

Why God Allows Three-Year-Olds to Be Burned to Death in House Fires

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1. The Most Agonizing Question

My three-year-old granddaughter was burned to death in a house fire.

Thirty-four years ago, when my brother, nineteen years old, was killed as the pedestrian in an auto-pedestrian accident, from what I could tell, his death, while tragically sad, wasn't particularly horrible. It was fast, and Kevin did not see the car coming up from behind the direction he was looking—which is why he stepped in front of it. He probably literally didn't know what hit him. There was likely a quick moment when he at some level realized something was wrong, *maybe* even to the extent of realizing he had been (probably?) hit by a car, but from what I know of such very quick moments, whether and to what extent they involve knowing what's (probably) happening, they do not involve great suffering or distress. From what I can tell, Kevin's quick moment ended as his head hit the road, and at that point his conscious experience ended, at least so far as this life goes. He was gone.

Not so for little Sadie. She had been sleeping in a room where the family in the house couldn't get to her. But she wasn't somehow quickly killed in her sleep, without knowing anything about it. She was heard screaming. When I got to the hospital burn unit, where Sadie (or at least her body, as I think of things) was being kept on life support, much of her was bandaged, but I was able to see badly burned parts of her that weren't bound up. I of course could not tell how bad the pain got before she lost consciousness, but from what I could tell, her death did involve horrible suffering. My angry statement on social media:

Ours is a God (if God there be) who allows 3 year olds to be burned to death,
screaming in terror, and all alone

“Why does God allow horrendous evils?” is how I would phrase the question that in my life I have long agonized over the most. Now a horrendous evil had befallen a dearest loved one of mine.

Two kind friends, both fellow philosophers, wrote to suggest that God might provide special comfort in such scenarios, so that Sadie's death may not have been as horrible as I was imagining. Tom Morris (who commented publicly, and so whom I presumed, and have since verified, wouldn't mind being named, and even quoted) put it this way:

I hold out a hope that even in fire and bombs and after the screams, there is a presence that we never or very rarely feel in ordinary life that calms and loves, embraces, welcomes, and transforms - and not just for us but our animal friends as well. Otherwise nothing makes any sense at all.

My friends had a good point. With respect to allowing Sadie to die alone and in terror, it's as if I assume that God does not provide special comfort, and then blame Them for acting as I assume.

Still, I feel I have to confront Sadie's death in the "terrified and all alone," uncomforted, version of it: that God allowed her to die so horribly is what I feel I "must face." I think that part of what's behind my difference with my friend Tom here is that I don't find it helps all that much with making sense of how God is behaving to suppose that They did provide the comfort Tom suggests, but allowed Sadie's life to end in that room, anyway. Perhaps "Why did God allow *that*?" is a *bit* more puzzling where "that" includes that the death was terrifying and horrible, but it turns out that for me, it doesn't feel that different, at least with respect to it being hard to understand how God could allow it: I feel I'm confronting pretty much the same mystery I did thirty-four years ago.

I should perhaps say that, despite my perhaps coming off as trying to have a tough, face-the-facts stance, I think I am at bottom really a softie in pretty much the way that Tom is. My hope, by which I soften the horrible blow, is that Sadie died in that room and then immediately experienced the love and comfort of God. It's just a difference in timing, though I must admit that Tom's hope is much more comforting when I worry about how the time around her death was experienced by Sadie. (I find it matters a good deal to how horrible I think Sadie's death was, just not so much to how hard it is to think that God allowed it.) "In this world you shall have trouble" seems to resonate deeply with me, and so I imagine her greatest troubles ending only when Sadie left this world. Maybe Tom's hope in the end makes more sense. It does seem to line up with Stephen's experience of his would-be horrific death by stoning as told in *Acts*, and I suppose if I were God, Yea, I would hold people's hands as they pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and not just after they have done so, if I were allowing them to pass

through such dark shadows. And I guess I have heard reports here and there of such hand holding. But, you know, on matters such as these, God seems to not do things as I would.

2. Having the Answer to the Most Agonizing Question?

I was asked to speak at Sadie's funeral. Despite all the importance I put on total honesty in such settings, I think that in the about 90 seconds I took to speak, I may have managed to tell a very consequential lie: I said I didn't know why God allows three-year-olds to die in house fires.

In claiming such ignorance, I was following in the precarious footsteps of my former teacher (and then later, my former colleague), Nick Wolterstorff, who wrote this (from which I'm taking, with a little alteration, the phrase "the most agonizing question I have ever asked") in *Lament for a Son*, a book he wrote after the death of his twenty-five year old son in a mountain climbing accident—a book that has provided a lot of very honest comfort to many where I come from, including my parents, when they have lost younger dear loved ones:

I cannot fit it all together by saying, "He did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing he could do about it." I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing. . . .

I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.¹

¹ *Lament for a Son*, pp. 67-68

I was not simply and straightforwardly lying when I said that I didn't know why God allowed Sadie's death. It is complicated—and the ways that I do and do not have an answer for why God allowed it is the main thing I'm trying to sort out here. For one thing, I take myself to have been technically telling the truth, because I take myself not to really *know* (emphasis) *anything* (separate emphasis) substantial about these matters, including even that God exists (much less what Their reasons might be for anything). But I think that when we are speaking in “knowledge deserts,” as I call them, and as I most definitely was, and we come out and say that we “don't know” something, we tend to convey something far more substantial than just that we (of course) don't know the particular matter in question (just as we fail to know the answers to all the other questions we have in the region). We tend to somehow mean something like that on the matter in question, we don't have an answer that we even accept.² And, as opposed to Nick's expressed stance, I do in a way—and I think in the way most relevant to our current purposes—have an answer that I accept to our most agonizing question of why God permits such tragedies.

And what's more, my having this answer seems key to my faith surviving senseless young deaths, and surviving the matter of horrendous suffering, sometimes unto death. And I even think that having this answer may be how many others hold on to (some of) their faith in the face of these greatest challenges to it, even when they don't explicitly realize that they have this answer and are hanging on in that way. And perhaps that's so even when they explicitly and honestly (in the sense of saying what they think) deny that they have this answer.

My brother's senseless and tragic death had not caused any crisis of faith for me, but, as I put the matter when talking with others familiar with the songs of Bob Dylan, that was for “Positively 4th Street” reasons. I there allude to these lines from that song:

You say you lost your faith, but that's not where it's at
You had no faith to lose, and you know it

But in alluding to those lines, I didn't mean to be claiming that I had no faith at all left to lose by the time Kevin died: I still had some. What I meant was just that any faith that could be knocked off by the fact that God, if They exist, allows tragic senseless deaths, as well as horrific suffering, had already been knocked off long before. It turns out that I am not one for whom tragedy has to strike close to home for it to have its effect on my

²[connection from Deserts App]

thinking about whether there might still be a perfectly good God who allows it. I took the Problem of Horrific Evil, closely related to what I suppose could be called the Problem of Tragic Senseless Deaths, to provide the strongest reason against God's existence, and to be clear: It had knocked off a good chunk of my faith in God. I'm just saying that what measure of my faith that had survived did so because, in the most relevant way, I had a good answer to why God allows even horrific suffering (and also why God allows non-horrific, but tragic and senseless young deaths).

But at the time of Kevin's death, I didn't realize I had this answer. (I "had" this answer only in the way you can when you don't explicitly realize you have an answer.) If someone asked me if I knew why God allowed such tragic, senseless, early deaths, or why God allows horrific suffering, I would have answered no—and without sensing, as I did much later at Sadie's funeral, that I was being dishonest, as I heard the denial come out of my own mouth.

That we don't know such things—and usually even that we are extremely far from knowing them, sometimes expressed by the likes of "I don't even have a guess"—is almost an item of faith where I come from. I inherited that not only from Nick and other teachers, but even from the teacher from whom I learned the crucial part of the answer. This was Marilyn Adams, who—as I put it—taught me why God allows horrendous evils, when in seminar on the Problem of Evil that I took and that she co-taught with Bob Adams, we discussed her paper, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God." But Marilyn would not have described what she taught me in those terms, at least at the time she taught it to me (and truth be told, probably not happily at later times, either). She in fact saw the project of proposing reasons-why God might have for allowing horrendous evils to be a huge mistake. She argued that while the standard theodicies might be able to explain why God might allow some evil or other, they completely fell apart when they were applied to truly horrendous evils. There the attempt to identify God's reasons for allowing these evils was "hopeless" (p. 304), as God's reasons for allowing the worst evils are inaccessible to us in a very strong way indeed: "[W]here horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God's actual reason for permitting them; we cannot even conceive of any plausible candidate sort of reason" (p. 304). The key to her approach to the problem of horrendous evils, as she presented it (especially in the section of her paper entitled *Whys versus Hows*³), was turning away

³ Section 4.1, pp. 305-306, of Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God."

from the bankrupt project of trying to discern even possible reasons for *why* God allows horrendous evils and toward a different question, the answering of which was more promising: *How* does God, in a specialized sense that we will designate by using all-caps, DEFEAT horrendous evils in the lives of those who suffer them? We will soon look at what this DEFEAT amounts to, but you can guess already that I think that in telling us how God might DEFEAT horrendous evils, Marilyn really was addressing the perhaps not-so-hopeless-after-all question of why God might allow them.

