or worse depending on how normative a certain way of thinking and conceptualizing is. That is, people may not understand you very well at first when you use idiosyncratic concepts, but you are nonetheless free to do so in your attempt to pick out entities and ideas.

I want to head off at the pass an objection to this picture of conceptualization. There is a notable difference between offering a method of conceiving and the project of “carving up the world at its joints.” These need not entirely overlap. Someone may adopt as their goal to construct all and only those concepts that pick out fundamentally distinct aspects of reality. We might even think of this as the metaphysical project; picking out those things that actually exist and describing them in such a way to capture all of their attending properties. But that does not have to be the purpose of a method of conceptualizing something. Some users may have purposes in leaving some of the attending properties ambiguous or open-ended in the resulting concept. Thus, the method need not be so demanding that it keeps grinding until an exhaustive more robust concept is generated. This method could still successfully pick out real entities in the world while not attempting a full-blown, comprehensive metaphysic.

Thus, this project embraces and celebrates the vast conceptual variability in conceiving of God. When people use the term “God” in their everyday speech, I am not claiming that they are consistently failing to use the word correctly or are deeply embedded in error just because they do not have in mind the God as Rescuer concept mentioned earlier. Nor am I saying that religious epistemologists who do not endorse this concept are also in systematic error in the
sense that they are failing to refer to the thing that they are trying to refer to. Rather, I am offering a concept of God that would be better suited for the tasks of religious epistemology.\textsuperscript{15}

Unfortunately, many inquirers engaged in religious epistemology use concepts of God that are ill-suited for their intended purposes. If the primary goal of religious epistemology is to discover evidence of God’s existence and nature, then the concept of God used in that endeavor should be properly fine-tuned to yield salient evidence. In this chapter, I will examine two main families of competing concepts of God: Perfect Being Theology and Scriptural Theology. It is my contention that these families of concepts include properties that uniquely obfuscate the search for evidence or exclude some properties that make the search for evidence nearly impossible or hopeless. And moreover, there is a common problem that each of them share: they do not accurately describe what human inquirers ought to care about. There are some features of the human predicament that cry out for resolution. Again, these features are the possibility of personal death upon physical death, systemic moral failure, and widespread apparent gratuitous evil. If these are and ought to be of utmost existential concern, then these should serve as a grounding point for conceiving of God. It is this idea that the two main competing families of concepts of God fail to acknowledge. I turn now to addressing these views.

**Perfect Being Theology**

God is often thought to be the ultimate being - there is nothing greater than God. If there did exist something greater than the being we call “God”, then that other thing would be deserving of the title “God.” In other words, whatever property kinds one might think apply to God, the perfect being theologian would argue it must be applied maximally. For instance, if

\textsuperscript{15} The primary task I have in mind is discovering salient evidence that God exists. This method is well-suited to directing people toward transformative evidence. Chapter VI will explore the epistemological upshot of the *God as Rescuer* concept.
God is to be powerful, then God must be omnipotent. If God is to have knowledge, then God must be omniscient. If God is to be morally good, then God must be omnibenevolent and morally perfect. God is lacking in nothing according to this strategy for conceiving of God.

First, let’s clear the air of common objections to this view that fall flat. Of course, there are some maximal properties and superlatives that God does not have, but ascribing such properties would either be a category mistake or are not features that make something “great,” and thus do not pose a problem for God’s proposed greatness. For example, having the property of being the best freehand rock climber in the world is arguably one that most concepts of God would not have in virtue of being a category mistake. Why? If God is incorporeal, then it is a category mistake to ascribe “being the best freehand rock climber” to such a God, because as far as we know, rock climbing involves contact between a physical body and a rock face. There are also properties that are superlative or point to something maximal, but are not great-making and thus would not be a deficiency if God did not have them. Being the most deceitful agent would be one such property. It points to something maximal and would not be a category mistake - God is the type of metaphysical being that could be deceitful if God so chose, yet it is arguably not great-making.16 A critic might point out that a Perfect Being Theology does not have a good independent reason for excluding “deceitfulness” from the list of great-making properties. That is, they may say it begs the question to disqualify deceitfulness and other traditionally negative moral traits, since the strategy of Perfect Being Theology allows the inquirer to conclude that God is morally perfect – not that you start with such a property. This is a fair point. In response, the Perfect Being Theology proponent may tweak their claim to “God is the being with the

16 Of course, upon acting in a deceitful way such a being would no longer be worthy of the title “God”, at least according to our modern, Western morality.
greatest possible array of compossible great-making properties.” In this way, we have to be a bit more careful in our ascription of properties to God, since one ascription may block another one. For instance, one cannot possess both the property of being maximally honest and the property of being maximally deceitful. It must be possible for the entity in question to possess both properties concomitantly. We will return to this line of argument in a bit.

It should also be mentioned that Perfect Being Theology is not identical to the Ontological Argument. St. Anselm famously makes use of Perfect Being Theology in his attempt to conceive of God, but he goes a step further by arguing that we can know *a priori* that this God exists from the mere fact that God is conceivable. The Perfect Being Theology proponent does not have to make this extra epistemological claim. It is merely a method of constructing a concept of God. We can put it simply this way:

Perfect Being Theology (henceforth PBT): If God exists, then God has only maximally-great compossible properties.

We might describe the method in three-steps: (1) determine the great-making properties, (2) articulate what it means to have the property in a maximal way, (3) include in your concept the largest array of those properties that are consistent with each other. The product of this method will be a concept of God. This concept may provide much utility for users of the concept for various purposes. Yet, the project at hand is to discover whether this method and the resulting concept it produces is best suited for the purpose of discovering whether God exists, not merely if it has any utility for some users. I argue that it is not best suited for this purpose.

Here are a few reasons why. First, a user of the method of PBT finds herself in the difficult position of selecting which properties are great-making that she would then ascribe to...
God. As human religious inquirers, we are all embedded in a cultural context that influences how we value things. Consider the ancient Greek religious inquirer at the time of the fabled siege of Troy, where heroes of their civilization such as Achilles, Agamemnon, and Ajax embodied the prized virtues of the day.\(^\text{18}\) A huge motivation for these warriors engaging in battle was the desire to be remembered by many future generations for their great deeds. To put it rather simply, being famous was a great-making property in that culture.\(^\text{19}\) Why wouldn’t a religious inquirer at that time include that in their conception of God – perhaps being maximally famous or being maximally worthy of fame? After all, this is the notion of greatness, and perhaps even moral greatness, that permeated the culture. It is unlikely that any ancient Greek religious inquirer would have avoided including this in their conception of God while using the PBT method.

Furthermore, our modern perspective would discourage including this kind of property in our efforts to carry out the methodology of PBT. That is, our modern, Western conception of greatness need not include fame, as it may have for cultures of the past. It strikes me as a problem for PBT that it may produce varying conceptions of God depending on the culture of which the inquirer is a member. Its vague search terms allow too much variability for it to be useful for the purpose of discovering whether God exists. It would be nice to have a method with more objective, universal guidelines that would apply to all human beings.

Perhaps another example will help drive this home. Above we mentioned the properties of being honest and being deceitful. I mentioned the property of being maximally deceitful as an


\(^{19}\) This kind of eternal glory pursued by these legendary Greeks is captured in the Greek word “kleov”. We will explore this idea more in a different context in Chapter V.
example of a property that is maximal, but God would not be deficient for lacking it on the PBT method because it is arguably not a great-making property. Most modern inquirers would not consider being maximally deceitful to be a property that makes an entity great. This may be because we view moral perfection as something a maximally great being would exemplify and being maximally deceitful disqualifies one as being morally perfect, therefore God would not be maximally great if God were maximally deceitful. But, again, this line of reasoning heavily depends on the cultural context modern thinkers find themselves in. Consider the Norse and Germanic worship of the trickster god Loki. Though Loki is not described as maximally deceitful – he does help Thor and the other gods steal valuable items at times, and he certainly displays characteristics of trickery and deceit that are a large part of his character. It is not a stretch of the imagination to think that a Germanic person during this time, if given the chance to employ the PBT method of God-concept construction, would have included deceit, trickery, or guile into the concept. Yet, in our modern, post-Judeo-Christian moral milieu, we would be quick to include the virtue of honesty and truthfulness into our conception of the divine.

What does this mean for PBT? Let’s contrast this objection with a relatively recent defense of PBT by Thomas Morris. In his piece “Perfect Being Theology,” he explains this method and offers his own example of generating a conception of God following the method. He begins this conception by noting that greatness of metaphysical stature or status amounts to

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20 For a comprehensive summary of the scholarly material regarding Loki worship, see Frank Stanton Cawley, “The Figure of Loki in Germanic Mythology,” Harvard Theological Review 32, no. 4 (1939): 309-326.

having as many compossible inherently good properties, i.e. those that are better to have than to not have. Here is his list of properties in ascending order of greatness:

1. conscious (a minded being capable of thought and awareness)
2. a conscious agent (capable of free action)
3. a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent
4. a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with significant knowledge
5. a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with significant knowledge and power
6. a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with unlimited knowledge and power who is the creative source of all else
7. a thoroughly benevolent, necessarily existent conscious agent with unlimited knowledge and power who is the ontologically independent creative source of all else.\(^\text{22}\)

This is a “concept of a greatest possible or maximally perfect being” that “would accord with the intuitions of most perfect being theologians.”\(^\text{23}\) All of the properties mentioned in (7) are thought to be great-making – and I happen to agree that they are. Yet, the flaw of the view is that its methodology hinges greatly on the results of one’s power of intuition. There is much to be said about the role of intuition in philosophy, and well-meaning, thoughtful scholars disagree as to its epistemological power. I won’t attempt to take sides in that debate, but for this current case, there is an important caveat to the use of intuition that needs to be offered – and it is in the spirit of the objection given above. One worry is that my powers of intuition are colored by a host of circumstantial details of my life – my culture, upbringing, life experiences, choices, and all the rest affect the very real feeling that things are evident, clear, obvious, or strike me as true. That God would be maximally great, at least in part, by being maximally loving may be intuitive to me and Morris, but not so for people in many other cultures throughout time. This is not to say that disagreement undercuts justification, although it might, but it does make for an unhelpful method for those that perhaps have the wrong intuition about great-making properties. Thus,


people with diverse intuitions on the collection of great-making properties may construct jointly inconsistent concepts of God based on this method. This is a flaw of the method. To be slightly tongue-in-cheek, wouldn’t a great-making property of a method be that the method is immune from error on the basis of accidental circumstance? I believe so.

Morris’ conception laid out in (7), that would indeed be shared by many PBT apologists, unfortunately and inevitably adds another burden to the religious inquirer. As with any project of constructing a concept, there is the activity property ascription. The inquirer and user of the method is actively, consciously considering including various properties in her concept. As Morris does above, there is a progressive nature to this method of accumulating typical maximal properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. And this is no accident. A crucial theme of the method is that the user considers what would be the great-making properties of a being and intentionally, with their cognitive powers, assign those properties to the concept they are constructing.

A question to consider is this: What degree of understanding of those properties must the inquirer possess in order to justifiably ascribe them to their concept? As I write, I look out on hills of beautiful green grass. I know that the hills are green because the grass covering them is green. And yet, I could not give an exhaustive explanation of what the term “green” even means. I have a rudimentary understanding that I can perceive greenness when light refracts off an object with a wavelength of 495-570 nanometers. But there is a lot more to what “green” means – imagine all that an expert physicist could tell you about the color green!
Yet, importantly, I am still justified in using this “fuzzy” concept of mine due to the immense evidence I get from my correct usage of the term amongst my peers. I know of only a few people in my sphere of influence that would disagree that the grass I see appears green – and this is only because I know that they have a degree of color-blindness in that part of the spectrum. Other than those few individuals, all of my usage of that term has been enormously successful in the practice of referring. That is, I get a great deal of justification for my ascription and usage of the term “green” by how practically successful I am in using the term, even in the midst of a disastrously small amount of understanding of how the color green is seen and perceived by human beings.

But now consider the project at hand of constructing a concept of God and including properties like omniscience. I have studied omniscience a bit more than green, and at the very least, I possess a basic, definitional understanding of this term: all-knowing or knows all that is possible to know. But the moment I pry a bit further, I realize that I have a far looser grasp on the collection of things that are “possible to know.” Does this include propositions about the past? About the future? The present location and velocity of quantum entities? Additionally, the ever elusive consensus on the meaning of the word “know” only reduces my confidence in deploying the term correctly and precisely. Indeed, these deficiencies in understanding regarding the notion of omniscience affect my ability to justifiably ascribe the property during my concept construction. As an inquirer into the existence of God, I want to be cautious when ascribing

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24 “Green” is fuzzy to me because of my lack of expertise in physics; it may not be fuzzy to others. I do not mean to imply that the meaning of words reside in their usage in a broadly Wittgensteinian sense, although this may, in fact, be the case. See a discussion of this in William G. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction*, (Routledge, 2018), 88-99.

25 Let alone whatever we might say about the reliability of my senses and the alignment of veridicality with my judgments and how reality actually is.
properties to my concept, particularly when overburdening my concept of God with extraneous properties which could negatively impact my epistemological efforts. Therefore, without proper clarity, I should be hesitant to heavily lean on a property like omniscience. Perhaps there are individuals who believe they have nailed down everything you would need to know about the notion of omniscience to be able to have justified confidence in ascribing that to God before they know that God exists. But, I would wager that most religious inquirers have not done this philosophical legwork.

In fact, this extra philosophical legwork involved with the method of perfect being theology is the exact kind of epistemological roadblock that an ideal conception of God for the purpose of discovering whether God exists would try to avoid. I am unconvinced that a God seeking to rescue us from our human predicament would be terribly interested in the philosophical prowess of people to intellectually grasp a handful of tricky religious ideas. Yet, according to perfect being theology, this is precisely what is required. In later chapters, we will see more about why God would not be interested in such things. The key point here is that perfect being theology requires its practitioners to ascribe things to God that require quite a bit of understanding, likely through philosophical and theological machinations, and this presents an unnecessary obstacle to the search for actual evidence of the being(s) in question.26

There is another problem plaguing these maximal-type properties. Unfortunately, in this case, for properties like omniscience, they are not on display in relevantly important ways for

26 Admittedly, any conception of God or theological claims makes a demand on the user’s understanding. However, I contend that some of the omni’s and im’s central to PBT uniquely evade plain understanding, whereas the God as Rescuer concept makes use of only one maximal property, omnibenevolence. Maximal goodness has no obvious internal consistency problem nor is there reason to think that in principle it is property impossible to possess in a way that, say, omnipotence and omniscience both have. See Patrick Grim, “Some Neglected Problems of Omniscience,” 1983, for a sample of issues that immediately arise when certain maximal properties are included in one’s conception of God.
epistemic purposes as their more “showy” counterparts like being green or being tall. My fellow language users and epistemic peers with regard to the color green share a near unanimous affirmation of the existence of a phenomena of green and we all seem to have a fairly similar idea of what it is like. After all, it is on display all around us, particularly if one happens to be standing by the rolling, green hills I described earlier. Yet, the property of omniscience is so much further removed from us, and moreover, the peer group of language users that have some familiarity with that term do not share overwhelming affirmation that the object in question, which might possess the property, actually exists. In other words, there is diminished justification in the attempt to include a term like “omniscience” into one’s God concept due to the lack of epistemic support you would gain from practical success stories. “Omniscience” is very much unlike “green” and “tall”, in that it arguably is never on display. In its finest moments, it refers to an abstract property, of which human beings have no relatable experience, and of a being that the peer group of language users of the term would have significant disagreement about whether the property obtains at all in virtue of many of them rejecting any form of theism.  

I claim that these objections make the method of perfect being theology sub-optimal as a starting place for religious inquiry and God-concept formation. But the perfect being theology apologist might have a personal worry that they could never worship a being that didn’t possess these maximal properties. That being doesn’t sound like God to them. They might wonder if a being that lacks omniscience and omnipotence is really worthy of worship. To be clear, at no

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point did I claim that God, if God exists, does not possess some or all of these maximal properties. The present concern, and this is key, is whether we should build these properties into our concept of God at the outset of our religious inquiry. Suppose it turns out that the method for constructing a concept of God that is best suited for discovering whether God exists produces a concept of God where God is extremely powerful and has vast knowledge. This does not preclude the possibility that God actually has these traits to their maximum. God may indeed be omnipotent and omniscient. But, these terms are not frontloaded into our concept God before we have even begun to find evidence that God exists. So, the perfect being theology apologists may find the kind of God they are looking for in the product of a different method of conceiving of God. Let us move on and examine another popular method for conceiving of God.

**Scriptural Theology**

Perhaps the most common way that people build their conceptions of God is by appealing to a certain community’s compilation of revelatory documents or traditions. Adherents of major world religions largely get their ideas about God from their sacred scriptures. On this view, something divine was the inspiration for the oral tradition passed down by ancestors and/or the content written down at some point by human authors. There is a spectrum of views on the degree to which divine inspiration is responsible for the content of various texts, and we need not be concerned too much with that here. On nearly any view of divine inspiration, God (loosely speaking) communicates God’s ideas and thoughts in such a way that their meaning is preserved in the mind and writing of a human author. Thus, other people can read the text and gain information about what God is like and the mental states of God. If one could isolate all and only the divinely inspired passages, then you could use each proposition contained in the passages to build a robust conception of God that presumably has God as the source of the data.
Consider the Christian scriptures. Many Evangelical Christians endorse a verbal, plenary view of divine inspiration on the 66 books of the Protestant Bible. On a traditional interpretation of the meaning of various passages, I can begin to build a robust theology and conception of God that may include notions such as trinity, incarnation, eternity, moral perfection, providence, omniscience, and many other features. This is a fine project. But, it is not the method best suited for discovering whether God exists.

The key problem for Scriptural Theology is that the justificatory power of the assembled collection of propositions used to construct a concept is only transmitted to the inquirer if the religious inquiry has already been completed, or at least certain stages of the inquiry have been completed, such as discovering that God exists. That is, the reasons I would have to endorse certain resources as saliently revelatory are reasons I could only justifiably affirm were I to already have evidence that a divine revelator exists and is doing some revealing.

Admittedly, this criticism hangs on an internalist model of justification where the inquirer needs the right sort of reasons and mental states to achieve the level of justification required for knowledge. Suppose that the Christian Scriptures are in fact divinely inspired documents to the effect that the ultimate source of the claims made therein come from the mind of God, the communicative efforts of God revealing and humans recording occurred in such a way that there was no loss of meaning or intent in the resulting product, and that the product contains, among other details, only true propositions about God.\footnote{This requires granting a model of revelation and inspiration where the communication occurs without a loss of meaning.} Thus, reading and understanding the Scriptures would be a reliable way to find out what God is like. For an externalist concerning justification, an inquirer could read and understand the Scripture, form beliefs about God on the basis of the
true propositions (either the propositions themselves or implications), and have those beliefs be justified – without having “any sort of cognitive access to the fact that the belief-producing process is in this way reliable.”

That is, the inquirer need not have any reasons for thinking that the Scriptures have any such property like divine inspiration for acquiring justified beliefs about God on the basis of those Scriptures.

It is beyond the scope of this project to evaluate the various merits of both internalism and externalism. The remainder of this project will assume an internalist model of justification when speaking about evidence, reasons, and knowledge. Yet, even granting an externalist model of justification, the method of Scriptural Theology for constructing a concept of God would still not be the best one suited for the purpose of discovering whether God exists. This is for one main reason, which may strike some as just a denial of externalism, but I view it as an intuitively strong motivator for endorsing internalism. In the possible world where God exists and has inspired certain texts, yet people need no acquaintance or cognitive access to these facts for justification, inquirers are relatively in the dark about whether a given writing or experience is effectively producing correct beliefs about God. There is no great way of achieving mental clarity or peace that the time I am spending with any given religious text is having the appropriate accurate-belief-producing effect. And when time is a finite resource, at least as I write this in 2021, it would be tragic to have been trying to discover whether God exists by reading material that in no way contributed epistemically to that end. Instead, genuine inquirers ought to be pursuing the acquisition of good reasons for thinking that their ideas about God are correct, not merely having correct beliefs.

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Moving on from concerns about externalism, the Scriptural Theology method is still deeply problematic given an internalist model of justification. The problem for the inquirer on the internalist model is that the inquirer herself does not yet possess good enough reasons to believe that those Scriptures would be reliable indicators of truth. In a world where God does exist and has done some revealing through inspiring Scripture, the Scriptures are in fact reliable indicators of truth, but not for her. The inquirer would already have to be in possession of good reasons for thinking that God exists to conclude that the Christian Scriptures were divinely inspired. In turn, if knowledge of God’s existence was the goal of adopting the method, then the method faces a fallacious circularity problem. To be sure, Scriptural Theology can be a useful method of constructing a concept of God for other purposes like worship, adoration, or writing a systematic theology for your religious tradition, but it is not well-suited as a method for discovering whether God exists.

**Conclusion**

Both Perfect Being Theology and Scriptural Theology fail to accommodate a key insight this project is offering; religious inquiry, including the method for concept construction and the resulting method it produces, ought to take seriously the deep, universal aspects of the human predicament. I contend that the Existential Method and the resulting “God as Rescuer” concept meet this standard. In the following three chapters, I will explain and defend my presentation of the human predicament. Let us turn now to the first aspect of the human predicament: death.
CHAPTER II

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF DEATH

The Existential Method for constructing a concept of God encourages us to consider those aspects of the human predicament that most impinge on us existentially. I presented what I take to be the three most salient features of the human predicament: the possibility of personal death when our physical bodies die, the intractability of moral failure, and the existence of apparent gratuitous suffering. In what follows, I will defend the idea that irreversible personal death is, in fact, an undesirable outcome and as such, we should be interested in discovering whether there is a way out of the predicament.

Clarifying the Terms

There are a few terms that will be important to achieve some clarity on before proceeding. Let’s first examine the notion of desirability. English speakers typically use “desirable” with positive connotations. If a state of affairs is desirable, then it is worthy of a subject’s desire. In this sense, desirability is a one-place property ascription. Yet, there is another dimension of desirability where we might want to ask, “Desirable compared to what?” In this way, “more desirable” becomes a two-place relation where one state of affairs is more

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1 I acknowledge that we sometimes apply the word “desirable” to objects, statuses, and lifestyles among other things. My intent is that states of affairs would cover the set of things on which it would be appropriate to predicate desirability. Furthermore, I recognize that ascribing desirability to a state of affairs would also be indexed to a certain time and set of circumstances. I will be using the term “desirable” to mean an all-things-considered property and will only mention the circumstantial and time-sensitive considerations when applicable.
worthy of a subject’s desire than another state of affairs.\textsuperscript{2} There are two key implications of this way of thinking about desirability: first, a state of affair’s desirability lies on a spectrum, between the extremes of most desirable and most undesirable; and second, a state of affairs may have the property ascription of undesirable yet also be in a two-place relation with another state of affairs that is more or less desirable. Likewise, a state of affairs that is desirable may also be in a two-place relation with a state of affairs that is more or less desirable. In other words, a state of affairs may have the property of “undesirable” yet be more desirable than other state of affairs; and, a state of affairs might have the property of “desirable” yet be less desirable than other state of affairs.\textsuperscript{3}

Equipped with this conception of desirability, we can begin to unpack and assess a key claim made in this chapter: personal death is an undesirable outcome. I make a distinction between personal death and physical death for the purpose of articulating this feature of the human predicament. Personal death occurs when I cease to exist; whereas, physical death occurs at the moment of bodily death. To be clear, it is not relevant to the present discussion when exactly this occurs. That is, we can consider the full range of philosophical positions on the desirability of death without committing ourselves to any particular definition of death as far as our physical bodies are concerned. And still, I also want to make conceptual space for the

\textsuperscript{2} Likewise, “more undesirable” is a two-place relation where one state of affairs is less worthy of a subject’s desire than another state of affairs.

\textsuperscript{3} Later in the chapter we will explore more specific suggestions of what would be desirable or undesirable. Yet, at this point a critic might be wondering about the relationship between desirability and something’s value (and undesirability and disvalue). In my view, this is a distinction without a difference, unless the user of these terms smuggles implicit notions of objectivity or subjectivity into either one. For instance, it might be helpful to distinguish between a subject’s finding \textit{x} desirable and \textit{x} being objectively valuable. If this were the idea in mind, then the subjective desirability of \textit{x} need not map onto \textit{x}’s objective value or disvalue at all – people are quite capable of misidentifying objective value. But the distinction could easily run the other way – objective desirability and subjective value, with the same implications. This leads me to view the terms “desirability” and “value” as synonymous unless, again, notions of objectivity or subjectivity are lopsided on either term.
possibility that our personhood could persist after our physical bodies die. This amounts to leaving open the possibility that dualism, broadly construed, is true. In turn, this discussion does not take a stand on the issue of what constitutes a human person or rely on any particular view of personhood. For example, it could be that we are souls and we survive our physical death. It could also be that we are identical to some collection of physical parts or systems or functions and thus my personal death would presumably coincide with my physical death. Or perhaps neither of these is true. Regardless of when you might think physical death happens, such as at the stopping of the heart, lower brain death, upper brain death, or something else, and no matter what you think we are as persons, brains, central nervous systems, souls, a contiguous string of related mental states and memories, or something else, this discussion focuses on whether it is desirable for a person to die. I contend that it is not.

