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Abstract Review of “Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?” (2002), by Carl Mosser.

EVIL: A REAL PROBLEM FOR EVANGELICALS

Blake T. Ostler

In one of his contributions to *The New Mormon Challenge*, “Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?” Carl Mosser (an evangelical graduate student at the University of St. Andrews, St. Mary’s College) argues that, far from resolving what he calls the real problem of evil, the Latter-day Saint view of God exacerbates the problem. He concludes that (1) the Latter-day Saint view does not resolve the real problem of evil, and (2) the Latter-day Saint God cannot simply eliminate evil at will, and therefore evil remains a problem even for God. The real problem of evil, according to Mosser, is not the incompatibility of God’s goodness and power with the existence of evil, but the fact that there is any real evil at all. Mosser distinguishes the real problem of evil from what he calls the merely intellectual problem of evil. The intellectual problem of evil, according to Mosser, is not a real problem but merely a “puzzle to be solved,” arising from the view that if an all-powerful and perfectly good being has created a world that contains what merely *appears to be* evil, then that is

Review of Carl Mosser. “Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?” in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, 212–18. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002. 535 pp., with glossary and indexes. \$21.99.

inconsistent with an omnipotent God's existence (p. 213). Just how there can be a real problem of evil, where a *real* evil exists to be overcome by God's omnipotence and also a world that contains what merely appears to be evil but truly is not, Mosser never addresses or explains.

Is There a Problem of Evil?

Mosser maintains that there really isn't a problem of evil at all. First, he asserts that Alvin Plantinga has resolved the logical problem of evil that arises from the inconsistency among the notions that (1) God is a perfectly good being who would create a world without any genuine evil if he could; (2) God is an omniscient and all-powerful being who can create a world without genuine evil; and yet (3) genuine evil exists. For this problem to arise, the notion of genuine evil must be grasped. Genuine evil is an act or event the nature of which is such that the world would be better, all things considered, had it not occurred. It is evil that is not justified because it is not a necessary condition to obtain a greater good. Given this understanding of genuine evil, these propositions constitute an inconsistent triad.

So has Plantinga resolved the logical problem of evil? In the view of perhaps most analytic philosophers of religion, Plantinga has successfully answered the logical problem of evil *as it was presented by John Mackie*, who argued that God could create persons who always do what is right.¹ Plantinga has shown that if persons have libertarian free will, God cannot create persons and bring it about that they always do what is right.² However, Plantinga has not shown that (1), (2), and (3) are consistent. He argues that every apparent evil, for all that we know, may be justified by a greater good such as free will. Thus Plantinga rejects (3) by claiming that we are not in a position

1. John L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, n.s., 64 (1955): 200–212. See Daniel Howard-Snyder, introduction to *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xii–xiii.

2. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (1974; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 164–95.

to make “all things considered” judgments.³ It is just logically possible that every instance of evil may result from free acts of others, and, for all we know, God may be justified in not overriding the free decisions of creatures given his purposes.

Does this response constitute a defeat of the logical problem of evil? Hardly. First, Plantinga’s response does not exonerate the compatibilist position that has been the majority view held by credal Christians since the time of Augustine. Plantinga’s defense assumes the libertarian view of free will, which holds that free will is incompatible with an act being caused. Compatibilists believe that free will is compatible with an act being caused.⁴ Further, Plantinga has not shown that God is constrained by logic to create morally irresponsible persons such as we are if he creates *ex nihilo*. Plantinga assumes that God must create morally fallible persons if he creates them free. However, that is not true given the evangelical view of creation *ex nihilo*, for if God creates *ex nihilo*, then he can create any persons that it is logically possible to create. He certainly could have created more morally sensitive and rational persons than we are.⁵ Richard Swinburne has argued that a perfectly rational being is necessarily good.⁶ There is no logical reason that God could not have created perfectly rational beings who are perfectly good even though they are free to choose evil if they wish. If Swinburne is correct, the fact that a person always rationally chooses to do what is right is not incompatible with libertarian free will. Given the credal view, there

3. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 464–84; and “Epistemic Probability and Evil,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 69–96. The same point is made by William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 97–125.

4. James F. Sennett, “The Free Will Defense and Determinism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8/3 (1991): 340–53.

5. For a technical treatment of this issue, see Ben Huff, “Contingency in Classical Creation: Problems with Plantinga’s Free-Will Defense,” *Element: An E-Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology*, www.nd.edu/~rpotter/huff_element1-1.html, available as recently as 17 March 2003.

6. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 182–88.

is no reason that God could not have created perfectly rational persons who would always see by the light of reason that choosing what is right is the most rational course. Thus God had open to him the possibility of creating more intelligent and morally sensitive creatures who would bring about less evil than we do through our sheer irrationality. God is thus morally indictable for having created creatures who bring about more evil than other creatures he could have created from nothing.