It was a couple of years later that I began to realize that I had an answer. This occurred in an interview for a philosophy job, when I actually was under critical pressure to explain how I can still believe in an all-benevolent God in the face of the horrendous evils in the world. (Really, it was like a scene from a bad Christian movie, where our Christian hero is being grilled by an intellectual secular skeptic.⁴) As I started to explain matters, it was like I was listening as a spectator to the words coming out of my own mouth, and I realized that the philosophy I had been studying, the theodicies I had read, including especially Marilyn's, actually were not as inadequate as Nick and others, including Marilyn, had taught me to think in explaining the ways of God. In fact, I began to realize, in the way most relevant to our current concerns, I actually had an answer to why God would allow horrific evils, and then also tragic young deaths. I'll be here trying to explain what that answer is, but also in what ways I do and in what ways I do not have this answer, and how having this answer, even in the very partial and vague way that I have it, relieves at least much of the great intellectual pressure against believing in God that is produced by the most challenging forms of the Problem of Evil. The helpful "theodicies I had read" really just consist of the reading that Marilyn and Bob Adams had us do for their seminar on the Problem of Evil, that I took at UCLA in 1987, which (at least so far as I can remember that seminar) match up quite well with the readings they included in the anthology on *The Problem of Evil* they then co-edited,⁵ but here, the only writing, other than Marilyn's, and also one of his strongest critics, that I will use is John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, a selection from which was discussed in the seminar and was included in their anthology. That said, the way that the answer has developed for me in the intervening years has largely consisted in my seeing how what Marilyn taught me fits in with other answers to the question that she told me was radically unanswerable: Why does God cause, or at least allow, horrendous evils? And as I have

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only fairly recently come to realize, seeing Marilyn's answer against the background of other answers is important to the plausibility of Marilyn's answer.

3. How (I Think) There Is No Reason Why Sadie Died in that Fire, How God Is Not the Agent of Death

What I was mainly honestly trying to convey at the funeral when I said that I didn't know why God permits deaths like Sadie's was that there was a certain kind of account of God's reasons that I most definitely did not have, and did not want to be understood as offering:

As it happens, I'm actually a philosopher who has spent a lot of time worrying about the problem of evil, but I'm sorry, I can't tell you why God allows little girls to be burned to death. All I can say is that this nightmare has contained some beautiful moments – like hugs from strangers in the hotel lobby who had themselves lost children in the past, and encounters with strangers around town, and also in this sanctuary on Sunday, who had heard of our tragedy. But the most beautiful was also the most horrifying: after rushing down to the burn unit in Augusta, Georgia, walking into Sadie's room with my son, her Dad, and saying goodbye: kissing her on the forehead and saying, "Grampa loves you, Sadie." Nobody should ever tell you that God allows horrors to happen in order to make possible these beautiful (though sometimes horrifying) moments. But I think we should notice to the extent that we are able that they are beautiful (through the horror), and thank God for them, so far as we can, as part of our thanks to God for the short but beautiful lives our little ones had, and the privilege we had of playing our role in them.⁶

What I was most anxious to avoid, even as I acknowledged some of the beauty that I had experienced, was any picture on which God chose Sadie to suffer such a horrible death because They saw a great opportunity to make some such beautiful moments

⁶ This is my best attempt to reconstruct what I said at the service, based on the little script I had written for myself to be able to look at if I needed to, together with my recollection of what actually came out of my mouth.

come out of it—or other good consequences that can result from tragedies. I couldn't believe Sadie's "mistake" was stumbling into a scenario where her tragic death would be well positioned to have lots of such great consequences, and that's why God, eager to jump at such a great opportunity, chose her for the honor.

On the matter of why God chose Sadie, I actually don't only think that we can't know God's reasons, but in an important way, that there really are no reasons: God *didn't* choose Sadie to suffer her tragedy, for any purpose, known or unknown to us. Or at least, that's what I think. (And you need not join me in this to accept the main part of the answers I will convey as to why God might allow horrors and tragedies. I include it because some of you may be like me and need this option.) But here I seem to be aligned with Nick.

Seeing God as the agent of death is one way of fitting together into a rational pattern God, ourselves, and death (p. 67),

Nick writes, but it's not a way that he can accept. Here he explains the anger he felt when at his son's funeral, he was given a book written by another father who had lost a son to a mountaineering accident, in which the father had taken comfort from the thought that "God had shaken the mountain," as Nick put it, non-literally, to express the thought that God had chosen the man's son to die at that time in that way, and had made it happen:

I find this pious attitude deaf to the message of the Christian gospel. Death is here understood as a normal instrument of God's dealing with us. "You there have lived out the years I've planned for you, so I'll just shake the mountain a bit. All of you there, I'll send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely."

The Bible speaks instead of God's overcoming death. Paul calls it the last great enemy to be overcome. God is appalled by death. (p. 66)

Nick is there rejecting a picture on which God is acting to limit the lifetimes of individuals to what God has allotted them, so that's a bit different from the picture I'm rejecting here. But I think what Nick is more fundamentally rejecting is any picture of God acting as the "agent of death," whatever reason we might suppose God is acting for. So I think Nick would also reject the idea that God shakes mountains at opportune times in order to bring about beautiful moments that can follow on the heels of tragic deaths – as I would certainly reject a picture on which God allows young men to step in

front of a fast moving car because they have reached the end of the time God has planned to give them.

Although beautiful things can come out of what look like tragic and senseless deaths, and also from horrific suffering, bringing about such beautiful results can be, at most, part of the reason that our world is such in general as to contain such deaths and such suffering, and not for why the evils are caused or even allowed by God on particular occasions. For one thing, such evils seem on many occasions to occur in ways and in circumstances where, as should have been predictable enough to God, they weren't particularly likely to produce much by way of beautiful moments. For another, even when such beautiful moments, and other nice consequences, do result, and perhaps even result predictably enough, that beauty seems not nearly enough to justify allowing the evil, and those beautiful moments very often don't involve the principal victim of the tragedy. So these can't provide the real reason God allows these evils.

Or so I think, apparently along with Nick. God created a world where tragic and horrible things can and often do happen. The world contains us, and often the world chooses someone to suffer tragedy because one or more of us choose evil for them, for bad reasons. But often the world "chooses" victims of tragedies in ways that don't involve anyone literally choosing the tragedies to happen for any particular purpose. They are matters of chance. The world "chose" Sadie to suffer a senseless death, but not literally, nor for any particular purpose. Her death really was senseless in terms of why it happened, even though some good can be made to come from it. God must have chosen to allow it to happen, but this could be, not for any reason particular to Sadie, but in order to keep to a general policy for the world on which even horrible things are allowed to happen.⁷

⁷ In his paper "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God" (originally in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Cornell UP, 1988); page references to the reprint in van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery : Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell UP, 1995)), Peter van Inwagen develops such a picture, on which much of what happens in the world are "matters of chance" or are "due to chance," where by such things he means this:

The event or state of affairs is without purpose or significance; it is not a part of anyone's plan; it serves no one's end; and it might very well not have been. A chance event, in other words, is one such that, if someone asks of it, "Why did that happen?" the only right answer is: "There is no reason or explanation; it just happened."

Van Inwagen continues:

But you must hear this statement charitably. I do not mean to imply that a "chance" event in this sense has no explanation of any sort. If Alice suddenly remembers that she had promised to buy a box of crayons for her son, and turns into an unfamiliar street in search of an appropriate shop, and is struck and

You may join me (and I think Nick, though I may be going beyond what he intended) in seeing matters this way, on which, in important ways I've tried to spell out a bit, God didn't choose the victims of very bad evils to suffer them, and on which God has no "particular reason," as we might put it, for causing/allowing the particular tragedies that occur, and on which God is therefore in an important way not "the agent of death." And you may find some relief in such a picture.⁸

But the relief is quite limited, and we really haven't answered our question in a way that would allow it to cease being such a pointed challenge to our acceptance of the existence of a loving God—as Nick very painfully realized. God may not be the "agent of death" in the way I've tried to articulate: Perhaps we can say They are not the agent of particular deaths. But God did at least decide to put us in a world where we are generally subject to being "chosen" for death, including sometimes early and tragic death, and for other tragedies. And being God, in each case, God sees the potential tragedy coming (at least as a possibility, so even if you think that the future is open in such a way that even an omniscient God may not know what will actually happen), but then at least positively allows it to happen, presumably for a good reason. We may say

killed by a car whose brakes have failed, her death may well be a "chance" occurrence in the sense I mean—someone who did not believe in divine providence would almost certainly say that it was—even though in one sense her death has an obvious explanation: She was struck by a car. But if her grieving husband were to cry in despair, "Why did she die?", it would be a cruel joke to tell him that she died because she was struck by a large, heavy vehicle moving at fifty miles an hour. That is not the sort of explanation he would be asking for. By calling an event a "chance" event, I mean that it has no explanation of the sort Alice's husband might ask for: It has no purpose or significance; it is not a part of anyone's plan. (pp. 50-51)

As van Inwagen phrases the kinds of reasons God does and does not have in such a case, God has no "special reason" or "reason particular to that event" for allowing Alice's accident, but to get to what kind of "general" reason God positively does have, van Inwagen says They have "no reason beyond His general policy of allowing deaths by misadventure" (p. 63).