Using our above conception of desirability, this does not amount to the claim that personal death is the most undesirable state of affairs, and there may be states of affairs that are more undesirable than personal death. In this way, if it is true that a religious inquirer is existentially motivated to desire rescue from the predicament of personal death, then that religious inquirer would also have reason to desire rescue from all states of affairs that would be in a two-place relation of more undesirable with personal death. Importantly, the religious inquirer may not find all states of affairs that are more desirable than personal death to have the property ascription of desirable. Given what properties we will be permitted to ascribe to the God as Rescuer from the other aspects of the human predicament discussed in Chapter III and Chapter IV, we will be able to conclude that the Rescuer would ensure that post-mortem

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4 An exception here might be the idea of eliminativism. The eliminativist may deny that any personal death is really occurring, because there are no such things as persons. Thus, the possibility of my personal death is off the table as a negative aspect of the human predicament.
existence for human beings, viewed in its totality, would reasonably have the property “desirable.”

The idea that personal death is undesirable has had its fair share of skeptics. Epicurus famously wrote “Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not.”\(^5\) The idea here is straightforward, but we need to make sure we are not conflating personal death and physical death. Epicurus’ point is strongest when considering personal death. By definition, I am not around to experience death. Personal death occurs at precisely the moment that I will never have more experiences. Thus, I can’t participate in feelings of fear and disappointment, or notice its undesirability – I am not around to do so. In this sense, Epicurus is right. The undesirability of death is not found in its being an unenjoyable experience – it is no experience at all! Rather, if death is undesirable, that property will be ascribed in light of its opportunity cost.\(^6\) If given all of the necessary information to make a wise decision, we would want to know if a rational inquirer would opt-in to an everlasting, continued existence without a terminus of personal death or would personal death be more desirable.

The number of ways existence could be after one’s physical death is limited only by our imagination. And again, each configuration will find itself somewhere on the desirability spectrum mentioned earlier. Depending on where such an existence falls on that spectrum, our rational inquirer will likely give varying answers on whether personal death would be more


\(^6\) In a later section of this chapter, we will linger on the question of whether there are fates worse than personal death, and more specifically, whether a state of unyielding boredom would be one such fate.
desirable. Consider the traditional Christian accounts of hell. The reprobate who remain unsaved by Christ for whatever reason are consigned to eternal conscious torment. I suspect that most of us would consider personal death to be more desirable than eternal conscious torment. This is largely due to the horrendous kind and quality of experiences that would make possible the persistent torment required by the view. So, then, to what degree would the kind and quality of experiences have to improve in order for personal death to no longer be more desirable?

I am not certain of how to solve this line-drawing problem. Yet, borrowing from what we will learn of the God as Rescuer concept in the next chapter, we could reason in the following way. In order for God to rescue us from the predicament of moral failure, God would also need to have victory over moral failure. Thus, for God to be our rescuer, God must be morally perfect. A byproduct of moral perfection is that one would always will the good of another and manifest the good of another all things considered. And in this case, the good of human beings would be to avoid the undesirable state of personal death and instead live indefinitely in an existence that is genuinely desirable. Therefore, in order to properly rescue humanity from the predicament of the possibility of personal death, God must have the requisite power to create and/or maintain a post-mortem existence for human beings that is more desirable than personal death. Again, to be very clear, I am not arguing that God exists, that there is an afterlife, nor that we ought to think it is desirable. What I am saying is that if we conceive of God as Rescuer as described in Chapter I, then God’s rescue of humanity from the predicament of personal death would need to include providing a desirable place for humanity to exist. I do not have an account of the exact conditions of when an existence moves from desirable to undesirable, and I do not think this weakens the God as Rescuer perspective.

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7 We will explore whether this idea is rational a bit later in the argument.
However, there is a related and more powerful worry, which will be the focus of this chapter. Some say the problem is not that we can’t know the exact conditions of when an existence moves from desirable to undesirable, but rather that any heavenly state where people continue to exist indefinitely is undesirable. The driving force of the complaint is that immortality, or the lack of personal death, would eventually lead to an existence that is undesirable.\(^8\) For instance, Bernard Williams famously argued that immortality would lead to intolerable tedium.\(^9\) If his conclusion is true, then we ought not desire any sort of blissful-type afterlife (heaven) that precludes death. Of course, there are possible worlds where the afterlife is quite blissful for a finite amount of time, even a very long time. Yet of interest here, and of interest to many religious inquirers, is whether the heaven hoped for, in which denizens reside indefinitely into eternity, is in fact desirable at all. I argue that Williams’ argument, while valid, has several objectionable premises. Moreover, further attempts to reboot his argument also fail to decisively rule out the desirability of heaven.

**The Argument**

Why think that heaven would be undesirable? According to Williams, the troubling feature of heaven is that its inhabitants have immortality. Immortality sometimes can refer to the inability to undergo physical death, but this is not what is at stake. Rather, the worrisome aspect of immortality is that the individual will not undergo *personal* death. Whereas physical death marks the end of a biological life, personal death marks the end of a person’s existence. Thus, in the heavenly state of interest to most human religious inquirers, denizens of heaven enjoy the

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privileged position of immortality, i.e. they will not experience personal death, though they may have experienced physical death.

To be sure, Williams is not opposed to the notion that people might survive their physical death and enjoy a kind of afterlife where immortality was optional. His argument concedes that it may be desirable to live as long as one wishes in a non-immortal afterlife, and upon reaching or approaching the unyielding boredom that Williams predicts, the individual may choose to cease to exist. This is to affirm that his argument does not attack the notion of post-mortem existence per se, rather only the kinds that involve immortality.

So, to put Williams' complaint simply, it is the lack of personal death that he finds problematic, “I am going to suggest that...an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever.”

Indeed, he argues that given enough time in the heavenly state, any activity that a person could spend their time doing would become unyieldingly boring and tedious - and, therefore, such an existence is undesirable. Thankfully, Williams does not expect us to just take his word for it. Here is his argument reconstructed:

1. There are only a finite number of pleasurable activities.
2. Every activity after a long time eventually becomes unyieldingly boring.

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10 Williams, “The Makropulous Case,” 81.

11 Some thinkers point out that it would be inappropriate for humans not to get bored of any activity after enough time has passed. See Attila Tanyi and Andric Vuko, “God and Eternal Boredom.” Religious Studies 53, no. 1 (2017): 51-70.

12 Williams does not give us a clear presentation of his main argument. This is an attempt at a charitable version of it.
3. If there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities and every activity after a long time eventually becomes unyieldingly boring, then there would exist a moment after which it would be undesirable to continue existing.

4. If there would exist a moment after which it would be undesirable to continue existing, then heaven is necessarily undesirable.

5. Therefore, heaven is necessarily undesirable.

This argument is valid. However, each premise faces considerable objections that undermine the cogency of the argument. I will address the main flaws of each premise, but I will primarily be contesting premise 2 through a discussion of the possibility of renewable and inexhaustible pleasures.

**Flaws in the Argument**

The points offered below are not meant to be decisive criticisms of Williams' argument. Admittedly, much of the cogency of his argument and the counterarguments offered here will turn on whether someone finds it intuitive that our activities, projects, and loves will eventually bore us. I present some ideas and examples that may cause reasonable doubt in Williams' argument and strengthen the desire to pursue potential evidence concerning the existence of a heaven-like place.

Premise 1: The Possibility of an Infinite Amount of Activity Kinds

Premise 1 states that we only have a finite number of activities. Clearly, Williams needs this in his argument because if there were an infinite number of activities to enjoy, then it becomes quite plausible to suppose that we would not become unyieldingly bored; there would always be some new adventure to pursue. Yet, it seems that human beings, in this earthly life at least, only have a finite number of activities to pursue, and an even smaller subset of those would
be pleasurable. Or more precisely, there are a finite number of kinds of pleasurable activities.\textsuperscript{13}

There may be disagreement about how exactly to carve up all of our activities into distinct kinds, but it is plausible that the set of kinds is indeed finite.

But for Williams' argument to work, there must also be a finite number of kinds of activities in heaven as there are during our earthly lives. On some prominent accounts of a heavenly life, in particular certain Christian conceptions, citizens of heaven are given a resurrection body, which presumably has certain features that our earthly bodies do not.\textsuperscript{14}

Perhaps such a body affords new and limitless kinds of activities unfamiliar to earth dwellers. Now, one may think it implausible to suppose that even a heavenly body would unlock an infinite number of new kinds of activities, but it is logically possible. Another tack open to the critic of William's thesis is to point out that human ingenuity and creativity could usher in new and unique types of activities, particularly in the environment of heaven that would lack certain earthly drawbacks such as deadlines, endpoints, and perhaps things like resource scarcity.\textsuperscript{15}

Though these do not serve as a strong defeater for premise 1, they undercut the overall persuasiveness of the argument. That is, it is not beyond reasonable doubt that there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities open to some people in some possible heavens - and this is enough to lower the cogency of Williams' argument.

\textsuperscript{13} This avoids the objection that there a potentially infinite number of activities wherever there are potentially infinite sequences. For instance, one might travel from A to B only in halfway-point increments and count each travel increment as a separate activity. Stipulating that there are kinds of activities allows us to lump all of these travel increments into a single kind.

\textsuperscript{14} See St. Paul's discussion of the resurrection body in I Corinthians 15:35-58 (NRSV) to understand the underpinnings of this popular Christian idea.

Premise 3 and 4: Is Boredom a Fate Worse Than Death?

Premise 3 of Williams' argument first asks us to suppose premise 1 and 2 are true; that is, suppose there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities and eventually all such activities become unyieldingly boring. If we grant these two ideas, Williams says that it follows that there will come a time when continuing to live would be undesirable. Let's take a look at some responses to this premise.

One might argue that the premise is only plausible if you eliminate certain strategies to stave off boredom. Even if we grant that each individual activity will eventually become boring for a time, this does not guarantee that all activities will eventually become always boring, due to the possibility of creative activity scheduling. We can imagine a varied schedule of activities where a heaven-dweller would participate in activities until a hint of boredom is detected and then move on to the next activity. Armed with an astonishingly wide array of different activities, the passing of time can sometimes refresh the newness and excitement of an activity. Williams must stipulate that no such recombination and ordering of activities will stave off boredom in the heavenly realm. But this stipulation is not so egregious as it might seem. After all, the power of his argument comes from the infinitude of heaven. Any schedule of activities or combination of schedules designed to prevent boredom will eventually be repeated many times; in fact, the number of repetitions would continually approach infinity. There is certainly some initial persuasiveness to the idea that eventually all activities would become unyieldingly boring given this immense repetition of combinations and creative activity schedules.

A critic of Williams may respond to this claim by saying that humans return to activities they have performed many times in the past after a long break and often find great pleasure in them. A reason for this, they may suggest, is that human memory can often forget the full
phenomenal texture of an experience. Thus, even though activity \( x \) may have been overdone in the past and become boring to me, after a 20 year hiatus, that same activity may have a renewed freshness, allure, and mystique given my own lack of memory of the phenomenal quality in my initial performance of the activity. Yet, here, our imagined case of the resurrection body may cut against Williams' critic here. It seems plausible that the new and improved resurrection body would shore up the noetic deficiencies in our earthly bodies. Perhaps it is unreasonable that heavenly citizens would have such forgetfulness of phenomenal texture. After all, the lack of perfect phenomenal recall is the cause of much grief in this earthly life, particularly for those who have lost a loved-one and desperately want to remember more vividly the what-it-was-like of being with that person. It is not unreasonable to think that the kind of heaven human religious inquirers are interested in is the kind that does not include such deficiencies. Thus, I am not sure this is a strong argumentative maneuver for Williams' critic.

However, there is a dubious implication of Williams' claim in premise 3. Again, if we grant premises 1 and 2, Williams claims that life in heaven would then become undesirable. There is of course a myopic view one can take when assessing the desirability of an activity or situation, where one only looks at the properties of the thing under examination. But maybe what we are really looking for is whether something is desirable \textit{all things considered}. That is, to know if something is in fact undesirable, it would be important to know if the \textit{other alternatives} are more or less desirable than the status quo. In Williams' imagined case, there are only two choices: continue living in heaven while enduring unyielding boredom, or cease to exist and undergo personal death. We may clearly see how the former would be undesirable, but it is not immediately clear that it would be worse than the latter.
It ought to be noted that typically, when we wonder if there are fates worse than death, we run a thought experiment which contrasts the experience of a current suffering with the alternative of undergoing physical death. Usually the alternative of ceasing to exist altogether is not under consideration. Indeed, it is much easier to entertain the idea that there are cases where physical death, with continued personal existence afterwards, is preferable to a current earthly suffering, than to affirm that ceasing to exist is sometimes better than enduring suffering. Yet, it is this latter affirmation that we might question. How are we to be sure that continuing to live in heaven while enduring unyielding boredom is more undesirable than ceasing to exist? Here we run into a difficulty of the human mind's ability to analyze whether existing would be preferable to not existing - it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the what-it's-like of non-existence, since of course, there would not be an existent being to have phenomenal experiences!

Affirming premise 3 requires that one be able to justifiably assign a value to the path leading to nonexistence that is higher than the one with continued existence in a state of immense suffering. But, one cannot justifiably assign such a value; human beings are unable to properly make this comparison. Thus, one cannot reasonably affirm premise 3. This is enough to cause reasonable doubt in the cogency of Williams' argument, but there are more potent objections to explore.

Premise 2: Are There Renewable and Inexhaustible Pleasures?

Premise 2 makes the very strong claim that every activity, even the pleasurable ones, will eventually result in unyielding boredom. It is important to note that Williams must include the "unyielding" attribution. For instance, if the claim were merely that every activity becomes boring, this would not be very troubling or problematic. After all, boredom from our routine activities is not uncommon in our earthly lives. We generally either switch to another activity to
distract us from the boredom, or we use the times of boredom for valuable reflective thinking about our lives. Yet, this boredom does not make our earthly lives undesirable. If this kind of boredom were the kind in heaven, it would not undermine heaven's desirability, just as it doesn’t undermine the desirability of earthly life. Williams needs the claim that eventually a given activity, or combination of activities will never not be boring.\(^{16}\)

Brian Ribeiro, a defender of Williams' argument, champions this idea, “There’s no earthly experience, activity, or project that you --- remaining more or less as you now are --- would enjoy, were you allowed to do it forever.”\(^{17}\) The clause, “remaining more or less as you are now” concedes some ground to the critic of Williams. It allows for the possibility of a certain souped-up resurrection body and mind that could assist in staving off boredom indefinitely. So, our response to Ribeiro should not lean on such versions of a heavenly state.

A potential direct counterexample to Ribeiro’s claim can be found in John Martin Fischer's notion of an inexhaustible pleasure.\(^{18}\) That is, if there are some pleasures that are forever renewable, then heaven would never become unyieldingly boring, for there would always be a set of activities with a bottomless well of pleasure to draw from. Ribeiro strongly rejects this idea: “I find the claim that there is any pleasure which will remain pleasurable regardless of how many times you have enjoyed it previously to be, if not a conceptual falsehood, at any rate

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\(^{16}\) Bruckner echoes this concern, “...it would demand too much to require that an eternal life be free of any episodic boredom...for we cannot provide a guarantee against chronic boredom even for our finite lives,” Bruckner, “Against the Tedium of Immortality,” 636.


I will address both of these charges in turn. Let’s unpack the concepts involved in affirming the existence of inexhaustible pleasures.

A renewable pleasure is one that is in principle capable of providing pleasure on multiple occasions. Act-types are the kind of things that can provide renewable pleasures. Some act-tokens are of course non-renewable. For example, eating this slice of watermelon in front me is a non-renewable pleasure. Once I consume the watermelon and my mouth has been cleansed of all watermelon-molecules that could allow me to detect its taste, then the taste of that watermelon is a non-renewable pleasure. After all, my body has dramatically transformed the particles that made up the watermelon, some going to fuel my body and others going to waste. In fact, one might argue that any activity becomes non-renewable if it is indexed to a time. But even act-types that are renewable pleasures will not be enough to rebut Williams' and Ribeiro's claims; after all a renewable pleasure just admits of more than one occasion of pleasure. What we need are inexhaustible pleasures -- pleasures that are renewable and will not be exhausted, no matter how many times one partakes in them.

What about affirming the existence of inexhaustible pleasures is a conceptual falsehood? I cannot locate the conceptual confusion. If we are committed to the existence of renewable pleasures, it is not a conceptual stretch to imagine that there might be some that are always renewable. Ribeiro’s charge falls flat here. But, his primary claim was that it is obvious that the notion of an inexhaustible pleasure defies empirical data. What empirical data does he have in mind? He claims that life is filled with the “wearing out of friends and loves and interests.”

But, this is simply not true for all human beings. There are plenty of people that experience the

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near opposite of Ribeiro’s remark; their relationships and interests have an upward trajectory that show no signs of plateauing. To be sure, there are certain people for whom Ribeiro’s sentiment rings true. Yet, there is no evidence that the wearing out of friends, loves, and interests is a fundamental part of the human predicament.

I argue that, in fact, there is plausible evidence to the contrary of Ribeiro’s claim. Consider the following examples of sources of inexhaustible joys:

1. Competition - The desire to be the best at an activity and maintain one's place on the leaderboards is a potentially unending source of a certain kind of pleasure. Imagine a heaven populated with many like-minded individuals who share one's passions and hobbies where healthy competition and improvement in one's own performance never ceases. Even once one has reached the top and has become the best at an activity, there is a great deal of pleasure that could be had by defending the title from challengers.21

2. Raising Children - Does it ever get old and boring to see one's offspring mature and flourish in their lives? Our empirical data does not, as Ribeiro claims, obviously suggest that it does. Many parents remain engaged and excited to have a front row seat to their children's lives and enjoy watching them become flourishing adults. And further, it is not unreasonable to think that a heavenly realm might include the creation of new children. One could enjoy the pleasures of mentoring and raising children into eternity, forever enjoying the flourishing of new beings.

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3. Marriage - Many couples who have been married decades and are nearing the end of their lives report a closeness, affection, and companionship that is on an upward trajectory. It is not at all clear that the passing of time would necessarily transform a state of genuine, agapic love into unbearable tedium.

4. Knowing God - On many conceptions of God, God is a person who has profound and perhaps infinite wisdom and goodness and was causally responsible for our existence. Having a deep acquaintance knowledge of such a being could provide a limitless source of pleasure, fulfillment, and joy for human beings.

5. Friendship and Family - Though strife can arise between friends and family, it is often external circumstances that promote conflict. Presumably, such occasions for strife would be few or non-existent in heaven, and thus there could be an ever-deepening bond between our friends and family.

   Of course, some of these examples may or may not be persuasive to the reader. Yet, I think these are enough to refute Ribeiro's ambitious claim that our empirical data makes the denial of inexhaustible pleasures obvious, and indeed, they serve as a defeater for Williams' argument. Some might worry that even if there are new experiences and adventures to be had within the above categories, repetition of an activity kind will inevitably lead to boredom due to a lack of freshness or newness. Shelley Kagan nicely illustrates this idea:

   Or, you go through all the great art museums in the world (or the galaxy) and you say, ‘Yes, I’ve seen dozens of Picassos. I’ve seen Rembrandts and Van Goghs, and more. I’ve seen thousands, millions, billions of incredible works of art. I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?’ And the problem is that there isn’t.

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22 Some have pointed to our basic drives for thirst, hunger, and sex. Provided that we reside in heaven in some kind of human-like body, satisfying these drives could provide inexhaustible pleasure in virtue of the continued need for satisfaction on these fronts. For further discussion on this, see Corliss Lamont, “Mistaken Attitudes Toward Death,” *Journal of Philosophy* 52 (1965): 29-36.
There are, of course, things that you haven’t seen before—but they are not new in a way that can still engage you afresh.\textsuperscript{23}

Kagan’s point is important. Consider the experience of being engaged in a loving friendship. And now take a moment to consider being in that friendship for decades, centuries, millennia and beyond! Admittedly, there might be particular experiences along the way that are strictly speaking new, but the entire enterprise might lose its freshness and appeal. The activities in friendship like collaborative efforts, mutual respect and admiration, and unselfish love are played out in various circumstances over and over and over again. Kagan asks us if this is really something that could still engage us and keep us wanting more.

John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin give a resounding yes. They argue that, “the richness, beauty, and meaningfulness of friendships and deep personal relationships cannot be reduced to factors that can ‘run out,’ as it were.”\textsuperscript{24} The resources available in these relationships are not the kind of thing that expire or exhaust. It is not entirely clear what it would mean to have harvested all of the beauty or meaning out of a friendship. Yet, this is what one would have to hold if one thought there were no inexhaustible pleasures. What I take to have shown from the above discussion is that inexhaustible pleasures are not conceptually impossible and it is reasonable to think that such pleasures on earth could continue indefinitely in a blissful type of afterlife, if such a thing exists. Not only does this undermine premise 2 in Williams’ argument, it challenges the modal claim in premise 4 - that in all possible worlds where heaven exists, heaven is undesirable. That is, there seem to be possible worlds where certain joys and


pleasures are inexhaustible for at least some people. This is enough to render a heavenly existence desirable for those people and undermine Williams’ argument.

Yet, some might worry that not all inexhaustible pleasures are created equal. Some are merely nice to have – that is, including them would certainly make heaven better, but it doesn’t stop being heaven if we don’t have them. However, others are necessary. If people in heaven did not experience them, then a heavenly life would not be desirable. Richard Swinburne offers one such necessary condition:

Above all a good after-life would be one where we can know God the source of all other being, interact with him, and worship him far better than we can on earth, and greatly enjoy doing so, and where this action and all other actions are done in cooperation with others…only that sort of life would be worth having forever.25

Not only is knowledge and relationship with God an inexhaustible pleasure, but it is a necessary condition for heaven to be a place worth residing forever. There are two possible implications of Swinburne’s claim: (1) the only inexhaustible pleasures are the God-related ones, and (2) the availability of other inexhaustible pleasures are not sufficient to make heaven desirable. I do not think Swinburne has (1) in mind. He suggests that activities are worth doing forever only if their progression is valuable for its own sake and would take an infinite time to finish.26 One such set of activities would include the relationships with friends and family, “for human well-being consists in growth…and to be known and loved by others more and more fully.” Deepening those love relationships is an intrinsic good and it is not clear that the depths of such love are

25 Richard Swinburne, “Why the Life of Heaven is Supremely Worth Living,” in Paradise Understood: New Philosophical Essays about Heaven, ed. By T. Ryan Byerly and Eric Silverman (Oxford University Press, 2017), 350-360. Swinburne mentions a few other necessary conditions, but addressing them would go beyond the scope of the paper which is to address Williams’ concerns.

26 Swinburne, “Why the Life of Heaven is Supremely Worth Living,” 355.
finite. So, Swinburne must have in mind (2), that such inexhaustible pleasures, even those of
deepening love relationships with others, are not sufficient for heaven’s desirability. There is
something about the God relationship that would make heaven undesirable were it absent.

I contend that Swinburne is confusing two different ideas: a merely desirable heaven and
a best possible version of heaven. Recall, my response to Williams attempts to outline the
former idea – that some version of heaven is desirable and immortality would not necessarily
lead to unyielding boredom. This is a much lower bar than outlining a best possible blissful-type
afterlife. I am open to hearing Swinburne’s suggestions about what sort of place that might be.
Many theists, including Swinburne, insist that part of human well-being is engaging in a
depening love relationship with God. If we couple this with the idea that the best after-life
would be one where every human’s well-being were increased as much as possible, then the best
afterlife would include a love relationship with God. This may be true. But it does not follow
that any other lesser after-life would be undesirable. Such an existence might still afford folks
the other inexhaustible pleasures mentioned earlier, and if the pleasures truly are inexhaustible,
there is always something desirable worth having. Swinburne is caught in a dilemma: either he
admits that only the God-related pleasures are inexhaustible, and we are then in need of an
argument of why competition, raising children, marriage, and relationships with friends and
family are not potential sources of inexhaustible pleasures, or he claims that these other pleasures
are inexhaustible in heaven, but such an existence is undesirable, which betrays some conceptual
confusion about what an inexhaustible pleasure is. Fortunately, Swinburne can escape this

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27 To be clear, I am not assuming that human relationships can provide inexhaustible pleasures. I am
claiming that it is not empirically or conceptually obvious that they can’t provide inexhaustible pleasures. This is an
open question, and I leave it to the reader to decide whether human love relationships ever become unyieldingly
boring.
dilemma by dropping the claim that a loving God relationship is necessary for heaven to be desirable. To be sure, a deepening love relationship with God may be a necessary component of the best possible version of heaven, but this is too strict a condition for mere desirability.