Further, Plantinga explains natural evils by arguing that it is logically possible that God created devils free in a libertarian sense and with enough power to bring about earthquakes, tornadoes, diseases, cancer, and so forth. But how does God's creating beings he foreknows will freely bring about vast amounts of evil get him off the hook for natural evils? It seems that creating devils and then granting them enough power to interfere with the natural order of things is itself an instance of evil. There is no logically necessary reason that God would have to grant devils such power to wreak havoc with the natural order and thereby to bring about vast amounts of suffering. Far from constituting a defense of the problem of evil, Plantinga has simply given a scenario that is an instance of divine culpability for natural evil.⁷

Mosser also maintains that no one has stated a successful evidential problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil argues that, given the types and sheer magnitude of evils that we experience, it is *probable* that events occur, which, all things considered, the world would be better off if they had not occurred. Whereas the logical problem of evil relies on deductive logic, the evidential problem of evil relies on inductive evidence to establish the claim that *probably* the types and amounts of evil that we actually experience are inconsistent with God's existence. Certain events are so overwhelmingly, crushingly evil that

7. See David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 237–84.

we cannot begin to fathom how they could be necessary for a greater good; our every attempt to explain them is either inadequate or morally unacceptable. The circumstance of a little girl in Detroit being raped multiple times and then brutally tortured, beaten, and murdered by her mother's boyfriend, or the days of pain of a fawn burned in a forest fire, seem to be actual instances of such inexplicable evils.⁸

The problem with the evidential problem of evil is that humans may well not be in a position to make the kinds of probability judgments required.⁹ Can we really discern accurately whether God could have reasons for the types and amounts of evils we experience? However, such a view seems to confuse the fact that while there is much that we don't know, it doesn't follow that what we do know cannot support such probability judgments. We are in a position to know that we cannot begin to fathom any greater good that is accomplished by such evils. We can also see that any explanation we come up with is either inadequate, because we cannot see that such evils are necessary to accomplish the greater good, or repulsive, because our explanations are themselves morally reprehensible. Thus the evidential problem of evil is precisely that, so far as we can see, a God such as is described in the creeds cannot exist while there are also genuine evils. Yet there appear to be genuine evils. Thus we are justified in concluding that, so far as we can see, the God of the creeds cannot exist. Thus the evidential problem of evil is not decisive, but it presents a problem for those who trust their experience as veridical. On the grounds that it is morally insensitive and fails to grasp the nature of the challenge such

8. See William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 1–11; Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 193–205; Richard M. Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 206–18; and William L. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 262–85.

9. See Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," 69–96; and Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 97–125.

evils present for the evangelical view of God, I also vehemently reject Mosser's characterization of such evils as a mere "puzzle to be solved."

Does Mormonism Resolve the Problem of Evil?

Mosser admits that Mormonism does in fact solve the intellectual problem of evil—that is, the logical and evidential problems of evil: "The Mormon concept of God can provide an apparently quick and easy solution to the intellectual problem of evil by denying God's omnipotence and that he is a Creator [*ex nihilo*]" (p. 217). Of course, such a concession does not concede much since Mosser believes that the intellectual problem has been solved by Plantinga. In addition, Mosser argues—correctly, in my view—that limiting God's power buys a solution to the problem of evil at too high a price *if the sole explanation for evil is that God does not have enough power to prevent the evils that actually occur*. For example, God could have seen what Hitler was up to and have eliminated him, even without omnipotence. God had the power to prevent such evils because, on the Latter-day Saint view, he had at least the power of a human, and a human standing near Hitler could have killed him. Mosser contends that if Latter-day Saints argue that God must have had his reasons for not preventing evils which mere humans have the power to eliminate, "they are using a strategy for answering the problem of evil long employed by classical theists, and it is difficult to see the advantage of Mormon finitism" (p. 215).

However, Mosser has overlooked the fact that God need not employ such strategies if he is omnipotent in the sense accepted by evangelicals. Latter-day Saints do not employ the same strategy as credal Christians because it makes sense on the Latter-day Saint view to say that God must create an environment conducive to the growth of intelligences as they actually are. It makes no sense within the context of credal Christianity to limit God in this way because he can simply create any persons he wants out of nothing. The God of the creeds could have created a world that is free of any evil whatsoever. He could have created persons who were already