⁸ In "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy" (*Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 161-187), van Inwagen quotes (with the writer's permission) a letter he received from a pastor, explaining how van Inwagen's position, on which the tragedies which befall us and loved ones can be "matters of chance" in the way we saw in the previous note, plays a crucial role in the pastor's counseling. The pastor, Dr. Stephen S. Bilynskyj, who, we are told, is both a trained philosopher and a Lead Pastor of a church, wrote this:

As a pastor, I believe that some sort of view of providence which allows for genuine chance is essential in counseling those facing what I often call the "practical problem of evil." A grieving person needs to be able to trust in God's direction of her life and the world, without having to make God directly responsible for every event that occurs. The message of the Gospel is not, I believe, that everything that occurs has some purpose. Rather, it is that God's power is able to use and transform any event through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus a person may cease a fruitless search for reasons for what happens, and seek the strength that God offers to live with what happens. Such an approach is very different from simply assuming, fideistically, that there must be reasons for every event, but we are incapable of knowing them. (p. 187)

that God’s reason is not a “particular” one, but is to adhere to some general policy, and to some of us, that may help matters a bit. But it doesn’t help much. (And for some it seems not to help at all, but rather rubs salt in the wound: These are people who find comfort in the thought that God is choosing everything that happens, even their loved one’s tragedy.) Why did God choose to stick to such a general policy, where They so easily could have instead intervened and prevented the tragedy? Or if we construe these divine general policies as being such that it’s really not an option not to adhere to them once they are in place, then why did God formulate that non-interventionist policy so that it would have Them not intervene in these horrible particular cases that we worry about? Well, that’s really just the shape that our most agonizing question takes, once we countenance a view on which God doesn’t specifically choose everything that happens. And even if it’s been shaped up a bit, that agonizing question hasn’t been answered so far—here.

4. DEFEAT—Individualized

As I’ve already intimated, Marilyn counseled us to renounce the hopeless project of proposing possible reasons *why* God might allow horrendous evils, and instead give an account of *how* God DEFEATS those evils in the lives of those who suffer them. She is there using “defeat” in a specialized, yet intuitive, way, articulated by Roderick Chisholm in his paper “The Defeat of Good and Evil,”⁹ that we are designating by putting the word in allcaps. Chisholmian DEFEAT is one side of a distinction between two ways that evil can in a broad sense be overcome by good (or good by evil): As Chisholm tended to formulate the distinction:

To be DEFEATED, an evil is not just balanced off by an equal or greater good, but, through some form of “organic unity,” is made part of a larger whole whose value is greater than it would be if the evil were replaced by its neutral negation.

⁹ Roderick M. Chisholm, “The Defeat of Good and Evil,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968-1969): pp. 21–38.

In the following passage, Marilyn uses phrasing from one of Chisholm's historical inspirations, G.E. Moore (an even more (philosophically) famous philosopher from earlier in the 20th Century than Chisholm), to help characterize the DEFEAT vs. overbalance distinction, and then illustrates the notion of DEFEAT by means of an aesthetic analogy, of the type of which DEFEAT theorists can be fond:

The balancing-off relation is arithmetical and additive: value-parts are balanced off within a larger whole if other parts of opposite value equal or outweigh them. Alternatively, value-parts may be integrated into a whole to which they bear (in Moore's words) "no regular proportion" via relations of "organic unity." In these latter cases, not only may the whole have a different value from the part, but also a significantly smaller, negatively (or positively) valued part can contribute to a greater overall positive (or negative) value in the whole; in which case (to borrow Chisholm's label) the negative (or positive) value of the part may be said to be "defeated" within the whole. Aesthetic examples illustrate this principle—for example, in Monet's study of Rouen cathedral in early morning, the ugliness of the bilious green color patches is defeated by their integration into the vast beauty of the artistic design.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is from Adams's book (bearing the same title as the paper we've been discussing, but published 10 years later than the paper), *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell UP,), p. 21.

Leibniz, another of Chisholm's inspirations, was especially fond of such aesthetic analogies. Here's a particularly nice passage, from Leibniz's 1697 essay, "Ultimate Origination," as translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Hackett Publishing, 1989), p. 153):

But, you ask, don't we experience quite the opposite in the world? For the worst often happens to the best, and not only innocent beasts, but also humans are injured and killed, even tortured. In the end, the world appears to be a certain confused chaos rather than a thing ordered by some supreme wisdom, especially if one takes note of the conduct of the human race. I confess that it appears this way at first glance, but a deeper look at things forces us to quite the contrary view. From those very considerations which I brought forward it is obvious a priori that everything, even minds, is of the highest perfection...

And indeed, it is unjust to make a judgment unless one has examined the entire law, as lawyers say. We know but a small part of the eternity which extends without measure, for how short is the memory of several thousand years which history gives us. But yet, from such meager experience we rashly make judgments about the immense and the eternal...Look at a very beautiful picture, and cover it up except for some small part. What will it look like but some confused combination of colors, without delight, without art...But as soon as the covering is removed, and you see the whole surface from an appropriate place, you will understand that what looked like accidental splotches on the canvas were made with consummate skill by the creator of the work. What the eyes discover in the painting, the ears discover in music. Indeed, the most distinguished masters of composition quite often mix dissonances with consonances in order to arouse the listener, and pierce him, as it were, so that, anxious about what is to happen, the listener might feel all the more pleasure when order is soon restored....He who hasn't tasted bitter things hasn't earned sweet things, nor indeed, will he appreciate them. Pleasure

Chisholm clearly saw the importance of the notion of DEFEAT he was explicating to the project of theodicy: Three of the four historical giants he lists in his second paragraph as having seen the important distinction between the DEFEAT and the overbalancing of evil by good did so in the course of giving or discussing theodicy.¹¹ And we will see why DEFEAT so well serves the purposes of theodicy in [section 6](#).

Marilyn's key complaint about the old theodicies, by which she diagnosed why they failed so miserably when it came to horrendous evils, is that they focused on global goods, and DEFEAT on the global scale. Relative to her aesthetic analogy, her complaint was that old theodicies treated the lives ruined by horrendous evils to be ugly little color patches, those evils DEFEATED by how they fit in with the rest of the beautiful picture that God created. By contrast, Marilyn sought an account that would vindicate the goodness of God, not just as the producer of global goods, but as being good to created individuals, even when God allows the individuals to suffer horrendous evils, by an account of how God DEFEATS those horrendous evils, not globally, but *in the lives of those who suffer them* (when we construe those lives as including life after death), by means of integrating them into goods *for those individuals*.¹²

does not derive from uniformity, for uniformity brings forth disgust and makes us dull, not happy: this very principle is a law of delight.

¹¹ Chisholm, p. 21: "I shall discuss a distinction that seems to me to be of the first importance to the theory of value. The distinction was seen by such theodicians as St. Thomas and Hume's Demea. It was seen more clearly by Leibniz in his Theodicy and by G. E. Moore in the first and last chapters of Principia Ethica."

¹² In a footnote (fn. 12, p. 302 of "Horrendous Evils"; it also occurs in the book of the same title, p. 30, fn. 27), Marilyn writes that she owes the distinction "between the overbalance/defeat of evil by good on the global scale, and the overbalance/defeat of evil by good within the context of an individual person's life" "to a remark by Keith DeRose in our Fall 1987 seminar on the problem of evil at UCLA." When I saw that note in the published version of her paper, I couldn't remember the remark of mine in question. But what I do remember here is that I was very much responding to Marilyn's application of the notion of DEFEAT to the lives of individuals, which had very much caught my attention when I read the draft version of her paper before we discussed it in class, so I can hardly be responsible for that (much as I would like to be). Perhaps what I suggested was something about how to think of the distinction in question and how it relates to the other key distinctions in play here? At any rate, though I suspect my role here was rather minor, I am very happy to have played any role at all in shaping Marilyn's presentation of her emphasis on preserving God's goodness to created individuals in her treatment of horrendous suffering.

5. DEFEATING Horrendous Evils in the Sufferer’s Relationship with God (Extended beyond Death): “Resources to the Rescue,” Indeed!

How could God do it [DEFEAT horrendous evils in the lives of those who suffer them]? So far as I can see, only by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person’s relationship with God,¹³

Marilyn asks and answers, in keeping with her key convictions (a) that “The worst evils demand to be defeated by the best goods” (p. 309); (b) that in responding to the problem of horrendous evils, theists can and should—and indeed, must—appeal to the goods they accept, and not limit themselves to the goods that non-theists agree with them about; and (c) that, from the Christian point of view, one’s relationship with God, and particularly the beatific vision we will enjoy in the life to come, is our greatest good:

Where the internal coherence of Christianity is the issue, however, it is fair to appeal to its own store of valuables. From a Christian point of view, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived, a good incommensurate with both created goods and temporal evils. Likewise, the good of beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely non-transcendent goods or ills a person might experience. Thus, the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would *engulf*. . . even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life here below.¹⁴

I believe we do well to seriously question Marilyn’s “only” in the first of the quotations indented above, and we will do that just a bit later in this section (and again later in the paper, in section 9.b), in part because that can help make the case that horrendous evils can be DEFEATED by being incorporated into the sufferer’s relationship with God more convincing: “Look, ruinous as those evils can to the lives in which they occur, they arguably can be in some cases DEFEATED by even non-transcendent goods and in the sufferer’s earthly life, so imagine how definitively they can be DEFEATED by our surpassingly greatest, and transcendent good, in the life to come!” However, because in the most problematic cases, horrendous evils are not defeated in the earthly lives of

¹³ PAS, p. 307.

¹⁴ PAS, pp. 306-307 [explain ellipsis]

those who suffer them, we will start with a more direct defense of the plausibility of Marilyn's account as one of DEFEAT.

When one considers "the depth of horrendous evils," it can appear a daunting task to account for how they can be DEFEATED, and that depth accounts for Marilyn's pessimism about the DEFEAT of those evils by non-transcendent goods:

I am convinced that the depth of horrific evil cannot be accurately estimated without recognizing it to be incommensurate with any package of merely non-transcendent goods and so unable to be balanced off, much less defeated thereby.
(PAS, p. 306)

So, Marilyn instead reaches for the great, transcendent good for created persons to accomplish this, one imagines, still-daunting task.

But, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, I think the way to go here is to start by seeing how easy this should be—once one is appealing to such immense heavenly goods for those who suffer great but earthly evil. It should feel a bit like cheating. It's "Resources to the Rescue," as Marilyn entitles the chapter of her later book of the same title as the paper we've been looking at (*Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*¹⁵), and it's an overwhelmingly powerful rescue party that she calls in: She appeals not only to participants' relationship with God, but to their living on after death, and to the intersection of those two hopes—the future beatific vision from which participants in horrific evils will come to view those evils in retrospect.

The appeal to the value to the sufferer's relationship with God after full union with God is attained after death is crucial to the application of Marilyn's account to cases like Sadie's, especially when we are taking Sadie to have died in terror and alone, without God providing her any special comfort at the end of her natural life. Laura Ekstrom takes Marilyn to be offering a "Divine Intimacy" account (and indeed, to be one of the main proponents of such an account), on which suffering enhances the sufferer's relationship with God: "The focus of this line of theodicy is on the interaction or relationship with God that suffering makes possible, rather than on the moral improvement of the sufferer's, or someone else's, character," Ekstrom explains.¹⁶ But Ekstrom seems to

¹⁵ *Horrendous Evils*, Chapter 8, pp. 155-180.

¹⁶ "Divine Intimacy Theodicy," Chapter 3 of Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will* (Oxford UP, 2021); the quotation is from p. 73. This chapter is an update of Ekstrom's earlier paper, "A Christian Theodicy," in Justin McBrayer, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Blackwell, 2013).

construe the account as based on the deepening of one's relationship with God during this life, and so then registers against it the "Objection from Ineffectiveness," that suffering in many cases does not promote greater closeness with God. In fact, when great suffering does in this life impact the sufferer's relationship with God, the effect is often negative: "Very common reactions to suffering include confusion, bitterness, and rejection of God's existence, rather than a sense of closeness to God" (p. 89), Ekstrom points out. The response to this problem that Ekstrom proposes has the Divine Intimacy theorist merging their account with a free will defense, and claiming that "in permitting those instances of suffering, God offered the great good of an opportunity for the sufferer to achieve new or deeper intimacy with God, but the sufferer freely failed to take advantage of the opportunity" (p. 91). I would think that, even in many cases where this "missed opportunity" defense can be applied, it would not apply very well, for, even supposing that God cannot foreknow how someone will freely respond to a situation, in very many cases (and my guess would be that this is so in almost all of the relevant cases of "missed opportunities") where God allows horrendous suffering, it is all too predictable (even if it cannot be known with complete certainty, even by God) that this opportunity for intimacy with God will be missed. At any rate, I presume that Sadie's case would not be handled by the claim that she missed her great opportunity, but that she would rather be counted as a sufferer for whom "intimacy with God [was] not available" (p. 91) in her presumably (and hopefully) fairly brief time of bewildering and horrific suffering. Because of cases of unavailability, Ekstrom concludes that "the divine intimacy theodicy can provide at most a very partial justificatory account" (p. 91).

But I love Marilyn's account precisely because it does apply, and applies well, to some of the cases of great suffering that, like Sadie's, are especially tough because they lead to nothing good for the sufferer in this life—often because they are cases of suffering unto death. And it applies to such cases because of Marilyn's focus on the perspective from the beatific vision, attained after death, not on the sufferer's feelings about their relationship with God in this life. We may cite (the happy, but perhaps to some, suspicious) cases of those who experience the (perhaps only partial) DEFEAT of great suffering already in this life, in their closer relationships with God, because they can report a foretaste of what the account posits will be experienced in full by even those who get no foretaste of it now. Especially from Marilyn's Christian perspective, even those who experience great suffering in this life not as promoting their closeness to God, but as being forsaken by God, may eventually find in this very aspect of their

experience a point of contact with Christ, who was moved to cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“Where the internal coherence of Christianity is the issue. . . , it is fair to appeal to its own store of valuables,” Marilyn writes above. And this seems right where it’s probabilistic, and not just logical, coherence that’s at issue.¹⁷ Still, we should note where we make what may be seen in some ways as a costly appeal to contested goods. Where we imagine the problem of horrendous evils being pressed by an argumentative opponent, aggressively out to show, say, the irrationality of the Christian’s view, it is dialectically “fair” for the Christian to appeal to contested valuables that they accept, but it’s also fair for the opponent to note how the defense needed to appeal to such controversial goods. In the context of explaining their holding to a Christian view in the face of the problem of horrendous evil, it is fair for the Christian to say: “Look, I can make sense of God’s allowing some of our world’s horrendous evils, but by supposing their relation to some highly contested goods that I believe in. It turns out that my acceptance of the existence of God comes for me as something of a package deal, which package includes some other big and highly contested items.” And when this explanation is possibly functioning as an invitation to the listener to adopt a theistic view themselves, even in the face of the problem of horrendous evils, it seems fair for the appeal to contain a warning: “Look, if you’re anything like me, you’ll find that theism only works as part of a package deal, which package includes some other big items.” And I suppose it’s no great surprise that theism tends to come as part of bigger packages, containing other extravagant objects.

But once the Christian is availing themselves of those extravagant resources, I think it should be not at all surprising if they can then account for God’s overcoming horrendous evils, even in the sense of DEFEATING them. In fact, it should be positively expected: “Well, if you’re going to help yourself to such immense goods, far surpassing in their vastness all the non-transcendent goods and even the horrendous evils of this life, I suppose you’re going to be able to account for the DEFEAT of those evils.”

If we were only trying to account for how horrendous evils might be overbalanced (or even very greatly overbalanced, which seems to be how Marilyn uses “engulfed”), the point would seem straightforward: horrifically bad as these evils are, we’re supposing the Christians at issue just do believe in an afterlife that dwarfs our current life in length,

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but also in the immensity of value experienced, so, if they can appeal to those goods, it should be no problem to suppose that horrendous evils will be overbalanced, and even greatly so, by goods for those who suffer the horrendous evils.

But the prospects for DEFEATING horrendous evils should be bright, too. Once a good so great that it far surpasses in immensity even the horrendous evils is in play, any evil that can be incorporated into that great good so as to enhance that immense good's value in any way would seem in a way easily DEFEATED.

Well, easily "in a way": These will be immensely painful episodes of DEFEAT, so they in a way will be achieved only through great cost, and where that great cost dominates one's view, it can be hard to think it can be overcome in any way. But where such DEFEAT is achieved, the evils won't be just barely DEFEATED, but will be DEFEATED "easily," in being DEFEATED by a great margin, and so making it "easy" to see, at least from a certain perspective, that the evil is DEFEATED.

I keep hedging: "from a certain perspective." No doubt, when the immensity of a horror fills one's mind, it can be hard to convincingly see how it could ever be even overbalanced (so one might even wonder about our "straightforward" point above), much less DEFEATED—by anything. The thought that it can even be overbalanced can indeed seem from some perspectives grotesque. But those would be short-sited perspectives, and so far as one can adopt an alternative perspective from which one can at some level recognize that there are, on the Christian view, goods that do in fact engulf the badness of those horrors, one can from that perspective make this "easy" call.

If you are a believer in God, who also, in a way tied up with your belief in God, believe in life after death, where we will enjoy immense goods, you should expect our current life to be very different as a prelude to all that, from what it would be if it were all that God gave us. (You should be not at all surprised that, and maybe even expect that, the evils of this world will look badly UNDEFEATED when one takes into account only the uncontested goods of this life—when one plays the "solve the problem of evil" game by the rules Marilyn advised us to reject.) What seems suggested is a general perspective on how God deals with us in this horror-strewn life, calling us forward, often through dark valleys, realizing values that are only scored in the face of great evil. In fact, if you think the life to come is one lacking in horrific evil, then realizing the special values that can only be realized (and perhaps only eventually) in the presence of such evils starts to

look like a major part of what this often sad life must be for. If we are to enjoy the transcendent good of unity with God, and this good is indeed so immense as to completely engulf (overbalance by a great margin) the horrors of this life, it would seem that any non-transcendent evil we suffer will be DEFEATED if it ultimately enhances for us that immense and engulfing good: It will be something we wouldn't wish away from the standpoint of the beatific vision, to put things in very Marilyn-esque terms.

And the individual's relationship with God would seem to be a very promising site for such DEFEAT, not only because of its immensity, but also because, as we know from our relationships with one another, interpersonal relationships seem just the kind of thing that can be enhanced in value to those related by histories of great hardship. Just how suffering, and even great suffering, can enhance the value of interpersonal relationships, is not easy to explain, but in advance of any explanation, we can all relate to stories of those—like, for example, old soldiers who have been through the hell of war together—who find themselves connected in deep ways that would not be possible without the experience of great hardship. Since I seem to be in quoting-Dylan mode, as Bob Dylan puts it quite simply in his catching-a-quite-common-thought-blowing-in-the-wind mode: “Strange how people who suffer together have stronger connections than people who are most content.” I trust we can all sense the almost proverbial plausibility, alongside the admitted strangeness, of such thoughts.

The “proverbial plausibility” I am claiming here is just for the thought that our interpersonal relationships can be enhanced in value by great suffering. We can put this in terms of “partial DEFEAT”: We know from relationships with one another that even great suffering can be at least partially DEFEATED by being incorporated into the relationships of those who suffer.