**Conclusion**

What is at stake in this chapter is whether the human situation of death is a predicament—something bad to be avoided. If personal death is desirable, then death would not be something I would rationally want to be rescued from and thus I should not include the rescuing from death in my construction of a “God as Rescuer” conception of God. Yet, if personal death is undesirable, then I should include rescue from death in my construction of a “God as Rescuer” conception of God and do what I can to find out if there is any evidence of such a God. We examined the most prominent argument against the idea that death is undesirable. According to the argument, there is something about the everlastingness of life without death that would eventually lead one to an extremely undesirable state of intolerable boredom or tedium. The soundness of this argument hangs mostly on whether or not there are inexhaustible pleasures of which one may continually partake and stave off boredom. I, and others, argued that we have no evidence to suggest that inexhaustible pleasures would be impossible in an afterlife intended to be desirable by a morally perfect God. Furthermore, our current experience of renewable pleasures does not suggest that they begin to dwindle in their pleasure-promoting ability, but rather that in some cases, the renewable pleasures increase in their efficacy over time. Thus, at least from my perspective and available evidence, it is existentially important to discover if there is a way out of the predicament of the possibility of personal death. I will include the rescue from personal death into my conception of God and I invite the reader to do so as well as we construct together this “God as Rescuer” conception of God.
CHAPTER III
THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF MORAL FAILURE

The God as Rescuer concept, derived from the Existential Method discussed in Chapter I, states that God is a being that is willing and able to rescue humanity from its predicament. In the previous chapter we discussed the first of the three key aspects of the human predicament, which was the possibility of personal death upon our physical death. We turn now to addressing the second aspect of the human predicament – the problem of moral failure.

I have three aims in this chapter: first, to explain that human beings do in fact have a serious problem concerning moral failure; second, that we have been unsuccessful in conquering the problem of moral failure; and third, that we should not expect to be able to conquer it on our own, and thus, we are in need of moral rescue. In the following discussion, I will be making use of quite a few moral terms that in other contexts have very specific meanings. One hope of mine for this chapter, and in fact for the project as a whole, is to make it as accessible as possible to a broad range of perspectives.¹ I will use moral language from virtue ethics, deontic ethics, and consequentialist ethics; words like: right, wrong, good, bad, virtue, vice, obligations, permissions, harm, and benefit. The key arguments do not hinge on the truth of any one of the perspectives within which these terms are typically found. I ask you as the reader to try your best to offload some of the baggage you bring to the table with these words, because they can

¹ In fact, this chapter does not even assume moral objectivism or moral relativism. The only key metaethical move required to endorse the conclusion of the chapter is a rejection of moral nihilism. This will be discussed at length.
all be of use in various ways in this discussion without committing yourself to a particular theory or denying another one.

The Problem of Moral Failure

Every human being who has ever lived has at some point performed a thought or action that was immoral. I am not absolutely certain about this, of course, but the claim seems to be on rather safe grounds. Most people would think the person a liar or madman who thought they had been morally perfect for their entire life. This is not a shocking turn of events. Our best evolutionary science maps out detailed phylogenetic trees showing that homo sapiens is at the spear’s tip of a long history of ancestors that behaved in increasingly primitive ways the further back we look, with perhaps slight perturbations of civilized behavior along the way. At some point in this process, the “lights came on” for organisms; brains developed to the point where self-awareness and genuine agency emerged. These are features of consciousness that not all organisms share, but healthy members of homo sapiens do. However, the natural selection that led to the emergence of these features, also led to the development of instinctual behavior whose primary directive was to propagate one’s genetical material. Moral blamelessness and perfection was and is not a goal of this directive and behavior selection process, and if it is now, it is only in a derivative or instrumental capacity to serve reproductive efforts. So, human beings have the unique position of having inherited brains that at one level have some primitive instinctual drives that are not always aimed at the moral good, but also brains that have the capacity for genuine agency and pursuing the moral good. It is no wonder that most human beings struggle to overcome these deeply ingrained tendencies.

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2 Even survival is a derivative goal to reproduction.
Not only do human beings face moral temptation due to their biological, inherited proclivities, but they also face it from their socialization experience. However, all human beings experience a socialization process and learn the norms of their broader culture and subculture, expectations, and boundaries of personal and social interaction. And yet, each human culture has some weaknesses. It can be difficult for people to see past these blind spots. Many people incorrectly suppose their intuition is above the fray of these cultural nuances and use it to guide their behavior, when in fact, their “intuition” is at least to some extent a product of their socialization. The result then is that as products of these socialization efforts we will exhibit at times the virtues and vices of their particular inculcated social norms. This can easily lead to moral mistakes. So, human beings are all, to varying degrees, in danger of falling into moral failure, and we shouldn’t be surprised about this.\(^3\) There are some significant hurdles to overcome in doing the right thing.

How big of a problem is this? Does this problem of moral failure really deserve to take a top spot in our short-list of most extreme existential predicaments? I believe so. The reasoning goes something like this:

1. Part of what it means to live the good life or our best life is to live in a morally blameless way.
2. Human beings are unable, without assistance, to live in a morally blameless way.
3. Therefore, human beings are unable, without assistance, to live the good life.

I find the conclusion (3) to be existentially worrisome. This is bad news indeed if the best human experience would forever elude my unaided efforts. I am using “the good life” in its

\(^3\) I hesitate to make the universal claim that all human beings ever have failed morally. It is logically possible for that to not happen, though it is incredibly unlikely. I’d like to leave conceptual space for this possibility.
classical sense: a life well-lived in accordance with virtue and where the human experience is best given the various uncontrollable inputs that influence the experience. Philosophers have debated the conceptual contours of the good life for millennia and I will not partake in that discussion in very much depth. Suffice it to say that premise (1) suggests that part of the best human experience, relative to one’s situation, involves living a morally blameless life. I use the phrase “live in a morally blameless way” to refer to the state of acting in accordance with moral perfection from a certain point onward. Human beings by virtue of having morally erred at all are disqualified from achieving moral perfection, but they can begin at any given time a journey of moral blamelessness that sometimes abruptly ends with moral failure yet could also persist indefinitely, depending on the choices that are made.

Now, this argument is not without its detractors. Thinkers have voiced opposing premises to both (1) and (2) and I’d like to address their worries. Let’s begin with premise (1).

**Moral Saints**

Susan Wolf famously argued that it is not rational or desirable for human beings to strive to be moral saints, where a moral saint is, “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be.” Her main concern is that,

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5 One might point out the various ways we can divvy up human action into its component parts (preparation, motivation, execution, etc...) and assign different moral weight to each. For instance, some from a more Kantian moral perspective might assign the greatest moral weight to the motivational aspect of moral decision-making. That is fine for our purpose, and in fact, it will be suggested that all of these component parts would need curative attention from the God as Rescuer. The point of the project is not to offer a competing view of where to allocate moral weight and value, but to point out that no matter how the project of valuation turns out human beings fall short of moral perfection and are unable to attain moral blamelessness on their own.

“For the moral virtues, given that they are, by hypothesis, all present in the same individual, and to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character.”

In other words, the good life cannot include both the demands of moral saintliness and well-rounded nonmoral pursuits, because the demands of the saint don’t allow much space, if at all, for other qualities of life that would seem to constitute the good life. Wolf gives some examples of qualities and interests that don’t seem to be available to the moral saint. For example, the moral saint would desire what is best for people and encourage them, and so, would not exhibit a sarcastic, pessimistic wit. The moral saint also would feel uncomfortable with the misuse of resources and time that would go into learning and performing gourmet cooking. Yet, possessing a sarcastic wit and gourmet cooking are nonmoral virtues that can comprise a good human life. Without condemning the moral saint, Wolf suggests that it may not, “always be better to be morally better.”

It may seem initially that Wolf’s suggestion is in conflict with premise (1) in our above argument. The good life is almost definitionally one of utmost desirability, and I am claiming that a component of this life is living in a morally blameless way. Therefore, living in a morally blameless way is, at least, very desirable. But, Wolf is arguing that we should not consider the moral saint an ideal that trumps other ideals, and even further, that moral sainthood is undesirable compared to a life that is more well-rounded and nonmoral virtues are pursued.

I think the apparent tension dissolves when we make sure to include conceptual space in our moral theory for supererogation. Supererogatory acts are those that are morally good, but not morally required. So, Wolf’s moral saint is leaning heavily into supererogatory acts – the

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acts are in fact morally good and the moral saint is as morally good as possible. But, these actions are above and beyond the call of moral duty. When we make conceptual space for supererogation in our moral theory, then we create avenues for the good life to be realized that need not, or perhaps would not, demand moral saintliness. That is, I could still be morally blameless without ever performing any supererogatory acts. Moral blamelessness is the absence of any moral failure, which occurs when I violate a demand or requirement of morality. I could be free of moral failure in my life while not pursuing supererogatory behavior. I don’t think Wolf’s piece poses a threat to my view, but I think exploring her ideas on moral saintliness help clarify what could be, but need not be, included in moral blamelessness.

**Strangeness of Moral Properties**

I’d also like to acknowledge another threat to premise (1), which comes from the moral nihilist. The moral nihilist claims that all moral claims, such as “the killing of innocent life is wrong”, are false. And if moral blamelessness is achieved, at least in part, because of the truth of moral claims and people acting in accordance with them, then moral nihilism would undermine the project of becoming morally blameless. Moral nihilism comes in a few different forms, but the one of interest to me for this project is the version that denies that moral predicates refer to anything at all. There are no moral properties, nothing “out there” in the world serves as the truth-maker of moral propositions. Thus, all such moral propositions are false.

One of the key reasons offered in support of this view has been called the Argument from Queerness. J.L. Mackie, a notable proponent of moral nihilism, offers both a metaphysical and epistemological concern about moral properties. The metaphysical worry is that including moral properties in our worldview requires positing, “qualities or relations of a very strange sort,
utterly different from anything else in the universe.”\(^8\) And the attending epistemological concern is that if these moral properties exist and are indeed quite strange, then to come to know them would require “some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”\(^9\) The unstated conclusion is that we ought to remain skeptical of the existence of moral properties on the basis of this strangeness.

I will not try to rehash the debate between the moral naturalists and moral non-naturalists concerning the nature of moral properties that ignited after the argument from queerness got some traction. However, one of those views needs to be adequate in order to avoid moral nihilism, yet I do not need to endorse either for the success of the present project. My confidence that one of these is correct and that moral nihilism is false comes from the independent evidence I have that some moral claims are true.\(^10\) That is, my moral experience of identifying and discerning the presence of various moral properties like courageousness, humility, and patience is evidence for me that certain moral claims are true. The notions that the truth-makers of these moral claims are either strange in their nature or are type-identical to natural properties does not undermine the evidential value of my experience.\(^11\) I do not offer my experience as a reason for Mackie to change his mind or a reader of this who is convinced that

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\(^10\) It would not be helpful to cite the Frege-Geach problem as one’s independent evidence for the truth of moral claims. The Frege-Geach problem offers reason to think that moral claims are truth-apt given that they function in moral reasoning. This would rebut moral nihilists, such as Richard Joyce, who argue that moral claims are not truth-apt. Mackie’s brand of nihilism still embraces cognitivism regarding moral claims. For an explanation of the Frege-Geach problem regarding noncognitivist metaethics, such as emotivism, see Alexander Miller, “Emotivism and the Rejection of Non-Naturalism,” in \textit{An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics} (Polity Press, 2003): 40-42.

\(^11\) The nominalist regarding moral properties may feel compelled to note that the truth-makers would be token-identical. This change also does not affect the overall thrust of the argument concerning the predicament of moral failure.
moral nihilism is true. Rather, I am reporting why I am not a moral nihilist and why it does not pose a problem for my argument concerning the predicament of moral failure. If you suspect you also have evidence for the truth of moral claims, then do not let the argument from queerness worry you.

**Moral Gumption**

The second premise of the above argument that illustrates the existential concern of moral failure is that human beings are unable, without assistance, to live in a morally blameless way. Perhaps some individuals can go for significant stretches of time without falling into some degree of moral failure, but eventually all human beings periodically find themselves in positions of moral failure, some more often than others. The question before us is this: do we have any reason to think that human beings are or will be able to correct their moral deficiencies on their own?

An affirmative answer to this question comes by way of the secular humanist. Now, the term “secular humanism” is unhelpfully loaded, and has ambiguous connotations in different contexts. For our purposes we can use the description offered by the American Humanist Association, “Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good.”\(^\text{12}\) Now, to be clear, this isn’t directly contrary to premise (2). Premise (2) simply claims that human beings need some kind of assistance or aid from the outside to achieve moral blamelessness. It is certainly part of my project to suggest that we call this outside helper “God” in virtue of the Existential Method discussed in Chapter I. The

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claim is not that people need to believe that God exists in order to perform morally good behavior. I think it is patently obvious that people can do morally good things without any sort of attendant belief about God. The claim is that achieving the state of moral blamelessness will not happen without aid from God, in accordance with how I am using the term “God”. This flies in the face of the spirit of humanism, where human reason and experience is sufficient to accomplish all that is good for human beings. In fact, the entire theme of this project involving a divine rescuer is quite anti-humanist. For the humanist, as the name might suggest, humanity can be its own rescuer.

This may be true of many problems that have faced and will continue to face human beings throughout history such as infectious disease, severe geological and meteorological events, and even extreme destruction by morally bad actors. But my main contention here is that morally blameless living is not one of them. Human beings have simply not demonstrated that they have the tools to accomplish this feat, on both large and small scales. The statistical and historical evidence is overwhelming. We have never encountered yet in human history a person who was able to at some point, without turning back, enter into living a morally blameless life. It is a large sample size.

Moreover, for more than 2,000 years of that history, people have been applying dedicated time and energy into figuring out the moral life through philosophical and other efforts. A densely populated field of moral theories, decision-procedures, proverbs, and teachings lay defeated on the battlefield of moral history. None of these have proven to have the effective formula for actually generating moral blameless practitioners. Again, this is not terribly surprising given the biological and sociological hand human beings are dealt. But the fact remains that some of our best minds have attempted to articulate and exemplify the good life.
Many of them and many of us have and will lead good lives, yet strictly speaking none of us have fully lived the good life as it is classically envisioned – precisely because of periodic moral failure.

A well-intentioned moral philosopher would surely want the byproduct of their moral theory to be practitioners who actually lead lives that are morally good, and perhaps further, strive toward moral blamelessness. And this has probably happened over the history of moral philosophy; surely there have been people who studied and attempted to live out the “big-three” perspectives (consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics) and did so successfully. And they even managed to live a morally better life after such study than before.

But is this the norm? It does not seem to manifest event at the top of our educational hierarchies. Few, if any, graduate programs in moral philosophy that train our next generation of philosophical leaders emphasize the moral growth of the student. Instead, students are often just instructed about the ethical theories and how they differ. How tragic and ironic for those who are meant to be learning ethics! The trope of the moral philosophy professor who didn’t take his own medicine plays out in current pop culture through the television series The Good Place. One character, Chidi Anagonye, a Senegalese moral philosophy professor, finds himself in a hell-type afterlife for his cardinal sin of indecision and the moral and social fallout that often resulted. Chidi simply could not make a decision because his vast knowledge of ethical theory made him second-guess all of his choices in an attempt to determine which path was morally

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best. One lesson the character of Chidi illustrates is how deadlocked modern normative ethics has become. The big-three have a lot going for them, but each has devastating problems.\textsuperscript{14}

Consequentialism suffers from a crippling decision-procedure problem. It is not really possible for people to actually use the theory to make morally correct choices. The list of consequences for even the smallest of our actions begins to increase exponentially with each passing second. There is no way human beings can calculate all of the actual or expected consequences and assign them a valuation in a way that would lead to accurate moral judgments. Deontological ethics attempts to offer a more realistic decision-procedure by offering a collection of various moral rules that apply in different contexts, but hangs itself on its lack of guidance for the practitioner on what to do when the rules suggest contrary behavior. Do I right now continue working on this project and achieving my goals or play with my children? Both, it could be argued, are enjoined upon me by a deontic-inspired rule. No deontological view has been able to offer a compelling, unproblematic way around this problem. The proponent of Virtue Ethics is quickly enmeshed in a Euthyphro-style dilemma. If what is morally right is whatever the virtuous person would do, then I will want to follow this virtuous exemplar. But aren’t we curious as to why the virtuous person is doing what they are doing? Does the virtuous person do things because they are good? If so, the reasons those things are good are closer to the bedrock of morality than the precept(s) of Virtue Ethics, in which case, I would want to discover, adopt, and act in accordance with those reasons. Or are things good because the virtuous person does them? This produces a problem of arbitrariness. If the virtuous person had committed a

\textsuperscript{14} There is, of course, a vast literature on the merits and flaws of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. This project is not the right space to assess it. The following paragraphs are included to highlight key problems for the views seen commonly in the literature.
rape, then we would be forced to consider rape a moral good, which of course is quite objectionable and so much the worse for Virtue Ethics.

I recognize that this is an extremely brief take on the “big-three” in contemporary moral philosophy and there are hundreds of scholarly articles and books published each year that attempt to carve out little nuances that purport to solve some of these problems and other issues that have been raised over the centuries. And perhaps you or I might find a gerrymandered version of one of these views quite compelling and undefeated by countervailing evidence. The point is that the secular humanist is fighting an extremely tough uphill battle to discover an adequate basis for ethics that is entirely based on human reason and experience. Not only have we not discovered one so far and a clear winner has yet to emerge in normative ethics, but it is far from clear that the “big-three” and their other moral relatives have led to significant moral improvement for humanity, let alone that ever elusive status of moral blamelessness.¹⁵

Perhaps the problem is time. We simply have not had enough time to invent the correct procedure to move someone along from morally problematic to morally blameless. In the grand scheme of human history, we’ve enjoyed vibrant moral philosophy for a fairly brief time. And it is not all for naught. There do seem to be significant moral discoveries and innovations that have occurred in its brief tenure. For example, the modern woman in America enjoys the same constitutional rights that a man does. This was not always the case. A general shift occurred in the cultural ethos on the treatment of women, and moral progress was made. The practice of

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¹⁵ Toward the end of his discussion about morality, John Cottingham has this to say about the prospects of sorting out the competing alternatives that purport to explain the nature of moral obligation, “even if an exhaustive case by case examination were feasible, it would be a mistake to suppose this is an area where decisive refutation is feasible by the use of coercive philosophical argument...in the all-important area of morality, how we interpret it will depend in large part on how far we are gripped by a certain picture of reality, or how far we can with sincerity live with that picture.” John Cottingham, Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95.
enslaving other people was an unquestioned norm for most societies of the ancient world and even up until the 19th century. Sadly, some slavery does still persist in the world and it is a grave injustice, but it is nowhere near the pervasive, cross-cultural problem it once was. Moral progress has been made in this area as well.\textsuperscript{16}

But this is not a good enough reason to think that eventually we will sort out all of the other moral failures that plague the civilizations of the world. While some moral progress has been made, there has also been a fair bit of moral regress. On some theories of morality where consequences of actions matter and calculating states of happiness and suffering is used for evaluating the moral goodness of action, one could argue that the present day is not human history’s moral zenith. Nor should we be confident that its peak lies somewhere in the future, perhaps it has already come and gone. Technological advancement, which we can only assume will continue unless a coalition emerges that advocates for institutional sanctions, brings with it the promise of great moral benefit and the ability to reduce certain unnecessary harms, but it also has the potential to introduce types of moral harm that human history has not yet contended with.

The British television show \textit{Black Mirror} imagines a near-future version of modern society where certain startling advancements have been made in technology particularly involving artificial intelligence and consciousness. One episode depicts a particularly cruel abuse of an artificially conscious entity where this entity, as a form of punishment, experiences the felt-duration of 6 months in solitary confinement, all in the span of a few real-world seconds.\textsuperscript{17} Now, of course, this is a fictional story and relies on the notion of digitized

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\textsuperscript{16} To be clear, I am not saying that this was significantly caused by work done in moral philosophy. \\
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Black Mirror}, “White Christmas,” Season 2, Episode 4, directed by Carl Tibbetts, written by Charlie Brooker, Netflix, December 16, 2014.
\end{flushright}
consciousness. Yet, the alarming possibility the show highlights is if technological advancement one day offered this to us, untold psychological damage could be inflicted on such beings. The potential for conscious suffering would be orders of magnitude higher than at any previous point in history. The humanist should take pause; does humanity in principle have the tools to conquer such moral challenges as they come? More than likely the next technological age will leave its own ugly stain on humanity’s moral report card, that is, if history is a reliable indicator.

But, we do not have to imagine possibly dubious futuristic technology to generate the worry. Consider the advent of the internet and social media. No one would deny the great benefits brought to society from these; instantaneous communication, wide and ready access to information, and greater connectivity on a global scale. However, the same systems that present near-boundless opportunity and benefit also provide a platform for more sinister, or at least, harmful outcomes. Many social commentators lament the epidemic of loneliness ironically in partial result from the pervasiveness usage of social media. The freedom, accessibility, and anonymity of many online interactions have outstripped the moral character of many users of the technology. There is no guarantee that the moral problem facing human beings simply needs a shot in the arm of more and more technological advancement. Unintended negative consequences consistently arise. Such advancement simply increases the size of the moral sandbox to play in, for good or for ill.

Now, one might tweak one’s secular humanism to instead be the claim that the best and only path forward for humanity is to use our collective efforts to create a more flourishing world for ourselves and our descendants. But, it is only rational to endorse this version of humanism if one has decisive evidence that God does not exist. Recall, on the Existential Method of conceiving of God, part of what it means to be God is that God is willing and able to rescue
humanity from their moral predicament. This would provide an alternative route, instead of mere human reason and experience, to the flourishing and just world of interest to the humanist. In other words, the truth of humanism is precisely one of the doctrines at stake when one inquires about God’s existence and searches for evidence. Thus, it is begging the question against the religious inquirer to use the supposed truth of secular humanism in an argument to undermine methods for conceiving of God.

**A Rescue Plan**

Human beings need help. We aren’t living morally blameless lives, there is no good reason to expect this to change any time soon, and this is troubling because the good life, then, is indefinitely out of reach – unless a rescuer exists that is willing and able to help us in our predicament. I have suggested that we call this rescuer “God”.

We need to discuss what it would mean for human beings to be rescued from the moral predicament. Ultimately, it would mean providing a path forward to enable human beings to become morally blameless. But, not just any old method will do. The rescue efforts of God, if God exists, would need to include careful attention to the role of motivation. Most moral theories give some significant weight to the role of motivation. That is, it is not quite enough in fulfilling your moral duty to merely do the right thing, rather, the right thing needs to be done for the right reasons. In this way, having the proper motivations is a necessary condition for achieving moral blamelessness, but not a sufficient one.\(^{18}\) Any strong moral theory would want

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\(^{18}\) Few moral theories claim that motivation is the sole, sufficient criterion for morally good acts and/or persons. I would argue that a person with pristine motivations who consistently did the act that led to less well-being in the world is morally deficient in some way. Likewise, the person who consistently (and perhaps unwittingly) increases well-being by their actions, but were sinister in their motivations would be morally deficient as well.
to avoid creating space for a category of moral luck, or at the very least, minimize the category significantly. 19 In her summary of the topic and literature on moral luck, Dana Nelkin describes moral luck as occurring when, “an agent can be correctly treated as an object of moral judgment, despite the fact that a significant aspect of what he is assessed for depends on factors beyond his control.” 20 That is, we still often dole out moral praise and blame even when some aspects of a situation are beyond the agent’s control. Without getting far afield into the problem of moral luck, suffice it to say that when a greater role in moral assessment is given to the motivation of the agent, the less moral luck affects our moral judgments. 21

Building intentional, good motivations into what it means to behave morally blamelessly allows us to dismiss one potential way that a rescuer would help humanity in their moral predicament. You could imagine a being with immense power and knowledge of the sort that it could force human beings to act in a way that is in accordance with morality. This kind of coercive method could take a number of forms: threatening an everlasting conscious torment as a result of doing wrong, promising extravagant rewards for behaving well, or in extreme cases overriding either the body or the mind to actively control the person and make her perform the good. A compelling theory regarding the motivational component of morally blameless living blocks any of these coercive measures from being genuine forms of rescue from our predicament. This is because they do not truly address the core problem of moral failure.