morally superior in a world without any natural evils. He could have created already morally advanced creatures who did not require the extreme conditions we encounter in this life as a basis for growth. However, such soul-making strategies work within the Latter-day Saint worldview precisely because God cannot create out of nothing just the persons he wants. In Mormonism, God's goal is to assist us to advance by confronting *genuine* challenges to aid our growth and learning. Unlike the God of the creeds, the God of Latter-day Saint belief did not create intelligences or determine their level of advancement and moral sensitivity. He takes us as we are and lovingly works with us from there. God can have reasons to allow evils—even genuine evils—on the Latter-day Saint view because he must bring about conditions conducive to the growth and advancement of persons like us. Things may occur that do not make the world, all things considered, better than it would have been had they not occurred. It is not better, all things considered, that a little girl be raped and murdered. However, the fact that such acts *can occur*, that genuine evils are *possible*, is necessary to God's plan where persons are genuinely free. If God intervened every time someone were about to bring about a genuine evil, he would frustrate his purposes for us. For example, if knives were steel-hard when spreading butter but suddenly turned to rubber whenever a person wanted to use a knife to stab another person, the natural order necessary for God's plan to be accomplished would be frustrated. There would not even be the possibility of morally significant free actions in such an environment.

Thus Latter-day Saints have strategies available to them to resolve the problem of evil that are not available to creedal Christians—even if a lack of divine power is not the reason for such a solution. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that, on the Latter-day Saint view, God has “maximal power”—or all the power that it is consistently conceivable for a God to have in relation to a real world having a real history and a real social environment that includes free persons.¹⁰

10. See Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2001), chap. 4.

Mosser's Argument against the Latter-day Saint Solution

Mosser offers two reasons why he feels that even though Latter-day Saint doctrines “can solve the intellectual problem” of evil, such a solution is nevertheless bought at “two high costs” (p. 215). First, a part of the LDS answer to evil is that “there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Thus it appears that the actuality of evil is built into the structure of reality. Second, Mosser argues that a part of some LDS theodicies is that God is limited by an intractable chaos that he organizes into an ordered cosmos. Mosser explains that because on the LDS view God is constrained by the “inviolability of the freewill” of other beings and because of the “uncreated laws of nature” and the “intractableness of eternal matter,” Latter-day Saints can consistently argue that “some evils occur that God is simply powerless to prevent” (p. 214). Thus he concludes that evil will never be overcome according to the Latter-day Saint view because if “evil is in part due to the inherent nature of matter, then God simply cannot overcome it” (p. 216). He asserts that this is the real problem of evil because the Bible views God as decisively eliminating evil at the end of time through his omnipotent power.

Mosser claims that the notion of opposition in all things “is simply unfounded.” He disposes of this doctrine with a quotation from John Kekes: “Whatever is true of phenomena requiring contrasting aspects, it is not true of good and evil. It is absurd to suppose that there can be kindness only if there is cruelty, or freedom only if there is tyranny” (p. 215). Now it is true that we do not need to be unkind in order to be kind; however, it does not follow that we could know and appreciate what kindness is unless we had some idea of what it would be like for persons not to be kind. In the Book of Mormon, the ancient Hebrew prophet Lehi teaches that, in order to appreciate our experience of good, we must be capable of recognizing evil. Thus his point seems to be that opposition is essential to our *knowledge* of both good and evil (an epistemological issue), not that every good *always* requires an off-setting evil to exist (an ontological issue). As Lehi states:

If Adam had not transgressed . . . he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, *having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin*. But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:22–25)

A similar point is made in the Book of Moses, where God tells Adam, “Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, *that they may know to prize the good*” (Moses 6:55). The point is that tasting the bitterness of evil in the world affords us an opportunity to know and learn to prize what otherwise we could not appreciate.

Moreover, there is also an ontological dimension to “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11) in addition to the epistemological dimension. There are virtues that require opposition in order to be realized. Lehi argues that God’s purpose in creating humankind was to make it possible for us to know joy. As a condition to experiencing this joy, it is necessary to be able to choose between good and evil and to experience both bitter and sweet. While it is not necessary to be unkind to be kind, it is necessary to have genuine choices among good and evil alternatives to be free in a morally significant sense. Indeed, F. R. Tennant has argued that our concept of good has meaning only when related to concepts such as temptation, courage, and compassion.¹¹ Courage is developed through facing real challenges, compassion comes about as a response to the presence of pain and suffering, and temptation exists only where there is the possibility of choosing evil. As Hugh McCann argues:

11. F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* (London: Cambridge, 1928), 1:188–89.

True virtue has to be tested and refined. Someone with the virtue of patience must have tasted affliction and disappointment, and seen things through; the courageous person has to have endured danger and risk; the compassionate must have struggled with temptation, sorrow and hardship. The point of such experiences is not merely to strengthen our tendency to act rightly. . . . [Virtue] requires that we know trial and suffering, and human weakness in the face of them, in the only way they truly can be known: through experience. . . . In short, true virtue requires knowledge of good and evil—not just as they are manifested in our own struggle with sin, but as they are played out in the travail of the whole world. As we gain this knowledge, we become more suited for God’s friendship.¹²

It is significant that Lehi’s discussion of opposition in all things occurs in the context of agency as a necessary condition to allow individuals to be agents who can choose for themselves. The point of opposition in all things is not that we must be evil to be good, but that in order to be moral agents in any significant sense we must be capable of choosing between good and evil. If we were capable only of good acts, we might be innocent, but we could not be moral agents. Thus it is not the *actuality* of evil that is necessary but the possibility that persons can make significant choices. There are no significant choices if we are not moral agents in the sense that we can freely choose either good or evil.