But can it ever be worth it? Is great suffering ever fully DEFEATED in such a way, so that the lives of those who suffer horrendously are better for them on the whole for containing that suffering, when we limit this to DEFEAT attained by incorporating the evil into relationships among humans, and only during this lifetime? For Marilyn, the answer to this seems to be a very clear “no”: As we have seen, this seems for her a consequence of recognizing the depth of truly horrific evil: “I am convinced that the depth of horrific evil cannot be accurately estimated without recognizing it to be incommensurate with any package of merely non-transcendent goods and so unable to be balanced off, much less defeated thereby” (p. 306). But I think this isn't clear at all. I

think it's easy to imagine someone who suffers in a way that counts as horrific, but who reasonably comes to judge that suffering to be DEFEATED in their own life in the way we're considering. And it would be quite brave to judge them to be clearly wrong in that judgment—in part because, as I think Marilyn would agree,¹⁸ their finding this in the end to have contributed to their greater good is partly (but emphasize that “partly”) constitutive of whether it is in the end for their good.

Of course, many others who suffer greatly but then have relationships that are greatly enhanced by that suffering would judge that this does not fully DEFEAT the suffering. (And these judgments seem to be very subject to having greatly glitchy tipping points, so it's easy to imagine someone judging that it's positively absurd that such full DEFEAT could ever occur in the way we are now considering.) And perhaps still more would not be able to make sense of the comparative value judgment on which the matter of DEFEAT turns, in order to make that judgment one way or the other. Maybe in evaluating the degree to which their great suffering was DEFEATED already in this life, some would affirm the phrasing Marilyn applies to those who, from the standpoint of the beatific vision, will judge their earthly suffering to be DEFEATED by being incorporated into their relationship with God: that they “would not wish away” their suffering, but not because they would judge the suffering to be fully DEFEATED (by this-worldly goods), but just because they greatly value the enhanced relationships they enjoy in the here and now, without being able to make sense of, much less endorse, the comparative judgment needed for the proper ruling of full DEFEAT.

But I don't intend to be defending the positive judgment of DEFEAT that might be made by some who suffer horrendously as actually correct. That this judgment could even be reasonable in some cases of horrendous suffering and earthly human relationships is enough to call into question Marilyn's strong insistence that horrendous evils are not ever DEFEATED by non-transcendent goods – but, more importantly, also bolsters her more central claim that horrendous evils can be DEFEATED (and even by a great margin) by being incorporated into the sufferer's relationship with God, extended beyond death.

We can perhaps make the case for DEFEAT more convincingly by digging more deeply into just how this DEFEAT is to be accomplished, and in only the last (admittedly very long) paragraph of her essay before her one page “Conclusion,” Marilyn quickly

¹⁸ [but about how value to the subject being objective (so one could get this wrong about oneself), but *partly* constituted by how things seem to the subject]

“sketches” three ways “charted by Christian soteriology” by which horrendous evils can be DEFEATED by being integrated into the relationships with God of those who suffer them. In her Conclusion, she confesses that “the most troublesome weakness in what I have said, lies in the area of conceptual under-development,” where she seems to have in mind specifically the sketchy nature of those three ideas—which sketchiness she corrected in subsequent works. But I must say that for the purpose of providing relief from the problem of horrendous suffering, I initially felt I didn’t even need Marilyn’s quick sketches: All I needed to hear was the idea that horrendous suffering could be integrated into the immense transcendent good of the individual’s relationship with God, stretching past death, to see the plausibility of the thought that from a Christian view like Marilyn’s, these evils, horrific as they are, can be DEFEATED in the individual lives of those who suffer them. (We will see what I have always taken to be the most troublesome weakness of Marilyn’s paper in [section 7](#).) But even for one like me, who is already convinced, it is important, as an exercise in conviction seeking understanding, to grasp as best as we can, the how of this all. And, what’s more, I have since come to see that my conviction—that depended on my various (borrowed) ideas (some, but not all, borrowed from Marilyn) about the how of DEFEAT. So we will be digging a bit more deeply into the question of how this DEFEAT is achieved. But for now, we can go with the quite general yet promising thought that horrendous evils can be DEFEATED by being incorporated into the sufferer’s relationship with God, as we first address how such an account, if it can be plausibly given, relieves some of the great intellectual pressure exerted by the Problem of Horrendous Evils.

6. Theodicy?: Speaking to God’s Reasons Why

“Theodicy” ordinarily means something quite general, along the lines of “a defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil,” as many dictionaries have it, more or less. One thing I brought to my encounter with Marilyn’s work was an appreciation, that I very much shared with her, for how powerful a challenge to theism the problem of horrendous evil poses, and for the theist’s resulting desperate need for some such defense from it (i.e., for some “theodicy,” in this broad sense). Adopting a phrase from J.L. Mackie’s classic paper “Evil and Omnipotence,” Marilyn tended to express the destructive power of the problem of horrendous evils by saying that it

threatened to render theism “positively irrational,” and I’m happy to go with that rendering of it. I certainly felt that threat.¹⁹

But Marilyn used “theodicy” in a more narrow way common in philosophical theology, on which it applies only to such defenses from the problem of evil that proceed in a particular way: by proposing potential reasons why God might cause or permit evils,²⁰ and as I’ve already indicated, Marilyn thought this common project, at least when it attempted to take on truly horrific evils, was utterly hopeless. Her key idea, as she saw it, was that she could find the needed relief from the problem without having to engage in the hopeless project of addressing God’s reasons-why, by shifting from the impossible why-allow, to the more manageable *how*-DEFEAT, question. Though she didn’t express her plan in these terms, she thought she could thereby engage in the theodicy in the broad sense in which it is desperately needed, without having to propose a theodicy in the narrower sense, in which she thought it was hopeless. Using Mackie’s phrase for it, Marilyn acknowledges the great threat to theism when she asks

Does not our inability even to conceive of plausible candidate reasons suffice to make belief in such a God positively irrational in a world containing horrors? (p. 305)

She then immediately answers, “In my judgment, it does not,” but this is because the threat, while real, can be answered in a different way, by means of an account of *how* God DEFEATS those horrors in the context of the lives of the individuals who suffer them. This would be “enough”: To maintain the reasonableness of Christianity

it is not necessary to find logically possible reasons *why* God might permit [horrendous suffering]. It is enough to show *how* God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors—by defeating them within the context of the individual’s life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.²¹

¹⁹ Ref to 3H, Part One

²⁰ Marilyn gives this parenthetical gloss on “theodicy”: “that is, attempts to give morally sufficient reasons why God permits evils in the amounts and of the kinds and with the distribution found in this world,” “Evil and the God-Who-Does-Nothing-in-Particular,” p. 110.

²¹ PAS, p. 306; emphases in the original. Marilyn was there writing about what was not, and what was, needed “to exhibit the logical compossibility of both dimensions of Divine goodness with horrendous suffering.” I am getting my “To maintain the reasonableness of Christianity” introduction to this quotation from her next sentence: “In my opinion, the reasonableness of Christianity can be maintained in the face of horrendous evils only by drawing on resources of religious value theory.” Marilyn moved back and forth freely between the logical compossibility of the

As I read Marilyn's paper, I found myself agreeing that a good account of how God would DEFEAT horrendous evils within the lives of those who suffered them (which I agreed would be needed for a successful account of how God could DEFEAT them at all), would relieve the great intellectual pressure that the problem of horrendous suffering causes for believers. (Well, at least some of it. I guess I'm willing to say: much of it.) However, against Marilyn's own account of what she was about, it seemed to me to accomplish this precisely *by* addressing the question of why God might allow this suffering, and so not really by leaving God's *whys* behind as a mystery that we are completely hopeless to solve, or even to begin to solve.

At the seminar meeting, I made the case by contrasting the effectiveness of such a defense of theism based on the DEFEAT of horrendous evils with one based on the mere overbalancing of those horrors, but overbalancing it, not just globally, but for the individuals who suffer them. The notion of the Chisholmian DEFEAT of evils was clearly key to Marilyn's defense, and isn't such DEFEAT so important for defending God's goodness (as Chisholm and his historical heroes sensed) precisely because it so much more effectively addresses God's reasons-why for causing or allowing evils than does mere overbalancing? "Yes, God knowingly allowed that truly horrific suffering, but that's no mark against God's goodness to that individual, because God will provide that person with an eternal afterlife full of goods that will greatly overbalance that suffering": Does that not seem an unsuccessful defense of God's perfect goodness to that individual, because, since, for all we can see, God could have provided the wonderful afterlife without the horrific suffering, we haven't effectively addressed why God allowed that suffering? And isn't the greater effectiveness of a DEFEAT-based account due to its addressing the question of why God might allow it, consistent with God's goodness to that individual, by explaining how God will see to it that the individual not only enjoys a life that is a great good to them on the whole, despite that evil, but also one that is better for them, on the whole, for containing that horrific suffering? (Isn't that precisely why theodicians tended to gravitate toward a notion like the one Chisholm worked to uncover and labeled DEFEAT?)

key Christian claims and their reasonableness. I think this was a mistake, and am most interested in the reasonableness of Christian thought, and so take her claims in that direction. At the start of the quoted passage, I would have put things in terms of it not being necessary to find "credible" (or something along those lines) reasons why, as opposed to "logically possible" reasons why.