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19 For an extended discussion of moral luck, where it can occur, and its connection to skepticism regarding moral assessment, see Bernard Williams, Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Thomas Nagel, Mortal Questions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).


21 This is not to pretend that our motivations are not influenced by the circumstances of our upbringing, genetics, and various life-inputs. This claim would presume a libertarian notion of free will with enough power to rise above the influence of such things in some cases.
Introducing any kind, let alone extreme versions, of rewards and punishments as a *primary* reason to act in a given way does not provide one a *moral* reason but rather a prudential one. Merely increasing the number of prudential reasons to act in a given way and following through on those reasons does not constitute positive moral formation. In fact, some might argue that such reasoning and behavior moves away from the good life; the good life would include doing what is morally best for the right sorts of reasons. The extreme coercion of body or mind certainly does not usher people into morally blameless living since they have not freely chosen to perform the acts in question.\(^{22}\)

So, in order for the rescuer to help us, the aid must allow for proper intentions in one’s motivational structure. That is, there needs to be space for a love for the good and doing it for its own sake.\(^{23}\) In this way, the rescue would be free of coercion. As we discussed in Chapter II, our *God as Rescuer* concept includes notions like everlastingness, great power and knowledge (at least enough to provide a way for human beings to continue existing after their bodily death), and some good will in its providing a great good to humans, namely, continued personal existence, all things considered. Additionally, this being is an agent, able to make decisions and have its will expressed in the world as an unmoved mover of sorts. In fact, this follows from the standard definition of power as the ability for one to manifest the states of affairs that one would will to be the case. Thus, a being with immense power would have this ability to a very high

\(^{22}\) Again, this point relies on a libertarian or compatibilist view of free will. The former will mostly be assumed throughout the project.

\(^{23}\) A goal in this discussion is to try not and assume any particular normative ethical theory. Therefore, I will not attempt to give a robust account of what I take the good and the good life to be.
degree; that is, there would be few states of affairs that such a being could not manifest by sheer will.24

Yet, the predicament of pervasive moral failure forces the user of the Existential Method of conceiving of God to build a bit more into their concept of God beyond power. Recall, we will only want to include properties in our concept if a being would need to have a property in order to successfully be a rescuer. A willingness and ability on the part of the rescuer to save humanity from the predicament of death allows us to build into our concept of God some good will. After all, there is a good, namely one’s personal survival in a desirable afterlife, that such a being would aim to secure for people. However, good will and its attending moral praiseworthiness is not morally sufficient to be able to fully rescue humanity from the predicament of moral failure. I contend that we need to include the property of omnibenevolence or the idea of moral perfection.25 Without it, a being would not meet the requirements necessary to be an adequate rescuer.

Let me explain. One method the potential rescuer could use is to be a moral guide for humanity. The idea would be to somehow communicate to human beings how they ought to live. I have in mind here what Christians sometimes call “walking in the Spirit”. The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in Galatia that walking in the Spirit produces results in one’s life such as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” and failure to do so will lead to “gratifying the desires of the flesh,” which we can

24 I am purposely avoiding attributing the property of omnipotence. We don’t have a good reason from examination of the human predicament that such a property is required to rescue human beings, and we noted additional reasons to be suspect of this property in Chapter I.

25 Many readers will have concerns that the problem of evil, in at least some of its forms, defeats the idea that a morally perfect being exists. This is a worthy concern and I address it at length in Chapter IV.
take to mean wrongdoing.\textsuperscript{26} In Christian theology, part of the divine Godhead, the Holy Spirit, at least sometimes, communicates to human beings through their conscience to deliver timely guidance for right living. In this way, God could act as a moral rescuer by being a resource of moral fortitude and guidance for human beings. To be sure, I am not assuming that God exists in this discussion. Rather, I highlight the Christian story of the Holy Spirit engaging with people to illustrate how a rescuer might accomplish moral guidance. And if this is the way that a being would go about rescuing, then moral perfection is required in order to be a worthy guide. That is, if human beings are aiming for moral blamelessness, but are following a guide that also has not conquered moral failure, then at times the guidance from that being would lead people astray into wrongdoing.

**Objections**

Here’s a possible retort that we can call the “Good Enough” objection. Why jump all the way to moral perfection? It seems that one could include a property like “extremely morally good” to the tune of only making one moral error, say, every 100,000 years.\textsuperscript{27} In this world, God is for the most part a very reliable guide for moral behavior and it would be a vast improvement for humanity if such a being were to exist. Wouldn’t this “almost rescuer” be good enough for people’s predicament of moral failure? It does not seem like one’s living-out the good life is

\textsuperscript{26} Galatians 5:13-6:10 (NRSV)

\textsuperscript{27} This objection would need to deny most versions of a divine command theory in ethics, which may not be palatable for inquirers who are committed to the idea that morality ultimately originates from God. this family of views, God always does what is morally right because what it means to behave in a morally right way is to act in accordance with God’s commands, and God would always adhere to his own commands (to deny this invites a host of bizarre psychological implications for the divine). There are versions of divine command theory that rely heavily on an already established value theory, perhaps where the moral value of God’s commands are grounded in God’s intrinsically good character. “I assume that [God’s commands] are consistent with the divine nature having properties that make God an ideal candidate, and the salient candidate, for the semantically indicated role of the supreme and definitive Good…” Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 250.
derailed too much by morally failing at such an incredibly low rate. I agree; discovering the existence of such a being would be great news, because it would entail that there was a way forward for us morally. But, I am even more interested in the being that never errs morally, and I think you ought to be as well. This being would be an even better guide. If it turns out that no evidence is emerges regarding the existence of a morally perfect being, then perhaps I would alter the conception of God to have a bit less moral prowess. Ultimately, it is up to us to tailor the search terms to suit our inquiry goals. Yet, at the outset of our inquiry and search for evidence, I believe it makes sense to seek after that which is most desirable, which is the morally perfect being who guides us into morally blameless living.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, the “almost rescuer”, who also would have an obvious interest in living the good life, would be separated from this goal by occasional moral failure, and would itself require moral rescue. The need for moral rescue exists for all beings that are not morally perfect, not just humans, and only moral perfection is sufficient to qualify one as an adequate rescuer for a being’s moral predicament.

Another objection focuses on the goods that might be lost in a world of total moral perfection. At first blush, it seems obvious that the well-intentioned inquirer would desire a world of moral blamelessness, where all agents continuously do what is morally right indefinitely into the future. Yet, one might argue that such a world lacks a certain type of beauty. There are some morally good and beautiful acts that depend on wrongdoing having been done. One example is the activity of forgiveness. A large part of forgiveness is not holding

\textsuperscript{28} One might respond to this objection by noting that in an everlasting existence post-mortem, the tendency to morally err, even after such long intervals, will trend toward infinity. The amount of times this “almost rescuer” would err would approach infinity. To say that our moral rescuer will have erred a potentially infinite amount of times begins to make little sense of such a being actually being qualified to be humanity’s resource for moral fortitude and guidance.
against someone what they have done to wrong you. In a world with no wrongdoing, we would all miss out on the beauty of forgiveness. Here are a few responses to this. First, this project does not claim that being rescued from moral failure by a rescuer will occur in this lifetime nor even relatively quickly in a potential afterlife. It may be a very time-intensive process where people are continuously being positively formed. It is not a guarantee that a world of moral blamelessness would ever be achieved. After all, the rescuer is not coercing the wills of people to align with moral blamelessness. The ability for people to freely choose between moral progress and failure ultimately makes space for occasions of moral failure indefinitely. In this way, the beauty of forgiveness could be with humanity for a very long time, even forever. Furthermore, forgiveness is both a static and dynamic event. At a moment in time, I make the choice to no longer hold against you the wrong you have done to me. But, I also need to maintain a disposition of forgiveness toward you. Upon remembering the wrongdoing, I continue to have a posture of forgiveness. The virtues of forgiveness persist over time. Indeed, part of the journey toward moral blamelessness will be mastering and maintaining this posture of forgiveness toward all people who have wronged you.

**Conclusion**

Human beings have not been able to achieve morally blameless living on their own. We should also not expect this to happen in the future. There is not persuasive evidence that the project of Secular Humanism will be successful. I argue that human beings need a rescuer that

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29 Humanity is still rescued from their moral predicament in this world, because it now has a path forward in the hope of moral blamelessness, instead of being stuck in moral failure.

30 This is true only if forgiveness is, in fact, a morally right behavior in all situations of wrongdoing directed toward you. I would like this project’s portrayal of our moral rescue to be free from as many specific normative ethical claims as possible.
could be a reliable, consistent moral guide for right living. And importantly, I have not claimed that such a rescuer exists; rather, the current project seeks to persuade the reader to adopt the concept of *God as Rescuer* for the purposes of inquiry into whether God exists and what God might be like if God exists. We ought to include in our concept of *God as Rescuer* the type of rescue efforts that would successfully usher people into moral blamelessness.
CHAPTER IV

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT OF APPARENT GRATUITOUS EVIL AND ITS ATTENDING SUFFERING

One of the most beautiful and yet sometimes tragic implications of having consciousness, is that one’s life can go better or worse. Whatever we might say it means for a life to go well, human beings have been deeply interested in seeing that it does.¹ Yet, despite our best efforts and often due to the malevolent intrusion of others, some human lives do not go well. In fact, all human lives have aspects to them that are not going as well as they could be. As such, this “not going well” is part of the human condition – it is something all human beings encounter in virtue of being a human. Still further, lives not going well plays out as actual lived experiences. As conscious subjects, we go through them; there is a first-person experience of living through these not-going-wells. This chapter focuses on how the human predicament includes the intersection of both the objective human condition, or the ways that lives do not go as well as they could, and also the subjective human condition of actually experiencing and enduring those ways. These together form the human predicament of evil and suffering and we will explore the ramifications this has on the Existential Method for constructing our concept of God.

The objective condition would be the evils, ills, and woes that afflict our lives to various degrees, regardless of what a particular subject might make of them. It is not the goal of this

¹ As stated in Chapter III, it is not my goal to offer a fully worked-out value theory that we could use to understand how lives go well or not. Common sense notions are sufficient for my purposes.
chapter to articulate a full-blooded treatise of what constitutes the good life and to provide an exhaustive list of goods and evils such that we can exactly measure how a life is going. Yet, I do believe that most honest participants in this discussion would concede that evils occur in our world on a routine basis. Frankly, this is so apparent and obvious to me that it would be difficult to take seriously someone who would deny their existence. Evils loom incredibly large in the lives of a vast number of people. For the sake of clarity, however, it is worth mentioning a few examples. To be sure, not every occasion of an evil is equally severe and lies somewhere on a spectrum ranging from the trivial to unthinkable calamity. It may be as transient as getting a splinter lodged in your palm as you slide your hand over a wooden railing. Such an occasion would be annoying, but not debilitating. Nonetheless, it is an occurrence of evil; in this case, a negative, unchoiceworthy state of affairs of wounding caused your life to not go as well as it could have if you had not received the splinter.² It can also be as devastating as the loss of a child from a natural disaster, like a tsunami. The life of loss the bereaved parent would now contend with is negative, unchoiceworthy, and is manifestly not going as well as it could have.

One might object that I have unjustifiably labeled these two examples as “evils” because I am not in the epistemic position to know if either life did not go well as a result. Perhaps some great benefit came to the victim of these so-called evils and their lives actually went better. You can imagine a wild scenario where shortly after splintering your finger a wealthy benefactor, who is bent on paying off the student loans of the next person he sees with a splintered finger, discovers you and delivers this great windfall into your life. Can you really say your life was not going well as a result of splintering your finger?

² By “unchoiceworthy” I mean in the scope of all other things being equal. As I point out below, there are almost always scenarios you could construct where some evil could be choiceworthy when pitted against a narrower range of options.
Here we must make a distinction between the event itself and the consequences that follow it. Conflating these misses the specific objective and phenomenological features that are salient in properly assessing the human condition. In the moment of the splinter entering my flesh, causing pain, and creating a wound, I am now in worse health and my life is not going as well as it could have. It is an evil. This is to say nothing of what comes next. There are a host of things that may happen, and we can engage in all sorts of comparisons and assessments of whether something was “worth it.” But, it would be a mistake in doing so to say of the splintering event that it was good. Rather, we can say that it may lead to an independent good. Or as the subject, I may judge that it was worth undergoing the evil of the splinter in order to receive some later good that came as a result.

So, there is an objective human condition of lives not going as well as they could be. Yet, there is also a subjective dimension to the situation of lives going better or worse. Humans are conscious beings capable of perceiving and experiencing goods and evils in their lives; we actually live them and have a first-person acquaintance with a host of qualia and states of affairs. It is here that I find the term “suffering” to be useful in capturing the fundamentally conscious, subjective nature of this aspect of the human condition. I will be using the term “suffering” to refer to the situation of a) perceiving that your life is not going well, b) the desire to have it go better, and c) the attending experiences related to those mental states. One reason for articulating suffering in this way is to make conceptual space for the variance in perceptual experiences of human beings. Such are our powers of perception that there can be two extremes

\[\text{This definition attempts to avoid the confusion in the literature that sometimes occurs when authors equate the terms “evil” and “suffering.” I am stipulating that “suffering” refers to strictly the subjective and phenomenological experience. This allows for the possible cases where there may be genuine suffering in the absence of evil.}\]
of what we might call misaligned suffering. This occurs when one’s subjective human condition of whether one’s life is going well is not in alignment with the objective condition of one’s life going well or not. For example, someone’s life that is going demonstrably well or above average might be perceived by the person living it to be not going well, for whatever reason. And likewise, someone’s life that is not going very well at all may still have the perception, albeit mistaken, that their life is going well. In these cases, the degree of suffering the subject experiences does not directly correspond to the actual evils in their life. This happens all the time, and it is important for a view on this topic to make room for this phenomenon.

**Apparent Gratuitous Evil**

If it is indeed the case that lives do not go as well as they could, it is worth considering the degree to which they do not go as well and what the consequences are when they do. As mentioned above, we can proceed without ever needing to conflate the objective occurrence of an evil and a life not going as well and the consequences that follow. Yet, from a subjective perspective of trying to understand if there is any significance or meaning to be found in the occurrence of evil – asking the “why” question – it is reasonable to consider the consequences. This is true because there may be certain goods and ways one’s life could go quite well, or at least better, if only some evil occurred.

Let’s consider the mundane example of exercise. I have the goal of becoming more physically fit, whatever the reasons may be. To do this, I must exercise my body and undergo some training. I also come to discover the basic biological story of exercise – my muscles develop tears in them due to prolonged or heavy duress. After a workout, I am left in a weaker state than when I began. I am fatigued and relatively less able to deftly perform the same feats of strength I could before I exercised. In this way, I take on a small amount of risk that a situation
will present itself where I’ll be unable to meet its physical requirement given that I’ve exhausted myself. Yet, I still proceed with the confidence that once my body self-repairs the muscle, the muscle will become stronger and I will be able to exert a bit more power the next time I go to exercise, thus getting me closer to my goal.

In this scenario, a bit of evil occurred in my life – the tearing and wearing down of the muscle and the state of being fatigued that left me open to some danger. In admittedly a very small way, my life in that moment is going slightly worse than it was before. Yet, many people throughout history have voluntarily taken on this evil in order to achieve a good, namely physical fitness, that is relatively inaccessible without that evil. It was worth it to them. The benefit outweighed the cost. In this case, the “why” question about evil is not terribly worrisome; the evil occurred of the subject’s own volition in order to achieve a good that arguably is, and at least was perceived to be, greater than the cost of the evil and resulted in a life that is going better than before.

However, gambits like these don’t always pay off; the evil incurred can outweigh the intended good. This is the story of nearly every lottery ticket purchase - the loss of money and the attending goods it could have provided in exchange for a frighteningly low probability of winning a great reward. In the end, nearly all lottery ticket buyers are left on the short end of the value stick. They have gained nothing, save a small hit of dopamine, and lost some amount of money that could have been directed to better ends. Examples abound where the subject

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4 To keep it simple, I have drastically under-described the benefits and costs. There is a far more complicated collection of costs and benefits at play in the decision of whether to exercise. I am assuming here for the present argument that all things considered physical fitness is a good and objectively makes one’s life better than it would be otherwise.

5 This is a case which involves the amount of discretionary income of the buyer and the subjective experience of the entertainment of playing the game. I would contend that most lottery playing experiences are not a great value proposition and leave the buyer worse off than before.
voluntarily takes on an evil with the hope of garnering a greater good only to discover for whatever reason that the initial cost outweighed the benefit, leaving them worse the wear. Even here the “why” question concerning evil is not existentially troubling even if it indicates a miscalculation on the part of the inquirer.

Both of these scenarios involve the subject voluntarily taking on the evil and experiencing either a surplus or deficit of well-being in their life as a result. In both cases, the “why” question lacks disruptive force because the subject is on the hook in a way. Their agency was clearly involved in the causal chain of events, and thus to some degree the person had control over the outcome. The “why” question at some point simply offers a mirror. This can be extremely unsettling for some, particularly when the cost of their own misdeeds is overwhelming. But, for our purposes, it doesn’t directly impact one’s inquiry concerning the existence of God and how to construct a concept of God in the first place.⁶

Some evil, however, invades our life without our consent. It occurs without our voluntary approval. This happens in two main ways. First, it can come from someone else’s consent and actions. Examples pepper nearly everyone’s life in some way: getting cut-off in traffic, being betrayed by a friend or family member, losing out on a trade you thought was fair and someone else decided to have their cake and eat it too. The actions of others need not always have malicious intent behind them to bring about an evil in our lives; accidents can also lead to evils in our lives. For example, your neighbor may have accidentally left the lid of their trash can slightly ajar overnight leading to wind or vermin strewing refuse over your property.

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⁶ At most, you might get a concept of God which includes, “that being which allows for human agency to take on risk with variable outcomes,” which is interesting, but not fundamentally important for answering the human predicament.
The actions of others, whether an intent to harm is present, can lead to our lives going worse to varying degrees.

And still, answering the “why” question regarding these evils is not as worrisome as the category of evils we will get to in a moment. The explanatory train makes a definitive stop at the locus of another human agent. The actions of another person led to some event in question that made your life better or, in the above cases, worse. Now, to be sure, it can be deeply interesting to investigate why a given person acts in the way that they do. To do so would begin to tread into questions regarding the extent of the power of a purported free will, the nature of a human person, and the impact of the developmental process on decision-making. These all deserve a fair hearing and would help fill out the contours of this discussion, but getting into them all would take us too far afield. Recall, the goal of this project is twofold: (1) to discern what exactly are the most existentially worrisome features of the human predicament that all people face in virtue of being a human, and (2) to use these features as the starting place for constructing a concept of God where God would be that which is willing and able to rescue human beings from that predicament. In light of this, there is another source of evil that, I believe, exerts more existential pressure than the evil that occurs as a result of my own doing or another person’s activity. And to some degree, the force of the worry that does emerge from concerns about “agential evil” is addressed in the previous chapter on the predicament of moral failure.

There is yet another source of evil in our lives and that is, generally speaking, from the natural world.\(^7\) I mean to include any and all events that result from the various laws of nature

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\(^7\) Again, one might argue that any of the above alleged separate sources stemming from our own agency and the agency of others ought to be receive a reductive interpretation – human persons are just as much part of the natural order. I do not find that interpretation helpful in understanding different sources of evil in our lives and insist on separating them.
operating on the existing parts of the physical world, on both the macro and micro scale. And in particular, I mean to exclude those events that have human agency as a salient and substantial contributor to the outcome. Consider, for example, lightning striking the tree outside my window, which severs a branch that crushes my house. My life in that moment is not going as well as it was before – my property has been damaged and that property being intact contributes to my life going well in a number of ways. Further, the event of the lightning strike does not seem to include salient or substantial human agency in its causal story, if any at all. Now, the fact that I have chosen to live in a house that is so close to a tree whose branch could affect me in this way, or that I have chosen to not remove the tree from its station, does involve human agency. One could argue that with such decisions, I voluntarily took on the risk that such an event might happen, whether I consciously considered the possibility of a lightning strike negatively impacting me in this way. Yet, these human elements in the causal story don’t carry the same causal weight as the lightning itself. Crucially, the genesis of the lightning strike originated from a non-agent, according to the many natural laws acting upon the material world.

It is with this final category, sometimes called “natural evil”, that the “why” question is most troubling. Of course, the scope and devastation of natural evil can far exceed damaging part of a house. Entire communities, families, and ways of life are on the line. Untold multitudes have been annihilated by apocalyptic proportions of water, wind, fire, and earth spewed forth from a planet in turmoil, for one reason or another. The ways that lives do not go

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8 I won’t deny that a story could be told about how human activity can influence weather patterns and storm generation. A butterfly effect view of causation may lead one to deny that there are any purely natural events free from the causal input of humans. I have sought to remove these worries with the qualifiers “salient” and “substantial.”
as well, or are brutally ended, and the attending insufferable experience of that evil appear to be

grateful.

This notion of gratuity looms large in this present discussion and requires some

explanation. Gratuity in this context means over and above what is necessary to achieve some
good. It is extra. It is more than what is required. Or further, it is more than is reasonable or
expected. We have to be precise here. Recall that we made a distinction between the objective
ways a life goes better or worse and the subjective perception of how painful or woeful an evil is
(the suffering a subject experiences); the gratuitousness of an evil also admits of this distinction.
This is simply to say we can attend to either the question of whether an evil is actually
gratuitous

compared to some plumb line of acceptable good results or to how severe a particular subject or
group of subjects perceives the gratuity of the evil to be. For instance, my 6-year-old son views
the evil of being sent to his room to be entirely gratuitous I can assure you. That is, whatever act
of defiance, disobedience, or harm he performed, in his mind did not warrant this time out – to
him, nothing good can come from this timeout. However, my perception of the situation is one
that does not view the punishment as gratuitous. In my mind, and you may disagree of course,
this time out will serve as a negative reinforcement to the harmful behavior my son exhibited
earlier. This evil in his life is well worth the resulting good and is thus not gratuitous. This
example shows that two different subjects can have entirely different experiences of a situation
and accord it differing levels of gratuity, in this case, one a great deal and the other none at all.
But, there is an objective truth to the matter. Did that timeout actually generate more good in the
world than the bad injected from the evil? I leave that to the reader to ponder. The important
idea, for our purposes, is that there is an objective, mind-independent truth about whether more

good occurs in the world as a result of an evil, or a way that a life did not go as well for a time.
Let me address what I think some readers will worry about: the consequentialist undertones at play throughout the discussion. To be clear, I am not assuming a consequentialist value system whereby *all and only* what matters for determining the value of an event, whether an agent should have allowed something to transpire, or performing an act is whether there are net positive results. I do not think this discussion needs to assume this is all and only what matters. I think it does matter to some extent and the present argument need not indicate what that extent is. Perhaps there are some evils that a God as Rescuer should not ever allow, regardless of whatever great goods may result from it – I am not sure about that. What I am contending and find interesting for religious inquirers is whether there are in fact great goods, or whether we can *trust* that there are great goods that occur as a result of apparently gratuitous evil.

We are now equipped to formulate the third feature of the human predicament. In virtue of being humans, we face the predicament of living in a world where the evil that occurs and the attending suffering may be gratuitous. The evil and suffering may be greater than whatever good results from it. If it is the case that the world abounds with gratuitous evil, this is to be lamented. It would be tragic. Any religious inquirer, and in fact, any human being should want this to be otherwise. It would be great news indeed if the evil we encounter was not gratuitous. We should want this to be the case, and as such, we should be on the lookout as religious inquirers to discover if there is a way out of this predicament.

**Implications for a God as Rescuer**

This project uses the Existential Method discussed in Chapter I to construct a concept of God. In brief, the Existential Method for constructing a concept of God contends that we use the term “God” to refer to the being that is willing and able to rescue human beings from their predicament. As we have shown above, one core predicament that human beings face is the
possibility that the world they inhabit abounds with gratuitous evil. So, the *God as Rescuer* concept that emerges from the Existential Method would aim to rescue human beings from the predicament of the possibility of gratuitous evil and its attending suffering.