Thus Mosser has misunderstood the thrust of the doctrine of opposition in all things. His argument works only if the actuality of evil is built into the world, not its mere possibility. Mosser argues that the doctrine of opposition in all things makes the existence of evil a “necessary” feature of the world (p. 216). However, the doctrine of

12. Hugh J. McCann, “Divine Providence,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2001), at plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/providence-divine/ as of 17 March 2003.

opposition in all things implies only that the *possibility* of evil is necessary to a world designed to function as an environment of personal growth. Moreover, Mosser himself must accept that evil is a necessary possibility within the world, for he accepts Plantinga's free-will defense. The prominent feature of the free-will defense is that God cannot create a world containing free creatures and guarantee that there is no evil. Even omnipotence cannot guarantee that there are both significantly free creatures and no evil.

This last point is also significant because it shows that Mosser's claimed advantage for his omnipotent God who could rid the world of evil by the exercise of omnipotence is illusory if God also chooses to have free creatures. Moreover, if persons remain free, God cannot guarantee that all evil will be eliminated as Mosser claims. Indeed, I would guess that Mosser rejects the doctrine of universal salvation. If so, he cannot consistently adopt his own argument against Mormonism, for there will always exist the evil that some persons will remain in an unsaved condition. Moreover, it seems to me that such a possibility is built into the very structure of the nature of love. If what God seeks with us is a truly loving relationship, God cannot unilaterally guarantee by his power that we will return his love with our own reciprocating love. For love cannot be coerced, forced, or intimidated into being by sheer power. Any love that is worthy of the name leaves the beloved free to choose whether to enter the relationship and, once in it, whether to maintain the relationship. God cannot coerce our love. Omnipotence is simply irrelevant to what is really valuable in our relationship with God—mutual and reciprocal love that respects the dignity and freedom of the beloved. It is the very nature of love that makes libertarian free will valuable in the first place. Mosser may envision a God who exists all alone before creation without any relationships with others, but the living God is a person who seeks our love in return for his. Such love is a good so great that it justifies leaving us free despite the evil we may cause by the use of such freedom. Mosser's solution to what he calls the real problem of evil cannot be adopted consistently with his adherence to the free-will defense.

Further, is chaos really intractable in Latter-day Saint thought in the sense that it constrains God's will? Hardly. God speaks; chaos hears and obeys God's will.¹³ Mosser argues that we should see chaos as fundamentally evil and thus the creation out of chaos in Latter-day Saint thought is inconsistent with the assertion in Genesis that God's creation is good (p. 216). However, Mosser's argument misunderstands the LDS (and biblical view) twice over. First, God did not declare the creation "good" until after he had finished creating it by organizing it. It is not good until it is organized. The very structure of the biblical narrative presents God as working with chaotic powers that he subdues by organizing the chaos into a good creation. Second, chaos is not evil in Latter-day Saint thought—it just is. The point of referring to the eternal environment in which God lives is that it is necessary that natural laws arise when matter is ordered. God cannot have water that is not H₂O, nor can he have water that supports human life but does not cause humans to drown when they inhale it. There is nothing inherently evil about chaos or eternal matter any more than there is something inherently evil about natural laws. Indeed, such laws are a necessary condition to any environment that could act as an arena of soul-building. If there were no regularities, we could not learn from our experience.

Further, whereas Mosser envisions the kingdom of God as being brought about by God's unilateral power, Latter-day Saints expect the kingdom of God to be brought about through our love for God. Only when we truly do the will of God freely will his kingdom reign. The kingdom is not brought about by coercive power, but by loving persuasion. The kingdom of God is not found in the sky but inside of us. If the kingdom is not drawn from our loving hearts and our willingness to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven, his kingdom cannot come.

But what shall we say if Mosser is somehow correct that God could once and for all eliminate evil from the world by his omnipotence? It

13. *Lectures on Faith* 1.22.

seems to me that God is indictable for not doing so right now if he can. If God can really do as Mosser says—if he can really create a kingdom without evil immediately by merely willing to do so—then what possible justification could he have for allowing the kinds of evil we experience? God could save everyone by simply willing it—given Mosser’s assumptions—but he apparently desires some people to go to hell. Whence then evil? Mosser gives us a God who leaves us in the midst of evil when there is no possible justification for doing so. Is this God really a serious contender for the title of the God of love? Should we worship sheer power in the place of the living God?