In retrospect, I see now that I would overstate that contrast.²² I tended to say that an account based on how God would merely overbalance an evil “doesn’t even begin to address the question of why God might allow it.” And now that seems wrong. That God will overbalance an evil in the life of an individual certainly is not irrelevant to why God might allow it. (Though I will add that the sense that an account of how God would overbalance the great evil may start to seem to vindicate God’s goodness to the person who suffered it in part because we sense that these schemes will in the end be ones on which the evil is not just overbalanced, but DEFEATED.) And on the other side, as Marilyn came to stress, an account like hers of how God will DEFEAT horrific evils does not give a complete of why God allows them, but only a very partial one: It does not, for instance, give a full enough account of God’s reasons to tell us why God allows just the horrendous evils that They do allow, as opposed to others, which They do not allow. (And my vague addition in section 3 above, on which God largely lets the world distribute the horrors, is highly speculative, not only in terms of lacking good reason to think that it’s right, but is also in not being very thoroughly worked-out in terms of what it is speculatively proposing.)

In response, Marilyn did indeed stress the incompleteness of the reasons-why that accounts like hers provide. When she later filled out her approach in her book of the same title as her earlier paper, she softened her stance a bit—but not much—on what a mistake it is to focus on God’s reasons why. Here is how she explained the change:

I was originally tempted to think that explaining how God could defeat horrors within the context of an individual's life and insure to each participant a life that was a great good to him/her on the whole would be enough, apart from any suggestion of partial reasons why, to defend the logical compossibility of the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God with the existence of evil. Against this, Keith De Rose insisted that the fact that God could defeat horrors was itself a partial reason why (a necessary precondition) of Divine permission of them. His arguments have persuaded me to modify my position. (pp. 54-55, n. 41)

²² I think that, sadly, I only came to see this after Marilyn’s death—in fact, as I prepared to speak about Marilyn’s work on the problem of evil for a memorial session on different aspects of her work held at an APA convention soon after her death.

However, Marilyn continued to say what a “bad idea” it was for theism-defending philosophers of religion to try to solve the problem of evil by proposing reasons-why that God might have for allowing even horrific evils, and she would continue to stress that we don’t only fail to know God’s reasons-why, but that we can’t even come up with candidates; she would just add the word “complete” to her complaints: (here the emphasis on “actual” is Marilyn’s; I am adding the emphasis on “complete”):

In my judgment, this [proposing morally sufficient reasons for why God might allow evils] has proved a bad idea, first because trying to make these considerations do all the work of explaining why God permits evils in the amounts and of the kinds and with the distributions found in this world, often only adds to the problem of how a being thus motivated could be good in the relevant sense. Such attempts show rather that where horrors are concerned, not only do we not know the *actual* reasons why of Divine permission; we can scarcely think of any candidates for a *complete* explanation. (p. 54)

But I think that, from her own point of view, this misdiagnoses the problem with the defenses that Marilyn rejected, and the advantage her defense has over them. It’s not that they made the mistake of pursuing accounts of God’s reasons-why, while she, seeing the hopelessness of coming up with *complete* accounts of those reasons wisely switched to focusing on accounting for *how* God can DEFEAT the evils (even while now recognizing that this does provide very partial reasons-why that God has). Proponents of the accounts that Marilyn considered “hopeless” might well also admit that their accounts are quite incomplete (and might even insist that trying to give a complete account would be “hopeless”, and also insist that they cannot even come up with candidate *complete* accounts), and this would seem to do nothing to address the real problems Marilyn had with these proposals. Consider a hypothetical proponent of an account that Marilyn would most strongly reject. Let it be an account that, like hers, appeals to the DEFEAT of horrendous evil, but unlike hers appeals just to global, and not individual, DEFEAT, and explicitly proposes to tell us God’s reason-why for allowing horrific suffering in those terms—say, by means of a contrast theory: “Look, that part of God’s world truly is horrible, and, sadly, things only gets worse for that poor individual (say, that innocent child who is cruelly tortured). But the world is like a beautiful painting, and often very ugly parts contribute to the greater beauty of the whole in a variety of ways, but including by providing needed contrast with the more beautiful parts, and that’s why horrific suffering endured by some individuals can actually

contribute to the greater value of the world, and that is God's partial, but still morally sufficient, reason-why for allowing that horrific suffering." Such a theodist may freely admit the incompleteness of their account: "Oh, certainly, my account is **very** incomplete. For instance, it is not complete enough to tell you why God let just the individuals They did allow to suffer horrible evils, as opposed to other individuals. I can't give you a complete account: I don't know the mind of God! I just mean to be giving you enough of an account of God's reasons-why to . . ."

Well, how to finish that is our big question. And I think the answer is: "to vindicate God's perfect goodness in the face of Their allowing that evil." Marilyn's complaint against that claim and the proposed theodicy that issued it would then be, not that the account is (of course) quite incomplete, but that what part of it we do have seems headed in a bad direction, and, by failing to vindicate God's goodness to the victim of the horrendous evil, it fails to vindicate God's perfect goodness. And the contrasting virtue of her account would then not be that she has moved past the hopeless project of discerning God's (complete) reasons-why: The global defeat theorist may well join her in that. I would propose that Marilyn accept that her account vindicates God's goodness precisely *by* giving a partial account of God's reasons-why for allowing the horror. The contrast would be that her account of God's reasons-why, by actually vindicating God's goodness to the key individuals involved in horrendous suffering, while partial, does succeed in vindicating God's perfect goodness.

7. But Is God's Goodness to the Individuals Really Vindicated?: Marilyn's Real "Most Troublesome Weakness"

Well, or does it? To my mind, *that's* the key question about the success of Marilyn's defense, the true "most troublesome weakness" in her defense. And it's not a "weakness" in being something she did a bad job in not addressing better, but just a troubling aspect inherent in defenses like hers. In fact, I think it's really just the troubling aspect of this problem of horrendous evil, which I think shows up in its least troubling, but still very troubling, form in defenses like Marilyn's. The problem is that God knowingly allows evils that seem far too great for a perfect being, who so easily could prevent them, to allow, and that even these great evils being DEFEATED for the

individuals who suffer them, so that they contribute to the very long term good of those individuals, does not clearly justify God in allowing them.

The problem can perhaps be brought out more clearly by an analogy—one that Christians are invited to make. In the gospels, Jesus invites us to compare the goodness of our Father in Heaven to the goodness of earthly parents:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!²³

And you know, as we make the comparison, it's easy to think God just does not come off as a very good parent. As the protester might well dramatically put things, we can set aside for now any worries about any lacks of bread, fish, and good gifts: Our Father in Heaven can seem to fail in the most basic test of warding off even the most horrible of snakes in cases where They can so easily do that. When we can keep our children safe from the worst snakes of this life, we must do so, to be even minimally good parents, and musings about how falling to these snakes can be good for our children in Very Long Run should not even enter our thoughts.

Marilyn had thoughts about the comparison of God with human parents, and in pursuing them she considered cases in which human parents do seem good despite choosing paths for their children that involve horrible suffering (parents who choose very painful medical treatments²⁴). So how this comparison cuts is not a simple matter, though addressing this problem will clearly involve citing differences between God's relation to us and human parents' relations to their children, even as we acknowledge similarities. But we will return to this problem when we are better able to evaluate it, after first sketching (but perhaps not quite so briefly as Marilyn did, at least in her initial paper) ways horrendous evils can be DEFEATED. We start our sketching with Marilyn's help.

²³ Matthew 7: 9-11, NRSVUE, similar to Luke 11: 11-13.

²⁴ [305 . 6]

8. The Cross as Theodicy

Following her conviction that theists should appeal to the controversial goods posited by their own theological traditions, the first, and central, of Marilyn's quick "sketches" involved a specifically Christian account of how evils are and will be DEFEATED:

How could God do it [DEFEAT horrendous evils in the lives of those who suffer them]? So far as I can see, only by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person's relationship with God. Possible dimensions of integration are charted by Christian soteriology. I pause here to sketch three. (i) First, because God in Christ participated in horrendous evil through His passion and death, human experience of horrors can be means of *identifying* with Christ. . .(p. 307)

As a point of solidarity with my fellow theists who are not Christian, I like to focus some attention on accounts of DEFEAT that are not so narrowly available only to specifically Christian forms of theism—and in keeping with that I will also briefly explore accounts of DEFEAT that don't take us into such specifically Christian territory. But this specifically Christian account of DEFEAT, Marilyn's first, is the one that most powerfully spoke to me, in a way tied up with how I am in a strong way a specifically Christian theist—one for whom the back-up position, should I somehow learn that Christian theism is wrong, would not be sliding over to some other specific form of theism, nor some more generic form of theism, but would be hopping all the way over to death-is-the-end naturalism (which, truth be told, is not just a back-up position for me, but seems to be some kind of secondary way I already have by which I view the world).

I think because I have always found the problem of horrendous suffering to be the greatest and deepest problem facing belief in God (and in another form, to be the greatest problem that faces us just as humans in our world), I find that I have become intellectually (and emotionally) dependent on a picture on which God somehow managed to get Themselves horrifically tortured to death, and to thereby. . .

Well, just how God's managing to get Themselves tortured to death helps anything has always been hard to explain: In its way, and viewed from some outside viewpoints, that it does help is a strange thought. But I think the most basic completion of that sentence really just is: . . .and to thereby join us in the great suffering that we are all subject to, and that all too many of us have had to actually go through; to identify with us in our

suffering, as we can now identify with Theirs. In its most basic form, it is just the old proverbial, if strange (and strange already when just applied to relationships among humans), thought: “Strange how people who suffer together have stronger connections than people who are most content,” extended to our relationship with God, and past our deaths.