How might such a rescue be done? The quick and wrong answer would be that a God as Rescuer would simply eliminate any occurrence of evil and suffering. Doing so would deprive the world of great good that can occur as a result of the allowance of particular evils. There are plenty of examples of this, including the one offered earlier about sending my son into a time out. Rather, the rescue would be done by exercising a sufficient amount of power, knowledge, and goodness to ensure that *any* occurrence of evil and its attending suffering leads to greater good in the long run for human beings. Our rescue from the predicament of apparent gratuitous evil may not include our acquiring detailed knowledge of what this greater good is in every instance nor all the maneuvers of power, knowledge, and activity in the world required to produce such an outcome. I contend that it is an adequate solution to the predicament of apparent gratuitous evil that it merely turn out that the evil is, in fact, *not* gratuitous and was only apparently so from our perspective.

In this way, the God is Rescuer may not make available to humans a *robust* theodicy, or a full defense of God’s justice in the face of evil, where humans are privy to the details of God’s

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9 A critic might wonder about the use of “human beings” here and why the moral community is limited to us. Surely other conscious beings, such as non-human life on this planet and perhaps elsewhere, can have an evil occur in their life and experience suffering. Why wouldn’t the God as Rescuer factor their experience into the calculus of ensuring a brighter future for all? Perhaps, such a being would, and it could be that a more detailed description of that being’s moral compass would include expanding the moral community to include those beings. I take the discussion of who is included in the moral community to be slightly off-topic, albeit very important. For my purposes, I will say that the God as Rescuer would be a rescuer toward any being in the moral community. However, the Existential Method is by definition a human-centric method for constructing a concept of God that meets the existential predicament of human beings, and thus, I will refer to human beings throughout as the primary recipients of rescue in this project.
reasons for permitting evil and suffering. The project of theodicy, broadly-considered, is to explain to the inquirer, skeptic, and believer alike how a being can be worthy of the title “God”, possessing the quality of moral perfection, while certain types or amounts of evil are allowed to occur. Following this, this present discussion amounts to more of a pseudo-theodicy. Let me explain. The claim on offer in this discussion is that if there is a being that fits the concept of God as Rescuer, then that being will provide a solution to humanity’s predicament of apparent gratuitous evil and it’s attending suffering. This solution need not include sufficient epistemic access to the mind of God whereby a human being would be satisfied and equipped with God’s reasons for allowing all evils, as a robust theodicy would attempt to demonstrate. Instead, at a broader level, religious inquirers would hope and trust that this being will carry out this rescue in some way that may be unclear to us. Even if this solution does not provide emotional balm when inquirers experience great evils in their lives or consider great evils in the world, it does address the worry that we live in a world with apparent gratuitous evil. If a God as Rescuer does exist, then there is no gratuitous suffering.

On pain of being repetitive, I have to stress once again that this project at no point assumes that God does exist or that there is any being out there that instantiates the concept of God as Rescuer. Because of this, the theodicy discussion here is once-removed; for our purposes, we are entertaining the problem that evil poses for us existentially for the sake of understanding and constructing a suitable concept of God with which to begin our evidential

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10 For a more detailed discussion on robust or “full-explanation” theodicy, see Paul K. Moser, “Theodicy, Christology, and Divine Hiding: Neutralizing the Problem of Evil,” The Expository Times 129, no. 5 (2018): 198 for a more detailed discussion on robust or “full-explanation” theodicy.

11 This is akin to what Moser calls a partial-justification theodicy. Moser, “Theodicy, Christology, and Divine Hiding,” 198.
search for such a being’s existence. The sort of problem of evil in view here does not put pressure on any belief in God, because no such belief is suggested in this project. Rather, this project offers a way of conceiving of God, which even someone who insists that the problem of gratuitous evil serves as a defeater for evidence of God existence should endorse.

**Addressing the Problem of Gratuitous Evil**

Someone could hold both of the following ideas at once without contradiction: the concept of *God as Rescuer* and that there are instances of gratuitous evil. This would imply that there is not a being that instantiates the concept of *God as Rescuer*, since we affirmed earlier that such a being would, if it existed, ensure that no evil was gratuitous. Even though the concept of *God as Rescuer* isn’t threatened by purported instances of gratuitous evil, the whole enterprise of religious inquiry in which one might use the concept of *God as Rescuer* in the attempt to discover whether the concept is instantiated does become less interesting. That is, if it is *obviously* the case that there are gratuitous evils, then there wouldn’t be much point in religious inquirers fussing too much about the God as Rescuer and looking for evidence of such a being because a strong defeater for that evidence would already be in play. So, the religious inquirer will want to know whether there are good reasons for thinking that there are instances of gratuitous evil, again, instances where no greater good will outweigh the evil that has occurred.

William Rowe offered what is now a classic argument that uses the idea of apparent gratuitous evil to conclude that there likely is not a being worthy of the title “God” as traditionally conceived. The following argument from Rowe has been a mainstay in discussions concerning the evidential problem of evil and is still unrivaled in its precision:

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. (Therefore) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.\textsuperscript{12}

Premise (1) is the claim that there are cases of gratuitous evil. There are evils that are over the top and unnecessary to achieve some good or prevent a greater evil. Premise (2) is a theological claim about how a morally perfect, and extremely powerful and intelligent being would prevent any such gratuitous evils from happening. Therefore, as the conclusion states, there is no being with those attributes.

Rowe goes on to give two now famous cases that aim to persuade the reader of the truth of premise (1). These have come to be known as E1 and E2. E1 is the story of a fawn who is trapped and burned by a forest fire, suffering over the course of a few days until death claims it. E2 recounts the details of a real-life case of a little girl being beaten, raped, and strangled to death in Michigan.\textsuperscript{13} These cases are meant to be representatives for two main categories of evil: natural evil (E1) and moral evil (E2), and of course, there is no shortage of instances in either category. Rowe argues that together, E1 and E2 put great pressure on theistic belief through the following inference:

(P) No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being’s obtaining it would morally justify that being’s permitting E1 or E2.

(Q) (Therefore) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being’s obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting E1 or E2.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{14} Rowe, “Evil and Theodicy,” 120-121
The conclusion (Q) is the key piece to supporting the idea from premise (1) in Rowe’s above argument that there are instances of gratuitous suffering. As such, religious inquirers will want to know whether the inference from (P) to (Q) is a good one.

Some critics of this idea, known as “skeptical theists”, resist the inference from (P) to (Q) on the grounds that our lack of epistemic access to God’s good purposes in allowing a given evil to occur does not entail that God doesn’t have such good purposes. Stephen Wykstra has referred to the (P) to (Q) inference as a type of “noseeum inference,” and calls out Rowe in particular:

Rowe holds that the theistic God would allow suffering only if doing so serves some outweighing good. But is there some such good for every instance of suffering? Rowe thinks not. There is much suffering he says, for which we see no such goods; and this, he argues, inductively justifies believing that for some sufferings that are no such goods. Since it gives such bite to what we cannot see, I call this a “noseeum argument” from evil.15

Now, in what Nick Trakakkis has dubbed Rowe’s noseeum assumption or RNA for short, you might be right to make a noseeum inference if you could also demonstrate that the following assumption were reasonable,

RNA - If there are goods justifying God’s permission of horrendous evil, it is likely that we would discern or be cognizant of such goods.16

That is to say, if RNA is reasonable, then we might be able to infer (Q) from (P).


Much has been written about whether RNA is reasonable, and yet, the skeptical theist argues that it is not reasonable for two main reasons: human beings’ cognitive and moral limitations. There is a long tradition within theism of noting the cognitive and moral gap separating the divine and human beings. In the book of Isaiah, the Yahweh character declares the cognitive and moral distance between humanity and the divine:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
    nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
    so are my ways higher than your ways
    and my thoughts than your thoughts.¹⁷

Likewise, in the book of Job, the Job character confesses to Yahweh that:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
    things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.¹⁸

Pointing out these examples in religious scripture is not to claim that all of God’s thoughts are in principle unknowable by human beings, but rather that not all of them are currently disclosed to us and are not discoverable by human beings apart from God’s self-revelation.¹⁹ That is to say, there is nothing in principle that makes it impossible for God to reveal the inner workings of a thought or a plan that God has to human beings. God’s thoughts need not be “higher” or “too wonderful” in a metaphysical way that would prevent a human being from ever understanding. Instead, it is plausible to suggest that God’s thoughts and plans operate on a set of possible goods

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¹⁷ Isaiah 55:8-9 (RSV); Scholars debate the exact texture of “gabahh,” which most translations offer as “higher.” This is often used literally to refer to height through the scriptures, but it can often have figurative meaning as it likely does here. It is difficult to tell whether the original author(s) intended it to be a cognitive or moral distance.

¹⁸ Job 42:3 (RSV)

¹⁹ It could be the case that God’s thoughts are in principle unknowable by human beings. But, the skeptical theist does not need to commit herself to that doctrine.
and evils that exceed the extent of our knowledge of goods and evils. Michael Bergmann presents this idea in the form of three skeptical theses:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.  

Without such good reasons, the skeptical theist argues that we ought not make the inference from (P) to (Q). That is, our human perspective on goods and evils and the way certain goods and evils lead to other ones by no means exhausts all of the possibilities that are feasible in our world. Our limited human perspective is due both to an epistemic gap and a moral gap. It is not obvious that we have the kind of character required to adequately morally assess God’s thoughts, plans, and purposes even if they were revealed.

One way to explain the idea of this moral gap is to look at one purported case of divine character on display in the crucifixion of Jesus. Paul Moser, following the lead of pastor and theologian H.R. Mackintosh, argues that we can generalize, “on the Christological lesson about


21 For an exploration of what it would take to overcome this epistemic gap, see Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73–93. On 84-85, Wykstra suggests that one must meet the condition of reasonable epistemic access (CORNEA) as a requisite for making appearance type claims of the sort needed to generate the worry of apparently gratuitous evil. CORNEA is described as follows: “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 she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different in some discernable way be her.” Applying CORNEA to the present discussion, one might argue that both E1 and E2, Rowe’s earlier cases of apparently gratuitous evil, would not be discernably different to an observer if p (God having “outweighing” good reasons for allowing the evils) obtained or not.
our inadequate understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus.” Mackintosh explains our misunderstanding in terms of our own moral deficiency:

The great reason why we fail to understand Calvary is not merely that we are not profound enough, it is that we are not good enough. It is because we are such strangers to sacrifice that God’s sacrifice leaves us bewildered. It is because we love so little that His love is mysterious. We have never forgiven anybody at such a cost as His. We have never taken the initiative in putting a quarrel right with His kind of unreserved willingness to suffer. It is our unlikeness to God that hangs as an obscuring screen impeding our view, and we see the Atonement so often through the frosted glass of our own lovelessness.

Our lack of understanding the divine moral character and decision-making on display in God allowing the crucifixion of Jesus reveals, “our own moral short-comings regarding the kind of self-sacrificial love characteristic of God…and our deficient moral profundity in relation to God’s perfect moral character.” If this moral deficiency is the case, we can reasonably generalize our failure to understand God’s allowance of apparently gratuitous evil in the crucifixion to other cases of apparently gratuitous evil we encounter in our world. This moral deficiency can generate a misleading expectation about what God should do in the face of apparently gratuitous suffering. As such, we ought to place less confidence in claims about which evils and their attending sufferings constitute a genuine problem for God’s existence and perfect moral character.

Another way of understanding the moral gap is the Parent Analogy. Wykstra suggests that just as an infant, or whatever aged child you’d like for the purposes of analogizing our

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25 Again, this is not to assume that God exists. Rather, this is to point out our own moral deficiency compared to God’s perfect moral character if God exists.
knowledge to omniscience, is unable to understand the moral reasonings of a parent who is issuing a disciplinary verdict out of love, so we may be unable to comprehend the moral reasonings of a God who would allow a certain degree and scope of suffering.26

However, some have argued that the Parent Analogy when taken a bit farther, in fact, presents an additional problem for the skeptical theist.27 To see this, Trakakkis makes a distinction between two types of divine hiddenness: type 1 is the idea that God’s reasons for preventing apparently gratuitous evil are hidden from us, and type 2 is the idea that God hides the fact that God has a good reason at all for allowing apparently gratuitous evil and/or the fact that God exists and that God loves or cares about us.28 RNA above is likely false given the reality and plausibility of divine hiddenness type 1 – that is, the skeptical theist is right to point out that we should not expect to be cognizant of God’s exact reasons. But, the critic’s worry goes a step further – in lieu of not being cognizant of God’s reasons, shouldn’t God go to great lengths to make us aware that there is in fact a good reason to allow the apparently gratuitous suffering that we are experiencing?29 That is, the truth of type 1 divine hiddenness would not entail the truth of the more worrisome type 2 divine hiddenness. Type 2 divine hiddenness is more worrisome, because, continuing with the parent analogy, it is not merely that a child is

26 The parent analogy can also be used to understand the epistemic gap. However, I contend there is value in making a distinction between these two gaps. One might have epistemic access to God’s reasons and fail to have the moral character to adequately assess them. For more on the parent analogy see Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering,” 88.


unaware or cannot comprehend the parent’s moral reasoning, but the good parent goes to great
lengths to assure the child of the parent’s love even in the midst of discipline. The child is not
left in the dark to wonder if the parent loves or cares for them throughout the tribulation the child
finds himself in. But, applying this analogy to God, human beings are, it is argued, left in the
dark to wonder if God loves or cares about us in the midst of evil and suffering. Trakakkis offers
a revised assumption that may support the inference from (P) to (Q) offered above:

RNA₂ - If there are goods justifying God’s permission of [apparently gratuitous evil] E
and the nature of such goods is unknown to us (or unknowable by us), God would make
his existence or love sufficiently clear to us so that we would know that there are God-
justifying goods for E, or so that we would not infer (from our failure to discern the
nature of the relevant God-justifying goods) that there are no God-justifying goods for
E.¹³¹

In the face of apparently gratuitous evil and without access to God’s reasons for allowing it,
RNA₂ claims that God would let us know that there are, in fact, good reasons for allowing the
evil or at least give us enough evidence so that we wouldn’t infer that there aren’t any good
reasons for allowing the evil. God could do this in a number of ways, but Rowe and Trakakkis,
among others, argue that God would make his existence and love sufficiently clear to us and not
be hidden according to type 2 divine hiddenness. There are two main ways to respond to this
claim and we will discuss each in turn: continue with skeptical theism or pivot to a type of free
will defense.

The skeptical theist can dig her heels in and say that God may have and hide good
reasons to withhold clear evidence of his love and care for us. Even if we don’t know what those

³⁰ See William L. Rowe, “Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” In The Evidential Argument
³¹ Trakakkis, “The Skeptical Theist Response,” 538. This is actually “RNA₁” in his paper and he uses the
term “horrendous” instead of “apparently gratuitous” when referring to the problematic evil in question. I’ve
changed these terms to reflect the direction of the present discussion.
good reasons are, it doesn’t mean they are not there. To suggest otherwise, says the skeptical theist, is to imply yet another noseeum assumption like RNA. This maneuver is a bridge too far for Rowe and company. Rowe admits that this move is open to the skeptical theist, but it comes at the cost of endorsing the following four claims:

1. A being of infinite wisdom and power is unable to prevent any instance of apparently gratuitous evil without thereby forfeiting a greater good1.

2. A being of infinite wisdom and power is unable to enable those who undergo apparently gratuitous evil to understand just what good1 is (for which the evil was necessary) without thereby forfeiting a greater good2.

3. A being of infinite wisdom and power is unable to be consciously present to those who undergo apparently gratuitous evil without thereby forfeiting another greater good3—despite the despair and loneliness of those who undergo apparently gratuitous evil without any conscious awareness of God’s presence.

4. A being of infinite wisdom and power is unable to enable those who undergo apparently gratuitous evil without any conscious awareness of God’s presence to understand just what good3 is (for the sake of which the evil without any conscious awareness of God’s presence was necessary) without forfeiting another greater good4.

Rowe claims that anyone who reflects on (1)-(4) will see the “inherent implausibility” that (1)-(4) are the way things are. Now, Rowe does entertain the idea that the above is only implausible if we assume the falsity of one or more of the skeptical theses offered earlier by Bergmann. In which case, the implausibility would be derivative not inherent. Rowe simply rejects this move and offers no reason for why the skeptical theist is incorrect. This insistence can be found a bit earlier in the same work when Rowe says, “Surely there must be some point at

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32 Or as an earlier footnote mentioned, the religious inquirer may not meet the condition of CORNEA.
33 William L. Rowe, “Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann,” Noûs 35, no. 2 (2001): 301-302. Again, I have substituted Rowe’s use of “horrendous suffering” with “apparently gratuitous evil” to fit the present discussion. This is a paraphrase of the points he offers.
which the appalling agony of human and animal existence as we know it would render it unlikely
that God exists. And this must be so even though we all agree that God’s knowledge would far
exceed our own.” But, this is precisely the claim in question by the skeptical theist. It appears
that Rowe and company are committed to the idea that any rational religious inquirer must
concede that there is some amount and/or gravity of evil that would make it unlikely that God
exists. Of course, feeling strongly about this commitment or appealing to appearances still does
nothing to defeat the defeater that is skeptical theism.

Skeptical theism becomes even more difficult to reject when one considers the
implications of broadening the scope of both where and when outweighing goods could manifest.
Remember, skeptical theism admits of significant latitude regarding the exact attributes of the
being whose existence would satisfy the condition for “theism” in its namesake. Thus, it is not
out of bounds to import Christian theology to fill out this theism in order to provide an additional
answer to skeptical theism’s critics. Suppose for a moment that we inhabit a world where there
is a God, and that some broadly construed Christian story is true, where one implication is that at
least some human beings dwell with God forever post-mortem in a heaven-like afterlife. If that
is the case, there is an eternity of opportunity for various outweighing goods to manifest and
offset the deficit stemming from apparently gratuitous evil during earthly lives. Paul Moser has
offered one such type of response:

The God of New Testament Christology can give lasting benefits via the resurrection of
humans, after the model of the risen Jesus (Rom. 8:11), and thereby extend the time for
such benefits. So, there would be no limit to earthly life for the divine provision of
benefits in the wake of unjust suffering and evil.36

36 Moser, "Theodicy, Christology, and Divine Hiding,” 8.
If the window for the manifestation of outweighing goods stretches indefinitely into the afterlife, then there really is no amount or type of evil that could, in principle, not be “worth” allowing for the sake of some future good. The critic of skeptical theism may demand that an honest participant in the discussion allow at least some conceptual space for a defeater to God’s existence that cites some amount or degree of evil. We can imagine the critic asking the theist, “do you honestly believe that there is no possible instance of evil in a human being’s earthly life that would make God’s existence less probable?” Equipped with the defense that there might be a heaven where goods may manifest that outweigh the apparently gratuitous evil and suffering of mortal lives, the skeptical theist can reply, “yes,” even in the absence of a compelling, full explanation of why God would allow it.

**Conclusion**

It is important to keep in view how this discussion of the problem of apparently gratuitous evil relates to the current project. At no point is this project assuming that God exists and even less so that there is, in fact, a heaven of the sort that can do the work in the above argument. Rather, we have been exploring a salient feature of the human predicament that should inform how we conceive of God. This salient feature is that some evils that befall us and others appear to be gratuitous. That is, from our perspective, we don’t have access to strong enough reasons to think that some amount of good will follow from all occurrences of evil such that there will be more good in the world as a result of the evil occurring than if the evil had not occurred. If it were true that there was gratuitous evil, and even a great deal of it, rather than merely apparently so, then this would be a tragic outcome for human beings. This is not the sort of world we would want to be in, particularly when the gratuity of the evil we might experience
is largely due to factors outside of our control.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, we should hope that the world is not this way. Perhaps there is evidence out there that a rescuer exists, a being that would ensure that goods manifested which outweighed whatever is bad about the evils that occur and their consequences.

As with the other two predicaments in the previous chapters, this is also not a recommendation to simply believe or blindly assert that there is a rescuer, or to epistemologically stack the deck in favor of supporting this hope. We should come by our evidence honestly and not engage in wishful thinking to the point where we believe something because it would mean an outcome for us that is happier or more satisfying to believe in. Instead, recognizing that \textit{apparently} gratuitous evil is a feature of the human predicament and would be tragic if it were \textit{actually} gratuitous commends us to build into our conception of God the following idea: a being who would be willing and able to rescue humanity from the predicament of apparently gratuitous evil and its attending suffering by ensuring that goods will eventually manifest that outweigh the evil.

In order to achieve such a rescue, this being would need to be extremely powerful, wise, and good in order to navigate and sovereignly orchestrate the world. We will further examine in Chapter VI what might be some limits on God’s rescue methods, if God exists.\textsuperscript{38} But as we have seen with the above discussion of skeptical theism, the religious inquirer is wise to continue using the \textit{God as Rescuer} concept and the hunt for evidence of such a being’s existence, even in

\textsuperscript{37} Of course, if it is the case that the world is in fact this way, it would by no means constitute a reason for self-termination; we might reasonably at least attempt make the best of a bad situation.

\textsuperscript{38} There is reason to think that some pathways to achieving “solutions” to apparently gratuitous evil involve violating other great goods that God would want to ensure, such as the preservation of human freedom. This freedom, some have argued, is easily undermined and God would go to great, if not all, lengths to avoid putting coercive force on human volition when it comes to knowledge of God.
light of apparent gratuitous evil. That is, the amount and gravity of apparently gratuitous evil by
no means *obviously* serves as a defeater for any evidence that would purportedly be found by the
“successful” inquirer, because the God as Rescuer may have good reasons beyond our ken to
allow *any* instance of suffering – apparently gratuitous or not.
CHAPTER V

OBJECTIONS TO THE GOD AS RESCUER CONCEPT

The Argument for God as Rescuer

The previous three chapters have made the case that the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous evil are features of the human predicament. I use the term “predicament” to indicate a negative normative status rather than just using the normatively neutral “situation.” We are not in a human situation that is neutral with regards to present or future valuation. We are in a predicament – our fate looks grim without outside help. With the possibility of personal death upon our physical death, we stand to lose everything we have ever cared about. Even those people, accomplishments, and marks on the world that survive our deaths will eventually end also. This would clearly be a loss of value. Our moral outlook is bleak as well. For all we know as religious inquirers without any prior religious commitments, all human beings have fallen short of moral perfection,¹ and it is not at all clear that human beings will be able to achieve moral blamelessness through solely our own efforts. And further, perhaps most obviously, our predicament is a tragic one indeed if there are vast amounts of gratuitous evil and the attending suffering it causes.² A helper external to the human

¹ I added this clause to leave conceptual space that there may in fact have been, are, or will be human beings that are morally perfect. But we have no good evidence of this prior to religious inquiry.

² I use the term “vast” here because if there is any gratuitous evil, then there is likely more than just a little bit. The examples used consistently in the literature as examples of apparent gratuitous evil occur quite often. Though, even just one instance of actual gratuitous evil would call into question the morality of a being who satisfied the concept of God as Rescuer.
predicament could potentially remedy this situation by ensuring that this apparently gratuitous evil is not in fact gratuitous but merely apparently so – that some greater good could not have been achieved otherwise. Even without a robust or full-explanation theodicy, the religious inquirer equipped with the response from skeptical theism may still pursue evidence that such a being exists with the understanding that a morally perfect God may have reasons for allowing apparent gratuitous that are beyond our ken.

Now that we have the basic contours of the human predicament, we can see now see the project as a whole in the form of an argument for the adoption of the God as Rescuer conception of God:

1. The most salient features of the human predicament are the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous evil.
2. All human beings ought to be interested in discovering a solution to this predicament, because doing so carries the most existential significance for human beings.
3. Human beings are unable to offer their own genuine solution to this predicament. External help is required.
4. One way of articulating the search for external help is inquiring into God’s existence if God is the sort of being that would be interested in offering a solution to humanity.
5. Inquiring into God’s existence requires that we construct a concept of God to guide our search for evidence of God’s existence.
6. A concept of God, for the purpose of inquiring into God’s existence and nature, should be constructed on the basis of features of the human predicament that ought to be most existentially important to human beings, as opposed to other conceptions that do not prioritize existential concerns.
7. Constructing a concept of God on the basis of features of the human predicament that ought to be existentially important to human beings will yield a God as Rescuer concept, where the title “God” refers to that being who is willing and able to rescue humanity from its predicament.

8. Therefore, the religious inquirer should use the concept of God as Rescuer in their search for evidence of a being that may provide a solution to the predicament of utmost existential significance to human beings.³

Premises 1, 2, and 3 were the focus of Chapters II-IV. We concluded that three features of the human predicament, the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous evil, are genuine worries about the human experience, to which we should want to find a solution. And as of yet, we have not been to manufacture our own solution. Premise 4 recognizes the longstanding search for help and significance on the part of humans and how this has often been directed toward a “God” figure. Premises 5-7 are discussed in Chapter I; they highlight the necessary role concept construction and use are in the epistemic process, the option for inquirers to tailor their constructed concepts on the basis of certain methods of concept construction, and the idea that the Existential Method for constructing a concept of God is better than the other competing methods for God-concept formation, again, for the purpose of inquiring into God’s existence, and ultimately yields the God as Rescuer conception. We can then conclude in (8) that religious inquirers should use the God as Rescuer concept for the purpose of searching for

³ A critic might wonder if there is one, single concept of God as Rescuer that is being recommended. In Chapter I, I offered reasons to prefer the Existential Method of God-concept creation and we have been mapping out a God as Rescuer concept that results from the Existential Method. Other similar God as Rescuer concepts could emerge from someone else running the Existential Method, particularly at the stage of fleshing out the concept with further details. I want to make space for semantic variability, not only in the concept of “God” broadly considered, but even within the subset of those that could be considered God as Rescuer concepts.
evidence of the existence and nature of a being that is willing and able to rescue humanity from its predicament.

This present chapter focuses on the various objections that might be raised against this argument. Some of them have been addressed in the previous chapters, particularly ones directed toward (1) and (3). I will address the objections that are most problematic for the above argument.

**Objection 1: The Rescuer Should Not Be Called “God”**.

A critic might wonder why the term “God” is used at all in the above argument. How does humanity having a rescuer relate to religious inquiry regarding God’s existence and nature? There are other more generic ideas concerning the divine such as “ultimate reality” or “being itself” – wouldn’t the term “God” more appropriately fit those rather than anything to do with rescuing humanity?

There are three reasons for making this connection. First, religious inquiry regarding God’s existence and nature admits of great variability across different individuals, cultures, and eras. No method of religious inquiry or conception of God can accurately claim it has been the obvious, dominant view in the history of humanity’s search for the divine. Various, and sometimes incongruent, God-concepts and methods for constructing a concept of God have enjoyed significant long-standing adoption in some regions and historical periods. In this way, there’s no universal standard-bearer of theology by which to easily dismiss the present thesis as irrelevant or misguided by definition.

Second, the vast majority of religious inquiry over the ages has had questions of significance and existential concern as primary drivers of the inquiry. Such inquiries highlight both the features of the human predicament in the above argument and other big questions
indexed to prevailing cultural notions: will the righteous be rewarded, will the unrighteous be punished, for how long and to what extent will these recompenses occur, does my life have meaning, will I see my loved ones again, will order be restored? To ask questions of existential significance has always been important to religious inquiry, so this project and the resulting God as Rescuer concept is very much at home in the history of religious inquiry.

Third, the concept of God as Rescuer turns out to look quite similar to more traditional conceptions of God. And further, understanding what a being that satisfied the concept of God as Rescuer might be like would lessen any perceived strangeness of connecting the notions of rescue and thinking about the divine. In the previous chapters, we briefly sketched what it would mean for a being to rescue humanity from each aspect of their predicament and the attributes such a being would need to possess in order to be able to perform the rescue. Let’s take some time to explore each further.

This being would need to be extraordinarily powerful. By “power” I mean the ability to manifest one’s will in the world – to make happen what one intends. This conception of power implies two intuitive ideas: beings can be powerful in different modalities and it makes power a property of gradation – that is, some beings are more or less powerful than others. For example, the winner of the world’s strongest man contest has more power than me. There are some situations that could not resist bending to the strong man’s will in a way that they could resist my will. Consider the activity of relocating a 400lb. weight 50 yards away. If the strong man willed this weight to be in location B instead of A, he would have the power to make that happen, and I would not. My will is limited in this way, and thus I am not as powerful as the strong man. Yet, we could also imagine a different way of being powerful such as wealth. A very wealthy man might have the same level of power as the strong man, but not in the same way. Instead of
moving the weight himself, he could hire several average-strength men to load the weight onto a sled and drag it the 50 yards.

The current project need not specify what mode of power the rescuer would use in the act of rescuing. It could be that such a being would have a much more direct conduit from the mental state of willing and the resultant reality the being intended, even to the point where the only required step is having a mental state in order for reality to conform to that state. Many of us have power in this mode but only in trivial ways. For instance, in order to achieve the state of affairs in the world, “Clint is thinking about having a cup of tea,” all I would need to do is think about having a cup of tea and then I would be participating in this mode of power. Yet, human beings are rarely, if ever, able to alter external reality by sheer mental activity. The exact mental states operative in this mode of power are not crucial for our purposes; the important point is that it is a real mode of power and to have this power over things external to oneself is remarkable. It seems like the rescuer would have to possess a fair amount of power in this mode, that is, the ability to effect external reality by sheer will, to be able to perform the actions necessary to rescue human beings from the human predicament.

In addition to being powerful, the rescuer would need to be extremely intelligent. The rescue plans broadly considered, for instance the sovereign maneuvering over the natural world to ensure that evil isn’t gratuitous, would require a mind able to make connections, predict, and accurately assess probabilities on an extreme magnitude. This project does not hinge on sorting through problems regarding the definition of intelligence, particularly the debates arising over how to think of human intelligence. There are, of course, different kinds of intelligence and

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4 The mental state could be a propositional attitude, it could be an intensional mental state, or it could be a sort of imperative in the mind, such as “Let there be light.”
perhaps divine intelligence would be in a category unto itself, utterly different in kind. Or maybe it’s not unreasonable or too anthropomorphic to suggest that the rescuer possesses an intelligence akin to human’s, albeit to far great degree. Whatever the case may be, in so far as we are discussing the mental states, decision-making, and actions of the rescuer we can assert that the rescuer would need to be extraordinarily adept at making inferences, noticing connections between sets of events, calculating potential consequences, and a host of other mental and intellectual activities. It could be argued that these kinds of skills or “know-how” collapse into the power attribution. But, as the literature on knowledge-how indicates, even if knowledge-how is conceptually and actually distinct from propositional knowledge, it could still be the case that all know-how requires or involves some amount of propositional knowledge.⁵ And so, the rescuer would know a great deal of propositions about the world if in fact such a being is ensuring greater good results from any and all cases of evil and its attending suffering, in addition to whatever intellectually demanding work would be required for the other features of the human predicament.

As we saw in Chapter III, the rescuer would also have to be morally perfect.⁶ Part of the process of rescuing human beings would be a cooperative, non-coercive interaction between humans and the rescuer. Not only might the rescuer supply emotional or volitional support that

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⁵ For an extensive treatment of the relationship between knowledge-how and knowledge-that claims, and in particular, the claim that knowledge-how can be explained purely in terms of propositional knowledge, known as intellectualism, see John Bengson and Marc A. Moffett, *Knowing How: Essays on Knowledge, Mind, and Action*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Note that the property of this being as “rescuer” is contingent, namely on existence other beings in need of rescuer. The property of moral goodness being inferred and applied to our concept of God as part of the Existential Method and that the being who satisfies the concept would have inherently may recommend the rescue of humanity from their predicament, which is what is being argued in this project. As such, God’s property of being a rescuer is dispositional and becomes actualized in God’s rescue efforts toward beings in need of rescue.
would encourage one to enact some kind of virtue, such as courage or fortitude, so that an individual might overcome temptation and pursue moral blamelessness, but the rescuer might even lead more directly, suggesting courses of action to the individual through human conscience. If the rescuer were not morally perfect, then sometimes the rescuer would err. In these instances, it would be morally incorrect to emulate the rescuer, and thus, the rescuer couldn’t serve as a moral exemplar and provide that this aspect of the solution to our predicament.⁷

There are two other attributes that one might be able to infer about a being who not only satisfies the God as Rescuer conception but also succeeds in such a rescue mission.⁸ The rescuer would need to possess everlastingness – the rescuer cannot itself also require rescuing from the predicament of possible personal death. There would not be much confidence that the rescuer’s goal of having humanity avoid personal death would be achieved and maintained if the rescuer did or could fall victim to personal death.⁹ It also arguable that the rescuer would need to be relational, or committed to tailoring its interaction with each person according to their unique personality, background, and other characteristics, if the rescue mission is to be successful. In order to rescue humanity from its predicament of moral failure in a non-coercive manner, the being would need to engage in a cooperative relationship with human beings, even if all of the

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⁷ See Chapter III for a more detailed treatment of what we might call the “Good Enough” objection, which questions whether the rescuer would need to be morally perfect and instead could settle for mostly morally good or morally good enough.

⁸ A further research area is whether the God as Rescuer conception, coupled with other principles, could allow the religious inquirer to suppose that the Rescue has other attributes.

⁹ Theologians have long debated whether God is a necessary being. If God is a necessary being (and a person), then it is false that God could fall victim to personal death. We need not make any assumption or commitment about the modal status of God’s existence to make the arguments in this project work.
nuances of interaction were largely hidden from human awareness.\textsuperscript{10} The bobbing and weaving of this being’s piecemeal revelation of moral goodness and prompting in the conscience of human beings toward moral blamelessness would take on varying degrees of self-revelation. That is, human beings might have an experience of God \textit{de re} without consciously reporting \textit{de dicto} that they had an experience of God.

So, a being that satisfies the \textit{God as Rescuer} concept would be extremely powerful, intelligent, morally perfect, everlasting, and relational. This being would bear some striking resemblance to a being that would satisfy more traditional conceptions of God. Although these properties do not rise to the grandeur of classic properties like omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, creator, or even incarnational, this project by no means claims that such properties are not true of the being that might satisfy the \textit{God as Rescuer} concept. The claim is that the Existential Method gives you a \textit{God as Rescuer} concept that need not commit the religious inquirer \textit{at the beginning of their inquiry} to these properties unlike the more traditional methods of God-concept construction. It could turn out that the being who rescues humanity is omnipotent and omniscient. But this is not assumed at the outset, because it is not necessary to answer humanity’s deepest existential questions and predicament.

Refusing to assume the traditional properties of God is for the benefit of the religious inquirer. These traditional properties of God can present unnecessary obstacles to the discovery of evidence that God exists. The literature attempting to sort out the conundrums presented by these properties and, in particular, to make them consistent with other ideas such as human free will or God’s moral perfection, is so complicated and challenging to understand that it would be

\textsuperscript{10} For an extended treatment of non-coercive pursuit from God and divine hiddenness, see Paul K. Moser, \textit{The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology} (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
nearly insurmountable for the average religious inquirer to rationally deploy the more traditional concepts meaningfully in their pursuit of evidence for God’s existence. If they aren’t required for the kind of religious inquiry that matters most, and they present unnecessary obstacles, then we shouldn’t force religious inquirers to use them. Thus, the Existential Method doesn’t make inclusion of such traits a priority at the outset of religious inquiry, and contends that it is quite reasonable to think of the being that is willing and able to rescue humanity from its predicament as “God”.

But still, the critic might worry that two other widely held ideas about God are missing from this conception: “creator” and “ultimate reality.” Let’s examine each of these in turn. There is no doubt that public discourse regarding theism often involves the concept of *God as Creator* as seen in discussions about whether to include creationism or intelligent design units in public school curriculum\textsuperscript{11} or in founding political documents such as the Declaration of Independence.\textsuperscript{12} Since the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, a premium has been placed on achieving a robust understanding of the causal structure of the world, of which so-called “first causes” are included. People have long associated understanding these primordial first causes with understanding certain roles or behaviors of the divine. As such, the concept of *God as Creator* holds a central position in the theology of theists and non-theists alike. Also, many religious polemicists and spiritualists alike use the moniker “ultimate reality” to refer to God in some sense that may not be laden with the same cultural baggage that “creator” does. Yet, I take


\textsuperscript{12} “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Thomas Jefferson, et al, July 4, Copy of Declaration of Independence. -07-04, 1776.
this to be sufficiently related to the idea of creator to address them together if what it means to be ultimate reality involves being the most fundamental, foundational entity on which everything else depends.\textsuperscript{13}

This project doesn’t deny that the being that might instantiate the \textit{God as Rescuer} concept may also function as humanity and the universe’s creator. It may very well turn out that the rescuer is also the creator.\textsuperscript{14} However, even the property “having created the world” is not as existentially significant as having the properties associated with performing the rescue for humanity from their predicament. This is because that which is \textit{most} existentially significant is forward-looking – it involves the future. It may be enormously existentially significant to know that you were created by a divine being either directly or indirectly; it would greatly help you understand your own story, and may even speak to something about your identity. This is particularly true if it turns out that the God as Creator is also morally perfect, wants what is best for you, and created you for a unique, important purpose. This would be an amazing truth to discover. But its significance, at least in part, is derived from what the implications would be for your life moving forward and how to now understand your story and live in light of such a revelation. So, again, the Existential Method seeks to lower the bar to entry as low as possible for religious inquirers to not run into unnecessary obstacles in their pursuit of evidence of the God’s existence. If a property, even as esteemed and widely used as “creator”, is unnecessary to

\textsuperscript{13} For an example of polemics that focus more on God’s hierarchical, logical, and metaphysical priority rather than temporal priority, see Edward Feser, \textit{Five Proofs for the Existence of God} (Ignatius Press, 2017).

\textsuperscript{14} And yet, I leave room in this project for the rescuer to not be the creator. On some Christian trinitarian models of understanding the divine, God the Father creates, among other things, and God the Son, Jesus, rescues humanity. In this case, the rescuer is not the creator in terms of being different persons, and of course, the rescuer is the creator in the sense of being one numerically identical to each other as one entity. I leave it up to the reader to adjudicate whether they want to adopt this model. I am not convinced that the project of religious inquiry \textit{must} assume that the rescuer is identical to the creator, as long as the rescuer has all of the properties necessary to fulfill the concept of \textit{God as Rescuer}.>
answering the most salient existential problems faced by human beings moving forward, then it
should not be included at the outset of inquiry in one’s conception of God.

**Objection 2: God is Ineffable, and so, Religious Inquiry is Pointless**

It is worth addressing an objection that threatens to undermine any religious inquiry – the
problem of religious skepticism motivated by divine ineffability. If God truly is ineffable, then
human beings cannot know anything about the rescuer, and thus the search for evidence of such
a being cannot be facilitated by any religious epistemology that makes claims about what God is
like to some degree.

If skepticism broadly construed is concerned with the availability and possibility of
knowledge or justified belief for human beings, religious skepticism, at least in part, has these
same concerns directed toward knowledge of God. There is one particular religious skeptical
argument that takes precedent over the others. That is, the problem this argument poses must be
answered by the non-skeptic before addressing other objections to religious knowledge.\(^{15}\) Before
we look at what this specific argument is, let us examine its motivating principle:

\[
P: \text{If God exists, then God would be the sort of being that is in principle outside the}
\text{bounds of human understanding.}
\]

This is an ancient idea. God is so other, utterly unlike the created order human beings are
familiar with, that the human faculties for acquiring knowledge fail to appropriately connect with
such a being. There is something about God that puts God beyond the ken of human knowledge.
We saw a similar style of reasoning used by the skeptical theist in answering the problem of
apparent gratuitous evil in Chapter IV. God’s reasons for allowing certain evils are beyond our

\(^{15}\) Henceforth, when I speak of skepticism having to do with knowledge, assume that similar arguments
could be made about justified belief.
ken. But, the religious skeptic applies this idea to the semantics of any affirmative proposition about God. If God is in principle unknowable, then crafting true and justified statements about God becomes difficult if not impossible. For if God is truly beyond the bounds of human cognitive reach, then it seems human beings could have no evidence for making justified assertions about God’s existence or nature, which is one primary goal of the kind of religious inquiry of interest in this project. This puts pressure on any religious epistemology that seeks to explain how human beings might come to know anything about God. A general form of the skeptical argument goes like this:

1. A successful, positive religious epistemology requires that human beings be able to truthfully and justifiably ascribe properties to God.
2. But, no human being can truthfully and justifiably ascribe properties to God.
3. Thus, there is not a successful, positive religious epistemology.

A successful positive religious epistemology claims that if God exists, then it is possible and reasonable that at least some human beings could come to know that God exists. Using for example the ideas at work in this overall project, a coherent plausible story could be told about a morally perfect being who is the rescuer of humans from the human predicament and reveals itself to human beings through their conscience, perhaps through comfort during loss or conviction of some wrongdoing. This might count as evidence that God exists and has various properties like being very powerful or being morally good.

It is this idea that is denied in (2). Or more precisely, (2) denies that human beings could justifiably infer anything about God on the basis of such an experience. To be clear, the religious skeptic is not implying that atheism is true; it might be true that God exists and reveals itself to human beings in the above sort of way. But crucially, the religious skeptic argues that we cannot
know or even justifiably assert that the experience involved a divine being, let alone claim to know any traits possessed by such a being. The religious skeptic defends this idea by appealing to two ideas. The first is divine ineffability, which states that if God exists, then God would be the sort of being that is in principle outside the bounds of human description. The second, and perhaps the stronger of the two, is divine inscrutability, which states that non-God beings are fundamentally incapable of understanding or grasping anything true about God. Divine inscrutability, or at least some versions of it, entails divine ineffability, where true propositions about God evade all past, present, or future human categories of thought. Thus, if human propositional knowledge necessarily passes through the lens of human categories of thought, and true propositions about God cannot be articulated with human categories of thought, then the religious skeptic is right - human beings cannot have knowledge of God, or at least propositional knowledge of God.

But why think that God is ineffable? Certainly, these great thinkers can simply declare that God is this way. However, shrewd religious inquirers will want to know if there is any evidence for such a claim. We will examine various interpretations of ineffability to see if there is more support for one version over another. But first, we might wonder if the project is doomed to fail from the outset. All skeptical arguments are afflicted by a tension inherent in the

16 It would be odd indeed, for God to be inscrutability but not be ineffable. Ineffability has also sometimes been referred to as “transcategoriality.” See John Hick, “Ineffability,” Religious Studies 36, no. 1 (2000): 35-46.

17 There is a viable question here: does the religious skeptic motivated by a commitment to inscrutability leave room for other modes of knowledge, such as non-propositional knowledge or acquaintance knowledge of God of the sort mentioned earlier in our imagined successful, positive religious epistemology? If so, this amounts to claiming that one would have evidence for God’s existence that is non-propositional in nature, yet not be able to infer anything about God’s nature or justifiably make any property ascriptions. The sensibility of this idea hinges on whether knowledge by acquaintance can allow one to justifiably make any propositional knowledge claims.

18 We will focus on the property of ineffability. If God is not ineffable, then there is some reason to God is also not inscrutable.
assertion of skepticism, and this brand of religious skepticism is no different. If assertion amounts to a claim to the truth, and the claim is about the inability of human beings to justifiably assert truth, then the skeptic is left without good reasons for asserting the truth of skepticism itself. The skeptic might be correct; human beings might not have access to knowledge, but they cannot offer reasons for skepticism that are themselves immune from skeptical concerns.

There is a similar tension with claims about divine ineffability. Asserting that God is ineffable is still a claim about God, in both the attribution of the property “ineffability” itself or other properties of God that may lead one to infer God’s ineffability. The problem is that one cannot both claim that God is incapable of being described by human categories of thought and say that this claim is evidenced by something one knows about God in terms of one’s human categories of thought. But perhaps not all version of divine ineffability succumb to this kind of self-defeat. We will look at four versions of divine ineffability and see if any avoid this problem.

**Four Views on Divine Ineffability**

Advocates of divine ineffability sometimes differ on how exactly we should think about ineffability. There are different ways that a religious skeptic might conceive of divine ineffability in defense of the above premise (2): that no human being can truthfully and justifiably ascribe properties to God. Here are the four main types of divine ineffability:

Total Ineffability (TI) - Human categories of thought cannot appropriately latch on to God\(^\text{19}\) - not even the property of ineffability.

Strong Ineffability (SI) - Human categories of thought cannot appropriately latch on to God - except the property of ineffability.

\(^{19}\) By “appropriately latch on to” I have in mind that a category mistake has not been made. In this case, it is not merely that all statements about the divine nature are false, but rather that they are neither true nor false. Michael Scott and Gabriel Citron’s work on apophaticism calls this maneuver “metalinguistic negation” where one expresses an unwillingness to make assertions, positive or negative, about God. See Michael Scott and Gabriel Citron, “What is Apophaticism? Ways of Talking About an Ineffable God,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8, no. 4 (2016): 35-38.
Moderate Ineffability (MI) - Human categories of thought cannot appropriately latch on to God - except infinitude, or some property like this, from which we can infer God’s ineffability with regard to other properties.

Weak Ineffability (WI) - Human categories of thought are only ever approximately true about God, and affirmative propositions involving such categories are strictly false.

Let’s look at each of these in turn. The first view, Total Ineffability (TI), holds that absolutely no human categories of thought can be applied to God, including ineffability. This means that there would be a complete religious skepticism - nothing could be known about God. It seems that among the four views, TI is most guilty of the aforementioned self-defeat. One could not genuinely recommend or offer reasons for TI, because any reason or evidence for the truth of TI would violate TI. We have no reason, and in fact, could have no non-circular reason to endorse TI. Now, TI could still be true - it is just that we cannot be justified in believing it.

Strong Ineffability (SI) makes an exception of the property of ineffability. This alone is something we can know about God. All other properties are category mistakes. This is a position staked out by John Hick on numerous occasions.20 According to Hick, divine ineffability does not mean that absolutely no categories of human thought can apply to God, it is just that human beings can truly and justifiably ascribe only certain formal properties and no substantial properties. Unfortunately, Hick doesn’t clearly define the difference between formal and substantial properties, but one of his interlocutors, William Rowe, offers the following distinction:

A formal property of the Real is some abstract characteristic the Real has that is a condition for our being able either to refer to it or to postulate it as that which is encountered through the personal deities and impersonal absolutes of the major religious

traditions...a substantial property of the Real would be a property that belongs to its essential nature.\textsuperscript{21}

The idea, then, is that ineffability is a formal property and not a substantial property. It is still the case that we know nothing about the nature of God, e.g. whether God is personal or impersonal, even if we can know that God is ineffable. Yet, merely carving out the logical space for this possibility does not mean we are given a good argument for thinking that God actually is ineffable. As Hick points out, the supposed upshot of holding divine ineffability is that it contributes to religious pluralism and understanding religion in its various forms.\textsuperscript{22} But there are two problems. First, that the truth of divine ineffability would lead to a good result, in this case, alleged improved religious pluralism, does not constitute evidence for the truth of divine ineffability. It may be a nice implication, but we need strong evidence that recommends the truth of the view apart from what would happen if people believed it. The most we get from Hick is the historical observation that, “Each of the great traditions says, in its own way, that God in God’s ultimate nature is beyond characterization by the range of concepts available to human thought and embodied in our languages.”\textsuperscript{23} Hick is certainly right here; plenty of religious traditions have suggested a form of divine ineffability. But again, merely saying so, doesn’t make it so in this case.

Moderate Ineffability (MI) allows for some property ascription, but the one or two that are accessible for human understanding generate ineffability concerning all other possible

\textsuperscript{21} William L. Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” Religious Studies 35, no. 2 (1999): 139-150. Hick and Rowe use the term “Real” to refer to the ultimate reality spoken of by world religions. For our purposes, we can think of the Real as God.

\textsuperscript{22} Hick, “Ineffability,” 45.

\textsuperscript{23} Hick, “Ineffability,” 35.
property ascription of the divine. One such property would be “infinitude.” The MI proponent might suggest that the divine is infinite, and that this alone is knowable about God. If God is infinite and human beings are finite, and the finite cannot access the infinite, then it seems the religious skeptic is correct about God’s ineffability. So here, ineffability regarding all other property ascription is inferred from the presence of another known property of God, namely God’s infinitude.24

However, the property of infinitude suffers from a vagueness problem. There are a number of ways a being could be said to be infinite, and often “infinite” functions as an adjective to describe the scope of another property such as power, knowledge, or goodness. Are we to assume infinitude as a property includes maximal power, knowledge, and goodness? If so, this is not an impressive ineffability – in this case, infinitude would allow one to predicate quite a bit about God. Perhaps the most charitable interpretation of this property is some kind of metaphysical infinitude – that God’s existence is on a plane of being that is wholly unconnected and unfathomably higher than the plane of being humans reside in. In this way, our language could not hope to appropriately latch on to God – God’s plane of existence is in no way reachable by us, not even with our concepts.25

Yet, even if we grant the notion that human beings can know something about God from which we can infer ineffability, it is not clear why special privilege is given to this one property

24 Arnobius mentions a list of traits the presumably might play the same functional role as infinitude. He mentions “first cause, foundation of all things that exist, unbegotten, perpetual, and alone...” among others. See Arnobius. Adversus Gentes (T. & T. Clark, 1871) I., 31.1.