In its brutally basic form, this thought about the deepening of our relationships with God is strange in that it can seem to suggest that God could have achieved what They sought by just directly and horrifically torturing (some of) us (but really, why not all?) in a way that would be totally gratuitous, but for the fact that They also managed to torture another one of us with whom God is identified, and the shared suffering, that would otherwise be gratuitous, would be redeemed by the deep connection it can come to foster between God and each of the others of us who suffer greatly. And of course, that’s not the story. The hope is that the claim that suffering deepens our relationship with God will make more sense when it is embedded in the actual more general story of the place of horrors in our world (of how the horrors of our world make possible deep values for us that God sought to realize). This suggests that the account of how God will DEFEAT horrendous suffering that we are currently considering—by making it a point of contact with the suffering of Christ, thereby enhancing the sufferer’s post-mortem relationship with God—will make more sense when viewed against a Christian account of other roles of horrors in our world. And the problem for that hope is that I can tell that I can tell that Christian story only very uncertainly and sketchily.

But I suppose the general account of the role of horrors in our world (aside from enhancing our relationships with God) will have to be at least in part along the following lines: We are called to live good and meaningful lives (some, but not all, will explicitly think of such as living in obedience to God), often doing so under extremely difficult circumstances, in the face of doubt, pain, temptation, and sometimes horrors, thereby realizing the special values that are scored when such things are done in such muck and mire. Here, my focus is drawn to what we do in this world, and when we consider how horrific evil in this life makes special values (beyond identifying with the suffering of Christ) possible a bit more carefully in [section x](#), our focus will be a bit broader. But it does seem very plausible that there are important values realized by what people do in the face of overwhelming, horrific evil—and also in situations of great personal doubt and uncertainty. These are values that could not be fully realized in a world in which suffering never got horrifically bad, and (to run together the horrors and the

uncertainty, which of course, needn't always be encountered together) everyone acted in full knowledge that, eventually at least, everything will turn out right. If you think the life to come is one lacking in such muck and mire, but that the horrors of this life will be largely resolved in the life to come, then realizing the special values that can only be realized in such a setting starts to look like at least a big part of what this sad life must be for. When all is made right (which we perhaps cannot know will happen, but can hope for, and can perhaps even accept will happen), and we are living in beatific fellowship with God (and in fellowship with one another, I think we should add), we will not wish away the horrors of our current lives, for the sake of the enhanced values they make possible, even if only in our lives to come.

On this general picture, the role of Christ would seem to involve God somehow entering this often dark world as one of us, and to thereby have one of us actually win this damn game, by giving God complete obedience in tough circumstances—and obedience to the very end, and a gruesome end at that. Given some such account of the role of Christ's suffering, I can make sense of it that, from the standpoint of the beatific vision, someone might not wish away their own horrific suffering, if they have come to see it as a way of identifying with that suffering of Christ—as I understand some have come to greatly value their own suffering, already in this life.

We are invoking values that are made possible by horrific suffering, other than identifying with the suffering of Christ, now focusing on the special value that can attach to what we do in the face of such suffering, and, to be clear, we are not considering difficult good action as an account of the DEFEAT of horrific suffering in its own right, as a justification for allowing horrific suffering (though we will consider such alternative accounts of DEFEAT in their own right in [section x](#)). I realize that the allowing of much horrific suffering can't be justified by appeal to these values—nor, often enough, by appeal to giving people the opportunity to realize these values (in the way we saw Ekstrom consider for the value of intimacy with God). I am not saying that God allowed Sadie to die horrifically to give anyone the opportunity to act heroically to save her—though in Sadie's case, [firefighters](#) did act heroically in the face of horrific evil to get her out of that burning house, and it is truly wonderful that they did so, even if, as it turns out, it came too late to save her life. At the risk of bogging things down, I feel I must stop to acknowledge that the heroism shown by Sadie's rescuers does partially DEFEAT (even if perhaps only very partially) the evil of her horrible death, and so, I suppose, making that heroism possible was a part (even if perhaps only a small part) of God's

reason for allowing her death. What I am denying is that that's the part of God's reason that justifies allowing this horror. That honor goes to how her horrific suffering will enhance the greatest and transcendent good for Sadie that she will ever experience. But I am saying that the value we are appealing to makes most sense when it is considered against the backdrop of a more general account of the values made possible by horrific evil.

For me, then, the plausibility of this, Marilyn's first and central account of how horrific suffering will be DEFEATED in the sufferers' relationship with God, is epistemically rooted in how interpersonal relationships are generally promising sites for the DEFEAT of suffering, and is enhanced when seen against a more general picture of how our operating in a horror-strewn environment enhances the eventual value of our lives.

But while acknowledging some of what stands behind the plausibility of the thought that our suffering can be DEFEATED by becoming a means by which we identify with the suffering of Christ, I think that that account of DEFEAT speaks as powerfully as it does to me because I *experience* the suffering of Christ as a site of the DEFEAT of the great suffering of this life. I have had no mystical experience of this, as Marilyn quickly describes that,²⁵ nor on any reasonable understanding of mystical experience; it just is that when I consider the suffering of Christ (this would happen for me when reading the accounts of Christ's death at the ends of the gospels, in the wake of their accounts of the life he led, and occurs most powerfully for me in the celebration of the Eucharist at church), I have a sometimes powerful sense, as I now put it, of this being a site of the DEFEAT of human sin, suffering, and misery. (I know I haven't prepared for throwing sin into that mix; the reason for its inclusion will be picked up on in [the following section](#).)

I am certainly far from alone among Christians in having some such sense—though of course few would articulate what they are sensing in just the terms I have, by using the specifically Chisholmian notion of the DEFEAT of evil. But I would hope that others would find my perhaps odd way of articulating it to be true to what we are – together, in a way, I hope – sensing is at least an important aspect of the power of the central event in the Christian story of God's encounter with humanity.

²⁵ Continuing the quotation from Marilyn's paper that's indented at the start of this section: "human experience of horrors can be a means of *identifying* with Christ, either through *sympathetic* identification (in which each person suffers his/her own pains, but their similarity enables each to know what it is like for the other) or through *mystical* identification (in which the created person is supposed literally to experience a share of Christ's pain" (pp. 307-308).

As an example of a Christian finding in the cross an answer to the problem of great human suffering, I will cite the Eastern Orthodox theologian (I guess I think of him as, in a very good way, a “popular” theologian), Brad Jersak, kind of channeling Simone Weil (and I’ll be interested here in this line of thought as it comes through Jersak here, in the below comments, not addressing how it occurs in Weil’s own writing), not while carefully writing, but in answer to a question (specifically, in response to being invited to riff on why he loves Weil so much) on a podcast. I love this answer because Jersak explicitly contrasts the answer to the problem of great human suffering provided by (experience of) the cross with those non-answers provided by theodicies, only to admit at the end that the answer he has in the cross can itself be construed as a theodicy:

For me, what happened was in the midst of my trauma, so the traumatic aspect of my deconstruction. A lot of that had to do around the problem of pain and suffering and evil. And every attempt to rationalize that – we call that a “theodicy” – every attempt to rationalize it felt like calling good evil or evil good to me. And she comes along and says exactly that. My mentor says “You need to read her.” So what she did for me in the midst of my deconstruction, as my idea of God was falling apart so badly I didn’t even know if He was good, she comes along and she says things like this: First of all, there is an infinite distance between the goodness of God and the affliction of humanity. It’s a real contradiction. Second, don’t try to rationalize it, or you’ll end up blaspheming God. Third, let the contradiction act like pinchers that grab you and arrest you and throw you down. Well, it already had in my case, so I’m reading this and I’m going “This is exactly what happened to me! She’s describing my inner world and my external circumstances perfectly!” And she said, “And when it throws you down, it will throw you into the abyss.” And in the abyss, what did Nietzsche see? He saw the abyss. It was just darkness to him. But she said, “Look up! And when you look up you will see God hanging on a cross, and on that cross, the cross spans the infinite distance so that the entire timeline of human history and before lies between the two nail wounds that pass right through his heart.” And then she says, “And your affliction functions like a nail that hammers you right into his heart. So now in that person hanging there, you see the goodness of God and the affliction of humanity to the nth degree intersecting in that one person, and from his wounds then flows supernatural love that could

actually heal the world, and makes sense, makes meaning, of your wounds.” And I’m just like “Whoa!” And when I say that, it can be just like another theodicy. But I didn’t just say it, I experienced it, you know, and she took me into that experience. And it was [pause] I owe her my life.²⁶

There are differences between Jersak and myself in how we articulate our experience of encountering Christ’s suffering—and no doubt in how we experience it. (What is most noticeable to me—though this may be persnickiness on my part—is Jersak’s use of “contradiction,” and even “real contradiction,” where I definitely would not such terms.) But especially in light of his talk of his how his “affliction functions like a nail that hammers [him] right into [Christ’s] heart,” I would hope that he would approve of talk about our suffering being a way by which we can identify with the suffering of Christ, which wouldn’t require him to hold that such identification exhausts how Christ’s suffering benefits us. And given his talk of how this “makes sense, makes meaning” of his own wounds, I would hope that he could join in talk about this being a way that great human suffering can, in the Chisholmian sense, be DEFEATED in the lives of those who suffer it, should those who suffer greatly eventually come to see, as Jersak sees now in his own case, how this “makes sense, makes meaning” of their wounds. If so, then, for the reasons we looked at in section 6, this DEFEAT provides a theodicy for God’s allowing the great suffering of humanity, for this DEFEAT provides us an account of why God might allow that suffering which, while partial, does vindicate God’s love for those whom They allow to suffer greatly. And Jersak does in the end seem to recognize the answer he finds in the cross to be such a theodicy.