25 Ineffability proponents may differ on whether the God laid out in this view could successfully reveal itself to human beings. The incarnation of Jesus would possibly serve as a bridge between such planes allowing some knowledge; but, of course, this is a bridge too far for the religious skeptic to endorse as an answer to ineffability.
“infinitude”. What about this one property of God makes it, in principle, accessible to human beings, whereas other potential attributes such as goodness, compassion, power, knowledge, and personality are, in principle, not accessible? Borrowing the formal property and substantial property distinction from Hick, all of these properties, including “infinitude”, are substantial properties. There is no significant difference between infinitude and the other properties to justify the lift of ineffability on one and not on the others.

Lastly, let’s examine Weak Ineffability (WI); Human categories of thought are only ever approximately true about God, and propositions involving such categories are strictly false. This view at least allows meaningful utterances to be spoken about God. It is not a category mistake to use human concepts to describe the divine. The trouble is that we are always somewhat incorrect in our attempts to do so. It is an error-theory of divine property ascription. For example, ascribing the property “being morally perfect” to God might be approximately true, but it does not capture the reality of God’s moral stature, and thus, is strictly speaking false. Sometimes this view has taken the form of apophaticism or the more popular terminology “negative theology”: human beings can only truly and justifiably speak negations about God. Pseudo-Dionysus wrote this of God, “[God] is not a material body...has neither shape nor form...suffers neither disorder nor disturbance...”26 There are a host of negations we might say justifiably about God on WI.

The religious skeptic who would endorse WI allows for a bit more knowledge here, and accordingly the support for the position is stronger. After all, in WI we can now say that God is not like us in many ways through the via negativa of asserting negations. If God is unlike

anything else we have experienced, why should we think that our contingent human-made concepts could hope to capture the divine reality in the affirmative?

William Rowe has an answer for us. In his response to Hick’s view, Rowe admits that he, “cannot see how the Real can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties.”

His argument would go like this:
1. If God is ineffable, then neither of two contradictory properties could apply to God.
2. But, every entity must have one or the other of two contradictory properties.
3. Therefore, it is false that God is ineffable.

The first premise is Hick’s view. Consider “personal” and “non-personal” as a pair of contradictory properties. Hick’s view implies that neither of these properties applies to God; God is ineffable and evades all human categories of thought. But, Rowe’s second premise is a powerful one. Most, if not all, contradictory properties allow us to categorize all actual and possible entities into one of two camps. Rowe even extends his argument to include things we normally deem to be category mistakes, such as the claims, “the number two is green” and “the number two is non-green.” The first is false and second is true, even if the person uttering either statement is confused about the ability for numbers to bear colors. The truth of one would imply the falsity of the other, and vice versa. Likewise, for God, if we say that it is false that God is not personal, then it must be the case that God is personal. If this is the case, then WI is self-

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27 Rowe, “Religious Pluralism,” 146.

28 This is why his view is more in alignment with SI, but Rowe’s response to Hick serves as an argument against WI as well.


defeating. In its attempt to deny attributes, it implies that we can succeed in positive assertions regarding divine attributes.

Hick’s response to Rowe’s argument is not very satisfying. He digs his heels in and claims that the Real or God is just the sort of thing that couldn’t have any of these attributes, in virtue of their being based on human conceptions:31 “One can say the Real is non-round, non-green, non-large, non-intelligent, non-French and so on *ad infinitum*, as well as non-personal, simply because it is not the kind of reality that could have any of these attributes.”32 But, we are then pushed back to the crux of the problem facing the other versions of ineffability - there is no argument, *independent of assuming something about God*, for thinking that God is ineffable.

Surprisingly, Hick tries to flip this point back toward the critic of divine ineffability when he says, “To deny that there can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept.”33 But, Rowe gives us good reason to accept this “dogma” – for all entities, we are able to apply one or the other of two contradictory properties,34 and God is no exception to this idea. It seems *ad hoc* to suppose, without non-

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31 It should be noted that there may be an argument for divine ineffability that derives from an argument concerning the ineffability of the entire cosmos. That is, one might suggest that all language contains metaphorical elements and we never truly succeed in having our concepts appropriate latch onto anything, including the divine. I would take on this argument here. Of present interest is whether God is uniquely ineffable in a way that other objects are not.

32 Hick, “Ineffability,” 42.

33 Hick, “Ineffability,” 43.

34 One might wonder about the relationship of this claim with quantum mechanics and one of the theory’s claims known as wave-particle duality, and in particular, how to understand the nature of quantum objects. There is no settled consensus among physicists as to how to interpret wave-particle duality; a respectable view in the contemporary discussions on this topic is the idea that our epistemic uncertainty regarding the status of a photon’s nature does not mean any particular photon is metaphysically indeterminate. If this idea is correct, then Rowe’s critique of Hick remains compelling. For a recent treatment of the literature regarding quantum indeterminacy, see Claudio Calosi. “Quantum Indeterminacy,” *Philosophy Compass* 16, no. 4 (2021): 1-15.
circular evidence, that God is the only entity that escapes the axiom in premise 2 of Rowe’s argument.

Furthermore, Hick’s metaphysical commitment to religious realism, showcased in his usage of “the Real” to describe the divine, is threatened by his epistemological insistence that the Real is in a sense, behind a veil that we are, as presently constituted, unable to peek behind. Roger Trigg describes the problem as follows:

Metaphysical realists – those who take seriously the independent reality of the divine – have to accept that, although there may be partial and imperfect access to the Real, it cannot be totally hidden from us. If it was, it would be difficult to keep to any meaningful form of realism. The idea that the noumenal has some causal influence itself becomes irrelevant from a conceptual point of view once it is accepted that there is no connection between the nature of the Real and how we conceptualize “it,” whatever “it may be. 35

It becomes difficult to maintain one’s realism about anything, let alone God, if one builds into their philosophy of language and epistemology that human concepts are, in principle, unable to capture any substantial truth. As long as the religious skeptic’s arguments involve a realist notion of God, then claims of divine ineffability will contain internal tension.

As we have seen, premise 2 of the religious skeptic’s original argument, that no human being can truthfully and justifiably ascribe properties to God, is not strongly supported by appealing to divine ineffability, in any of its forms. There is no non-circular argument to suppose that God truly is ineffable. It could be that religious skepticism is true and can support the notion that human beings cannot offer true and justified propositions about God, but these strategies do not offer evidence for the truth of religious skepticism. The prospects of a successful positive religious epistemology are not threatened by the idea of divine ineffability since there is no good reason to think God must be or would be ineffable. Thus, the religious inquirer would still be

rational in attempting to discover whether there is evidence for the existence of a being who satisfied the concept of God as Rescuer.

**Objection 3: The Argument Doesn’t Account for the Relativity of Existential Significance**

This objection challenges premise 2, which states that all human beings ought to be interested in discovering a solution to their predicament, because doing so carries the most existential significance for them. The critic might ask, “isn’t something’s significance dependent on a constellation of facts about the person or group of people for whom it might be significant – their values, cultural norms, upbringing, desires, and so on?” What might be significant to one person may not be significant to someone else. In fact, it seems clear that cultures throughout history have had diverse characterizations of the human predicament and thus had varying sets of existentially significant problems.

Consider for example the ancient Greek culture. One prominent value appearing throughout their great works of literature, particularly in the Iliad and Odyssey, is the acquisition of fame. Not just any old fame would do, but the kind where one would achieve legendary status, renown, and glory where all future generations would know your name and your accomplishments (the Greek word for this idea is klèos). The degree to which such klèos was achieved is the degree to which your life had significance. In the Iliad, the warrior-hero Achilles acknowledges his deep desire for klèos:

“…if I abide here and war about the city of the Trojans, then lost is my home-return, but my renown [klèos] shall be imperishable; but if I return home to my dear native land, lost then is my glorious renown, yet shall my life long endure, neither shall the doom of death come soon upon me.”

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Achilles is worried about missing out on imperishable renown, eternal glory, and everlasting fame that would be recorded in the great poems and epics and shared with generations to come. As the story goes, Achilles opts to stay, continue fighting, and achieve klèos – and you might say that he got he wanted – here we are talking about him! Though Achilles is a mythological-fictional character, of course, there is a reason Homer included the saga of Achilles in his story about the siege of Troy; the oral tradition contained stories like this, and the theme of acquiring klèos was clearly important to the original audience and purveyors of these stories. The pursuit of klèos would have resonated with people, likely in a way that eclipses our own modern infatuation with fame. It was of extreme significance, enough to stake your life on it, and in fact, only truly acquirable through death. It is not that one would risk one’s life in order to possibly acquire klèos and enjoy it while alive; rather, one would trade one’s life in order to gain the klèos. In this way, it is existentially significant and seems to eclipse any regard for one’s continued personal existence post-mortem, since being around post-mortem to enjoy klèos is rarely part of the decision-making process.

One response to this objection is that the cultural significance placed on klèos occurs alongside the belief that people will continue to exist after their personal death. Greek literature and philosophy routinely refer to Hades and other locales that indicate people exist post-mortem. If that is the case, then the first aspect of the human predicament, the possibility that one will face personal death upon physical death, is no longer a problem. That is, the idea that one must first address the human predicament as outlined in this project cannot be undermined by suggesting a competing existentially significant value that assumes the original predicament is

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38 For a defense of the notions of eternality and everlastingness built into the usage of “klèos,” see Nagy, “Another Look at Kleos Aphthiton,” 1981.
solved. But let’s assume for the moment that we don’t know whether we will exist after we physically die and see whether we *ought* to include the acquisition of *klēos* in our list of that which is most existentially significant.

Now, the “ought” here is crucial, because it is not enough to simply refer to some individual or culture who happened to value something as having utmost existential significance. The religious inquirer will want to know what every and any human being *should* care about. In other words, they want to know what the *human* predicament is – a shared set of potential calamities that all human beings face, that are most important, and the solution of which would be obviously good for any human being.

The heart of the criticism takes issue with the idea of being justified in asserting that a certain collection of items of existential significance is indeed *most* important. One might ask, “how do you know that the three features of the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous suffering are the most important?” I argue that these three features comprise the most fundamental, basic loci of significance, and any other purported value of existential significance is derivative on these. In the example of the Greek value of *klēos*, the value such a thing could have is of course limited by human finitude. Eventually, whatever great deeds were done to accrue some *klēos*, *the fact* that one had done them will be utterly forgotten in a world where all human beings end with finality through personal death. Thus, the existential significance of seeing that one might not in fact personally die upon physical death would make it so that *klēos* could have even more value than it would if physical death marked the end for human beings. And further, a temporally infinite human life, as argued in Chapter II, has an endless potential for positive, significant experiences that will certainly outstrip *any* amount of *klēos* accrued over a finite lifetime. In this particular example, the predicament of the possibility
of personal death and its possible existentially meaningful solution is in fact more important than a predicament which would include klèos acquisition as a constituent part.

Furthermore, this example of klèos in Greek antiquity serves to demonstrate an important point about any proposed cultural value or good that should be considered as a contender in the human predicament.39 If the proposed good x is placed within a moral context and given obligatory status like “one ought to acquire x or ensure x for others” then the moral feature of the human predicament has conceptual space to acknowledge it and claim that humans will consistently fall short of moral perfection. If the proposed good is not placed within a moral injunction and rather is purported to be a constitutive part of the good life, then the death feature of the human predicament acknowledges that whatever is good will eventually come to nothing without a rescuer. If a proposed good can be shown to not be derived or included in the ones already under threat by the human predicament as portrayed by this project, then it would be a problem for my view only if it were shown to also have an equal existential import as the others.

Objection 4: We Just Need More Time

The fourth objection offers a counter-example in the form of a thought experiment. It asks us to imagine a futuristic human society where the salient features of the human predicament on my account are no longer problems. In this future age, human beings have

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39 To be clear, this phrasing is shorthand for the lengthier way of articulating the idea that the human predicament is a description of the fact that human beings, given no pre-theoretic commitment to the existence of outside help, stand to lose out on existentially significant goods or valuables. It is not that klèos is part of the human predicament on the critic’s suggestion, but rather that the possibility that I won’t get to acquire a certain amount or gravity of klèos should be considered to be part of the human predicament. The response is that klèos’ significance is derivative on the other aspects of the predicament already included, and is thus not most important. Of course, one might even argue that a certain way of pursuing klèos is at odds with moral perfection. We would want to know if there are any limits on what one was morally permitted to do to acquire klèos. Or if the critic suggests as an alternative ethic or moral position “one ought to acquire as much klèos as possible” then, here also, this position is derivative on the second feature of the human predicament – moral failure, human’s inability to guarantee that they will gain as much klèos as possible.
accomplish three feats: have physical bodies that never die thanks to miraculous inventions in medicine and bionics, have overcome moral imperfection and are blameless, and have eradicated all gratuitous suffering. Then, it would seem, the concept of God on offer in this project is of little appeal to the folks living in such a time. The intractable problems for which we wanted a rescuer are now gone. Discovering whether such a God exists would have very little existential importance for them.

There are two problems with this objection. First, it is not obvious that this thought-experiment is feasible. It is logically possible, but the idea that all human beings would be consistently blameless, without failure, by purely their own efforts is highly suspect. In fact, Chapter III addressed this idea and gave good reasons to think this is not going to happen. Simply postulating that such a state of affairs is possible doesn’t make it feasible or likely that it would ever be realized. That is, its mere logical possibility doesn’t detract from the current project’s insistence that moral failure will very likely be an ongoing problem without outside help. Second, even if the thought-experiment were feasible, it does not make much sense as an objection to the argument offered throughout this project and explicitly earlier in this chapter. The suggestion that religious inquirers use the concept of God as Rescuer in their search for evidence of the divine’s existence and nature does not rely on the idea that all human inquirers for all time should use the concept. I’m willing to concede that the human predicament may change in the future. In keeping with the spirit of this project, I’m interested in what ought to be existentially important to human beings. I think all religious inquirers should be as well. The referent of “what ought to be existentially important to human beings” may change depending on future situations, particularly one like the thought-experiment where the original predicament is largely solved. There would likely be a new set of existential worries. The Existential Method
for constructing a concept of God would not be threatened. But for now, both you and I face the current human predicament of the possibility of personal death, moral failure, and apparent gratuitous evil – we don’t actually face that future predicament whatever it may be. It would behoove us to find out if there is a solution for us, here and now. Thus, the thought-experiment doesn’t undermine the current project.

**Objection 5 – God Should Let People Know a Rescuer is Available.**

It is not obvious that a being actually exists that satisfies the God as Rescuer concept. This implies that if God does exist, then God is relatively hidden. This hiddenness itself can pose a problem for the idea that God is morally perfect. Typically, this problem is posed as a specialized version of the broader problem of evil discussed in the previous chapter – there is a gratuitous amount of evil and attending suffering in the world as a result of God's hiddenness and a morally perfect God would not allow such gratuity. We’ve already examined this form of argumentation; the response offered doesn’t change depending on the kind of evil invoked to generate the problem, even if some feel particularly emotionally gripping and worrisome. Divine hiddenness doesn’t pose a unique problem at this stage in the project.

And yet, divine hiddenness implores the earnest religious inquirer to think carefully about the project of discovering whether there is any evidence that God exists. It may be that the God as Rescuer would have good reasons for withholding certain degrees of self-disclosure for the good of the inquirers in question. And, it may be that some individuals have confirmatory experiences that yield evidential power in forming a justified belief about the existence of the rescuer. Such experiences and the self-disclosure efforts of the rescuer may not be in principle public or sharable data points that would assuage the worries of all human beings. In the following chapter, we will discuss the implications that the Existential Method and its resulting
God as Rescuer concept has on religious epistemology; both how one might come to know that the rescuer exists, if such a being exists, and what this means for the prospects of other prominent religious epistemologies.
CHAPTER VI

THE UPSHOT OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD AS RESCUER FOR RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

This project began with the observation that one’s concepts have implications for one’s epistemology. How one conceives of something will imply certain strategies for coming to have knowledge about it. For instance, when conceiving of God, I could develop a concept of God which includes the idea of a reclusive being living on a distant, extragalactic planet that desires us to discover its presence, yet is unable or unwilling to go out of its way to make its presence known to us. This being, assuming it knows about the existence of humans, wants humans to discover it exists, and knows how far away we reside, would prize technological achievement and space-faring prowess as primary traits for those that would get to know anything about it, given the lengths it would take to encounter it. Thus, if one conceives of God in this way, then one’s religious epistemology would have to include a plan to gather empirical evidence of this being’s presence on that distant planet and would involve a herculean effort of scientific collaboration and resource pooling.

Now, no serious religious inquirer conceives of God in this way. The traditions that take religious inquiry seriously have, for the most part, achieved some consensus on a few key properties that God would have such as extreme power, knowledge, and goodness, and perhaps some others, albeit to varying degrees depending on the tradition. But, both the bizarre
space-God mentioned above and the more traditional notions such as the concept resulting from Perfect Being Theology, where power, knowledge, and goodness are maximized as a matter of principle, fail to focus on the heart of the religious quest to begin with: a search for hope, significance, meaning and a solution to the human predicament. The Existential Method and the resulting concept of *God as Rescuer* laid out in this project offer a way to orient one’s religious epistemology around what ought to matter most to human beings – the items of ultimate, existential significance.

In this chapter, we will examine the implications for religious epistemology of adopting the *God as Rescuer* concept. This will involve filling out the contours of the *God as Rescuer* concept a bit more and making some inferences about how a being that instantiates the concept would go about the rescue of humanity. How this being would go about rescuing has important implications for the manner in which human beings should be vigilant for evidence of such rescue efforts and respond to such evidence if it turned out to be available. Some of these expectations will imply that some traditional modes of knowing about God’s existence are misguided, such as fideism and natural theology.

**Filling Out the God as Rescuer Concept**

In Chapter III, I argued that the God as Rescuer would need to have the property of moral perfection in order to be an adequate rescuer of humanity from its predicament of moral failure. It is the task of a different project to explore the contours of what this moral perfection entails and how it would affect the lives of human beings, if at all.\(^1\) Discussing the moral

\(^1\) As noted in Chapter III, it goes too far afield to attempt to stake a position on what normative ethical theory is best suited to understand and assess divine actions. Although the prominent, broadly-defined ethical theories, such as consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics, may have some points of disagreement on how they would assess the morality of certain actions, any of these are fine for the reader to adopt for the sake of understanding the present chapter.
perfection of God involves the thoughts and behaviors of this God, and thus, has direct implications for religious epistemology. That is, how we think about the nature and extent of God’s actions depend, at least in part, on what moral responsibilities we would build into their concept of God’s moral perfection. And a subset of those responsibilities could have substantial impact on the epistemic journey of human beings, regardless of whether they intentionally investigate the nature and existence of God.

Let’s examine a compelling candidate for a moral responsibility that God would have – the rescue of human beings from their predicament. Without relying too much on the preferred terms of any one normative ethical theory, it stands to reason that (1) human beings are in a helpless position regarding their predicament, (2) God has the ability to rescue them, (3) it would be a very good thing for human beings to be rescued, and (4) it costs God very little to participate in the rescue.\(^2\) This is enough to generate a moral responsibility for God. So, for the present discussion, let’s assume that God is morally obligated to participate to some degree in the rescuing of human beings from their predicament as laid out in this project.

Now, the manner in which God would go about rescuing could make a substantial difference in how we assess the morality of God’s rescue of human beings. One important aspect when assessing the morality of the manner of rescue is the coercive or noncoercive texture of the rescue. By “coercion”, I mean the use of force, in any of its various forms, whereby the will of the one applying force takes precedent over the will of the one to which the force is applied.

\(^2\) (1) and (3) were defended at length in the preceding chapters. (2) is a definitional result of adopting the Existential Method of constructing a concept of God and it’s resultant \textit{God as Rescuer} concept. (4) is not as clear as the others, and is open to a range of views about this cost. For instance, some adopters of God as Rescuer concept may find themselves believing that a Messianic, divine Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the concept of God as Rescuer and within Christian doctrine, God pays a great cost by dying on a Roman cross. It is an open question in this framework whether this cost makes the whole rescue project on God’s part merely morally permissible or still allows for considering it to be morally obligatory.
applied. As we will see in some examples, the level of coercion involved does not necessarily map neatly onto any moral categories. They need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Let’s examine a few typical rescue scenarios to see guide how we ought to think of God’s rescue attempt for humanity.

The Lifeguard

A lifeguard sees a person clearly struggling in the water, yelling for help, and then beginning to sink beneath the surface of the water. The lifeguard dives in after the person and the person appears unresponsive beneath the water. Without waiting for another signal for aid, the lifeguard safely brings the person back to shore. In this case, even though the lifeguard used force to rescue the person, it was not coercive. It was clear the person wanted to be rescued. It is safe to conclude, all things being equal, that the lifeguard did not act immorally.

The Firefighter

A firefighter investigates a burning building and discovers a physically-impaired adult male who insists he’d like to remain in the house. Remaining in the house would lead to the man’s death. The firefighter decides this is not in the man’s best interest and easily overcomes the resistance the impaired man musters against the rescue. The firefighter brings the man to safety outside the house. Now, in this case, the firefighter has acted in a coercive manner – she forcibly rescues the impaired man against his will to remain in the house. And further, it is not at all clear that the firefighter has done something immoral in this sequence of events. After all, she saved a life from a particularly painful demise; and a noncoercive strategy for rescue, such as spending precious time trying to convince the person of the foolishness of his preference, may have led to disastrous results. I suspect most readers would agree that the impaired person wasn’t thinking clearly in the moment or considering the long-term opportunity cost when he
declared he’d rather burn to death than be rescued. More often than not, people in such dire situations desire and are thankful to be rescued. In this case, then, the rescue was coercive, yet morally permissible, perhaps even morally required. The mere fact that one is coerced to do something does not imply that the one doing the coercing is doing something morally reprehensible.

The Interventionist

A family member is a methamphetamine addict. Concerned about the well-being of their family member because of the devastating effects of consistent meth use, caring family and friends decide to coerce the person to cease using the drug by issuing some kind of threat, such as refusing to either allow the person at family gatherings or to help them pay for other basic needs. Yet, coercive measures might exacerbate the problem. A sense of guilt and shame from loved ones might lead to the person to cope with their negative emotions through more drug use. At the very least, it isn’t obvious that coercive measures are always the most effective; it may be that finding ways to help someone through mutual cooperation and noncoercive intervention would more likely lead to the desired result.3

The Negligent Parent

A father decides that the best way to parent his sons is to enact and enforce no rules regarding what is socially acceptable in polite society. For example, he doesn’t instruct his kids to use “please”, “thank you”, “excuse me”, or “I’m sorry” in conversation with their peers or adults. Rather, he hopes his children will learn this by cultural osmosis from the observation of

3Admittedly, there are a host of details that would influence the moral assessment of coercive measures and many studies have been done on the effectiveness of them. Suffice it to say that there are some behaviors and situations that are in need of correction where it is not obvious coercive measures to rectify the problem are the best solution.
others. Here, the parenting strategy is noncoercive, particularly when compared to a parenting strategy that does outright instruction and correction regarding such behavior. We might also argue that such laissez-faire parenting is immoral; it does a grave disservice to the children who desperately need, especially during their younger years, firm guidelines and rules to help them navigate a complex social world.

These four examples are designed to decouple any definitional link between coercion and immorality. There are moral and immoral coercive measures, and there are moral and immoral noncoercive measures. Applying this decoupling to the discussion of what the rescue of humanity from its predicament would be like, we can wonder to what extent the being which satisfies the *God as Rescuer* concept would be coercive in its rescue attempts.

Let us examine each predicament in turn to offer a moral assessment of the coercive and noncoercive measures of how God might go about rescuing humans from that predicament.

**The Possibility of Personal Death**

Considering the predicament of the possibility of personal death, in order to rescue human beings God would need to provide the means for someone to exist indefinitely after their physical death. This would at least, in principle, prevent *personal* death from being an inevitable fate for all people. Where coercion could manifest is whether an individual *must* continue existing forever or is instead given the choice to opt-out of existence. If God allowed an opt-out choice, supposing that human beings are destructible, and thus could, in principle be offered an opt-out choice, it could be that a blissful-type afterlife is so choiceworthy such that no denizen would ever make the opt-out choice. In this case and by the above definition of coercion, God would not be making his will take precedent over the will of any particular human being through force, because every human being would simply prefer to continue existing and reject the opt-out
choice. The operative “force” here would be the inherent and/or instrumental goodness of the features of the existence human beings would enjoy in such a blissful-type afterlife.

But suppose that there is no opt-out choice for one’s existence in a blissful-type afterlife. Perhaps it is the case that human beings are the sorts of things that, once created, cannot be destroyed or extinguished, making an opt-out choice impossible post-creation. For instance, it may be that human beings are indestructible souls that exist indefinitely once they begin to exist. Thus, in this world, it would be inappropriate to say God is coercing anyone to continue to exist, since human beings would just be the type of entity that continues to exist and would not be destructible or extinguishable. This is at least a logical and metaphysical possibility. The potential coercive “force” operative here would just be the creative act in the first place. Given that human beings are indestructible and once created must continue to exist, then one might object to having been created at all. There are two main ways to levy the objection, a welfare concern and a rights-based concern, and both fail to be very persuasive. Chapter II dealt extensively with the premiere worry of inevitable, intolerable boredom in an everlasting life.

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4 Theologians have long debated whether God would ever be morally justified, perhaps at the behest of an individual’s request, in annihilating or allowing human beings to cease to continue existing at some point in the post-mortem state. It may be that human beings never find themselves in the epistemic position to make a responsible, fully-informed judgment regarding their own destruction. Yet, allowing this choice to opt-out of existence, if human beings are destructible, would lessen concerns over any coerciveness on God’s part when it comes to an individual’s continued stay in whatever blissful-type afterlife may await human beings, regardless of other moral concerns one might have about allowing that option.

5 I do not mean to help myself to any specific view of personhood or how persons are created, though the objection fits more neatly within a dualist perspective. Think of this objection as a parallel to a general antinatalist concern, but focused on whatever role God plays in the origin story of a human being, whether a special creative act of a soul at the time of conception or another stage of fetal/child development or even to a purported initial creative event of the cosmos.

6 As we explored in Chapter IV, any potential woe in one’s earthly existence has the potential to be outweighed by an incredible amount of future good. This renders the worry that God may have created human lives that are not on the whole worth living less plausible given the scope and magnitude of great good that can be experienced in a everlasting blissful-type afterlife.
This worry is squarely welfare-focused, and we saw a number of reasons to suppose that people are not obviously worse off living forever in a blissful-type afterlife than they are ceasing to exist at some point.

The rights-based concern is difficult to pin down. There is an identity problem at the outset of explaining the objection. The entity that would presumably have its rights violated in a creative act, of course, does not exist to be a bearer of rights at the time of creation. There cannot possibly be a desire to not be created present at the moment of creation. So, any rights-based concern would need to appeal to both some kind of future preference for having not been created and an attending moral principle whereby such preferences are protected by a right that is ethically binding, even on God. Depending on one’s view of the epistemology of foreknowledge, if God has some amount of foreknowledge about such preferences, God would have access to the hypothetical: “if this person were created, then at some future point they will wish they hadn’t been created, and will view their consent as having been violated.” In this way, God would be coercive toward an individual in the act of creating it with regard to its future lack of consent. To be sure, there are a host of preferences an individual would reasonably come to have post-birth, which if not respected, even prior to the preferences being consciously articulated, would violate the rights of the person. Derek Parfit offers the following example to explore this idea: “Ruth, who is pregnant, knows that, unless she takes some painless treatment, the child she is carrying would have some disease that would kill this child at the age of forty. If Ruth takes this treatment, this child would live to eighty.”

around half of her peer’s life expectancy. It is not a stretch to grant a rights-based thinker that a human right may secure this good for the child, and that the child has a justified claim against the month to not take the medicine. Yet, it is not nearly as obvious that the rights-based thinker is justified in supposing that there is a human right that secures the potential preference to not have been created. Again, this preference, and an according right, is not justified by a worry about some lack of welfare in the person’s earthly existence. At this point in the inquiry, the possibility of an everlasting blissful-type afterlife has not been ruled out and could more than make up for whatever woes plague that person’s existence now. It would need to be justified by an appeal to a lack of consent to having been created, not at the time of creation of course, but at some future time in that individual’s existence.

To answer this objection, we need to examine what undergirds the moral complaint being made by the objector. The idea is, “God was immorally coercive in my creation, because my future preference and consent to not have been created was not respected.” Yet, it is a logical necessity that I must first be created to even have such a preference or consent-giving power. So, the moral force of my consent plea is dependent on the creative act that I wish to be otherwise. That is, to have my moral claim taken as binding, I need to exist. So, in the very act of attempting to express a morally binding consent plea, I have given moral value to my own creation. In other words, the moral claim on offer is self-defeating; it cannot be suggested without undermining the very thing that gives it any potential legitimacy.

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8 Most of the major antinatalist arguments are undercut by the existence of a blissful-type afterlife, and perhaps even the possibility of one. For such arguments see, both David Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” American Philosophical Quarterly 34, no. 3 (1997): 345–55, and David Benatar, Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
In sum, we can conclude that God, if God exists, was neither coercive nor immoral in creating or allowing people to be created. If there is in fact a blissful type afterlife that is desirable, then it is certainly in one’s interest to survive one’s physical death and reside there. God’s rescue of humanity would involve securing our existence post-mortem and making access to such an afterlife possible – this rescue would also neither be coercive or immoral as we have discussed above.

The Predicament of Moral Failure

The second aspect of the human predicament, moral failure, would by definition require a noncoercive rescue. The God as Rescuer would deftly nudge and guide human beings toward moral blamelessness, perhaps through communing with them in their consciences. This sort of influence could be done in a way that does not override the free will of the individual. In fact, any rescue attempt that did transgress the boundary of controlling the will of the individual, for instance through some kind of direct, causal manipulation to force one behavior over another, would be no rescue at all. The resulting behavior would be categorically amoral; a lack of agency and freedom removes any responsibility that would generate a moral dimension to a given behavior. No rescue that involves the building of genuine moral character and progression of right behavior toward moral blamelessness could involve such an override of the human will.

Furthermore, it may turn out that in order to be properly rescued from their moral predicament individuals would need to enter into an interpersonal relationship with the rescuer. The nature of this relationship would be the crucible for moral transformation into resembling God’s moral blamelessness. Here again, coercive efforts are out of place. To be clear, in the context of an interpersonal relationship, one actor may have influence over the behavior of the other, and even give due caution about the negative consequences of various courses of action,
The Predicament of Apparently Gratuitous Evil

Finally, the God as Rescuer would prefer a noncoercive rescue strategy to aid human beings regarding the third feature of the human predicament, i.e. the apparent gratuitousness of evil in our world. As we discussed in Chapter IV, rescuing humanity from the apparent gratuitousness of evil in the world would ensure that the evil in question was not in fact gratuitous. God would possess good reasons for allowing such apparent gratuitous evils to occur on the grounds that they were not actually gratuitous, even if human beings do not have access to those reasons.

In fact, suggesting that God make more overt attempts to lessen the amount of evil in the world might threaten the kind of freedom of the will the God as Rescuer would desire for human beings. Consider the evil and attending suffering that results just from the effect of gravity in our world. Objects move toward centers of mass at enough velocity to cause great harm to human beings if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Suggesting that God prevent such harm by having falling objects always miss a human frame would quickly become a very strange world for us to inhabit. We would surmise that the world we lived in is one not running on

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9 A critic might worry about the supposed inherent coerciveness of moral standards: suppose that the being that satisfies the concept of God as Rescuer is in fact the giver of the moral law, and violation of which demands punishment that is beyond the natural consequences of the wrongdoing. On this picture, the relationship may be thought to have coercive elements. The human being, on threat of receiving extra punishment, is discouraged from acting immorally; and the rescuer would be causally responsible for the punishment. The merits of this worry largely hang on whether God would be the sort of being that would include extra punishments for wrongdoing beyond the natural consequences. Not all views that address how God might handle the problem of human wrongdoing require that God engage in the doling out of such extra punishments.
constant laws of physics, but squarely on the machinations of a God-like mind.\textsuperscript{10} Sometimes dropped objects would fall straight down, and other times, if a human stood in harm’s way, the object would veer off course, by divine influence, to avoid inflicting harm. At the very least, it would be removing many of the gravity-based options that those who wish to do harm to others have. Since we live in an embodied world, our freedom of the will requires that we be able to reasonably carry out our aims, that are within our power, without the laws of world shifting on us, even if such aims are malevolent. Such regular intervention on the laws of our world would make belief in a God-like being, coercive in some sense. The being whose existence is inferred from such observations would at least be extremely powerful and concerned with the bodily safety of all human beings at least regarding the effects of gravity. Without knowing the ultimate aims of such a being, one might feel a sense of compulsion to comply with the general precept of not harming human beings out of concern that such a being would enact some kind of retribution on those who do choose to harm. It doesn’t leave refusal to believe in God or act immorally as a viable option – it would be so obvious that God exists, that one couldn’t help but believe, and behave accordingly. As such, it would likely be the case that overtly ensuring evil isn’t gratuitous is not in the best interest of God’s rescue plan for humans from their predicament. Compelled moral behavior, on pain of possible severe consequences, does not necessarily lead to genuine moral progress and may be counterproductive to the rescue efforts regarding the moral predicament. We have good reason to think God would not be coercive in his rescue attempt and certain types of rescue attempts for each aspect of the human predicament are unlikely given their immorally or ineffective coercive elements.

Thus far, we have seen that given the aims God would have concerning the genuine rescue of human beings from their predicament, coercive measures would frustrate those aims, in particular, the aims of helping human beings make genuine moral progress being toward blamelessness. So, God would be interested in pursuing noncoercive strategies for rescuing human beings from the three aspects of the human predicament. In this section, we will explore what such noncoercive strategies might look like, and the implications this has for prominent methods of religious epistemology.

**Interest in Privately-Available Evidence**

In keeping with efforts to manifest the good of moral blamelessness in the lives of all human beings, God would need to be shrewd in how God self-discloses to human beings. As we saw above, not all self-disclosing activities would be suitable and effective for human beings to achieve moral progress. Given that human beings have a proclivity toward arrogance and pride as discussed in Chapter III, God might have good reason to withhold or carefully curate the ways God would self-reveal to human beings and bestow evidence of God’s existence. That is, a form of evidence revelation that would lead to arrogance, pride, and other morally deficient attitudes would not be the kind of evidence the God as Rescuer would be interested in offering as it would be counterproductive to the rescue God wants for human beings.

Instead, God would be deeply interested in having even the evidence for God’s existence be positively morally formative for the recipients of such evidence. That is, the evidence itself would provide a moral challenge giving the person an opportunity to be shaped into the likeness

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11 This is the crux of the matter. As we saw earlier, the predicament of apparently gratuitous evil, although an independent worry, precludes coercive rescue measures due to its detrimental impact on the rescue project concerning moral progress. The first predicament of the possibility of personal death upon one’s physical death could include morally permissible coercive measures, but need not, also as we explored above.
of God’s moral character. Paul K. Moser has called this approach to religious epistemology “volitional theism”, where divine self-manifestation in human experience would challenge our volitional center spurring us on toward moral blamelessness.\(^\text{13}\) Again, given the God as Rescuer’s goal of rescuing human beings from their predicament of moral failure, evidence of God’s existence and nature would be tailored to fit this goal, or at the very least, not work against this goal.

It is arguable that some prominent methods of religious epistemology are focused on gathering evidence of God’s existence that does not intrinsically pose any moral challenge. The project of traditional natural theology is one such method that we will closely examine here. There is some debate about how exactly to conceptualize natural theology, so let me make clear what I mean by this term. The project of traditional natural theology is the search for publicly available evidence concerning the existence and nature of God. It is the focus on *publicly* available evidence as opposed to *privately* available evidence that generates the worry for those concerned with God’s moral aims in self-disclosure efforts. To understand this worry, we need to clarify the distinction between *publicly* available and *private* available evidence.

Publicly available evidence is evidence that any capable inquirer has access to, at least with due effort and reflection.\(^\text{14}\) By “capable”, I mean that one’s cognitive resources, including one’s perceptual apparatus and reasoning faculties, are in good working condition; so, one can acquire information from the outside world and make good inferences based on one’s cognitive


\(^{14}\) The following paragraphs on the distinctions between publicly available evidence and privately available evidence and personifying evidence and spectator evidence are adapted from my work with Paul Moser in Paul K. Moser and Clinton Neptune, “Is Traditional Natural Theology Cognitively Presumptuous,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, no. 2 (2017): 213-222.
resources. Examples abound of publicly available evidence. Consider the claim that Barack Obama was the 44th President of the United States. There is abundant publicly available evidence for this claim. Any capable inquirer, having the needed cognitive resources, could collect footage of: Obama being sworn into office, Obama giving state-of-the-union addresses, thousands of people working alongside Obama and calling him ‘Mr. President’, and so on.

Privately available experiential evidence is itself available only to the individuals actually presented with that evidence in their experience. Differing from reports about it, such evidence is not automatically shareable by another capable inquirer, even via the rigorous exercise of that inquirer’s cognitive resources. Consider the claim that God is now self-manifesting to me, via my being convicted in my conscience of my selfishness. Let’s suppose that this claim is true, and is justified by my overall experience in the absence of undefeated defeaters, such as a defeater from having an obvious experience of being under the influence of mind-altering drugs. So, I have undefeated evidence for the claim that God is now self-manifesting to me, via my being convicted in conscience of my selfishness.¹⁵ This particular evidence via my conscience is only available to me; only I have access to this experiential evidence of being convicted by God of my selfishness.

I could tell you about my being convicted in conscience by God (as I am doing), and even describe the qualitative texture of the experience in question: its intensity, duration, and so on. That, however, would be public testimonial evidence about my being convicted in conscience and my relevant evidence; it would not be my private experiential evidence of my being convicted in conscience by God.

¹⁵ This is no way implies that I am infallible when it comes to assessing this evidence. I could be incorrect about how I am articulating the experience. And yet, in the midst of fallibility, the evidence remains undefeated in the way that is important for knowledge producing justification.
convicted in my conscience by God. My private evidence of being thus convicted by God is not something I can give you. I am not in a position to supply such evidence, to you or anyone else, in the way God does in divine self-manifestation. In addition, you will not have such evidence if God does not give you a similar experience of divine self-manifestation in your conscience. In particular, you cannot produce such evidence just by the exercise, however rigorous, of your cognitive resources. In this regard, my evidence of God’s intervention is not automatically shareable by other capable inquirers, even via rigorous exercise of their cognitive resources. It thus is privately available evidence for me, and not publicly available.¹⁶

Furthermore, publicly available evidence has different cognitive features from privately available evidence. Consider, for instance, publicly available evidence that is just *de dicto* (or, just propositional rather than *de re*). This is just one species of publicly available evidence, but it is familiar. It can be transmitted without epistemic loss through suitable testimony. Consider such publicly available evidence as the evidence that the earth’s core is composed of an iron-nickel alloy. Some of us who accept this evidence have not done the experiments necessary to confirm this evidence. We are justified, however, in believing this about the earth’s core, owing to the testimonial evidence from geologists whose findings are documented in peer-reviewed journals. Publicly available evidence that is just *de dicto* has this feature of transmission that privately available evidence does not.

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Given a distinction between privately available evidence and publicly available evidence, we can better characterize and assess traditional natural theology. Again, traditional natural theology is the search for publicly available evidence concerning the existence and nature of God. It attempts to discover evidence that any capable inquirer looking in the right places could find, if with due effort and reflection. Its purview does not cover potential evidence that is privately available, such as evidence from various ways that God specially self-reveals God’s presence or existence to individuals. This characterization of traditional natural theology fits with how most advocates of “natural theology” use the term.

The traditional natural theological arguments, such as ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, depend on premises whose alleged supporting evidence is publicly available to all capable inquirers. For example, a proponent of a cosmological argument may ask us (a) to consult current theoretical physics to establish that the universe had a temporal beginning in the finite past and (b) to conclude, eventually, that a God-like being must have been (or at least was) the primary cause in the origin of the universe. Such evidence from theoretical physics is publicly available to all capable inquirers. Many people, of course, would not (fully) understand the complexity of the relevant physics, but such people are not altogether unable to understand it. Given enough dedication and training, they could understand the physics and become equipped with the alleged evidence for the conclusion that God exists. In addition, ontological arguments are paradigm cases of natural theology. The premises in this family of arguments depend on reason alone to conclude that God exists. Evidence for these premises is

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17 Such an argument, like the Kalam cosmological argument, may also ask us to endorse the alleged synthetic a priori claim that everything that begins to exist has a cause.
allegedly available to anyone who is able to reason properly; it thus is publicly available evidence for all capable inquirers.

Along with the distinction between privately available evidence and publicly available evidence, we should consider a distinction between personifying evidence and spectator evidence in order to better understand why the God as Rescuer would be less inclined to self-disclose through natural theology. Moser explains that spectator evidence “makes no demand or call on the direction of a human will or life,” in particular, toward “an authoritative call to humans from an authoritative God,” whereas personifying evidence does. The talk of “direction of a human will or life” here is clearly intentional or goal-directed, and not merely causal – the God as Rescuer has the explicit goal of manifesting moral blamelessness in the lives of all human beings. This goal will not be reached by the mere acceptance of an assertion, since such propositional attitudes are not necessarily morally formative in a way that positively contributes to the project of cultivating moral blamelessness in us that God would care about. Instead, it involves the idea of responding to an authoritative divine call on one’s life-aim. This authority is derived from God’s moral perfection, which the God as Rescuer would need to possess if such a being could actually function as humanity’s rescuer.

Personifying evidence will shape and direct the volitional center, and thus the life, of a person relative to God; spectator evidence will not. Finding out from a geology textbook, for instance, that the earth’s core is made of an iron-nickel alloy is thus not volitionally transformative in the relevant sense. Such evidence does nothing to direct one’s volitional center toward divine goodness. Lacking that kind of transformative role, such evidence qualifies as spectator evidence. One can appropriate it without transformation of one’s volitional center

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18 Moser, The Evidence for God, 37. See also Moser, The Elusive God, 46–47.
relative to one’s life-direction. Not all evidence is like this; some is volitionally transformative relative to a divine call on one’s life-direction. An authoritative call by God in one’s conscience, for instance, to love one’s enemy unselfishly offers evidence that is relevantly transformative when received cooperatively.\(^\text{19}\) At least two options arise from such evidence in my conscience: I can cooperate with the call to self-sacrificial agapē, thereby directing my will and life favorably toward divine goodness; or I can reject or at least ignore the call, thereby hardening my heart against divine goodness. This latter option is consonant with the above discussion on God’s rescue attempts having a noncoercive texture in allowing human beings to resist God’s efforts to rescue them from their predicament.

Thus, at the outset of actually beginning the hunt for evidence of God’s existence and nature, we should not expect the project of traditional natural theology to be very fruitful.\(^\text{20}\) The God as Rescuer has our moral perfection as an explicit aim, and has a vested interest in having the evidence human beings acquire about God to itself be positively morally formative. The evidence promised by the traditional natural theology arguments is publicly available and amounts to mere spectator evidence and in no clear way present moral challenge to the volitional center of the inquirer. Such evidence and mental assent would be of little interest to the being who fulfills the *God as Rescuer* concept.

In fact, it is arguable that engaging in the project of traditional natural theology could easily lead one into further moral jeopardy. That is, if the above account delineating the moral

\(^\text{19}\) Again, the specific reference to enemy-love here need not derail the religious inquirer that does not endorse enemy-love as a moral good in their normative ethical theory. The Existential Method offered in this project and the resulting *God as Rescuer* concept does not assume any particular normative ethical theory. So, the reader is encouraged to substitute, within reason, other foundational moral principles that fit their preferred normative ethical theory.

\(^\text{20}\) Again, this applies to the specific purpose of inquiring into whether God exists and what the nature of God might be like.
value difference between spectator and personifying evidence is correct and endorsed by the reader, then we might suggest that the reader who insists on continuing a traditional natural theology program risks stumbling into further moral failing. It would be a manifestation of human pride and arrogance to continue searching for alleged evidence that allows the person to take undue control over the evidential process of coming to know whether God exists and what God is like. That is, it would be a display of volitional resistance to intentionally shirk the opportunity to make oneself open to evidence that would be salient for moral challenge through divine self-disclosure, in one’s conscience for example. Running both projects simultaneously doesn’t skirt the problem either. If personifying evidence is the kind of evidence that the God as Rescuer would truly prefer, then a persistent hunt for spectator evidence through traditional natural theology would betray some belligerence and pride on the part of the inquirer engaged in such a dual-track approach.

**Is There a Place for Fideism?**

The God as Rescuer’s intentional pursuit of human beings’ development of moral blamelessness through divine self-manifestation also precludes another common strategy for religious epistemology – fideism. To be sure, the term “fideism” is fraught with some negative connotations, some of which might be lessened depending on the version of fideism that is on offer. I will be using the term “fideism” specifically as it relates to religious epistemology and as a way to capture a view opposed to evidentialism. Evidentialism, again in the context of religious epistemology, is the idea that in order for beliefs to be rational, or for an inquirer to possess knowledge, there must be justification for a belief in the form of evidence. This evidence would need to be “well-grounded, or trustworthy, supporting” evidence and available to the inquirer in order for it to merit the inquirer’s trust as “a basis for a truth-affirming
commitment…such as a supported belief.” And further, such evidentialism need not include any commitment to a purely propositional structure of evidence, where justified belief in a proposition requires an inference from propositional evidence. This would succumb to an infinite regress problem. Instead, one might possess relevant non-propositional evidence, such as “the presence of God’s morally transforming love” in support of a propositional belief in God’s existence. In contrast, the delinquent kind of fideism that the Existential Method and the resulting God as Rescuer concept preclude would contend the following: reason and evidence are either unnecessary or insufficient to acquire genuine knowledge in the arena of religious ideas and that a unique epistemic modality, typically referenced as “faith”, succeeds in securing knowledge where reason and evidence do not. After all, the epistemic story of knowledge of God on offer in this project is that if the God as Rescuer exists, then God would want human belief to be “cognitively grounded in humanly experienced evidence” of God’s authoritative call toward moral blamelessness. There is no room here for unsupported belief in God – it would not serve the aims of the morally perfect God as Rescuer who is not as interested in mere belief, but belief undergirded by personifying evidence. In order to avoid this conclusion, it would be up to the individual who defends this version of fideism, and is simultaneously convinced by the preceding chapters, to outline the specific powers of this unique epistemic modality in a way that makes it superior to reason and evidence when it comes to securing religious knowledge, and that still secures the goods of personifying evidence as it relates to God’s rescue of human beings from their predicament.

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22 Moser, The Evidence for God, 98.
Yet, we need not dispense with the term “faith” and “fideism” in our discussion of the God as Rescuer. If by fideism one means the commitment to the centrality of faith in humanity’s attempt to know God and “faith” refers to the strength and depth of the volitional turn toward God, then there is space for faith in the project on offer. Moser describes this role for faith in a volitional theology perspective:

Such faith as entrustment of oneself to God is arguably a needed motivational anchor for human *faithful actions* toward God and others, in obedience to God. It includes one’s general *receptive volitional commitment* to receive any manifested and offered divine power of redemptive unselfish love as a gracious gift and thereby to obey God in what God commands and promises. In such faith, accordingly, one will commit oneself to personify and to reflect God’s distinctive moral character, including divine unselfish love, for others.23

That is, when our conception of faith includes the volitional and behavioral activity of trust, reliance, and obedience beyond the mere cognitive activity of assent or acknowledgement, *in response to a non-propositional evidence of experiencing of God’s love*, then faith becomes an indispensable part of the epistemic story of humanity coming to know whether God exists and what God is like. One’s faith, then, would be a well-grounded confidence that the God as Rescuer will participate in one’s rescue from the human predicament.

**Conclusion**

The Existential Method and the resulting concept of *God as Rescuer* make it unlikely that God would be interested in having people come to know that God exists and what God is like through traditional natural theology arguments and fideism in the sense considered above. The primary reason for this is the preference the God as Rescuer would have for self-disclosing evidence that itself is morally transformative for us toward moral blamelessness, considering the aims God would have in rescuing human beings from the moral dimension of the human

predicament. If one is genuinely pursuing religious inquiry regarding the existence and nature of God and one adopts the *God as Rescuer* concept, then one ought to have great interest in having religious experiences of the sort that yield personifying evidence, since such evidence is exactly the sort the God as Rescuer would prefer to offer if such a being exists.

Again, it could turn out that there is no being that satisfies the *God as Rescuer* concept and any alleged religious experience might not be the product of any genuine divine self-disclosure and would require some naturalistic explanation. This project is not suggesting that there is a being that satisfies the concept of *God as Rescuer* or that anyone will ever actually have a religious experience of the sort that yields personifying evidence. Rather, this project aims to orient our conceptualization of the divine around what matters most to human beings and letting the evidential chips fall where they may. This project also does not recommend a lowering of the epistemic standards for justified belief, where the justification for belief in God would come through religious experience, simply because human beings would want there to be a rescuer ready to help deliver us from our human predicament. Instead, this project would recommend that religious inquirers take measures to become the kind of people that would respond positively to God’s authoritative call on their life toward moral blamelessness and even an ongoing relationship with this God who wants their good.24


VITA

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