Jersak does resist any suggestion that this is for him “just like another theodicy,” on the grounds that he “didn’t just say it, [he] experienced it.” I think what he is getting at there is (a) how hard it can be, in view of the immensity and nature of the worst human suffering, to think that suffering could be made sense of, could be DEFEATED (as I’d put it), by means of anything, including by its being a point of identification with the horrific suffering of Christ. So, (b) if he were just saying this theodicy, it would be empty, like the others. But (c) since he did experience this DEFEAT (again, to put it in terms I, but not he, tend to use), it is not for him empty like the others. If something like that is right, then I think Jersak might be underestimating the value of “just saying” this theodicy. My different perspective may be due to the perhaps very different nature of my experience

²⁶ 45:45-48:20

<https://pastorandphilosopher.buzzsprout.com/967219/12225217-reconstruction-an-interview-with-brad-jersak>

(in virtue of which I may indeed in the relevant sense be “just saying” this theodicy). As you have seen here, I am happy to talk of myself as having experienced the suffering of Christ as a site of the DEFEAT of the great human suffering of this life. But in my case, this is nothing I’d be tempted to describe as a “mystical experience,” or anything like that – while I get the sense that Jersak’s experience *may* be more along those lines. For me, it is rather just a matter of my getting a sense, a glimmer, when I consider the suffering of Christ, of this suffering being a site of the DEFEAT of great human suffering. As such, it is continuous with other value judgments I make, and it is a judgment I feel comfortable in inviting others to join me in making, without feeling that I am asking them to join in undergoing any kind of special experience, or at least to see how I can be inclined to make it, even if they cannot join me in making it themselves (for whatever reason, including, quite commonly, that they cannot make sense of God being identified with any human person in such a way that God suffers in that human person suffering).

9.a. God’s Mercy, God’s Healing, and the DEFEAT of Evil: The Philosopher’s Verse

I claimed that the account of how horrific suffering could be DEFEATED that we looked at in the previous section was more plausible when it was seen against the background of other accounts of the values horrific evils serve in our world. For that purpose, I put forward the proposal that some of our actions can take on special value when they are done in the face of horrific evil. I emphasized that I was not claiming that pursuing this special good could be God’s justifying reason for allowing many of the horrific instances of our world: for that we need goods actually enjoyed by those who suffer the evils. Still, I must admit that I didn’t feel comfortable appealing, even in the relevant secondary way, to a good that I thought cannot serve as a primary basis of God’s justifying reason for allowing suffering like Sadie’s. But we turn now to an account which can be plausibly applied, in a primary way, to such suffering. It is an account which stays in line with Marilyn’s demand that it work by integrating the evil into the sufferer’s relationship with God, but it does not follow any of Marilyn’s three “sketches” by which which she works out that basic idea. In fact, as we will see in the next sub-section, it can be based on a misreading of Marilyn’s account by perhaps her fiercest critic. Finally, it is an account that is not narrowly Christian, as was the account of the previous section, in

being only available to specifically Christian theists. It is, however, the type of account that is given at the one place in the Christian Bible that, to my thinking, most directly and straightforwardly actually answers the philosopher's question of why God causes/allows evil (as opposed to suggesting answers that one must read into various accounts of God's dealings with us).

As background, I should admit that I am myself constitutionally disposed toward "free will defenses," which have been perhaps the main type of theistic response to the problem of evil, first, because I accept, in about the strongest way possible, the "libertarian" account of freedom that fuels these defenses, on which we are indeed free in many of our actions, though our being free is incompatible with our being determined to act as we do. And second, I believe that human freedom is of immense value, so I am convinced that it must play a huge role in God's relation to the horrors of our world—well, as it pretty much must play a huge role in all of God's dealings with us (if God does exist and we are free).

Yet that one direct answer to our philosopher's question that I find in my Christian Bible, though it is specifically aimed at moral evil, which is just the kind of evil that the free will defense is suited to explain, does not give the free will defense's account of God's allowing evil: It does not say anything like that God allows evil because They seek the good of human free action, and, since not even God can control someone's action while leaving them free, God must allow at least the real possibility of evil to get the good They seek. Rather, the "philosopher's verse," Romans 11:32, suggests a very different explanation of God's relation to evil:

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.²⁷

This could be understood as pushing very far indeed away from a free will defense: as suggesting God causes, and does not just allow, the evil it explains, and as not being very concerned with the freedom of those who do that evil. But I don't think we have to read the "binding over" of the verse in that way that I admit can seem suggested: this could still be disobedience of people who are free to obey and who are merely allowed to go bad, though they are put in situations where disobedience would be quite expected by an omniscient God. (Perhaps on occasions, good actions will occur, and will be welcomed by God, and perhaps they are sometimes even likely, but in the longer

²⁷ NRSVUE

run, we are all bound, and in a sense bound over, to mess up. Perhaps.) But I can't similarly see getting around the clear implication that puts this verse at odds with what I think is at the heart of the free will defense: namely, the verse's implication that the evil that occurs is no mere foreseen but unintended side-effect of God's dealings with us, as it is on free will defenses, at least as I think such defenses are properly construed. Rather, there is a value that God seeks that does depend on, or is enhanced by, the evil. This puts us on the other side of the great divide between the two types of defenses, into a defense on which evil is DEFEATED—here, by giving God's being merciful to us, the disobedient.²⁸ The implication is that the whole history of our relation with God is, or at least will be, better—and better for us—for containing that disobedience, and then the mercy, than it could have been without the evil. "O, felix culpa!"

Because our verse is aimed at the evil we do, it would be natural, at least when this verse is considered on its own, to suppose God's mercy will largely involve forgiveness. But God's mercy to us is also applicable to the evil, and especially the great evil, that happens to us, where it would not take the form of forgiveness (for the sufferer, though it may involve forgiveness for those who inflict the suffering in cases where it is caused by another person), but rather of healing and restoration—and indeed, in its context (I'm thinking of it as the culmination of all of Romans 9-11), even though our verse is focused on the evil that we do, the mercy that it promises for that seems more focused on healing and restoration than on mere release from punishment for that sin.

9.b. "If There Is Hope, It Lies There": God's Healing, and the DEFEAT of Horrors: Williams's Unintended Theodicy

We can mean different things by saying that a horrendous evil is "defeated," "overwhelmed," or "overcome," whether globally, or specifically for an individual who suffers that evil. Marilyn uses these terms semi-technically with particular meanings that, in the case of "defeat," we've already looked at quite carefully. In perhaps the most prominent attack on Marilyn's work (and also, I think, one of the main documents

²⁸ [acknowledge how, I suppose, the verse could be read purely instrumentally, but explain why it seems better to take it as impurely [a good label!] instrumental]

of the anti-theodicy movement), “Redeeming Sorrows,”²⁹ Rowan Williams (before he became Archbishop of Canterbury) took her to be talking in terms of “injury and restoration” (Williams, p. 135), and to be referring to the second, constructive phase of that. Here he quotes Marilyn, and then tells us how he understands her meaning (and I am adding the emphasis to the first words that are Williams’s own in this passage):

[H]orrendous evils exhibit such a disproportion to any and every package of created goods that only appropriate relation to the incommensurate goodness of God could overwhelm them’ (p. 113). *I take this to mean that* there are evils such that, after enduring them, the sufferer’s sense of worth and hope is so damaged that no particular experience of the finite world could restore it.³⁰ (Williams, p. 132)

This is a misreading: Marilyn doesn’t use any of the terms in question (including “overwhelm”) to *mean* healing or restoration from injury. But I think it is a fortuitous misreading, since such healing from traumatic injury is another important way by which horrific evils can be DEFEATED, even if it is not among the ways Marilyn considers, and so, ironically, in Williams, perhaps Marilyn’s fiercest critic, we have the start of the case for such DEFEAT (in the Chisholmian sense Marilyn intended) to be found in scenarios of divine healing from grievous injury. In addition to being fortuitous, Williams’s misreading of Marilyn *may* be deliberate (though I admit to finding Williams unclear on that matter). As we will see, Williams seems to have no use for what Marilyn actually means by the terms in question. So perhaps he feels he has license to “take” her, against her wishes, to mean healing by her use of the relevant terms, because he thinks that’s the only thing in the vicinity that she can legitimately use them to mean?

At any rate, though Williams seems very much out to reject any theodical explanation of how horrendous evils can be DEFEATED, in anything like Marilyn’s Chisholm-inspired sense, in a fascinating twist, he also contests Marilyn’s claim that horrendous evils

²⁹ Rowan Williams, “Reply: Redeeming Sorrows,” in D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Religion and Morality*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996; pp. 132-148. Williams is specifically replying to Adams’s own contribution to the same book, “Evil and the God-Who-Does-Nothing-In-Particular” (pp. 107-131), which in turn is largely a discussion of Maurice F. Wiles’s, *God’s Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986* (London: SCM Press, 1986). Williams, however, took the occasion of his reply to focus on Adams’s own approach, rather than her discussion Wiles’s thought. (I should perhaps add that I for one am glad for Williams’s focus here: Though, as Williams notes, Wiles’s book and Adams’s critique of it are very worthy of consideration in their own right, it is good that we have Williams’s statement of objections to Adams’s own thought.)

³⁰ Williams, “Redeeming Sorrows,” p. 132; the work of Marilyn’s that Williams is directly quoting is her “Evil and the God-Who-Does-Nothing-In-Particular” (see previous note), but she makes similar statements (one of which we’ve looked at toward the beginning of section 5) are in her “Horrendous Evil” paper, and book.